

# With Apologies to the Ottoman Empire

A Novel

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Any typographical errors in this PDF should be regarded as political statements.

## Chapter 01

Well, in any case your honor, at the time I was standing completely motionless, standing wholly despondent in line when I caught myself thinking about Milly Abreu back in '09, skinny with the micro-gut, skinny with the dyed platinum blonde hair that was maybe a weave but I couldn't tell, calling me "Nee Nee" (knee-knee) in a Bronx-bred accent, telling me I had a bubble butt and giggling about it, but, more specifically, how she used to "not date" but just get lavish gifts on the regular from this fat Spanish dude named Milkshake. But, more specifically, I was thinking about how my sister recently showed me a small handful of Facebook photos of her and how, wow, she looked...beat the fuck up. And I thought about Milkshake, I imagined a scenario where Milly met Milkshake and things were cool for a few, but little by little Milkshake transformed into a bridge that led to Milly's decline as a human being. I imagined going to eat at Chilango's on Manton Avenue and randomly, awkwardly, bumping into her discreetly offering "services" on the street, backed by an older "sponsor," her barely recognizing me, or maybe not even acknowledging me at all, and I'd have revelatory, in-my-feelings, feelings about it all, feelings that would change nothing. The fat guy behind the counter inside the Jiffy Lube told me I was all set to come back in forty five minutes and, in a tone of someone who sincerely cared for my well-being, told me I needed to get my tire

sensors looked at as soon as possible, because they were “definitely broken.” I said “Thanks! I definitely will.” to the fat guy behind the counter, then felt a brief surge of contempt for him for being such a good Samaritan, for pointing out that my tire sensors were probably broken and in turn creating an additional item on my “To Do” list, then started walking down the street. Was he genuinely that nice? The whole point of me going to this Jiffy Lube was to get a birthday gift for my dad at the Lowe’s up the street, as it was strategically located in relation to said Lowe’s and was also within walking distance of my studio apartment. The plan was to strategically buy a fifty dollar gift card while I was waiting for my oil change, to engage in ruthless time management with regard to my father’s birthday celebration preparation, as it was the location, the birthday gift, and the fact that, according to my car’s electronic maintenance system, I had less than two percent of my oil life left, and the fact that my normal body shop was booked well into next week. It was all of that that led to me finding myself at this particular Jiffy Lube on Mineral Springs, in North Providence, Rhode Island, on a late Spring Saturday afternoon at about three pm. To be frank, nothing about the situation could honestly be classified as “my first choice,” as there were plenty of places, both broadly and specifically, where I would have rather been. In fact, if circumstances had differed, if any of the above variables had differed in any sort of way, then I would have taken my car to literally any other type of body shop. I’m no proponent of Jiffy

Lube, but I figured they couldn't fuck up a routine oil change that badly. "How bad could it possibly be?" I thought, then thought briefly about the various challenges, almost all of them excruciatingly arduous, I'd endured with regard to automobiles over the years as I walked down to the intersection of Mineral Springs and Douglas Avenue, where to get to the side of the street the Lowe's was located I'd have to cross diagonally, so I was waiting for the first light to signal me to the other side of Douglas when I got a call from my friend Farhad. I hit the answer button and said "Hi Farhad." "Hi Nick!" he replied cheerily, then told me that he called to tell me that things with his estranged wife were going "really well!" and I thought about how Farhad was only twenty eight, which was young for a divorce, I thought, but then also thought "things happen." and being good friends with Farhad knew in a good amount of detail what "things" had "happened." He said that things were finally moving along and I congratulated him sincerely, he asked me if I wanted to go to "this girl Nisha's housewarming party tonight, I think you may have met her once, it should be a blast!" and I said "Yeah I should be around, but I gotta go, I have to buy my dad a birthday gift at Lowe's while I'm getting my oil changed." then hung up. The drizzle intensified as I paced uphill and entered the mammoth retail outlet, the automatic doors parted for me like I was consumer royalty. "Mmmhmm," I thought, contemplating briefly the pros and cons of Late Capitalism, then nodded my head

approvingly. I was thankful I made it before the drizzle became full-on rain, but was still slightly concerned about the walk back as I strolled through the registers and found the first one that looked open with no line. A younger black girl was behind the register, she reminded me of someone I knew, but I couldn't put my finger on who as I raised my eyebrows inquisitively, leaned in and rested my left palm on the conveyor belt and said "Hi. Can I, uh, get a gift card?" Her eyes lifted slowly from her phone, it looked like she was in the middle of playing a phone game, most likely viral and/or "freemium," and it looked like she'd just lost, as the screen read "Try Again In [Clock Ticking]." "Sure." she said jovially after a moment's pause, then pointed with her left hand over her right shoulder to an aisle on the other side of the store and said "I think we have some over there..." then trailed off and glanced back down at her phone. I looked to my immediate left and noticed three racks of what looked like gift cards, so I lifted one off the rack, held it up, and said "Is this ok?" "Oh. Sure." she said, somewhat gingerly, as she lifted her eyes from her phone again, perhaps expecting me to be en route, meandering aimlessly around the expansive store, searching hopelessly for a rack of gift cards, as opposed to still standing at her register, but now with a legitimate gift card in hand. As we made eye contact I was trying to avoid staring, but continued to believe that I'd seen her somewhere before, then simultaneously began to contemplate if that was racist, or at least abstractly

influenced by systemic prejudice, if I was only thinking that because I subconsciously believed that all black people looked alike, then handed her the gift card. “And how much would you like?” she said, emphatically clearing her throat right around the time she said “you” and I said “Fifty dollars please.” as she looked at the back of my credit card, squinted, then said “Could I just see your ID?” and I said “Thanks, I appreciate it.” as I fumbled through my wallet, then handed her my driver’s license and watched her intently as she matched the two cards, as she held them up side-by-side in front of her face, then ran the card and handed the ID back to me, then said “...and your PO number?” while still staring intently at her screen, not looking at me at all. “I’m sorry?” I said. “I just need a PO number?” she said, now turning her face in my direction. “...A PO number?” I said in a flummoxed register that may have suggested that I didn’t even know what a PO number was. She looked at me with a puzzled, slightly perturbed expression, I thought, possibly speculating that I didn’t even know what a PO number was, and said “Um. Your card is a business card.” then held up the card at my eye level and boldly displayed it in front of my face. I looked at my card again, curiously, and said “Um...no, it’s not.” then she looked at her screen again, curiously, and said “Um...yes, it is.” “Just put N/A!” a guy two persons behind me in line shouted. He was wearing a gray hoodie under a brown leather jacket and possibly held insider info on the Lowe’s POS system, I thought. The

cashier looked at him blankly as he said “Yeah, it happens all the time...” and another second or so passed, then the cashier said “Oh.” then she pressed a button on the register to consummate the sale and handed me my new fifty dollar Lowe’s gift card. I grabbed the card from her hand, politely, I thought, and said “Ok, thanks. Have a good day!” but the receipt was still printing and she said “Can I give you your receipt first?” and her eyebrows rose like tidal waves, her eyeballs protruded out of their sockets just a little as she squeezed the receipt tightly in her left hand, then she ripped the receipt off the printer and handed it to me while simultaneously turning to the next customer, the man in the gray hoodie, her eyebrows still thrustured upward in a parabola formation, similar to a set of late August ocean waves, then I smiled gingerly at the side of her face and walked away from the register and out of the creaky automatic doors. The corporate flower shop sat mired in low traffic under a cluster of ominous grey rainclouds and I thought about how it was, to me, objectively terrible weather to buy flowers. “They might as well just close the fuckin floral section right now. Nobody’s buying any flowers today!” I thought. It wasn’t raining yet, still drizzling, as I walked, gift card in hand, back down the street to pick up my car from the Jiffy Lube, then home to get ready for the housewarming party.



## Chapter 02

When we initially walked in I noted her wearing a flannel button-up shirt with two chandelier-shaped nipple rings dangling underneath it, brushing up against the fabric and I was struck by how decorative they were and vividly recalled a delivery driver I used to work with, back when I answered phones for a few months for a wings-related restaurant in college, telling me how nipple rings could cause permanent nipple damage, then showing me his mangled right nipple in 2006. Farhad and I had just left the housewarming party where we had been drinking heavy amounts of the complimentary jungle juice, and we approached the half-oval shaped seats by the stage as she occupied the stage, not dancing as much as just strutting slowly from patron to patron. "...The fuck is this?" I muttered to myself with both my arms half-bent, T-rex-like, as I stood up behind an empty seat and looked onto the stage, then sat down as she continued to mosey around the stage and I felt what I thought was my blood heat up in a pleausurably ominous fashion, in a way that was vaguely familiar, as she swayed back and forth with bright blue oval eyes, with her skin the tone of the pair of tan corduroys I wore to church in eighth grade, with her head more or less apple-shaped and her nose and upper lip curved up at symmetrical angles, with the curve of her lower back leading into her buttcheeks, the curve shaped similarly to a ski slope, though, full disclosure, I'd never been skiing and still haven't. Her

ass poked out, noticeably to me and, I assumed, the other patrons in the vicinity, from the 1990s grunge-era button up shirt. Already reminiscing somewhat about my college years due to the dancer's complex nipple rings that reminded me of the wings-related restaurant and the delivery driver's mangled right nipple, I sat and recalled a quote-unquote imbroglio I'd endured at age nineteen when I was attending the University of Massachusetts at Amherst with a five-foot-even Costa Rican girl who didn't work at the wings-related restaurant, but did live in my building, a large, twenty two floor edifice where she roomed a floor below me with an African-American girl I was platonically friendly with. She was a year younger than me, her name was Samantha, and I thought she was one of the best looking girls I'd seen up to that point in my life and also that she may have wanted my shit a little bit. I'm not saying she was one hundred percent about me, definitely not, not at all, not even close, but I had a chance, that much, I thought, I knew for sure. And I waited and waited, what felt like eternities stacked on top of one another but was actually just the first month of Spring Semester after I stumbled into a five minute drunken conversation with her in an elevator on a brisk Saturday evening, scared to make a strong move. But in the elevator on that brisk, inebriated Saturday evening, I felt as though there was a genuine spark of mutual interest, a spark that would haunt me for years afterward, solely because I had no game and, most likely I thought, looking up at the girl on the stage with my

arms still half-bent T-rex-like, still didn't. We made eye contact in a way that I felt was somewhat profound. By mid-semester she started dating some Lebanese dude named Dan, who looked pretty much just like me, granted with slightly larger and more defined muscles, but very similar to me in a generic sense, I thought. It was possible that I had a tendency, possibly due to an inveterate shyness, possibly because my virginity extended until I was twenty, possibly because my first sexual experiences after my first fuck were fairly informal, to hold onto fairly negligible bonds. I lived in a silent state of desperation for my last two and a half years attending UMass, defeatedly thinking how that "could've been me," how she just had that type of aura about her, how no one else seemed to have that type of aura about them, and how she ended up dating some meathead who looked just like me. I could barely look at her, much less speak to her, yet the small girl draped in flannel seemed to have a frighteningly similar aura as she walked slowly into my vicinity, kneeled down, bent over, and sensuously inserted my face into her flannel as her nipple rings most likely irreparably pulled apart the natural constituency of her areolas with each progressive second, as she delicately rubbed them both against my blushing cheeks. I had less than ten dollars of one dollar bills crumpled up in my claw-shaped hands, and I held out the few wrinkled bills like a peasant to a shaman as she stuck her hand halfway up uninterested and crawled away, as I perspired at a decent rate under

the eight dollar maroon feathered long-sleeve tee I'd bought at Target three or four years earlier. As she crawled to the other end of the stage I tried to be inconspicuous and successfully caught her profile, then scanned the club for anyone Lebanese-looking in my vicinity. "I wonder if she's Costa Rican?" I thought and after the last few notes of the Stone Temple Pilots song faded out she swept the ones strewn onto the stage into a sizeable stack, then walked slowly back to the back room, bow-legged and unconcerned. She never took the shirt off. I yelled a few phrases across the stage that were more or less one hundred percent a direct result of the amount of jungle juice I'd imbibed earlier in the night and she looked over, I thought in my direction, for a half second or so and I mumbled a non sequitur to myself softly, then pensively looked over to confirm if it seemed like Farhad heard what I muttered. He didn't, he was robotically bouncing his face off of a dancer's buttocks like a basketball on a side stage to my right, I got up and went to pee. The bathroom was designed in a dark grey and black porcelain and realistically probably needed an additional stall as well as two to three extra urinals to properly service the amount of patrons in the club. Waiting in line, with the back of my head lifelessly pressed against a porcelain tile, I melodramatically wondered what Sam was doing right now? What any girl I ever had a crush on was doing right now? What every girl I ever fucked with was doing right now? I approached one of the two urinals, a bowling ball shaped middle

aged man with slicked back light brown hair stood two feet to my left with his schlong descended under his gut, standing a foot and a half further back from the urinal than necessary in my opinion. I waited for thirty seconds or so as I stood with my exposed, motionless penis between the urinal walls, with my shoulders scrunched up toward my earlobes, and no liquid came out of my urethra, so I zipped up and walked over to the sinks, where the paper towel dispenser was clearly broken, to wash my hands.

## Chapter 03

The next day I was plucking a few stray knuckle hairs as I sat at a barren glass table in my studio apartment and it hurt, it was a deep burn, but I'd convinced myself they were a major turnoff to girls and it killed some time before Farhad scooped me up, as we were headed to a house party at his friend Vera's that afternoon. While I was doing it I noticed something that I'd been noticing for the last day or so, that I was grinding my teeth. It seemed almost subconscious, the grinding, and I wondered if I was just starting to grind them, or if I was just starting to notice myself grinding them, and I was concerned I'd been doing grave damage to my teeth for a potentially long time as I sat with my mouth awkwardly open in an attempt to stop grinding, as I looked at myself in the mirror and noted that I looked mentally challenged. "Don't do that at Vera's." I said aloud with my mouth still awkwardly ajar, making a mental note for myself. Vera was a few years older than Farhad and I, she'd known Farhad's family for a long time, briefly dated Farhad's older brother, and Farhad's mom loved her, "Ooh, I love Vera!" she'd say whenever Farhad mentioned her, but although Vera and Farhad were close friends, they weren't having sex with each other to the best of my knowledge, and that was a legitimate concern because if Vera and Farhad had sex it probably wouldn't have gone over well with Farhad's brother, becoming eskimo brothers with his own brother, it may have been a major

issue. While waiting I walked over to the sole window in my studio, it looked out over Mineral Springs, the main road that ran through North Providence, which was a town that arguably should have been reimaged as a district of Providence, and saw a guy who wasn't a cop but wore a North Providence Police t-shirt and bike helmet biking up the crumbling sidewalks, heard an ambulance siren screaming through the clear blue skies from the abutting housing projects, and nodded to an elder guido, Louie, the person my landlord called when I locked myself out of my apartment a month after moving in, as he wore an "Italia" track jacket with no shirt underneath, then I gazed up the street to the top of my block where a muted social club sat and briefly wondered what would happen if I ever tried to go inside, and briefly mused about hearing a rumor that beers were actually really cheap at social clubs, then smiled. There were two Chinese restaurants, both above average, within five hundred feet of my apartment complex, which sat above a strip mall that consisted of exclusively of "mom and pop" shops, and two teenage Puerto Rican kids across the street were standing on a balcony and loudly talking shit to a chubby, pasty Subway manager in his thirties. I glanced to the right and saw what was the equivalent of a yard sale being conducted in the Taco Bell parking lot, it looked pretty impromptu and probably violated some aspect of Taco Bell's corporate governance, I thought, and thought briefly about how I could've gone for a Doritos Taco Loco, but also how I

never ate Taco Bell before midnight, how I needed to start eating less Taco Bell. My nextdoor neighbor, Donna, stood in the Taco Bell lot, right next to the main table of the yard sale. She was hefty and epileptic, and also possibly mentally challenged, I thought. She marvelled at an item as she picked it up from the fold out table and held it in her right hand, above her head, and examined it intensely. Her dog Max, who was professionally trained to accompany persons with epilepsy, stood insouciantly beside her. As I gazed at Donna with muted interest, I suddenly remembered that an acquaintance of mine, Mike, who was recently diagnosed with stage four brain cancer, was also scheduled to attend Vera's party and recalled that I'd experienced somewhat of a falling out with him a few months prior, due to somewhat of a "he said, she said" argument I had with his now ex-girlfriend and that, in the interim, I'd heard he'd gone legally blind because of the tumor pressing incessantly against the back of his eyes. My enthusiasm for the party waned slightly. Donna lifted Max's leash in a spurt of excitement, the dog shifted into high alert, maintained an air of professionalism as she yelled "I'll take it!"



## Chapter 04

We walked into Vera's raised ranch at around quarter past five, I somewhat giddily decided to wear a white t-shirt I got for free from Planet Fitness inside-out along with eight year old khaki shorts that went up to my mid-thigh region, but the print from the Planet Fitness tee was, unfortunately, still visible even with the t-shirt inside out and I, unfortunately, dropped a chocolate covered strawberry on the shirt just a few minutes after we entered the house. I said "Ohhh, chocolate covered strawberries!" when I noticed a platter of chocolate covered strawberries in the kitchen and I reached to pick one up, but didn't have a firm grip on it as I lifted it toward my mouth, as I thought I saw Vera make an "Oooh, I'm embarrassed for you right now, you haven't even said hello to anyone yet." chagrined type of muted expression, as the chocolate strawberry was suspended in air. Despite the relative warmth of the late Spring afternoon in Providence it was, unfortunately, about forty degrees out at Vera's house, as her house was on the water and the party was primarily on the deck and in the backyard. When we walked onto the deck via a sliding door I noticed a medley of liquor and beer on a pull out table, next to this medley was a stack of red solo cups, and I thought briefly about the proper time to wait between stepping out onto the deck and pouring myself a drink, then reached for a cup but immediately heard a shrill voice utter 'Sup bro?' behind me. I turned halfway

around with my right hand still grazing the top cup in the stack. “Sup bro?” the voice repeated as it got closer. “...name’s Blake.” A guy named Blake stood in front of me. He was a Caucasian male, most likely in his late twenties as well, I thought, wearing a hemp necklace, a maroon American Eagle t-shirt, a “Beavers: University of South Carolina” white snapback hat backwards, and khaki pants and sandals. “Sup man?” I replied politely, thinking vaguely about the amount of alternate universes that would most likely need to be birthed until one existed where Blake and I were genuine friends, not necessarily in a negative way, but rather thinking purely mathematically, and we shook hands after awkwardly attempting to pound fists. Blake stepped toward me and the cup I was now holding and said “What’s your name? I’ll put it on a cup for you.” He had a black sharpie in the breast pocket of his t-shirt and pulled it out. “Um. Nick, but-” I said and he said “Not a problem bro!” then wrote “Nick” in cursive on the cup after plucking the cup from my loosely gripped fist, then said “You know, I don’t wanna have people losing their cups, or not knowing who’s cup is who, and then the cups are lying around and we’re wasting a bunch a cups...” and I thanked him and held a red solo cup with my name written in cursive on it. After Blake walked away, I poured the cup slightly less than half full with the sky blue bottle of vodka on the table, then filled the rest of the cup with ice cubes and lemon flavored seltzer. There were no lemons on the table. Mike sat at the table behind me, he was with an

attractive girl that I recognized because she was the on-and-off girlfriend of one of Mike's friends, he was also an acquaintance of mine, but I didn't know him well enough to know his on-and-off girlfriend all that well, or well enough to make a point of saying hello as soon as I saw her on the deck, I kind of doubted that she knew who I was, she looked a little like Jessica Alba, or someone told me they thought she looked like Jessica Alba back when Jessica Alba was more popular, and I agreed and in the interim years following the conversation continued to tell people "Yeah, [her name] is attractive, she looks a little like Jessica Alba, right?" whenever she came up in conversation. Mike's face was bloated nearly beyond recognition, maybe three times the size I remembered it being pre-cancer, and his hair was disheveled, but not the in the intentionally disheveled way he used to style it, and a look of permanent bewilderment was scarred across his comportment. "What's up man?" I said as I walked over gingerly and sat in an open seat next to him while making muted eye contact with a person I didn't know sitting in the seat next to the empty seat. "...it's Nick." "Heeeeyyyyyy..." the y's of his elongated "hey" faded out, I thought, sadly. "Great to see you." he said and stared blankly ahead. "Well..." he paused, he gazed in my vicinity and said "not see you, but you know what I mean..." and we both laughed, him genuinely, I reticently. "How you doing?" I said, clearing my throat slightly and he said "Hanging in there." then "How's the new job?"

after a slight hiccup in conversation, and as soon as he said “new job” I chagrined slightly, then felt guilty about chagrining, then remembered he couldn’t see me, then felt guilty about remembering he couldn’t see me. “Fuckin sucks, but it’s ok.” I said and Mike chuckled, possibly unaware of my sincerity, and said “Well, I’m happy for you, man. Heard you got your own place now, too?” I didn’t detect any ill-will regarding what I considered to be our minor falling out in his tone, which was reassuring, but the jarring change in his physical state since going blind seemed to overwhelm the ill-will reassurance. I looked over the balcony and saw a small group of people playing cornhole in the backyard and took particular note of Alfonso, who was a good friend of Farhad’s who I found entertaining, they worked together at a local casino where Farhad worked as a high stakes blackjack dealer, where Alfonso worked as a highly regarded waiter with an opulent set of clientele, standing confidently with his hand on his hip as he started sketching the contours of what looked like his new boyfriend in the cool air with his drink hand, laughing joyously to a group of people I didn’t know. I walked down to the backyard and made a potentially ill-advised cornhole joke and laughed as a few other people, including Alfonso, chuckled, and I felt a moderate amount of relief as I scanned the backyard for Blake. Farhad wore a track jacket and was talking close to Alfonso’s face and pensively said “So...what do you think?” Alfonso stepped back half a pace, he brushed his

short black hair forward confidently with his right palm, then he stroked his closely cropped beard, his belly pressed against his tight black t-shirt and his nipples were visibly hard. He was one hundred percent Italian-American and smiled insincerely at Blake, or I silently hoped that his smile toward Blake was insincere, then turned back to Farhad and said "What did I tell you about Danielle? ...Do you remember Danielle? Before all of this happened!" He clapped his hands together, somewhat violently, in front of Farhad's face and I walked over, patted Farhad's shoulder, and consolingly said "Don't blame yourself." as Farhad's eyes scanned Alfonso's face for a silver lining. There were fifteen to twenty people at the party, the weather was making it difficult for me to genuinely enjoy myself, and I also felt severely underdressed and also possibly acutely depressed. Farhad and I left after about an hour, after about three vodka and seltzers, and Vera said "I can't believe you guys are leaving already!" more scornful toward Farhad than myself, I thought, as she stood in the middle of three girls I didn't know, but didn't feel one way or the other about not knowing. I said bye to Mike after we climbed the stairs back up to the deck and made eye contact with his stare that still seemed only empty and jarring, but only solipsistically jarring, I thought, in the sense that it only made me think about how I'd somehow neglected to feel properly bad about his condition, and also how I'd probably continue to do so. The female acquaintance made small talk with a few

people I didn't know in the vicinity as he said "Hey man it was great to see you." slightly delayed, then said "We should hang out soon." and I said "Yeah, definitely." and imagined calling his house phone, his mother answering in a tone that implicated I was selfish for allowing a "minor falling out" to occur with a person who had been diagnosed with stage four brain cancer, then reluctantly handing him the phone as I paced back and forth nervously in my apartment, strenuously and anxiously waiting for her to hand him the phone with no idea of what we could possibly discuss once he actually got on the phone. The fact three-fourths of my legs were exposed in the brisk forty something degree breeze was excruciating. A person I'd considered a decent friend for some time was dying a slow death and I was reticent to make a simple phone call. As we walked back to Farhad's Nissan I began to admit to myself that I'd been thinking about the girl from the other night all afternoon, the girl that reminded me, in aura as well as physicality, of Samantha from UMass. "Go post up there!" I thought to myself optimistically, in the tone of a motivational speaker that's always, ultimately, condescending and insincere at bottom as I opened the passenger door. "Fuck that, I can't possibly be that lame." I counter-thought as I sat in the seat, but then thought "Drake does it and doesn't he, like, get mad pussy?" and briefly re-considered it as I put on my seat belt.

## Chapter 05

I sat in the passenger seat of Farhad's car as the setting sunlight peered into my squinted eyes and onto my body and I felt warm for the first time all day. Farhad was consumed with his separation, Alfonso was consumed with his new boyfriend, Mike was blind, dying, and hoping to hang out with me soon, and I'd just heard earlier that afternoon that Solomon, a rotund six foot two half-Filipino, half-Latvian ex-bouncer I grew up with, was laid up in the ICU with both of his legs swollen to the size of oak trees, apparently from "high blood pressure." and I thought "Man, he's not even thirty yet, who'd have thought?" while admittedly using all of the above anecdotes solely for the purpose of justifying my loneliness, in turn convincing myself to go to a strip club by myself, then thought about two years earlier when we sat at a bar by ourselves, Solomon and I, with Solomon's buttcheeks slightly rubbing against my hip, swallowing the barstool like a green grape thrown into an open mouth, when he told me that I'd "never guess" what his doctor told him that week. "What'd he say?" I said in a wry monotone before Solomon said "He said I'm 'morbidly obese.'" I started aggregating the unrelated anecdotes in my head and began to poorly construct an argument for drowning my sorrows solo, possibly at a gentleman's club? as it seemed like drinking by myself was no longer just an option to benignly consider, but rather a burden thrust upon my shoulders. "Everyone I

know is either relatively happy or utterly miserable.” I thought “But what about me?” I thought “What’s wrong with me?” I thought. “What is it that’s preventing me from being relatively happy or utterly miserable, too?” I thought. I could be, couldn’t I? I could be relatively happy or utterly miserable. And, if I could, what better place to become relatively happy or utterly miserable than a Providence city gentleman’s venue? At the time it made sense, Alfonso was happy with his new boyfriend, so I should go to a strip club by myself to see a girl that reminded me of a girl I had a crush on in college, almost a decade earlier. At the same time I felt an intense, unrelenting amount of disgust with myself for even contemplating such things, such things were so beneath me, I thought, yet also completely in line with my character. I stared at the sun ahead of me, bright red and bleeding into the also reddening sky, it seemed gigantic and otherworldly, as it dipped its grundle into a puffy, magenta-tinged cluster of clouds, as we continued to drive right into the red horizon that never got closer, as I watched intently as the light bounced off the horizon like a few million basketballs bouncing stochastically at a youth summer basketball camp. “Maybe I’ll post up Patrick Ewing...” I thought. “What’s the worst that could happen?”



## Chapter 06

When I got back to my studio apartment I sprawled out on my bed, flicked on the TV, and began watching, mid-episode, the episode of South Park where the Chinese restaurant owner with a politically incorrect accent keeps screaming “Goddamn Mongorians!” as a group of Mongolians repeatedly ruin his business, Shitty Wok Chicken. I was thoroughly lifeless, I was beginning to seriously reconsider attending a strip club alone for the first time in my life, I was beginning to feel a little scared, but was also moderately amused by the episode of South Park when I got a phone call from Pry, a good friend of mine who was five foot six with shoes on, in contrast to myself as five foot ten with shoes on, and studying to be a lawyer. He said “Sup-” and I said “Hey Pry wh-” slowly, drawl-like, as I held the phone fetally against my ear and he said, interrupting me “-you pussy?” and I finished saying “-at’s up?” saying “-at’s up?” at the same time that Pry said “pussy.” According to Pry, he was calling because he was with his dad, Dave, at the strip club off Cicilline Street, the same one I’d been considering attending, and called me because he thought that I might be interested in joining them. “Fortuitous...” I thought to myself with a Cheshire grin as my tired eyelids retracted slowly like an automatic garage door. “Yeah I’m pretty tired...” I said, faux yawning and stretched the arm that wasn’t holding the phone up in an exaggerated way as I continued to

speaking. "But maybe I'll come through." I said, then threw on some pants and a light jacket and made my way over. When I walked in Pry was wearing a long pea coat, it looked like a trench coat at glance, which made him look a little creepy, which made him fit right in, and Dave was sitting at the bar buying shots, he was two or three inches shorter than Pry, abutting rotund, and consistently jovial in my experience with him, which admittedly usually involved us imbibing excessive amounts of alcohol. He worked as a bond broker downtown and either made an obscene amount of money or was exceptionally poor at budgeting his money, and bought me a shot and a beer when he saw me and I thought "What a great way to start the night." and allowed a genuine smile to half-appear across my face as the order arrived. The clubs in Providence were mostly mob-backed (extorted) I thought, which was based almost entirely on an article I read in 2010 that reported members of the New England Mafia were arrested for extorting strip clubs in Providence, apparently the heart of the New England Mafia had historically been based on Federal Hill in Providence. The downstairs of the club was one large square, maybe more rectangular, room with two hallways shooting out of the southwest corner, one for the restrooms, and one for champagne rooms, which were where the longer, more private lap-dances occurred. Five or so years previous, Pry, Dave, and I sat at that very same bar, when drinking legally was still relatively exciting for Pry and I, and Dave explained what

he viewed as the general principles of attendance. "This is a gentleman's club." he said, "You have to be a gentleman here. This place, it's like a neighborhood bar, but with tits." and I nodded somewhat profoundly, then the bartender, in response to a comment I'd just made about the tastiness of the lemon she put in my vodka-seltzer, said "I love the fruit they get here too, but nobody will tell me where they get it from!" then smiled and shook her head.

## Chapter 07

About twenty minutes after I walked in and met up with Pry and Dave the girl from the other night, the one that I had just recently admitted to myself that I had been thinking about all day, strutted out and stopped to talk to a bouncer and as she appeared, as I perceived her appearance, I started to feel slightly euphoric, as if I'd hatched some incredibly complicated scheme that was going just as I planned. "So yeah," Pry continued, "I definitely think he's gay." in reference to a mutual friend we discussed banally and Dave leaned in and grinned and said "You think?!" juicily, then we all said that if he was gay that we were definitely cool with that, that there was no problem with it either way, obviously, and we all nodded our heads. However, the entire time I was glancing to my left as she continued to speak with the person I assumed was a bouncer, I noted her buttcheeks enveloping a dental floss thin thong, protruding outward and upward into the desolate club space and felt as though maybe I should have been looking elsewhere, but also thought that, given the venue, maybe I was acting appropriately. That night she had the gelled, curly black hair and wore what I estimated to be eight inch transparent heels that catapulted her to about five foot two and I noticed her bright blue eyes as more of a focal point that night, noting that her eyes were shaped extremely ovally, but acutely pointed at the ends in a way that made them seem "deep" and/or "seductive."

“Damn...” I thought morosely, taken aback by her physical features as I continued to sneak glances at her conversing, as I noted that her posture was very professional and began to brainstorm ways to talk to her, and began to strongly believe she was too attractive to even speak to, even though at the time I considered myself a pretty good looking guy if you were into body hair. I started to feel a concerning amount of anxiety and started chugging the cans of Coors Light that Dave continued buying me at an above average pace. Eventually, she walked onto the main stage and I drank one and half cans of beer in the first three-quarters of the first song, assuming, correctly, that I needed to be discombobulated enough to stumble myself up there without perspiring too profusely. “This girl is...” I coughed. “mad hot. I gotta go throw some ones at her, I think.” I noted to Pry and Dave before I approached the stage, where I sat a few chairs down from an older, fairly well-built, Caucasian man in a lumberjack type outfit. A minute or so later she crawled over to me and said “Hi.” softly and I replied “Hey.” bluntly, fidgeting in my seat slightly and she said “What’s your name?” and I said “Um, Nick.” and she said “Hi Nick. I’m Aniah.” She smiled, genuinely I thought but I was most likely incorrect I thought, and leaned her body over into my chest, then told me I needed a thicker coat. She had no idea I was wearing thigh high shorts six hours earlier. “Yeah, it’s kind of cold out...for this time of year I mean.” I said while also thinking “Aniah. I like that name. I like

that name a lot.” without necessarily realizing that it was obviously a stage name as she suggested a bubble coat. “Not a chance.” I thought and nodded my head agreeably as the conversation continued innocuously enough, transactionally enough, and our eyes met for a half-second. “Can I come hang out with you later? If you’re not busy?” she asked and I said “Sure, if you want.” coolly, then placed a few one dollar bills insouciantly onto her left buttcheek, noting that her skin was quite soft while also recalling an instance where I noted another girl’s skin was “so soft” and Pry making fun of me for it, crooning “Girl. Yo skin is sooo soft” in an R&B baritone whenever I walked into a room for years afterward, as I stood up and contorted myself around her body, and in a restrained giddiness made my way back over to Pry and Dave. “Another round of Coors Lights!” I shouted, waving around my index finger in a circular motion. “Yeah!” Dave shouted jubilantly, with the spirit of Dionysus resonant in his voice. A few minutes later, leaning against the bar, I saw Aniah get off stage and go and sit with an older whiskey-scented man, or an older man who I thought looked whiskey-scented, and I looked over toward her as she made eye contact with me when the whiskey-scented man looked away as Dave looked at me and said “Whoa, what are you doing?” in a concerned tone, which was somewhat concerning because Dave was rarely concerned about anything when we were drinking, and I shrugged my shoulders in a slightly embarrassed way, but also somewhat

indifferently, and just tried to be more inconspicuous with my glances moving forward. She walked away with the other guy a minute later and an oppressive sense of unavoidable calamity enveloped every organ in my entire body. "Well that's that..." I thought. "UMass all over." then thought things like "Oh well." and "Honestly, I'm probably better off." and "Definitely, without a doubt, better off." and "That type a situation?!" then scoffed to myself in a relieved way, not feeling relieved in the least. Ten minutes later she came over to where we stood and Dave put his hands around her without physically touching her body parts, then tilted his head back and said "Whoa! Who's this cutie?!" "Hi, I'm Aniah." she said as she stood motionless in front of the three of us. "Ohhh, I love your eyes!" Dave said enthusiastically, stilling standing a few inches in front of her. "These?" she replied and shrugged uncomfortably. "...They're contacts." then chuckled either kind of nervously or slightly embarrassed, I thought. I wasn't about to lose the respect I'd built up for myself as a person and politely said "Listen, I respect you and your work, but I just thought you should know, while I can't speak for my colleagues, I'm, personally, probably not gonna do a dance tonight." "You wanna drink Aniah?" Dave asked. "That's fine..." she said. "and yes please. I'll have a Kahlua and Malibu." "You want a White Cuban, Aniah?!" a female bartender barked in a husky voice and Aniah nodded her head.

## Chapter 08

“Look at this handsome guy.” Dave pinched my cheek performatively and made a kissy face as he waddled back and forth on his barstool, as I also waddled back and forth, but I was standing up while waddling I found myself, somewhat uncomfortably, standing face to face with Aniah more than once during the night, as she was like a boomerang the whole night, but very polite, and I was in a cement state of incredulity that she actually kept coming back around to hang out, even though, to be fair, it did seem to be a pretty slow night, and a few times, a select few times when she came back around I felt like she was staring into my eyes in a non-transactional manner, but also tried to be careful about reading too much into it, especially because, even though I kept saying “I’m not even drunk yet!” to Dave and Pry, I knew on some level that I was thoroughly inebriated. “Yeah, I am a handsome guy.” I thought with select reservations. I looked down and our eyes locked, again, briefly, I may have pulled away prematurely, possibly rudely? or it could have been her. She whispered “You’re a nice guy, right?” to me and I said “Of course.” only brief considering the possible motivations behind her, or anyone else, asking me, or anyone else, if I’m/they’re a “nice guy.” Other than that, Dave did most of the talking. She was Vietnamese-American, she had a four year old son, she was born in Long Beach, but spent some time in Minnesota before growing up north



of Boston, her underwear was riding up her ass. “Ugh, I think I need a new pair of underwear.” she said and gently tugged at the “underwear” that comprised approximately fifty percent of her outfit. “Minnesota?!” Dave exclaimed. “I know, right? It was terrible!” she said with more amicability than I’d sensed in her previous statements and I thought “Wow, Dave really knows how to be conversational.” and began to ponder, motivated at least somewhat by uncontrollable jealousy, ways that I could be equally conversational. Pry put on his trenchcoat-esque peacoat and I looked at him, it felt like my eyeballs were bobbing in their sockets, and said “What are you leaving?” and he said “Fuck this. This place depresses me.” and after a fair amount of premeditation I told him he looked like he was about to shoot up a high school and he didn’t audibly reply, but seemed to register the comment. “Eh, I gotta work in the morning anyway.” Dave said and hopped down from his stool, then Pry glanced at Aniah, then glanced at me, and said “...You staying?” They left and we sat. The club was desolate, another dancer came over, she looked to me like may have been Asian, but I thought Aniah was Costa Rican, or at least she acutely reminded me of a girl who was Costa Rican, and had just discovered she was actually Vietnamese, so I didn’t want to make any assumptions about the other dancer’s ethnicity as she looked at me quizzically and said “You from Johnston?” and I said “Nah, sorry.” after a slight pause, then she said “...You look like you could be from Johnston.” I took

a fake sip of beer, then said "Yeah, sometimes people say that to me. I'm actually three-quarters Greek though." reason being that the insinuation of saying someone "looks like they could be from Johnston" was, generally speaking, that they were one hundred percent Italian. "I'm from Johnston." she said in a tone that suggested she was clarifying an inquiry, still staring at me blankly with regard to my comment that "I'm actually three-quarters Greek." then Aniah interjected "Girl, have I told you how much I admire you for riding that motorcycle into work?!" then the other dancer adopted an excited tone, equally excited as Aniah's, and said "Girl, that's nothing! You should see when I ride on it with my son!" They both cackled and Aniah said "Yeah, I rode one a long time ago. I had a crush on this boy..." her eyes drifted as if she was experiencing the memory for the first time as she spoke. "He drove like an asshole though! After him I said 'Never again.'" then she rubbed her hands together like she was wiping away the memory. Aniah and the other dancer discussed their general thoughts on motorcycles for another few minutes, then the dancer from Johnston meandered to the back, then, maybe a minute or so later, a slurred set of vocals echoed loudly behind us, wailing "Lift up your shirt! ...Lemme see it! ...Yeah you won't cause you got a bomb unda theeuh!" and I looked back and saw an Indian guy sitting behind us, and behind him I saw a morbidly obese white man with a forward combover of noticeably dyed red hair and a gut that commanded his

entire torso sitting at the bar. His chin was one with his neck, he was yelling, presumably, at the Indian dude from a few feet away. The Indian dude shrugged at me incredulously, in a way that I interpreted as saying "Can you believe this?!" as possibly a type of plea for solidarity with me, as the old guy continued to shout slightly varied versions of the same insults, and I shrugged at him, more or less apathetic, then stopped paying attention and turned back to Aniah, then the Indian guy walked past us wearing a noticeably disgusted expression about a minute later the same set of vocals shouted "Hey. ...yeah. You! ...Why don't you lift up ya shirt! ...Yeah, you won't because you gotta bomb unda theeuh! ...Piece a shit!" and I looked around pensively and confirmed there was no one else left in the immediate vicinity. "Is he shouting that at me?" I said and forced a nervous laugh as Aniah shrugged. I chuckled again and said "I mean, full disclosure, I was actually baptized Orthodox Christian, but Greece was also actually a territory of the Ottoman Empire for literally hundreds of years, so I don't know... I don't know if you're familiar with the Armenian genocide at all..." then I motioned to the bartender as I leaned onto the bar and said "You hear this guy?" in an incredulous whisper, then lowered my register even lower and nodded at the fat old guy as he finished crooning "bomb unda theeuh!" again and said "I mean. I'm not offended, but, you know...somebody else could be." and the bartender

nodded her head and matter-of-factly motioned to the bouncer standing twenty or so feet behind her.

## Chapter 09

"Um...so what's your real name?" I said. "Ummm..." she said, looking up at me from the stool she sat on, I was standing up, leaning over her somewhat. "Sophia." she said. "Sophia..." I thought. "Does sound very...Vietnamese...to me..." and I looked at her somewhat blankly for a second or two as I thought this and she looked back at me, possibly inferring that I was thinking about how her name didn't seem "...Vietnamese to me," and I said "Ummm...so what's your number?" and she looked around skeptically and cautiously surveyed the scene, then whispered "Giving out numbers is, um, frowned upon..." and I pulled out my phone and said "I'll act like I'm typing something in my phone while we're talking and you just tell it to me?" She hesitated to reply and, while I was waiting for said reply, I unlocked my phone and started drunkenly mashing keys, then she began to recite a number. "...Oh 978?!" I said, jovially surprised for a reason that eluded me, then said "You're all the way from north of Boston?" and she said "Yeah I told you that already!" abutting offended, I thought, and I said "Oh, ok." in a monotone and she said "What's your real name?" somewhat slyly, I thought, after she finished reciting the last seven digits of her number and I recited my name, first and last, and she recoiled at the gibberish-like nature of my last name, then said "How do you say that again?" and I thought "Wow, she wants to know more about my name?!" then repeated

the name as she continued to look at me blankly and I, possibly preemptively, said "Nevermind." then shrugged, feeling somewhat ashamed, reflecting back to my adolescence when my peers, many of Anglo-Saxon descent, used to make fun of my name and create portmanteaus by combining it with certain homophobic slurs. I said "It's a stupid name anyway, you know? My grandfather actually changed his last name to Perry, my Uncle too, actually. You know?" and she said "Well, maybe if we ever meet up you can teach me how to pronounce it." smiling slightly while refraining from making eye contact as I smiled probably ear to ear while glancing down at her sitting insouciantly on the stool, then said "I mean, sure, I could probab-" "Because we're about to close." she said as the club DJ began his end-of-night public service announcements in a loud 1950s-era diction, broadcast loudly over the club speakers, he said "Laaast calll. Yes, that's right ladies and gentlemen! One last call for alcohol! Step right up to the bar! We have the beauuuuuu-tee-full Cindyyyy on the main drag, and the st-uuuuuuuuunnnnnng Denise on the side bar! Ready. Willing. Andddd able to serve beer! Wine! And the mixed drinks of your choosing! Cash only please." It was 12:52am and given the anachronistic nature of his diction I began to wonder what the DJ looked like, I imagined him looking similar to a stock main character in a black and white TV show, then thought about a Jackie Gleason or Leave It To Beaver character DJing at a twenty first century strip

club in Providence, Rhode Island and smirked for a second or two, then Sophia smirked back at me and I considered sharing what I was really smirking about, but then decided against it, finding it too awkward of an anecdote to adequately explain in my thoroughly inebriated state, and let her smile at me while presumably thinking that I was actually smiling at her. I'd been nursing the same beer for at least twenty minutes and it now tasted like urine. As our conversation was winding down I noted two scars on Sophia's body, one just barely visible under the necklace she wore and another one, more visible and fairly serious looking, on her right shoulder. They were deep enough that the skin healed in a fucked up way, and I asked her about them and she said "They're from a long time ago...but I don't talk about them." in a soft, but serious tone, and I nodded. When I got back to my car I texted her my number, but after I hit send I noticed that I spelled her name "Sophie" instead of "Sophia," so I sent a follow-up text that read just "\*Sophia".

## Chapter 10

Ideally, I would have moved to New York or something cool after I finished college, but my parents were, I believed, pretty much broke after the 2008 financial crisis, and at the time I was really bad with managing money and somewhat addicted to drinking alcohol at bars, and also had a few legal issues that constrained my ability to move and hampered my bank accounts. For the record, although I would have loved to move to New York, it eventually began to seem like moving to a gentrified Brooklyn was, if not ill-advised, wholly contemptible, and I soon realized that I'd actually rather exist in obscurity, in an intellectual solitary confinement in the rancid armpit of New England than drinking all kinds of flavored craft beer with gentrified hipsters that marvel at paying exorbitant rent prices on the same blocks that Jay-Z sold crack on in the eighties, "freelancing" while their parents wire them rent money, how could I live like that? I would have never survived. Having said that, in the interest of disclosure, I should note that I chose the only path probably more worthy of contempt than moving to Brooklyn. I attended graduate school. About a year before I moved to Mineral Springs, about a year after I'd finished a one year stint on administrative probation for a non-violent crime I'd allegedly committed, I quit my twelve dollar an hour job as a stockroom manager at a local Puma outlet because I "had another job," then abruptly quit another job I got



through Farhad, as a Life Insurance Salesman for New York Life, right after I passed my licensing exam. Farhad was justifiably pissed, but I told him there was nothing I could do, which wasn't true, but in my defense it seemed true at the time. Sitting in a training room with a group of people I wasn't sure if I should pity or despise, finding myself pitying myself and despising everyone else, I realized I wasn't capable of selling working class people what I broad-brush indicted as dubious financial products, that as much as I wanted to make a lot of money and pay off my student loans and live a lavish life of pure hedonism, something about the whole thing disagreed with me, so I was unemployed for about six months after that and lived a thoroughly hobo-like existence in my parents' basement, so it was exceptionally good timing when I got a job as essentially a billing clerk, technically "staff accountant," in Massachusetts because I was just about out of the money I'd saved from my student loan disbursements and increasingly desperate to move out of my parents' basement. I immediately moved into the studio apartment on Mineral Springs because it was the only spot I could afford and also afford to go out a few times a week, as I was only making forty thousand dollars a year, plus I owed just about twice as much in student loans. The congratulatory air, however, from my friends and family regarding getting a corporate job, apparently my first "real job," was thoroughly disconcerting and, indirectly, let me know what people really thought of me

when I was unemployed, and/or was working stocking sneakers, and/or was bussing tables. In short, what people thought of me for just a tad over a quarter of a century. Beyond the oppressive boredom of an eight to five work day, the congratulatory mood of the people closest to me depressed me severely and made me question if life was even worth living at all. "Great," I thought, sitting alone in my studio apartment, staring despondently at a blank white wall, cooking a four dollar steak on a Wal-Mart brand frying pan drunk at two am "now I have a real job and everybody loves me."

## Chapter 11

The next morning I was unironically playing the John Tesh “NBA on NBC Theme Song” on my phone at a white-clothed table, waiting for Farhad in an empty booth at a new Bolivian / Peruvian restaurant on Chalkstone Avenue that was gaining a sterling reputation around the Greater Providence Metro Region. As the song was concluding Farhad walked in and I said “Sup?” without lifting my head while closing the YouTube app on my phone. “Hi.” he said as his Gucci wire-rimmed glasses floated above his bushy brown-ish beard, he looked miserable and sat down. Farhad and I had been friends for about ten years, we met as busboys at a country club where, at first, we both thought the other was Mexican from Mexico, then realized we were actually the only two busboys who weren’t Mexican from Mexico, and also the only two that cut our own hair. He had a high fade at the time, mine was a lower temp. Farhad was born in Afghanistan, but both of his parents tragically perished in a car accident when he was still an infant and, following the tragedy, with no family state-side, he was put up for adoption and landed with a middle class Sicilian-American family in Johnston. Early on we realized that we both gave ourselves haircuts every one to three days and both, begrudgingly, admitted the other was capable of giving a decent fade. In addition, at the time, I was recording spoken word poems that people were misconstruing as raps, which I resented and also

felt deeply uncomfortable about, and Farhad was making beats. He was formally trained on the keyboard and/or piano, but his beats were mostly poppy synth-based layered loops, but he'd stopped making beats since separating from his wife. I suggested Mimosas, Farhad suggested Screwdrivers, and we ordered two Screwdrivers, the place specialized in breakfast and brunch buffets, so we walked to the buffet area where they had a good selection of fish, including tilapia, which I thought was an underrated, and underrepresented, fish, that my uncle would later tell me was a "dirty fish." They cooked everything on the spot, you just threw whatever you wanted into a bowl. As we walked over to the buffet area Farhad said "Ayyyyyyyyy," longingly as he picked up a pair of tongs placed in front of a container of mortadella, as we stood at opposite ends of the omelette section. Farhad said "Ayyyyyyyyyy," longingly as he dropped a modest scoop of the heavily processed meat into the bowl and began to exhibit physical tics that made me believe he was about to start discussing his estranged wife, then said "I think I might still be in love with her..." then paused then turned in my direction and said "What do you think? ...What would you do? ...If you were me?" and I said "Dude, honestly," I dropped three chunks of tilapia into my bowl fifteen feet west of him, didn't make eye contact, and said confidently "I think, given everything, you should probably...just dip?" to which Farhad immediately replied "I don't wanna stop seeing her though." to which I immediately thought,

incredulously “Then why’d you bother asking me the question?” and also “Why am I even indulging this question?” although I admittedly took a perverse pleasure in indulging in those types of questions. Farhad was three months younger than I was, but was also relatively inexperienced in that he’d been with his wife for ten years and had minimal adult dating experience outside of his time with her, I actually had reason to believe his only extramarital sexual experience was a blowjob he received when he was seventeen, so I made salient, rational points that I personally wouldn’t have taken into account when it came to my relationships, and Farhad agreed with me. He told me my advice was the right advice, that, as hard as it was to hear, that I was absolutely right. “This lettuce looks a little brown...” I said, holding a pair of tongs that held a few stray pieces of brown lettuce in the air, just in case Farhad had an urge to share an opinion on said lettuce, and decided to forego putting any lettuce in my omelette. Maybe ten minutes later he was scrolling through what looked like days of texts sitting next to me as I sat content with a mouthful of tilapia. “Look at this! Look at this right here.” he said and pointed at his phone and anxiously rotated it into my periphery. “What does that say?” his tone was legal, but also desperate and broken. He read the text bubble he was pointing at out loud before I could fully read the text. “9:51am: ‘i’ll let you know when i get back.’” he said, then closed the text and we both took a moment of silence to morosely glance at the time

displayed on his phone. It was 11:30am the next day. "Damn..." I said and he said "Do you think I should tell her I drove by her mom's house this afternoon?" and I said "Probably not." and he said "Well, I'm gonna." and I said "Ok." and he said "I'm not the type of person to lie about things," in a genuine tone, although we both knew that he was, generally speaking, the type of person to lie about all types of things more or less all of the time, but the state of shock and hurt that he was enduring apparently turned him into a temporary ascetic, which wasn't necessarily uncommon, I thought, having endured similar episodes myself. He popped some mortadella into his mouth with his index finger and thumb and said "If I drive by her mom's house she deserves to know it. I'm not gonna lie." he chewed in silence for a second "I'm gonna tell her how I feel because that's who I am. And she needs to know that." I said "You should tell her how you feel." as I continued to eat my meal at a normal pace, without necessarily allowing the conversation to slow my pace in any meaningful way, then he said "I called her, too. Did I tell you that?" and I said "That's big." and he said "I called her and I left a message. I said, 'Hi, it's Farhad. It's about 5:30.' By the way, I was in her parking lot when I was calling, I said 'Hi, it's Farhad. It's about 5:30. You know, I just wanted to call you and make sure you got home ok. Give me a call, or shoot me a text, whatever's more convenient, you know, whenever you have a chance.'" and I said "That's big." paused, then said "If you hadn't

reached out I would've said, you know...maybe she didn't text you because she was tired. Or whatever." I paused again, this time to finish chewing, then said "But if you called..." I paused to burp with my mouth closed, then said "If you called and left a message and she still didn't text back..." and he said "That's what I'm saying." and I said "It's literally next to nothing to text someone." and he said "That's what I'm saying." and I said "It's like breathing. Texting someone 'hey im home. feeling depressed, i'll talk to u tomorrow.'" and he said "That's what I'm saying." A young blond guy with no neck, eating a buffet with his girlfriend, mistakenly sat at our table while we were up at the buffet and all the other tables were filled, so we'd been eating our buffet bowls while sitting at the bar, where a tall Dominican bartender named Ashley had been making us shots all breakfast. "Ugh, I made too much again!" she said with a sly grin, she'd been letting us drink the leftovers of the shots we ordered for free every time we ordered a shot. "You guys want the leftovers again?" she said and Farhad motioned the shots over with his fork, he'd picked up the fork after hand-plucking the last piece of mortadella out of his bowl, and said "Please."

## Chapter 12

I had a plastic bag from the Dollar Tree filled with about a half dozen cans of Michelob Ultra by my side as I drove over to Farhad's mom's house later that night. He'd been living there since he separated from his wife and I walked around the side of the house, through the stone patio, and walked in the back door where inside Farhad's mom had made crab cakes and offered me a few after I cracked open a beer. Initially, I told her I'd already had dinner, but ended up having two or three at her insistence. "Where's Mike?" I said. "Still working!" she shouted, as she had a tendency to make statements at unnecessarily loud decibels, as Farhad fiddled nervously with his white wine glass, a quarter full, and leaned forward against the seven foot long island in the kitchen. His ass stuck up in the air as the three of us congregated, then he began to finger an open wine bottle and said "You hear about that idiot Alfonso?" I shook my head no and began to lean into the island too, sticking my ass out too. "You want a glass of wine?" his mom asked. "No...I have these beers." I lifted up my bag of beers, as well as my open beer as Farhad said "He's fuckin takin that kid to Italy. The one from Vera's party..." then stood up straight and said "You believe that?!" "You want me to put the rest of them in the fridge?" Farhad's mom asked and I said "Yeah sure, if you don't mind." then handed her the bag and she turned around and placed it in the wooden plated fridge that stood five feet



from the island. "Italy?" I said, with a somewhat forced incredulity because it actually wasn't that surprising, Alfonso was a romantic guy, a "lover" of sorts, at least when he first entered a relationship, and his family was from Italy, he was actually born there, technically he was an immigrant, granted the majority of his family, immediate as well as extended, disowned him or at least kept their distance after they found out he was gay, but he still had a few open-minded cousins that lived on the coast, so even though taking this guy to a foreign country this early was excessive, it was a terrible idea, it wasn't as excessive as it would be for anyone other than Alfonso. I was nibbling on my second crab cake when Sophia texted me. It'd been about eighteen hours since my text and, for the majority of the day, I'd been silently vacillating between rational thoughts about how different people text at different intervals and apocalyptic thoughts about how she'd never text me back, cursing her name and indicting her character before thinking things like "Then again, maybe she's just enjoying a day with her son." I carefully angled the phone so only I could see the screen, then glanced down and read the text: "so wen r u gonna teach me how 2 pronounce ur name?" "These crab cakes are delicious, Mrs. Fazzouli!" I said. "You know," Farhad began, "what kinda message does that send? Taking someone to Italy this early? ...Are you kidding me? You know how much a ticket costs to get over there? And he's buying two of 'em!" and I thought "If someone texts me. I text back.

Immediately. That's just the type of person I am." then typed "lol this weekend if u want." as Farhad said "Ayyyyyyyyyy. But I have problems of my own you know..." "Farhad. I can't listen to any more of this shit!" his mom interjected and Farhad said "I know, I know. I'm a pathetic little bitch right now!" and shook his head, stuck his ass back out, and grabbed a piece of sliced cheese and popped it in his mouth, then continued to sip his wine with an urgency that was somewhere between his normal pace and one imbued with genuine stress. "You need anything else, Nick? I'm going upstairs." his mom said, and I shook my head no.

## Chapter 13

“Yeah, ok, we’re on our way.” Farhad said and hung up the phone, then chugged his glass of red wine, then immediately filled it again, Vera was meeting us out. We were still standing around the island in his mom’s kitchen as he said “You ready after these?” holding up his wine glass, and I looked down at my glass and nodded affirmatively. Before he got the call from Vera we were looking at a picture Sophia had sent me that night during the course of our admittedly brief exchange via text, as he’d asked me what she looked like, asked me if I had a picture and fortuitously enough I had just received one. “No offense,” he said, glancing back down the picture that was still displayed on my screen, darkened slightly as the phone prepared itself to revert back to its lock screen “but I’d let her play eight rounds of tennis then sit on my face.” “No, no.” I said sincerely while shaking my head. “None taken.” I gulped down a good portion of red and felt a sense of relief. Before I came over, doing nothing, I’d tweaked my back to the extent that it felt like someone had stuck a medium sized knife in the right side of my lower back, and the pain had just started to subside when I went to the bathroom and stood in front of the mirror thinking “Finally, it’s starting to feel better...” and immediately tweaked it again doing nothing. The wine helped. “Wanna fill me up a little?” I said, noticing my glass contained maybe just one more gulp, and noticing there was, from what I could tell, just about

three-fourths of a glass remaining in the bottle. “And you said she’s loaded too?” Farhad said as he filled the glass, as he chugged his glass again, as he dumped the rest of the bottle into his glass. “Pffffssssshhhh!!!” I rocked my head back, completely speculating, and also finding myself obsessing about the “wen” in her text message, thinking about how even though most people, myself included, seemed to stretch the rules of grammar in text messages, you rarely ever saw anyone drop the “h” in “when.” “She’s got ridiculous money, I think. ...I’d imagine” I said and opened the island drawer, looked down, and confirmed the drawer was filled with packs of Gushers and Airheads and considered grabbing a sour apple flavored Airhead for the road as I said “She said something about having a 401k or something... A fuckin fund for her kid or something...” I took a swig of wine and Farhad shook his head, then he popped another small piece of expensive cheese into his mouth, and said “She must make at least seventy grand a year.” “At least.” I said. He gulped down the last sip of wine, his stomach protruded over his pant line a little. We left.

## Chapter 14

"Who? The pregnant one? You know I still don't know what I did to offend that girl so bad." Farhad said to Vera as he drove us through the city. "You slapped her tit!" Vera shouted from the backseat, sitting next to Alfonso, in a highly incredulous tone. "And you kept leaning into her like you were gonna try to make out with her." Farhad kept his eyes on the road and matter-of-factly said "See, I don't recall any of that." "You know, she's married..." Vera said, then trailed off in her disapproving tone. We were driving around the west end of Providence at about ten pm after meeting with Vera, where we decided to carpool, then picked up Alfonso, who never drove when he went out for drinks because of a previous DUI. "So, you're saying I physically slapped her breast?" Farhad said and Vera said "You, like, flicked it upward really hard, Farhad." as she looked at me, as I was now turned around in my seat looking back at her, as she shook her head disdainfully, partially at me, I thought nervously, and perhaps partially at the concept of whatever the majority of our species considered human decency. "It was really inappropriate." she said, jostling slightly in the backseat as Farhad took a hard right down a residential street. All the triple deckers needed at least some work done (shingles, gutters, paint, roof, etc), and a younger guy with curly black hair, wearing clown-like pajama pants, sat with his ass on the sidewalk next to a forest green trash bin. The radio was

tuned to jazz, Miles Davis "Sanctuary" came on and the car fell silent, but I didn't think it was because of the song, and as I considered the silence I began to believe that I was hearing Alfonso whispering in the back to Vera, and on second thought confirmed that Alfonso was indeed whispering about something. It sounded like he may have been talking about my penis, as about a month or two earlier he had been relentlessly asking me about my penis, admittedly like he did to a lot of guys, he had an alleged fetish for straight guys, "turning" straight guys, gloryholes, etc, and was very persistent about it, and, very reluctantly, I confided a few details, but only because Farhad brought it up first, and because at the time I'd felt like it was somewhat of a confidential conversation, and because I desperately wanted Alfonso to stop asking me uncomfortable questions, and because I was drunk. But it sounded like he was telling her a different set of dimensions than what I told him. Longer... but thinner too? "Maybe it's a wash." I thought as I tried to read his lips through the rearview mirror, as I thought about how disclosing that type of information without the other party's consent was a major faux pas, regardless of whether or not the information is complimentary or not, as I thought "It's like going around telling people other people's salary!" indignantly, sitting motionless in the front seat, listening to "Sanctuary" by Miles Davis, which was a song I genuinely enjoyed, one of the few jazz songs I genuinely enjoyed. I had no problem disclosing my penis size if need be, but I

worried I was being misrepresented with no chance to rebut, not that Vera cared either way, but it bothered me on principle, and I began to think about Nietzsche's quote from his foreword to *Ecce Homo*, "listen to me! I am such and such a person. Above all, do not confuse me with what I am not!" or something like that, as I mouthed it silently to myself as I sat in front seat, feeling my heart rate incrementally increase, then Farhad glanced in the rear-view and said "Alfonso!" and Alfonso's eyes met the mirror as he said "Yeah..." and Farhad said "You know Bobby Longo?" then Alfonso handed something to Vera, then his and Farhad's eyes met again in the mirror and Alfonso said "Of course I know Bobby Longo!" and Farhad said "He told me he saw you shitting in the bathroom naked the other day at work." Alfonso grabbed the sides of the headrest and pulled himself forward, his face was very close to Farhad's right ear, and he said "Everyone knows I shit naked!" as we pulled into a stone lot adjacent to the bar we were attending. "Everyone knows I do that!" Alfonso continued. "I'm clean. It's cleanliness." "Well, Bobby was uncomfortable." Farhad said. "He made a point of bringing it up to me because he knows we hang out." "Buck naked you shit?" I turned back, finding it hard to believe, even as someone who thought he took anal cleanliness more seriously than most. "Yup!" Alfonso said. "Even at work?" I said. "Everywhere!" Alfonso opened the car door, I opened my door too. "Then I make a whopper with the toilet paper..." Alfonso said,

then flipped his hands on top of one another on top of the car like he was making a sandwich. "Wet it. Soap it. Then wash my ass. Then I make another one and dry it." I wondered if he kept his shoes on when he went at work, because it seemed like taking your shoes off in a public bathroom was possibly the most uncleanly thing you could ever do, and that getting your feet that dirty almost defeated the whole purpose of "being clean," but didn't ask because between the penis conversation I thought I overheard and then shitting naked discussion I'd just had enough, as genitally-oriented of a person I thought I was, I was just completely fed up with discussing and thinking about dick and shit. As we approached the entrance there were two bouncers, one of whom was at the door wearing a white polo with what looked like a good amount of hair gel, watery, in his hair, with a tone to his skin that suggested heavy usage of a tanning bed. The other one was an older, tall black guy with a goatee. "You guys comin in?" the white polo said, he was mid-conversation with a waitress as he turned to us and Farhad said "Yeah." then the tall guy popped his head out the doorway and said "Yeah we got some real estate on the deck..." then he turned to the white polo and said "...right?" "Yeah. The deck." white polo said, but there was no deck, really, the "real estate" was just the parking lot of the bar with a plastic dome over it and as we were escorted out I noted in an aggravated set of thoughts that we were the only people even out there. We grabbed a table for four and a minute or so later the



waitress approached, she wore a good amount of makeup, brunette, based on accent most likely one hundred percent Italian, I thought. She leaned over into Alfonso. "Do you just want drinks?" she said. "Just drinks." Alfonso said. "I'm sorry. Um, what was that again?" She leaned in closer. "Drinks." Alfonso said. She leaned in another inch and said "Sorry, the music's so loud in theah." She tapped her right ear with the hand she held her pen in and nodded toward the interior of the bar. "One more time..." "Drinks." Alfonso said. Her face was still quizzical, somewhat oblivious. Alfonso's face scrunched up, I'd noticed it had been incrementally scrunching for the past few seconds, he recoiled six or so inches and said, loudly "Ugh! I'm sorry." He leaned back with the giraffe neck. "But your breath's terrible." The waitress also recoiled, she covered her mouth with her pen hand and moaned "Is it really?!" "Mami. I'm sorry, but I'm actually doing you a service! Nick!" Alfonso waved in my direction as I sat to his right, as I sat to his right wholly dreading the logical endpoint of the exchange. "Smell it." he said and motioned back to the waitress and she reluctantly walked around Alfonso's chair and stood over me as I reluctantly looked up and she softly blew her breath onto my face. It wasn't great. "I mean...I don't know." I said, muting my resentment for Alfonso as I looked back to Alfonso like a pupil, then back to her apologetically, and said "If you threw a mint in..." Vera rummaged through her purse as Alfonso said "Farhad. Smell it!" as Farhad sat to my right as she

walked over to Farhad and blew her breath softly into his face. He made a constrained expression, then gave no audible response. Vera threw her right hand into the air and said "Found one!" then handed the waitress a white Lifesavers mint. The waitress flashed a smile that reflected equal amounts of embarrassment and disdain, then popped the mint in and walked away with our order. After she was out of earshot, I noted, in a normal speaking voice, how I thought it was lame that the bouncers used the phrase "real estate" in reference to patio tables, and how there was no one occupying the "quote-unquote real estate" but us. Then I made a few disparaging comments about the bouncers appearance (hair gel) that got minimal to no response from Alfonso, Vera, and Farhad, then the waitress walked back with a tray of beers. She put all the beers down and smiled confidently, she leaned into Alfonso again and said "How's it smell now?" then blew breath and he sniffed, recoiled, and said "No." I rolled my eyes and slouched in my seat until the edge of the chair formed a cross with my buttcrack, then I took a sip of my beer, increasingly dreading Alfonso's response. Her shoulders slunked down depressed and my heart sincerely ached for her as Alfonso turned to me and waved his right hand in a fascist-like manner and said "Smell it!" She walked over to me again, shoulders still slunked, and blew her breath softly into my face. It wasn't great. "You're fine." I said and nodded affirmatively. "...it's not that bad." I slowly shook my head horizontally as I said "not that bad," her

expression was cemented concerned, and she said “Are you shooih?” in a heartbroken intonation, then blew it in my face again. It still wasn’t great. “...it’s fine.” I said. “Tell her the truth, Nick!” Alfonso yelled as she stood equidistant between us, as Alfonso’s right hand catapulted toward her torso with his palm up as he spoke. I shrugged noncommittally, then looked up to her again and said “Really. I think it’s fine.” “Are you shooih?” she said. “Yeah...definitely. You’re good.” I said. She blew her breath softly into my face again.

## Chapter 15

My sister and I had been calling my dad “Poo” for a few weeks, a variation on his real name, Paul, that was at first a one-time joke, but he didn’t seem to notice so we’d kept calling him “Poo.” I was eating dinner at my parents’ the next night after work, calling my dad “Poo” and my mom “Mom,” with the TV blaring in the living room that bled into the dining room as we sat around the rectangular table in a U-shape, my dad, myself, my mom, and my sister. I lifted my fork and shifted my face left and said “So, what you want for your birthday, Poo?” as I nibbled on a salmon filet with a side of brown rice, as he sat with his legs crossed and up on his chair in baggy sweat pants and faded white running socks with the gray around the toes and heel, with half of his face submerged in a large salad bowl, digging out the last few leaves of lettuce. His eyes shifted north and he raised his head out of the bowl and said “You could get me a pola.” and I paused eating my salmon, my fork frozen in mid-air as he continued scrape around the bottom of the salad bowl. “You mean a polo? Ok sure.” I said and sliced off a piece of the tail of the salmon and popped it in my mouth, then he looked back at me and said “It’s called a pola, I believe.” in an assertive, but not wholly interested tone. My mouth was full, I took a sip of water and swallowed, then said “I don’t think so.” but my dad had finished his salad and started walking toward the kitchen while I was saying “See. Polo is the brand...and

the shirts are called pola's." as I saw him flip a piece of salmon, the biggest piece on the pan, onto his plate and I raised my voice to accommodate for the increased distance, but he was already on his way back to the table, and I said "I'm pretty sure..." I finished chewing. "I'm pretty sure it's like Kleenex is a brand. But you also call a tissue a kleenex... but a tissue is more than just Kleenex..." "Can you pass the salt and pepper?" he said as he sat back down. I looked at the salt and pepper and noted they were, more or less, equidistant between us and said "You can't reach them?" and he looked again at the salt and pepper as an annoyed, almost indignant, expression appeared between his forehead and chin and he said "What? Do you want me to have to reach across the whole table?" so I passed him the salt and pepper and said "And the company Polo makes actual polos. Much like Kleenex makes tissues. But the polo shirt is larger...than the brand Polo. Any brand can make polos. Just like any brand can make tissues." My mom sat next to me wearing her reading glasses while giving off the impression of watching the TV. She turned her attention to her left, in our direction, as she picked up her glass of ice water and said "I don't know Paul...I always thought they were called polos." while smirking slightly, smirking like she always did when it appeared either I or my sister proved my dad incorrect about anything. My dad put down the salt and picked up the pepper, poured a little pepper into his palm to verify the rate of pour, then said "Then how bout a Lowe's gift card?"

## Chapter 16

Prior to getting Sophia's number, a few months previous I'd met some Italian girl at a bar and made out with her at the bar, but we went quite some time without talking to each other, and the style of her interactions since we started talking again primarily consisted of being effusive with 24/7 texts for days, then dropping off the planet, then telling me she "really liked me," then blowing me off one out of three times we made plans, which clearly screamed of having another guy in her life. Following a particularly arduous text exchange, she told me she was moving to Florida, which didn't surprise me in the least because I'd scrolled through her Twitter followers, mostly because of the nature of our recent interactions but also partially out of unrelated boredom, partially out of unrelated utter malaise, and found an attractive looking guy with a bio that said he lived in Florida. It seemed so depressing, but I also didn't know why I cared, it felt as though I should care less. I'd recently gone on a date with another girl before the Italian girl told me about Florida, and after I heard about Florida we went out for sushi, me and the Italian girl, and she wore sandals and I noticed for the first time that she had abnormally large toes, which made me feel better about her moving away. The other girl had a kid, which didn't bother me, I could see where people would say she was attractive, she was objectively attractive, and I should have kissed her probably the second time we went out but didn't, and felt

especially bad about it because my cousin's friend had "set us up," so I knew I was inevitably going to be thoroughly lambasted in the presence of people I knew and respected because I didn't try to kiss her. "What is ya cousin gay a somethin'?" I could already hear the refrain... We more or less mutually avoided one another for the next few weeks after that, putting in the minimal acceptable amounts of effort vis-a-vis texting, and I didn't really care, but wasn't sure why I didn't care more, it felt as though I should care more. Around the same time I'd decided to start drinking vodka in place of beer. I had about a quarter of a liter bottle of Svedka, five times distilled, in my apartment and I stared at it with the Celsius breeze of the freezer gently wafting in my face, I figured I'd bring it over my parents' house that afternoon for my sister's college graduation party. "Perfect!" I thought as I held the ice cold bottle in my right hand, as it immediately began to inject sharp pains into my right hand, as I thought "I won't have to stop for beer and this'll be more than enough to last me until later in the night. Maybe I'll even go out after."

## Chapter 17

My parents lived about fifteen minutes north of my studio apartment, toward the border of Massachusetts. I strolled into their more or less one level home wearing an oversized Michael Jordan t-shirt my sister bought me the previous Christmas and said “You know who got me this shirt?!” to my sister in an overly enthusiastic, borderline mocking tone as soon I saw her. I was the first one to the party. Logistically speaking, what hindered my transition to from beer to vodka was pace. I drank vodka at the same pace I drank beer, so despite the fact that vodka was indubitably an overall healthier choice of drink in terms of carbohydrates entering my body, it was probably less healthy in terms potential long-term damage done to my liver and kidneys due to the extremely high levels of inebriation I reached while drinking. My sister’s boyfriend and her friends trickled in over the next half hour, extended relatives too, and I felt an intense urge to indulge in nothing but silence, to be in the company of nothing but silence as various iterations of small talk began to generate organically, like bacteria or mitochondria or other things scientific. “So yeah. But when you think about it. I mean. Where’s the game going?” someone said. “That’s what I’m saying...” I said sarcastically, but in a way so, I thought, hoped, the other person took me seriously. I had a one night stand with one of my sister’s friends about a year or so before the party and she stopped by too. I only knew the girl



because she worked with my sister and I when we worked at Puma while she was in college, the same one as my sister, and she just happened to be out the one time I went to visit the college and was probably equally as drunk as I would eventually become at my sister's college graduation party and seemed aggressively forthright in her request to have sex, although at first I said "No, I can't do this, not that I don't want to, but this isn't right." but eventually I obliged. The vodka crept assassin-like as I sipped out of my heavily iced glass, I was drinking it with just a splash of seltzer, which on some level I recognized was most likely ill-advised. I wasn't sure if my sister was aware that we'd fucked, I didn't feel particularly great about it either way, but at that point I didn't see much of a difference either way as my dad glared at me as he grilled the chicken I'd volunteered to grill earlier in the week, but was now visibly too intoxicated to grill. He said "Slow down." to me sternly under his breath as he lowered the arm he held the spatula in slowly, like a police officer directing oncoming traffic. I nodded, saying something like "I'm fine, no worries..." then walked off the deck and onto the grass with a rapidly decreasing awareness with regard to where I was or how I'd got there, I found myself having a conversation about a garden hose, but felt like I was slurring my words and involuntarily leaning backwards, so I extricated myself as quickly as possible and went over to talk to my sister and her friends. I ate some of the buffalo chicken dip her friend brought over, I thought

it was incredibly delicious and started making small talk, asking my sister's friend for the recipe for the dip, telling her she should come over more often, but with the dip, as my sister sat in a lawn chair with sunglasses on. I scooped one of the last triscuits on the serving plate and moved it liberally through the dip and said "You wanna go out later?" to which she immediately replied "Mom's not gonna let you leave." incredulously, as if she couldn't even believe what I was saying to the extent that maybe she thought, hoped, I was saying something else. I continued to chew and said "Really?" genuinely curious and then thought about the possibility of teaching Sophia how to pronounce my name that night and became flushed with anxiety, feeling as though time was running out, that if I didn't meet up with her soon, as soon as possible, then the moment would be irretrievably squandered. "Will this spark be irretrievably lost?" I thought, and thought about the Italian girl and the girl with a kid, girls I liked exponentially less than Sophia, how sparks were so fickle, how they came and went with no regard for social norms, then shook my head incredulously. My sister avoided eye contact and said "Yeah." and I said "You really think so?" "Yeah." she said, then leaned in gingerly, possibly embarrassed, I thought, and grabbed the last triscuit on the plate. After a brief pause I said "Watch this." and placed my drink on the see-through glass table with the umbrella hole in the middle of it, then walked a few strides backwards, then sprinted toward the four foot high wooden fence that

surrounded the backyard and leapt upward. The crowd of my extended relatives and my sister's immediate social circle all presumably looked on, most likely around the time I reached full sprint, and witnessed my flailing body nearly clear the gated wooden fence, as I reflected briefly back to my high school years when I made All State in Massachusetts in the triple jump as well as the long jump, as the tip of my right foot got caught on the top link of the fence and I descended rapidly, face first, into the rocks aesthetically scattered at the entrance of the gate. I bounced back up and glanced over the fence at the gawking crowd of friends and relatives, honestly the right side of my face felt a little numb, and I yelled "I'm ok!" then waved joyously and ran down the driveway to my car. I drove back to my studio apartment laughing hysterically for the portion of the ride I remembered.

## Chapter 18

The next morning I woke up naked, face down on top of a \$1.29 Shredded Chicken Burrito from Taco Bell. It was still tightly woven in its original printer paper packaging as I unwrapped the top third of the wrapper and took a bite and said “Not bad...” to myself, surprised and overall relatively jubilant that I no longer had to make breakfast. I went through my phone and listened to an angry voicemail from my sister, read a few angry texts from my dad and, when I opened up my notes app, glanced at a note that read “u owe Sophia 50\$..” with the last edit recorded at 1:24 am. I considered absconding, maybe starting a new life in a nondescript foreign territory with a more accommodating climate, then I thought about my sizeable student loan balances, the United States government’s expansive database of its citizens, its legal right to garnish wages, and my unwavering monolingualism. I took a shower, threw some pants on, and meandered down to Chilango’s on Manton Avenue, the place had some of the best Mexican food in the city and it was cheap too, it was the first place I’d ever had a “beer-rita,” which was a margarita with an upside down Corona placed in the glass, which I actually found to be a pretty asinine idea in concept as well as execution, I hardly ever ordered it. I parked a few feet from the restaurant, arduously exited my car, all of my limbs sore, still ridiculously dehydrated, the \$1.29 shredded chicken burrito wasn’t exactly sitting well in my stomach, and

checked the sides and back of my car for dents and scratches and confirmed that the paint on the bumper on the left side seemed a little patchy, but other than that the car seemed to be in pretty good shape, it was a lease so I was sincerely hoping it remained in mint condition. As I opened the door, I heard what looked like a very pasty prostitute, a prostitute most likely of Northern European ancestry, I thought, judging from her outfit and the area she was standing in, shout something in Spanish very loudly, angrily, across the street, and I hesitantly glanced in the direction of the shouting, then ignored the commotion and nonchalantly moseyed inside. The place was empty save for three younger white guys with mustaches in the far right corner and I sat down at the table closest to the entrance and the waitress gave me a menu, I actually remembered her fairly well from previous visits, so I wasn't all that surprised when almost every aspect of her personality was reticent, when she spoke English similarly to how I imagined that I would do cartwheels down the narrow aisle of the restaurant that day. "Yeah, uhhhhh. I'll have thee-uhh...Taco Appetizer." I said as I pointed to the particular item on the menu I wanted. "And uhh Corona." I said and she nodded while jotting down what I assumed was my order, then flashed me a sad smile as she walked away with the menu. "Is it possible that she's staring into the depths of my soul right now?" I thought as she stared at me before she walked away, then began to somewhat seriously question my ability to

rationality interpret the social cues of others. I ate four sizeable tacos for five dollars, drank two Coronas, and paid my tab, then headed over to the Hot Club, a dive bar located on the Providence River. I sat on the sparsely populated deck at a cocktail table by myself and looked over the river into the three large cylindrical, industrial constructions spewing out dark grey gas. I figured I'd just keep ordering beers, they had the cocktail waitress on the deck that day so I didn't have to continually get up, she had tan skin juxtaposed with Norwegian white teeth. Her thighs were exposed and they were, like, pretty much painted tan, she might have been Portuguese? Twenty two or twenty three?

## Chapter 19

While I was sitting on the deck by myself, minding my own business, this guy Bobby, a “distant acquaintance” of mine, walked by me a couple times without saying hello. He was my boss when I worked at Puma, he was absurdly skinny with aspirations of being both a male model and an entrepreneur, which seemed pretty ambitious I thought, and was a few years older than I was. I should also note that Bobby had, in my opinion, a rather high opinion of himself, yet despite that he was terminated from Puma a few months after he hired me for, allegedly, stealing funds from the store's safe, which I didn't hold against him, nor did I presume him guilty of embezzlement, but even if he did steal the money, it didn't offend me personally, if anything it made me respect him more, taking life by the balls and stealing from safes, at the time I liked balls like that, stealing money took balls, I thought, and I liked that. In any case, I'd seen him out that past winter when he poked me wearing a googly eyed smile as I sat in a bar booth reading a Wikipedia article about Buddhism on my phone. Following a brief back and forth I said “You still in New York?” perfunctorily, because, last I'd heard, he managed a Skechers in Manhattan and, following a smug pause, he said “Yeah... Well, I'm back and forth.” then asked me where I was “living these days?” and I said “North Providence” then his expression melted until the condescension latent in his face became thoroughly

palpable, until I could taste the condescension on his face even while sitting ten feet away from him, and he said “Man...we gotta get you outta Prov.” The next day at the gym, with the comment still gnawing at me, I tweeted something about a “35 year old Skechers mgr” telling me “man...we gotta get u outta prov” and the next day at work I received a notification that “@triceps\_” had requested to send me a direct message on Instagram, which I knew for a fact was Bobby’s Instagram handle. “Is Bobby stalking my Twitter account?” I thought, knowing for a fact that he didn’t follow me on Twitter, and never checked the direct message on Instagram, scared to read the potentially vengeful text, and felt slightly remorseful if I had hurt Bobby’s feelings, but at the same time wondered if he had really seen my tweet, as it seemed completely absurd to me that he would be regularly checking my Twitter account, of all the things one could be doing on the internet, but at the same time why else would Bobby be sending me a direct message on Instagram? However, at Hot Club that day, when he walked by me two to three times and blatantly avoided saying hello, avoided even engaging in the simple, totally innocuous, act of a corroborative head nod, it seemed to confirm that he had indeed stalked my Twitter account, that the subsequent Instagram direct message was indeed a vengeful rebuke to my tweet. Why else would Bobby DM me on Instagram out of the blue like that? We had nothing to discuss. The loss of his acquaintanceship didn’t bother me as much as the



randomness of him apparently continually, anonymously viewing my Twitter account, despite the fact I'd had probably, at maximum, two to five conversations with him over the prior four years, all of which seemed disconcertingly random, like something that would make a normally rational person, which admittedly I wasn't, question his or her very method of living. After Bobby left the deck, I sat satiated in silence for two to three hours until the sun started to set, genuinely enjoying being drunk in the sun by myself, genuinely concerned about my dad, mom, and sister resenting me for my actions at my sister's college graduation party, genuinely concerned about the note on my phone that seemed to imply that I'd seen Sophia the night before as I watched the sludge, unrelated to industrial jobs, float in tandem with the empty Capri Suns, with the discarded twelve oz. Sunny Delight bottles down the Providence River. The waitress told me her name was Abby and I thought "Abby? Nice name." in an inappropriate and creepy way, I thought, and made a point to remember it.

## Chapter 20

The next day after work, where from 2:03 pm through 4:58 pm I repeatedly, without pause, changed the shades of a block of three Excel cells from dark gray to light blue then light blue to dark gray in my spreadsheet and then shut down my computer, I galloped up both flights of raggedy cement steps to my apartment's entrance, as I was still portentously contemplating the extent of what I should do regarding the "u owe Sophia 50\$" note on my phone and was also holding a chicken falafel wrap I'd just bought down the street at a small, family-owned hole-in-the-wall Mediterranean/Middle Eastern bistro, I believe the owners were Syrian, called North Side Pockets, that was located in a truncated strip mall that was connected to a Valero gas station. The keyhole to the entrance was stretched out a half size too big for my key, three out of five times the door would get stuck on a bump of cement when you swung it open, but I couldn't even get it open to violently stick on the bump as I shoved the key in and forcefully tried to turn it left while moaning "Ugghhh!" as I stood twenty feet above Hallak's Middle East Market with the home-made spinach pies for a buck twenty five, as I stood twenty feet above Kicks, a store for second hand women's dress shoes, as I stood twenty feet above an aquarium accessories shop that was only open two days a week that I still wasn't sure the name of, as I stood twenty feet above Frank's Fine Tailoring (and discount suit jackets).

I'd texted Sophia once the day before and she hadn't replied, which I felt was definitely understandable given the nature of the note I had on my phone. The wind gusted around the corner of the building as I stuck my ass out to keep the door open, it didn't get stuck on the bump that time, and I glanced down at the Taco Bell from the balcony as a fourteen year old cashier was noisily rolling out the dumpster to the fenced in area behind the store, where it kept its trash dumpsters, as a young family of four exited their front door, wobbling over to a navy blue minivan, the only car in the lot. "Hey you got some food?!" a voice rang out and I looked up and saw that my nextdoor neighbor Donna was leaving the building just as I entered. She was standing completely still, blank-faced in the hallway with her small dog Max, she was epileptic and the dog was somehow trained to hit a button if she ever had a seizure, which seemed crazy to me, but I didn't fully understand the logistics. "Yeah, you ever hear of North Side Pockets?" I said. Her eyelids peeled back and she shouted "Oh, I love that place!" at a decibel above conversational, she was five foot three, about two hundred fifty to three hundred pounds, and sported a light goatee. "Wanna hear a joke?" she asked pensively and I nodded my head, still standing in the doorway as she waddled side to side standing in place and eventually said "Who taught the elephant how to do the backstroke?" and I paused, faux contemplatively, and said "Ummm...I don't know. Who?" and after a beat she said "Greg Louganis!" Most of her

jokes involved elephants, sometimes she'd write a bunch of them in mediocre cursive on a few sheets of loose leaf paper and slide them under my door. She tugged the leash as Max sniffed around, the hallway smelled like a mix of laundry detergent and subpar marijuana, I thought. "You get my jokes?" she said, in reference to the three sheets of jokes written long-hand she slid under my door the night before and I nodded, then said "Yeah. They were pretty good this time." and she nodded nonchalantly toward her apartment door and said "You wanna sandwich? I just bought some lunch meat." I looked down at my hands, then said "No thanks...I got this chicken falafel wrap." and a minute or so later, after we said goodbye to each other at the same time, after I thought about saying "Jinx!" as we said goodbye to each other at the same time, but then thought she might not get it and that it would probably just unnecessarily extend the conversation, which would only make my chicken falafel wrap more lukewarm than it already was, she left the building, I assumed, to take a walk down Mineral Springs with Max because it seemed to be the primary activity for most of her days. I entered my apartment and ate the chicken falafel wrap.

## Chapter 21

Following a few restless nights and a plodding, incremental mustering of courage, I walked through the double doors already decently drunk and found myself surrounded by the octagonal walls of the club, eighty five percent of them mirrors, so I faced myself from all angles, which didn't suit my mood, and walked up to the bar and ordered a Michelob Ultra. "I could have just let this be..." I thought. "Fifty bucks isn't the end of the world." I thought. "...She'd live." I thought. "And a shot too. Please." I said. "Sure! What would you like?" the bartender said, she was younger and attractive and had tattoo sleeves on both arms, her auburn hair bounced along asymmetrically with her syllables, I felt butterflies in my stomach in a non-enjoyable way. "Vodka." I said. "...Just vodka?" she said and I nodded my head, then thought, retroactively, that I should have at least ordered the shot chilled, and while still shaking off the aftertaste of the room temperature shot of vodka I unintentionally made eye contact with Sophia as I witnessed her, it seemed to occur in slow motion, peel off an old man's belly wearing a one-piece turquoise dress twenty five feet diagonal from me. My heart dipped down into my large intestine, then rose up Christ-like with a little gut on its tip as I reluctantly, maybe autonomously, waved her over, waved her over with my head down, and she strutted slowly into my vicinity. "How are you?" she said softly. I greeted her nervously, said "Good." cleared my

throat violently then said "Good." again, although it was probably obvious to everyone in the entire club that she heard me the first time, I thought, then made very brief introductory small talk, then, cognisant of the urgency of the situation, at least the urgency from my perspective, said "So I woke up the other day. With a note on my phone that...said I owe you fifty dollars?" "Oh really?" she said in a tone that contained an inflection that made me lean toward believing she knew what I was referring to, but not in a way that made me positive she knew what I was referring to, and I said "Yeahhhh-uhhhhhhhh." and she said "Ummm, I don't know if it's fifty, but..." and I said "Oh...more?" and she said "Ummmmm..." I let out a nervous laugh and put my hands flat on the bar, I put my head down for a second, she leaned on the same bar and faced my direction, I faced the bar. "It couldn't have been that bad?...right?" I said without totally looking up and she paused, probably long enough to gather a cluster of thoughts and said "No..." in what I thought was a slightly disingenuous tone, then shook her head agreeably. "You just came in here at like eight o'clock really drunk. You had your shirt unbuttoned like ...all of the way down." "Was my face bleeding at all?" "You took me for some dances though." "Did we have sex?" "No!" She stepped back and tilted her head and squinted her eyes, her blue contacts complimented her complexion, I thought. "Then..." I stopped talking mid-sentence. "What happened then?" She glanced across the room like she was losing interest in the conversation, or maybe like

there was something more interesting occurring in a different part of the club, so I said “You want a drink?” and she said “Sure...” in an agreeable tone as she sat her partially exposed butt on the stool in front of her, on the right side of her right calf she had an intricate tattoo made up of a sign that looked familiar, maybe from other tattoos I’d seen? Was it a stock symbol? Something a respectable tattoo artist would give a twenty percent discount on? It looked like “Thomas” was printed in cursive letters across it, she’d tell me later it was her son’s name. “These two are good right?” I said as I sat on the stool next to her. She looked around quickly, again, like there may have been some event more interesting occurring at a different part of the club and I began to think that this interaction was objectively going terribly, that this idea was objectively as poor of an idea as I had instinctively known it be all along, that my life had objectively taken some dark, irreversible turn somewhere, probably at some traumatic juncture of my adolescence, that maybe I could objectively blame one or both of my parents for it before she said “Yeah.” then shouted “Mindy!” The bartender turned around. I leaned in and said “Yeah, uhhhh... I’ll have a vodka and seltzer with a lemon please? and...” I turned back to Sophia. “Um, what do you want?” Her eyebrows rose above her eyelids inquisitively, her eyelashes seemed to extend to an above average length, and she said “Can I have a Red Bull Vodka? Please.” then Mindy nodded her head in a way that made me think that she wasn’t surprised at

all by Sophia's order, then began pouring liquor into shot glasses, then dumping them in shakers filled with ice. I'd already noted that the club always put two shots of vodka in their vodka seltzers and I liked that. I looked forward over the bar and noticed a plump, olive-skinned girl dropping her jug-shaped, soccer ball-sized breasts on a Pakistani man's bald cranium on the horizon of the stage. "So, I apologize." I said and tried to force a sincere smile. "It's ok." she said, then giggled. "Why are you laughing? Giggling. If you don't mind me asking..." I said reluctantly, noting that she was looking over at the ATM machine about twenty feet from where we sat and she said "Can I tell you something?" and I said "Sure." before she finished saying "something," and she said "You see that machine over there?" "Yeah, it's an ATM machine." I said and she said "After the dances..." she giggled again, she put her hand over her mouth when she giggled. "You kept putting your card in the machine. And...um...it kept not giving you the money." "Well, yeah. I figured that's why I-" "And then you started throwing the receipts in the air." she said and I scratched my temple non-inquisitively and Sophia said "And then you started just screaming 'I'm an accountant. I got money!' throwing them all into the air. All the receipts. Over and over and over. 'I'M AN ACCOUNTANT! I got money!'" she repeated, she mimicked me by lowering her voice into a baritone register when she said "I got money!" and also made a quarterback-like "air-throw" with her right arm. "Honestly, Tommy was about to throw you out..." she



said in a serious, but good-natured tone and patted me on the shoulder sympathetically, then, slightly perturbed, I said "Then what?" "Well, I took you over to that stool over there," she said and pointed to a stool at the bar across the club. "and bought you a bottle of water. Then a couple minutes later I looked over and you were gone." and I said "To be honest, I keep most of my money in my savings account."

## Chapter 22

“Oh,” she noted postscript. “you got a little rough too!” She rubbed her left deltoid gingerly, somewhat performatively, I thought based on her playful expression, but then thought that abusing women was no performative matter and profusely apologized, but also began to think that, through self-deprecation, through booze, perhaps the encounter was taking a turn for the better? “Well...” I began, trying to rapidly construct my disgust with myself into some sort of moral narrative. “Are you really an accountant?” she said before I could fill the pause in my sentence with anything substantive, and I noted a moving object and tried to guide her forward with my right hand as a drunk Caucasian patron wearing a black FUBU t-shirt volatily rounded the corner with absolutely no regard for where the bar stools were placed, then said “Not really. I mean, technically that’s my title, ‘Staff Accountant,’ but probably not in the way that you would think? I work in billing, more or less...I would say.” “That’s nice.” she said. I tried to analyze her response without being awkward, she seemed sincere, as I thought about the fact I was a stock room manager making twelve dollars an hour less than a year ago, and wondered how the situation may have differed had I still held that position and how convincing I could be as an “accountant,” considering I’d just started my job as an “accountant” then thought “Awfully nice of her.” while also thinking of what to say

next, while also thinking “Maybe a little...too nice?” then said “Nah, it fuckin sucks.” finding it hard to believe that she was even speaking to me after how I’d acted the last time I saw her, I said “I’m not gonna lie, I’m a little taken aback that you would, like, buy me a water and stuff? Even when I barely know you, and was acting like an asshole like that? ...I feel like most of my friends wouldn’t even do that for me.” and she scoffed and said “What kind of friends do you have?” so I took her for a dance, it was the least I could do. When we arrived in the champagne room, after I paid thirty dollars to the portly champagne room attendant who actually seemed like a really nice guy, she whispered “...How are you?” professionally, after she shut the door to the champagne room, which was just a small room with a black leather couch, with a mirror above the couch and a plastic lamp on a small table, and I grabbed both of her buttocks drunkenly and one of my fingers accidentally brushed against her asshole, and she said “Don’t you dare...” but I had an inkling that she might have been daring me? but, having said that, I pulled back and didn’t put any of my fingers in her asshole because obviously that would have been totally inappropriate. I did lunge for a kiss though and, surprisingly, not only did she accept, but it actually went well as we made out in a way that I would personally define as “passionately,” in a way that seemed somewhat genuine, slowly, in a way that seemed to contradict my preconceived notions of what kissing a girl in a gentleman’s establishment would be

like, should be like, for the allotted fifteen minutes, which seemed surprising. I didn't even get to see her fully naked, but that was fine.

## Chapter 23

Having said all that, Sophia could be elusive, but I also found her to be emotionally mature and fiscally prudent, at least more than I was. Sometimes she'd text me "wanna get white girl wasted w me?" wait thirty seconds, then type "so i guess not..." She'd call me a young guy even though I was three months older than she was, then she'd tell me, in marvelling type of way, that I was mature for my age, even though I was belligerently drunk almost every time we hung out. She'd kiss the back of my neck wearing her bright red lipstick to see if I had another girl at home and I'd say "You know I could just wipe it off..." and then note that I didn't, why would I? I didn't have any reason to, right? She said she didn't care about looks, she didn't care about money, she didn't care about dick, or she cared about all three to such a degree that she said she didn't care about them just to see if saying something made it true. On occasion she'd get upset if her son was too busy to hang out with her. "You know, he can do math at a fourth grade level. And he's only five!" she'd say excitedly, then ignore my next five texts. "Take this." I barked one night as I opened my wallet. "...What's this?" she said. "My credit card." "...Why?" "I don't know. Take it for the week." She gave it back to me the next time she saw me. "Oh, you're here." "Ye-" "Hold on." she said and I waited as she scampered hurriedly to the back. "Here." she said bluntly, the credit card staring face up at me in her palm. "Oh, thanks." I

said meekly, glancing down at the credit card with my full name printed on it like a foreign object, and she said "Why would you think I would charge something? Like, you know who I am..." and I said that I guessed "we weren't that good at coming up with tests for each other" as I meekly placed the card back in my wallet. So I guess it would be fair to say that, at that point, I wasn't necessarily overly concerned with monogamy as she sighed "Nick, I need a prince charming..." with her face bobbed over her shoulder back toward me, as she leaned back into my body and I cupped her body awkwardly, struggling to hear what she was saying while thinking that the fact she didn't seem completely turned off by watching me throw receipts in the air in the middle of the club with my face bleeding, screaming "I'M AN ACCOUNTANT. I got money!" was a positive that I still hadn't fully comprehended. It seemed possible it could mean something. "This possibly could, definitely mean something. You can't just flippantly disregard it because the girl dances, that's just so ignorant, right? Like, who would do that? You know what's trashy? No, not exotic dancing. Actually, holding preconceived notions about people because of what they do for work? That's trashy. Monogamy is so, like, you know? Not that she can't be monogamous because she's a stripper..." I thought as I awkwardly cupped her body, struggling to hear what she was saying to me. "Where you live?" I said. She paused, like I thought people, myself included, usually paused before they said something false and said "Um, right

now? ...The Cape.” “The Cape?” I leaned my head forward, my lips were a few inches from her left cheek, then said “I don’t think I believe you.” and smiled. She reluctantly smiled back, then said “Well, right now, um, Stall Lake.” then said “You knoww mee.” and clapped her hands together, then kept them together for a few seconds as her smile widened as I noted that things seemed to be going well, very well, I thought. Stall Lake was a mostly Portuguese city to the east of Providence. It was a profitable heroin hub, as far as I knew, and the most well-known person the city produced was an NBA player who was addicted to heroin while he was in the NBA, which I thought was actually kind of impressive, to be able to play professional basketball while addicted to heroin? “And you said you grew up in Larry...” I said and she confirmed, somewhat meekly, I thought, via vertical head nod. Larry, Massachusetts was a small city northwest of Boston, right on the New Hampshire line, and was generally known as a “Hispanic city,” by, I assumed, mostly white people. I didn’t have the census data. This was the fifth time I’d seen her, I thought. The first time I was on jungle juice, hypnotized by her chandelier-like nipple rings, the second time I got her number, the third time I was blackout drunk and bruised her left deltoid, the fourth time I was apologetic and we made out passionately. “The only person I’ve ever met up with, outside the club...that’s my kid’s father.” she said dramatically after I’d asked her to go out with me the next night. “You don’t play around then?” I said and she

immediately sighed, again dramatically, and said “I’m just letting you know, Nick. I’m too old for games.” then she paused again, she was the same age as I was, twenty eight, then said “His name is actually Nick, too.” “Oh...” “It’s kind of bugging me out a little.” she said as she looked down to the floor and I thought about what she just said for a second, then raised my voice into an inquisitive register and said “Really? ...Nick?” and emphasized by raising my voice when I said the “-ih” in “Nick.” “Yeah...” she turned her head to the side and looked at me directly, then she faced forward again and said “I’m probably gonna get busy soon.” and I raised my beer gregariously and made a cheers motion with the can. She had already finished her drink, so I actually just made a cheers with the air. The foot traffic was noticeably increasing as she got up, turned around, and placed her small hands on my kneecaps, then tilted her head back really far and looked up into my face and said “Thanks for coming in to see me.” as I smiled sincerely and felt like a genuine bond was forming between us, like this was a good thing even though, on some level, I felt like hanging out with exotic dancers was considered a major faux pas in many corners of the world. “What do I give a fuck?” I thought in a somewhat euphoric mood as I watched her walk away and continued to confirm to myself that I didn’t care. “I mean, what has contemporary bourgeois society ever done for me? I mean, why should I have to sculpt my lifestyle around these thoughts that I think other people think? I mean, who are these people?



Silently judging other people and forcing people to sculpt their lifestyles around what they think? Is it not a form of fascism, these silent judgments, these silent judgments that force people to sculpt their lifestyles away from the innocent young women who just so happen to work in strip clubs? How could it not be fascism?" I thought, thinking that, yes, it was definitely a form of fascism, and figured I'd probably head home after I finished my drink, maybe go through the Taco Bell drive-thru, maybe eat a quesadilla, possibly whack off after eating a quesadilla.

## Chapter 24

So I sat alone taking the final sips of my drink as the bar approached capacity and noticed a larger guy with the soul patch facial hair, he wore a grungy, white-gray-ish t-shirt with a word like “Motivated” or “Ambition” written in Medieval print on it and was sipping a mixed drink that had a sky blue tint. Every thirty seconds or so I thought I felt a set of eyes on me and assumed they were his, then glanced up at a lightning speed to confirm, but he leaned over to me as my eyes darted up and said “What’s-ya name?” in a gravelly voice before I could look away again. My head tilted back slightly on reflex, I stuttered for a second, then said “...Nick.” “Oh...Nick, huh?” He scratched his chin right below the soul patch in a contemplative fashion and paused briefly, then said “You Greek?” and I said “Ummmm...three quarters.” and he said “Ayyyyyyyyy!!” he looked to his left where two shorter, rotund but muscular men sat. “Close enough, right?!” He turned back to me shrugging with an array of “Mediterranean” hand motions. “Tekanes!” he said and looked at me with warm eyes, the lids rumped around the edges “The name’s Stavros!” He stuck out his hand and I shook it before he told me an extremely detailed narrative regarding his ex-wife, how she was an exotic dancer, and she was smoking hot, even to this day, and everything was great for a while, but then he got sick of dealing with her bullshit. “You think I’m a sucka?” he asked me. “That’s what I said to her, you know? I’m thirty

seven years old.” he said, then took a generous sip of the sky blue drink. “I have experience with this shit. I barely get outta the house these days. This guy right here...” He turned to the guy sitting to his left, “This guy right here saved me! ...Gave me a job as an electrician. This guy...” Stavros shook his head. “I’d fuckin kill for this guy. You know what I mean?” The guy next to him smiled and nodded politely, in a way that, I thought, confirmed that he either knew the level of inebriation Stavros inhabited and/or wasn’t as drunk as Stavros. “That’s cool.” I said. “You on Facebook?” he said. “Facebook?” I said, then before he could reply said “Actually, no, I’m not.” “Ahh, I was gonna friend you if you were! You know, guys like us, man...we have that passion. Other people, they don’t understand! I can see that in you. That passion!” “Yeah.” I said in a genuine monotone and, without any premeditation, began silently comparing my human brain to forms of artificial intelligence unconvincingly, but also contemplating various theories of collective thought and philosophies of multiplicity that I found intriguing, but didn’t totally understand. “You like that broad, don’t you?” Stavros said as a devious smile appeared across his face. “That one you were sitting with?” “Yeah, she’s cool.” “You’re in love that broad.” Stavros said as he pulled up his Facebook and started scrolling through his timeline for pictures of his ex-wife. “Hol’ on, lemme pull it up.” he said, then scrolled for another twenty seconds. “...fuckin smokin, right?” he said as a picture appeared, as he

turned the phone in my direction, as I nodded my head agreeably, peering over his elbow, and said "Mmmhmmm." then casually took a sip of vodka. "But let me tell you something..." he said and I waited, then he said "You neva come to the club." "Ok." "...evuh." "So I shouldn't...?" "Neva. My ex-wife...I'd just drop her off. Then I'd pick her up." He waved his hand in the air. "That's it. These otha guys in here....Pffsshhhh!" then he shook his head as I nodded my head and said "Ok. Well, that's fair." "We're passionate people!" he said, then laughed jovially. I looked down and noted that I was almost done with my drink and, possibly noting that I was almost done with my drink, Stavros said "What's your number?" and I said "Ummm..." as he said "I'm gonna call you when I'm down this way! You know all the good spots to go to around here I bet!" Stavros' passion was fleeting, his life advice punctual, he had his phone open ready to type my number. I thought about being in the reverse position a few weeks earlier, leaning over Sophia and asking her for her number, then imagined Stavros saying "Nah, just say your number, and then I'll act like I'm typing something in the notepad of my phone." and I then reluctantly reciting the ten digits of my phone number. "Well," I began after begrudgingly reciting my number, stretching, forcing a yawn, and getting up from my seat. "I actually think I have to get going..." I pulled out my phone, insincerely checked the time, then pulled out a few ones from my wallet and dropped them on the counter. "Ok-ok!" Stavros said,

anxiously grinning in a way that made me feel as though he was impressed with an element of our conversation that he wasn't disclosing. "...now, where were you from again?" "...North Providence. Well," I said, then paused, in a caveat-type way, and said "I live there." "Oh..." he said, then paused to think, I thought, and placed his right index finger at the center of his lips as if an extremely novel, groundbreaking idea had suddenly been generated in his brain, then said "Hey, do you think you can give me and my buddies a ride back to our hotel? ...We're in Johnston, you know where that is?" but before I had a chance to reply, he leaned in very close to me, closer than he had already been standing, which was already too close, and tapped his right nostril, then whispered "You do coke?" without a doubt mentioning it only as incentive to give him a ride to his hotel, and I darted my eyes furtively toward the door before I made eye contact with him. It was true that I'd snorted cocaine before, but didn't do it anywhere close to regularly, I'd actually only done it a handful of times, and had no interest in snorting any that night, especially not with Stavros, but also didn't judge anyone for doing cocaine on a weeknight either, so I said "I mean..." then trailed off. "No, no." he said and nodded his head up and down as the two rotund men behind him shrugged somewhat apologetically, I thought. "I don't wanna inconvenience you. That's no problem Nick!" he slapped my shoulder and said "Anotha time!" and I left.

## Chapter 25

Looking back, one thing I definitely appreciated about Sophia was that she wasn't one of those people always directly and indirectly talking about themselves in a way that lazily baited people into asking them about themselves. "Yeah, if it wasn't for alcohol I'd probably be successful like my two sisters buuutttt..." the bartender said at the cigar bar where Farhad and I sat at the bar, staring blankly ahead, surrounded by a few relatively benign clouds of cigar smoke. "Oh, what do your sisters do?" Farhad said eagerly as I sat matter-of-factly sipping my beer, forcing myself with all of my strength to pay attention to the ensuing conversation. "Well, one of them is an anaesthesiologist and..." She was a tall blond that had a boyfriend, a legitimate boyfriend that she lived with, that Farhad was interested in, apparently despite the boyfriend, because I'd said something like "It could get messy..." in a critical tone imbued with my own experience that trailed off with the intent of not seeming overly critical, and he said something about how he "technically" was single, and the limited liability he believed that entailed. "But yeah, back in Virginia this girl...we were out and she called me that. A 'pig.'" the bartender continued and squinted her eyes and glanced at empty space as if she was imagining the girl was behind the bar with her, then said "That's liiike the one thing you do not call me. So I was like 'actuahl-lee. you're a trough. You're what pigs eat out of..." and as I

digested the pig-trough analogy it seemed to me like the retort may have implied that she ate out the girl that insulted her, that if she was a pig, and the other girl was a trough, and pigs eat out of troughs...but then thought "That couldn't be what she meant, right?" and grinned slightly, then thought that I should probably stop grinning because things already seem kind of icy between us and grinning at an anecdote about a girl in Delaware calling her a "pig" could potentially make things worse, then hid the grin by taking another sip of my beer as Farhad said "Oh, there you go!" enthusiastically. They took a shot together after the bartender poured two shots and placed them on the counter without asking me if I wanted one, then she lit a cigarette behind the bar and there was loud jazz playing. Very loud jazz. "What the fuck is that?" I asked Farhad urgently and sincerely inquisitive, in reference to the jazz assaulting our eardrums as I covered my ears while pretending to scratch the backs of them. "Dat's my high school jazz band." an old guy in the corner said. He was hunched over a glass of red wine on the end of the bar and, amazingly, heard what I said, despite the insanely loud music, despite being at least fifty years my senior. His hair was white and he wore an equally white half-zip pullover sweatshirt, branded Tommy Bahama. "Yeah?" Farhad turned toward him, grinning. "Well, I played the skin flute in high school." he said and snickered back at me as the bartender laughed along in the manufactured register of someone attempting to curry favor, then

Farhad motioned back to me, absorbing the bartender's laughter giddily, and said "And he played the rusty trombone!" We all laughed heartily as the old man said "Oh..." softly and after a few seconds passed, as our laughter trailed off, it became apparent that he was serious, that it actually was his high school jazz band, that somehow the recordings were not only preserved, but that the old man was narcissistic enough to ask the bartender to play the recordings in the bar at an unreasonably high decibel, but he was nice about the rusty trombone comment. He said he still played in a jazz band and, after some back and forth, the old man and Farhad realized the old man knew Farhad's uncle Frank. "Frank's amazing!" the old man said. "Fuckin ridiculous." Farhad said. Farhad and the older jazz man went back and forth about people they knew and their musical tastes for the next few minutes as I watched the TV, took sips of Michelob Ultra, and tried to avoid any awkward eye contact with the bartender. Farhad said he was trained on the piano, but mostly just made synth beats with the talent, then said "I'm garbage!" In the midst of the back and forth, one of the old guy's acquaintances, a middle-aged man who I'd noticed professing his love of college basketball earlier, to which I pompously thought "Yeah, you would support young black men being exploited for labor," who wore a nondescript baseball cap, said the name "Tricia." "Yeah. Tricia's son plays the clarinet, I think..." he said, or something like that, and the old jazz man said "Tricia?"



then repeated “Tricia?” more ominously, then took a step back from his glass of wine and said “Tricia fucked me up the ass! Why you’d bring her up?!” I turned to Farhad and tried to address the bartender as well as I said “Well, I have to work in the morning...” and the three of us nodded at each other as the loud jazz coupled with the old man yelling made it increasingly hard to hear much of anything. We stayed in the bar for two or three more minutes as the older jazz guy, trance-like, kept screaming “Tricia fucked me up the ass!” over and over, almost robotically at a certain point, I thought. Quite frankly, it was a little disturbing. The self-involved bartender handed us our tab as the situation seemed to be rapidly escalating to a level where the bar manager may have been required to get involved and we left.

## Chapter 26

"Yeah, but I don't care about looks. I don't care about dick. That stuff doesn't matter to me." Sophia said as we sat together a few nights after the whole "Tricia fucked me up the ass!" thing. We hadn't officially copulated or anything like that, but I was good with it. "Why rush things?" I thought, "Why does everything always have to be about fucking?" I thought. "Honestly, I almost prefer oral!" I thought. The night before she'd asked me how I liked her hair and I told her "straight" and she said she'd wear it that way at work the next night if I'd stop by, so I agreed, then made a sincere compliment about her butt, which she seemed to accept sincerely. To be honest, I'd always preferred girls with "fat asses," to the extent that I made a mandate to myself to only try to date girls with "fat asses," if for no other reason than to ensure that I maintained physical interest, which I thought was an important part of sustaining a healthy relationship, which I didn't feel that badly about because I felt like everyone had certain physical preferences in potential partners, and to deny that immutable fact of human nature was just pretentious and, ultimately, probably an exercise in futility, but maybe I was superficial. I'd had a debate with Sophia the night before about the color of grape soda, so when she texted me to come by I decided to text like she texted and wait a manufactured amount of time to reply. I waited maybe half an hour or so and when I texted back I typed "i'll come by if u admit grape soda is

the color purple” and she immediately texted back “yes its freakin purple! Lol now come by” and I found it interesting that her response time seemed to contract as mine expanded and, about twenty minutes later, I strutted in nonchalant and buzzed off about eight beers and a shot as she rounded a bend right by the entrance and we made eye contact, she blew me a kiss by putting her palm over mouth, kissing her hand, then blowing the hand back down to her torso. “Nick! Don’t leave!” she said and immediately got yanked, almost cartoon-like, into a room for a dance. “Is it possible that I’ve become too cynical on life and love?” I thought as I stood in the middle of the strip club by myself and approached the bar, noting a drink card promotion displayed next to a container of lemons. “So if I buy one of your cards...” I said “I get twenty five dollars of bar credit for twenty dollars cash?” and the bartender nodded amicably as I felt my phone start to vibrate in my pant pocket. I nodded amicably back to the bartender and made a “Sorry, one second, sorry.” hand motion, then grabbed my phone from my pocket. “Hi Farhad.” I said. “Hi Nick.” Farhad said and sighed. “...I was just seeing you were around for one last beer?” I cupped my hand over my left ear and turned my face away from the bar and said “Yeah, come to the club from the other night.” at a decibel just below yelling. “Ay, I don’t have any cash on me...” he said and I said “I’ll pay for you.” and he said “I don’t want you to do that...” “Just call me when you get here,” I said with my hand still over my ear “and I’ll come out.” A few

minutes after I'd hung up, after I'd bought myself a twenty five dollars of bar credit for twenty dollars cash drink card, Sophia came over and we hugged hello. "Can you stay for a little bit?" she said softly as I leaned in intimately toward her, just to make sure I could hear what she was saying. I looked down at the top half of her head and maintained a muted facial expression as I gently placed the gray gift card into my wallet behind one of my credit cards and noted the complete lack of font on the card. "Yeah, my friend Farhad is coming through in a few." I said and a few minutes later, when Farhad was in the lobby, he texted me "here" and I went out and opened my wallet, but before I could grab any cash the bouncer nodded that we could just walk in. "Thank you very much. I really appreciate it." Farhad said with a politeness that contrasted, absurdly I thought, with his usual crudeness, and I recalled Dave's comment, "This is a neighborhood bar, just with tits." and smiled at Farhad as we walked in and sat down at the bar, just the two of us at that point, as Sophia apparently got grabbed for another dance, or went to the back to change or something when I went out to grab Farhad. Earlier that night, Farhad and I had been with Alfonso drinking root beer flavored whiskey shots when Alfonso asked me memorize the bartender's name for him, which I did, and then after Alfonso referred to him by name he poured us shots the size of juice boxes. We took them in a tightly enclosed circle and Alfonso said "Ugh, your breath stinks!" to Farhad and I said "Yeah, honestly, I smelt it

earlier.” feeling relieved that Alfonso brought it up and not me, to which Farhad said “ayy, why don’t you fuck off, the two a you,” or something equivalent, loudly, then exhaled into his hand and sniffed nervously. In his defense, I’d never known Farhad’s breath to stink, it was actually the opposite, he usually had good, usually minty, breath whenever I’d meandered close enough to smell it. Sitting at the bar at the club we both leaned on the porcelain counter with our forearms and I ordered the first round. “Well, you know, you never know...” I said consolingly, unsure of which problem of Farhad’s I was superficially addressing. “Things could work out!” “Man...” he said, moving his hand back and forth in front of his nose, wafting air. “You need to check your breath too...” and I paused, recoiled slightly, and tried to comprehend the comment, feeling almost as if Farhad was speaking Spanish or another language where I could understand select phrases, but was unable to speak proficiently, as I looked at him intently, as he looked across the bar unassumingly. I cupped my hand over my mouth and nose and exhaled and sniffed simultaneously. “What is this...?” I said. “What?” he said, with what I inferred to be a faux nonchalance. “What is this, like, payback?” He shrugged his shoulders and his eyes darted back and forth, his attention seesawing between the main stage and my gaze. “...because I agreed with Alfonso that you’re breath stunk earlier?” I said. He pulled his head back, his Gucci glasses shifted slightly, just slightly lower on his right eye and higher on

the left, and he said "What? ...You think I'm still-no, man! I don't care...I'm just saying." My two eyebrows moved in unison and took the shape of what I imagined to be a parabola as Farhad adjusted his glasses, and I said "Well, I don't know, maybe my breath does stink. What would you expect after drinking all this beer?! You know?" "That's what I'm saying." he said and nodded his head, then said "My breath stinks, too!" When Sophia came back around she held two breath mints in her right palm, one for her and one for me, and I, thoughtfully I thought, cracked mine apart and split it with Farhad as he shouted "Look at those pepperonis!" incredibly loudly at the stage in reference to a girl dancing who had, what I agreed were, thicker than normal nipples,. He popped the half mint in his mouth. Sophia sat next to me and I introduced her. "Nice to meet you." Farhad said jovially, his gaze no longer fixated on the stage, and shook her hand in a motion that made it seem like he might kiss her hand. "We're probably gonna leave in a few I think, if that's ok... It's been a long night." I said, now petrified that my breath could possibly be a major turn off, and Sophia seemed slightly disappointed with the comment, so I suggested we stay for one more drink, with the explicit intent of not speaking so much as a stray syllable anywhere near her face in the interim, to which Farhad agreed, and then we left.

## Chapter 27

Farhad parked right next to me in the parking lot and he leaned his lower back against his driver's side door handle, sighed sincerely, and said "I've been having some bad diarrhea today." as I placed my ass against the end of my passengers' doors, one buttcheek on each, and I said "Like 'you might shit yourself' bad or...?" and he scoffed and said "No, not that bad." as I hit the unlock button on my car key and said "What you been eating?" as he looked up toward the sky and said "Nothing really. I think that's the thing..." and I hit the lock button on my car key. The car beeped. "Maybe it's a reaction to that." I said and ran my fingers sensually over the front passenger's door handle and he said "Maybe. But what am I even shitting out then?" and I thought for a second, drunkenly thinking about how sober I felt, glanced at my keys again and said "Probably beer now." Farhad nodded and leaned back against his car drunkenly, he had his hands buried in jacket pockets and was hunched over, was leaned in just slightly, and his expression conveyed thirst, the way his thick glasses were juxtaposed against his bushy beard under his turquoise baseball hat made him look hand drawn as much as human, and he said "I just wanna be over this girl and I'm not." I looked down at the cement, noncommittally and disinterested, and said "Yeah I've heard divorce is tough." and he said "You know?" I lifted my head back up, I nodded insincerely and said "You'll

get there.” “Yeah I know. I just really thought fucking some other girls would help more than it did.” “Well...” I turned both my palms up toward the sideways smiley face shaped moon and then moved them slowly toward Farhad in a conciliatory way and said “You know...it’s a start.” “Yeah.” “I think it’s the right move.” I looked in my car window and watched, in drunken amazement, as the light from the flashing club sign illuminated the leather interior, then said “You gotta get back out there.” He nodded, then said “How did you go about it...” and I tilted my head quizzically. “Or how is it going in there?” he restated. “With her?” then nodded toward the entrance. “Oh.” I said, confirming I understood via vertical head nod, then said “It’s good.” somewhat reticently and he said “Seemed it. She was all over you!” His expression was both congratulatory and disapproving, I thought. “Yeah, I guess. I don’t know. She has a kid...you know. That shit...” “Ayyyyy.” he said and cocked his head back. “As long as you’re happy, man.” I didn’t say anything and Farhad adjusted his glasses, then said “Fuck money, that’s for sure!” and I nodded and said “You gotta take it day by day. That’s the thing.” He shook his head and said “See? I don’t do that at all.” “No, you’ve been jumping in head first!” I said and smiled slightly. A group of younger Indian men exited the club as I finished my statement and one of them wore a denim shirt buttoned all the way up, tucked into his jean shorts in what I thought was an oddly stylish way as he walked by us, and I made a point not to glance at them



to see if they glanced at us. They seemed to be just conversing benignly as they walked past us, as I checked my phone. It was 12:28am. "Fuck...." I said in an authentically curious tone. "How long have we been out here?" Farhad checked his phone unconcerned as I said "I need to get a burrito before they close." in an overly concerned tone. "Ok man, not a prob." he said, his hands still in his jacket. "I know people rave about their steak and cheeses, but a lotta people don't know...they have great burritos too." I said as Farhad unlocked his car, neither one of us were leaning against our cars anymore, but we were both waddling semi-drunkenly in between them, doing our best to make sure not to bump into one another as we waddled. "You wanna come?" I said, raising my eyebrows inquisitively following an awkward pause. "Nahhh." He kicked a small pebble. "We can leave it here. Maybe talk later...my mom probably has something in the fridge anyway." "But I don't know, man..." I said, not thinking as the words left my mouth, words that I hadn't consciously approved to exit my mouth, still anxious about the burrito, but also feeling a fluid need to continue to speak. "It's like, I don't know..." Farhad's eyes perked up as he lifted his head from a despondent position into an intrigued position, an intrigued position that made me reconsider even bringing the topic up, and he said "Oh, about what?" with his head slowly moving toward me. "I mean, she has a kid!" I moaned like a child, not particularly thrilled that his head was moving toward me. "Plus, there's other

shit...baggage, if you will. Inklings I have... Stuff that, you know..." "Personally," his tone shifted it register into an uncharacteristic baritone. "do you wanna know what I think?" "Go head." I nodded, feeling strongly that I knew exactly what he was about to say. "I think you're fuckin crazy." he said, his voice slowing approaching a crescendo. "She could be in there sucking a cock right now!" and I nodded agreeably, not that I necessarily agreed, but I felt like disagreeing would be shortsighted, and it seemed like a reasonable enough statement to make, a statement that I could ostensibly see myself making if I were Farhad. "You'll figure it out though." he said and the conciliatory, but ultimately superficial tone of the comment felt familiar, and it occurred to me that, perhaps, the "tables had turned," that maybe I had suddenly transformed into Farhad, that I was now actually speaking with myself, and I wasn't entirely sure who was more contemptible, myself as Farhad, Farhad as myself, myself or Farhad, so I said "Maybe I am crazy..." then Farhad said "Ayyyeee." "It's just...never easy." I said and thought of more words but didn't say them. "I mean. how am I gonna disqualify someone just because...I don't know..." Farhad looked at the cement and seemed to be carefully avoiding making eye contact with me, I thought, as I looked at him hoping for eye contact, and he said "You don't wanna be too deep in that type a stuff...not that she's into that type a stuff." "Fuck it...." I said almost angrily and checked my phone again, then spoke almost apologetically as I said "I think

I pretty much have to go now if I'm gonna get this burrito." and we embraced as we unlocked our cars remotely, then I bought a chicken burrito up the street with the banana peppers, which I found to be a very underrated burrito topping, a topping that was only offered at a small percentage of burrito spots that I frequented.

## Chapter 28

A few days later I found myself wearing Jordan brand sneakers and, while looking down at said sneakers, I began to feel strongly that they really weren't my style and started to seriously question why I even wore them, but I only began looking down at them in the first place because the skin on my heels was getting scraped to the point it was painful every time I took a step and, finally, under my breath I cursed the anonymous manufacturers that knitted them so crudely around the heels, then thought they were probably knitted by underage Chinese wage slaves and retracted the previous thought. I was grilling some chicken over Alfonso's. The lake that sat behind his single level house had a family of four struggling to canoe their way across the murky, seaweedy water as I vaguely registered hearing their cries, saying things like "Just row a little bit harder, Dale!" and "Yeah, just like that, just a little bit harder, Dale! You can do it!" but didn't turn around, as I wasn't about to get roped into helping any "boat people," I thought. I just didn't feel up to it, plus I had plans to hang with Sophia after we ate, so what was I gonna do, get all wet with lake water before I went out? I didn't have time to take another shower. Farhad walked in with his dad, Jake the Snake, who was the Sicilian dad that adopted him after his parents tragically perished in a car accident when he was only an infant. Jake strutted in wearing a leather jacket, his characteristically blank expression, with a

skullet of linguine-like gray curls, and said “Ayyy, Nick! Great to see you, wanna cigah?” and held out a medium sized stogie. I grabbed it politely as I said “Thanks Jake.” It was pre-cut and I worried that for the second night in a row my breath might stink as I lit it with the grill lighter and thought extensively about how I didn’t want to have a reputation for bad breath, how I’d have to make sure I cleaned my teeth thoroughly after dinner. “Even then, cigars linger...” I thought anxiously, aware that things like bad breath can have dire consequences early into seeing someone, before you’re on close enough terms to tell them to go brush their teeth, when it’s still acceptable, even expected, for communication to just cease with no explanation. I guzzled down the light blue can of Bud Light and continued to flip the chicken breasts with my black plastic spatula. Farhad’s uncle Frank came over too, he walked in by himself with a solid head of black hair for his age, wearing a black button-up with acid wash jeans and tan loafers. “Ayyy, Nick! Great to see you, where’d ya get the cigah?” he said and I nodded, then flipped a chicken breast and mumbled “Jake gave it to me.” mumbled because the cigar was in my mouth as I flipped the chicken breast with one hand while holding the light blue can of Bud Light in my other hand. Frank was Farhad’s mom’s brother and Jake’s ex-wife’s brother. I turned to Farhad, who was also drinking a light blue can of Bud Light, and said “I think these are done.” After Jake divorced Farhad’s foster mom he married Frank’s ex-wife, or

Frank married Jake's second wife after Jake divorced her, I wasn't sure... Either way, technically, they were eskimo brothers, I thought. "You see Mary Lucia lately?" Frank said to Jake in an extremely nasal Brooklynese as they sat down on lawn chairs we'd placed in front of a few coffee tables we scattered on the grass, overseeing the lake. The family in the canoe was still struggling, but slowly gaining ground it seemed, judging from the more optimistic grunts I was overhearing. "Alfonso, where do you want this shit?!" Farhad yelled to Alfonso. "Not lookin gud." Jake said to Frank, in reference to Mary Lucia.

## Chapter 29

Later, the club was busier than I expected, as I felt my patience with constantly meeting Sophia at the club waning severely. “Is she playing me?” I thought, but it didn’t seem make any sense, financially speaking, which would be the only sense she could really be “playing me,” I thought, beyond being purely psychotic, which made me feel like my impatience was possibly ill-founded, which tried my patience. The club was filled with local politicians that ranged in age from early to mid twenties to, statistically speaking, people most likely to be dead within five or so years, and I recognized a pudgy Spanish kid with yellow teeth from a local social club that, in all seriousness, called itself the “Millennial Professional Group Of Rhode Island” that I despised in concept. Pry was involved with it and I secretly resented him for being involved with it, or maybe not secretly as I seemed to recall telling him I despised the group in concept over text message at one point, even though it was, more or less, mandatory for him to be at least tangentially involved with it given that his employer was heavily involved with it. Sophia was wearing a midriff top with a little belly protruding out, not necessarily indicative of any serious weight gain, probably just a heavy meal, as I sat at the bar and drank a beer and silently fumed, silently aware that, relatively speaking, I didn’t have all that much to be mad about. “You look hot.” I said to Sophia, not thinking, as I registered her presence

standing next to me, playfully not speaking, which made me feel better, that she was playfully not speaking despite the level of irritation evident in my voice. She tilted her head and said “Thank you.” then handed me a mint and I wondered if it was just a gesture or.... “It’s, uh, pretty busy in here...” I said. “Yeah...” She looked around. “Wanna go out to the patio?”



## Chapter 30

“See. That’s the test.” she said as her knee knocked my knee on the patio, as she scrolled through my phone, going through my Pandora stations drunkenly. She’d found the 2pac channel, the Bone Thugs one too. “If you didn’t like 2pac...I don’t know if this could work.” she said and I thought “Ok bitch, how bout you meet me outside the club though?” to myself and grinned deviously, consciously deciding to use waves of silent misogyny as a weapon against my impatience, but, in all honesty, the truth was, not only did I have a rudimentary 2pac Pandora station on my phone, I actually knew his oeuvre down to the Teddy Riley vocoder outro at the end of the “California Love (Remix),” the version that appeared on the retail version of All Eyez On Me. But I didn’t brag about it. Even though Farhad and I used to sing it drunk, back when we put gel in our hair and lived with our parents and/or weren’t separated from our wives, when we went to the casinos in Connecticut in his Nissan Maxima with the tinted windows screaming “‘puter ‘putah ‘puuuteehhhh!” along with Teddy Riley, screaming out the windows at three or four am. “Love is love.” I replied softly as she typed a Bone Thugs song she wanted me to listen to into the YouTube app on my phone, a song she said she and her younger brother “always used to listen to when we was growing up,” as I put the phone up to my ear and struggled to listen. “I can’t really hear it, but it sounds pretty good.” I said. “I looooveeee that

song.” she said and took her hand off my knee and put it next to her ear like she had a headphone in her hand and bobbed her head with impressive rhythm. “Ooh!” she cackled. “What?” “It sounded like they said your name!” I grabbed the phone from her with both hands and anxiously rewound the song a few seconds, I listened and, with a quizzical expression etched onto my face, said “Um. I don’t know. It still sounds like gibberish to me...” and she said “I know.” and winked, smiled, then began to laugh and slap her knee, and my shoulders inched up toward my ears and my lips became slightly puckered, and I said “You know, my actual...” but mid-sentence, unamused but also entering into a state of revelation, I realized I didn’t even know her last name and suddenly felt like my lack of knowledge was absurd, that I should almost be offended that I didn’t know her last name, how could I not know her last name? “You know who wouldn’t tell you their last name?” I thought, then thought “Someone who’s playing you.” “What’s your last name?” I said. She stopped laughing abruptly, as if I said something that ruined the moment as her face went blank and I briefly considered saying something to break the awkward silence that ensued, but instead I just looked down at my sneakers, wondering why she had the reaction she had and again regretting wearing the pair of sneakers I wore, I felt absurd wearing Jordan brand sneakers, then she told me her last name, then specified the pronunciation as well as a common mispronunciation. After she emphasized her hesitancy in

telling me, or anyone else, her last name in a direly serious manner, emphasized that she never told anyone her last name in a direly serious manner, I said “I mean...it’s a...nice...name.” where the pitch of my voice rose just slightly as I uttered the hard “i” in “nice,” and noticed that her eyes widened a little as I said “nice” and I took it to mean she was possibly receptive of my hesitant compliment? And that I should probably strongly consider changing the subject? And, as I considered changing the subject, the song playing on the patio concluded, then a longer than normal pause ensued before the next song started, as I stared at her staring in the direction of a goofy blond man in a long black peacoat as he sat down at the patio bar. “I have to go say hi to this guy.” she said. “I’ll just be a minute.” and left her drink as I said “Ok, cool.” As I glanced in the patio bar’s direction, I felt almost positive the young bartender by the patio bar had ass implants as she smiled innocuously at me, as a minute went by, as a few more minutes “went by.” Then a few more minutes went by. Then I glanced over, which I had been consciously, arduously, trying to avoid doing for the past two to three minutes and saw a new drink laid out in front of her and as I witnessed the new drink laid out in front of her I felt like I took an uppercut to the gut, then began to mutter angry non sequiturs to myself under my breath. I considered just leaving, but thought maybe that would escalate things unnecessarily. I tried to avoid looking visibly upset and, eventually, began to angrily unlock my

phone, then realize I didn't have anything I wanted to do on my phone, then lock it and put it back in my pocket, then whip it back out again, angrily. "Fuck it." I said to myself and stood up and stormed back inside, but when inside found the same static cluster of local politicians, so I looked around, unwilling to maneuver through the entire constituency of The Millennial Professional Group Of Rhode Island, and repeated "Fuck it." to myself again, then shook my head disgusted, then thought "Could it have been the cigar?" ominously, then turned around, and stormed back outside, silently cursing myself for accepting the cigar from Jake the Snake. "How could I have been so short-sighted?!" I thought blowing my breath into my hand, my hand pressed against my sizeable nose as I walked back out where the first item that caught my eye was Sophia sitting across from my abandoned drink, looking overly angelic and conciliatory, with two of her own drinks in front of her. "Hiii." she said in a tone that was more gregarious than necessary. "...Can I have a taste of that?" I asked, whipping my hand back down to my waist region, pointing in the direction of the drinks as I plopped my ass back down on the futon, smiling slightly, unable to wholly contain my excitement that she was sitting there. "Sure, which one?" she said. "The new one. I've already tasted the other..." I said and she handed it to me. I tasted it and said "Not bad." then smiled and our gazes met as I put the drink down and she said "Sorry. I took a little longer than I thought. You know how it-" "No worries!" I swatted my

hand through the increasingly chilly air while thinking about how short-sighted I was being, thinking about how it was so obvious that she was obviously coming back, then said “I just went to the bathroom.” She fidgeted her hips back and forth and sculpted her ass into the cushion of the futon. I sat back down and sipped my drink and said “Yeah, you know...you have to make sure you pee regularly. Otherwise, you could like end up with bladder problems when you’re older and uhhhh...”

## Chapter 31

The next day after work I was drinking a Disaronno on the rocks with Farhad at his mom's house, outside on the patio a few feet away from his stepbrother's trampoline as it sat complacently on the cramped backyard grass next to a beat up treehouse. The trampoline was netted in, I'd jumped on it a few times and considered it somewhat of a death trap, especially if you were jumping on it after drinking heavily, but Farhad had managed to have sex with a few girls on it since his separation and I'd told him I was proud of him for it. "Before you know it, the thing'll be outta season..." he said, noting the chilled, schizophrenic air that typified summer in New England. The sun was peeking out behind the trees in the backyard and I could hear the next door neighbor playing what sounded like Young Thug on what sounded like laptop speakers as Farhad raised his rocks glass and said "You wanna jump on it... when we finish these?" as I was trying to look into the window I thought the music was coming from. "Maybe." I said. I'd sent Sophia a text earlier in the day and still hadn't heard back, and I thought "Maybe she's having sex." nonchalantly, then thought about what "in the world" would cause a thought like that to "enter my head," then thought that it was definitely a possibility, then thought that I didn't care either way, then thought that wasn't true. The sculpted rocks on Farhad's mom's patio looked nice. He brought out a Bose speaker

system and starting playing select tracks off of Big Punisher's Capital Punishment, and Big Punisher said "Dead in the middle of Little Italy little did we know we riddled some middlemen who didn't do diddily" as I thought about how thinking about people I was intimately involved with having sex with other people, and the sensations those thoughts produced, made me think about Karina, a Russian girl who was born in Moscow and emigrated to the United States at the age of seven that I dated a few years before I met Sophia. She spoke English as a second language, was disgustingly materialistic, but also really funny and sensual. Her mom, if she didn't hate me, immediately disapproved of me and forbade Karina to see me, mostly because of my Greek heritage, as she seemed to believe strongly that "all Greek men are pigs." even though I was fairly sure she was aware that I was only three-quarters. Karina told me she had reason to believe a Greek guy broke her heart when she was younger and I agreed that it definitely seemed plausible and we laughed about it a lot when we were together, which was almost every day. Now, when we started fucking Karina had a boyfriend, although she was allegedly on a break with him at the time, which may or may not have been true, and she ended up marrying that boyfriend, a childhood friend turned boyfriend, and after she got engaged, which was proposed more or less while we were still fucking, I distinctly remembered feeling physically sick at just the thought of her fucking him after she told me she was

engaged to him. It ruined porn for me for at least a month, which was unheard of at the time. A few months after the engagement, I found pictures her dad put on the internet of the night she got engaged, the family celebrating the engagement, her smiling while showing the ring off with her mother, and felt an urge to blow up the entire planet somehow, wondering how she could smile in a photo like that, wondering how I could gain that ability. But I was younger then, I thought, more naive about things, using alcohol to run from my anxieties rather than lubricate my social settings. Things of that nature. I'd recently heard, directly from Karina, that she was having her second child soon. Since things ended we'd vacillated between sincere friends and minor acquaintances, "keeping in touch" and occasionally meeting up for coffee, I really had no interest in being friends with her yet would somehow find myself in a Starbucks parking lot drinking coffee with her every few months, cursing myself for being in a Starbucks parking lot drinking coffee with her, muttering "this is the last time" to myself as I drove out of the Starbucks parking lot after drinking coffee with her. I wasn't sure if it was appropriate to send a congratulatory text for the birth of her second kid, as I didn't particularly feel one way or the other about it, and what was I supposed to text? "Two kids?!" Farhad said when I informed him of my minor imbroglio as we jumped on his thirteen year old stepbrother's trampoline as two empty glasses of Disaronno sat lifelessly on their sides on the grass,



melting brown ice seeping out of the brims. "You think I should send a text?" I said. "No!" "Just congratulating her, I mean." I said and he said "Oh... I don't know. do you still keep in touch like that?" "Kind of. But this might be another level. I think." Farhad did a somersault in the air and when he landed I was catapulted into the surrounding netting and fell on my butt, onto the metal springs between the trampoline and the netting, and he said "Right..." as the metal springs dug into my buttocks and I said "I'm...uh, not gonna text her. Fuck it." and he said "Yeah man. I wouldn't, if I were you." Karina's hair was auburn. She had fair skin. "I'm gonna let the situation breathe. Let her be with her family and whatnot. Maybe reach out in the near future." I said, then Farhad did a backflip and landed on his back, then was catapulted up two times and went up and down while lying flat on his back after he landed. There was now a bumblebee flying within the netting and I froze, then said "Relax." and put my index finger over my lips and said "Bee."

## Chapter 32

Now that I had Sophia's last name I figured I'd throw it in Google. Actually, to be honest, I'd been throwing it in Google for a few days, possibly a few weeks, most likely since I met her, with little to no luck getting any matching results, obviously because I lacked a surname, but it was three pm and I was vegetating, half-dead, prepared for, perhaps inviting, death, in my cubicle. "No social media?" I thought with an incredulous face, in an incredulous Allen Iverson "We talkin' bout practice?!" voice in my head. I started throwing phrases next to her name in the Google search bar like pastels, then I remembered her kid's father's name. "Nick..." I muttered aloud, smirked at the utterance of my own name, then glanced above the cube wall to see if my manager was at his desk, but not particularly caring if he was or wasn't. "I don't give a fuck if he's there or not..." I thought, even though he'd been overall very nice to me since I'd started working under him, then bingo the Google preview of the first article generated read "Nick [Last Name Redacted] and his wife Sofia..." and I stopped reading, re-read the sentence, which read "Nick [Last Name Redacted] and his wife Sofia..." I stopped reading, then re-read the sentence, which read "his wife," which was recently dated because I triple checked the publication date, then I stopped reading, light headed, and walked out of my cube in a trance, light headed, into the kitchen, and filled a plastic cup with

water, light headed, didn't drink it, pretended to sip it, then meandered aimlessly throughout the old mill building mumbling to myself, light headed, up through the third floor where the alleged ghosts of the building made more appearances than on the floors that had been rehabilitated into offices, for twenty minutes or so. "Sophia...with an 'f'?" I thought repeatedly, in an even more exaggerated Allen Iverson "We talkin' bout practice?!" voice. When I got back to my desk I texted her, I typed "can i see u?" and she typed "when..." "tn?" I typed at a pace so urgent it felt like I sent it nearly simultaneously with her previous text. "umm tn's no good..." she typed, slightly delayed, then I typed "tmrw?" and she typed "lol" then typed "ok." "ok ill text u tmrw." I typed.

## Chapter 33

The basketball courts on Smith Street vacillated between urban murals of quaint summer sunsets and high school kids farting on each other's heads while playing three on three, they were a couple miles from my apartment. I took a drive down there that night after work, where I spent the last hours of the afternoon quietly hyperventilating and muttering non sequiturs to myself, with the explicit hope that no one would be there, feeling strongly that I needed to shoot around by myself to maybe clear my head, maybe work a few things out in my head, maybe get some exercise to get a good night sleep in my head, maybe shoot around by myself, talking to myself under my breath in an aggravated tone. I took the scenic route and passed slowly by the barber shop with the 1950s, red, white, and blue swirly sign, the elder Italian guy who always sat outside of his meat market with his chef's apron on, the fortune teller storefront that marketed various witchcraft memorabilia, a stone to enhance your libido, a necklace to intuit if your crush is thinking about you this week, as I thought about stopping to get my palm read, then thought "pathetic, fucking pathetic" but it looked like they were closed anyway. When I arrived at the courts they were desolate. The sun sat on one of the east side backboards, the row houses across the street shielded the bourgeois cul de sacs from street traffic, and beyond the surrounding fences were swingsets and a chapel-like lounge area. A

grassroots church was in the middle of a sermon under the roof of the chapel-like area, it looked like there were maybe fifteen to twenty people in attendance. I started working on my shot, the frequent gusts of wind made me discount my airballs. I'd worked up a decent sweat, talking out my problems aloud under my breath under the rapidly darkening skies, through the gradually chilling air, when one of the church people exited the chapel area and moseyed onto the opposite side of the court I was shooting on. She was thin with closely cropped hair, she had her thin arms casually crossed, her skin was black like standard font, contrasted against mine as dark olive like...I started thinking about the colors of olives (black, Kalamata, etc) and then began to wonder why people said certain people had "olive skin"? Was it Spanish olives? Yet spanish olives seemed to have more intensely green tints, was my skin green? Obviously not, but green-ish? Green-tinted? Or was it olive oil? Olive oil seemed to make more sense, I thought, plus my skin was oily. I noted her in my periphery, but only gave her a slight head nod, just to be polite. She moseyed over to my side of the court and stared in my direction. "Do you come here often?" she said and her arms stayed crossed and she was smiling lightly. I jogged after my rebound, looked at her, and said "Yeah...um...fairly often. I would say." then kept shooting and she walked around a little, seemingly directionless. "Can I ask you a question?" she said, I nodded, and she said "Do you believe in God?" and I sighed lightly as I grabbed my

rebound and stopped playing as I was slightly out of breath, so I inhaled and exhaled heavily for about ten seconds, then glanced at the lady more directly, thinking about how cliché the question was, disgusted with how cliché it was, and said “Nah, not really.” then threw up another shot. It ricocheted in and out and I muttered something about the double rims to myself softly and shook my head, then ran after the ball to grab it before it bounced off a bleacher with volatility but, unfortunately, it bounced off a bleacher with volatility anyway, and I ran after it in the other direction as the wind still gusted in spurts, and I recognized that I’d stopped talking to myself, that I’d had a good conversation going, and wished the lady, who continued to pace around the half court line, would get her ass off the court, so I could start talking to myself again. “How can you know?” she said. “If you don’t mind me asking...” I dribbled in between my legs, behind my back, and said “What?” as I picked up the ball, legitimately, at best, only half-paying attention to her and felt like I was uncharacteristically unconcerned about how that may have made her feel, and took a half step toward her and said “About God, you mean?” She nodded and I became slightly concerned that I was being rude to her by only, at best, half-paying attention to what she was saying. “I don’t know.” I caught my breath again. “How can you know you know?” I said matter-of-factly, not even attempting to be “profound,” definitely not trying to be adversarial, but just bluntly saying the first words that came out of my mouth, then

dribbled another couple times. “HMMMM...” she smirked, the intention of which seemed ambiguous to me, then nestled her hands under her armpits. It was about sixty five to seventy degrees out and she was wearing pants and a long-sleeve shirt, so the pits could have ostensibly been sweaty, and I was slightly grossed out, thinking about her hands, now possibly damp with her own armpit perspiration, and wondered if she was the leader of the church group, if she would be shaking hands as the congregation concluded, wondering if she would disclose that fact, the fact she’d had her hands under her sweaty armpits for minutes on end, before offering a handshake to a church patron. “Have you ever come to one of our services?” she said. I shot a three pointer that went in, swish, no rim whatsoever, and said “Nah, you always do it this night?” “Mostly. Yes.” “Yeah...um. I mean, it seems like you guys have a pretty nice thing going on over there.” I said and nodded my head in the general direction of the sermon as I held the ball against the side of my torso. She shrugged her shoulders, then I glanced at an empty Diet Sprite 20 oz. bottle lying on the court’s out of bounds line below a sign that read “NO LITTERING: POLICE TAKE NOTICE!” next to a stretch of grass that looked like a recycle bin. “See?” she said, then said “You never know...” and I said “Anything’s possible.” completely meaninglessly, but sincere about its complete lack of meaning and the wind took another jumper. She hadn’t uncrossed her arms since she walked out and she said “Well, ok...” somewhat

curiously, almost optimistically, I thought, and turned her body around standing in place and started walking back toward the service. "Have a good rest of your night. Maybe we'll see you around..."



## Chapter 34

The next night Sophia wore ocean blue-rimmed designer glasses that pointed up at the corners and by doing so somehow made her look like a different person, to the extent that I had to look over two-three times just to make sure it was her as she approached benignly and said “Hi, how are you?” and I said “I gave you a napkin with my full name on it.” which admittedly wasn’t my planned intro. “What are you talking about?” she said and took half a step back with a posture that, to me, suggested she may have been considering making an animated dash for the exit. Her neck was bent and her head tilted away from me and I said “I need you to burn that.” undeterred by her shift in mood, by her absconding posture, then she squinted her eyes angrily as I said “Do what you wanna do with your life, but I can’t have people knowing my name.” as I started punctuating select syllables with my right index finger, then said “You know who comes up when you Google my name? My mother!” I slammed my index finger down through the air as I angrily uttered the first syllable of “mother.” “Her address, I mean!” I clarified as a few ounces, maybe air bubbles, of life seemed to exhale from her body as she said “What are you...?” “I fuckin Googled you!” I said. Her neck wasn’t bent anymore, it recoiled vertical and descended into her shoulders slightly. “Well if that’s what you want me to do Nick...then I’ll burn your napkin for you. No problem!” she said snarkily and I specifically

noted it, even in my flummoxed state, as the first time she'd been snarky with me and also noted it as possibly the first time I witnessed her genuinely react to something I said. "Ok..." I replied in a retracting tone, I was sweating profusely, mostly in my armpits. "Maybe I don't care that much about the napkin. But you couldn't tell me?!" I said and she closed her eyes, fatigued, as I was in the midst of finishing my sentence, then grabbed the top of my hand and nodded toward the corner of the club and said "Can I explain?" and I raised my eyebrows cynically and said "Yeah." pronouncing the word with more of an "ah" than an "eh." She took my hand and we walked in the direction of a quieter corner of the club, I grabbed her lifeless forearms from her lap, she didn't seem to care, or at least didn't resist, and started examining them intensely, up and down. "What are you doing?" she said. "Checking for needle marks!" I said, refusing to look up from the petite forearms I was in the midst of thoroughly examining and she said "Shhh!" as she placed her index finger of the arm that I wasn't holding over her mouth and blew out air urgently, then I looked up rabid and said "You don't do that stuff, do you?!" "No!" She hushed me with both of her hands, I looked over her exposed thighs and up and down her arms and didn't see any needle punctures. "What did it say?" she whispered. "...What?" "When you Googled me." "Nothing fucking good!" "Gawd..." She placed her face in her hands for half a second. "You know...I knew you were hiding something. I've got a good nose for this

stuff. I couldn't sleep last night." She put her index finger over her mouth again and side-eyed the bartender fifteen feet to our left and I whispered "Killed a guy?!" at a high decibel, a decibel that was the apex of what a whisper could logically be defined as, then said "The fuck am I supposed to think of this?" incredulously, but also kind of matter-of-factly as well, and she didn't reply. "I mean, you're..." I felt my mouth, nose, and eyes contracting toward one another, then lowered my voice even further and whispered "married?" "Technically..." she said, to which I replied "You have some balls!" "I'm sorry!" she said, then looked down and away and said she couldn't look at me. "I can't even look at you right now..." she said. She looked at me. She said "Can I try to explain?" The sound of the breath released from her sigh seemed louder than it should have been, I thought, and she said "And then you can leave if you want..." My heart was pounding, but my sweat glands were slowly drying up, and Sophia and I took a brief tour of her personal history, partially via Google. Her first boyfriend, Anthony, was a light-skinned Puerto Rican kid who had my complexion and actually a pretty similar haircut to the one I had during the era when he committed the crime he was still incarcerated for, he murdered a twenty two year old guy when he was twenty when Sophia was eighteen because he saw him enter Sophia's house, which he saw from his house, which was located across the street. It happened, allegedly, the day after he and Sophia broke up, or the day after Sophia broke up with

him. The article I read stated that Sophia and Anthony were allegedly in a “three year, on again, off again, relationship.” and I thought ominously “Is this what she’s like? Is she ‘on and off’?” as I re-read the paragraph, then re-read the paragraph again. As she sat next to me, avoiding eye contact, looking down, she said “He pointed the gun at me right after he shot him, but it jammed up...” and I nodded my head, unsure of how to respond, but thinking “Wow, she could be dead right now.” but not wanting to say “Wow, you could be dead right now, huh?” The kid who got shot was with his girlfriend at the time and probably not trying to have sex with Sophia, as his girlfriend was pregnant, and it seemed absurd to even think, to even begin to speculate that his pregnant girlfriend would have agreed to any sort of threesome arrangement. Anthony fled to the Bronx, but eventually surrendered to the Massachusetts State Police and was currently serving life in a state penitentiary with the possibility of parole starting at the end of the year. “I knew it was gonna be bad when he moved next door...” she said and I again didn’t share my immediate thoughts, I again thought about her spelling of “when” as “wen” in her first response to me via text, thought about how she told me the other night that she didn’t graduate high school, how she wanted to go back for her GED, thought about how the socioeconomic state of this country was nearly at a caste system level, wasn’t it? Her husband, her son’s father, was locked up in county jail and possibly due out at the end of the

summer. In her early twenties, Sophia started dating a chubby, pasty redhead, a regular patron at her place of employment who wore over-sized fitted hats and baggy clothing named Nick. He was a year younger than her, a year younger than me, and was from Stall Lake and, from what I could gather, was disingenuously principled and whiny on the internet. He began dealing marijuana in his teens, then at some point got into heroin and prescription pills, not necessarily in that order, I was speculating on the order. She married him after she got pregnant. "We weren't that far into our relationship when I got pregnant..." she said and I said "And?" "Well, I called my parents, you know, to tell them..." "That you were-" "They're very traditional." she said. "They asked me if I loved him...that if I did, they thought we should get married..."

## Chapter 35

In the months that followed Sophia giving birth her son, her husband got shot eight times, allegedly, over a drug dispute with a Russian kid from the same area, which resulted in a punctured lung and complications in his leg, and, subsequently, he was prescribed painkillers to aid his recovery, which he got addicted to, which eventually led to heroin. Allegedly, I thought. He was dealing and using pills and heroin until he and Sophia were arrested in the home they shared on charges of heroin trafficking and a few other more minor charges, maybe two years after the shooting, where the police, allegedly, used Sophia as an incentive for her husband to provide information about the Russian kid. "I know it sounds bad...I just..." she said, then said the words "Russian kid" in a sentence in a scornful tone, then I thought briefly about Karina and her mother's disparaging thoughts on Greek men. "I mean, I thought I was..." I said. "I just...didn't realize how heavy he was into things...then he got addicted and..." she said. "To the...?" I said. "But I told him this is his last chance. That I can't do this anymore...once he gets out..." She exhaled and looked away, then looked back at me and said "My life is so fucked up." dramatically but sincerely, then said "It's funny, before you came in I thought these glasses would hide me, make me a different person, but it's like you saw..." I also suspected that one of her older brothers was facing robbery charges for stealing a

container of toothpaste from the Dollar Tree in North Carolina, then stealing a car that he apparently didn't realize had a child in the backseat. I saw that on Google too, so I mentioned it. "That's why I've been hesitant to, you know..." she said, she said she knew it wasn't right and I agreed, but noted it went both ways, which I wasn't sure that I meant, I probably didn't really mean it, or at best I just barely meant it. "How else could you trust me? If..." she said, trailing off, and I nodded rationally and said "Yeah, honestly, it's probably better that we don't fuck right now. All things considered..." as I kept the left side of my face buried in my palm and suddenly felt engulfed in a nearly uncontrollable anxiousness regarding my previous statement, as if I had betrayed some core principle of my self, to fuck as much as I possibly could regardless of the consequences, despite the fact that historically I only fucked if multiple unrelated contingencies were met, that I would somehow subsequently fall into pieces that could never be recombined after betraying this principle, this principle that I only lived by in theory, by simply uttering that statement. My beer was getting warm, she scrunched up her face, I didn't know what to do. "I understand if you never wanna see me again..." she said. "Nah, it's not like that. Just," I paused and thought "Is it not like that?" in a genuinely curious way, as if I was no longer personally involved in the situation, but was instead some sort of critically minded spectator watching a double of myself play a character in a scripted scene, then asked her to

“just give me a little time to marinate” and to “let me digest the information.”



## Chapter 36

The next night I was lying on my side in a “Z” shape drinking a fruit smoothie out of a blender cup with a purple straw and wondering if it had too much sugar to drink before going to bed when I noticed my phone vibrating beside my buttcheek. By the time I’d turned myself around and picked up the phone the call had gone to voicemail, the phone read “Missed Call - Blocked ID” and I said “Ah, well.” to myself with a tired expression, no longer caring as much about the potential sugar content in my fruit smoothie, feeling fully reconciled with falling asleep within five minutes, no longer caring about answering phones and speaking English, then the phone started ringing again, Blocked ID again, and I picked it up and forcefully said “Hello.” and after a brief pause a meek voice said “Hiii,” and I said “Who’s this?” “Your favorite little person.” “...Sophia?” “Yeah. Umm...” she began as static pulsed in and out, the connection wasn’t great, she said “I was just wondering...if you would wanna grab a drink with me?” then my voice elevated into a mid-falsetto as I said “Like...tonight?” “...Yeah.” “Like, outside the club, right?” I said, still occupying the mid-falsetto register. “...Yeah.” she repeated. Her vocal tone seemed pensive, possibly a little inebriated? Nervous? I gazed at my smoothie and said “Sure. where you wanna go?” She didn’t know, so I started throwing out landmarks. “Garden City?” I repeated after she threw

the name out, after quietly rejecting the last five names I'd thrown out. "...They have places open this late there?" I said skeptically and she replied "We'll figure it out." and I agreed giddily. Garden City was possibly a neighborhood, but also a shopping plaza in Johnston. To be honest, I wasn't really sure what people were referring to when they said "Garden City," but I knew how to drive to a shopping plaza that I personally identified as "Garden City," so I drove there and thought about the last time I'd been, a few years earlier when I was in a rapidly deteriorating relationship with a plus-sized Greek girl from Cyprus when we'd gone to visit her friend, a manager at the Lady Foot Locker on the least busy strip of the mall, and it was awkward, mostly due to my anxious avoidance of what most people would probably define as "normal small talk," I thought. Later that night, after going out to a club where I could only hear, at maximum, fifteen percent of what she said to me, after "grinding" on the dance floor and feeling equally embarrassed and libidinal about it, we fooled around for over an hour in my tan Oldsmobile and briefly tried to have vaginal intercourse after I said "It's ok, I'll pull out," and she said "Did you know pre-cum you can get you pregnant?" as I played the Def Squad El Nino CD I got for my birthday in eighth grade on repeat. The car ran the entire time, the CD started again from the intro and it was a little jarring as I seemed to remember that the CD was on track two when I started feeling her breasts, it was at least a hour long album, as so many

rap albums of that era were, and on my way home I distinctly remembered wondering if we could have died from carbon monoxide poisoning from spending that amount of time in a running but immobile vehicle. The car's alternator died a month later. Prior to Sophia arriving, when I initially took a left into the plaza, I noticed a stand-alone Omaha Steak store, which I had never seen before, but which reminded me of my great aunt Dena, specifically how she used to order me combo packages from Omaha Steaks for like forty bucks a pop, how the steaks were fairly delicious. I sat in my car and did nothing as I waited and thought "Is it possible that I'm really the only dude outside of her son's father that she's ever met outside the club?" as I began to lightly rummage through the coins I'd tossed in my cupholder. It seemed like some type of accomplishment, but also possibly false. Probably false. But also possibly false, but also probably false, but also definitely false? But also possibly true? At a later date, I'd go into the Omaha Steak store and find out the deals my great aunt used to get were only available online. "From one to ten, how good of a father figure would I be?" I thought as Sophia's white SUV pulled into the lot. She was on the phone, on a Samsung the size of her head, and flashed me a smile and apologetically motioned for me to wait a second as I continued to rummage through the change in my cupholders and began to separate the pennies from the nickels, dimes, and quarters. From that day forward I'd throw out any spare pennies I accumulated during the

week as I realized I never used them, that all they did was obstruct the dimes and nickels that I did use. She wore ripped jeans and a tan-cream loose-fit blouse when she plopped out of the large vehicle and walked in a slow strut, possibly intentionally, or possibly by habit, around her car to my car. Her head barely made it above the bottom of my passenger side windows as she walked. "This door's so heavy." she gasped as she swung it open and sat her ass in my car. "It's a luxury vehicle, you know..." I said, then told her she looked nice, very nice, she did, honestly I already felt my penis expanding in size as it relaxed against my left thigh, as she leaned forward and placed her phone in her large pocketbook, as I leaned back and noticed she wasn't wearing underwear and witnessed the cellulite of her upper butt stretch until the skin turned lighter and lighter, then watched intently as the pigment gently pulled itself apart, as the top sixth of her buttcrack became visible for three-fourths of a second. I'd Googled the general vicinity of the section of "Garden City" where we met before I left my apartment, still found no resolution as to what logically defined "Garden City," but did find a Cambodian spot that was open late down the street. I fidgeted awkwardly with my steering wheel as the car hummed and said "You hungry?" and she said "A little..." "Yeah, me too." I said happily, continually reminding myself of the alleged significance of the situation, continually reminding myself of the skepticism I held regarding the empirical veracity of the significance of the

situation, as she sat in the car, visibly pensive, with sparse eye contact occurring between us. “There’s a Cambodian spot right down the street, Google says they should still be open.” I said, consciously breaking what I felt was a mounting silence and she said “We can do that.” softly and I thought “Her sentences seem truncated.” then nodded and shifted the car in reverse and, as the reverse camera became visible on the dash, she said “Oh, that’s nice...” then I looked at her, then I looked at the camera, then I said “The camera?” She flashed three-fourths of a forced smirk and said “Yeah...I have one too.” I shrugged my shoulders and said “It comes in handy, truuue.”

## Chapter 37

As I drove down the street Sophia glanced at herself in the visor mirror, I glanced over and thought I noticed a small, just barely visible, unplucked knuckle hair on her pinky as she hand-sculpted her hair and audited her make-up and thought "We have so much in common." while also noting to myself that I should keep my eyes on the road. "Hey..." she said, with considerably more spirit than she'd exhibited to that point, I thought, and closed the mirror and turned to me. "Do you really think I look good?" and I said "Um, what do you mean?" somewhat nervously, still noting to myself that I should keep my eyes on the road and she said "You've never seen me outside the club. You said earlier that you thought I looked good." I hit the brake at the stop sign and said "Yeah." and shrugged, then while stopped glanced up and down at her performatively and said "I mean, it's a little dark, but you look the same to me as you always do." "Really?" she said, seeming genuinely surprised and even more spirited than when she said "Hey" thirty seconds previous. I nodded and smiled and she seemed more reticent than I'd expected in returning my smile. We crept in the side door of the Cambodian restaurant and she said "You gonna be a gentleman and pull out my chair for me?" with a playful attitude and I wafted myself to the side of her like a littered fast food wrapper in an autumn breeze, landed on her side of the table, then begrudgingly pulled out the chair. "Don't get

too used to this.” I said and smiled slightly, only somewhat sincere. The place was connected to a Jiffy Lube and the decor was muted, I thought about the fat guy at the Jiffy Lube on Mineral Springs, where they actually did a decent oil change, as we walked in, thought about how I still needed to get my “tire sensors looked at ASAP,” how I also probably needed to go for my annual physical now that I had health insurance, how the list of menial tasks I had to do somehow seemed both inexorable and expanding. “Can you give me a minute?” she said as she grabbed her large bag and walked into the bathroom for forty five seconds and I thought “Why not go to the bathroom before I pull out your chair for you?” somewhat perturbed, alone at the small wobbly table analyzing possible methods I could use to reduce my list of menial tasks before she came back out as an older, possibly Cambodian, lady greeted us at the small wobbly table. It was just the the three of us and she asked us what we wanted to drink and dropped two rectangular black menus on the table, two rectangular black menus that read “Ming Hai” in muted yellow font. I asked for a water with a lemon, Sophia asked for water, no lemon, and I glanced at the menu, perused it, and estimated the bill. “Are we doing apps?” I said in a tone that was as reticent as it was inquisitive. The interior of the restaurant was anywhere from a thousand to fifteen hundred square feet, max, the street outside was urban but low-traffic, the waters came, the lady gave me an extra lemon and I appreciated it and

thought “I should reflect that in the gratuity.” then began to revise my estimate of the bill. Sophia looked down into her glass, looked around the place, turned around toward a painting on the wall of poorly drawn people dancing, and told me that it reminded her of the Vietnamese dances she performed growing up. “My parents still think that’s the type of dancing I do...” she said and hit the home button on her phone, I contorted my neck and noticed a seductive selfie that appeared with the caption “I Love My Life” over her forehead. I thought “That’s ridiculous.” in reference to her screen saver, thought “People who have to outwardly promote that they ‘love’ their lives probably hate their lives to the extent of being on the brink of no longer being able to even endure their lives.” and mashed the lemons at the bottom of the glass with my straw and said “Your parents don’t know what you do?” “You kidding me?” she scoffed. “They’d kill me.” “Oh...” “They’re very traditional.”



## Chapter 38

I glanced at the painting again, considered delving further into the nuances of traditional “Eastern” dancing, then said “What do you suggest here?” She ran her index finger down the menu, I felt her legs spread apart in what I thought was a slender v-shape for a moment, then contract. “The Pho...” she said, she pronounced it “fuh,” and my eyes wandered up and down the menu and I said “Now where would that...” trailing off as my eyes continued to meander, and she took the same index finger she slid down her menu, it was painted turquoise, it was a ridiculously skinny finger even given her height and frame, I thought, and tapped the line item that read “PHO - \$11.99 [add \$1 for shrimp]” on my menu. “Oh...beef or chicken?” I said. “I usually do beef.” she said and in my head I screamed “She ordered the Kobe beef like Shaquille O’Neaaaaa!” then smirked briefly. We both ordered the Beef Pho and as we prepared to eat, unwrapping our chopsticks, arranging our plates and bowls, she spoke softly, like someone could be listening in, and said “It’s good you like to try stuff like this...” She held her chopsticks over the bowl and said “You know how to use these?” “You fuckin kidding me?” I stretched out my arms over my head “...I’m a pro.” The tab came to thirty something. “I got it.” I said, then waved a hand she hadn’t raised away, then shoved a Discover card into the jacket, then said “You gotta head back?” in an overly friendly tone that I

somewhat regretted as the words left my mouth, as I registered the words leaving my mouth. She hit the home button on her phone again and said “Ummm...” as I twirled my chomped on straw around in my empty water glass and said “Can I ask you a question?” as she stared at me gregariously. “Were you talking to your sister in that bathroom?” I said and nodded my head in the direction of the bathroom, then said “...when we first walked in?” I only asked the question because she’d told me at an earlier date that the first time she met with the “other Nick” she asked her sister to stay by her phone so she could call her to make sure the other Nick didn’t kidnap her, or do anything else she deemed inappropriate, so I was wondering if she did the same thing for me, if she’d been on the phone with her sister when she went to the bathroom. Her expression bordered scornful when I said “sister,” then straightened out to slightly perturbed as the question registered, and she said “Maybe.” then made a scrunched up, kind of playful face. I relinquished my grip on the straw and dropped my shoulders a few inches dramatically, she took a glance around the place as I again reflected on her personal history via Google and thought that I needed to stop dwelling on it, that it was lame to dwell on things. I shrugged my shoulders two times, furrowed my brow faux-contentiously and said “You really think I’m gonna kidnap you? ...Me? ...Really? I mean, even if I wanted to, where would I even put you?” Her facial expression shifted as I began to regret making the

statement, wondering if it was too soon to make jokes, if my jokes were even funny, wondering if it was even possible that my jokes were funny, I said "I live in studio apartment!" then I smiled wide-eyed, severely doubting that what I said was amusing in the least, but hoping the self-deprecating element of my comment superseded any of the offensive elements. "You're funny." she said, stoically for a moment, then we both smiled, then I drove her back to Garden City completely ambivalent as to whether or not things were "going well." After we said goodbye, after talking for a few minutes in my parked car, she pushed open my passenger door and said "Ugghhhh," then heaved hard with both arms. "I think that may have went well." I thought as I hit reverse, as a muffled voice exhaled "Hey!!" and I hit the brake. "You trying to run me over?!" I rolled down my window and looked back and saw that Sophia was still slow-strutting around the Buick, her eyebrows pointed down toward the bridge of her nose, then rose as they progressed toward her temples, then she smiled as she shook her head, laughing slightly. "Sorry! I didn't, uh, see you in the rearview..." I said and put my palm out the window and brought it down to the level of her head and smiled back. On my way out I took the wrong exit and ended up on a set of quasi-familiar back roads. "Fuck it, I'll just take the backroads." I said to myself, beginning to realize that I didn't know where I was, then got a phone call, Blocked ID. "Hey..." "...Hi." "...Sup?" Then there was a pause. "I had a really good time." she said softly and I turned the

volume of the radio down a little. "Yeah, me too." I said and tried to think of other compliments to say before she said "So you really thought I looked the same today?" to which I turned the volume on the radio down to zero and said "I mean, if you keep asking me I'm gonna tell you no." then chuckled out loud somewhat confidently. Jubilantly perhaps. "Just making sure." she said softly, then asked me if I'd heard that new Future with Miley Cyrus. I hadn't. "It's my favorite song right now." she said and, rather than judging her taste in music, I instead recalled how I thought that calling someone right after you went out with them, in my experience, was an indicator of being seriously interested in them romantically and felt good. "Ok, I'll check it out." I said, thinking that, actually, I probably had heard it on the radio at some point, but just couldn't recall it specifically. Our continued conversation prefaced the next half an hour I'd spend trying to navigate the back roads back to my apartment, all the talking only discombobulated me more. I felt like I knew the roads, but was somehow going in circles, like in a bad dream where you have an eerie feeling of familiarity, but keep jumping back and forth between being lost and knowing exactly where you are, but in a nostalgic type of way. Eventually I passed the Greek Orthodox church I was baptized in and then I knew I was back in Johnston, where I started. I hopped on the nearest highway and drove home.

## Chapter 39

So at this point I think you get the overall gist, that things were obviously incredibly contentious at times, but overall they were also moving along and they continued “moving along” for the next few months. I was out with a few friends when Farhad and Solomon both said “What’d you have a crack on ya screen?!” both noting I seemed to have a crack on my phone screen at separate intervals when I held my phone out in front of me and performed menial tasks. “Nah, it’s only the protector.” I corrected both times. I didn’t think it was that noticeable. As I noted, things were going fairly swimmingly between myself and Sophia at the time, as mentally, egotistically, I was surprisingly satiated by seeing her outside the club, I felt like things were legitimized, like the stochastic interaction of events that led to us meeting one another possibly “meant something,” like finding out that she was married with a husband incarcerated on heroin trafficking charges was the best thing that could have happened to us. “Forty dollahs a piece!” Alfonso declared with a tab in his hand. Forty dollars a piece for: myself, Farhad, Solomon, Alfonso, Pry. Five times forty equals two hundred. Two hundred dollars. The bartender informed us the tab was one hundred and forty eight dollars from behind the register before handing the receipt to Alfonso, who was probably the last person I would have preferred her to hand a receipt to. She had green glitter on her face and her tanned breasts were propped up

architecturally, or at least the cleavage was tanned, most likely artificially tanned, I thought. "Forty dollars a piece?" I thought and felt a genuine scowl appear across my face. I'd just fuckin got there, I thought. I'd just hopped out of an Uber that smelt like the inside of a well-worn basketball sneaker and walked ten blocks under a light drizzle because the driver didn't know Pine Street was a one-way, I thought. "Sure." I said and opened up my wallet. Before I'd arrived, Farhad bought me a warm shot of Jack Daniels that I didn't want and I'd asked him to buy me a screwdriver as remuneration, then I had a couple beers. Solomon was there an hour before I was, I was pretty sure he ate food, possibly ordered an appetizer too, and only put in thirty bucks, so with my index finger and thumb I made a tiny jerking off motion to Farhad as Solomon emancipated a twenty and a ten from his wallet and tossed the bills into the messy pile of money accumulating on the damp bar counter. The bartender noticed and chuckled, then said "Ugh! I like feel sooo bad." then paused, then said. "You know...for guys with small dicks." then blushed slightly, Farhad had built some type of superficial rapport with her before I arrived and she said "That's why I always try to get a feel before anything goes down." possibly baiting us both, I thought, to divulge select thoughts on penises? I glanced at Farhad as he stared intently at her through his Gucci glasses, his eyeballs covering a greater portion of the lenses than normal. "You do the pat down?" I said, taking the bait, and patted an imaginary air bulge next to my

face. "Yeah!" she patted her own air bulge. "Well...it makes sense I guess..." I said as my eyes darted down to the floor, then back up toward the bar repeatedly. "You only get...so many penises in your life..." I said, trailing off and shrugging my shoulders in a matter-of-fact way, then a loud crash occurred behind us. We all looked back and saw a large dunk tank being hauled through the open bar window. "Oh no! Not the dunk tank!" someone said. We left.

## Chapter 40

There was an open container law in effect in certain areas of the city just for that weekend because there was some event going on at some convention center downtown. It was about seventy degrees and sunny as I took a sip of beer out of my plastic cup and tried not to spill any on my plain gray Hanes t-shirt while walking on the sidewalk. Farhad and I walked at a more brisk pace than the others and I turned to him and said "No offense. But there's no way I owed forty bucks back there." He turned to me as we continued to walk at a similarly fast pace and said "You had like five beers and a screwdriver!" indignantly, I thought. "That's funny coming from you." I said, scoffing as I began to walk a little faster, spilling a little beer on my t-shirt in the process. "You owed me the screwdriver for the shot." I said and stared at him feeling decreasingly justified in my comments as he shook his head before saying "I can't believe you don't think that that other bartender in there is hot." and I said "I don't know..." in a passively philosophical tone, suddenly amenable to abruptly shifting topics, slightly concerned about the beer on my t-shirt, I said "She has a certain, I wanna say, quote-unquote air about her. To me." Farhad took a long sip from his cup of beer while walking, then said "I think she's hot!" in a genuinely enthusiastic tone. "I'm not saying she's bad looking." I said and started to try to wipe the beer from my shirt with the licked tip of my



index finger, as the beer expediently began to irretrievably sink into the fabric. Farhad stopped speaking as Solomon and Pry caught up to us, as we were rounding the bend into a busier section of the city. "I'm really starting to like chunkier women. Really starting to, you know, see the appeal there." Farhad continued. "I think that's why I'm surprised you don't like her more..." I furrowed my brow and noted, but disregarded, the derogatory comments I overheard Pry and Solomon making about us as we passed Nico's Authentic Italian Family Restaurant, as I became irrationally intrigued by the prospect of eating lunch there. I un-furrowed my brow for a moment as I stared at the storefront, all of the tables inside were draped with old school red and white Italian style table cloths, I'd walked by the spot a few times before, but never a few beers deep or in daylight, then I said "Man. I've been open to heavier girls for way longer than you have." as Farhad and I both stopped at an intersection and waited for the light to turn to signal to us that it was ok to walk across the street. "Yeah, but-" he said. "I have a certain expertise, if you will." I said. "Well, that bartender is-" "How many plus-sized women have you slept with?" I said and turned and nodded inquisitively in his direction as Pry and Solomon caught up to us.

## Chapter 41

The next day I was at a green light, the one that signaled that it was ok for you to turn left, and it glared green for about three or four seconds before I beeped my horn at a stationary black mini-SUV in front of me, before I said "Fuckin prick." to myself as I lifted my foot off the brake and rolled through the light as the mini-SUV finally rolled its ass slowly through the light. I was driving to a wake and had the GPS on my phone directing me with my phone balanced on my right thigh, I was making decent time. "Bontempo Street...ok." I said and nodded my head, shifting my eyes from the phone to the street, back to the phone, back to the street. I flicked on my right blinker. So did the mini-SUV. Bontempo wasn't a main street, and I began to consider the possibility we were going to the same wake. "I wanna tell you about this girl I met last night, after you left." Farhad whispered to me in the procession line. "I got her number and everything." he continued and I nodded my head as I noted an older man wearing a leather jacket and dress pants standing in front of us, as his gut drooped over his belt buckle like a scoop of melting ice cream, a scoop that was on the precipice of falling out of its cone, as he interjected small talk, unsolicited, at various points in our conversation. "So, how did you know the deceased?" "Where you guys from?" "I have a son who's thirty four." "Friends are the most important thing you can have." Farhad was turned to me, away from the older man, he was wearing a

sportcoat while I went with a grey thermal and khakis. The wake was in East Providence, which was pertinent information that I took into account before I left, that ultimately resulted in me being more in line with the median dress code, I thought. Farhad's face traveled until it was uncomfortably close to mine and he stared intensely through his lenses, then said "So, she looks like Mila Kunis. But just with a really hard jawline." and I nodded again, I tried to keep my voice down and said "Oh. So, like, kind of like a...manly..." "Like the type of jawline girls find attractive in guys." he said. The line was barely moving, moving in such a painfully slow manner that it seemed like it could legitimately take hours to pay our respects, and I said "So, is she, like, muscular?" and he said "Ummmmm...huge tits." We reached a display of photos of the deceased and her family, I noted that one of the photos was of the deceased wearing a top that seemed to leave her right nipple fairly visible, and the man in front of us put on his eyeglasses and stepped out of line just slightly. "Just knock me right in the shoulder..." he said, then tapped his shoulder jovially. "if too much space foh'ms in front of me." he said in a suddenly thick Southeastern New England accent, then chuckled as he squinted and pointed to the pictures, after he had already stepped out of line and explained himself, then said "...Just need to get a better look." Farhad's chin was about an inch and a half from my left shoulder as he whispered "You'd send it in." somewhat anxiously, I thought, about the Mila Kunis girl, then I

contemplated the comment for a second, the line began to pick up a little steam, then asked him if he had a picture of the girl on his phone.

## Chapter 42

“He’s told me he’ll murder me if I ever leave him and I believe him.” Sophia said about her husband, who was now, I was just finding out, officially in the midst of an elongated process that would eventually lead to his release from prison, and I said “I don’t give a fuck!” in a sort of automatic, heat of the moment retort and she shot me a disapproving, an almost “I’m embarrassed for you” type glance and I said “You know what I mean. Metaphorically.” and she said “Potentially, um, in a few weeks.” when I asked “What’s the exact timetable look like?” She also expressed concern over her ex-boyfriend who had plead guilty to homicide, who her husband was also concerned about, and mentioned that the ex-boyfriend had sent her a letter a few years ago and that her husband was concerned then as well as now, although more so then than now, I assumed, given her husband’s current predicament. She said she’d tried to lose all contact with the homicidal ex-boyfriend, at least after visiting him in prison a few times and then realizing that he was changing for the worse, and also apparently gaining considerable muscle, and had no idea about the terms of his incarceration, and I said that the website I visited said he was up for parole this year and felt fairly emasculated while saying “Well, the website I visited...” and also said the website gave visitors the option of becoming pen pals with him, but that he was serving a life sentence, and that it seemed unlikely that he would

be released at his earliest possible parole date, but that it was concerning either way, and she agreed. Also, I'd found out that night, it came up organically I supposed, she told me that the phone number she'd initially given me was her sister's, it was pertinent because she got a new phone number a few weeks prior and I must have made some comment about the new number or something. "So when you said your sister's boyfriend threw your phone in the toilet..." I said. "That was the phone." she said. My eyelids lifted up and my exposed upper eyeballs started to feel just a little dusty as I began to connect some of the dots of an anecdote she recently relayed regarding her sister and her sister's kids' father. "...and it was because some dude kept texting her?" I said, curiously, in reference to the anecdote about her sister's phone being "thrown in the toilet." "That was you." she said, in reference to the same anecdote, in reference to the "issue" her sister had regarding her "son's father" allegedly "throwing her [Sophia's sister's] phone in the toilet" because "'some dude' kept texting her" a few weeks previous. "So," I said "your sister's son's father got really upset because 'some dude' kept texting her phone and threw said phone in the toilet, while I was texting what I thought was you, and enduring abysmal response times, but the phone I was actually texting was your sister's phone, your sister's phone that was being bombarded by embarrassing text messages from 'some dude,' 'some dude' that was actually me?" "Yeah." she said, then said "She kept trying to cover for

me, but he wasn't buying it." She shook her head disappointed, possibly in herself, possibly in her sister, possibly in her overall situation, possibly in the general patterns human interaction seemed to form over and over and over, ad infinitum. "So that night she gave you her sister's phone number?!" I thought in disbelief. "Is this guy reverse searching my phone number and currently, as we speak, trying to track me down because he believes I'm trying to fuck, or already fucking, or previously fucked, the mother of his children?!" I thought in disbelief. "I mean, he threw her phone in the toilet, right?!" I thought in disbelief. "But would he remember the number if he threw the phone in the toilet?" I thought slightly optimistically. "In addition to her husband potentially tracking me down when he gets out?!" I thought in disbelief. "In addition to her homicidal ex-boyfriend potentially tracking me down when he gets out?!" I thought in disbelief. Also, she told me that she told her manager, Wu, that I knew her "background," then noted her relief that I knew. "Looking back, it was tough..." she said, seemingly relieved. She was wearing a 1950s style dress with a large bow as a belt around her torso with her hands politely placed around her glass, with her eyes directed down to the floor. "I didn't know how to tell you...I felt like...that was gonna be the breaking point...one way or the other...you know?" she said with an apparent optimism that caused a mild euphoria in my lower gut region as her eyes approached mine, as I continued thinking about being hunted down

by her sister's son's father, her husband, and her homicidal ex-boyfriend in disbelief. "Yeah, I understand...that makes sense." I said and she said "Like...now. We can move on." she said and I smiled genuinely, although I felt slightly anxious about the phrase "move on," then looked to my left and said "That's him, right? ...Wu?" and she nodded affirmatively and said "He's the only one at work that knows. I don't even show people my license. Actually, I get real ghetto if people try and ask me my last name or anything like that." then gave me an example of how ghetto she could get if someone tried to look at her license and I nodded perfunctorily, and briefly felt similar to an ethnographer who would say "ghetto" in a voice generally associated with extremely Caucasian Americans. Also, while discussing said tendency to become "ghetto," Sophia noted that her husband and his mother taught her "how to be polite," and that she felt indebted to him as well as his mother for helping her hone those bourgeois social skills, and I set aside any feasible jealousy for a moment and genuinely appreciated the anecdote, and felt a form of vicarious indebtedness to her husband and his mother as well.



## Chapter 43

“Round and round and round and round...” Wu made a twirling motion with his index finger in the air next to his face as he spoke to me later that night. “I’ve been seeing the same shit for twenty seven years.” “Nice...” I thought despondently as he wiped an unspecified fluid from the bar counter with a damp white cloth. His hair was slicked back but wavy, pompadour style, and he always wore an oversized button up t-shirt over slacks and dress shoes. I thought he might be like a “Made Guy” in the mafia, if those guys still existed, before Sophia told me he was half-Chinese, which immediately laid that notion to rest because, according to mafia movies I’d seen, you could only become a “Made Guy” in the mafia if you were one hundred percent Italian. “Yeah, I bet...” I said, thinking that, overall, he seemed like a pretty nice guy. However, at the same time, I was still reticent to get into too deep of a conversation with any of the staff, up to and including Wu, as I didn’t even one hundred percent trust Sophia to keep my best interests in mind if things somehow went south, which still seemed to be the most likely outcome, nevermind Wu, nevermind some kid getting paid anywhere between twelve to fifteen bucks an hour to clean damp ejaculate off of a champagne room couch. So I guess my overall impression of Wu was that, although he seemed like a nice guy, he also seemed to think I was being reticent, which I definitely

was, and that he may have liked me more if I was more openly sociable.

## Chapter 44

The next morning, considerably hungover, I was heating up a cup of coffee for the fourth time that morning when an old lady who worked in the logistics department walked into the kitchen. “Oh, you again?” she said in a deadpan tone. “Hi Doris.” I said and fairly genuinely attempted to avoid eye contact. Pasty-skinned, Doris wore unnecessarily dressy slacks and had really long fingers, she was in her mid-to-late sixties or possibly older, and this was the fifth time that morning that we’d moseyed into the kitchen at the same time. I smiled and nodded, then pretended to check something on my phone as the microwave hummed in the background, as the refrigerator made an exaggerated wailing noise and I think we both wondered why it wailed in the tone that it wailed, why it wailed in a tone that sounded eerily similar to a ghost or ghoul or some sort orgasming. I’d put the cup of coffee in for fifty seconds with the thought that I didn’t want to come back to the kitchen again before lunch, then thought “In retrospect, maybe I should’ve just added ice and made an iced coffee...” impatiently, as I watched the seconds tick down, one by one, each second seeming to extend longer than a second should normally extend, then watched Doris hunch over the kitchen sink and clean her coffee cup. The last time we rendezvoused in the kitchen Doris shared her thoughts with me about the expired quarts of milk in the refrigerator. “What?” she said with her face submerged

in the fridge. “Nobody can throw out the expired milk but me?!” and I shook my head incredulously and said “I know, right?” as she slowly removed her head from the fridge while holding a quart of milk with her right index and middle fingers, and said “Nobody else checks it?!” and I shrugged my shoulders and made a disgusted expression as she sniffed the open container and said “Eckk!!! ...and why’d they already open the new ones!” then shook her head again. “That’s why they go sour so quickly!” she said. Doris had a thick New England accent, grew up in Vermont, but married an Italian-American corrections officer from Massachusetts. “You always hear about the cops killing these black kids...but you never hear about the black kids that kill the cops.” she whispered to me one time at lunch. I opened my camera phone, turned the lens in my direction, and began to monitor how my hair looked with little to no intent of taking a selfie. She opened the freezer door, she scooped out an ice cube, she dropped it immediately, it shattered on the linoleum floor. “How does one ice cube break into all these big pieces?!” she cried out in despair. I looked down, there were eight or so small pieces of ice cube scattered on the linoleum floor as she shuffled over and arduously picked up one piece. “Ugggghhhhhhhhh.” she said, then got up, shuffled over a few more steps, then bent back over as the microwave made a ding! sound, as I said “Well, that’s my coffee...” “Uuuuhhhhhggggg.” she said. I closed the microwave door softly and crept quietly

around Doris as she stood in a hunched over, crouched position and attempted to long finger a small piece of ice cube into her hand. She didn't seem to acknowledge the ding! or my comment regarding the ding!, and I walked back to my desk thinking about how arduous picking up all of those ice cube pieces looked, and when I got back to my desk I noticed I had a text from my mom that read "Hey Nick, Wanna come over for dinner tonight?" I disregarded the text as I retrieved a crumpled up napkin from the side pocket of my laptop case, brought it up to my eye level, and glanced at it inquisitively. "thank u for being awesome" read one line that she wrote in exemplary cursive on the crumpled up napkin. "Nick. i think your [sic] amazing" read another, and then on the back we both signed our names, which, admittedly, even at the time, seemed slightly embarrassing, but also seemed touching and made me think things like "aww," but sincerely, not sarcastically, even if we were both pretty inebriated, borderline obliterated, when we penned the signatures.

## Chapter 45

“Niko, your hair looks good.” my dad said as he and I sat on the back patio of my parents’ house and watched his platinum tinted grill cook half a dozen chicken breasts. “It uses an infrared beam to cook.” he said after we’d stared at it in silence for about thirty seconds. “Cool.” I said and he said “Have you been doing anything different to it?” and I said “What?” and he said “Your hair.” and pointed to my hair. “Yeah, not washing it.” I said matter of factly. “I’ve been finding that not washing it thins it out a little. Just without the greasiness of gelling.” I had very coarse hair, various people, Karina among others, used to call it “nappy” and then say “Ewww!” and point at it. My dad had even made similar, more politically correct, but still disparaging, comments and I’d been somewhat self-conscious about it since my childhood when I wanted to grow it long like the lead singers of my favorite grunge bands, but could only grow what was essentially, according to my peers at middle school, an afro. My dad was listening attentively with his eyes fixated on my scalp, then said “Be careful.” in a tone that was fatherly and portentous, then said “You know your scalp can start to stink doing that.” I placed my beer can between my legs for a second, scratched both of my nipples simultaneously, and said “Scalp doesn’t have a smell though.” We were drinking cans of Miller 64, I’d researched them, they were 2.4% ABV, a more or less pointless beer to drink, I thought, but then

again they were free, and I'd probably have four or five of them and catch a semi-decent buzz, I thought. My dad pulled back his body into the chair he was already sitting in, in a quasi-shocked type of motion, and said "Oh yes it does!" in reference to scalp having a smell, he put his beer down on the deck railing, it was in a red sleeve from a wedding we went to the previous summer, and said "A guy I work with, he smells like scalp all the time." He had one leg crossed on top of the other wearing short navy blue bathing suit shorts, his sandals were scattered on the ground around his feet, his skin was tanned deep beige, and his salt and pepper wavy hair was salon cut. His goatee was trimmed neatly. "The fuck do you want me to do then?" I thought, thinking about the comments he'd made in the past, both with regard to my hair being coarse and then with regard to my new method of making it slightly less coarse. "And you can physically smell it?" I asked skeptically. "Yes. If you don't wash your hair you will smell like scalp." "Because it's not like I'm going weeks without washing it." "Nick." he said sternly, then said "All it takes is a couple days." I got up and walked over to the grill, sliced open a chicken breast and, instantaneously witnessing pink, knew each piece of poultry needed at least another two to five minutes on the grill, then walked back to my chair and said "If I go to the gym, or if I play basketball or something where I'm sweating, then I obviously wash it right after." "You'd be surprised." he said, incredulous at my nonchalance, and uncrossed his leg and leaned out

of his chair, but maintained a crouched position and said "Let me smell your scalp." to which I said "No thanks." as he wafted me over, continuing to lean further and further out of his chair, then said "C'mon!" to which I said "No way man!" as I got up out of the lounge chair with an acrimonious expression and further rebuked his advance, only after his ass was back in his chair I sat back down and said "Do you still have Papou's .38?" Papou means grandfather in Greek. He paused to think for a second, then said "The gun?" "Yeah." "I don't know..." he said as I noted that his expression no longer contained scalp content and he said "I probably have it somewhere... Why?" and I said "You think I could I have it?" and noticed that my dad's eyes now seemed sad, but he smiled, or possibly just winced through the sadness, I thought, and he said "Why do you want it?" and I said "You know, in case I have to clap back!" then grinned, hoping my insincere sarcasm would be at least somewhat convincing as he sighed noncommittally then said "I don't even know where I have it. I don't even know if it works." He took a sip of beer, then said "I don't think it does." as I looked away and said "That's fine." then considered getting up to check the grill again as I looked over at the grill blankly, thinking almost exclusively about the handgun conversation and barely at all about the status of the chicken. I felt strongly, at that juncture, that I absolutely one hundred percent did not want to inform either of my parents that I was seeing a girl who was A) an exotic dancer, B) married, and C)



married to a person currently incarcerated on heroin trafficking charges. It was somewhat of a non-starter, I felt, but at the same time wasn't completely certain either way, for all I knew maybe they'd be encouraging about the whole thing, maybe we'd all sit at the dinner table enjoying a fine three course meal one night and they'd inform me in unison "Nick, we love how you aren't judging the employment choices of the girls you choose to shove your cock in! We love how open-minded you are when you have an erection! Exactly how we raised you to be: open-minded and erect. And for all of those reasons we support you! And here, please take this .38, just in case you have to clap back! We loaded it up for you and everything!" And I'd smile ear to ear, wholly taken aback, say "I'm just so glad you understand!" as I gleefully accepted the gun and skipped off to my car with a bag of leftovers in my left hand, a loaded gun in the right. "But why can't you at least tell them about the dancing?" I thought while sitting in my chair staring blankly at the grill. "Aren't you, in your own way, indicting her employment by refusing to disclose to your family what she does for a living? Aren't you just as bad as the people that unjustly judge people solely based on what they do for a living?" I thought. And they were all valid points, I thought. All valid, but then I thought about all of the preconceived notions surrounding strippers...you know? How...wouldn't it just be better if my family got to meet her first, and then form their own opinion without having any opportunity to prejudge her based on A, B, or

C? I was worried that my mother would prejudge her, which I found slightly odd because I normally didn't care in slightest what my mom thought about anything that I did, but then again it was possible that I was conflating caring about what she thought with caring about having to deal with her commentary. And that, in short, was how I justified "lying" to my parents about the "situation," although, to be fair, I wasn't technically withholding any information, per se. Rather, I was being prudent as to when the right time would be to disclose certain items. When (and if) Sophia met my family, then I would have no problem disclosing any of these items, I thought, but until then, why go around being imprudent just to be imprudent! For the time being, I was simply asking to borrow a unregistered revolver for a finite period of time. "You know you need a license to have one, right?" he said, also staring blankly at the grill. "Do you have one?" I said. "I don't think it's a good idea." He got up and slid his feet into his sandals. "I wouldn't feel comfortable giving you it." I got up too. "Ok, no prob." I said as he slid over to the grill as he still held the beer in its cozy in his hand. "Well, why would you need it?" he said and I thought about an article I'd recently read online, a local news outlet with wholly subpar editing standards and even more abysmal comment sections, even by internet standards, about a kid down the street from my apartment getting shot in the neck and killed in front of his girlfriend the night before in a home invasion, a grisly scene that included his mom getting shot in the jaw, and

having the invader bite her index finger off in a struggle for the gun, then said “I just figured it might be good to have one. I mean, Papou sent it to you because like...uhh...” “You wanna check the chicken?” he said. I went over, opened the top of the grill, the smoke felt pretty good on my face, the chicken breasts seemed done. I figured I’d put a steak knife under my bed instead and imagined myself slashing the ACLs of an imaginary home invader like a seasoned martial artist, then said “Mom! Is the salad ready?!” toward the small window that looked over the kitchen sink, as my mom’s expressionless face was displayed in the middle of the window as my dad said “She can’t hear you when you’re in the same room with her, why are you yelling through a wall?” I disregarded my dad’s comment, threw the cooked chicken breasts on the serving plate, walked back inside, and began to think about how my parents ate what I found to be an absurd amount of chicken in those days, up to and including: grilled chicken, chicken cutlets, chicken cacciatore, Greek chicken, as well as other variations of chicken. At a later date it would prove to be a real issue when I adopted a pescatarian diet. When we arrived inside the salad was on the table.

## Chapter 46

"Isn't it possible she could change?" Farhad said as we stood on his mother's front porch drinking white wine later that night as I stood with my back against the front door, as he leaned over me with my glass wobbling up and down as I spoke, with the wine swishing back and forth at the bottom of the glass like a pendulum. "I don't know..." I said, then paused to consider how to phrase my, for the most part, acutely negative feelings on the matter, then said "Every time you talk to me about it, you tell me a different set of circumstances, and every time you tell me a set of circumstances you tell me you think that set is the truth." as Farhad walked down the porch to urinate and said "No, keep talking..." as he pulled out his penis on the lawn and began to urinate. We were discussing his estranged wife. "This is what? Her fourth round of lies? This month?" I said, looking out onto the opposite side of the deck Farhad was urinating off of as he yelled from the grass "So, you think there's no chance that this girl..." He lowered his register as he put his penis back into his sweatpants and jogged up his mother's porch stairs. "So, you think there's no chance that this girl has just been misguided her entire life, and now that she's been called out on it, now that I called her out on all of her shit...that there's no chance that she could turn her life around? With me..." and I said "Maybe..." and he said "Well..." and I said "She is thirty two though..." and he said "...Yeah." We went down the

street to a steak and sushi lounge where Vera worked as a bartender part-time, she had a corporate job, some kind of “account management” role or something equivalently vapid, during the day, and ordered two twenty oz. Sapporos, I declined the accompanying glass as I noticed the hostess, Milagro, sitting five or six seats down from us at the bar. “She must’ve just got off work.” I thought, possibly slightly erotically, as I carefully glanced over at her delicately sipping a glass of white wine. Vera side-eyed Farhad, then said “What’s wrong?” in a disgusted tone as he wore his sorrow like a mink, slouched in his seat. Milagro was four feet ten inches tall, I’d guessed it correctly the night she introduced herself to me, when Farhad and I were slightly more inebriated than usual and standing right at the section of the bar that she sat at right now as she intermittently sipped her white wine. She said she was half Puerto Rican and half Irish, that her last name was Murphy or McNamara, I thought I remembered her saying Murphy, but also thought it was possible she said McNamara. She had eyebrows almost as thick as mine, and I estimated that my eyebrows were probably in the top one percentile of thickness in America, and a face that at times seemed really cute, but at other times seemed less cute in a way that was more volatile than normal. It seemed as though we would probably have next to nothing in common as she told me she was attending community college for accounting, that she was twenty five and got a late start, that she lived on Federal Hill.

“Damn, it’s kind of dangerous up there these days...” I said and she said “Oh, no. I’m actually, originally, from Manton.” Manton was a rougher area than Federal Hill and she seemed possibly a little offended, and I felt slightly embarrassed by the fact she was apparently more comfortable in violent neighborhoods than I was, feeling as though I should have somehow inveterately just felt comfortable in any dangerous neighborhood, despite having lived in an upper middle class neighborhood for thirteen of my first eighteen years alive. “That girl wanted your shit!” Farhad said drunkenly after we left. I was moderately interested, but was ultimately unconvinced, as I thought Farhad usually thought girls were more into him than they actually were, and thought he may be using that same metric for me, but also thought she had a great butt, and was intrigued by the possibility that she may have liked me. That night I noticed Milagro look over toward us and, once I confirmed the eye contact, I raised my beer and said “Sup, Milly?” “Hiiiiiii...” She smirked relatively unenthusiastically, I thought, then Vera poured us two shots of Jack Daniels and a shot of tequila for herself. “Here.” she said and pushed one shot over. “Farhad, you need this.” She pushed the other glass toward me, it was on the house, otherwise I would’ve asked for tequila, which I probably could have anyway, but didn’t want to come off overbearing, I thought. Every time I took a shot of room temperature Jack Daniels I’d have to swallow hard and avoid speaking for three to five minutes after

swallowing to avoid vomiting profusely all over whoever and whatever was in my immediate vicinity. I left the shot on the table, leaned into Farhad, and said "You know if she prefers Milly or Milagro?" and then thought briefly about Milly Abreu back in '09, but didn't seem to care as much as I did when I was despondently getting my oil changed at the Jiffy Lube on Mineral Springs, the fact that she may have descended into a calamitous life of street prostitution didn't strike the same chord with me as I carefully glanced over at Milagro perched on her barstool, noting her white blouse and petite arms that I considered nicely shaped. Farhad flicked the belly of his beer can and stared at it lifelessly, broadcasting his depression for all to see, not that there were all that many people in the bar, there were barely any, then said "I don't know, I always call her Milagro..." in an extremely disinterested monotone and I glanced over again quickly, then said "Hmmm, I'm pretty sure she introduced herself to me as Milly..." As I continued to contemplate walking over in Milly's direction, as we prepared to imbibe the lukewarm, complimentary shots of Jack Daniels that would undoubtedly catapult me right to the very verge of vomiting, Alfonso swung open the fifteen pound front door with a wide grin cemented on his face. The increasingly brisk night air swept across the bar stools for half a second and I felt it usurp my armpits and, as the air moved over my pores, I thought back to the city traffic lights wiggling violently in the wind as we drove through downtown, then swallowed a gulp of the sixty

seven degree Jack Daniels. “Hola, como estaaaa?!” Alfonso said, his decibel level suggested that he’d been drinking heavily before he came out, I wasn’t necessarily in the mood for his shit. Vera’s expression was equally as disdainful for him as it was for Farhad, I thought, as she stared in his direction disdainfully, as he started rubbing my pecs as I swallowed continuously to avoid vomiting directly on the bar, as I moaned “C’mon man...” in between swallowing violently. “What are you guys drinking?!” Alfonso said before saying “Farhad, why do you look so depressed?!” “What do you want?” Vera said and Alfonso said “Ummmmm, I’ll just have one of those.” then pointed to Farhad’s beer and removed his hands from my nipples, then said “Who’s this mami?!” as he shifted position and stood in the direction of Milagro. Before Vera could grab the beer he started walking toward her, I was fairly certain that he didn’t know her, that he most likely had no idea who she was, as he stopped about halfway between us and her, and said “You niggas comin’?!” then waved Farhad and I over jovially and Milagro said “Excuse me?” in what I thought most people would have defined as a perturbed tone, as she turned on her stool with her wine glass held out and tilted at an approximately forty five degree angle. Alfonso turned back to her and said “Mami. You’re gor-geous!” and waved his right hand sensuously around her cheek as she said “You know I’m Puerto Rican, right?” “Mami.” “And what’s with all the ‘mami’s?” I was resting my chin on my left fist contemplating Alfonso’s usage of the “N”



word with the soft “r,” juxtaposing the broader cultural and socioeconomic implications of the word with the more specific personal inconvenience it was causing me in a relatively bourgeois social setting, then turned to Farhad and hesitantly said “Should we just stay here or...?” as Alfonso said “I’m Italiahhhno, that’s latin!” Farhad and I walked up at a crawl pace and I said “Hey” meekly as Alfonso turned around jubilantly. Farhad slunked behind me as I patted Alfonso’s shoulder as Milagro stared at Alfonso. “Well, anyway...” I said. Farhad looked down at the beer he held in his right hand as I looked back at him looking down at the beer he held in his right hand, the thick goatee portion of his beard was squished west by the fist he’d been leaning on for the past ten minutes, Vera walked over and matter-of-factly placed Alfonso’s beer on the bar. Alfonso picked it up, took a sip, grinned wide like oceans just as I was realizing that I probably wasn’t as mortified by his behavior as I should have been and said “So, whattya guys wanna do?” I made an apologetic face to both Milagro and Vera and made a mental note to make a clandestine visit to the bar after I’d parted ways with Alfonso and Farhad to apologize vocally and hopefully maintain my social standing, partially because I felt bad about Alfonso’s behavior on a broader cultural level, but also because I wanted to maintain some semblance of a chance of possibly engaging in some form of sexual intercourse with Milagro in the future, even though I felt very strongly about Sophia, but I also felt as though

there were so many complications and contingencies involved in our relationship, and how could I commit myself to someone who was married? Wouldn't that be absurd? Even she wouldn't ask that of me, I thought, although she may not "ask" it of me, but she would probably expect it, I thought, but I wasn't doing anything that out of line, at bottom I was just apologizing for my friend's racist, or at least racially insensitive behavior, and also what if things fell apart between myself and Sophia right around the same time Milagro mellowed out about the whole Alfonso-using-the-N-word night? A few minutes later we went next door where the bar was styled as a college-age club, but was nearly empty. Granted, it was a little early in the night, especially for college kids, but it still had a club decibel volume, despite being empty. Farhad and I watched Alfonso barter with the DJ for a few minutes, then watched him drunkenly mount the stage, which was just a one and a half foot high wooden platform in the corner and, swooning back and forth, sing "My Heart Will Go On" by Celine Dion. We stood expressionless on the dancefloor, there were five of us total, as Alfonso struggled to reach the proper crescendos of lines like "...And the spaces / Between us!" as I winced and Farhad shook his head and, almost apologetically I thought, as if he suggested that Alfonso sing the theme song to Titanic, as if he was the Lou Pearlman to Alfonso's Justin Timberlake, he said "This isn't his best performance." as I gingerly took a sip of beer, turned to Farhad, and said

“He does sing though, right?” genuinely curious,  
because the singing was truly subpar.

## Chapter 47

That night I had a dream I was in a large two floor warehouse that was empty save for a few stationary bicycles, I guess it was a gym, or a newly renovated or recently opened gym that was still in the process of getting all of its exercise equipment intact and operational. I noticed Sophia enter wearing a pink spandex top, but she looked different, like a year or so had past, like she had somehow become more “upper middle class,” perhaps bougie, and I had a terrible feeling that I should follow her around and I did, and became thoroughly depressed as she ignored my blatant attempts to make eye contact and instead spoke with a friend I didn’t know. It was blatantly clear that she wanted absolutely nothing to do with me, I felt it in my gut as she left the warehouse with her friend and I realized that things between us had, at some point, become irreparable, and then the car her friend drove kept driving off, then rewinding back, then driving off again, and her pink spandex top was freeze-framed in the size of the entire frame over my consciousness in the background of the loop. Leaving the gym in a daze, I went to a house, triple decker, inner city, that wasn’t her family’s, but I interpreted it as her family’s house. There was a waitress there and an art project in the garage where the garage door was one hundred percent made of clear window panes, where a girl was leaning against the clear window panes with exposed breasts. I went

upstairs and went to bed, tossed and turned, and, in the morning, in the bedroom adjacent, I found a younger brother, the size of a large centipede, on the dresser trying on clothes jovially, in a miniature house made just for him on the dresser, as I waited forever for her to show up, with no imaginable way of deciphering my feelings on the matter.

## Chapter 48

The next afternoon I parked my car on Spruce Street on Federal Hill about a block away from Caserta Pizzeria, a long-time staple of the neighborhood that sold an item called the “Pepper Pig” that my dad and granddad loved. I did too. “Mmmm, Pepper Pigs.” I thought as I saw the Caserta sign, as I whipped into the parking spot as “Return Of The Mack” by Mark Morrison played at an extremely loud decibel level through my car speakers, through my four open windows. I was meeting Pry right around the corner for a one dollar oyster, six dollar martini happy hour special, and I got out of the car and noticed a black box that marketed itself as a meter for “All Spots.” I approached the box curiously, a curious expression pasted onto my face, it read “3 HOUR MAX PARKING - 9AM-8PM, MON-SAT” It was four pm on a Saturday. I’d parked on Spruce Street for years and had never heard of that arrangement, it seemed incomprehensible at first, unjust at second, and I began to feel indignant and thought “Do I even have quarters?” concerned that if I didn’t I’d be forced to find a spot in one of the surrounding neighborhoods, which I knew were terrible streets to park on, one time I saw a kid prancing through one of the neighborhoods just openly trying to pry open different cars parked on the street, and walked back to my car when I heard a voice shriek “Ayy, you didn’t pay dat did you?!” and when I looked to my right I saw a portly Italian-American man who, at a

glance at least, seemed to have an aging Mario from Mario Bros on Nintendo look about him, with a receding hairline and a mustache walking toward me. "Yeah, don't pay dat..." he said. The man spoke loudly, but jovially in a thick Brooklynese, which to be fair was a standard accent for the Federal Hill section of Providence. "Dey put that in over a year ago, but the cops, they don't check it on Saddadays." he said. "Oh. Yeah I was wondering what..." I said, trailing off as I attempted to register how our conversation began, it seemed like only a second ago that I was innocently glancing at a large parking meter I'd never seen before, daydreaming about young children trying to break into cars across the street... "Pshhh! They don't wanna pay em ovatime! To juss check thih metihs?! Youknowwhatimean?" "Oh." I said and looked curiously back at the box. The man wore black on black on black and held a black apron, his grayish, salt-n-pepper hair was maybe just slightly thinning on the top rather than receding. He gave me more background on the meters. "Yeah, we told em, over a year ago now, because I work ova at Cahhnstanteenohh's," he pointed around the corner to a restaurant that I was fairly sure was illicitly owned, then turned back to me. "We told em, 'Ayyy, don't put that in, we neva used to have pay to pahk heahhh!'" and I said that I thought that sucked. "And they did, they did wait about six months to put it in, which was nice. but they don't check it Saddadays." he said. I nodded my head, and he told me that I "don't gotta worry about gettin a

ticket today!" and smiled and I smiled too, then I scratched my temple and noticed my right foot was flared out to the east, somewhat homoerotically I thought, and I slowly began to shift it north as I said "Yeah, I don't ever remember having to pay to park here..." feeling a need to say one complete sentence, to which the man replied "Yeah, it was a little ovih a yeahh ago dey did it, we told 'em 'Ayy why you gotta do dat?!' But dey did it anyway!" He was waddling back at forth at an anxious pace, almost like the information he was relaying was confessional in nature, I thought, as he shook his head incredulously and shrugged his shoulders. "Well, thanks for letting me know." I said, sincerely thankful for the information, but about ready for the exchange to conclude, and walked over and closed my car door. I turned back around and the man stood in the same spot, thankfully also seemingly prepared for the exchange to conclude, he nodded in a "You're welcome, I know my words were at the very least of some help you" type of way, then waddled west toward the Bank Of America and Asian Massage Parlor at the end of the block, and I nodded back in a "Your anecdote was helpful, albeit verbose, but thank you so much!" type of way, then walked east toward Constantino's, the man's place of employment, and the bar with the dollar oyster special where I told Pry we'd meet.



## Chapter 49

When I got to the bar I opened the wood door and immediately saw that Pry wasn't there, that all of the bar seats were taken, but that there was one table open in the front, so I sat at it and asked the busboy where the hostess was as he rounded a corner, as he was seemingly unsure about a plethora of things, as he wore a white shirt and black tie with a few dirty plates in his hands. He stopped and looked around as I said "Well, do we have to order food to...um, sit?" and he said "Ummmmmmmmmm..." and continued to rotate his head back and forth, then said "I don't....think so?" and I said "Well, I'm getting oysters, so that probably...counts?" and he said "Prob...ably?" I felt a vibration in my pocket, I looked down and registered the phrase "Brian - Text Message" displayed on my phone. Clearly, it was Brian Tabouli, and accordingly I glanced down again and surreptitiously opened my phone, noted the text read "sup man? any word on the wedding?" and immediately closed the text window, as if the words displayed on my screen contained some sort of easily transmissible disease. In the interim, the busboy walked away and, as I continued to register the text message, I also wondered if I should have made more of an effort to verbally end the exchange with the busboy, thinking that maybe I should've said "Well, thanks for your help..." to him or something like that, rather than just abruptly looking down at my phone multiple times mid-conversation. I

knew there was no way I was going to Tabouli's wedding, but didn't start brainstorming excuses in the bar, instead I slid my phone back into my pocket and made a mental note to think of polite ways to phrase my intended absence at a later date, then thought about possibly generating an electronic note on my phone to remind to think of polite excuses, thinking that I'd probably forget my mental note and then when Tabouli inevitably sent a follow up text I would more or less have to respond on the spot, that then I'd have no time to think of a polite excuse, then thought about how I didn't feel like pulling my phone back out of my pocket to jot down an electronic note as Pry walked in the door. We pounded fists gently, then I looked around meekly shrugging my shoulders as he checked his phone. There was still no waiter, but I made eye contact with the hostess back at her station and she didn't seem to mind us sitting, so we sat without worries at the table.

## Chapter 50

“Are you European?!” a voice uttered out of nowhere and, startled, Pry and I both turned to our left and saw a rotund Mediterranean man in his forties in a grey New England Patriots hooded sweatshirt leaning his gut comfortably against our table. He was balding, but also had his head shaved at a two-fade, and his teeth were small and stained light brown and/or dark yellow as he flashed us an eager smile. Neither Pry or I replied initially and, apparently taking in our non-response, he clarified by saying “Your hat!” while pointing at Pry’s New England Revolution hat as Pry reluctantly acknowledged the comment, as the man said “So...are you?!” in reference to Pry being European. “No...” Pry said slowly, then touched the brim of his hat as if he were blind and was feeling the hat to decipher its print, then said “I’m, uh... just a poseur. Who likes soccer.” and the waiter said “Hahahahahaha!” cackling as he took a step back from the table. “...So, what can I get you guys? You wanna hear our specials?” I glanced at Pry as he stared blankly at the condiments on the table as the waiter continued speaking before either of us verbally confirmed that we wanted to hear the specials “Well, we have a twenty two ounce Guinness Blonde on special. Really, really recommend that one. Also, we have a Lobster Bisque. Soup of the day. And we also have...” he paused dramatically “complimentary movie style popcorn! Would you fellas be interested a bowl a that?” I

was explicitly intrigued about the popcorn and even said "Ooh, popcorn?!" to which the waiter replied "Super!" as he swung his head back and forth between us and said "Anything eeelllsseee?" I had my arms crossed on the table, I was leaning into my arms, and turned to him and said "Yeah, I'll have the six dollar Hot and Dirty Vodka Martini please." "Coming right up!" he said, smiling as he nodded his head and jotted a note down, as I noticed that his notepad's pages were wrinkled on the edges with a few dark brown dotted stains further into the pages. He turned to Pry and said "And for you sir? How about that Blonde Guinness?" then he petered toward Pry as Pry considered it, the waiter's eyelashes crossed as he blinked his eyes twice inquisitively as Pry said "You have Harpoon?" bluntly in a monotone register and the waiter's eyes widened, as if in a minor state of shock as he paused, then said, also in a blunt monotone "Yes. I'll grab that for you right away." then walked away at a brisk pace. I watched him with interest wiggle through the bar and adjacent tables to the kitchen. "He seem disappointed to you?" I said after I witnessed the waiter's frame disappear into the kitchen. Pry thought for a second and said "Yeah." and I said "I think he wanted you to order that Blonde Guinness." and Pry said nothing, then I said "Maybe he gets a commission." and Pry nodded, then his facial expression shifted slightly during the ensuing pause, then he said "What's the deal with ya girl?" and I peeled my eyes, which had been gazing at him for the past fifteen seconds, off of his and

said "You mean..." then clapped my hands together softly and rubbed the palms against each other. "It is what it is, you know? ...Yeah, it's good." I shrugged my shoulders, unsure of how to broach the evolving situation, puckering my lips in a meaningless way. I'd disclosed A) to Pry, A) being that Sophia was an exotic dancer, but was still hesitant to disclose B) and/or C), B) and C) being the married and married to a person incarcerated for heroin trafficking portions, and I was thinking things like "When the time's right I'll absolutely disclose B) and C) to Pry without a problem!" while cursing myself for not disclosing B) and C) at that point, thinking "How could this relationship ever last if I can't even disclose B) and C) to Pry, of all people!" as he said "Ok-ok." puckering his lips in a meaningful way, an "I'm intrigued with your lack of a detailed response, but I'll respect your privacy" type of way, I thought, with his arms crossed nonchalantly as he slouched in his chair, it looked like his upper ass was nearing the edge of it. I looked at him and nodded, noting his one word response, then said "It's good...it's good." with a poorly affected confidence as I continued to nod my head up and down, up and down, up and down. "You guys wanna do a shot?!" The waiter's gut was again abutting the table as he put our drinks down and anxiously awaited an answer. Pry looked at me noncommittally and in reading his facial expression I began to feel as though he may have been silently judging me for picking the bar, although I didn't see how there was any way for me to

anticipate this particular waiter working this particular shift in advance. "Well," I shrugged, I said "I have the martini, so..." and pointed at the martini gingerly, then said "What's the deal with the oysters though?" and he said "Well, they're-" and I said "One dollar?" and he said. "Yes." and I said. "Now, can I order any amount I want or-" and he said. "Yes." and I said. "does it have to be by the half dozen or-" and he said "No." and I said "like an even number or something?" and he said "No...you can order any amount you want." He grabbed his notepad from his pouch as I nodded and said "Ok." then glanced at the specials menu, which I'd already memorized, then looked back up. "Can I have, um, eight then?" "Sure!" he said in a nonsensically exuberant register, then clicked his heels lightly together and turned to Pry in a posture I imagined an ex-girlfriend would stand in if she'd accidentally bumped into a man who broke up with her on bad terms at a public venue. "Anything for you?" he said and his eyebrows stretched pointedly north, Pry shook his head no and the waiter walked away hastily.

## Chapter 51

"You're a queef." Farhad said as he strutted with his hands in his windbreaker as we walked in circles drunk through downtown later that night. "I'm tired." I said in what I thought abutted an effeminate register, but only during the "ir" of "tired," which, full disclosure, was fine with me at the time. "One more beer?!" he said incredulously, unapologetically fiending for more alcohol well after midnight, then took out his phone and said "I think Megan is around here somewhere with Nisha..." "Nisha?" I said and stroked my increasingly thick chin stubble and stopped walking, then raised my hand higher to massage my mustache with my index and middle fingers contemplatively and said "I guess I could stay out for one more." then started walking again. "Where you wanna go? Or where are they at?" I said, leaning into and over Farhad's shoulder. "I think..." Farhad said as he walked while scrolling through his cell, which I was still peering over "they're..." he looked up "...here." After the bouncer checked our IDs we walked down the circular staircase of the sports bar, I thought it had a bit of an upscale appeal for a sports bar located in downtown Providence. Megan worked as a blackjack dealer with Farhad, Nisha worked retail and had gone out with Pry for a month or two, but I'd heard through Farhad that they'd just recently stopped talking. "I remember you were talking to the Vietnamese girl..." was the first thing Nisha said to me, she was also of

Vietnamese descent and was sitting on her stool at the bar speaking to me softly over her right shoulder “that’s the only thing I remember.” She chuckled apologetically and said “Sorry...” and we made direct eye contact. Her smile was wide and her expression remained more or less static, but with the subtle hint of a slight smile as her head bobbed just slightly up and down. “No, no. it’s cool.” I placated, noting a sexual attraction to her, but also wondering if my attraction sprang from some sort of Freudian complex that no one believed in anymore, assuming briefly that Freud postulated a complex where you want to copulate with someone because they’re of the same ethnicity as the person you were currently trying to copulate with. “Probably not.” I thought, as Nisha was genuinely attractive, objectively attractive, in a way that shouldn’t have had anything to do with Sigmund Freud or anything else going on in my life at the time. I was standing up next to her chair as I waddled back and forth, tired and drunk, her fatigued pupils drooped down like they might fall into her oval-shaped sockets, both of our psychological features most likely wholly fictional. “Aren’t we crazy?” she said in reference to Vietnamese girls as she took a delicate sip of her draft beer, her smaller hand clutching tightly onto the upper, wider part of the glass, and I said “No, no. I mean...” I shook my head, afraid to agree, with no particular opinion on the matter one way or the other, although Sophia’s life did seem a little crazy, to say the least, and then made an incredulous expression and



said "I don't know. I don't wanna, you know...like speak about ethnicities as monolithic entities and shit." Farhad was talking to Megan next to us, leaning into her with his hands still in his windbreaker pockets as he said "Are you gonna blow me tonight, or what?!" jokingly, but also amenable to a serious response. Megan laughed and waved her right hand at Farhad and said "You're so crazy! I love it!" then hugged him asexually as he moaned "Ayyyyyy." "Yeahhhh," I continued. "but things are going well. you know..." completely unaware of what I was even referencing, but consciously trying to avoid letting an unusually long pause into the conversation. She nodded as I smiled thinking of segways. "How's work going...?" She returned my smile and we continued to converse benignly for the next ten to fifteen minutes, with the exception of about two minutes or so when her "roommates," both of whom I thought could have possibly also been Vietnamese or at least of Southeast Asian descent, at least at a glance, came over and asked her and Megan to go play pool with them, they were playing across the bar and they seemed borderline perturbed that Nisha and Megan were talking to Farhad and I rather than playing pool with them, they didn't even introduce themselves to us and I found myself wondering if there were latent feelings between either of the roommates and Nisha. Nisha said "Maybe later." to the roommates, kind of coldly I thought, and we continued to talk, her, Megan, Farhad, and I, until it was almost last call, then Farhad and I left. "That was cool."

Farhad said as we exited, hands still in his windbreaker pockets, and tumbled onto the street. I thought about becoming eskimo brothers with Pry, but dropped the thought quickly after it occurred to me and instead said "What do you think of Nisha?" to Farhad, who said "She's cool." more laconically than I would have preferred, and I rounded a corner and began to urinate by a dumpster and just let the conversation drift naturally away from whatever it was that I may have wanted to discuss.

## Chapter 52

The nonchalance of Sophia's speech juxtaposed against the relative scorn of her content as she said "I don't like guys who go to the gym...fuck that. You gotta put a fitted on to go to CVS? ...Why? To fuck with some other bitch?" Following a two second or so pause, I said "Mmhmmm," agreeing while nodding my head, to be one hundred percent honest I was slightly afraid of her, but also silently flexing what I was hoping would eventually turn into a more visible six pack under my thermal. We'd agreed to meet at a hole-in-the-wall hipster bar downtown, The Blue Fluff, that was hidden around a clandestine corner in the business district, with a decor that was aesthetically pleasing but also claustrophobic. I saw maybe half a dozen finger tattoos in a twenty five foot radius and the median price of a beer was about three dollars and twenty five cents. "I don't know..." she said and I said "What?" curiously, hoping that she was reconsidering her feelings on wearing a hat to CVS, that maybe she'd recognize the sentiment as slightly overbearing as she said "Sometimes..." her eyes meandered. "I just wanna move somewhere where nobody can find me. In the woods somewhere, you know?" I glanced over the bar, noting that the venue had a limited selection of beer, I was drinking a Modelo, personally, I'd always slept better in urban locales. Rather than verbally replying I touched the side of her hand and smiled, she smiled back in a more muted way

than I smiled, as an older Asian man walked in the door with a female Caucasian partner. Sophia noted him and continued to orchestrate her talking points with her right hand, the right hand was, to my eye, about the size of a smaller green apple excluding fingers, and said "It's like every Asian nigga that comes in the club always looks at me with the most shame, like 'the fuck happened to you?'" I raised my hands a few inches from my lap in a "What's the deal with airplane peanuts?" posture and said, almost tautologically "Why because you're Asian...and you work at a strip club, you mean?" "You know what I mean?!" She took a slurp of her Patron and Red Bull. "Like, I was supposed be better at math, or something..." "They have quotas?" I said and she said "What?" and I said "Like they need to have three black girls, four latinas, two asians, five whites, and so on and so on..." She tilted her head thoughtfully and said "That's actually true." then "Heyy grrrrl!" as a girl about two inches taller than Sophia, smiling genuinely, approached us, which wasn't a complete surprise because Sophia told me earlier that night that her friend might show up. Sophia was wearing all red as we sat at the bar, the outfit was lingerie-ish, but hugged her body tightly, she was overdressed for the venue, I thought, but still thought she looked good and wasn't offended by the incongruity at all, just generically took note of it as I registered our surroundings. Her jet black hair was straightened and I was juxtaposing her straight-thin hair follicles against the cushioning of her buttcheeks from

her half-turnt sitting position, giving little to no consideration to the fact that my gaze could be considered a form of chauvinistic objectification. “Hiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii!!” the friend said as they embraced. “Girl, sit down!” Sophia instructed, then said “Ohhh, I have to pee! ...Do you mind?” “Go head,” I motioned hastily toward the bathroom, then said “don’t fuckin pee your pants!” We laughed and Sophia excused herself to the restroom. As Sophia walked away, out of earshot, I said “Sorry, I didn’t catch your name?” to her friend, front-running a potentially awkward conversation of pronouns. “I’m Sasha,” she smiled and extended her right hand, I gave her a weak handshake and said “I’m Nick.” Sasha looked at me while squinting her eyes in what I found to be a scientific manner, then asked me if I was Portuguese and I said “Nah. Actually, I’m three quarters Greek.” then I thought I saw her recoil slightly before she said “Oh, I have a friend who’s Greek!” and I said “Yeah? That’s cool. Well, I’m, uh, three-quarters...” while voluntarily clearing my throat, then said “How about you?” and she smiled proudly, then said “Puerto Rican!” and went on to tell me how she was from Stall Lake, but unlike Sophia grew up there, and then a little bit about her and Sophia’s friendship, how it extended across multiple clubs, how they lived near each other and sometimes went clothes shopping together. “She really likes you...” she said, trailing off with a muted importance, I thought, as the “really” Sasha included before “likes” struck me acutely and I ominously thought

about how it was possible that the “really” implicated that Sophia was capable of giving off the impression that she liked people when she “really” didn’t. Granted if I was being honest with myself I was guilty of doing essentially the same thing with a potpourri of acquaintances over the entirety of my sentient life, but at the time that seemed to be of little to no importance because it suddenly seemed possible that Sophia was only giving off an impression of liking me, that maybe that impression was actually false, that maybe I was involving myself in a shell game of likes, a shell game that perhaps Sasha was intimately involved in, after all they did work together at a club that was nothing if not a shell game of likes, so was it that paranoid to think that they could still be in collusion, I thought as I ordered Sasha a Captain and Coke from the bartender, who had a few cheek freckles and four eyebrow piercings along her left eyebrow, and said “Yeah?” as I handed her the drink. “Well, I really like her, too.” “Yeah...” She rummaged through her purse. “I just wanna make sure...” She fiddled with something in the purse. “...you’re a nice guy.” and I nodded and said “That makes sense.” She seemed to find whatever it was she was looking for in her purse as her gaze shifted back up and she said “I like this place. It’s different!” enthusiastically, then picked up the drink and said “Thanks!” Sophia came back from the bathroom a minute or so later and she and Sasha started catching up, or just talking benignly, as I stared blankly into the

distance of the smallish downstairs. I was imagining a rail thin middle aged guy sitting in a booth with a sad face and straight light brown hair going back to his apartment every night and weeping while masturbating, feeling legitimately somber for him and/or the fate I was imagining for him when I overheard Sasha say “Yeah, I thought he was Portuguese!” then Sophia say “Yeah,” then notice Sophia briefly glance in my direction as she said “I think he’s got that ‘7-Eleven’ look a little.” I hunched over as I held my Modelo between my pectorals, began to lean further into their conversation, then said “What’s that supposed to mean?” in a tone that was intended to be equally inquisitive and confrontational to Sophia. Sophia turned from Sasha and into me and looked up and said “You have a...” she tilted her head around my Adam’s Apple while looking up into my eyes and said “handsome ‘7-Eleven’ look.” then smiled and touched my torso as she moved around me to sit back down. “Oh, cool.” I said, noting just for a moment that the word “handsome” was said in a tone that was almost interrogative in nature, but I was placated, more so by her touch than her words and sat down next to her as Sasha split the middle, standing in between the stools as she lightly sipped her Captain and Coke, and I said “Well, you know, historically speaking, Greece was actually a territory of the Ottoman Empire for literally hundreds of years. Actually, it was less than a hundred years ago when there was an Armenian and Greek genocide at the very hands of the Ottoman

Empire, which to this day is one of the most lethal genocides in recent human history, which also has never been officially recognized by the modern day Turkish...”



## Chapter 53

"You ate out a stripper?" Pry said as he shot the basketball poorly. He wasn't any good. "Yeah, so?" I said. I didn't give a fuck and didn't see anything particularly objectionable about it as long as the area was clean. We were shooting around at a really nice court right around the corner from his new apartment that apparently nobody knew about because nobody was there. "This is a new low for you." he said and I said "What? She can't be a nice girl?" indignantly and he said "Sure." with an air of sarcasm, I thought. I jumped up and grabbed his miss before it hit the concrete and said "She can't have a great vagina?" as Pry looked at me and said "You gonna shoot?" and without shooting I said "How can you confirm the cleanliness of a vagina without first-hand experience of said vagina?" I left-to-right crossovered straight into a midrange jumper that bricked off the left side of the rim, I watched the ball bounce onto the grass as we both stood there. "Whatever, man. Anyway, it's not like I'm marrying this girl..." I said, and by saying the words "it's not like I'm marrying this girl" immediately reminded myself of thinking "Man, I should marry this girl!" after she told me she bought me a bottle of water on the night my face was bleeding, it seemed so nice at the time, and, even though I had serious reservations about the institution of marriage as a whole, I felt like I was being peer pressured into disingenuous statements regarding whom I may or may not marry,

maybe I would marry Sophia, and what was so wrong with that if I did? Pry's facial features contracted and he started walking to the ball, the unmitigated sunlight made the blacktop oven-esque, even if you were wearing sneakers, and I said "What am I persecuted now? Now that I'm seeing a girl who dances? Is that it?" Pry dribbled, all right-handed on the left side of the court, which, for the record, was generally considered a faux pas to the majority of the basketball playing population, to the bucket and made a lay-up. "Nah man. You know I love you." he said genuinely, I thought, probably feeling bad for denigrating a girl that, given my butthurt comments, I genuinely seemed to like, I thought. "Yeah..." I moaned, audibly hurt, vindicated and relieved that I didn't disclose any additional details about the relationship at the oyster bar, and Pry said "I support you!" and I said "I feel like Christ right now." somewhat sarcastically because I wasn't religious, but the sarcastic sentiment of the comment, at bottom, was sincerely how I felt. He passed me the ball, I shot a free throw that went through the hoop, then said "You wanna play H.O.R.S.E.?" and he agreed to a game.

## Chapter 54

The vagina hole is a lot closer to the asshole than a ballsack is. Girls don't even really have grundles and it can be hard to thoroughly clean those areas. "No, you need to be careful," Sophia said playfully after I made a teasing, sexually motivated comment, then said "this pussy's crack!" It wasn't the first time she'd made the comment, saying the phrase "this pussy's crack," and I wasn't sure if I'd go that far, but at the time she said it I couldn't verify from a penile standpoint, first hand at least, but it was definitely well maintained and scented. Her asshole too for that matter. After she noted that her pussy was crack I made a complimentary comment and she said some of the girls she worked with stunk, "Some of those girls back there stink!" she said in a disgusted tone, then I nodded, then she said "My head hurts..." with her head on my shoulder. "From the accident?" I said, she'd got rear-ended by an SUV a few nights earlier. She sniffled and said "I think I need a tissue..." with her voice muffled by my shoulder and after a brief pause I looked down at her and said "Wanna get your nose off my thermal then?" Some people don't have a preference in vagina looks, but I did. I won't go too far into specifics, but it was mostly based off lip symmetry and hue. Sophia's was attractive, she had a C-section she said. We had started fooling around, beyond making out, hesitantly, for a while actually, although paradoxically she said we couldn't after I found out about

her situation, but that didn't last for all that long, and on some level we both seemed to realize that everything was wrong and immoral, which neither of us ever addressed except abstractly outside of the times things occurred, which was bad, although I thought on some level sexual interaction, libidinal urges, were a sort of "biological function" that were maybe only tangentially related to genuine bonds between persons. "The doctor said I had a slight concussion." she said, lifting her running nose off my deltoid and began to hold her head in her right palm, the hand covered her temple and I said "Honestly, you should keep an eye on that. Concussions are no joke." and she smiled in acknowledgement and looked away, then I said "No, but seriously. That NFL stuff with concussions? You can end up mentally retarded." and she said "I'm going to see my lawyer on Tuesday..." I looked over at her looking away and nodded, then she turned back to me and said "He's in Johnston? Sooo...if you wanna hang out after..." "With you?" I said sarcastically, and she pushed the arm I held my drink in and told me to shut up as a little vodka and seltzer spilt out of my glass and onto the dark counter. "Omar!" she yelled across the room with her hand cupped over her mouth, a portly black kid wearing a Slayer t-shirt looked over and raised his drink. "He used to DJ at my old club." she said.

## Chapter 55

An Irish-American looking guy with a five o'clock shadow wearing a long leather trench coat and acid washed jeans while also wearing a gray snow hat walked out of the hookah bar as Farhad and I walked in, as a Nicaraguan looking "cop" wore an outfit that looked somewhere between a police officer and an army sergeant and stood boldly at the entrance. "Remove your hat, bud?" he said to Farhad. Farhad was wearing a Transformers hat, reached up and touched it like braille, then pointed into a crowd by the bar and said "What about that guy? Over there?" in reference to a tall guy wearing a baseball hat on the outskirts of a cluster of people between the bar counter and the tables. "Ok." the officer said matter-of-factly, surprisingly amenable to the comment, and went over and asked the guy to take off his hat, then walked back to us, then Farhad begrudgingly took his hat off and we walked in the bar, which was packed, overcrowded in my opinion. We nestled into the only available crevice by the bar and Farhad immediately began a campaign to attract a bartender's attention. "You fuckin kidding me?!" the tall guy who just removed his hat complained loudly to his friend, he was standing about five feet to the left of us and held his hat in the same hand as his beer. "Oh? I can't wear my hat now? Fuck you buddy!" he screamed into the air as metaphor for the officer. "I've been wearin' it since I got in here. What the fuck changed since

then?!" His friend nodded. "I mean...you fuckin kidding me?!" Another kid, wearing a white t-shirt, stepped between them and chimed in by barbarically screaming "Fucking ridiculous!" "I can't believe it!" the kid with his hat in his hand replied. I was slowly coming to the realization that the place was packed because there was some type of relatively fancy Lebanese dinner event going on, with Middle Eastern folk songs being played live, with a middle-aged belly dancer, still in pretty good shape, swaying around in the corner. A group of old Lebanese guys sat at a long table with dirty dinner plates and burning hookahs in front of them, both standing up and sitting down, some of them drunkenly singing along to the songs. "I think that guy's pissed you ratted him out." I said to Farhad, who had his hat under his armpit as he stretched out onto the bar and turned his head back toward me. "Well, it's not fair. Why do I have to take off my hat?" he said, glancing briefly back at the hatless guy yelling about having to take off his hat. "It's a dumb rule." I said agreeably. "So dumb!" "I don't even wear hats anymore because of it." "Tell me about it....yeah two Miller Lites, please?" he said to the bartender. "Because you never know." I said. "There's just no logic to it..." "Well..." I thought about it for a second, again glancing back at the guy who was still genuinely inflamed to be hatless. "I think it's at least vaguely anti-black." I said, which was definitely at least partially true because about a half a dozen bars in the same neighborhood had recently enacted dress codes that were blatantly

targeted, I thought, at keeping African-Americans out of said venues, who were increasingly patronizing said venues. I knew it for a fact because an acquaintance of mine deejayed at one of the bars and had told me directly, he told Farhad who told me, that the owner was actively trying to keep black people out of the bar, that while deejaying one Saturday night he told him in an intensely guido tone to “Ay, keep dat rap shit to a minimum, if you know what I mean?”

## Chapter 56

Later that week, we were playing Monopoly at Solomon's apartment around the corner from Capo Cuts, a relatively well-known barbershop that got shot up that summer, apparently due to a dispute over either an intentionally bad haircut or a haircut gone awry in one manner or another. Solomon was very high and was in the process of smoking a bowl of medicinal weed his half-brother gave him as a "mozzarella cupcake," which was a chunk of mozzarella shaped like a cupcake, sat insouciantly on his lap. Farhad sat next to him on the couch, but he came over after the game had started, so he wasn't playing Monopoly. "Listen..." I said, sitting on my chair leaning to my left, hovering over Sophia who sat on the floor with the eight properties I owned laid out in front of me on the beige coffee table. "Now, let's say I trade you Baltic for Connecticut..." she scrunched up her face. "But hold on." I went on "I wanna compensate you for the difference in value." Sophia was sprawled out on her side with her hair straightened, wearing a white, flowy shirt that extended to her mid-thigh region. She owned Connecticut Ave and was drinking white wine out of a plastic cup. "Wait, what?" she said, somewhat confused. "Ok. Let's say, as compensation for the greater value of Connecticut..." I thought about how I wanted to phrase my statement for a second, then said "I won't charge you rent on any of my other properties until they have a house on them?" "Whoaaaaa." Solomon



said, then, as I registered his comment, I smiled at him devilishly, then said “I mean,” I stared down at the coffee table. “look at all these properties I have...” I moved my palms back and forth over the properties and she looked over them for a few seconds. “...And you’ll still own the purple block.” I said. “All of them?” she said, stroking her chin, her face slightly flushed magenta, slightly inebriated, I thought. “Of course. All of them.” I confirmed. She took the deal and I grabbed a mozzarella cupcake and gleefully took a bite. With my first three property monopoly consummated, along with the ample cash I had on hand, the game was over within half an hour.

## Chapter 57

She didn't have any social media, "But I'm always taking pictures!" she beamed proudly. "But you don't post them to like Instagram or Facebook?" I said as an incredulous expression appeared across her face before I finished the sentence and she said "I don't even like showing people. I keep them in a box under my bed, just so I can look at them when I want to." then smiled. Solomon was asleep on the couch snoring, Farhad left to help his mom clean up the kitchen, and Sophia was in the process of telling me about the guy she dated between her first boyfriend that went to jail for murder and her husband. "A Puerto Rican kid from Boston." she said, vaguely leaving out the circumstances regarding how she met him or who introduced them. "Like Boston Boston? Or like an outer suburb." I said, somewhat condescendingly, echoing a sentiment that permeated all of Massachusetts, that one may never claim to be "from Boston" unless they live explicitly within city limits. She said "Um...Roxbury?" matter-of-factly, either unaware of my condescension or generously refusing to acknowledge it. "Oh." I said. I knew a girl from Roxbury, which was at best the second most dangerous section of Boston that I knew of, my freshman year in college named Chantel Peoples and as a general rule on Monday nights she used to come in my dorm room and use all of my printer paper for whatever project she had due that week. "Just a few more sheets...I'm almost

done.” she’d say, then occasionally make unwanted sexual advances as I sat on my bed and unflinchingly stared at the white wall of my half of the cell sized dorm room. Sophia went on and said “And he was the one who suggested I get into dancing.” “That was nice of him.” I said, unsure of whether or not she inferred my sarcasm, also unsure of whether I was actually even being sarcastic. “I’d bought almost everything in our place...” She shook her head. “His studio. The reclining chair. Three-quarters of the tupperware. Motherfucker was living off me.” and I said “That sucks...” then wondered if the comment came off as sarcastic, as I didn’t think I was being sarcastic. “After that...after that, I said ‘never again.’” She brushed her palms together, back and forth, as if dusting them off. I cleared my throat and said “Yeah, I mean...my student loan debt is, well, you know. somewhat concerning. But with Income Based Repayment options, it’s manageable.” and nodded my head agreeably. She nodded her head and told me about a new mutual fund that a girl at work said she heard about from a customer, and asked me if I had any advice, “since you work in accounting,” which I didn’t because I said “It’s like past performance isn’t indicative of future results, which is a really financial advisor-y thing to say, but it’s pretty much true. To me at least.” She unsolicitedly continued to detail various aspects of her personal history as I moved down and sat on the floor next to where she was lying, where she was still lying, where she was lying when we were playing

Monopoly. Our lower legs were crossing just under the calves and she said she'd met her husband at her previous job. "It was a cabaret lounge," she said. "Cabaret?" I said only somewhat genuinely inquisitive, as I was almost positive I knew the general definition of a cabaret lounge and she said "It's kind of like where I'm at now. Just no nudity." and I said "Wait," then after a brief moment of silence I raised my hand in a stop sign type formation and lowered my face, I felt my face seesaw back and forth before I said "So he met you when you weren't even getting naked?" "...Yeah." she said, seemingly increasingly tired as the conversation continued, I thought, organically enough, with her white wine cup only a quarter full, with her facial expression displaying absolutely no intention of drinking any more of the white wine, a few brief bursts of magenta flushed onto her cheeks. I said "But I thought you said you were stripping when you-" "No, it was just like a cabaret club." she said matter-of-factly. "So, like a go-go dancer?" "Yeah. Kind of. Pretty much." she said matter-of-factly, then I shook my head incredulously and stared at the floor for a few seconds, then noted that he, her husband "has pretty much has no idea what I've been going through!" as my eyes met hers.

## Chapter 58

Joan was a billing clerk, too. The next morning I was in the second floor kitchen carefully measuring how much milk to put in my coffee while across the kitchen Joan cleaned out the refrigerator. She placed a container of noodles under my chin for review and I reluctantly looked down. They were disgusting. "Ew." I said. "You think I'm good to throw 'em out then?" "Uh, yeah..." I glanced at the noodles again and covered my mouth and hunched over slightly like I was about to vomit, then said "There's no way anyone's gonna eat those." Joan nodded and smiled, then tossed the container of noodles into the trash, then put her head back in the fridge and said "There's so much junk in hee-uh!" muffled slightly by the refrigerator. A half an hour later I went to lunch and as I moseyed onto the linoleum floor I noticed Mindy, a shorter girl about my age, with her ass sticking out of the fridge. I didn't know what she did at the place and, to be honest, didn't particularly care what day-to-day function(s) she was supposed to execute, or even why her ass was sticking out of the fridge, I barely cared what day-to-day function(s) I was supposed to execute, and one day I'm sure my ass too would be sticking out of a fridge, I thought, and I opened the adjacent fridge and pulled out a container of roasted red pepper hummus, then Mindy said "Ok..." as her head flew out of said fridge at a dizzying speed, "where the fuck are my leftovers?!" she said. She turned to Doris and said "I had

leftovers in here...I had a container of leftovers in here from TGIFridays. They were supposed to be my lunch. Have you seen them?" She continued to huff and puff, possibly approaching hyperventilation, with her arms straightened out and by her sides, asking visibly reticent people in the kitchen if they knew anything about her leftovers. She reopened the fridge I'd just opened and I said "What kind of leftovers?" "Ugh, they were these like mac and cheese noodles." she said "I was soooo looking forward to them, too." she said. The microwave, heating up someone else's lunch, hummed in the background as Mindy flung her head backwards in an exaggerated display of disappointment and grief, but beneath the hyperbole her face expressed genuine sadness. "Noodles..." I thought. "Could someone have like moved them? Or did someone....eat them." she said and raised both of her arms exasperated and then let them fall back to her sides of their own volition. Joan walked in the kitchen with her lunch and I looked at her as she looked at me as she overheard the end of Mindy's rant, as Mindy began to text furiously on her phone as we all walked to the lunch table. "I just, literally, can't believe this..." Mindy said and I recalled vividly the crusty epicenter of the noodles, the trajectory they took into the waste basket, as my phone began to vibrate in my pocket.

## Chapter 59

That night Farhad and I posted up with Vera downtown at about quarter to midnight at a bar that was darker than most, it was overly dim, where a Caucasian male DJ wearing a fitted hat and a serious, unwavering expression was showcasing his collection of underground hip hop via the venue's formidable speaker system. Farhad knew the bartender's boyfriend, I'd seen her before, and noted to myself both times that she had a very big nose and I leaned into Farhad and said "She's got a really big nose."and he said "Yeah, she does." Yet despite Farhad's "in" I noted that she wasn't appearing to give us any discounts on drinks, then I felt a vibration, a text from Pry, who said he might be around earlier in the night. "where u at?" he typed. "downtown" I typed. "me too." "cool" "where u at?" he typed. "local 121" I typed, then a few dots appeared on my screen, apparently indicating that Pry was in the process of typing a response, then the dots disappeared, then there was no reply text. About eight to ten minutes later Pry typed "can u send me a pin" "pin?" I typed back. "google maps?" he typed. "hold on" I typed as I recalled the type of pin he was referring to as I typed "local 121 providence ri" into my maps application and found myself saying "You know where the bar is, bitch." out loud to myself, as I knew for a fact that Pry had been to the bar more than once, as I knew for a fact Pry owned a cell phone that also had a maps application installed on

it, a maps application that could also generate a pin, as the pin was generated and I hit send, then heard Farhad in my periphery say "You have a cigarette on you by any chance?" I turned around anxiously, also contemplating why I was feeling anxious, and said "You going outside?" as I saw Farhad bumming a cigarette from what looked like the bouncer. "Yeah." he said and flashed a cigarette, then said "Wanna smokie?!" "Yeah, I'll come out. Hold up." I said. We went outside and Farhad bummed me an additional cigarette from the same person he'd bummed one from inside, maybe the bouncer, who followed us outside. Vera came out a minute later, Farhad turned to her and said "You want one? I don't know how many mo-" "Ew. No." she said. Farhad handed me mine. "Thanks." I said and lit it up, then said "You know...I've never been even remotely addicted to cigarettes?" Farhad shook his head seemingly disinterested as he lit his cigarette, then removed it and blew out smoke, partially into my face. "This is such a terrible idea for me, you have no idea..." he said as he looked at the cigarette in his right hand before gleefully taking another drag, then said "I haven't had one in months!" "It's weird..." I continued. "because I worked as a telemarketer when I was twenty one for, like, twenty hours a week and I actually bought a pack, not sure if you knew that, because we had these ten minute breaks every hour, just to try and have something to kill the time." I nodded to him in an attempt to confirm that he was still paying attention. "Threw it out not even halfway through the



pack..." I said. "I just couldn't get into it." "Did you ever inhale?" he said, possibly doubting the veracity of my story. "I think it's just the smell of them." I went on. "I dated a girl around that same time, she smoked Cloves when we first met, so her breath was always minty when we made out and I loved it. Truly loved it. Then she switched to Newport Lights and her breath became terrible, it was pretty much impossible to make out with her after that, no exaggeration, it was almost impossible to make out with her after she switched to Newport Lights." I pulled my phone out of my pocket and confirmed that I had no texts, I found it odd that I hadn't felt any vibrations in my pants since going outside, I found it odd there was nothing from Pry, I found it odd that he never even showed up to the bar... The next morning I unlocked my phone again and again found nothing from Pry and found it odd. I found it odd I didn't find a text that said something like "sorry something came up." something like "my bad dude i was really tired." something like "my girl put a gun to my head. sorry can't make it..." I found it odd to find none of that, absolutely nothing from Pry after I sent him the pin he requested.

## Chapter 60

That Thursday after I got out of work I met up with Farhad and Alfonso, again, downtown. It was early evening when we walked into a cigar bar on Pine Street and I didn't even know why we went there, no one particularly expressed any interest in smoking a cigar and I definitely didn't wanna smell like one. As soon as I stepped in the place I noticed Pry's dad, Dave, sitting at the bar, I could tell by the bald head and the Wall Street-esque attire. "Is that...Pry?" I said out loud, curiously, in a tone that may have suggested that I didn't know who Pry was, or that he'd been missing for an extended period or time, or had been in a coma for a few years. The cigar bar was just one decently sized room and I meandered toward the bar. Dave turned around and said "Heyyy, it's Nick!" and I shook his hand as he stuck it out and said "Hey, how's it going, Dave?" He nodded and pointed to the bartender, ready to order a beer, then Pry turned around and, as I turned to him, we made eye contact and, in an automatic motion, before I could fully or even partially comprehend the motions my body was making, I open-palm slapped him across his face. "How are you gonna ask me to send you a pin, then just not show up?!" I cried out barbarically as the bar went mostly silent, then walked briskly back into the humidor room where Farhad and Alfonso stood, cramped in the humidor room with the cigar manager, a younger redhead guy with a lot of freckles, with a

plethora of mannerisms that made a few patrons, some of my friends included, myself included, believe he was possibly gay. Alfonso was peering through the glass and said "What happened out there?" pensively and I shrugged and said "He can't text me back?!" with my voice cracking slightly. The redhead puffed a girthy cigar confidently, leaned against a wall of the humidor while wearing suspenders with a movie star protagonist-type posture, I thought, and said "What'd-ya like?" to me, apparently unconcerned about any events transpiring outside of the humidor room. "That hurt!" Pry yelled out across the entire venue as I took a puff of my freshly lit cigar and moseyed back over to the bar. "Sorry..." I said as I took a seat and put my hand, mostly just my fingertips, somewhat awkwardly as I avoided laying the palm down, on his shoulder. "I don't know what came over me." I said as Pry rubbed his cheek gingerly and told me I was a "real prick." "But, you know..." I said, then trailed off, elongating the "-ow" for a second or two in a meaningless baritone, then never finished the sentence. He puckered his lips and made a swallowing motion as he continued to rub his cheek and said "How was it anyway?" "What?" "Saturday." he said with a bit of an attitude, as if I should have immediately known what he was referencing. I ashed the cigar in a tray on the counter and said "Terrible. You definitely didn't miss anything."

## Chapter 61

"You know my friend, Sasha, right?" Sophia said as she sat on top of me in a bar booth the next night, her legs straddling my torso in the back of a dimly lit lounge downtown, our faces really close together. She was assiduous with her dental hygiene, it was nice, I wasn't comfortable and said "Yeah, she seems nice." "She thinks you're cute." she said. "That's cool...I'm flattered." "Yeah." "Yeah." I said, feeling sincerely flattered, but unsure of how to reply to her "Yeah." and she said "Sometimes we fool around." "That's cool." I gulped. "Yeah." "Sorry, did I just burp in your face?" I said and she said "No." and I said "Ok, good. I felt a little gas bubble..." and she said "Well, I mean. She's gone down on me. I've never gone down on her." I gulped again, this time in a more consciously clandestine way, and said "I don't blame her." Select hair follicles on Sophia's head moved ghost-like in the light breeze that was generated from the fan above, maybe fifteen feet up. The ceilings were high. "I've never gone down on anybody." she said. "Yeah." "Yeah, but I don't go down on her though." "Right." "But yeah. She thinks you're, like, really cute. She told me. Because I asked her about you." She shifted her ass on my thighs in a surprisingly asexual manner. "That's cool." I said. "She said we should all-" "Oh-" "hang out again." "yeah?" "But you're not like. One of those guys. Who would wanna..." "Wanna-uh...?" "Because I'm selfish." she said and I said "Ok." and she

said "I don't like to share." "Right." "So, if you wanna fuck with her, then go ahead." and I said "No, not...uh." "There's other guys. I don't care. I don't share." and I said "Ok, but-" "I'm just saying, it's all the same to me." I made eye contact with the fan and thought about the situation and where I was for a moment, or tried to hurriedly trace the evolution of the conversation, or thought about how to control the intense feelings of aggravation currently streaming throughout my entire body. I brushed Sophia softly off my lap, onto the cushion of the booth, and said "Ok. This is kinda fucked up..." in an aggrieved, indignant tone and she said "Huh?" in a tone that, I thought, betrayed the fact that she knew exactly what I meant and I said "Are you, like, baiting me?" "Baiting...?" she said in another unconvincingly quizzical tone, I thought. I stuttered a little as her left and right legs, from the thighs down, were lying flat on the seat and, from the calves down, were underneath my right and left legs as the right side of her body was lying down crookedly on the booth cushion perpendicular to mine, we were very tangled up from the waist down. "Why would you suggest a threesome? Or at least allude to a threesome. Then bait and switch like that? To see if I was a 'pig' who liked threesomes?" I said, genuinely hurt as she looked down at me from her flat-on-her-side horizontal position, then unsuccessfully began to try to sit up vertically as she said "No!" as if I'd horribly misinterpreted or misconstrued her statements, even though she had said

"I'm just saying, it's all the same to me." less than a minute ago, I thought, and I leaned over her and said "You can admit it!" snarkily and she said "No, I didn't mean it like that! I was just saying-" "Of course I like the idea of a threesome!" I said, then said "Who doesn't? How could you not? FFM? At least in theory. I just don't understand how you could penalize me for liking the idea of a theoretical threesome. I didn't know you were like that." "I'm not!" she recoiled, still tangled with my torso and somewhat struggling with my torso via her left leg. "I'm just selfish. Like that. And I thought you should know!" "Well, there's better ways to bring it up." I said. "Maybe. You're right." she said. "Like 'Hey Nick, I'm selfish with men and I just thought you should know.'" I said. "Ok." she said and I said "And then that's it. Just 'Hey Nick, I'm selfish with men and wouldn't be interested in a threesome with my friend Sasha, even if she, theoretically, was interested. Just in case you were wondering.'" "Well, she did say that. That she thought you were nice looking, I mean. So I thought it would be a nice thing to bring up!" "Well," I thought for a moment, processing the compliment and silently admitting to myself, yet again, that it was a flattering comment. "Well, I am flattered. I was being sincere about that. But it's just like..." I trailed off and she paused, probably waiting to see if I was going to finish my thought, then said "I'm serious!" Sophia hugged my torso, clung to my torso genuinely later that night and the next morning I sent her

a wordy text clarifying that I would never engage in a threesome on immoral grounds.

## Chapter 62

Looking back there was no way she couldn't have known, I'd been sending effusive texts to her on a semi-regular basis in the weeks that had passed between me getting her number, technically her sister's, and finding everything out, and then hanging out. She said she "wasn't sure it was me." but it was her sister's phone and her sister's kid's dad had to have been monitoring the phone because he threw it in the toilet, and may have been arrested because of it, or at least cited or something equivalent. What were the odds her sister was fielding multiple texts from multiple dudes on a phone that her kid's dad was monitoring? No sibling could possibly be that courteous. So if she only gave her sister's number to one guy, or even two or three, the idea that she "wouldn't know" who was texting her seemed...unlikely? Was it possible I was higher on the pedestal than I felt I was? That she was understating her interest level? Was it possible that a stripper fell in love...with me? Or was I misconstruing the entire situation, much of which, the phone numbers, the people owning the numbers, and the people monitoring the people who owned the numbers, admittedly seemed inherently unknowable to me. I was drinking vodka and seltzers by myself and anonymously looking up the online profiles of people I used to know in various capacities, thinking "What's the point?" existentially as I browsed through multiple tabs of online profiles that for



the most part disgusted me. "Of anything?" I answered myself in my thoughts. "Of anything." I confirmed in my thoughts. "Maybe I should give her a call..." I thought, then thought "But...wouldn't it be better...left latent and...unexpressed?"

## Chapter 63

"Listen..." I said sitting on a stool considerably more drunk than she seemed, she was drinking a Red Bull with no liquor, a can of Red Bull, I'd just shown up to the club, she looked at me innocently, her eyelids were decorated congruently, it was the beginning of her shift. "I think you need to leave the other Nick...and be with me." I said and the intensity of her gaze immediately increased at a concerning pace, at first with what seemed like a mix of shock and anger, then maybe with just annoyance, as she said "What are you crazy?!" "No-no-no-no." I shook my head so vigorously my coarse hair nearly blew in the breeze generated by my violently seesawing cranium. "...just hear me out." She maintained a serious, intensely unflinching expression and said "You know how crazy that'd get?!" in a tone that seemed to contain an undercurrent of fear, and I let my hands drop to my thighs and opened my eyes wider than normal, looked away and said "Ok, that's fair." then paused and said "But still..." She was apoplectic, but she didn't explicitly shut it down as I prodded "It's not impossible. Anything's possible." "It would never work." she said, then said "I mean..." Her face became contemplative, as if she wanted to retract the "It would never work." and consider the proposition isolated from the conditions currently surrounding it. "Keep an open mind." I said, now unapologetically spewing platitudes I didn't believe, then said "I mean...what's the...uh..." and

trailed off as she sighed deeply, in an almost performative way, almost as if she'd been waiting for me to propose this arrangement and was more apoplectic at how long it took for me to propose it than the actual conditions surrounding the proposition. Now her hands were on her thighs too, we both had our hands on our thighs facing each other and she said "We'll figure it out." then I ordered another round of drinks and we continued to drink liquor until we both were completely and utterly inebriated, until her friend Sasha came around and, noticing that I was completely and utterly inebriated, offered me a ride home, which I politely declined because I had to "go to work in the morning," but to this day remember as an incredibly generous offer.

## Chapter 64

Sitting at work the next day I began to seriously contemplate how the toilet paper in the company bathrooms was becoming increasingly coarse, so I decided I'd try wiping my butt with a wet wipe instead. I'd heard one of my cousins mention something via text about wiping his butt with a wet wipe a few months earlier, he said it was way more cleanly, so I figured I'd give it a shot, so I snuck a handful of Chlorox wet wipes, I grabbed them from the printer area in accounting and snuck them into the men's room and I shat. When I started wiping at first it felt great, then I finished wiping and pulled my pants up, then I started to feel a burning sensation. I didn't think much of it at first, as I had a tendency of discounting bodily discomforts, at least initially, and used the same source of wet wipes for the next couple shits that week. I found out later that week that they make wet wipes specifically for butt wiping and that the Chlorox wipes, in turn, did a number on my butthole. It took a number of weeks for my skin to fully heal and I had reason to believe there may have been a deep puncture wound to my grundel region as the cuts were a source of near constant discomfort that seemingly no amount of vaseline could relieve. I made heavy use of neosporin and was seriously contemplating buying some Cortizone-10, but was concerned about the warning I'd read online that said "Do not apply to the anus." but "was it just in the anus?" I thought, "or around

the anus too?" when I got a text from Karina. I congratulated her on her new child and, inadvertently, reminded myself of how terrible our history was again. Again, when she'd broken up with her boyfriend years ago we met and almost immediately started fucking vociferously, on couches, in bathrooms, on blow-up mattresses, mostly just at her friend's house, unless I snuck into her parents' condo after her angry Russian mom fell asleep. We fell in love, more or less. Eating chicken mcnuggets outside a McDonald's drive-thru after you fuck, talking to each other on the phone on the ride home, then for hours after you got home. Things of that nature. Things that, after the feelings fade, you're more embarrassed by than nostalgic for. After about six months of all that she called me, it was a couple days before Christmas, December 23rd to be exact, and I'd just finished working the four am stock shift at the Puma outlet I worked at at the time, easily the most arduous/heinous form of work I'd ever endured, I'd just finished working four am to noon and then partaking in an obligatory lunch with my boss at a restaurant I didn't particularly enjoy when Karina called me and said "I'm engaged." as if she was inconvenienced and/or perturbed by the very act of making the call, like she was going out of her way to do me a favor, to tell me she was engaged to another man despite the fact we had fucked less than a month earlier, or at least that's how I framed it, I thought "we just fucked less than a month ago, I thought we were 'working on' things!" as I sat in my car

simultaneously unsurprised and in a state of shock, and I felt as though something inside me had been irrevocably broken and wrote it down in a notepad I kept at the time and dated the entry "12/23/XX." She'd got engaged to her, alleged, ex-boyfriend, who had some sort of high-profile job in finance that at the time I didn't wholly understand, whose parents owned a house on Martha's Vineyard, who'd lived in another state the entire time, I should've seen it coming, I thought, but my experience in fucking at the time was, admittedly, extremely limited, I'd only fucked less than half a dozen girls and I'd only consciously ejaculated with one of them, the rest were either truncated fucks or fucks I was too drunk to remember, I was a mark for this type of situation I supposed, it was amazing it took twenty four full years for it to occur, I thought in retrospect. Granted, I was also an asshole in my own way, especially after she announced her engagement and blocked me on Facebook, calling her fiance "Santa Claus," saying "Santa Claus was good to me this year!!" next to a picture of the engagement ring in a post she wrote and posted on the night she got engaged, one I'd see months later when I finally convinced her to unblock me on Facebook, but at the time I didn't see it that way, Karina was a dirty filthy Russian whore with a pompous, racist mom that I wanted to spend the rest of my life with was how I saw it, and no one could convince me otherwise, I was physiologically convinced. That night I went to the wine bar we frequented at the time and kept

sporadically yelling “she got engaged?!” to my friends until the bartender asked me if I was ok and I said “Yeah, why?” then continued drinking until three thirty am when I had to leave for work, where I worked in the clothes I wore to the bar the night before and briefly, pathetically, sobbed in front of a few of my co-workers, some of whom were ex-cons. Karina and I continued “hanging out” after that and “being friends,” me becoming overwhelmed with jealousy whenever she spent a weekend with her fiancée, her becoming Sherlock Holmes-like with my text messages, emails, and Facebook likes, etc. That summer she moved away with her fiancée to another state and got pregnant. She typed to me “I have something i need to tell you,” and I typed, “Sup” and she typed “pregnant,” and I, again, felt a part of me irrevocably break as our emotional bond was probably at its peak during the period when she sent me the text that she was pregnant, but didn’t write the date down in any notebooks, but it was some time in August. After she got engaged, but before she moved away and got pregnant, we’d gone out for drinks with a few friends on Federal Hill, right around the time hookah bars were becoming prominent, when the street as a whole was shifting from Italian to Lebanese. I emailed her as I sat across from her at the bar that I was “going insane haha” which was one hundred percent true and, to be honest, wasn’t the first time in my life I’d felt that way, and we left after a few drinks, then she started slamming her bag into my shoulder as we crossed the street, walking back

to my car, and I said “The fuck are you doing?!” as I grabbed my shoulder gingerly. “I hate you!” she said, continuing to slam the overpriced designer bag, the bag that only someone disgustingly materialistic could justify purchasing, into my innocent body, I thought. We got in the car, she sat behind me and slid her hands over my eyes as I drove and, after a few minutes of that I finally screamed “You wanna crash! Go ahead! See if I give a fuck!” or some combination of equivalent phrases. Years later, we sat there, silently slurping overpriced and watered down lattes out of Starbucks cardboard to-go cups, she smelt like a vague mixture of lukewarm Gerber’s food and a urine-filled diaper, I was looking around, nervously trying to make sure no one followed me, and I considered the possibility that we would have been better off smashing into a tree that night. She was in town and I’d agreed to meet up for coffee, simultaneously thinking to myself “this is the last time I’m doing this.”



## Chapter 65

"If she really wanted to support her son she could get a job at McDonald's." Karina said. I sat with my arms and legs probably a little too close together and said "The minimum wage in this country is absurd." and felt equally confident in the authenticity of my comment and remorseful for bringing up the topic of Sophia to Karina. "Well, she could be a manager." she said, I thought equally confident in the authenticity of her comment as I was intensely remorseful for continuing speak and I said "I mean, what if you grew-" "I just, you know," she said, then paused, then said "I just want what's best for you. That's all." Her hair was somewhere between brown and red, she had large breasts she was proud of, the emotional weight of childbirth may have made her slightly more pragmatic financially, and she recently had her first injection of botox around her cheekbones. She was insistent that it was necessary even at twenty seven, and I made a disparaging comment about it without qualifying the comment by saying something like "But you're pretty as is, you don't need Botox!" although I briefly contemplated saying something like 'But you're pretty as is, you don't need Botox!' but felt like, given our history, the comment would have come off as insincere, plus I just felt like getting Botox at any age was ultimately absurd and deserving of derision. "I appreciate the concern." I said in an aggravated tone, hoping to put an abrupt end to the topic of Sophia, and she, more

calmly, said "I have to pick up a few things at Baby Gap. You wanna come?" and I felt my eyes bulge slightly as I said "Baby Gap?" with mixture of scorn, incredulity, and curiosity. "C'mon!" she laughed, she had a jovial, endearing laugh. "It won't be that awkward." I still had an slight indentation on my right knee cap from a time within the first forty five days of us fucking that we fucked while blacked out on a couch without cushions. I held a pair of tiny overalls, possibly blushing, and said "you all set?" meekly, carefully trying to avoid drawing attention to myself, trying to draw her attention from about ten feet away as she gazed over toward the general vicinity of the cashier with her forearm covered in what looked to me like OshKosh branded clothing. "Can you hold a couple of these?" she said, holding out a few parcels of tiny clothing. "Sure." I said and tried to absorb the parcels of clothing onto my arm without dropping any of the other tiny parcels of clothing already on my arm, feeling deeply uncomfortable, pretty much equally remorseful to the remorse I felt about bringing up Sophia in the car, wishing that I suggested that we just hit up the Stop N Shop, she needed food too, and just browse around there instead, it would have been good to pick up some fresh produce, would have been a nice silver lining for me. "I think I'm gonna be out with Melissa later tonight. If you can sneak out for a drink..." she said, fiddling with the stereo volume as we sat back in her car and I thought about the possible connotations of "meeting out for a drink" and immediately thought about

fornicating for just a brief moment, thought about what it would be like to have sex with Karina after years of not having sex with her, if it would awkward or intense or awkward and intense, or maybe just blasé, then before directly addressing the comment, which I planned to do, said “You like my t-shirt?” and she scrunched up her face in a disgusted manner and said “Ew.” while glancing at the plain white t-shirt I was wearing. I said “Remember when-” “The first time we met?! Uh, yahhhh. Trashy!” she said and laughed. I smiled, thinking how absurd I thought it was to think a white t-shirt was “trashy” in that day and age, how it was actually pretty stylish, perhaps even endearing, I thought, then said “Do me a favor?” as my face and tone shifted apologetically serious. “Keep what I told you on the-” and she again interrupted me and said “Obvioussssssly.” while smiling again in an endearing fashion. Ten to fifteen minutes after we said our goodbyes, we both had other things to do, and I considered texting her that night, maybe meeting up with her and her friend and I did, and we met up in the quasi-clandestine way we always seemed to meet and it was nice, it was a nice, wholly nonsexual time, I thought. I felt mature about it, I thought “Not everything has to be about fucking, you know?” and felt like I meant it, felt like it may have actually been possible that Karina and I could actually be genuine friends despite the fact that I had actually been vehemently opposed to being genuine friends with her since she announced her engagement. I shuffled back to my car thinking that her advice was

pompous and biased, but also rational and cogent. It felt good to get some things off my chest.

## Chapter 66

I had an enduring inkling that my buttcrack may have been on display on the stool I sat on, it was the third time I'd felt that way that afternoon, so I yanked up gently on my boxers, then felt and heard a shy rip, then pulled down my shirt to cover any potential crack exposure and glanced down to confirm what pair of boxers I was wearing. They weren't one of my newer ones. I'd gone to Target with my sister a few days previous and ominously found myself in the kids' section. I strolled through the aisles and remembered Sophia telling me her son was obsessed with Luigi from Mario Bros. on Nintendo as I saw a Mario Bros. themed checkers set on display next to a bunch of nuevo Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles action figures that reminded me of my childhood. I bought it. For a four year old kid I thought it was a good value for ten bucks, but while I didn't doubt the quality of the gift I was hesitant to actually give it, I wondered why I'd even bought it, when and if the right time would ever arise, as I thought that, ultimately, what sticks with you is the kid, at least when the kid has redeeming qualities, and not all kids have redeeming qualities, but when he comes off like a kid with a solid amount of potential in a potentially deleterious environment, and you're just trying to get your dick wet, to find a genuine connection in the world, and then you have the fate of an ostensibly innocent child on your conscience, and he's on your conscience, but at the same time he's not your business, so why's he

on your conscience, you ask yourself, because it's not your kid, but yet your actions will still ostensibly one way or another have some sort of palpable impact on his future, on how he turns out, on the environment he grows up in or doesn't grow up in, and it haunts you, it haunts you for a long time, probably forever, and there's no redemptive quality to the suffering, there's no silver lining, no beautiful metaphor, no euphoria in the melancholy, because it's not even your business, you're just a bystander, a suffering bystander, a crying witness, a second rate Jesus on a cross, a second rate Jesus voluntarily nailing himself to his homemade cross, so people don't even look at you as some kind of martyr, as some kind of pariah, as some kind of savior, no, they refuse to give you the pleasure of deifying your suffering and instead just look at you for what you are, more or less an asshole, and you feel like more or less an asshole, because it's hard to construct an argument where you're not more or less an asshole. I continued to bite into my chicken burrito across the table from Farhad, we were on the east side of Providence in a hole-in-the-wall Tex Mex place, it was hallway-shaped and I considered it a great restaurant and didn't care that other people like Pry thought I vastly overrated it. It was one pm and we were two of four customers in attendance. Farhad stared at me across our table and said "You wanna go to Block Island on Wednesday?" I stopped thinking about the Luigi checkers and contemplated the proposition while I finished chewing

one of the final bites of my burrito. Block Island was a small island off the coast of Rhode Island frequented primarily by I assumed, having never been there, pompous Anglo Saxons and children with names like "Doug." It was only approachable via ferry. "I want you meet this new girl I'm talking to..." Farhad said, I hadn't finished chewing or audibly replied and he said "You know..." in a philosophical tone, he said "...she's a really great girl. I really think you'd like her a lot." The moral conundrums of seeing a girl with a young child who seemed like a really good kid continued to percolate in the back of my mind and I said "Sure, I could probably take Wednesday off." "There's this beach where we can bring beers to and get fucked up." he said excitedly as perspiration continued to form on my temples, mostly from the mixture of the medium hot sauce and the liberal inclusion of banana peppers in the burrito, per my instruction. I lifted my tray and slid my empty burrito wrapper into the trash, then grabbed two or three napkins and blew my nose. "You ready?" I said, wiping my nose. "Yeah-yeah." Farhad shoved a final, sizeable, bite of his burrito into his wide open mouth. He tugged his jacket in toward his belt buckle and said "Are you still talking to that girl?" in a muffled way, because his mouth was full, I'd been trying to avoid the topic to an absurd degree over the past few weeks, even as things had been overall going well between myself and Sophia, and it made the question seem somewhat awkward, almost tense, and I covered my mouth with a loose fist, held a

burp half in, and said “Chea.” and he said “Nice! You hook up with her yet, or...” and I removed my hand from my mouth, a little burp escaped, and I raised my hand back up to my mouth and said “Her, uh, vagina is really nice. But not technically.” through my loosely closed fist, then we walked out onto the fairly busy city street.



## Chapter 67

Farhad still seemed to be processing the spectrum of phenomena he'd endured since separating from his wife and, for better or worse, was very forthright with the neuroses he was enduring. We carried our bags toward the Block Island ferry. "Ohhh, is this for Block Island?!" a woman said excitedly, wearing un-rubbed-in sunscreen on her cheeks, thick eyeglasses, and a visor as she looked up at the very large ferry plopped in the seaweedy water. We put our bags down behind her, we'd both heard rumblings from separate sources about Alfonso that morning, that his new boyfriend was married, still married, to a female cop in Providence, that she'd found about the trip to Italy and had been pretty seriously verbally harassing him via voicemail and in person. Neither one of us knew his new number. "He's already had to change his number two times!" Farhad said. "I'm just saying, you have to take the threat of violent retaliation at least somewhat seriously." I replied. Farhad's gym bag was filled with twenty four Corona Light bottles, I insouciantly carried a small refrigerated lunch box filled to its brim with seven cans of Michelob Ultra. There was a red barn with a counter set up to to purchase ferry tickets. "Is Solomon gonna make this ferry?" I said as I glanced at the line in front of us, then at the line rapidly accumulating behind us. Farhad checked his phone and said "Ayyyyyyee" then picked up the gym bag arduously and it exhaled flurries of tink-like

sounds as the Corona bottles kissed, as we took one step forward and halted again. The hairs on his mustache and goatee bristled as he expressed his agitation and said "It's already ten forty." and shook his head, then said "He can just meet us there." I agreed, there was no use in all three of us missing the boat we'd all agreed to take just because Solomon was running late, I thought, although I was sure, deep down, Solomon would have disagreed, that he would take silent offense at us leaving without him, that he'd be emotionally bruised that we didn't wait for him, that he'd think "If it was either of them, I'd wait." but would never say "If it was either of you, I'd wait." to either of us. The ferry schedule was written in teal chalk in about eighty two point font above the barn. I squinted and stared at it, then said "Looks like there's a high speed one at eleven thirty..." "Yeah, he can just take that one." Farhad said, now occupied on his phone, unapologetically staring at the phone and most likely only half-interested at best in what I had said, or Solomon's plight for that matter, or less than half-interested at best with regard to Solomon's plight for that matter. It was a pretty nice ferry, the seats were nice at least, the layout of the seats seemed pretty nice, they sold beer, and a couple young boat boys, all with brown hair and side parts, strapped in our paraphernalia for us. "Honestly, man. I've still been thinking about my ex-wife a lot." Farhad said as we stood on the front deck of the ferry, overlooking the, at the time, seemingly infinite body of water occupying the

space between us and Block Island, and in preparation for the ensuing conversation I thought about my life broadly for a moment, ruminating how I got where I was, where I was exactly, “stranded” in Providence, a negligible city at best, I thought, discussing ex-wives while waiting to get drunk on a beach pushing thirty, and I considered the possibility that I was rotting away slowly of my own volition, that I found pursuing the path of least resistance of my own volition preferable to anything other course of action. Was I just waiting patiently for my own death, I thought impatiently. “Oh, yeah?” I said hesitantly. “Yeah, man...” “Did, um, banging Stacey help at all?” “No.” he said in a perturbed, child-like tone, like a small child that was just told he can’t have dessert, or was told that he has no choice but to eat his vegetables, I thought. “Nothing?” I said somewhat incredulously. He shook his head and said “The whole time all I was thinking was ‘Man, it would be so nice if this was Chantel’s pussy.’” “Well...we’ve all been there.” I said, I felt, unconvincingly and he said “Yeah, but I was married, man. That means something. Fuckin sucks, man...” and gazed down at the bag of beers, then said “You wanna drink one of those now?” I looked down at the beers too, they were strapped in pretty tight, the wind gusted violently into our faces and slicked back our hair. “You mind if I ask you a question?” I said, Farhad nodded, then I pinched his windbreaker and said “How many layers are you wearing right now?” He pinched the other side of it as his black, sweater-like, chest hair

peeked out above the layered collars and he said “Two t-shirts and this windbreaker.” “Aren’t you hot?” I scoffed, feeling moderately certain that it was a bad idea to try and dislodge any items from the beer bags the boat boys had strapped in so tightly. He shook his head unoffended and said “Nah, not really. It’s really windy out here.” and I nodded, thinking that I probably would have been oppressively hot wearing that many layers.

## Chapter 68

We got to the beach and found a spot near the edge of where the sand began to bleed into the rocks and pebbles that bled into the peninsula where people were fishing, possibly illegally. We started drinking beers, we went over to a tiki stand at the center of the beach and did a shot of tequila, Farhad stood straight up and scanned the beach and said "I wonder if Stacey's laying out around here somewhere..." and after a beer or two we moved our towels closer to the center of the beach, we were standing up admiring the light ocean waves when Solomon arrived, we took note of him trudging along the same path we trudged through about a half an hour earlier, where the sand began to bleed into the rocks and pebbles that bled into the peninsula where people were fishing, possibly illegally. He waddled up to us and started putting his shit on the beach as we stood and gazed out at the quell waves of the Atlantic, the varying shades of blue of the egregiously expansive body of water, I thought, and the clear, cloudless sky blurring against one another at their horizon. I gulped down the final sip of my third beer and heard a shrill voice ominously exclaim "Ey buddy, whatta you doin there?" A slender, curly haired Caucasian man approached us, trudging through the sand slowly like there were twenty pound dumbbells in his sneakers. He wore a navy blue and white uniform-like mesh t-shirt tucked into his khaki shorts, with large white sweatsocks

scrunched up above his white New Balance cross trainers, and he shrugged incredulously as he matter-of-factly said "You can't drink on the beach...what?" He shrugged again, this time directly at my puzzled expression as he said "You didn't know that?" He extended his right hand and I put my empty beer in it, his name was Steve and he demanded immediate forfeiture of all beer and liquor. Farhad pleaded, he offered to take the beers to another beach, to leave the beach we were on for good, to give him twenty dollars and disappear forever. When Steve refused he made a disparaging comment about his socks. Sensing Farhad losing his composure and unsure of what would become of us if we were kicked off the beach, I tried to apologize, tried to convince him this wasn't some premeditated infraction, that it was just an honest mistake, to which he said "This is a state beach, buddy. What did you think? ...Why do you think we sell beer over there?" and pointed extremely rationally to the flurry of tiki bars and the main restaurant twenty feet behind us. "You think we sell beer to people who can bring their beer onto the beach for free?" My ignorance seemed unfathomable to Steve as he grabbed Farhad's gym bag, as he put his hand around the handles and tried to lift it but came to an abrupt halt with the bag, still containing over twenty full Corona bottles, slung over his shoulder as he tried unsuccessfully to straighten his legs. "Jesus Christ." he said, then glanced down at the bag with an incredulous expression. While still hunched

over, partly by twirling his index finger in a circular motion, Steve asked Solomon to open his Bud Light Lime branded fanny pack where there was, somewhat ironically I thought, no beer. He opened my refrigerated lunch box and started picking up the beers, he kept picking up the ones I had already drank and said "Are all these empty?!" while glancing up at me still hunched over and exasperated. "No..." I said, angled away from him, the sun was in my eyes, but I looked down out of the corner of my eye and said "...some are still full." as Farhad said "Whatta you a busboy here?" seeming to genuinely enjoy watching Steve struggle to lift up his bag of Coronas. "Must feel reaaaal good taking people's beers. ...Is this the highlight of your day?" Steve finally, arduously, threw the gym bag over his shoulder and grabbed my lunch box too. I felt helpless. We started walking toward the restaurant that sat at the center of the beach, Steve turned back toward Farhad and retorted "What? You can't afford to buy a beer at the bar? It's like five bucks! ...Whatta you that broke? Then don't come to the beach on Block Island! Stay up wherever you're from. Do you not have a job?" "Oh, I have a job, man. I make a good living. Probably better than you!" Farhad said, leaning in gregariously toward Steve's left shoulder as we continued to walk. Steve's New Balances slushed through the fiery sand as we approached the pavement and, at that moment, I too wished I was wearing a pair of New Balance sneakers, as my feet felt more or less on fire as we continued to

walk, I had no idea know why I didn't just put my sandals back on. Although he confiscated our beer bags, Steve didn't dump the beer. Instead he said we could pick the bags up from the front desk when we left the beach, which I thought was actually pretty nice. "Well, this fuckin blows..." I said as Steve walked away briskly with all of our beers, as we stood at the entrance of the most likely overpriced beach bar devoid of any alcohol-based paraphernalia. We'd barely been on the island an hour. I thought we were gonna drink on the beach for free and get fucked up then leave, Solomon thought we were renting mopeds, and like bitter lovers we discovered the truth behind this perverse threeway, that Farhad strung us both us along to acquire a crew for his one true purpose. "I don't know, I kinda wanna go over and see if Stacey's here..." he said, peering over the veranda of the restaurant, out onto the beach. We stood there cemented on the deck, Farhad glanced around squirrely, the brim of my hat abutted the bridge of my nose. Solomon polished his sunglasses on the bottom of his light blue, cut-off sleeve shirt and we waited for a table. "We might as well get something to eat...I'm pretty hungry." someone said. I ordered a chicken sandwich and we shifted to liquor, up to and including: vodka martinis, bloody marys. mudslides, gin martinis, and more tequila shots. "This sandwich is worth \$4.50, tops..." I said, effectively to myself, as my comment coincided with another drink order arriving, as I pulled apart the bread and stared despondently at the chicken



breast as it apathetically covered less than a third of the bread. "Fuck this, I'm getting a moped." Solomon said sternly. "You guys can come if you want, but I'm going either way." Farhad contemplated the proposition for a moment and before he replied Solomon said "Well, that's why I came down here, so that's what I'm doing!" "Yeah, yeah..." Farhad said in somewhat of a philosophical tone, as if he was registering Solomon's disgust in a purely detached manner, then said "That's totally understandable." Solomon put his credit card on the table and Farhad turned to me and said "You wanna go see if Stacey's still on the beach." and I contemplated the proposition for a moment, then said, also in somewhat of a philosophical tone "She was a little cold when we went over earlier, no?" "You think so?" his voice generated some concern and I said "...She definitely wasn't effusive." "Yeah, I kinda thought so, too. ...Fuck it. There's this other girl that said she'd be down here that I wanna meet anyway."

## Chapter 69

Farhad and I walked into the indoor bar from the veranda table as Solomon walked over to a moped vendor who wore white pants, a Hawaiian shirt, and a gold chain with no cross or pendants on it. "I just have to find her..." Farhad said matter-of-factly, toggling between looking at his phone and surveying the area. "She texted me and said she's somewhere in here..." The bar was packed with drunk people in bathing suits, a guy outside was playing Elton John on a small stage, and I crooned along, enthusiastically singing "BA-BA-BA-BENNY AND THE JETS!!" as we walked by and with each successive syllable became increasingly self-conscious of my singing voice before I immediately stopped caring, drunkenly, and laughed to myself as we continued to walk. Steve was hurriedly pacing around clearing tables and it seemed like at that point all remaining patrons were sloppy, inebriated blobs of flesh meandering between veranda and sand like blood cells, or something scientific and microscopic that could ostensibly have consciousness, but how could we ever know for sure? The floor was covered in sandy mud and sandals were highly recommended when traversing. "I think that's her." Farhad said, staring intently ahead. "Ok, you wanna say hi?" I said, walking behind him in a straight line. "Yeah, let's go say hi." We started walking and Farhad said "Just so you know, and I know you probably wouldn't, but I still wanna say this: this girl may be a lesbian, so

don't make any gay jokes, or gay comments, ok?" and I nodded incredulously, as if I'd never made a joke at the expense of the LGBTQ community in my life and said "Of course, man. Obviously!" and I was still shaking my head as the girl Farhad was attempting to meet up with, who he seemed to have an inkling was a lesbian, exclaimed "Farhad Faaaazzzzoulliii?!" as we approached. She was a slim five foot seven blonde Caucasian holding a Corona in her right hand, wearing a bikini top and basketball shorts whose sexual orientation I didn't speculate on, she was flanked by two generic looking twenty something brunette white males. "I've been waiting all day to see you!" she said and wrapped her beer arm around Farhad and gave him a big hug. Farhad shrugged meekly and said "This is my friend, Nick." "Nice to meet you." I said jovially, I thought, and shook her hand, then turned to Farhad and said "A round?" as I lifted my eyebrows up in an exaggerated motion. He nodded. "Anybody need anything...." I said trailing off ambivalently to the group as I received blank stares. "No...?" I let another moment pass, they either didn't hear me, partially heard me, but were unsure of who I was addressing, or were just blatantly ignoring me, so I said "Ok." and walked away. The area where we stood was too crowded to get a spot at the bar, so I moseyed about ten feet to the left and ducked in a crevice, I stuck my hand into my basketball shorts, grabbed my wallet, lunged over the counter, and began a campaign to make eye contact with a bartender when

a voice rang out behind me and said “Sup Joe Budden?” I turned to my left, just for a moment, and it seemed like a portly black dude sitting at a table behind me was talking to me. “Doesn’t he look like Joe Budden?” I overheard him say as I turned back around. I was wearing a knock-off Charlotte Hornets hat with no logo on it, just got a skin tight temp that week, was decently tanned, and had recently grown a thick black beard, so I chuckled hesitantly, realizing at that point that he was most likely referring to me. “You got the thick beard with the hat...” he trailed off, now directly addressing me as I turned one hundred eighty degrees around, suspending my campaign to make eye contact with a bartender as he said “You know who Joe Budden is?” “Yeah, yeah. ...’Pump It Up.” I said, referencing the only Joe Budden song, released in 2003, that I’d ever heard. The portly black dude was sitting next to a muscular, well-groomed guy, who may have been Brazilian, with a sculpted five o’clock shadow beard. Farhad walked over and anxiously said “You get the beers yet?” and I said. “Nah,” I looked over my shoulder, feigning agitation, and said “this bartender is taking forever.” “Hi, I’m Farhad.” Farhad said, noting the portly black dude and the muscular man, then everyone shook hands. “I’m Fernando, and this is my friend Roy.” The bodybuilder, Fernando, was civil, but his tone was no-nonsense, I thought. “Where you guys from?” Fernando said. “Oh, I’m from Providence.” Farhad said. “What street you from?” Fernando immediately replied and I noticed his

face seemed to become increasingly flushed with either intrigue or skepticism as he said “What street you from?” and thought that Farhad and I both knew that he wasn’t from Providence, and I wondered if he was reading the same skepticism I was, and what a potential conflict would do to my status as a benevolent Joe Budden lookalike. “It’s all loooovee fam!” Roy interjected drunkenly, apparently sensing the suddenly mounting tension. Roy and Fernando were both drinking Strawberry Daiquiris. “Nah.” Fernando prodded as Farhad continued to delay his reply “What street you from?” “Uhhh.” Farhad said. “You know,” Fernando turned back to Roy, tapped his chest, then Roy’s chest and said “like we’re from Charles Street.” The only person I knew from Charles Street was an extremely Italian ex-con I used to work with at Puma. Also, Solomon worked at the Home Depot on Charles Street and one time I had my car towed to Mario’s Auto Body, a repair shop located across the street from said Home Depot, it was also across the street from easily the most disorganized Walmart I’d ever shopped at, a decent Wendy’s, and a strip club, The Nissan Hammock, where Alfonso received a complimentary blowjob in 2009 because his cousin managed the club. “Oh, no-no,” Farhad said, finally registering Fernando’s contempt as he nervously kicked a few grains of non-existent sand with his sandal. “I’m not actually from Providence.” “Then why’d you say you were?” Fernando said, still skeptical, I thought. “Well, you know...down here a lotta people they

don't know Rhode Island...so, you know. It's easier to generalize." Farhad said. "So where you from?" "Uhhh, Johnston. It's like right-" "Ahhh, Johnston?!" Fernando's mood shifted quickly. "I love Johnston! Everybody wears track suits and fedoras over there! Like the mafia! Hahaha!" I paid for two beers and handed one to Farhad. Nobody wore fedoras in Johnston that I knew of. "Well, anyway. It was really nice to meet you guys!" I said. "It's alll looooveeee fam!!" Roy repeated, unlike Fernando he seemed like a genuinely laid back, nice person, then embraced me and said "...you know what I mean?"

## Chapter 70

We walked back toward the other girl and her friends, but when we moseyed back over we found that they'd disappeared from the area. Farhad glanced around the bar half-interested and I turned my Corona upside down with the lime at the top of the bottle, let the liquid swish back and forth, and said "Those guys were pretty serious about being from Charles Street..." trailing off cynically, I thought, and Farhad recoiled slightly as he said "Ayy, how was I supposed to know?" "We're not that far off the coast of Rhode Island..." I said. "It's all tourists down here!" he said and I scoffed, but didn't verbally retort. We simultaneously took our first sips of Corona and I said "Let's go check out some of the hotels out there." optimistically. Farhad agreed and we left the beach and checked out a few hotel bars, but they were either mostly empty or packed with senior citizens, so we popped in the last hotel before you had to head into the heart of the island, its bar overlooked a second beach and from the deck in a zombie-like trance I took twenty one identical iPhone photos of the late afternoon sun setting behind the sand and water. "Heavy stuff..." I thought heavily as I scrolled through the photos. Coincidentally enough, Stacey, the girl Farhad had initially intended to run into, was at the bar with a guy I couldn't get a good glimpse of, or at least it seemed like she was with him, they were the only two at the bar, and while looking over I noticed what looked like Farhad, with

his back to me, talking Stacey. "Farhad, we will have this conversation." she said coolly drinking a Corona as I approached the bar feeling content with my photo library. "...but not today." Farhad, now thoroughly intoxicated, rebuked her rebuke, not wholly dissimilar to how he rebuked Steve's rebuke a few hours earlier. The guy who sat next to her was probably about five foot five with PED-esque muscles, had two sleeves of angel, devil, and anime-like flower tattoos, wore a fitted Boston Red Sox hat over his studded pierced ears, and turned to me, in reference to Farhad rebuking Stacey's rebuke, and said "You don't talk to a woman like dat. Dat's disrespectful, you know what I mean?" in a way that seemed overly confrontational, I thought, given the situation, specifically given the fact that it was Farhad, not me, that was being "disrespectful." I said "Farhad, c'mon..." and ominously nodded, then Farhad, after pausing to contemplate the situation for a few seconds, agreeably nodded back, then chugged the rest of his beer and we left, and after we exited I, completely lacking any sense of irony, considered going back in and trying to fight the five foot five guy because he was "disrespectful to me," but Farhad held me back perfunctorily, as I gave up my campaign to fight the five foot five guy without much argument. There was no point. Plus, I had my cooler, I'd grabbed it before we left for the hotel bars, back when we were both amazed to find out from the hostess that Steve actually may have been a co-owner of the entire beach bar, and we found a



spot under a large white staircase that lead into one of the main hotels. We began to guzzle down the last of my beers at a casual pace, discussing life and love as families of pasty tourists littered the streets, many of them wearing cummy unrubbed in sunscreen on their cheeks like they were walking a runway, meandering in and out of a gift shop that was also located under the large white staircase, most of them carrying large shopping bags filled with some combination of \$39.99 hooded Block Island logo sweatshirts and \$24.99 Block Island logo baseball hats, I thought, as they walked under the staircase nonchalantly, their eyes darting away from the two of us like litter in the streets. Solomon came back a few minutes later and we ducked into mom and pop spot next to a Ben & Jerry's and grabbed some clam cakes, the clam cakes were absurdly hot when the waitress brought them out to us and I immediately burnt my tongue and the top of my mouth, which I was surprised I even felt given my level of inebriation, to which I morosely thought "How could I possibly be this drunk, yet still feel pain?" The ferry ride home was sublime. It was a terrible day.

## Chapter 71

She said she liked this purple lipstick but couldn't find it anywhere. "The one I stole from you?" I said, recalling an instance, around the time when we first met, when I somehow or another found one of her lipstick containers in my pocket and ended up holding onto it for a week or so. She paused contemplatively, probably trying to recall the instance herself, then nodded her head affirmatively and, while looking into her eyes, I became skeptical as to whether she actually remembered the instance I was referring to, and wondered if she was just humoring me by saying she remembered. Later that night, Alfonso wanted to go to Balloons, a strip club that was unanimously known as the grimmest in the city and, for that matter, possibly all of New England. He was driving with Farhad in the front seat, we were driving around aimlessly at eleven pm before he shouted ecstatically "I wanna get grimy!" and suggested we go to Balloons. In the backseat I pushed the purple lipstick, which she'd given back to me because I told her I'd try to find it online, out of my pocket and into my right palm surreptitiously. I could just barely make out the item number printed on the bottom in the dark backseat and typed it into my phone, then a plethora of Amazon pages popped up in the search results, Amazon pages for the lipstick in all different colors as the first three "promoted" sites, and then the first non-promoted site was Amazon as well, then I stopped looking as Alfonso said "Here!"

and I closed my phone and we walked in the entrance, which was surrounded by a dirt parking lot where I was taken aback by the number of decrepit men alone sleeping in their cars, to the extent that I seriously contemplated whether I was enduring some type of hallucination for a few moments, thinking “Who are these people?” at the decrepit zombie-like elder male strip club patrons as I walked by. A guy wearing an army jacket with a shaved head had his entire face and exposed scalp covered in tattoos as he sat in a booth made of what looked, to me, like bulletproof glass. “Ten dollars please.” he said without really looking up. We slid the bills through the slit and walked in, it was practically pitch black, half the light in the place emanated from open phones. Balloons didn’t have a liquor license, so it never had to close, but it also didn’t have a bar. It did, however, have a vending machine, and on top of the vending machine sat an eighteen inch TV, which sat on top of a light gray VHS player, which played gonzo pornography, anal gaping, on the eighteen inch TV, which I noted as we took a few seats in the back, or I guess it could have been the front, I guess it didn’t matter. A few dancers meandered around aimlessly among the dozen or so patrons sitting in the dark. The lack of a bar or formal stage made the seating unavoidably incongruous, like a dream where the scene is clearly nonsensical, but everyone is acting normally, I thought, then thought about how I thought I was hallucinating when I saw the plethora of old decrepit men sleeping in their cars just

moments prior, then irrationally wondered if I was hallucinating again, briefly, as I glanced again at the gonzo pornography playing on the eighteen inch TV, then I opened my phone again and somewhat clandestinely pressed the link to the non-promoted Amazon page with my right thumb. "Eight bucks? Not bad..." I thought as the page for the lipstick generated, flicking my fingers apart on the screen to zoom in. I probably shouldn't have bothered, it seemed almost like a lame thing to do, buying girls who were married lipstick, it seemed totally lame, but I had reward points from my Discover card, so I ordered the lipstick and as I consummated the purchase a skinny Spanish kid with an absurdly thin mustache and full goatee, wearing a plain black fitted hat and plain black t-shirt, nudged me and said "Sup bro?" I turned around flummoxed and said nothing. "...You want some beer?" he said as I stared at him blankly, suddenly very self-conscious about the Amazon page for purple lipstick that was still displayed on my phone, that was also one of the few sources of light available in the immediate vicinity. "Yeah." Farhad said, unsolicitedly leaning into our conversation. The Spanish kid said "I can get you twenty bottles of Coronas for forty bucks." and Farhad said "...Can you get Corona Lights?" and the Spanish kid said "Maybe. Depends what they have in stock." and I waited for a moment, hoping for clarification with regard to what "in stock" meant at that hour of night, just out of pure curiosity as I wasn't particularly interested in buying bootleg Coronas

at Balloons, or even staying at Balloons, I didn't want to stay at Balloons, but he didn't clarify and a longer than normal pause ensued. I shifted my gaze out into the general population of the venue and noted a stick figure blond dancer with the skin tone of a blank canvas meandering our vicinity and a morbidly obese black woman with the skin tone of a triple creamed coffee doing the same, she had a jheri curled ponytail, they both wore ill-fitting bikinis, the blond had been walking around blatantly offering handjobs to reticent patrons when we first walked in. I straightened my arm and extended it in front of Farhad's heart, who was by that point in the process of bartering for the Coronas, I turned to the Spanish kid and said "Could you give us a second?" then Farhad, Alfonso, and I turned around and formed a three man huddle. "I don't really wanna stay here..." I confessed, staring at Farhad point blankly. "Hi daddies!" the black dancer yelled in our direction, Alfonso poked his head out of the huddle, smiled lukewarmly, and waved back noncommittally, then Farhad dug his head deeper in the huddle and whispered "Well, we already paid the cover..." trailing off to insinuate that it was worthwhile to stay and "get our money's worth," I thought, then I dug my head deeper in the huddle until our foreheads were about half an inch apart and whispered "Yeah, but I'm already losing my buzz..." and Farhad nodded agreeably like he always did when he didn't agree with you, I thought, then he paused for a moment, recognizing that he couldn't dig his head

any deeper into the huddle, then said “You wanna get those Coronas?” and I paused, glancing again at the gonzo pornography on the small TV screen again, noting that the anus was gaped to the extent that the scene could hardly even be considered erotic, then said “...Not really, but if you wanna stay that’s fine with me, I don’t care.” and shrugged my shoulders.

## Chapter 72

"I mean I used to steal Playstation 3s. I used to, like, steal Italian-made men's dress shoes when I was in my early twenties..." I said the next day as Sophia nodded perfunctorily, then said "I'm not perfect either..." I continued congratulating myself for doing relatively risky things in my youth, granted there's a sliding scale of risk that may have wholly undermined my congratulatory tone, then turning around and congratulating myself for turning out "well adjusted" and benevolently working a job I didn't particularly enjoy, then dug in my pocket and said "Here. Before I forget...I got this for you." I said and handed her the purple lipstick I'd ordered next day delivery on Amazon. She looked at it with a puzzled expression and said "You got this..." she stared down at it and said "...for me?" then looked up and I said "Yeah?" in a puzzled register and she said "Thank you!" shouted "Thank you!" and clapped her hands together one time, kept the hands together, then leaned over her seat and embraced me enthusiastically, I recoiled slightly, but only out of surprise, as she shouted "You found it! This is so nice of you!" I was playing "Dipshits" by Cam'ron and Juelz Santana as we sat in my stationary, but running car and Cam'ron said "Mommy backed up, said she sees the difference / 'You're mature, handsome, mixed with a lotta ignorance' / Dick in her intestines, bout to poke her chitlins" and Sophia said "Ew. Those boys are ignorant." scoffing in a soft voice as she peeled her body

off of my body. I'd taken the day off work to hang out, ten minutes earlier I was in a Dunkin Donuts where I'd made eye contact with a Spain-Spanish brunette wearing white capris, or maybe she glanced at me as I glanced at her, either way I took particular note of the glance as I held a tray with two iced coffees on it and wondered what she did for a living. She had an upper class look about her, I thought, but I also considered it possible that she worked in a service industry, but just dressed traditionally proper, or was in business school, or just had rich parents, I felt a decently strong attraction to her physically, and as I carried the tray of iced coffees wondered how long Sophia and I would continue talking and how things would end if and when they ended for good, thinking specifically about socioeconomics, how Sophia had recently told me she was trying to get her GED, then thought about articles I'd read that mentioned that America was increasingly a dual income economy, thinking specifically about my sizeable student loan balance and the average salary of workers with a high school or equivalent level of education. "Wanna get some oysters?" I said as I took a sip of coffee then winced and said "This is like eighty five percent milk." as my phone vibrated, I looked down and confirmed that it was my work phone, an email from a lady asking that I re-submit an invoice, a lady whose email signature read "When The Power Of Love Overcomes The Love Of Power The World Will Know Peace." I glanced down, the email read "Hi Nicholas, As you may or may not know,



Arial New is generally frowned up by Compliance. Is there any way we could re-submit this in Courier New (see attached)? Please advise. Best Regards, Diane, Sr. Business Manager, INBU (When The Power Of Love Overcomes The Love Of Power The World Will Know Peace),” and I sighed disdainfully. “Where do they have oysters around here?” Sophia said in a genuinely curious register as I was sighing disdainfully. We ended up staying at Balloons the night before, and after we accepted the twenty Coronas for thirty five dollars, Farhad talked five dollars off the kid’s initial price, a guy with red hair and a thick chin beard interrupted our conversation, which had shifted to oysters, and said “Excuse me, I don’t mean to interrupt, but” that he’d managed oyster bars for the past seven years and that the ones they had at The Federal Tap on Federal Hill were “some of the best in the state.” “I know this place, it’s called The Federal Tap. They have some of the best oysters in the state!” I said enthusiastically and she shifted her head down toward her lap and I noticed her eyelashes drooping down, abutting her sockets. “I don’t know...it’s not a busy place, is it?” she said softly, reticently and I said “It’s three o’clock. Happy hour just started, so...” “Is it nice?” “It’s pretty nice.” I said and she said “I don’t wanna go anywhere nice.” and I pressed the home button on my phone, I looked at the time, I irrationally toggled the child lock for the windows on and off and said “Actually, it’s kind of a dump...to be honest.” and she said “Is it far?” with her limbs were pulled close

to her body, to which I said “Ummmmmmmmmm...couple minutes?” and she said “Is there anywhere closer?” and my lower lip protruded and I nodded my head up and down violently and said “You wanna go to Dunkin Donuts?” “What’s that?” she said, turning around to look in the rearview. “Because if you wanna go to Dunkin Donuts-” “Is that a Red Lobster?” she said, her mood now seemingly improving by the syllable, I turned my head and looked back and said “Um, looks like it.” trailing off as she was already turned around, her knees on the seat, her ass was pressed against the dash, and she held her hands around the head-rest intently as she looked out the back window. “Aren’t they in like Chapter Eleven or something...” I said. “Oooh, have you ever been?” “What about Yen Ching?” Her eyes were fixated intently on the lobster logo above the double doors as she said “How far is it?” “Um,” I looked at the lock screen of my phone and said “couple minutes.” then we went to Red Lobster.

## Chapter 73

The next night was Farhad's twenty ninth birthday and he threw a party for himself at his mom's house, it was a Monday night, so my plan was not to get too fucked up, plus I had to pull teeth to get Sophia to attend, which probably wasn't the best idea, but regardless, as a condition of her attendance I promised that it wouldn't be a late night, so my plan was not to get too fucked up. We walked in and a five foot six Cape Verdean kid I'd never seen before stood in the kitchen talking enthusiastically to Farhad about the new Justin Bieber record. "You heard that new Bieber?" he asked anxiously. "Ridiculous." Farhad said. "...The fuck is this kid?" I thought. He adjusted his wire rimmed eyeglasses with both hands and I wondered why I only knew maybe half the people at the party when Farhad and I were close friends. There were a dozen or so people in the kitchen, including myself, Sophia, and Farhad's mom and stepdad, and I was drinking my second margarita when Vera looked over to me and said "Want another one? They're good, right?!" as she held up a pitcher of piss-colored liquor, I smacked my lips together and said "...They're spicy." "This Bieber is bangin!" Farhad said, turning to me. "...Have you heard it?" "Nah not yet. I've heard it's, uh..." "Banginnnnn!" I was wearing a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles t-shirt under a gray cardigan, but had I known the guest list in advance, or if Farhad had just warned me that there were going to be a bunch of

people I didn't know in attendance, I most likely would have dressed more conservatively, I thought. "Ey, Nick how are ya?!" Farhad's mom said as she sipped a glass of pinot grigio, as she ate some triscuits dipped in guacamole, and I introduced Sophia and felt nervous about the whole process, I think she may have felt the same, she definitely did, and I made a point at least at the beginning of the night to steer the discussion away from any talk of employment, not that I cared, but I thought she might have, or that I might have. The pinot grigio bottle stood cork out in the middle of the island and Farhad slouched next to his mom on the island. Slouched next to Farhad was a slender brunette he'd just met named Tara, as I assumed Stacey had either told him off or wasn't answering his texts anymore or both. Tara was posed meekly, she was reminiscent of a shadow, accentuating her slender form next to him and actually stayed in that exact same pose for more or less the entire night. Farhad was by the stove shoveling a meatball in his mouth? There she was, leaning in reticently with a blank expression three feet behind him... Farhad was by the island in the kitchen chugging a glass of red wine? There she was, smiling sadly and loosely hugging his torso... Farhad was in the bathroom taking a piss? There she was, noncommittally twiddling her thumbs under the archway outside...

## Chapter 74

A few minutes after urinating Farhad's face appeared about two inches from the bridge of my nose, his bushy brown beard was disproportionately concentrated in the goatee region and he said "I'm not smoking any weed tonight, how bout you?" "Uhhhhh," I exhaled, stretching my arms above my head. "...yeah me neither." "Want some of this scotch?!" he said as he pulled out a large brown bottle out of a wooden case enthusiastically, then "Look at 'dis! It was distilled twenty nine years ago, it's just as old as me!" I held out the glass he'd handed me, then simultaneously made a sincere but effeminate hand motion and moaned "Ohh, that's too much." after a few ounces immediately settled at the bottom. "You want some a this?" Farhad asked Sophia as he moved the bottle a few inches in her direction and she said "No, thank you." and raised her wine glass gingerly. Farhad held up his seven-eighths full rocks glass jovially, then he nodded his head and said "Let's take these outside!" Tara, who stood mute about seven feet to our left during the entire exchange, forced a brief smile and I smiled back awkwardly as my eyeballs tilted out of their sockets at insincere angles. "Who's out there?" I said as we began to walk. "My mom...Vera...Alfonso...Vera's got Cali Kush!" he said as I tried to chug my glass of scotch while walking. I turned back to Sophia and whispered "Don't act too meek." in a concerned tone as we walked outside. "Am I?" she whispered back, also concerned,

which I actually liked, leaning in toward me until our shoulders brushed together slightly, then we moved away from each other a few inches. “No, not really. But I don’t want you to look like that other girl, she looks like an asshole.” “Oh...ok.” she said, seeming fairly receptive to the request. “She can’t just interact like an adult?” I said as we tumbled down the stairs into the fenced in backyard porch area, but she seemed too nervous to vocally co-sign that aggressive of a proclamation and just kind of nodded her head blankly. “Is this really from California?” I asked Vera as she wore a yellow and pink sundress and a leather jacket, as we stood by the patio heaters, the heater towered over us both, and I noticed we were both wearing the same all white low-top Chuck Taylors. “Yeahh. I was out there last month, and after I left my ex-boyfriend was nice enough to sneak some back for me.” she said. “You can do that? With TSA and...?” I said, surprised and impressed. “Yeah. He just shoved it up his asshole.” she said. “Oh. Looks like...you have a lot of it?” I said as I looked over at a large plastic ziploc sandwich bag filled with hearty chunks of weed on the glass outdoor table, then pulled down on my eyelids and tried to stretch the fatigue out and said “So it’s pretty strong stuff then?” “Ummmmm.” She paused, her lungs ostensibly filled with the weed smoke, then she exhaled into the heater. “It’s just a different type of high.” she said and extended the bong piece like a finger roll in my direction. “You want some?” I glanced over at Farhad, who was now standing in the

corner of the patio, engulfed by his own shadow and staring in my direction with his eyebrows flickering up and down excitedly. "Sure, why not?!" I said and grabbed the piece and slid my index finger over its blowhole. The first puff felt like oxygen in my lungs, I giggled a little. "Tee-hee." I said, then held out the piece back in Vera's direction. "You want another one?" she said and I said "Take two and pass, right?!" and also giggled slightly. My shoulders approached my earlobes as I re-accepted the piece, but I didn't take a deep enough breath before inhaling the second hit, my lungs popped, and I started coughing violently. "...You good?" Vera asked in a concerned tone as I kept coughing as, mid-cough, I laughed jubilantly at an off color remark Farhad made and we both cackled leaning into the heat lamp. "Mmmmm..." I thought. "That heat feels great." We went back inside and I started experiencing time a lot differently than I had previously, specifically because my experience of time no longer seemed strictly linear, I thought, and also, full disclosure, because my sentience was violently fading in and out. I felt as though a few hours had passed while I stood next to the counter in the kitchen, but also simultaneously felt like I knew that it had been, at maximum, a few minutes. I longed for the times, a few minutes prior, when I had been innocently enjoying being high on Farhad's mom's patio. Suddenly I felt myself as four feet tall, looking over the edge of the island up at the people in the party who had forgotten I was there, but also realizing that, on some level, I was

still there and they knew it, which made me wonder what I was actually doing if I wasn't four feet tall peering over the island, then I was normal sized again on the other side of the island and we all played Uno, then I became fully lucid for seven to ten seconds and felt relieved to be back to "normal" before becoming extremely fucked up again. I forgot all the rules to Uno and Alfonso looked at me funny from across the island as he dealt all of us our cards. I thought "Is he mad at me?" nervously, then realized I most likely hadn't moved my limbs in five minutes. He dealt us our hands, the both of us surrounded by giant card players, they were all between eight and ten feet tall and made of stained glass, the talking points around the island echoed as if they were coming from another room and a guy with long brown hair in a cream V-neck sweatshirt stood next to me and blatantly looked at my cards over my shoulder. "Man, I wish I was that fucked up." he said and I became lucid for another seven second spurt, then, as I became exceptionally fucked up again, abruptly left the Uno game, mid-game I stopped playing, I believe, and found myself next to a couch in the living room, I started pacing through some concept of "time" I was creating for myself while still dislocated from my normal experience of time. "Hold on." I said and put my hand over my heart as if I was preparing to recite The Pledge Of Allegiance. "Sophia!" I yelled and she said "What's the matter?" as she jogged around the bend into the living room, I paused, then looked in her eyes sincerely, and said



"Feel how fast my heart is beating right now..." She made a peace sign and placed it over my heart and said "Feels normal to me." "No." I disagreed as I put my palm over my heart again. "...it's going so fast!" I took a deep breath, then asked her if she thought it was possible that I was dying, she shook her head and left the the living room without responding. I sat on the couch with my head tilted back toward the wall window. "I just feel so bad..." I moaned a few minutes later, baiting a response, and found Sophia back on the couch where she was now a square block of flesh, and tilted her entire block-body to its side and stared at me pitifully. "Why?" she said curiously. "I don't know..." I said trailing off philosophically. "I feel like I'm gonna vomit all over Farhad's mom's street. She doesn't deserve that." When I left the living room and went back to the kitchen I felt as though everyone was now aware, it was an open secret, that I was fucked up to point of no longer being able to engage in rational, or even drunkenly rational, behavior. Farhad's stepdad would never let me live it down, even months after the fact, whenever marijuana, any type of marijuana, was even casually offered to anyone, any time it was in the vicinity of my physical frame, he'd say "Uh oh. Don't let Nick smoke that! ...Nick, you want some a that?!" then laugh heartily. I stood despondently at the backdoor and Farhad put his hands on my shoulders and looked me in the eyes as I looked down at his trash can and said "Nice trash can, are people still playing Uno?" "You'll be ok." he said and I said "I think I

just need to go home.” “Yeah...maybe just go sleep it off.” he said, visibly embarrassed for me, from what I can recall. Outside on the patio Farhad’s mom gave me a nice hug. “It was great to see you, Nick! Feel better.” she said and I noticed a pack of cigarettes in her left hand, and briefly considered trying to bum one, then walked into the street. “Here. Take this.” Sophia said and handed a white plastic Stop N Shop bag up to me, which I vomited violently in for ten minutes or so, then dropped in the street. I stared pensively at her in the driver’s seat on our way home and felt myself fading, my heart must’ve been going three times its normal pace, maybe even eighteen times, I thought. “I’m just so sorry!” I cried to her as she drove my car and genuinely felt like I was ominously fading to black, like my consciousness had grown some other side, a darker, deader side that I never believed in that was now coming for me with some sort of passive vengeance. “I feel like, socially speaking...I let a lotta people down tonight.” I continued. She looked at me blankly. “Just...” I shook my head. “Just tell them I’m sorry...we had to leave so early.” Farhad picked me up the next morning to drive me back to my car. I slothed my way into his car wearing white sweatsocks and unwashed basketball shorts and he stared at me blankly as my ass plopped into the tan leather seat and said “When you take your car could take your bag of puke with you, please?! My mom’s been bitching about it all morning.”

## Chapter 75

“Look over there...” Sophia whispered as she glanced at a hefty Hispanic dancer wearing a short beige t-shirt that had the word “PINK” printed on it in dark brown, as I glanced at a guy that I felt reasonably certain sold fairly large quantities of cocaine as he enjoyed a relaxing mixed drink at the bar. “You know who wore that first?” she flashed a disapproving screw face at me in reference to the t-shirt, then glanced back at the dancer. “They’re all biting my style...” Being under five feet, there was an incongruity to her when she talked shit, but in her defense I did remember her wearing a t-shirt like that at one point, but wasn’t sure if she wore it before the hefty dancer, to be honest I didn’t know enough about the hefty dancer to say for sure. Sophia stared intently at a strip of blank air for a few seconds, then said “Do you have any idea how much money I’d make if I sucked dick?” and I considered the question for a moment, then said “I think I have a vague idea.” “You two should be on that show Dating Naked!” the raspy-voiced female bartender, mid-forties with closely cropped hair, wearing a Harley Davidson silver studded belt, shouted enthusiastically. I’d seen her at the Hot Club one time making out with a guy wearing jean shorts in the geometric center of the deck and made a grossed out face to my sister, who was sitting next to me and also already making a grossed out face while glancing at them making out. “I’m not naked though...” I said. “Huh?”

"No worries, nevermind!" It was almost eight pm. The sun was still up, she fiddled with her outfit and I contemplated the awkward pause as I made eye contact with Todd Cilantro and said "...You wanna go out to the patio?" Todd was a childhood friend of Karina's, about six feet tall with short, crew cut styled bright blond hair, he was smiling in the middle of the club like an asshole. Karina said he was the first guy she ever did more than make out with, she said she whacked him off at her parents house when they were both in middle school, that it didn't take that long, that he was terrible in bed and that he took the fall for her when they got caught with beer on a local beach, when they were still underage, one summer, the summer they were fucking. "Sure." Sophia said. The patio was a "tiki bar" huddled under the I-95 South overpass, the sun was slunked halfway behind the freeway with a glare that was firmly late summer as we sat on the sand-colored futons the club was trying to pass off as couches. Sophia held her drink with both hands and said "So yeah, my son has been eating way too much peanut butter lately." continuing a conversation about nutrition we were having earlier, inside, she protruded her stomach outward to stretch her lower back as I said "What's in your drink?" and she said. "Um, Vodka and-" "Can I have a sip?" She handed it over and I took a long sip and said "Mmm..." while puckering my lips and let the liquid massage my taste buds, I said "That's good. Really sweet though..." and handed it back to her, then said "I bring peanut

butter and jelly to work all the time. It's decently good for you, no?" "Nooo." she said in a tone I would use if someone asked me if I put ice cream on swordfish. "Really. It's not good for you at all?!" I scratched my inner thigh by rubbing the denim against the skin and said "What about the protein?" "Nooo, there's a lot of fat. And not the good type of fat either!" she said, then I shrugged and looked around, disinterested in having my lunch choices denigrated any further. There were maybe half a dozen people outside, two of them were dancers smoking cigarettes, discussing their car insurance payments about four feet behind us and their quoted rates actually seemed pretty reasonable, I thought. Her knees knocked together as she said "You like the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, right?" "You have to ask?" "We saw the new movie last weekend." I glanced at her bare legs, for a second I noted they were kind of shaped like very thin triangles, I thought about shapes, the both of us as richly detailed but two dimensional figures made wholly of interrelated shapes, I thought our tans were comparable, but she insisted she was darker, which if I was being completely honest I would have agreed was probably true. "Was it any good?" I said, as my glance shifted back up, and I said "I'm generally skeptical of remakes." "Yeah, it was good! ...It was family day." she said and looked me straight in the eye as she spoke in what seemed to be a premeditated staccato. "Family day." I thought. "We went and saw it at the Providence Place Mall...the one by the arcade." she trailed off.

“Marco Busters?” I said, genuinely unsure of the name of the mall’s arcade. She wasn’t looking at me in the eye as she pensively said “Yeah, that’s near you, right? ...You ever go to that one?” then a minor pause ensued and I said “Yeah, I spend my days off there riding up and down the escalators all day, up and down the escalators, you know, just waiting to bump into people I know...” I paused then in a sarcastic tone said “Maybe you?” and she punched me in the shoulder, after a decent wind up, with her right fist.

## Chapter 76

"I think I wanna be a phlebotomist." she said, her entire face was engulfed by a wide-eyed look that resembled hope, she'd just come back out to the bar wearing the same one piece turquoise dress that she wore the night she told me about the receipts that I threw in the air by the ATM and I said "What's that?" while thinking reflexively about lobotomies. "It's like a nurse...but you just take blood." she said. It was midnight, the place was slow and I'd unintentionally ended up drinking the entire night away, she sat on the stool next to me, also having unintentionally drank the entire night away, and I thought I noticed a complete lack of underwear under her dress when I took note of her exposed vagina, and was reflexively aroused, but also hesitant to address it. "Shhh..." she said and placed her index finger over her lips sensually and drunkenly, and, abutting fully erect, I noted her silver studded clit ring, thinking about how I usually wasn't overly excited at the sight of an isolated vagina, but that I was finding myself incredibly excited at the sight of her isolated vagina. While she was changing in the back I'd met a guy named Tony and his two friends, one of whom was an erudite, slightly overweight blonde, the other a slender, slightly effeminate younger guy, and they both told me, somewhat despondently, that they worked at Bank of America. "Cool..." I said unenthusiastically. All three were still in the vicinity. "Did you know phlebotomists can make like seventy thousand

dollars a year?" she said, then pulled down her dress a little while still sitting on the stool. "Yeah?" I ripped the stem off a beer can I finished half an hour ago and said "That's like a pay cut for you though, no...?" then started chewing on the vodka tinged ice at the bottom of my glass. I was pretty sure Tony was either a drug dealer or a low level professional criminal or both. After about ten minutes of being in his presence I remembered that I used to see him at a neighborhood bar on Douglas Avenue with what I thought was a mafia looking older guy back around 2010. "You look familiar...I know you?" he said while Sophia was still in the back, while we were in the bathroom, while we were urinating side by side, while we were staring up at the bathroom ceiling, while we were attempting to avoid looking at each other's penis while conversing. Tony had a square jaw and slicked back black hair, his eyes were dark and beady and they shifted at lightning paces, but only in straight lines. He wore a silk, baby blue button up with open toe sandals and boot cut jeans and seemed to know everybody. "Wendyyy. Great to see you, hun! Can we get a couple a shots over eah?!" he said, then turned to me and said "You like Miller Lite? There. Take that." and placed a can of Miller Lite in front of me as I sat by myself. "Oh...my...god!" Tony's slender male friend exhaled as he moseyed over to Sophia with the blonde girl, he stopped between myself and Sophia and said "You are...so...cute!" then petted her wavy black hair. "Thank you." Sophia said politely, but also in a



somewhat subdued manner, I thought. The slender guy told me not to get offended, but that I kind of reminded him of Drake and I wasn't offended, but also didn't take it as a compliment, as Sophia went "Oohh!" like a mother reacting to a compliment given to her son as he said the word "Drake," then went across the bar. She walked back over a few minutes later as the slender guy and I continued to talk and she whispered softly in my ear "Don't let him steal you from me." then gazed at me sensually as I reflected briefly back to a homoerotic experience I had as a pre-teen and said "You think I'm bi?!" self-consciously, but she didn't seem to hear me, so I let it go, pushing the experience back into what I thought was my subconscious where I supposed it was probably better off. "That's where it belongs." I thought nervously. A customer Sophia knew had entered the club as the slender guy and I continued to engage in small talk as my interest in our conversation continued to wane at a steady pace, then she went to the back to change. After she left, the blonde asked me "Do you know her?" in reference to Sophia, and I didn't know how to answer and she said "She was all over you." in a pejorative and/or reticent tone and I said "Oh."

## Chapter 77

“You can’t have everything you want.” Sophia said with a fair amount of playfulness, but also with an undercurrent of sincerity as I stood with my back against a wall feeling increasingly tired, it was twenty of two and the club closed at two. Her body was pressed up against me from my chest down, her face occupied the space between my nipples, her nipples book-ended my belly button, and her hair gel greased my light grey thermal just slightly. I made a mental note to throw it in the hamper when I got home. “I should’ve never told you my last name. I slipped up.” she said, then dramatically sighed, her playfulness subsiding rapidly, and I took offense, thinking about the “Don’t let him steal you from me.” comment an hour earlier and accused her of being capricious in my head. I thought about a few things at the same time while I kind of gazed out at nothing in the club with her forehead resting between my pectorals, I thought about her first boyfriend sitting in his jail cell with my complexion. where’d he sit until anywhere between the end of the summer and the rest of his life, the girl taking care of a fatherless child because of his actions, Sophia’s husband sitting in a county jail cell enduring opiate withdrawals, me nearly peeing my pants at a “Driving To Endanger” misdemeanor court date in 2009 after I almost killed a girl on a bike pulling out of a flower shop in my shitty Oldsmobile Aurora, the same Oldsmobile that I would almost kill myself in via carbon

monoxide poisoning a year later while trying to have sex with the plus-sized girl from Cyprus, making out for over an hour with the car running, I thought about going to Stall Lake to meet my lawyer and shaking with anxiety, ceasing shaving my ass “just in case” I had to go to jail for a short period of time, because the fine print of the “Driving To Endanger” subpoena I received contained the phrase “maximum of two years incarceration,” I thought about Karina calling me on December 23rd to tell me she was engaged, then going home and drinking cup of coffee after cup of coffee until I couldn’t feel my face. We’d sat back down and she remained more or less motionless with her arms crossed. Her eyes only fleetingly met mine as I stood back up, like a house plant wobbling in a whirlwind of basic capitalism but more naked, I tilted my head back exhaustedly, then put my hand on her thigh and leaned over, she cocked her head and I stretched my arms Jesus-on-the-cross like. “You want another one?” I said. “I need to relax.” she said with a negative connotation in her voice, perhaps a little accusatory. I ordered a water for Sophia and another beer for myself and considered going home. I noticed Wu glance over at us but couldn’t decipher the connotation of the glance, I wiped some perspiration from the tops of my eyebrows and said “Honestly...” I massaged the stickiness of my temple. “I could use, like, I don’t know. A fucking bath or something...I’m so tired.” I paused for a moment, then said “Although I hear they’re filthy to take.” “Ew.” she said and I said “Yeah, seriously.

It's like a cesspool of germs." We both sat there, eyes glazed over inebriated, everything remotely wrong in the world possibly a direct result of my existence, and she told me a story about her first boyfriend. "Did I ever tell you about the bathtub?" she said ominously and went on to tell me how her first boyfriend brought a toaster into the bathroom one night, one night when she was maybe sixteen, as she took a bath, submerged in warm water, and made her stand up with the threat of throwing the toaster in the tub, with the threat of killing her via electrocution, then he punched her back down into the water, then he turned the water cold, had it run cold, accused her of being unfaithful, then had her get back up again, toaster again, then punched her back down again, she got up, then he punched her back down again, she got up, then he punched her back down again, she told me how she received her first stab wound that night, the one on her chest plate, the one that was always covered by plastic necklaces and fashion forward t-shirts, how the pattern lasted a little over a half hour, how she'd make sure to keep her head down if she ever walked by another man while with him, then said "Every girl in here is fucked up." matter-of-factly, looking out into the general population around us, and, honestly, I didn't have all that much meaningful to contribute in response to the anecdote, but told her I greatly appreciated her sharing, that it meant something to me that she shared that, and shared my condolences. A few minutes later I glanced at her,

her limbs were still held close together on the stool as she said "I'm more than just a dancer to you right?" and I told her yeah.

## Chapter 78

The next afternoon it was raining, with large gusts of wind that swayed my car back and forth on the highway as I sped through the snake pattern that Interstate-95 shaped as it approached downtown Providence. I started to worry that my alignment might be in need of repair before I saw a few sizeable tree branches violently blowing around and realized the swaying back and forth was only wind-related and felt relieved, but still felt an inkling, felt like it was possible that maybe the wind was a red herring, that maybe my alignment was out of whack... I parked and walked quickly through the streets, they were almost completely desolate, the wind howled in my ear like I was the one causing the storm. "Ridiculous!" I thought, trailing off in my thoughts and shook my head with my hands dug deep, as deep as materially possible, into my pockets. "Hi Nick." Vera said, looking at me out of the corner of her eye as I sat down at her bar and ordered a Miso Soup and a 20 oz. Sapporo beer. She'd asked me to stop by that afternoon, that's why I stopped by, but I knew she'd be busy, it was so overcast it could've been midnight, it was fine. A guy I knew but didn't want to talk to, because I was embarrassed to be in a bar by myself at four in the afternoon, stood to my right. I should admit that it wasn't totally out of the ordinary for me to be at a bar by myself, it wasn't like some "three standard deviation event" or anything, at least I'm fairly certain it's three standard

deviations where events become “black swans,” but honestly who gives a fuck, but for whatever reason, any time I was at a bar by myself I felt acutely self-conscious and always felt almost physically unable speak with anyone I wasn’t genuine friends with. “Maybe I need to start going to bars by myself more often, just to get acclimated to the scene and become less introverted about the whole thing, you know?” I thought as I kept my eyes glued to my phone and avoided eye contact, as I overheard Vera making drinks and conversation. Admittedly, the bar was a lot busier than I expected, even though I expected her to be busy, and I was definitely slightly uncomfortable. The winds continued to gust strongly against the windows and cursive lit up logo in the front window. “It’s frickin windy out thea, eh?” I overheard the guy I knew remark, and it was windy, too windy to even be out. “Vera!” I said. She turned around. “...Forget the soup?” I said, then she raised her shoulders incredulously and said “Really?!” “You already put in the order?” I said and slunked back down in my seat, then said “Ok, that’s fine.” Oddly enough, in about two to five minutes time the entire place cleared out, I thought that it was possible there was a some special event that I was unaware of, but I wasn’t sure. I put my phone back down on the counter and relaxed my posture, I stood on the foot rest, my ass pressed against the back of the stool, I cupped my hands over my mouth and said “Vera!” A second later, she popped her head out from the back. “...Is it too late to get the Miso with no

scallions?" and she nodded in a very muted way, I thought. I asked Vera. I had to. She was so level-headed. I told her, reiterated in parts, the whole situation, but relayed the events without explicitly imbuing them with my feelings. "Nick, to me..." her voice was so wise. "I think Sophia is really into you." I tasted the Miso, there were scallions. "I just remember how she looked at you that night." she said. "You really think so?" I replied, somewhat disingenuously. "I don't know." she shrugged and I thought "Now she doesn't know?" in an incredulous tone in my head, hoping the thought didn't trickle into my facial expressions, then immediately disregarded the thought as preemptive and slurped another spoonful of Miso. She looked back at the last remaining patron post-exodus as he sat despondent at the other end of the bar, then turned back to me. "Ultimately, obviously, it's up to you and how you feel. But I thought it seemed like she may have had at least some feelings for you. At least I would think... I thought I could tell in her eyes that she did..." I nodded as she trailed off and gently swirled my spoon around the soup in a contemplative fashion. As the conversation stalled somewhat I didn't disclose my feelings. I felt them at a distance, somewhere where I could only wave at them, like a mother to her son as he climbed the set of steep stairs of his school bus on the first day of school, as we continued to talk. "Maybe it's worth the work..." she said, then said "Sometimes it is."



## Chapter 79

Later that night we cracked open a couple Bud Select cans on our way up to Boston as Farhad drove with one hand on the wheel and one hand on the rim of his can of beer in the cupholder, Solomon was squished into the backseat and said “You know I used to bounce up here?” “Yeah?” I said inquisitively, although I was more than well aware that he used to bounce in Boston because A) I knew Solomon when he was a bouncer and B) he brought up his history of bouncing more or less incessantly. “Yeah. If you wanna go to Coconut Joe’s I can get us in for free. I know a guy.” he said “Coconut Joe’s?” I said as I raised the pitch of my voice to an absurdly sarcastic falsetto and made an exaggerated jerking off motion to Farhad, forgetting for a moment that Solomon was sitting in the middle seat in the back and could easily see my hand moving up and down by my crotch. “Jus’ sayin...” Solomon said, his tone affirming that he definitely noted my hand moving up and down by my crotch as Farhad found a spot on the street and we left our beers carefully on the side of the road. Farhad turned around, anxiously looked around for a meter, and said “You sure it’s legal to park here?” I checked the “Park-Boston!” app and confirmed that it was. “I wonder if I’ll bump into the girl I met up here a few weeks ago with Vera...” Farhad said and we meandered around the city using Google Maps, unable to find the bar that Farhad patronized with Vera until Farhad became visibly

frustrated and said "Ay, this app doesn't know fuck all about Boston!" and I agreed, noted that I was also sick of walking around, and we dipped quickly into a sports bar. There was a pale-faced, dark-haired bartender with a few freckles on both of his cheeks wearing a white shirt and black tie behind the bar. He said "Sup bros?" as he dried a beer mug with a striped white towel as we sat down, Farhad perused the menu and said "You gonna eat anything?" and I said "I ate some eggs before we came." while also perusing a menu. "I thought we said we were gonna eat up here?" he said and I said "Yeah, I guess I'll probably just get like a burrito or something later." without looking up, feeling more full from the eggs than I had expected. Solomon raised his head like he was smelling something and with his index finger grabbed the bartender's attention to ask "What's the deal with the cheesy fries?" Farhad grabbed my attention to point to a line item on the menu that read "Shots - Buy One, Get One Free!" and said "You wanna get a shot?" Solomon grabbed the bartender's attention to point to a line item on the menu above the bar that read "Jumbo Cheesy Fries - \$7.99" and said "Let me get an order of those?" Farhad ordered Patron shots, the bartender poured too much and said "Oops!" "What is it that...like a double shot?" I asked, portentously eyeing the size of the glasses as he brought over three rocks glasses three fourths filled with tequila, three limes, and a salt shaker. "I think it might be a triple..." Solomon or Farhad said. "Are you wearing perfume again?" I said, sniffing what I

thought was an egregiously female fragrance on Farhad. "Yeah, I never stopped." he said, turning to me unconcerned, eagerly eyeing the small glass of liquor now sitting in front of him, then said "I just got some new samples, they're dope!" I nodded, his preference for perfume didn't offend me, I actually thought it smelt pretty good, although ultimately I still preferred cologne, I'd just legitimately forgot that he wore perfume, I told him "You smell like cunt." then, after nodding, I downed the sizeable "shot" in two and a half gulps, then, more or less as soon as I finished swallowing, my phone began to ring, the screen read Blocked ID. I stared at the screen, a little startled and also a little afraid as I walked outside, then hit the answer button and said "Hello?" I spoke staccato as I stumbled out the door, I was swallowing my saliva violently, repeatedly. "...How are you?" the voice said and I said "Sophia? ...How's it going?" She paused for maybe one second, then said "Are you drunk?" and I said "No." pensively scratching the tip of my nose looking down at the cement, it was now pretty much completely dark outside, a group of Swedish tourists walked by, then I said "Not really. Why?" "Oh... you sound different." "Oh, I'm just out with a couple friends." "Oh," she paused, then said "Well, I was just calling to see if maybe you had time to stop by tonight, or grab a drink after, or..." I should note that the night before Sophia gave me a blowjob and I said "Yeah, definitely. I'm in Boston right now, but..." "Oh." "Want me to text you when I...?" "No, that's fine." "You sure?"

"Yeah." "I'll text you either way." I said and she said "No that's fine. I'm at work anyway. I'll be busy later." and I imagined her sitting sadly on a wooden, high-school-locker-room-like bench nearly naked with a large phone awkwardly pressed against the side of her face, then the word "blowjob" echoed in my brain alongside a GIF-length memory of her giving me the blowjob the night before, almost as if I had completely forgotten that she gave me a blowjob the night before, almost as if I found myself in the middle of a terrible dream where I had completely forgotten the one thing I should have remembered, only remembering the one thing immediately after I'd taken a large shot of Patron and was on the precipice of vomiting on a moderately trafficked Boston sidewalk. "Ok." I said nervously thinking of things to say and she said "It's fine." "Ok." I said nervously thinking of things to say and she said "...You don't wanna get back to your friends?" "Nah." I said, sincerely in no rush to go back and hang out with Farhad and/or Solomon and she said "I feel bad." "About what?" "I don't wanna keep you from your friends..." "How're you feeling?" I said, still nervous, and unable to think of anything better to say, cursing myself for going to Boston the night after getting a blowjob, how could I have possibly been so short-sighted. "I'm fine." she said. "You mad?" "Why would I be mad?" she said. "I don't know..." "Why would I be mad?" she said. "I'm, uh, not sure. I just wanna make sure you're not...mad." I said as I kicked a small rock off of the stairway and it landed in

front of a pair of Airwalks. I looked up and saw that they were worn by a guy in a Dave Matthews Band t-shirt, and thought about how much I symbolically despised Dave Matthews Band, and how much my sister and a lot of people from our hometown in general loved them. "...You're cute." she said surprisingly and I exhaled nervously and said "Thanks." "Mmhmm." "I'm a grown man though." "That's good." she said. "I need a man." she said and I said "I'm fully grown, you know? I'm like completely done growing." "You gonna be good up there tonight?" "Of course." She didn't reply immediately, then I said "I'm not like that." "Oh, really?" "Yeah."

## Chapter 80

I felt ok. "In retrospect, maybe I should've hung around post-blowjob and waited for a call." I thought and felt uneasy, but it didn't seem healthy to just wait around like that, it seemed desperate, but also possibly heartwarming. Farhad leaned into me anxiously as I rubbed my hands together back in the bar and grabbed my beer and said "Was-that-the-stripper?" and I said "Yeah." and he said "Nice!" and Solomon said "Here." and handed me a shot of room temperature Jack Daniels, then said "Ayy, salud!" His armpits were boombox black with sweat. I again started swallowing my saliva violently after taking the shot and struggled to say "You guys need drinks?" while burping slightly, and Solomon raised his still three fourths full Corona, then nodded his head affirmatively. His hair was gelled back so thoroughly it gave off a strobe light type of glare as he bobbed his head up and down to the almost comically generic club music, I thought. I made my way to the bar and placed the order, but after I placed it I involuntarily hiccupped and accidentally vomited all over it, the bar and the order, as the bartender was placing the beers down. A guy with a flip fade haircut standing next to me cowardly ratted me out to the bouncer by pointing his thumb right at me while looking in the opposite direction as the bouncer shined his flashlight on my vomit-stained fleece, as the bartender glared in disgust at the vomit-soaked beers she just inadvertently touched. "You

wanna wash yourself off?" the bouncer, a tall and fat black guy, asked me as he escorted me out of the establishment. "Thanks, that's really nice of you, man." I said and hiccupped. "In retrospect..." I thought, as I held my hands under the warm water running from the rusty faucet, "I probably should've had some of Solomon's cheesy fries when I had the chance..." I only got about a quarter of the puke off my fleece, then we went to another bar, where I tried to pull myself together, unsuccessfully, then we drove home.

## Chapter 81

The following evening I was in the process of eating two artichokes my mom gave me while sitting on my futon while watching an episode of Kojak that I'd stumbled upon on Netflix, at a pace where pulling apart and eating both artichokes would take up the entirety of the episode, which was about forty to fifty minutes with the commercials cut out. My sister and her boyfriend had come down to visit earlier in the day, but we didn't do all that much other than go to a renovated Chinese restaurant across the street for Mai Tais, then go to another place that wasn't open yet, but since I "knew" the bartender working that day we were allowed inside to have a beer, then we called it a day. The artichokes made my hands exceptionally slimy and I could feel the face around my mouth was grotesquely slick too. When I was with my sister and her boyfriend, who I didn't usually drink with, I'd felt a little awkward at first, but increasingly euphoric as the day went on, which I supposed was just par for the course for daydrinking. Later, when eating artichokes by myself, I felt blase, elated when I got a good chunk of artichoke, and abutting depressed and lonely. After I ate I showered and went to visit Sophia before she got busy, which I hadn't planned to do, unsure of what I would do after, as I walked in and waited maybe twenty minutes until she approached me and said "How are you?" in a disaffected tone, like she barely knew me, or didn't want to know me to the extent



that she did, or didn't want to see me all that much, or I was reading too much into her tone. I said "Is everything ok?" and she said "Yeah." in a tone similarly disaffected as the one she said "How are you?" in, then we sat awkwardly for more moments than conversational silences should normally extend, then I said something aggressive and she said "Why are you being so aggressive tonight?" in a tone that was, paradoxically I thought, more friendly than her previous tones. "I should just let it go," I thought, "maybe even just say 'Have a good night.' and go home. Yup. Just recognize that it isn't a good night for either of us and cut both our losses." Instead I confessed my feelings, or confessed my feelings to an extent, feelings that I'd mostly expressed indirectly, but that I reiterated more directly, to which she didn't really confess to the same degree, or at least to the degree I'd have liked, which was probably at the time an impossible degree. Karina had told me she didn't "know how I felt" after I protested after she got engaged, which I had always assumed was a lie, but I wanted to directly confess "how I felt" to Sophia so she wouldn't have that out, but she would probably have the same out, I guessed after the fact, if she just lied like I assumed Karina did, then Sophia said "I'm gonna get busy soon..." as we both stood against a wall in the back trying to keep our voices down, but I had a disconcerting feeling that certain people were overhearing our conversation and tried to reconcile myself to that fact as I continued to speak and listen. "I know it's probably not

the right time, but I don't know...I just wanted to, uh, make sure we're on the same page, you know?" I said and she turned toward the middle of the club and said "Nick..." then trailed off, still peering into the club, which was actually getting pretty busy, then turned back to me and said "Go with your gut."

## Chapter 82

The breeze was brisk the next night, but it was still pretty nice out as we sat inside at a Nuevo Italian restaurant at about eleven pm where the kitchen closed at eleven pm. Sophia had called me two times in a row with the Blocked ID at ten thirty to tell me that she was feeling sick, that she had taken a ride to talk for a little bit, and I thought that was nice of her, Farhad was wearing sweatpants and Alfonso had just ordered seventy dollars of food, our waiter was fair skinned with reddish hair and wore the standard white collared shirt with black tie and black dress pants. He'd been homicidally pacing around the restaurant since we sat down and asked for menus. "Guys, I think wanna try the Chicken Saltimbocca..." Alfonso mused, eyes glazed, he was incredibly high, as his eyes eagerly darted up and down the menu. He waved over the waiter and said "Can I place an order of th-uhhhh...." he pointed at the cursive print menu. "...Chicken Saltimbocca?" "Do you want veal? We have some already prepped?" the waiter said and Alfonso said "Ummm...I really wanna try the chicken." and the waiter said "Sure, be right back!" and Alfonso handed him the menu, which he clenched like the edge of a cliff, then walked briskly back to the kitchen. A few moments later we heard a series of loud banging sounds and Alfonso leaned in across the booth table to us and said "I think they're pounding the chicken!" then laughed hysterically. Farhad was slowly peeling the label off of

his beer bottle and I was similarly despondent, sitting next to Farhad and across from no one, staring out in the blank space of the empty restaurant, contemplating my somewhat irrational hatred of both the phrase “Nuevo” Italian food and the actual food itself. “I’m so high!” Alfonso said and grabbed his face with both hands, then said “...Do you think I should order, like, maybe just one more thing?” “Probably not.” I said, then mouthed “Yeah, I’ll have another...” inaudibly to the waiter as he walked by, I held up my beer bottle and pointed to it with my index finger while raising my eyebrows. Alfonso noted the waiter via side-eye, smiled, then leaned in again and said “You see that girl over there?” There was only one female in the place, the bartender. “...You know who she dates?” Farhad and I said nothing. “...This sixty five year old doctor.” Alfonso said in a gossipy, fluctuating tone, then cackled extremely high pitched. She looked about thirty, I thought, and was thoroughly uninterested in both the bartender as well as the anecdote as Alfonso said “He bought her a fifteen thousand dollar handbag last Christmas!” as Farhad said “What a whore.” as the waiter said “And here’s your calamari!” and swirled the plate onto our table. Alfonso popped a few pieces into his mouth and said “Sooooo goooooood.” We ate in silence for about forty five seconds, the complimentary bread was almost all gone, and Alfonso asked if he should ask for another basket, but before I could answer “no” Farhad turned to me and said “You know how much this kid spends at Wendy’s?” then nodded toward Alfonso. I

paused with a mouthful of calamari, not fully registering that he was talking to me, and said "What?" "You know how much this kid spends at Wendy's? Every time?" he repeated. "I don't know...twenty bucks?" "Fifty dollars!" Farhad exclaimed, then exclaimed "Every time!" The sticker on Farhad's beer bottle was hanging onto the last morsels of its adhesion, and I noticed him knock his sweatpants together at the knees as he popped another calamari into his mouth. He kept his mouth wide open for about three-fourths of a second before he tossed it in. "That's fucking absurd." I said. "I wanna try all the things on the menu!" Alfonso said defensively, then cackled. "Really when you think about it..." I said as I chewed with my mouth open. "...almost every restaurant you go to has pretty decent calamari." The waiter brought out the Chicken Saltimbocca next, even though we still had a half a pie of Margherita Pizza, in addition to the calamari, on the table. His teeth were clenched together like a venus fly trap as he said "Anything else?" as Farhad and I both emphatically nodded no. Alfonso insisted we share everything he ordered that night, from the Margherita Pizza to the second basket of bread he ended up requesting to the Saltimbocca that looked like two thin chicken cutlets of pedestrian quality with an unfamiliar sauce spread on them. It all got split three ways. Farhad and I threw in a few twenties, Alfonso left a forty dollar tip, I got up to pee, then we left. Farhad paced on the street and, after a pensive moment where I felt as though he was about to ask me an anxious

question, he said "You have your phone charger on you?" "Nah." I said as he looked at his phone, visibly concerned, as a male teen ran full speed from a Subway sandwich shop across the street into a hookah bar without stopping or slowing down. "What's your percent at?" I said. He squinted at the phone, then said "Seventy two." and I said "I think you're probably good." and he said "Are we gonna be out all night you think?"

## Chapter 83

Sophia was wearing all black with the sky blue eyeshadow and said "You know I could pimp you out?" in a tone that seemed pleasing to me, and I squinted and said "Like...?" with the "i" slightly extended. She looked like a Halloween costume. I had my shirt tucked in like an asshole. I looked at my reflection in the store window and all I saw were eyebrows, I looked closer for the scar on my right one, but walked passed the window before I could see. "I don't know...to old ladies. Maybe some younger ones too." she said somewhat proudly, I thought, and I said "I'm not interested in that." and she said "Girls pay too, you know." and I said "That's good to know, but no. I don't support sex trafficking." She grabbed my hand as we descended a set of stairs and I said "Or how about this?" as I turned my head down toward her, accepting her small hand, a little rough in the palms, into mine. "How about you give me...fifteen percent of the ones you get on stage, or ten percent of the cumulative bills you get. Then I'll reconsider it." She giggled and I acted as if I was serious for another few seconds, I looked at her stone-faced and said "I'm not for sale." then giggled in a high register. "Neither am I." she said, seriously but still smiling. We walked down the stone steps and she took each one carefully, gingerly even, still holding my hand as we reached the bottom. "How's....what's his name...Farhad?" she said. "You wanna go here?" I turned my palm upward and placed

my hand out in a “voila” motion toward a small, grey-bricked Mediterranean restaurant we were rapidly approaching and she said “I don’t know...is it fancy?” Across the parking lot sat a large Staples and I said “You never see Staples anymore...” and opened the heavy wood door for her, then said “I guess we’ll see.” No one was in there except for the hostess and a few members of the waitstaff. I turned to Sophia and said “Too fancy?” She nodded, said “You knowwww meee,” and we walked out. “Sorry. Sometimes I just get nervous...” she said softly as we ascended the stairs we’d just descended. It was cool. “No worries,” I thought. We just sat in my car for a few minutes, cooled down, then headed elsewhere, headed up to the East Side of Providence. I didn’t try to kiss her or anything.



## Chapter 84

"I mean I'm not trying to..." I began. "I know." she said. "It's just, I don't know. I've been getting kind of mixed signals from..." I said. "I know." she said in a reassuring tone and smiled and I considered delving deeper into the issue, but, enriched with the benefit of not having been drinking for hours, enriched with the benefit of being more or less wholly sober, I didn't. We sat in the back of a dimly lit Greek restaurant on Bowen and Meeting as I softly, possibly considerately, sipped an overpriced espresso, she had a sugar free Red Bull en route as she said "You're pretty hairy, huh?" and nodded toward my exposed forearms, which were definitely hairier than average, I thought. "You never noticed?" I said in a surprised, skeptical but unoffended, tone. "No, I have." "Yeah. I actually used to shave my entire body, but I'm trying to go for a more authentic look of late." I said, which was true, as the demands of obsessive manscaping coupled with sheer amount of body hair I'd been endowed with had seemed to reach the point of diminishing returns in recent years. A handful of Brown University students sat down in the booth behind us, I glanced briefly behind our booth and as I turned my neck forward again noticed her lift her right index nail into the vicinity of her right nostril and said "You picking your nose?" reflexively and she immediately whipped the finger under the table, retorted "No!" then glanced, red herring-like, at the other booth, then said "I was just

scratching it. The outside of the nostril.” pointing to the outside of her opposite nostril with the hand that remained above the table. The hand that I believed she was picking her nose with remained under the table. One of the Brown kids started speaking loudly in an extremely nasal voice. “Yeah, I mean, like, collective thought isn’t interesting in isolation, per se.” he began, then I heard a pause, and thought I heard him gulp water before he continued to speak incredibly pretentiously, I thought. “Ugh...” I whispered carefully across the table. “these kids...” She sat unconcerned, not really engaging with my comment. “You don’t think they’re complete twats?” I prodded. Her face barely moved and I noticed the hue of her cheeks seem to lighten in tone and wondered what that might mean, then considered that all things had no meaning, that there was no God and life was wholly meaningless as she said “I don’t know. They’re not really bothering me, I guess...” politely as the waitress delivered her sugar free Red Bull. “Could I have a straw?” she said to the waitress and the waitress nodded, then walked away as I said “I don’t know...they’re just so pretentious, you know? So spoiled.”

## Chapter 85

Back at my apartment Sophia had her pants off, she was on my bed, I was on my bed too, I took my pants off too. "I can't." she said as we were slowly and sensually kissing one another without an overabundance of tongue interaction, without any excessive, sloppy saliva, she was straddled on top of me. "I shouldn't." she said as her buttocks hugged my erect penis like I imagined a grandmother would a newborn baby. "He'll know." she said, I felt a little cramping in my legs and noted to myself that the last game of half court three on three basketball I played outside that morning was probably superfluous. "Relax." I cupped her ass with both palms. "We don't have to do anything..." "You haven't fucked anyone lately, have you?" she said. "Nah." "No. Seriously." She tried to catapult herself backwards and exclaimed "Nick!" as I tried to grab her as she lost control of her body, catapulting herself backwards, speeding in the direction of the dusty wood floor, I pulled her up with my forearms rubbing against her torso and said "Definitely not!" in reference to having sex of late, in a grunt-like but sincere tone, and as she slid back onto me I felt what felt like the tip of the head of my penis begin to press into a lightly lubricated hole and she said "Ow! Ow! That's my ass!" shifting around glitch-like as the light cramping in my legs suddenly became acute in my right thigh and I screamed "Ow!" more loudly than she was screaming "Ow!" She lifted her ass up off the

most northern tip of my penis via her knees, both of which pressed into my thighs, and said "What is it?" in a more insouciant tone than I had expected. "Ahhhhh, my thigh!" I said, straightening my right leg as straight as I possibly could, as she turned around to look back at it, as the muscle continued to tighten. "Ahhhhh!" I continued to scream, simultaneously thrusting my hands down to grab the thigh and catapulting my head backward in pain. Sophia hopped off me as I squirmed around portentously, naked on my bed, my erection deflating like a lightly punctured birthday balloon. "Ahhhhh!" I screamed in agony and she said "Oh my god, what happened?!" now seeming sincerely curious and urgent, cupping her hands around her mouth as I said "Ah-I think I played basketball for too long! ...My muscle! ...It's all...tightened up!" "Oh my god-where? You never told me you played, what? In a league?" she said apologetically, then said "You didn't have to hang out if you just had a game, I feel bad." "No-no," I was still clenching my thigh with all of my strength, with both hands as I said "ahhhh-I just play streetball. Down the street...with some-ahhhh-high school kids!" The muscle felt hard as cement as I gripped it, it felt like it'd turned itself upside down inside of my leg and I said "Feel this!" and Sophia approached gingerly, she still had no pants on, and I contorted my neck awkwardly and caught a glance of her naked thighs. She put one finger on my thigh and said "Ooh, that's hard. Are you gonna have to go to the hospital?" "Just get me a warm

washcloth...please.” She turned around and jogged five feet to the kitchen and said “Where are the cloths?” “That cabinet.” I said, making eye contact with her, then nodding to the cabinet with the top of my head. “This one?” She opened the wrong one. “No.” I nodded again. “The one to the...west of it.” I said and loosened the grip on my thigh slightly. “This?” she said, her voice meekly raising in pitch as she stood next to the cabinet where I kept my Williams-Sonoma set of pots and pans. “No. Ahhhhhh.” I clenched my thigh tighter again and said “The one to the...left.” She moved her ass back three feet, no underwear, opened the correct cabinet, grabbed a cloth, ran the faucet until the water got hot, put the cloth under the hot water, then pranced over with the hot washcloth and dropped it on my thigh. “Uhhhhhhhhh yeahhh...that’s the spot.” I exhaled orgasmically as the cloth made contact with my still rock hard thigh, abutting my still increasingly flaccid penis. Within a few minutes the warm cloth began to loosen the muscle, I’d need two more before I could walk around the apartment again. “Phew.” I’d finally exhale joyously, finally walking around my apartment, still completely naked, and finally say “That was a close one.” genuinely relieved.

## Chapter 86

“Have you ever been tested?” she said softly but snarkily a few days later, almost a week later, after we’d been hanging out for about a half hour, as I was playing a song by an artist named oOoOO that I prefaced by saying “this is really weird, electronic, stuff, but I like it,” and had finally put the pieces together, the mysterious “thing” she was doing the few times she said had an “appointment” before we met up. It was laser hair removal. She wouldn’t tell me where though. I was in my phone’s notepad jotting down a few ancillary items on my grocery list, my eyes meandered up, and I said “Like for STDs?” “Yeah. Have you ever?” “Yeah, of course. I had a urethral infection called called ‘Urethritis’ when I was twenty one, which was the only time I’ve ever had any sort of infection in my penis.” I said as I put the phone down, then said “And even that, I’m pretty sure, was just from jerking...” I lowered the register of my voice and involuntarily cleared my throat, silently admitting to myself that I hadn’t meant to begin the sentence that I had begun, then begrudgingly said “...off into a sock repeatedly.” and trailed off looking away from Sophia out of the driver’s side window. “Well, I knew I was good.” she said. “I haven’t been with anyone, but” she paused for a beat “you can never been too careful...” then her voice rose into a squeaky, childlike register as she said “I can’t be fucking around.” and the squeaky register undercut the serious intentions of the comment,

I thought. She seemed confident, too confident to be lying, I thought at the time, then, as a wave of anxiety began to take shape in my consciousness, thought “She seemed like she was a little ambivalent when we were naked on my bed, no?” remembering the ambivalence in a similar manner to the blowjob I remembered while talking to her on the phone in Boston, then thought “But is the tip of a penis accidentally brushing, perhaps just slightly, barely, penetrating an anus technically sex?” then she said “My ass hurt for like three days after, by the way.” with her right hand floating capriciously like the breeze was guiding it as it guided her speech. “I snuck in and went up to my brother’s for the weekend with my son...” she said, her briefly exposed eyelids gave off a decent amount of shame as she said “Thank god he didn’t wanna come.” I apologized somewhat profusely by saying things like “I really, sincerely, thought I was just trying to keep you from, uh...” and “I saw you falling down.” and “To be fair, my leg was all cramped up.” and “In no way, shape, or form do I want to have sex with you, or anyone else, non-consensually.” and she nodded perturbed, I thought, but overall seemed understanding and assuaged my concerns. “...Did it even go in?” I said after a moment of silence and her face turned incredulous and I furrowed my brow as her head began to seesaw and said “Just for the record, I’m not that promiscuous either.” The evening air was dense and getting denser in proportion to the daylight fading out and I made an attempt for eye contact and said “You

don't have to believe me..." "No promises." she said. "I was a virgin until I was twenty, if that helps corroborate..." I said. "We'll figure it out." "Go with your gut." I checked my phone and involuntarily imagined her having sex other men, I tried to train myself not to care, we got out my car and stood in silence for a minute, both unsure of what it was we were going to do with the day, if anything, and I thought that if she harbored any resentment, regrets, fear, anxiety, frustration? emotion? then she hid it well. Because at the time all I seemed to infer was a vague sense of fatigue.



## Chapter 87

"If you did all of this then left I'd fucking murder you." she said after I said "What do you think I'm doing all of this and I'm not serious?" I thought for sure the night before when I thought I heard a subtle knock at my door that her husband had found out where I lived. I didn't answer the door and didn't even check the peephole for twenty minutes just in case he was gonna wait until I looked through it, then once he saw an eye in the peephole, stick some kind of thin sword through the hole to stab me through the eye, into my brain, and kill me instantly like in the movies. I didn't sleep well. I was used to occasionally having disturbing nightmares, when I was sixteen I'd dreamt my grandparents were chopped up on the couches of my childhood home and I walked in the living room and said "Oh, you're here!" enthusiastically, to the chopped up corpses of my grandparents that now made up the couch cushions in my childhood living room, but Sophia had been making a concerning amount of appearances in my dreams of late, I thought. In reality, I'd inadvertently seen her leave an elevator at the club with really disheveled hair the other night and thought "was she just fucking?" emotionally, then thought "her job is dancing though..." rationally, then thought "the way this arrangement is currently constructed, it will do you no good to give undue concern to things like this" pretentiously, but was still upset. I grilled her a little about the disheveled hair and she paused, mixing a

drink with the straw that it came with, somewhat perturbed, then said "...I'm married." At a wedding the next week I had oral and vaginal sex with a girl whose name I didn't catch after she physically pushed me against a wall in the Motel 6 I'd booked with my friend, then shoved a few morsels of cocaine up my nose with one of those little metal things people in movies use to snort small amounts of cocaine, then we had sex until said friend knocked at the door repeatedly while eating a fun size bag of Fritos, sincerely yearning to go to bed. I was most likely willing to have sex with the girl before the cocaine, granted I was extremely inebriated, off of just alcohol at the time, and we snorted more cocaine out of a dollar bill later on in the motel room, in pictures she looked kind of like a young Cher, or what I imagined Cher looked like when she was younger, recalling one photo of Cher with Sonny Bono I thought I remembered seeing when I was in my teens, and the next morning I noticed she'd put her number in my phone before she left the room. I never texted her and could occasionally hear echoes of her faintly throwing dirt on my name in the distance, usually when I took the time to ruminate on things I felt I should regret to different degrees.

## Chapter 88

Maybe somewhat intentionally I told Sophia about Samantha from UMass a few nights later, I said "You know, when I first saw you I thought you were this girl I had a major crush on in college? She dated some dude who I thought looked like me..." "You were better looking though, right?" she said, not interrupting as much as taking shrewd advantage of a natural pause in the anecdote, smiling and leaning into me in a way that displayed earnest interest in my story. "Obviously." I said in a stern tone, then went on in a more normalized register. "She was Costa Rican though. Maybe it's because you used to hang out with so many Spanish girls..." I said and then thought about saying something like "stylistically, I mean, not saying that you could physically transform from hanging around Spanish girls, obviously that's totally ridiculous, plus the girl Samantha wasn't even stereotypically 'Spanish', not that I even know what stereotypically 'Spanish' means, so I don't even know what I'm talking about," but didn't and she said "Well, I don't wanna be a rebound!" laughing, but also seeming genuinely concerned. I shook my head and pedantically said that, firstly, she was the one married, so wouldn't I be the rebound? And, secondly, I never dated the girl from college, so I was pretty sure that, technically, she couldn't be a rebound on a girl I never had sex with or dated. "Whatever. You know what I mean." she said. "Yeah, whatevuh." I said sarcastically

and nudged her shoulder with my shoulder. "More so than her ethnicity, it's like...she wasn't even a midget, so I don't know what I was thinking comparing you two. She was, like, you know, a normal sized human being." I said and Sophia said "Shut up!" and nudged me back harder than I nudged her. Later that night, I went over Farhad's mom's house and stared at one of his mom's cats drunkenly and thought about how odd it was that species have instincts as the cat looked at me, then licked its leg, which seemed really deep at the time. "Like, how do all cats just instinctively know to clean themselves with their tongues?" I said to Farhad as we cooked two hot dogs on his mom's frying pan at two am, then ate the hot dogs on single pieces of toasted white bread.

## Chapter 89

"What did Alfonso get a new number again?" I said as I stared at a text convo that I'd sent read only "Hi Alfonso" with no reply from three days ago, three days ago when I was philosophically staring at Farhad's mom's cats and we were grilling hot dogs on frying pans, as Farhad stroked his beard as he fiddled with a shoelace on his industrial looking black boot. "Yeah his boyfriend's wife got the new number again." he said. "The cop? Again?" I said, somewhat stupidly I thought, given the specificity of Alfonso's imbroglio. "Yeah. She called him fifty seven times Wednesday night. Not even kidding. Fifty seven times!" he added an extra syllable to "times," "tie-ims!" he said, then said "Left a voicemail threatening to pop his cherry or some shit, I don't even know, it sounds like it's pretty serious though..." I boldly, selfishly, let out a silent fart and hoped it didn't smell as I said "Oh. Well, he told me last week he had these coupons for tex mex, and I was supposed to pick them up from him tonight. I was gonna get a burrito there for dinner, and was kind of hoping to, you know, use those coupons..." and trailed off kind of desperately, exceptionally hungry. I thought I saw Farhad sniffle a little, but he didn't confront me or ask any questions regarding any specific scents in my apartment. Sophia's husband was officially out of prison, he'd been back living with her and his mother for the past week and she told me they had sex for the first time the other night. "It'd been so long I'm not gonna lie...it felt

amazing.” she said. “That’s nice.” I said, appreciating her honesty, but not feeling great, but also recalling having oral and vaginal sex at the wedding and feeling as though I needed to respect the non-exclusivity that was a precondition of our relationship, but also feeling terrible, almost as though someone was in the process of prying open my stomach with their bare hands, but also respecting her honesty. “No, I don’t feel like I’m a moral authority,” I explained to Farhad in an uncharacteristically philosophical, somewhat forced register. “but, at the same time, what the fuck?” “What the fuck what?” he said, I thought skeptically, as we walked gingerly down the poorly built steps from my apartment building and I said, Vera had told Farhad what I told her at the bar the other night, I said “Listen. I’m not the Pope. I’m not Mother Teresa. I’m not claiming to be a moral authority or anything like that. But I’m also not a junkie. I’m not getting shot up at inopportune times! Maybe this is actually my duty...to, like, nudge her in the quote unquote right direction.” We both reached the bottom of the stairs gingerly and, as I checked my mailbox, I wondered if Farhad was intuiting the lack of confidence I felt behind my words, as I sifted through a few sushi coupons while I waited for a response then said “I’m just throwing it out there.”

## Chapter 90

She told me she watched the same VHS porno every time she whacked off, that it was a double penetration old school tape and from the way she described it it sounded 80s-era, possibly late-90s Jenna Jameson-era, but that would be at the latest, I thought. "But the girl looked like she really enjoyed it. It wasn't fake like some others I've seen." she said. "You whack off to a videotape? The same one? Over and over?" I said and she said "Well, I have to be careful because I can only do it at specific times. And I have to be quick..." then I pulled out my phone and went to the @mostlyblowjobs account on twitter and started scrolling through the pictures and GIFs posted hourly, sometimes even more frequently than that, I thought, while displaying the phone over my shoulder. "Where do you find that stuff?" she asked as she hesitantly touched the screen to expand one of the images. "The internet." I said, then said "It's like eighty five percent porn." and she looked at me wide-eyed, then back at the phone as a run-of-the-mill double blowjob GIF repeatedly itself infinitely. "No, seriously." I continued. "They've done studies. It is." I gave her a few sites to check out, but she started watching full scenes, talking to me about how she only had time to watch one video, sometimes not even. "What do you mean?" I'd say and she'd say "It was like half an hour." and I'd say "Huh? Just skim to the good parts. Like the cumshots, or the nutlicks. Junctures

of that nature.” perplexed, almost in disbelief, that a girl who stripped for a living barely knew the first thing about watching porn. “Who doesn’t fast forward porn, is this some kind of joke?” I thought. But, yet again, I found myself making assumptions about her character based solely on what she did for a living, I thought, but then again, I thought, if someone assumed that I was “good at math” or something equivalent because I worked in accounting I guessed I wouldn’t be that offended, so maybe it wasn’t that bad, but she did seem like a genuinely innocent person in a lot of ways, it wasn’t like we just met, why was I always questioning her character, in disbelief with regard to her character? “Oh, she must know how to fast forward porn!” was the assumption I was making, but was that a fair assumption to make? But, then again, some of the things we’d done sexually were fairly deviant, which I appreciated, but those deviant acts possibly lent merit to my skepticism, I thought. She said she preferred to get emotionally invested in the scenes and I thought about nothing for a few seconds, then, without thinking, said “How do you usually do it? ...If you don’t mind me asking...I mean,” and shrugged once meekly, then said “I think we’re on close enough terms now, right?” and she tilted her head at an angle, somewhat skeptically, and seemed to contemplate the question or possibly just me in general and said “I have a vibrator.” stoically. “Cool.” I said. “...And a small dildo. If I do it right I can squirt. Well...” She hesitated, then said “Yeah. I can squirt.” and I said



"Sometimes I use Vaseline." We were drinking iced coffee again, she wore one of the three necklaces she normally wore to cover up scar on her chest, she didn't have the sky blue contacts in, and her eyes were noticeably brown. "You have to be extra careful now." she said. she wasn't drinking the iced coffee, she was reiterating to me that her husband was now living with her and their son and his mother in a three story house, with other relatives living on other floors. "He's good with computers. So, if anyone reaches out to you...saying it's me? Don't answer." I nodded and took a sip of my iced coffee, I felt dainty sipping out of the straw for some reason, I missed my mouth with the straw on the my first attempt, and noted that I never seemed to genuinely enjoy iced coffee unless I made it myself. "I'm telling you now." she said, then said "I won't reach out to you." and I said "Roger that." and she said. "This isn't a game!" she snapped and I thrust my skull backward until I hit it on the headrest, then said "No," rubbed the back of my head for a second, then said "you're right." Her eyelashes flickered up and down like a lightbulb on its last legs as she glared at me. "You could probably die because of this shit." I thought to myself and imagined a gunshot to my gut, me keeled over and dying a slow, painful death on a linoleum floor somewhere, thinking, keeled over, thinking "Was it worth it?" then thinking "Eh, possibly, but, ughhhh," then collapsing on the floor and dying an arduously slow death. "Things don't always go in straight lines." I said and pulled up a chart of a stock,

possibly Apple (AAPL), but it also could have been a chart of the US Treasury Note's 10 Year Yield, on my phone, on the stock app. I didn't personally invest in its shares or follow its stock price, or buy or sell its derivatives if it was the 10 Year Yield, but still went on to say "It's like...things zig..." I pointed to a line with my index finger. "and...zag." then pointed to another line. She didn't seem impressed, but at the same time seemed as though she may have appreciated the effort as she gazed out, up on top of the plaza, above the laser hair removal locale. "It would probably be really cool to live in one of those apartments up there." she said. I leaned into her and stared upward and she said "You think those are condos?" "Yeah." I said, squinting, my outer elbow sat on top of her inner elbow. "They definitely are, I think. I don't know. Maybe someday." "But I'm a mother first." she said as she opened the car door, then said "I'm not some bougie chick, so if that's what you want..."

## Chapter 91

The next day Sophia texted me “Hi” then Farhad texted me “Hi” and I screenshotted the two texts, one above the other, and sent the picture to Sophia and typed “look at farhad lol” then I laughed out loud to myself, then typed “what a bitch” as I continued to laugh to myself, then began to think that screenshooting the texts and sending them to a girl may have actually been the bigger bitch move of the two and slightly regretted sending the text. We were gonna meet up later that afternoon and I felt slightly worried, more worried than I normally felt, that she would bail on the meeting because although things had been heating up, overall going well and “progressing,” she called her husband her “ex” by accident the other night, she lamented not being able to “hang out” a few nights before that, there was an subsequent, increasingly volatile, ebb and flow due to the increased intensity, like the AAPL/10YY chart I had showed her, except the zigging and zagging seemed to be bother me more than it bothered her, but it clearly bothered us both deeply and it seemed likely that at some point one or both of us would bow out of the whole thing unless things broke one way or the other soon. I’d been feeling increasingly bothered, it may have been gnawing at me incessantly, by the other Nick, or, more specifically, Sophia’s reluctance to reconcile how she felt about the other Nick as a potential father figure with the real life actions of the other Nick, or at least what I knew

of the real life actions. I'd told her, consciously overstepping my bounds, that the risk of staying with a person who was inconsiderate enough to get shot when he had an infant child was incomprehensible to me. "Yes, on some level," I said. "Maybe I'm burying it deep down or just insincerely avoiding the issue, but, yes, on some level, I'm speaking out of self-interest, given that I've professed feelings for you, to an extent. But, even if you have no interest in 'being with me,' and you have every reason to be skeptical of me, I agree, but I don't see how you can continue to have your son around this person and honestly believe you have your son's best interests in mind. Because, the more I think about it, and I'm not gonna lie, I've lost sleep over thinking that this guy's gonna come find me and attempt to stab and/or shoot me, but the more I think of it...more than anything, he's just incompetent. And I'm not afraid to say that, that any person who gets shot, then becomes substance dependent, then gets himself and his son's mother arrested because of said abuse, is just incompetent at whatever it is he's trying to accomplish. I'm not even trying to take a moral stance here, I'm speaking primarily from a utilitarian point of view right now, I think. Plus, heroin is, like, the most addictive drug that exists. Plus, he's white. Every prejudicial structure in the country has been constructed to help him not be dumb, have they not? And that's not to contrast me as 'competent,' because I'm not saying I am, I'll readily admit that, in many ways, I'm a total bum, that's fair, but I am saying

that if you're just hoping that this type of stupidity won't rear its head again, that it couldn't come back and do serious harm to you or your son, that it's not likely to rear its head again at some point in the future, then I just think you're taking an irresponsibly large risk, in my opinion. Some kid up the street from me just got killed, because some drug dealer or something targeted him and broke into his home, then his mother got shot in the jaw and had her finger bit off! You say all you care about is your son, that you'd leave the other Nick except for your son, but I would argue the contrary, that if all you care about is your son, then you should leave the other Nick for the sake of your son. And I apologize for saying all of that. I'm sorry." and somewhat to my surprise, she said "You're right. I mean, I can't say you're wrong..." but, realistically, at that point, even though I appreciated the reply, it was a neutered consensus, and we were both aware that it was a neutered consensus, any catharsis was truncated, it was a neutered consensus.

## Chapter 92

I'd just left the gym with Vera and as we exited the CVS across the street made me think I should probably have some lube in my apartment. "Bye Vera." I said. "Oh, Nick..." she said inquisitively, she had a side ponytail and held a large plastic refillable water bottle with her left hand on her hip, held above her capri black spandex pants and Puma cross trainers. "I forgot to ask you-" "What's up?" I stood upright in the middle of the parking lot, seven or so feet from where she stood on the sidewalk. Glancing briefly to my left, I thought I saw Wu, the manager from Sophia's club, allegedly the only person that knew her backstory at the club, leave the gym. His hair was disheveled for the first time, that I'd seen him at least, and he wore a white headband. I side-nodded toward him, but he either didn't see me, or purposefully didn't acknowledge me, or I mistook him for someone else, and I wondered, if he purposefully didn't acknowledge me, if it had anything to do with him feeling as though I was stand-offish when we met, as I was admittedly a little reticent to be what would I define as "overly friendly," but could also imagine that stance reasonably being misinterpreted as "stand-offish," then Vera said "Where did you get that trail mix we were eating the other day?" as a car drove through the lot, not necessarily toward the open parking spot I stood in, but I took a few steps toward the sidewalk anyway. "You mean the Trader Joe's one?" I said and she said "Was

that it?" "The one with the almonds, cashews, and pistachios?" "Yeahhh." she said, I thought I noticed her lick her lips quickly as her eyes widened. "Yeah that was the Trader Joe's one." I said. At that point I'd walked over to the sidewalk because I remembered that I'd actually parked next to Vera in the side lot, not in any of the parking spots in front of the gym, and we started walking together and I said "They have the best trail mix." She agreed, then I drove my car across the street into the CVS parking lot and entered the automatic doors that creased into three folds as they automatically opened, so it felt like they might whack you in the shoulder if you walked through them too quickly. First, I went to the "Shampoo & Lotion" aisle and noticed some petroleum jelly. I considered the petroleum jelly for a moment, but then made a decision to go to the "Feminine Hygiene" aisle before finalizing any decision, just to make sure, and found, squished between some Vagisil and a CVS Brand yeast ointment, two different bottles of KY Jelly. They both seemed more apropos for vaginal and/or anal intercourse than petroleum jelly, and I went with the orange one, the "warm gel." I walked up to the checkout line as a raspy voiced older lady with pink highlights in her hair, with matching pink low top sneakers and a cheek stud ring, had jetted in through the three-crease automatic doors right as I approached the register. She said she wanted a retroactive discount for a coupon she forgot to use fifteen minutes earlier. "Yeah, I was juss heeuhh..." she raspily corroborated.

"Truly, there's nothing worse in this world than a person who wants to use a coupon retroactively." I thought. "These people, the people who try and use coupons retroactively, born into different conditions, are the same people who become genocidal dictators." I thought, holding my orange bottle of KY Jelly in the palm of my hand, standing in line. In addition, the other cashier's shift had just ended, so that cashier was now standing diagonally in front of me, and the remaining cashier behind the register apparently needed to check that cashier's bag before dealing with pink highlights. "When you working next?" the one cashier said to the other as she rummaged through her purse. "Well, I'm off tomarroh, then I'm here Thursday...I think ten to four? And then Friday at...some time...?" She shrugged, then laughed hoarsely, they were both dark haired Caucasian females, fairly overweight, shorter hair, could have been distant cousins. "Ahhh, I'm here tomarroh, but off Tursday. But I'll be here closing Friday, fou-ah to ten!" "Ok, I'll see you den!" she said and kept her bag open for a second after the other cashier finished rummaging through it, then said "...I'm-good?" "Of couhise!" The other cashier said, waving her out of the store. A senior citizen lady with short curly white hair, with a bonnet type 1920s hat, holding a quart of two percent milk in her arms like an infant, now stood behind me with her husband, a slight, old white man with a side part and very wrinkly skin. I held the KY Jelly close to my hip and suddenly became acutely cognisant of the thick black



mustache I'd been growing for the past week or so. Pink highlights only took a minute or two and, thankfully, when I finally approached the register, the cashier was discreet, she put the Jelly under the counter, out of the general public's periphery, until I pulled out my card, then threw it in the CVS branded plastic bag before attempting to make any serious small talk. I nodded appreciatively as the sale was consummated and nearly bumped my shoulder on the three-crease automatic doors on my way out.

## Chapter 93

Alfonso was displaying a video of himself performing fellatio for an intended audience of myself and Vera, as Vera had vaguely alluded to the existence of the video a few minutes earlier, and Alfonso overheard her, then pulled out the video as we sat at a cigar bar where none of us were smoking cigars. "Look at this!" Alfonso said as he turned the phone in our direction. Farhad peered over curiously, then, once he registered what the video displayed, said "Ugh, put that shit away!" but Alfonso just pointed at the screen and said "Look at your boy!" to Farhad, then laughed and leaned into me and Vera and whispered. "He's a carpenter...married. Ten inches!" Internet porn ultimately ruins you for gonzo endeavors like Alfonso's, but it was good for him. But then you look at the carpenter with the ten inch penis...there's a guy with a steady job, probably unionized, good penis, why lie to yourself? "So this guy, he just let's you suck his cock and that's it?" I said. Alfonso paused and looked at me, his eyebrows lifted in a synchronized fashion, and he said "Yeah." then I nodded my head neutrally. "You'd be surprised how many guys are out there like that." he said, and I registered the comment, then motioned to the Portuguese bartender for another beer, then said "Where you wanna go next?" as I took a sip out of my new beer and said "I feel like I'm starting to smell like cigarettes." A minute or so later the bartender left the bar and meandered to the back, presumably to restock select

liquor and/or beer, I thought, after we paid our tab and Farhad gazed over the bar, then picked up an unopened wine bottle, untwisted the cap, and drizzled a few ounces down his throat. "Are there cameras in here?" I said, genuinely concerned, watching him intently as he drizzled a few ounces of stolen wine down his throat, but also partially looking over the bar to see if the bartender was coming back. "I don't give a fuck." he said, then burped, then noticed a few drops of wine dribbled on his scarf and sighed deeply. Alfonso stroked his closely cropped black beard and critiqued Farhad's beard length. Farhad glanced at his phone quizzically and said "It's midnight already?" I got up from my stool and said "I need to start making more smoothies." as I stretched all four of my limbs and said "I need to be healthier." Alfonso leaned in toward me, he'd put his phone away. "You have a Ninja, right?" referencing the blender I'd recently informed him about receiving as a gift. "Yeah." I said. "You have any fruit?" he said. "I have an apple, but I think it's rotten." I said and he said "Doesn't matter!" then grabbed my shoulders and said "Throw it in!" I pulled back homophobically, the tips of his fingers still just barely brushed against my shoulder blades, then I said "Even with the stem and the seeds?" "And everything! Doesn't matter!" He clapped his hands together and said "Smoothie!" "Let's go across the street." Farhad interjected. He turned to me and said "You know Brooke?" "Ummmm, I don't think so?" I said in a flummoxed register, feeling overwhelming sure that I

either had no interest in seeing Brooke or genuinely didn't know who she was. "She used to work over there. I wonder if she still does..." he said in a ponderous type of tone that also struck me as overly effusive, then grabbed what was left of my beer from the counter, nodded in a "You done with this?" type of way to me, to which I nodded yes, then he finished the beer in a gulp or two. "You know Janet?" he asked rhetorically as he placed the beer back down on the counter, as the bartender emerged from the back, as we both awkwardly avoided eye contact with said bartender, as the now open wine bottle stood unassumingly among a cluster of unopened wine bottles. "Yeah, of course." I said, immediately recalling, five years earlier, Farhad whispering to me that "I would pay two hundred dollars, at least two hundred dollars. just to see her [Janet's] tits naked, just from the waist up, I don't even care." as we sat at her old bar, and I recalled myself agreeing with the proclamation, somewhat hesitantly, in a soft nod while glancing over at Janet as she poured a beer behind the bar. "She looks like Janet." he said.

## Chapter 94

“Yeah, I have a friend like that. Alfonso...” I shook my head disdainfully. “Kid puckers his lips and checks his reflection in his phone every half hour whenever we go out.” I said and put my phone in front of my face, made eye contact with my reflection, then puckered my lips in an exaggerated fashion. “Ughh. I ha-a-a-te that!” she said, joyously agreeing with me that Alfonso’s narcissism was off putting. We were downtown at a bar that was renovated from the Rhode Island Federal Reserve building to a hotel/bar type establishment, it had hired a jazz band to play subpar renditions of songs that were popular forty years ago at a very loud decibel on the “stage,” as a variety of authentic Caucasians dressed importantly throughout the venue. Through some permutation of smalltalk, Sophia started speaking briefly with the bartender about her “investments” while ordering drinks, this time for her and I both, which was nice, I thought. On a few previous occasions she’d offered to buy drinks, but I had always rebuked the offer, even though I felt like I was consistently spending more than I wanted to, and also more than I could afford, on drinks. It wasn’t a great situation for me financially. She told the bartender her month to month cash flow was constrained, mostly because her sister had two kids, one of whom was autistic, and beyond the government aid that covered her fixed expenses was financially dependent on her, and also because her father also

needed influxes of cash occasionally, but she didn't mention all of that to the bartender, she just said her month to month cash flow was constrained, but not in those words either, she said "I don't know if I could afford life insurance right now, but thanks." after the bartender said he sold insurance on the side, clearly trying to do legitimately anything within his means to prolong the conversation. I shook my head somewhat condescendingly as she handed me my vodka and seltzer with a lemon, then politely excused herself to the bathroom. Sasha was with us and she turned to me and, unsolicitedly but kindly, told me that Sophia would mention me a lot on their rides home, she mentioned it in a tone that was kind-hearted, but also in a way that suggested she was sick of hearing about me. "About me?" I shrugged in a manufactured falsetto, then said "Well, if she feels that way then why is it like pulling teeth to get a text from her sometimes?" feeling open to a conversation with Sasha about where Sophia and I were "at" while Sophia was peeing, but then thought that having someone murdered in front of you, then having the gun pointed at you after the person was murdered in front of you by the person you had been dating for the past few years, all when you were only eighteen years old, could reasonably cause you to be irrationally cautious when it came to love later in life, but still felt somewhat agitated that I was consistently more expedient in our correspondence than she was, timeliness was a pet peeve of mine that I found hard to

control at times. Sasha's disdain for me as a concept seemed to wane slightly as we continued to speak, in place of the disdain was a type of sincerity, the level of which I was unsure of, as she said "That's just how she is. She's not easy..." She looked at my drink curiously, then said "but she's one of the realest people I've ever met." About fifteen minutes later Farhad was conversing with Sasha in the corner of the bar. He'd asked me if Sophia had any friends, and I told him Sasha would "probably be out," but I wasn't sure if she was single, to which he said he'd "definitely meet up." They looked like they were quasi-snuggling when I glanced over, as his hand was definitely on her thigh and she leaned in until her nose abutted the bottom of his beard for a second, but I'd later find out that he was just asking her to confirm if he had small lump on the side of his neck, apparently he was worried he had cancer. Eventually, they came back over to the bar and we moved to a table right next to the bar. Farhad was wearing a red Transformers, flat-brimmed hat with a matching red hoodie and Doc Martins, and I thought he looked absurdly Blood-like, save for the Doc Martins, in my opinion he had no business wearing that much red at one time. I sat across from Sophia and next to Farhad, Farhad waved over the waitress and ordered me two four dollar Dirty Vodka Martinis after I said I'd probably be amenable to, "like, one more drink." "That's right motherfucker." he said as he leaned toward my ear with his beer clutched in hand "You're drinking two!" His

register lowered, the poorly performed jazz was still being played at a decent decibel, Sophia was fucking around around her phone, the phone obscured the majority of her face, Sasha was looking through her purse, and he said "I think..." he leaned in a half inch closer. "you might have a threesome possibility here. And..." he paused dramatically, then said "I think you should pursue it." I smirked genuinely then grimaced reflexively as I glanced diagonally and saw Sasha's eyes rise from whatever she was doing in her purse and, as our eye contact registered, began to panic. "You know...I heard what you just said, right?" Sasha said in a clarifying, but not totally upset, tone, I thought, as Farhad and I looked at each other, then I looked straight ahead, trying to avoid making unavoidable eye contact with the people sitting at the same table I sat at, as Sophia's eyes peeked over the top of her phone and she said "Yeah..." then glanced at Sasha, then back at Farhad and I, then shook her head disapprovingly, but not totally upset, and said "I heard it, too."



## Chapter 95

Todd was friends with Tara, the girl Farhad had been seeing. "Todd and Tara, it has a ring to it!" I'd overhear him note later on in the night, over my shoulder as I started strumming an air guitar solo standing next to Farhad with my back to the bar, wholly aware that a friend was standing adjacent and filming me with the explicit intent of posting it on social media, wholly aware that the next day I'd text him "Hey, can u send me that video u took of me playing the air guitar lol" then save the video to my phone. Todd was a thirty seven year old lawyer that Vera met online, they went on a date and Todd tried to kiss her and she declined, but through Todd Vera met Tara and Tara and Vera bonded over a shared interest in California Kush, and Vera introduced Tara to Farhad. Tara confided in me, unsolicitedly, on a previous occasion that "My friend Todd has been constantly telling me...he, like, thinks Farhad is just trying to fuck me. That he like doesn't even care about me." then sighed and I shrugged politely, not necessarily disagreeing with Todd's assessment of Farhad. "He's just sooooo in the friend zone." she said, in reference to Todd not Farhad. Todd would walk into the renovated trailer bar that maintained a potent, omnipresent odor of hemp and tater tots wearing possibly the most yuppie outfit possible: a Dave Matthews Band bent brim hat, a navy blue sweater over a collared shirt, khaki pants to confirm white collar job, and creme brulee boat shoes. Farhad

had officially filed for divorce and Alfonso, who was unable to make the party last minute, decided to throw him a celebration to boost his spirits, to celebrate Farhad finally “moving forward.” “I’m having a Mule!” he exclaimed in the middle of a crowd in his lumberjack flannel, as the Gucci eye glasses on his face waddled up and down, as he was wide-eyed with glee, as he yelled over the bar “Yes. A Moscow Mule please!” I drove over with Solomon, I’d considered asking Sophia to come, but thought better of it, or I mentioned it to her as an event I would ask her to, but verbally confirmed that I’d thought better of verbally asking her. About a half hour after we showed up I saw Todd and Tara walk in, it was right as I was exiting the bathroom, but they were surrounded by a dense crowd at the door, so I figured I’d delay my hello until we were all in the same vicinity, plus at that juncture I had no idea who Todd even was or what he looked like, I didn’t know if Tara had possibly been in the bar by coincidence, with maybe a guy who no one knew, who Farhad maybe didn’t know she was seeing. “You didn’t say ‘hi’ to me when you saw me walk in?” Tara said to me, the first thing she said to me as soon as we were in the same general vicinity, she said “You didn’t say ‘hi’ to me when you saw me walk in?” in place of more traditional greetings such as “Great to see you again, Nick.” or “Hi, how are you?” and I said “I tried to make eye contact with you, but you glanced away. Plus there was a crowd at the door...” pensively and she said “You’re full of shit!” laughing slightly, but still fairly sincere

about the accusation, I thought, and I said “Well, I’m saying hi to now, let’s say hi to each other now, is that okay?” and we both said “Hi” to one another, then Solomon nudged me and I turned around, fairly gleeful for the opportunity to turn around, as he said “Hey, just out of curiosity, I was talking about this with Farhad, who do you think’s better, Miguel or Adam?” and I paused before replying, allowing the question to fully register. Every Thursday night we played basketball at a middle school in Johnston, and I quickly realized that Solomon seemed to be implying that I was the third best player, or possibly even the fourth or fifth best player in the game. I strongly considered quitting the game right there as I suddenly felt strongly that I was at the very least in the conversation for a three-way tie with Miguel and Adam, I felt both disrespected and hurt, but also felt as though it would be rude to make a scene about a pickup basketball game and potentially ruin the night by potentially making a scene. “This night is about celebrating Farhad’s divorce.” I thought reassuringly and began an honest attempt to diffuse my agitation. As I unenthusiastically replied “Probably Miguel, I guess.” to Solomon, behind us I overheard a skinny young kid with dark hair and a confident posture, wearing oversized eyeglasses, in the midst of having a minor argument with the bartender. “Where’s the receipt?” the bartender asked. “...Which one?” the young kid said. “The one I keep!” “Uhhhh...” The kid said he threw it in the trash and the bartender seemed thoroughly fed up, she looked

a little like a shorter Pam Grier, Jackie Brown era, I thought, and wore a muted white v-neck t-shirt and slightly ripped blue jeans. I stepped up to the bar and said "Fuckin kids, right?" She nodded unenthusiastically and I said "I'll have a Miller Lite please." It was a Tuesday night, Trivia Night, and the place was close to capacity as the trivia master's nasal shrill travelled incessantly through the venue's speaker system. "Question number eight. On what date was John Wayne Gacy...born?" he said as I kept carefully glancing back and forth, between the bartender that reminded me of Pam Grier and the young kid with the glasses, he seemed so smugly nonchalant, or maybe I just felt old at that moment, or maybe he reminded me of me in a way, when I was that age, or the age I presumed him to be, early twenties? Not even two minutes later I'd see him shove a jumbo hash brown doused in ketchup into his rail thin frame and I'd mutter "What a cunt." to myself while looking at him scornfully then, thankfully, fail to note any evidence of anyone overhearing me, even though there were three to five people in my immediate vicinity. There were now a potpourri of friends and acquaintances scattered around the bar area, Todd already wanted to go to the strip club, I overheard him say "Yeah bro, I can definitely, like, all of us in for free." to someone, and an older, slightly built black guy wearing a Boston Bruins hat in addition to a Boston Bruins t-shirt and a black backpack came up to Tara and I, I wasn't purposefully standing next to her, I didn't even

notice she was in my vicinity until the man addressed us jointly, and told us it was his birthday, that he was forty five. "Oh...happy birthday." I said, and he awkwardly acknowledged me, I thought, then meandered to the other side of the bar. I thought about how, regardless of race, it was just really difficult to connect with certain people, sometimes there no commonality there, regardless of race, and a minute or so later I was back at the bar attempting to buy Farhad a drink from the Pam Grier bartender, who now seemed to be blatantly ignoring me, when Tara leaned into me and said "Do you think we should buy him a drink?" in reference to the forty five year old African-American man standing across the bar. We both looked across the bar and I said "I don't know him." and she said. "He's homeless, isn't he?" and I said "Why, because he's black?" and she said. "No! ...I mean, do you think he is?" and I said "Maybe he's just a big Bruins fan, I don't know." and she made an incredulous face and I said "What? Black people can't like hockey?" then waited for a response for a few seconds, then said "You want me to buy him a Corona?" in defeated, but also subtly disgusted, tone as Farhad came over, I don't think he knew what we were talking about, and said "Yeah, put it on my tab!" We all looked across the bar, the guy slugged down the rest of his Corona rapidly, strapped on his backpack, and left the bar before any of us could get the bartender's attention.

## Chapter 96

The next night I was playing basketball with Solomon, Solomon's friend Maxx Major, a local DJ, and Maxx's friends Jodeci, Heavy, Diamond, and Melvin at the court provided by Solomon's apartment complex. The court was a quarter court with brick walls pressed right up on the baseline, a stairwell leading to an emergency exit that infringed on the left side of the three point arc, subsequent brick walls that cut off the corners of the three point arc, and a giant pole planted right at the top of the key. I was playing decent. Melvin was sitting out the game of three on three because he missed his free throw and was occasionally making humorous comments, or comments that were intended to be humorous, from the sideline, and as the game became somewhat heated he yelled out "Oh, there you go Steve Nash!" in reference to me from the sideline as I dribbled along the baseline. A possession later I crossed over Diamond and drew a foul on Jodeci at the rim and, again, he said "There it is Steve Nash!" The words "There it is Steve Nash!" echoed in my head at a loud decibel for the next few minutes and I was visibly shook, I thought, I was totally thrown out of my game by the comment. I didn't think I played anything like Steve Nash. Possibly Kyrie Irving, or maybe a little like Allen Iverson, who was my favorite player growing up, I was pretty much all quickness with an erratic jumper, I thought. Then again, to be fair, I suppose you could

make an argument I had a little Manu Ginobili in my game, but the overall point remained... Was it because I was the only white guy on the court that I was deemed to be "Steve Nash"? Everyone else was either African-American or Hispanic, except for myself and Solomon, who was half-Filipino and half-Latvian, but could probably pass as white in most social circles. I forcibly transformed my wince into a smile and nodded at Melvin benevolently. Roy thought I looked like Joe Budden, Sophia said I had a "7-eleven look," Sasha asked me if I was Portuguese, an anonymous exotic dancer said I "looked like I could be from Johnston," Tony's slender male friend told me "No offense" but that I reminded him of Drake. And now Melvin was calling me Steve Nash, I started to become genuinely confused with regard to who I truly resembled in life, the nature of human sense perception, questioned the inherent worth of human sense perception as a whole, as a concept, and began to feel anxiety with regard to the apparent fluidity of my racial identity. I recalled watching a YouTube video titled "Greeks Are NOT White" the day after Roy said I looked like Joe Budden, then reading a comment that bluntly stated, in all caps, that "GREEKS WERE WHITE.....BUT THE TURKS TOOK OVER FOR HUNDREDS OF YEARS AND NOW THEY LOOK LIKE ARABS!! SEE, GREEK MEN WERE SO FOND OF GAY STUFF THAT WOMEN WERE NOT PRODUCING CHILDREN AT ALL, UNTIL THE TURKS CAME IN AND REPLACED GREEK HOMOS AND EVENTUALLY THE

NEXT GENERATIONS WERE ONLY HALF WHITE OR BARELY!! BIG NOSED ARABS IS WHAT THEY ENDED UP LOOKING LIKE.” then I thought “Maybe it’s the Ottoman Empire’s fault?” as I crossed over Heavy, left to right, and missed a layup off the back of the rim.



## Chapter 97

A few vodkas deep I felt like I was on drugs, euphoric, my senses seemed enhanced, I loved it. "There are two assholes in every relationship." I thought, also joyously thinking of how clever that seemed, then thought "Two to three in a love triangle. Add a little kid and the lines get stretched into a poorly drawn circle, or maybe a blob of pointless lines." and smiled deviously, then jotted a note down in my phone when she went to the bathroom that seemed both sincere and profound, that I would read the next morning in utter disgust. "So, you've never shoved anything up your nose?" I said and Sophia scrunched up her face and said "No. Ew. I told you that before." We'd barely discussed my extended comments about her husband and I found that portentous and unnerving, but was also consistently hesitant to bring it up because I knew it would only put a damper on both of our moods. "True. I snorted prescription codeine my senior year in college, and tried cocaine maybe, like, twice? Two or three times?" "Ew." she said and made a sincerely disgusted face, I thought, then I went on to say "It didn't do much for me, especially the codeine. To be honest, I was too fucked up to even tell with the cocaine." "That's because codeine's supposed to put you to sleep, dumbass." she said. Our arms brushed against one another and she said "You still don't believe me, but I really am a good girl. You know, at my last club, I was the only dancer they invited to the employee Christmas

party?" and I nodded my head, impressed, but ultimately unconvinced, feeling as though I would perpetually occupy a state of being thoroughly unconvinced, possibly about everything, possibly frozen in a state of intellectual suspense about the veracity of my own existence for eternity, and sat there on mute, smiling slightly. Sometimes there's not a lot to say. Brad Rosovsky accused me of stealing his iPod when I was twenty one after I'd vaguely "threatened" his roommate in an unrelated dispute a few months earlier, a dispute where I strongly felt as though I was ultimately the aggrieved party. I knew what it was like to be misunderstood. "You see her over there?" Sophia said, in reference to an attractive, thin blonde dancing on the side stage. She looked maybe twenty two, tops, I thought, and I said "Yeah." "Girl is an aaaddict...it's sad." she said and I shook my head sadly. Her eight inch heels clanked together as her feet dangled and she told me about a book she was reading that she found interesting, but that she lost it in her room and was still trying to find. I said "Yeah. I don't read much anymore. Used to though." "You're so smaht!" she said and nudged me playfully. I furrowed my brow pretentiously and said "Actually. I used to even read the dictionary. Used to write down six words a day. With their definitions and everything." then smiled gregariously and her eyes lit up slightly, I thought, then imagined how my eyes may have lit up when she said "Yeah...I can squirt." and compared the two faces in my head. "Even wrote an

example sentence with the word in it for each word, too.” I said proudly. “See, that’s what I shoulda done.” she said and I burped in a muffled way, a borderline hiccup of a burp, I thought, and touched her elbow gently. “I don’t wanna be forty years old up on that stage.” she said, then said “I can feel my ass already starting to sag!” She giggled and I peeked at her ass, it looked great, but I also didn’t know what it looked like years ago, I thought. I put my hand on my forehead and made a tired expression. Rivers of jealousy nonsensically streamed through my veins and I pressed my lips together tightly and froze my eyebrows halfway up. She stuck her ass out sitting, or maybe it was the natural pop. I said “But anyway, yeah. I only got like halfway through the dictionary, then I quit.”

## Chapter 98

After I left the club I met up with Farhad, Alfonso, and Vera as they were preparing to smoke a bowl in Vera's car, as Farhad sat in the front seat and said "This shit is from Paul. It's gonna get us so high!" "Paul... sweet name." I thought. My middle name was Paul. My dad's name was Paul. This yoked five foot seven black dude I used to play pickup basketball with two summers previous was named Paul and not long after learning that his name was Paul I noticed him working out at the same gym I went to and we began saying hi to each other. I'd say "You been playing lately?" smile, then raise my eyebrows in a sincerely inquisitive way, even though I wasn't all that interested, how could I be that interested in whether or not someone I barely knew had been playing pickup basketball lately, I actually dreaded the interactions more often than not, and he'd also smile ear to ear and say "Yeah. you?" and I'd nod my head happily and say "Yeah." We'd been having more or less that exact same exchange for over two years, but we'd never seen each other at the courts since that summer, it was actually completely absurd that we continued to put in the effort go through those completely meaningless motions, I thought. If I put three fourths of the effort into my romantic relationships that I put into inquiring if Paul at the gym had been playing pickup basketball lately, then I'd probably be married with kids, I thought. Before we parked Farhad asked Vera to stop so he could buy a

bong piece, she said she forgot her bong piece at home, or possibly elsewhere, she wasn't positive where it was. "What'd you forget your piece Ver'?" Farhad said in a conciliatory tone, one similar to a human addressing a dog that lost its toy. "Yeah." Vera said and scratched her temple with a curious expression. "I don't know where I put it..." then Farhad said "What're you, a fuckin asshole?!" then Vera said "Shut the fuck up Farhad!" "Turn up the music!" Alfonso said enthusiastically as we listened to a beat tape Farhad just finished, as Farhad looked back at me and said "Listen to these beats!" enthusiastically and then anxiously waited, then looked back at us at least three additional times within a minute and a half for a critical response. "What do you think?" he said with his head poked into the backseat for the fourth time. We were all really high. "I'm so high." I giggled. I put in an order for twenty dollars of weed with Paul via Farhad, then decided I'd leave and pick up a bong piece on my way home after I told Farhad his beats were great, which wasn't insincere, I actually liked most of them. "I'm gonna leave. I think I wanna buy a bong piece." I said and Alfonso said "You're leaving already?!" seeming deeply disappointed as we both sat in the backseat dancing. Whenever he thrust his hips it jarred me out of my position, I was dancing, but just more slowly. "I gotta work, man." I said and he said "Call out!" and erotically, I thought, touched my shoulder while dancing. "Nah." I said and shook my head slowly with my hand half-pulling the door handle, thinking of how to

phrase my rebuttal slowly. "I have to, like, run a report." I said, then thought about how I'd recently found out that Alfonso made over one hundred thousand dollars a year as the head waiter at the casino, then thought about how he'd been disseminating information about my penis, how I thought that was somewhat of a faux pas, then considered disseminating information about his salary, but quickly affirmed that Alfonso was fully in tune with disclosing all aspects of his being, that he definitely wouldn't care. In spite of his pleas I got out of the car, said goodbye, and started driving down Atwells Avenue toward the convenience store where Farhad bought the bong piece, where I was going to buy my first bong piece. It was a mini-mart with a pee yellow banner that read "Atwells Mini Mart." I did a five point parallel park into a spot right in front of the entrance and walked in and noted, while feeling exuberantly high, that the cashier was a middle-aged Indian dude with his right arm missing from the elbow down and started doing laps around the store, but couldn't find the bong piece section. "Is this really where Farhad bought the bong piece?" I thought ominously, then almost bumped into a disheveled blonde wearing pajama pants while holding three packs of Bubbalicious and a Kit Kat. She looked at me like I was high and I started thinking I that might have been be too high. I bumped into a display of Reese's Pieces, I loved Reese's Pieces, and the top shelf of the display that held the Reese's Pieces dislodged from the central unit. I held the dislocated shelf despairingly and

glanced back at the cashier as he was in the midst of checking out the Bubbalicious girl with his only hand. The register was 80s-era, I noted, but then shifted all of my available energy to slowly but surely solve the detached shelf issue. After I put it back together I noticed that the smoking case was right behind it. "That's crazy." I thought in reference to the smoking case "existing there the entire time," it seemed so fortuitous at the time, like my luck was finally taking a turn for the better, so I tried opening the case, but it was locked. "You want something?" the cashier asked me, just finishing up with the Bubbalicious girl. "Yeah, um, can I get that one right there?" I said as I pointed to a clear glass pipe with a handwritten "12.99" tag on it. The Indian dude came around the counter, whipped out a key, tossed it from one hand to the same hand, and opened the case. I reached inside and grabbed the clear pipe, at second glance noted that it kind of resembled an ill-intentioned dildo, held in a smirk, wondered why I was even thinking about ill-intentioned dildos, thought about how psychology seemed so out of style all of the sudden, how Freud and Oedipus were now basically caveman explanations for why I would be thinking about ill-intentioned dildos, when it seemed like only ten years previous that thinking of an ill-intentioned dildo would be totally Freudian, then nervously thought about being high again as I moved my hand, possibly more slowly than normal, into the case and said "Thanks." before the cashier locked up the case and moseyed back to the

register. I strongly considered asking him what happened to his arm as he ran the bong piece through the register, but didn't because it didn't matter.



## Chapter 99

I mused about reading Wikipedia articles referencing eras of human history where love ripping people to shreds had a certain cache to it as Sophia said “Nick. You don’t want my problems.” in a tone that was convincingly fatalistic. She sat on my lap, I had my head turned down and to the right as tears accumulated at the edges of her eyelids on the outskirts of my periphery, as she told me she couldn’t break up her family, that “despite everything” she knew her husband could be a good father, that that was more important than how she felt. “However I feel...” she said and I said nothing and she said “Sometimes I wish I’d just get hit by a bus!” and wiped a tear from her eye before it dropped onto her cheeks with the other tears that were slowly evaporating in a pool of lachrimation and makeup, and I felt oddly more taken aback by the tears, the visible display of emotion, the emotions that I had been waiting for months to verify first hand, than the fact that things were ostensibly ending, which seemed like more of an inevitability than a possibility, I thought, to be honest, I’d felt like things had been on the verge of ending pretty much since they started, although I felt strongly that I wanted things to continue, but at the same time wasn’t sure if her words changed anything, or I felt as though our entire relationship was essentially comprised of one of us telling the other one things they already knew and then wondering how it would change things. “Can you

look at me?!" she said and grabbed my face, but I didn't as she held my jaw in her left palm. "What do you have to say?" she said and I turned my head, increasingly frustrated with my inability to think of anything to say, and said "Give me a minute, ok?!" I felt tears accumulating in lower eyeballs, but having had a decent amount of experience in weeping by that point in my life managed to hold them in place. A few seconds later I said "This probably happens to you all the time..." while trying to come off as unemotional as possible and she said "No...this is different." and I immediately thought that she pretty much had to say that, that it was probably ill-advised for me to even say "This probably happens to you all the time..." but also felt relieved as the syllables emerged from her mouth. She didn't she say was good on her own again like she normally did, or that she didn't need any males in her life, but it also didn't seem to matter as much as she said "We'll figure it out" as we sat down, as I felt oddly euphoric, I felt like for the first time I knew that she cared, "She cares." I thought euphorically and I felt at one with nature in a very nihilistic way. I said she didn't know everything I'd been through, that just because I didn't discuss it didn't mean it didn't happen, and she agreed and said she wanted to know more about me, that she felt like I didn't tell her stuff and, feeling "put on the spot," wondering if this would truly mark the end of our correspondence, I struggled to think of anything to share about myself, as if the things I wanted to share were superglued to my esophagus, like

my secrets were action figures wholly melted into the pavement of my childhood driveway, like I was pointing them out to her, stuttering, saying "See that there? That's, uhh, my first sexual experience..." at a blob of He-Man stained pavement. I started to believe that maybe I had developed some sort of undiagnosed mental illness and recalled "mental breakdowns" that I seemed just barely adroit enough to keep concealed from family and friends, that, latent for decades, maybe were even equal to the traumatic events she'd endured, but just in different ways? Equally opposite trauma? What did it matter? "Everyone is in here is fucked up." There had been certain signs, signs that I haven't disclosed, it's so difficult to disclose all of these details your honor, do you have any idea how many details there are in every instant? I've even had to truncate our time together for the sake of clarity, and I thought vaguely but acutely of suicide, not out of depression necessarily, but just fatigue, perhaps more specifically laziness, "It could take up to like a year and half..." she told me one time about how long it could take for us to "be together" and I felt like ending it right there, the courtship as well as my life, there was no answer, there were never any answers, and when there were I'd always be there to expertly obfuscate, my only real skill, until I became too fatigued to care, and I told her it didn't particularly matter to me, that the time we shared had been great, but that at the same time "if anyone has to suffer" it should probably be me, with the underlying

point being that maybe I didn't even mind suffering, that maybe I even preferred it, and she didn't say anything. She walked away a few minutes later and didn't come back out, and I realized that I was too drunk to remember if we'd said goodbye or not and began to consider, strenuously, if I should wait for her and, if so, for how long? I asked the bartender if I forgot to tip her the other week, that I seemed to have some memory of not tipping her, and that, if I did, I felt bad, that I actually felt bad just by virtue of my uncertainty. She smiled meekly at me and said she had too many customers to remember those types of things, then I left.

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October 1, 2016

Providence, Rhode Island