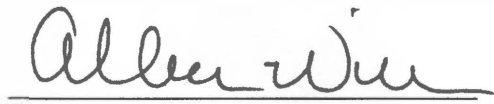


To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Christopher Smith entitled *Disintegration*. I have examined the final paper copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.


Michael Knight, Major Professor

We have read this thesis
and recommend its acceptance:


Professor Allen Wier
Professor Charles Maland

Accepted for the Council:


Vice Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies

DISINTEGRATION: A NOVELLA

A Thesis
Presented for the
Master of Arts
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Christopher Smith
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Thesis
2002
509

Dedication

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my parents, Lynn and Jerry Smith. Their love, support, and advice are the primary reasons I have been able to make it this far. I would also like to dedicate *Disintegration* to Alejandro Armendariz, Christopher Larkin, Alan Pohl, Eric Queen, Aaron Condon, Jennifer Croake, and Michele Deemer. Finally, I would like to give a special mention to Mark Bernard; he helped me keep the gun out of my mouth.

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I wish to thank the members of my thesis committee for helping me to complete my novella. Their guidance, advice, suggestions, and comments were what I greatly needed and desired; without them, the task of constructing a readable work of fiction would have been impossible. I would *especially* like to thank Professor Michael Knight. Through all of the drafts, all of the struggles, all of the mistakes I made, he was patient, considerate, and understanding in teaching me how to write.

Abstract

The underlying idea I had for this thesis in the beginning was to capture a time period that represents the end of all that is known and understood for the protagonist. I wanted to create a written snapshot of flux, where nothing is calm, nothing is certain, and above all, nothing is predictable for the protagonist; everything is new and in a constant cycle of change.

For this narrative time scheme, I chose the end of the protagonist's last summer at home and the beginning of his college career. I introduce the reader to the protagonist during his final two days at home before he leaves for school. For these two days, I make the reader a witness to the end of something that the protagonist was once a part of through the eyes and narrative voice of the protagonist himself. This ending represents the loss of stability with the people around him, the loss of belonging, the loss of trust (with others and himself), the loss of friendship, and thus his disintegration from these elements.

The remaining chapters focus on the narrator's first week of college. Here, the narrator is uprooted from what represents home and is forced to contend with his inability to integrate with the people around him, namely his roommate and women. It is not until the end of the novella that the cycle of disintegration is broken and the narrator is able to begin the healing process that comes from connecting.

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I. Introduction

The epigraph to E.M. Forster's *Howards End* reads, "Only Connect." To only connect is what every single character in Forster's work tries to do, whether it is between lovers, family, friends, or even the land. Through reading this novel, the reader gains a sense that trying to connect in the space of time the novel is set in is perhaps the most difficult period in all of the characters' lives. Forster captures a timeframe that shows the Wilcox family coping with the loss of a loving, forgiving mother and wife, the Basts on the verge of an impoverished prison, and the Schlegel sisters trying to find a balance between cosmopolitanism and nationalism. Adding to this overwhelming sense of desire to connect in Forster's novel is the land itself trying to maintain its luscious countryside all the while London threatens its border every second.

In *Disintegration*, I try to create this sense of wanting to connect within a tumultuous period. *Disintegration* takes place during the narrator's last week of summer vacation and first week of college. It is by no means historically equal to the age when England's vast empire was fading into the sunset. But what first intrigued me, what made me pick this occasion to write about, was that psychologically, emotionally, it is more than equal to the fall of an empire. The narrator in my novella isn't merely watching a land of ancient estates and aristocracy overrun by a burgeoning city, but rather, he is watching every single thing around him change, and as such, he has to find some way of integrating himself into this change, be it a new location (more specifically, the loss of home, comfort, his definition of "normalcy"), new friends, new love, and newfound freedom. And the arising struggles that come from such change would cause

an overwhelming sense of confusion in just about anyone, and that is the ultimate reason why I chose to write on this specific section of the protagonist's life.

Not surprisingly, then, this novella has turned out to be entirely more in the internal than I had originally planned. Right before I began writing the first chapter to *Disintegration* a few years back, I was reading every short story of Ernest Hemingway I could get my hands on during my lunch breaks at work. I would scrutinize every line, read each paragraph or dialogue numerous times over and over to try to find some sort of systematic way of constructing a short story in the style of Hemingway. I wanted to be able to say a million things in just a few lines. After work, I would go home and write in an attempt to capture this essence of Hemingway.

I was in the middle of something I thought would be just like Hemingway's sense of story. I had bought an old typewriter and was using that to write short short stories that were purely dialogue, purely objective. I thought it upon myself the sole responsibility of bringing a masculine sense of brief/external writing to the reader; adding to this desire was that I had not long before taken a class on twentieth century British writers and I was in strict protest against anything having to do with Virginia Woolf, mainly her overtly internal, *To The Lighthouse*.

Needless to say, these short short works of mine were dismal failures. I couldn't keep the mind of the narrator separate from everything else. Though I abandoned this objective style of writing entirely, I can't say I became everything I hated in a writer. I found that the story I needed to tell could in no way be dealt with in the style of Hemingway. I was telling a tale about a college age boy and to have a work about this that dealt mainly with the external would be utterly pointless, unfulfilling, and carry with

it no weight. And I found that when it came time to face Woolf again, this time with her novel *Mrs. Dalloway*, I saw the genius, the purpose behind having a work that is so strongly based in the mind of the protagonist. Her whole novel takes place within a day and externally deals with very little: Mrs. Dalloway is having a party and Septimus Smith suffers from shellshock and walks with his wife to a park. Alone, the events of these and the other characters in one day are meaningless. It is what the narrator exposes in these characters that makes the story worthwhile, complete. The window that Woolf creates into the characters' minds allows the reader to see the characters' motives, their desires, their pain, and their confusion. Specifically with Mrs. Dalloway, the reader is made privy to the dual nature of her being, her attempts at coping with her early self, Clarissa, the young, sensitive, and romantic one in relation to that of her latter self, Mrs. Dalloway, who is class-oriented, shallow, and self-centered. Such a complex duality would be hard to express if Woolf had not made the internal world of *Mrs. Dalloway* visible to the reader, and instead, relied only on the objective details of the day. Seeing a similar need to work with the struggle of psyche and not just the external, I threw my typewriter in a box and started over with what would become "David Byrne and a Tuna Biscuit."

But I now understand that making *Disintegration* a novella strongly rooted in the internal was the only way to keep it alive, to keep it moving. A work about a high school kid smoking marijuana or a college student drinking is nothing less than worn, outdated, uninspiring. For the purposes of this work, these seemingly meaningless occasions are merely a springboard to something else, something that is at the heart of the struggle to connect.

As I began to write *Disintegration* I found that these internal struggles of integration were, if not the sole, the primary reason I wanted to write in the first place. I became obsessed with finding out what the narrator was motivated by. At first glance, I figured the answer would be very simple. The opening chapter shows the narrator at the end of his comfortable symbiotic/integrated relationship with his friends. Things, for one flickering instant in his life, are, for a lack of a better term, okay—normal. But even so, I saw the signs of a larger desire for acceptance to be present in the thoughts and actions of the narrator. I think the very act of smoking marijuana with his friends, specifically with Andrew, is a way of trying something new to preserve the past. For the narrator, this act is somewhat experimental, dangerous to him, and to be able to conquer this fear of something like this with his best friend is his way of trying to maintain his relationship with Andrew.

But as I said, this first chapter is the end of his acceptance with his friend and the beginning of a struggle that haunts him for the rest of the novella. When the narrator believes he has had his leg touched by Aunt Brian's in the Jacuzzi, I bring forth an overwhelming fear in the narrator that possesses him, making him overtly conscious of his surroundings, and for one brief instance, he sees the possibility that Andrew noticed the incident between Aunt Brian as well. And this unsureness, compounded with the sense of being "tricked" in the Jacuzzi, adds to the final lines of the first chapter the narrator's feelings of embarrassment, fear, regret, and the cloudy understanding that things are probably going to get worse, especially when he hears that he can not sleep on the couch in wet clothes.

“San Francisco Fact Checking” solidifies these feelings of angst and thoughts of confusion that arise in the previous chapter. But I had the hardest time writing this chapter out of all the other ones, essentially because of the very need to capture the above-mentioned feelings and thoughts and still be able to convey a sense of tension and movement in the story. For one thing, on the outside, nothing happens in this chapter. It is a story about nothing—two friends are having coffee, and there is a serious danger of the cliché in writing such a tale. And for many of the drafts, I was stuck in stagnation with what to do with this work. I saw that I had to go even more into the mind of the narrator, and doing so, I found something I had never intended to discover: his neurosis. In a sense, this chapter marks the beginning of the end for the narrator, his true disintegration from his best friend. When Andrew confronts the narrator concerning the night before, and the truth comes out about where he slept, I show the severe stress and loathing the character has towards his own self. Outwardly, I make the narrator express his anger towards Andrew, trying to blame him for not saving him from a night in bed with Aunt Brian, but on the inside, I capture his sense of guilt and blame he has towards the incidents of the night before and I believe this is what finally put this chapter in motion.

For the next chapter, “Giving it the Old College Try,” I show the narrator trying to forget about the incidents back home. The opening paragraph has him sarcastically admitting he will call Andrew as soon he gets a chance. Unfortunately, the narrator’s severe neurosis and doubt returns almost immediately, this time in an entirely different form. I bring forth the intense fear this character has about his self, but the manifestations of it in this chapter take the shape of social anxiety and acceptance. In the

earlier two chapters, the narrator wants to remain integrated with his best friend, to have that stable connection to the past and old times, yet fears what he has done at the party may make this impossible; but in “College,” I change the desire for integration into the form of fitting in with the new.

With the third installment of the novella, the narrator finds himself immediately in conflict with the newness around him. To begin with, he becomes torn between two distinct beliefs about his roommate. At first, Adam reminds the narrator of a kind old man, someone who I think the narrator believes he could take advantage of if he ever wanted. But, in order to uncover the dual nature of thoughts in the protagonist, I expose a strong distrust in the narrator towards Adam. I think in the scenes where Jenna is directly or indirectly dealt with is where this idea of mistrustful scrutiny of Adam by the narrator is best captured. And this internal struggle the narrator has over Adam is really where the integration/disintegration idea comes into being once again, where I want the reader to see the narrator having to make a decision: Is it worth becoming Adam’s friend?

If his attempts at connecting with his roommate are somewhat unsuccessful, the prospect of being involved with the women of the college seems just as bleak, but not entirely impossible. He meets a woman named Jenna who invites him to a dance. At the dance, where the narrator and Jenna end up kissing each other in the middle of the auditorium, he turns his neurotic fear and need for acceptance around and tries to use it to his advantage. The internal thoughts of anxiety and self-doubt that the narrator has throughout the chapter are replaced by a desire to have everyone notice him, to look at him, and remember that he is the one with the girl. But, as soon as this happens, Jenna leaves him stranded in the middle of all the people, and he again has feelings of

disintegrated loneliness and isolation. Even with the way the chapter ends—a seemingly integrating event is about to take place—it is still written in a way to elicit all of the signs that this is only temporary, and it is in no way a permanent fix for the narrator.

“Morning After Bitter Pills” could have easily been given the title of Chinua Achebe’s novel, *Things Fall Apart*. Concerning Adam, this is where the narrator sees that any possibility of connection is hopeless; he will never be able to integrate into any positive relationship with his roommate. He knows that he has been with a woman whom Adam has shown interest in, and when the narrator confronts Adam about this, his fear overwhelms him as he watches Adam punish him in his own way. My goal as I was writing this chapter was to make the battle between Adam and the narrator almost entirely internal. Like the narrator says, there will be no fists flying, no punches landed—Adam is going to psychologically torture him, and when he teases the narrator about Jenna calling, he is playing on what he knows will hurt the narrator far more than any physical violence.

The ramifications of the night before aren’t any less painful with Jenna. At first, after he leaves her dorm room, the narrator feels he has made the connection and he is on his way to a certain acceptance. The idea I had when I wrote this scene was to try to capture the essence of the feeling the narrator has when he kisses Jenna on the dance floor and to concentrate it exponentially. I believe this is illustrated when the narrator is walking to the cafeteria and he thinks that a community has formed around him, that he is involved in some great communal warmth in the quad among the other students. But after he confronts Jenna, he understands that he has been used. Jenna plans on remaining with her boyfriend at seemingly any cost. I didn’t want to come right out and have him

say that is what happened, though. I wanted him to fight it all the way to the end, to struggle over finding a way to make it work. I wanted to bring out the desperation of the narrator, his undying need to belong and it is when he sees Jenna whisper “I love you” to the man on the phone that he finally gives up.

The final chapter presents two contrasting elements to the novella as a whole, and as such, “The Graveyard Shift” is where the title *Disintegration* becomes ironic. After a failed phone call in the last chapter, “Graveyard” opens up with another call from Andrew, informing the narrator of a visit. But Andrew doesn’t arrive alone, and is instead accompanied by Aunt Brian. As I was beginning this chapter, I felt that the earlier two chapters were almost entirely based on the question, why does the narrator sleep in the same bed with Aunt Brian? And for a long time I had no idea how I was going to answer that question. When the answer is finally given, I wanted it to be the moment where it is the narrator, and not the people around him, that disintegrated. In other words, I wanted the narrator to disintegrate his connection with himself. I also wanted this to be a trigger for the collapses of his relationship with Andrew. I definitely did not want another direct confrontation between the narrator and Andrew because I felt it would have been too forced and too similar to “San Francisco.” In a sense, the relationship he at one time had with Andrew represents the old self of the narrator and I wanted that part of him to be destroyed forever. I believe I capture this sentiment in the internal monologue the narrator has just before he falls asleep next to Aunt Brian once again.

As well, this chapter is about the final collapse of Adam and the narrator’s thin connection to each other that was maintained merely through the act of being roommates.

This is where the narrator reaches his boiling point, where the struggle to maintain a passive peace with Adam becomes impossible. In writing this scene, I also wanted to finally give his roommate a backbone as well and I thought the best way to do this would be via the vacuum. In the previous chapter, I introduce the vacuum, something that became an unconscious symbol for me and an object of resentment and power for the narrator. In his mind, it represents a battle of wits and stamina even though he clearly admits it is his responsibility to use it. Finally, I allow Adam to confront him about the issue of the vacuum, and this is where the narrator, in his mind, decides he has to take a stand, specifically against going to the disciplinary meeting. He refuses to go, and as he escapes Adam later in the afternoon cleaning up trash, the narrator admits that if he only went to the meeting Adam would have more than likely taken all of the blame. This shows the narrator for the first time understanding his fault in everything he has done to ruin the possible relationship he could have had with his roommate. I feel that this is also the place where the narrator is really taking a full look at his psychological state and its responsibility in the decisions he has made.

But as I noted earlier, this is where the title presents a difficulty in its meaning to the work. Reluctantly, I decided to reintroduce a character to the story that has only a brief appearance in “College”: Melissa. I was hesitant at first because I knew I needed her but I wasn’t sure how I could use her successfully in the novella. But after I wrote the classroom scene with her, I knew immediately what she represents to the narrator. Melissa is acceptance, safety, integration. She quickly becomes a cure for the narrator, a relationship he can carry out the way he wants. And I believe that making Melissa the one who is more aggressive is key to this as well. What I learned writing this work is that

the narrator is for the most part passive in his mannerisms. He, almost always, does not strike first. To make an integration work for this protagonist, I had to present to him someone who would be the aggressor.

But this quality alone would not suffice in making the connection entirely successful between Melissa and the narrator and that is why I went back and wrote the car scene. As I wrote this part, what I wanted to show is that, in the narrator's mind, Melissa also represents a bridge to the past. He, for the first time, is able to make a connection between the past and present as he drives with her and relives the days when he first got his license.

What finally makes the relationship work is when Melissa and the narrator hold hands. I always knew that what I did with Jenna and the narrator wouldn't have worked here. I couldn't have the two spend the night together; besides it being repetitive, it also presents the problem of unnecessarily complicating what Melissa and the narrator already have with each other. To have them go to bed with one another and expect the reader to believe everything would be okay with the two in the morning would be ridiculous. I had to have the two perform an act that would carry with it enough—but not too much—weight that would signal to the reader an understanding that a strong connection is made between Melissa and the narrator.

Why this novella is titled *Disintegration* is because I captured the part of the cycle in the narrator's life where relationships in his life are eroding into nothing. In the first chapter, the reader is catching the end of the integration part of the cycle, where the narrator is beginning to lose his once solid relationship to his best friend. And it isn't until the last part of the final chapter where the disintegrating half of the cycle is finally

broken, and the narrator can begin to build a new foundation with which to construct a healthy, fulfilling relationship where he can connect. So, while this story ultimately contains a segment of the narrator's life where he finally can integrate himself, it still shows that the protagonist can reach this new plateau in his life only by suffering through the disintegration that change presents.

II. David Byrne and a Tuna Biscuit

It was one a.m., and Andrew and I were sitting in Aunt Brian's hot tub in the backyard, stoned. The backyard was a tiny plot of land surrounded by a wooden fence. Aunt Brian's hot tub sat on a cement slab dug into the ground with another brick wall enclosing the slab making a sort of lowered patio. The enclosure, minus a ceiling, gave the illusion of total privacy, like we could do anything we wanted and no one would hear or see us.

Aunt Brian and Uncle Rob were gay. Andrew and I were never sure if they were “officially” a couple, but, every time one had a party, the other was there. When Aunt Brian would show up at the video store where Uncle Rob, Andrew, and I worked, they would talk for hours in the back office. They would finish each other's sentences. They would laugh at jokes where Andrew and I would shrug in ignorance. Every story they rehearsed involved the both of them. They were like an old married couple who knew each other's thoughts and every detail of each other's lives. And, every time they had a party, Uncle Rob, who was our manager at the video store, would say, “Children, we're having a party, and you better be there or you're grounded.” We would laugh it off and when he walked away, Andrew and I would say to each other, “see you at Aunt Brian and Uncle Rob's party.” Or, the morning after one of their parties, where we would always spend the night because we were too drunk to drive, one of us would inevitably say, “that was quite the party at Aunt Brian and Uncle Rob's.”

It was the last week of summer before Andrew and I went off to college, and as any respectable family member would do, Uncle Rob decided to get us high for the first time, so we wouldn't be party virgins our first year in college.

"What is that?" I asked, when Uncle Rob opened up the drawer with the weed in it; but I knew what it was. I just wanted to hear the explanation for why my heart was beating a little faster. For me, it was more than just being up close and personal with a substance that every teenager is told to stay away from. My mother used to tell me about her life growing up. She told me that her brother, so desperate for cocaine, put a gun to my grandmother's head and robbed her. Her other brother was so strung out on it that he used to beat all of the women in her family for no clear reason.

"Come on, it's time to feed the little birdies," he replied, smiling a closed mouth grin with the lamp light shining in his eyes and patted me on the back. I smiled back with squinted eyes and shaking lips.

We left his bedroom and went back downstairs. I walked behind him, slowly, gripping the handrail on the way down. "This isn't coke. This isn't coke. This isn't coke," I told myself.

I ran into Andrew in the kitchen and told him what Uncle Rob was carrying outside.

Andrew raised his eyebrows and turned towards the porch to see if it was true. "Really? Are you?"

"I—Are you?" The thing was, Andrew and I had a friend who started smoking when he was very young. Every time we went out with this friend, he had to smoke. Every idea for what to do was prefaced by, "We could smoke." "We could smoke" he

would he say, “and go to the mall. We could smoke and go swimming. We could smoke and go see a movie.” Of course, Andrew and I would say no, and every time we talked about this friend, we would laugh and imitate the suggestions he made to us. “How can he do that stuff,” either of us would say.

Uncle Rob opened the patio door and leaned his head into the living room.

“Come on, boys, let’s go,” he ordered and shut the door.

“Well, I always planned on trying at least once,” I told Andrew. Even my mother said she had tried it before.

“I’ve always heard you don’t get stoned the first time, anyway,” replied Andrew.

All of us sat on the patio and smoked. When the pipe was handed to me, I looked around at everyone. Uncle Rob was grinning. “Are you sure it’s okay?” I asked, staring down at the pipe. I touched the weed with my finger and rubbed it against my thumb.

Aunt Brian jumped in and said, “You’ll be fine. It’s just like being comfortable with everything. Nothing will happen.”

I put the pipe to my lips and let Aunt Brian light it for me. I didn’t cough. I just held it in like they told me. Hold it in as long as you can, they said.

Andrew and I were like Uncle Rob's little chicks, looming around the pipe, chirping to mom, or in this case, Unc, for more marijuana. The smell that had always seemed so disgustingly potent, no longer seemed that way. Instead, as I exhaled through my nose, I realized that it smelled more like what it really was: a dried herb, like cloves without the sweetness. I looked at Andrew as I passed the rectangular wooden pipe to him. We made eye contact and said the same thing to each other with our eyes: I can't believe we're doing this. I wanted to tell him that it really wasn't that bad, that it was

good to be smoking with Uncle Rob. Andrew, much like I did, lowered his head and looked down at the pipe for a minute. He put it to his nose and sniffed.

“You okay?” he asked me. He wasn’t smiling.

“Yeah, sure. I don’t feel anything.” Actually, I was ready to smoke more. “Hey, you were right,” I said to Aunt Brian, “I feel fine.” Everyone else had lied. I wasn’t paranoid. I wasn’t scared the cops were going to show up at any minute, that every sound I heard was an undercover agent coming to arrest me. I wasn’t eating uncontrollably or laughing at everything.

Andrew gave me the lighter and put the pipe to his mouth. I lit the pipe and watched him close his eyes as he inhaled.

We stopped smoking after the pipe went around the circle a few times and leaned back in our chairs.

Andrew and I decided to move it to the hot tub. I thought my bathing suit felt really weird dry and before I dropped into the water, I rubbed my hands against it, telling everybody my observation. Andrew put his arm on my shoulder and looked at me with a straight face before erupting in laughter. In the hot tub, I could feel the water adding to the numbing effect of the marijuana. My heart beat in my head and my thoughts drifted, not more than usual, but with the weed I was able to keep track of all my mind's wanderings. I did feel comfortable with everything. Aunt Brian was right. I giggled, I don't know if it was out loud or to myself, thinking about how Andrew called my station wagon the Millennium Falcon. It was easy to see why: big, gray, a fast piece of junk. When Andrew rode with me in the Falcon, we would always kid around, acting out our roles as Chewbacca and Han Solo. I laughed again, this time out loud.

"Hey, Andrew... Andrew." I said.

He was looking at his hands float on top of the water. "What?"

"Remember this?" I stood up and yelled.

"Chewbacca! Get us out of here!"

Andrew roared like a Wookie in response.

"Take us into hyper-drive, Chewie!" I demanded.

A splash of stars shot past us (in reality, it wasn't stars splashing but Andrew and me throwing water into the air).

"Tie fighters, get us out of here, Chewie!"

"Brian, look at them," Uncle Rob said. "You boys OK?"

"What have you done to them?" asked Aunt Brian. He looked at the two of us deeply entranced in our sci-fi fantasy, shaking his head with a wrinkled forehead and surprised, open eyes. He had his hand on his chin.

"Now see, what if you boys waited until you were at your first college party to get stoned like this? Disaster little ones, disaster." He was cracking up.

A mid-thirties year old man walked in from the house and out onto the patio. He was short with blonde hair, wearing a tank top, bathing suit, and flip-flops.

"Hah! It's Steve!" yelled Uncle Rob.

"Hi, Steve," moaned Aunt Brian.

"Hello, Hello, Hello," Steve said in a whiny, exaggerated, and southern effeminate tone before he looked down at the two of us in the hot tub and grinned. Then he sat down at the patio table with Aunt Brian and Uncle Rob and kissed Brian on the cheek and lips and rubbed his head. I could feel my own cheeks burning red. I had never

seen that happen before. I looked at Andrew—he didn't seemed to have noticed. I wasn't sure what he would have done if he saw that kiss. I wanted to make sure he never did. I didn't want him to know, to be sure about it. I always thought Andrew, underneath it all, was a little homophobic. He never came right out and said he was, but sometimes when he saw a gay couple or made some remark about Aunt Brian and Uncle Rob's sexuality, I always thought I saw a slight cringe creep into his face. I never really cared, but I just didn't want Andrew to see them kiss.

Brian was staring at me. I mouthed "What?" wondering if something was wrong and forced an exaggerated smile by clenching my teeth and opening my mouth. Steve was standing over Brian with his hands on his shoulders and his face turned towards the side, talking to Uncle Rob. He leaned over to kiss Brian again, this time on his forehead. I turned away.

I sat back down, splashed hot tub water on my face and rubbed my hands across my eyes. Andrew's eyes were shiny, glass orbs. He broke his silence and began a dramatic monologue about a Viet Nam Veteran who keeps having flashbacks. He usually did it towards the end of the night, when he was drunk. It was about this poor sap who, setting his eyes on just about anything, whether it be a beer or a rock, would break out into violent ramblings about being shot at in the jungles of Viet Nam.

"Shit," Andrew started in a Martin Sheenesque voice. "I remember sitting in that hellhole of a jungle, waiting... waiting for 'Charley' to walk by our path... What I would've given to have had a fuckin' beer while I sat in that hellhole... Just one damn-- Oh, God, it's an ambush! They've surrounded us! Ahhhhh!" He shot at them with his imaginary rifle.

I looked over at the patio table. Steve and Uncle Rob were roaring in amusement. Brian caught my eyes and smiled at me. I turned to my friend and decided to help him out. "Split up, Sergeant!" I said. "I'll meet you at the river!"

"Look out!" Steve yelled.

Running through the elephant grass and infested/crawling floor of the jungle, I made it to the river. I stopped to rest and I smelled the wetness of the jungle: dead leaves, slow, warm water, and my own sweat. Not long after I stopped, "Charley" caught up with me and began shooting large caliber bullets at me in an attempt to rip my body apart. I dove underwater for cover and listened to the bullets seer past me. A helicopter flew above my sunken body. I wasn't going back up there with all that fire coming down on me. I closed my eyes. I had the feeling that I could stay under water forever if I needed to. To tell you the truth, it felt so comfortable at the bottom of the hot tub, and I had no longing to return to the surface for air because I didn't need any—my lungs weren't stinging from the lack of oxygen. I felt so warm and weightless. Basically, I saw nothing wrong with just staying underwater and relaxing, letting my Viet Nam adventure be replaced by calmness. Unfortunately, not everyone saw it that way because Brian pulled me out of the water by my hair while someone else kept saying, "let him drown," in a whiny, lispy voice.

"Let him drown! Ha ha ha," Andrew laughed. "Did you hear Steve? He said let him drown."

Everybody laughed, except me: I was annoyed. I was so very high, and it felt so cold above the water's surface. I stood up in the middle of the Jacuzzi without anybody's

help. "I'm hungry." The laughter exploded, the men at the table grabbing their sides while Andrew leaned over the Jacuzzi gasping for breath.

Brian asked me what I wanted to eat. "All I have is some bread," he said in a relaxed southern accent.

"That sounds really good." We walked into his condo and searched the kitchen. His air was set at sixty and the water that dripped down my body felt like ice rolling down my skin.

"Let's see... Here's some bread--Oh, What's this? Tuna."

"Oh, Shit. Give me some of that." My eyes popped open. I hated tuna, but I was starving. I grabbed the can from Aunt Brian and shoved it under the electric can opener. I snickered like a man who had found the treasure before anyone else. "Man, I'm fucking hungry." I took the tuna off of the can opener, opened the roll, and plopped the tuna on top of it. I smushed it together and took a bite. "Oh, God that's good." I took another bite. When I was a kid, my mom would make tuna salad and put it in the fridge for anyone to eat. Every time I found that Tupperware of tuna, I'd let out an "eww" and slam the door. But I couldn't stop eating it. "Oh, that's so good." Aunt Brian and I walked back outside to the hot tub.

"What's that smell?" Uncle Rob asked, nosed scrunched in the air, with his back facing me. He turned around. "Oh dear God, what is that?"

"It's a tuna biscuit, man." I took a bite.

Everyone broke into hysterics, again clutching at their sides and massaging their facial muscles for relief.

"Oh, man!" yelled Andrew. "How can you eat that?"

I took the last bite and slipped into the hot tub, closed my eyes, and leaned my head against the edge. Andrew was smoking at the patio table. Aunt Brian got into the water, moaning as he drew his legs and body into the warmth. He sat across from me. I saw him looking at me, very seriously. "Man, you were so right," I mumbled as coherently as I could, closing my eyes. "I'm so high." I looked over at Uncle Rob, Steve and Andrew. "Thanks, man. This stuff is great," I said to Uncle Rob.

Aunt Brian kept looking at me and nodded his head. He ran his leg across mine underneath the water. My eyes widened and my head stayed nailed to the Jacuzzi cushion. My stomach was warming and my head rang. I pulled my legs closer to my body, acting like I was cold, shivering and looking down in an attempt to play it off. "Man, it's getting cold," I said. I looked up to see him still staring at me and I smiled an unconfident and wasted smile at him. Did he really mean to rub his leg against mine? I felt sick and embarrassed. Worst of all, I felt sober. Tricked. Paranoid. My stomach began aching from the tuna and I clutched at it, trying to hold it in one piece. The weed was making my head hurt. I wanted to go home, but I had no way to get home. I was stuck at Brian's house until morning. I looked over at Andrew. Andrew was staring at the cement with an open mouth and heavy eyes. I was tired. "I'm going to bed," I said. Only Brian said anything.

"Do you want me to show you where you can sleep."

"No," I said. "I was just going to sleep on the couch." I stood up, grabbed my towel off one of the patio chairs, wrapped it around my body, and walked inside into the arctic air. I collapsed onto the couch. The leather couch moaned as my body fell into it. The Talking Heads were playing on the stereo--"Once in a Lifetime" was the song. I saw

David Byrne on the television; it must be a video collection, I thought. I watched the talking head whirl around in his white suit with an expression of concern, his face squinted in concentration. He frowned and put his hand to his forehead to aid him in his concerned glare--he was staring at me. All I could do was chuckle at the strangeness of a man dancing and being concerned at the same time. When you dance, you aren't concerned about anything or anyone; you're just dancing and having a good time. "You don't know me," I mumbled to the television. The video jolted to an image of a moving roadway in the dark being illuminated by headlights. His face appeared in the road, and it was still staring at me. I yawned as he mouthed the lyrics: "You may ask yourself, am I right, am I wrong? And you may say to yourself, my God, what have I done?" I chuckled again and closed my eyes. The last thing I heard before I fell asleep was Brian telling Uncle Rob that I couldn't sleep on the leather couch with wet clothes.

III. San Francisco Fact Checking

The night after the party I met Andrew at our favorite coffee shop, San Francisco Coffee House. It was tradition. After every party, every night of drunken revelry, we met for coffee, to nurse our hangovers, and joke about the details of the night before.

Usually, we would have spent most of our time together at a party and would have so many of the same stories to laugh about the next day. But, for this last one, I was afraid we wouldn't have the same stories to tell.

I walked up the stairs towards the rooftop, to our usual table overlooking the street below and I was burning up, yet I wasn't sweating. My feet and hands were ice cold. It was a heat caused not by the outside temperature and therefore unable to be cured by the cooling night. It was a heat that usually made me emit a quiet, tortured moan.

I wasn't sure I would have anything to say to my best friend. I felt I had done something wrong, something irreversible. I mean, I remembered up to a point the night before. I remembered smoking, and I thought I remembered Brian feeling my leg. I didn't remember falling asleep in Brian's bed.

When I woke up the morning after the party, I found myself alone in a bed I at first didn't recognize. My chest felt like somebody was pressing down on it with one of those old fashioned heavy blocks of iron, not the electric, plastic kind. Sunshine from the not so blinded windows reflected off the white walls, accentuating my head's pain with a

bright pounding. It smelled of sunny dust and air-conditioned smoke. I rolled over on my side and found a note next to me:

“Food’s in the fridge. Bought some orange juice, muffins, pancakes, waffles, eggs, bacon, sausage, etc. Wasn’t sure what you liked. Lock the door when you leave.

--B”

I fell out of bed, finding myself in a pair of my own, dry underwear. I had no idea how I got those on, or where my bathing suit was.

I had the overwhelming urge to shower before I went downstairs. I walked over to the other bathroom, in the guest room, where I should’ve have ended up the night before in the first place, and locked both the bedroom and bathroom doors as they shut behind me. I leaned over the sink, bracing my arms against the counter. I held the counter ends so long my hands began tingling before I made any move to brush my teeth.

As I ran the brush against my teeth I never moved my eyes away from the mirror. I watched the toothbrush run around my mouth and foam. I stared at my eyes, mostly at my eyes. This girl once told me I had eyes that made her shudder on the inside. I was trying to see if that was possible--could I make myself shudder? I wasn’t sure why I would need to, though. I wasn’t sure of anything. I tried to put the evidence, the facts together. I kept staring and brushing. Brushing so long that my gums began to bleed. I just shook my head and frowned in disbelief--I didn’t see it. I didn’t see anything but my tense, curled up body soaking in the Jacuzzi.

I twisted the knobs and let the water hiss into the tub. I removed my underwear and kicked them to the floor. I still had the smell. I stank of chlorine, weed, and the musty smell of Brian’s house.

The shower is like a spiritual reviver, a life giving force. The water, the heat, the privacy, it's like therapy... water therapy. I sat in the shower--which you have to do to get the full effect of the treatment--surrounded by three beige, plastic walls and a glazed glass door. The water sprinkled my head as I hugged my knees and rested my forehead on them. I tasted the water as it washed down my head. The steam made a ghostly ascent off my skin, as did the odors. I couldn't see in front of me, the steam was so thick. In this chamber of fog I tried to remember how I got into Brian's bed, but I couldn't think of anything. I couldn't move past the couch in my mind.

I stood up--slowly, so I wouldn't black out from the heat and an empty, grumbling stomach--and washed myself. It was one of those half washes where the soap goes as far as your arm can reach without the rest of your body moving. I slouched against the wall and rinsed. I could have stayed in the shower forever. Brian, I feared, might be sitting at the table downstairs; maybe, I imagined, he would be waiting for me to come down. Maybe he would be waiting to tell me what happened, what I did, what we did. Or maybe he would be reading his newspaper and we would eat in silence.

I took hold of the towel hanging on the shower door and dried the top of my body first while the bottom half stood in the path of the water. I had to take it slowly. I had to enter the chilly iciness slowly, become acquainted with it again in small doses. I stepped farther out of the water's path until only my feet were being soothed in constant warmth. I turned the water off and let it run out of the faucet and onto my toes. I shivered violently when I opened the door and let the cool air flow into the therapy chamber. I shook and shook, stepping onto the cold, white tiled floor. Worst of all, visibility returned to normal on the outside of the shower stall, and I could see myself shivering in

the mirror. I looked pale and I had dark circles under my eyes. I began a sudden, sharp fit of coughing and I watched my body hunch over and shake. I grabbed my stomach and winced after each gasp.

When I finally made it to the kitchen, breakfast was waiting for me, but there was no sign of Brian. I was relieved, but still nervous. I kept waiting for the sound of the garage door opening. I tried to sit down, but I couldn't. I didn't even stay to eat. I wrapped up some food in a paper towel and rushed out of the door, forgetting to lock it.

I went out the back way, surveying the grounds. It looked like Emperor Caligula had hosted the party. The cement was still wet. To the far-left corner a chair was tipped over. Another was lying on its back in the grass. Empty beer cans and glasses littered the backyard. Towels were piled on the remaining chairs and Jacuzzi. There was even one in the Jacuzzi, along with some floating plastic cups, grass, and cigarette butts. On the patio table, I spotted an empty can of tuna. I cringed, stretching my neck back and frowning my lips. On the other side of the table was the wooden pipe. Near the bowl it was black and dirty with ash. I shook my head and walked away.

It was well past dusk and the upstairs of San Francisco Coffee House was completely dark except for a few candles that burned at the tables. I saw the outline of Andrew's face already at our usual spot.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"Hey, man."

No opening joke about the party this time. No one liner we had been repeating the night before. He was gripping his coffee with both hands.

“That was some party last night, eh?” I sat down in front of him.

“What are you drinking?”

“Hmmm. I don’t know. What did you think about the party last night? Man, I got stoned.”

“Yeah. Me too.”

I could feel my face burning red. Again I was struggling to form some timeline of details. I was trying to guess what Andrew was thinking. What detail was I missing in my timeline that he possessed? Why was he breaking our pattern of opening jokes?

“Are you okay, man?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I’m just tired I guess.” Andrew turned around and watched the highland traffic pass.

I looked down myself and watched the sidewalks fill with the weekend crowd of young businessmen and women and aged hippies turned yuppies walking towards the bars. “Me too. I don’t remember passing out at all. Do you?”

He turned around and looked down at his drink again. “I sort of do. I ended up on the couch.”

I was at a loss. How did he end up on the couch, I wondered, where I was obviously trying to sleep and I made it upstairs into the bed of a man twice my age? My face was prickly. I wanted to know why Andrew didn’t say anything to stop me from going upstairs. Not only that, how could he take my spot on the couch without a second thought. Did he watch Brian take me upstairs and ignore it? I had sickly images of Brian carrying me upstairs or holding my hand as I followed behind him, all the while Andrew saying goodnight to us while he plopped down on the couch.

I kept my gaze below, afraid to look Andrew in the eye. In a parking lot next to a teller machine there was a couple making out against a car. He had his hands placed on the hood behind him for balance. A couple of guys at the teller machine were watching them and snickering.

Again, still looking across the street, I finally spoke to Andrew. "How did you end up on the couch? That's the last place I remember being."

"Rob and I stayed out and smoked for awhile after you went in. Brian said he was going to check to see if you were alright."

"Brian came back in after me?"

"Yeah, he just said he was going to see if you were alright."

"And that was it? He never came back out?"

"No. When I went in, no one was on the couch so I took it."

I thought back to the Jacuzzi. I wanted to think I had just made it up, that Brian never really touched my leg. I remembered telling Brian that I would be okay and I went in by myself. But if what Andrew was telling me really was true, that Brian did come in after me, I was beginning to believe he did run his leg across mine on purpose.

"So he did come in after me?"

"Yes, man. Jeez," Andrew laughed, like I was joking around with him, playing up the forgetful stoner role. "Dude, you *were* stoned, weren't you." His mood seemed to lighten. "Man, that was some good tuna, eh?"

I shook my head and groaned.

“You remember that. Tuna Biscuit!” He was laughing. Now he was looking at me. He imitated me taking my first bite out of the repulsive biscuit: “Oh, Oh yeah, that’s good.”

“Man, fuck you.”

He was still laughing. “What?”

“Ugh. Nothing.”

“Come on. I was just kidding.”

I took a sip out of my drink. The coffee was blazing hot and when I took the sip it singed my mouth. I knew that after I opened my mouth and gasped for air, it was going to have that dry, numb, burnt taste. I wanted to yell some profanity, some angry remark at what I had done.

I looked down again, my eyes watering furiously, and saw the guys below still watching the couple on the car. She was kissing the front of his neck and he was trying to open the door and lead her in. One of the guys watching shouted, “Whew!”

“I’ve gotta use the can.” I stood up, knocking my chair backwards to the floor.

I reached the bathroom with a spinning head. I must’ve stood up too fast, because everything had a red tint around it, the blood rushing to my head. Before I could move to the stall, Andrew came in behind me.

“Hey, man, thought I’d join you,” he said.

“Jeez, it’s hot up there.”

We both faced separate urinals.

“You all right?” he questioned, staring in front of him.

“Oh, yeah... I just burned myself. Coffee’s hot.”

“You looked pretty pissed about the tuna biscuit.”

I laughed through my nose and coughed.

When we were washing our hands, he asked me: “So, what the fuck did happen last night, man? I just remember passing out on the couch downstairs.”

“I passed out too.”

“Where did you end up sleeping, though? I didn’t think there was anymore room.”

Even though I believed Andrew had no idea were this was leading consciously, I knew what direction he was taking it. I had done something he would never think of doing, would never let happen, no matter what. And if I told him what did happen, even though I couldn’t really say what really did, every time he would see a gay person, he would think of me sleeping in Brian’s bed and shiver. He would judge me. Why, I wanted to say, does it matter where I slept? I wanted to lie. Tell him, maybe, I slept in my car, or I fell asleep in the tub, something outrageous like that.

“I slept upstairs.” I said this as I walked out the door, throwing away the paper towel and not letting him get another word in.

Andrew and I returned to our table. Again, I looked down into the parking lot across the street. The guy who was kissing the girl was unable to get her into the car. She was leaning against the door and throwing up. The teller machine was unattended and the couple was underneath a lone yellow lamplight, her bent over and he holding her up. It was like a scene out of a Tennessee Williams play, a prelude to an opening act, something that would be going on in the background of a New Orleans street corner.

Andrew started again. In between sips of his drink, he asked, "Where upstairs did you sleep?"

I watched two men sit down at a table across from us, on the other side of the rooftop. They were holding hands and when they sat down, one of the men reached across the table and rubbed the arm of the other.

"Why?"

"Oh, man. Look at those two guys over there." Andrew wasn't disgusted. He didn't have a look of nausea on his face, and neither did he become infuriated at the sight of two men showing their affections for one another in public. Instead, he just laughed, like it was funny, like he was in on some joke. He looked at me, too, like we were both in on the joke together.

"I slept in Brian's bed."

"Ohhh, man!" He was laughing louder. "Was it fun?"

"Yeah, right."

"I'm just kidding. Was he in the bed too?"

"I think so."

The smile from his face withered away. "What happened?"

"I don't know. Nothing, I guess."

"Eww. How did you let him take you to bed?"

"I didn't. Why didn't you fucking stop him? You took my spot on the couch."

"Me? I didn't know. You were gone by the time I went in."

I wanted to remind Andrew of the party at my house the summer before. My parents went to a cook out for Labor Day. I had Andrew over, along with some other

friends, and we all drank about a six-pack of beer each. We were yelling at my neighbors and running and jumping into the pool at full speed. I became so careless I took a leak right off the upstairs balcony. All the while, Andrew said nothing about it. He didn't stop me from doing anything. I could have drowned in the pool, had the neighbors call the police on me, but he didn't seem to care. He kept laughing and cheering me on. And when my parents came home, Andrew was the only one left and we were both real drunk. Instead of staying, helping me to play it off, he walked right out the front door without even saying goodbye. "You saw him come in after me."

"Yeah, to-*check*-on-you. I didn't know he was going to take you upstairs."

I mumbled something incoherent.

"You always pull this shit with me," I said a little louder.

"What does that mean?" Andrew said, moving back from the table.

"You don't do anything. You never do."

"Yeah, right. I didn't know."

We were both standing. The two men at the other side of the rooftop were staring at us. I caught a quick glance of a man and woman fighting on the sidewalk below. He was trying to put his arm around her and she was pushing him away, her hand shoving his face. He was laughing but she looked like she was about to cry or punch him.

I believed Andrew had no idea what I was talking about. It never occurred to him, I thought, that he has done this before; that this habit of never helping me was not a habit for him at all. He had never thought to do it, and because he never thought of doing it, it wasn't his problem.

My fingers were tapping the black-iron table, making the rest of my drink vibrate in its cup. When Andrew and I went to a Halloween bash, I walked out on him. I accused him of owing me money, and when he refused to pay, I rushed up the basement stairs, out the front door and called a cab. I tried to tell him how much he owed me and why, but he just said, “no way. I don’t owe you anything.” As I tapped my fingers, I remembered how ridiculous I felt, dressed up as some famous literary character, with big smoke-tinted glasses, a cigarette holder, a straw hat, and a Hawaiian t-shirt, turning around and walking up the stairs. As if making myself noticeable by arguing with my friend so loud people could hear it over the music wasn’t enough, I had to wear an outrageous costume that people would identify me in: “Look at the idiot,” I imagined them saying as it happened, “yelling and running up the stairs in the faded Hawaiian shirt and goofy hat.”

“I better get going. I gotta to pack tomorrow and I’m really tired.”

“Yeah... I’m pretty tired myself.”

I waved Andrew by and let him pass. I followed him downstairs and out to the parking lot across the street. We both got in our cars without saying a word, but before he pulled away, Andrew rolled down his window.

“Gimme a call before you leave.”

“Alright. Yeah, sure,” I said and we both drove off towards opposite ends of the parking lot.

IV. Giving It the Old College Try

The following weekend, I left for the small Catholic college I had chosen to attend for my freshman year. I never called Andrew. It wasn't worth calling him; I knew he would ask me what I was doing, and I would tell him I was packing for school. He would say, "cool," and again, ask me what I was up to. It would be a cycle of repeating pointless details. We would say little and talk about the most uneventful happenings since we last met at the coffee shop and say our goodbyes. I kept telling myself before I left, "I'll call him, I'll call him, I'll call him." On the drive up, I ordered myself to call him once I got settled in.

I never said goodbye to Brian and Uncle Rob either. If I could barely face Andrew in person, I knew I wouldn't have the guts to see either of them at all. I imagined that Brian told Uncle Rob that I slept in the same bed with him, clothed in just a pair of underwear. There was no telling what else he said about the night. Maybe Uncle Rob helped Brian carry me up the stairs. Even if Brian said absolutely nothing to him about the night, Uncle Rob would find some way to get it out of me, and then he would laugh about it, giggling at what might have taken place. I could see him waving his index finger in front of me, telling me I was a naughty boy.

After I had moved all of my boxes and clothes into my dorm room, I began to unpack. I paused every so often and watched my roommate, Adam, unload his trunk of clothes. He was a large man. Okay, well, not large, but roundish, with close shaved, thinning hair--heredity or stress had reached him early. He spoke with an uncultured southern accent, one you'd find in a medium sized rural town outside an urban metropolis

like Atlanta or Charlotte. The slouch in his body as he walked over to the closet, his smooth shuffle, and light whistling made me think of a kind, old man.

“Hey, is it okay if I have this closet?” he asked.

“Yeah, sure,” I said lightly.

“I hope you don’t mind, but I went ahead and took the bed on this side.”

“No. Sure. It’s cool.” I looked up at him while he was arranging something in his closet. He was so pleasant, I thought, willing to please and make sure I was happy with the choice he made. I felt like telling him I wanted that bed just to see what he would say.

Steel beams traced the ceiling of our dorm room that was drowned in beige paint; I could see where somebody had put glow stickers of stars up there. I wondered how long they had been up there. I hoped they still worked, that they still had some glow to them and hadn’t faded out yet. All I could see then were slight outlines of dots, planets, and moons. The floor was icy white tiles and on each side, a dark, heavy twin bed. Next to the beds were two desks, still bare and stacked with unopened boxes. Towards the rear were two windows, one with an air conditioning unit and another with faded blinds. To the left of the entrance were two closets with no doors, and in the middle of them, a dresser with a mirror nailed to the pale painted cinder block wall. One of the slats of wood above Adam’s closet was broken.

Luckily, Adam had a roll of carpet to add a note of comfort to the dusty wasteland. It was deep seawater blue, and when we finally rolled it out, the floor seemed to form a dark, square iceberg.

I moved over to my newly made bed with its clean, crisp, white sheets--courtesy

of mom--turned around to face the wall and lay down on my side. In my shorts and t-shirt, I shivered. I put my hands between my knees to warm them and bent my legs a little bit to get comfortable. I wanted to pull the sheets over my head. I wanted put the pillow above my face. I wanted Adam to leave. I was living with someone, I told myself. I was living with someone in a little square room. I wanted to go home. I wanted my parents to come pick me up and take me home. I could be home, in my bedroom, all by myself. I felt my eyes water. Adam was unpacking a box of books and his printer. Please don't move, don't make a sound I wanted to tell him. Please let me go to sleep by myself, alone. I turned my head and bit down on my pillow, hard.

Adam and I walked to the auditorium together for freshman orientation. There was a feeling of electric nervousness in the air. I looked around me, at the students walking along the pathway and open field towards the lighted building, a beacon of some new acquaintance. The students were buzzing off the escape from high school, yet restraining their joy because of the unaccustomed innocence of being a freshman again. They looked tense... tight, like they knew they were walking in the right direction, but they weren't sure why they were walking there, or if they were doing it right. I shook my head and tried to ignore the knot in my stomach. This was nothing, I thought. This was nothing.

Although I thoroughly believed that sentiment, my hands were still a little cold in the humid summer air. My heart did beat just a little faster than usual. And the more I looked at the people around me, the more I picked up on their feelings and their needs to attach themselves to a group. They hurried their shuffle to the auditorium to escape the

brutal openness of being outdoors and alone, amongst the other dozens of people scurrying to the safety-in-numbers, surrounded-by-walls auditorium. My roommate especially. At every phrase, every boring and uneventful comment I said, Adam laughed his post-pubescent-southern laugh and seemed to quicken his pace every second.

Adam and I reached the auditorium in one piece. Well, two pieces I guess--an out of tune duet. The auditorium was old. It had wood parquet floors, high ceilings, and an upstairs with a fast food restaurant: a mom and pop grease joint. Inside the buzz continued. A hum with a sound of desperation. We were waiting for the "peer leaders" to come out and split us into groups so we could have someone to latch onto.

I suppose I should have known--expected--my peer leader to be who he was. I guess, on the drive up to school, sitting in the back seat, praying I was going to have a blast my first year in college and asking the dear sweet lord to help me meet lots of people who will like me, I was asking for it. I was asking for the man they called Stubbs. Everyone seemed to know Stubbs, and when he entered the room all of the people in the auditorium seemed to brighten up and get excited. Each of the peer leaders walked up to him and shook his hand; some of them hugged him like he was a long lost brother or lover returning from his long voyage at sea.

Stubbs, walking with a slight limp because of the brace worn around his right leg (which, I learned, was due to a near fatal accident during a failed attempt at a keg stand) was a heavysset man, with tangled, long blond hair and a freckled face. When he smiled, a faint glimmer of silver fillings shinned in the back of his mouth. And when Stubbs spoke, he imbibed his words with a sharp New Jersey accent. I suspected I could find him on the board walk of the Jersey Shore any summer night, one hand wrapped around a

plastic cup of beer, the other around a hair sprayed woman. He read off the list of students in his group and told us where to meet.

There were eight of us in the group. We sat in a circle of couches while Stubbs gave us a semi-rehearsed speech about the activities of the college.

“The church is, of course, open all the time. You’ll usually see a couple of the brothers in there. They’re pretty friendly, so you can talk to them if you want.”

“Do they give Vespers?” someone asked.

“Umm... Yeah, I think on Wednesday nights.”

Church church church; I puffed my lips and raised an eyebrow.

“What about the restaurant in the auditorium?” Someone else said. Stubbs went on to explain what the restaurant was and that we could use our meal cards there.

I rolled my eyes. I bit down a little on my index finger and looked around at my fellow students before asking, “So, how about the parties?” I expected a laugh and a “whew hew!” but all I got was a clipped, half chuckle.

I watched Stubbs grin. It was more a grin of embarrassment than something that spoke the phrase, “hey, now, I’ll let you in on it.” I shuddered in a way only visible to myself.

“Ummmm, yeah, there are some parties,” he laughed nervously, turning his head to each side. “They’re usually at the apartments in the back of campus.” When I saw how familiar Stubbs was to everyone when they announced his entrance back at the auditorium, how everybody who went to school with him lit up at the mere mention of his name, I wanted to be a part of that. I wanted him to tell me to meet him afterwards and then, when I did meet him, he’d tell me to follow him, that he would show me where

to go. I wanted to be his understudy. When the lead actor was sick, I wanted to be the guy everybody pointed to and said, “Okay, now you do it.”

“You’ll even get to party with the brothers,” Stubbs said. I didn’t care about the brothers showing up at the party. “Christ!” I fumed under my breath; I felt my face prickling. I smiled back. “Cool.”

I sat astonished at what had happened. I had spent most of my life standing at the back of the line or outside the circle. I never had the guts to take that first step, to introduce myself to the people having the most fun or to ask if I could do what they were doing. I always waited, waited for them to come to me, and they never did. This time, I went to them and it got me nothing but a tingling face.

“So...” I drifted to the girl sitting next to me after the peer meeting was over, not yet resigned to going to the back of the line. I told her my name and asked, “What’s your name?” as I looked down at her nametag.

She said, “Yup, there it is. Melissa.”

“So, what do you thi—“

“Oh, hey Stephanie!” she said to her friend walking in the room and got up and went to her.

I needed to get some air, even if it was 95 degrees out and the air made your breath scorched and your lungs feel like you inhaled a mouthful of sauna. It was a hot, humid, sticky, August afternoon, where you could feel the heat fuming from the grass itself. I left the peer session feeling just as hot and sticky.

I was reeling, a little dizzy, a little light headed from the feeling of being alone, like I made the wrong choice. I remembered the party—before Aunt Brian rubbed his leg

against mine. I felt open and loose that night. I wasn't afraid to be loud, to be goofy, to be laughable around people. I didn't care and I knew the people around me didn't either. I figured I could make that a habit in college, be more expressive, more open, more sociable. I wanted to be that guy who everybody asked about, especially the girls. "Where is he? Did you see where he went? Will you tell him I said hi? Tell him to stop by my room for a little action, will you?"

Outside, in the "quad," the grassy area with a volleyball court, surrounded by all the rotting dorm rooms, I ran into Adam talking to three girls. I scoffed at my own failure. They were all laughing, and Adam was leaning back and putting his hand over his paunch. It looked so easy for him. I imagined him a cowboy, standing out there in a pair of shorts, a sleeveless t-shirt, a cowboy hat, big leather gloves and boots. He was leaning against a fencepost with horses grazing behind him, tilting his hat above his brow, and the ladies were telling him how durn funny he was.

"Yeah. Um, hmm, I heard about that," Adam was saying to one of the girls. I caught only the last half of the conversation. "You did that!" his laughed boomed as he leaned forward and clutched at his sides. "Well, I don't know what I would have done, but... shoot."

I walked up to them, drifting a little behind Adam, almost leaning over his shoulder, trying to peak in.

Adam introduced me to the girls. I didn't shake anyone's hand, just mumbled a hello and waved when Adam told me their names. When he got to Jenna, I looked her in the eye. She smiled and turned towards the girl next to her. Jenna was the only one I saw. Jenna told us she was from Florida and had already taken some college classes.

I looked down at the grass, trying find the words to speak. I guess I thought the grass was supposed to give me some unheard wisdom. Umm, my mind was saying, umm. Ummmmmmmmmm--

“So, you’re from Florida?” is what I came up with. She nodded. “I’ve been there.” Supposing it was in my repertoire at the time, I would have told myself I needed a drink.

“Most people have,” Jenna laughed back.

I bit my tongue and laughed with her.

Jenna asked if we were going to the dance later that night—one of those back to school dances. She said we could meet her and the other girls there. Of course we agreed. Before Adam and I left to go get some lunch, we told the girls we’d meet them at the dance.

The dance was held at the same auditorium where I was earlier in the day. The floors had been cleaned to a nice, wooden shine. The DJ was set up at the far left corner. Non-alcoholic drinks were being served at a makeshift bar towards the rear.

I ran into Jenna as soon as Adam and I got to the auditorium. She was dancing with her friends and when she saw me walk onto the dance floor, she ran up to me and gave me a hug, tightly wrapping her arms around my neck. I smelled the taste of vodka and punch on her breath. Obviously not a concoction made at the makeshift bar. She was wearing a tight jean mini-skirt and a black shirt with a low cut neck. I could see the top half of Jenna’s breasts peeking out of it. I could see the trickles of moisture running down her neck, down her chest, down into areas I wished that I could see. Her forehead

was damp, making her long brown hair curl around it. She grinned at me and I smiled back, partly because of the warmth of her body pressed against mine in a tight embrace, partly because I was a little surprised at her affection, and partly because I had been drinking as well.

“It’s freakin’ hot in here!” she yelled over the music.

“God, I know!” I yelled back into her ear. I paused for a few seconds and stared at her ear. It looked so soft. God it was hot in there. I glanced passed her and waved a hello to her friends who were talking to Adam. They were all watching us except for Adam who was looking at the floor to his side, like he was waiting for someone to speak into his ear over the music.

“Whew! What’s that I smell on your breath?” Jenna smirked.

“Guilty as charged,” I said.

My night had started a few hours before the dance when one of the girls I had met earlier out in the quad got her older brother to buy some vodka for Adam and me. We decided it would be best to take a few nips to help soften our stiff joints so we could dance better at the party.

I filled my blue plastic cup half way full of vodka and added some 7-Up. I licked my fingers because a little had dripped onto them and then took a small taste of the vodka—I had never had it before. When I inhaled, the sharp, coolness of my breath caught me off guard, and I choked up a gagging cough. Adam squeaked out a giggle. “That’s some good shit,” I said in between gasps. I filled the rest of the cup up with the soda and mixed it up again. Before I could take another sip, Adam put his fingertip on the top of my cup and spoke.

"Come on, man," he asked in his slow southern tone. "Do a shot with me." He poured the liquor into a shot glass until it spilled over the top. He took his own shot glass in his hand and clinked it against mine. I opened my eyes wider and put the glass to my lips. I sucked down the vodka and felt my stomach turning itself inside out. I swallowed hard. My eyes watered and my throat stung. Adam yelled loudly and then the music started. Well, I suppose the music had been going the whole time, but that was the first time I heard it.

"Oh, God! That was horrible!" I gagged again.

My head felt as if it was floating on air. My stomach felt like it was on fire. I could feel the vodka seeping into my bloodstream. My arms, hands, legs, and feet were heating to the warmth of the drink. I collapsed onto my bed, sighing loudly. Leaning back so I could brace myself against the wall, I stretched my legs out. I shook my head and blinked.

"You alright?" Adam asked.

"Yeaahhhh," I moaned. I took a big gulp of my drink, now a little watered down from the fast melting ice; I knew the cup was still half full of vodka, but I could taste the alcohol less and less each swallow. I splashed a little more Smirnoff into my cup. Youth and alcohol were on my side. I wanted to dance.

"Hey, turn that up," I told Adam. "Tumbling Dice" was exploding on my speakers. The room was warm, charged. I could feel a pulse, an energy surging through the walls. Probably the alcohol thinking for me. But it felt soothing. It felt like there should have been a campfire in the middle of our dorm room and that we should be crowded around it passing the bottle to each other and talking about the act of drinking,

how alcohol can soothe the temperament. I looked at Adam, watching, waiting for a sign to light a match and touch it to the carpet. The pulse reverberating all around me was quickening, and the warmth was seeping through my flesh. I wanted to close my eyes, but I knew Adam would say something, would worry that I was going to pass out. I didn't want the night to get serious at all. I felt comforted, comfortable--

"You're drunk," said Adam, giggling and peering at me with squinted, watery eyes.

"So are you," I said. We both laughed. "You ready to dance tonight?"

"Hey, that one girl's pretty hot?"

"Huh? What girl?" I asked nervously, leaning forward.

"The one from Florida. Jenna." He was leaning back in his bed now, his hands clasped around the back of his head

"Jenna? Yeah, she's damn hot. I think she was giving me the eye," I said jokingly.

"What? Shhhhit." Adam rubbed his face. "You wish."

His tone was light hearted, but a little biting too. "No, no. She was giving me the eye, man."

"Yeah..." he trailed off without finishing his sentence and took a long pull off the bottle. He tipped it so high some of it ran down his chin and onto his shirt. He looked down at the spill, pulling his shirt closer to his eye to inspect it.

I got up and sat down at my desk. Things were getting serious, and it was making me wonder what Adam was thinking. That long pull he took off the bottle didn't convince me he was joking.

I took another drink and forced a smile. Adam poured himself a new cupful, looked at me and said "bottoms up" very calmly and polished off his drink in one go. I could see the bottom of my cup clearly. I stared down into it and ran my fingers along the rim.

"You gonna put the moves on her?" I said, again, trying to retain a smile.

"I'm a gentleman," he said in the strongest southern accent I had heard him use all day.

"Yes, of course," I put on a southern accent as well, making my words as formal as possible. "But I do believe even a gentleman enjoys the company of a lady."

Adam's grin was returning and he put the vodka bottle to his eye and gazed into it. "Damn I'm drunk."

I stood up, falteringly, barely catching myself on the desk before falling back over. "Let's go dance" I muttered and walked out the door with Adam following behind me.

Jenna and I released our embrace. I looked down at her shoes, a pair of black pumps with some nice leather straps across the top and back.

"Well, you wanna dance?" she asked.

I looked back up. She was smiling at me, waiting for an answer. I felt like I was wavering, slightly. I hoped she didn't notice. "Yeah. Yeah," I said, over eagerly.

I wasn't sure what song the DJ was playing, but it was definitely something that you could grind to. Jenna and I started dancing like a couple of white folks. I tried to move my hips, swaying back and forth, pretending I was one funky guy. I moved my

arms around as well, following the rhythm. Sometimes I would put my hands on the top of my thighs and shake my butt. I turned my head to each side every so often, pretending that was part of my dance, but more so checking to see who or if anyone was watching me.

Jenna, though, was much more successful in getting her groove on. She was a girl, and girls seem to have more natural rhythm, more ability to get down when the time comes to get down. She followed the bass and rhythm hypnotically. Her hips played with the beats. Her feet, depending on which one she was using less to balance on, turned outwards slightly. The effect was erotic. When one foot did pivot outwards, she would bend down a little, parting her legs. Her mini-skirt would slide up her legs, exposing her upper thighs. The first time she did this, I closed my eyes and let my head fall back; "Oh, God," I said to myself, like someone who had just had their pants unzipped by a woman for the first time. I think she noticed. I started waving my hand in front of my face as if I were hot.

Another song came on, a little slower on the tempo, but none-the-less packed full of hard driving bass lines and rhythm. Up until this point, we had been dancing like uncomfortable teenagers, about two or three feet away from each other, sensing each other, watching each other casually, yet intently. I was glad there was something to be cautious about. I was glad that I could see her being careful around me.

I was sure I wasn't imagining it, that the erection in my pants wasn't a false alarm. Every time I looked at her face, I could see her green eyes sparkling. She kept biting her lips like she was stopping herself from saying something. She put her hand on the back of her neck, tilted it to the side, and closed her eyes. I wanted to grab her by the

waist, lock my hands right on the small of her back and push my lips hard against hers. I couldn't hear the music anymore.

Then we moved closer together, crossing the imaginary barrier we had made on the dance floor.

"Hi," was all I could think of saying when we let our bodies touch. I don't remember who made the first move to dance closer, but there we were, ignoring the noise, ignoring the music, feeling only each other. She looked at me and laughed a little in recognition that she knew something was going on. She too was willing to see what would happen. She was open to just about anything, I sensed through her eyes that never moved away from mine, and so was I. I did what I wanted to do: I wrapped my arms around her waist and pulled her against me. The strong smell of her shampoo mixed with the faint smell of her sweat, now soaking her forehead and hairline, was like an aphrodisiac, and together with the flaming heat of the Auditorium, I was light headed.

I finally smiled back, matching her grin and raising my eyebrows. We pressed even closer together and our legs fit together like a jigsaw puzzle. I pressed tighter on her back with my hands; it was moist and it felt so good and warm to be touching her. I wanted to say "Oh, God" again but I knew she would hear me. I kept absolutely quiet, afraid I might scare her away, like she was some wild creature I had found in the woods and was sneaking up on. But what made it even better was the fact that I had known Jenna for all of a day, and she was letting me do this. She was letting me touch her, wrap my arms around her, and grind against her with our legs entwined. It gave the situation a whole new meaning, new desperation. Some, almost perfect stranger, was allowing me to share in her lust and was returning it as much as I was giving it. The feeling was like

cheating on a spouse—like there was some added pleasure in believing that it was wrong and I could get caught at any moment. It was the newness of the experience, the unsurety and Catholic guilt that I was somehow sinning that made it sweeter for me, that made me want to do it more, to take it further.

Jenna and I were dancing with our heads tilted down towards the other's neck, leaning into each other. She tightened her grip around my neck and rubbed my back.

I traced my lips against her neck, tasting her salty skin. I moved from the top of her neck, right underneath her ear, down to the base of her neck, above her shoulders. She stopped rubbing my back and pressed her fingertips into my back. My eyes widened. She put her lips to my ear. I could hear her breathing heavily into my ear, and I thought I heard a slight moan.

It was so dark in the auditorium. There were only a few, dusty and aged yellow lights shining dully from the ceiling. They illuminated very little, and the lackluster reflection they gave to the wooden floor provided an eerie, mellow glow that saturated the room. Covering the large windows was a dense layer of moisture, visibly illustrating the heat and humidity permeating throughout. There was a huge crowd now. The building was full. There was really no room to move around, no place for Jenna and me to go. We could only move our bodies together, in place. I still couldn't hear the music. I could only hear Jenna's breathing. I wanted to look at her through this dark heat that enclosed us.

I took my face away from her neck and pulled back a little. Before I could look into her eyes, we started kissing. Both of us, at the same time, lunged for each other's lips. I felt a surge of adrenaline pump through my heart. I was like some animal craving

another. I moved my hands from the small of her back, down further and squeezed her towards me. She took one of her hands off my shoulder and did the same thing. We were no longer dancing. We were making out, lips pressed tightly together, breathing heavily through our nostrils. I didn't care if anyone was watching. I didn't care if the music had actually stopped, so everybody could pay full attention to what was going on, on the middle of the dance floor. In fact, if I had to trace one thought that was going through my mind--besides the thought that I was kissing a girl who I had just met on my first day of college--I wanted everyone to see. I wanted everyone around us to see us kissing. People would talk about Jenna and me. I didn't mind. I wanted people to know me, that I was the one making out with the girl on the dance floor. I had forgotten about Adam.

The kiss, though, was short lived. Jenna pulled away from me, leaving my mouth open in wonder.

"I can't," Jenna said. She turned around and ran out of the auditorium, leaving through the rear entrance.

I didn't even get a chance to say anything. I felt like I was trapped in the middle of one of those shots from a eighties movie where the camera cranes over the one person not dancing at a high school prom or some club, something like *Pretty in Pink* or *Bright Lights, Big City*, where the lights illuminate the smoke, the peoples' heads bobbing up and down to the beat of the music, the bar in the distance, and the one lone person who seems to have a giant circle of space engulfing him. I was that person, I was Andrew McCarthy/Michael J. Fox feeling the emptiness around me grow, slowly becoming accustomed to the music again, the faces looking at me and most likely laughing at me.

The music kept growing in volume, the bass shaking my body, the treble ringing in my ears. I was feeling dizzy and definitely not drunk. I felt tired, hot, worn out and uncomfortable. My sweaty body felt dirty. I shook my head. A graceful exit was definitely not an option. I watched Jenna's friends leave, and, of course, they were going to her. Adam trailed behind the rest of them and before he followed, made eye contact with me and pursed his lips together. He rubbed the back of his head and walked out the door.

I put my hands in my pockets and turned towards the rear entrance myself; better to try to leave unnoticed, pretend I was just going back to my dorm room to hang out instead of chasing after a woman I barely knew.

When I made it outside the door, my sluggish walk turned into a jog. There was a walkway that led back to the dorm rooms and I was treading along it rapidly. Unfortunately, I ran into Adam and the girls. They were in a group talking with each other, and when they saw me coming towards them, they stopped moving their mouths and stared at me approaching.

"What happened?" asked one of the girls before I had a chance to stop and catch my breath.

"Yeah. What did you do," said Adam.

Why were they trying to blame this on me? I thought. Surely they were watching us while it happened. "What do you mean, what did I do?"

"She looked pissed, man," said Adam. He turned to the girls and they nodded their heads in support.

"We just started kissing and she ran off. I don't know." I was shaking, and they

noticed. Adam looked me up and down. "I need to go see if she's alright," I said, turning towards the girls and away from Adam's glare.

"Oh no," said one of the girls. "You're not going anywhere. You've done enough already," she continued. I looked at her, holding my arms in my hands, trying to stop my shivering and shaking. My brows tightened and furrowed and I looked at her, telling her with my eyes that she couldn't stop me.

"Are you fucking blind? Did you not see us on the dance floor? She kissed me for Christ's sake. I have every right to see her. I just want to make sure she's okay." I had never talked to a woman like that before in my life. I had never yelled at a woman, never used the word "fuck" like that in a sentence to a woman. I looked surprised. She looked pissed.

Before she could say anything, I ran. I just took off, breaking through the group. Adam tried to stop me, shooting his arm at me to grab my shirt, but I made it out of his grasp and took off before anyone else could try. I ran past my dorm room, up a gravel hill, up the dorm driveway, up another grass hill, up four flights of stairs and down a hall to her dorm room.

Each dorm suite had a little hallway that was enclosed by a big metal door. Before I opened the door, I bent over, trying to catch my breath. I was so damn thirsty and my heart was pounding in my head—it was the vodka that did me in. I was sucking in the air, sighing every time I let out a breath. I couldn't go to Jenna wheezing like this, and besides, I hadn't yet decided if I was doing the right thing. I needed to rest.

I sat down and hugged my knees. I started laughing. I don't know why, but I started laughing. All I could think about was what I had done on my first day in college.

What, I asked myself, am I going to do when I get back to my room. What am I going to say to Adam? The man will probably want to move out and the week isn't over.

"Alright. Alright. First things first," I muttered, groaning as I stood up. I knocked on the hallway door. Nobody answered. I knocked louder and louder and kept knocking. "Jenna?" I spoke through the single glass window in the door. I looked around me and dropped my shoulders in despair. But, before I could turn around and leave, I saw her door opening in the darkness of the hallway. When she reached the end of the hall and her face was visible through the window, I could tell she had been crying. I tried to smile but I couldn't move my lips.

She unlocked the door and didn't say anything, and walked back to her dorm room. I followed her and shut the door behind me and watched her collapse onto the bed. It was dark. She didn't have the lights on and the street lamp's fluorescent shine coming through her blinds gave the room its only source of illumination. Even through the moderate darkness, I could tell she wasn't in her skirt anymore. She was wearing a t-shirt and some Umbros. Her legs still looked great.

"I'm sorry about running out. I sort of have a boyfriend," she said, looking down at the floor.

What the hell was I supposed to say to something like that? I met this beautiful woman on my first day of college. I thought that about her even before I took my first drink. I thought, when she wrapped her arms around me and pushed her tongue into my mouth, that she probably felt the same way. It was my first instant attraction experience. It was the first time that I didn't have to work to get a girl to like me. She liked me just how I was. I was actually physically attractive to this girl on looks alone, not through a

long serious of dates and talking and phone calls and movie watching and dinners. I was just there and that was enough for her to want to grind against my body and let me kiss her neck. But, she had a goddamn boyfriend. “Oh,” I said.

I sat down next to her on the bed. I still wanted to kiss her, touch her, feel her body against mine—even if she had a boyfriend. I didn’t want to get up and walk out that door without feeling her body against mine, her lips touching mine. I still wanted to run my hand across her leg, to feel her warm, smooth skin. She wouldn’t have kissed me if she were so sure of things with her boyfriend, I thought to myself, trying to justify my desires.

“Then why did you kiss me,” I added, not sure if I wanted to hear the answer.

“You can’t expect anything to happen tomorrow. Tonight would...” before she finished she slowly leaned into me and started kissing me. I mumbled “okay” in between breaths, when our lips were separate for an instant.

Jenna put her arms around me as we kissed and leaned back, laying her head on her pillow and bringing me down with her. She rubbed her leg against mine. I tried not to smile while we were kissing, but it was hard.

Jenna was running her hands through my hair with one hand and trying to unzip my pants with the other. She pushed me off of her and stopped kissing me, leaving my zipper halfway down. Instead of her coming to some realization about what was going on, she grabbed the sides of her shorts and pulled them off, furiously, angrily, underwear and all. I finished the job she started on me, standing up and taking off my pants, tripping as I tried to get my jeans past my socks. I moved over to the bed and she pulled me back on top of her.

V. Morning After Bitter Pills

On the morning after, I woke up in Jenna's bed, alone. I wasn't sure where she was, but I didn't care. Even though my head was hurting and my stomach was churning, I was grinning just to be lying in a woman's bed. A new start I was thinking to myself. Things are fresh. I welcomed the warm glow from Jenna's window and the hum of her air conditioner. I pulled her cotton sheets up to my shoulders and sighed.

I couldn't help but to feel relieved, like I had broken a curse. Ever since the night of the party back home, and what had happened with Andrew at the coffee shop, I had this overwhelming sense of dread because I had slept in the same bed with another man. Although more time had passed since the party and I was fairly certain that sleeping was all we did, the vision of me waking up in Brian's bed, the blazing sun glaring off the white walls and the satin sheets was seared in my mind. And adding to the embarrassment of this memory, I believed that Andrew thought the worst—that the fact that Brian and I were in the same bed was enough for a guilty verdict in Andrew's eyes. That was what made the scene stay in my mind; Andrew wasn't about to forget what he assumed happened between Brian and me and because of that, I wouldn't be able to either.

I wanted to call Andrew. Tell him the good news. Tell him that the night of the party was a mistake. A slip-up. How could I have done what you think I have done? Look what happened last night with Jenna and me? That was what I heard in my imaginary conversation with him. It was, in a way, an accident that I slept in Brian's room in the first place I wanted to tell him. I didn't go to his room on my own free will.

I had no purpose for going up there at all. I was dragged upstairs and my best friend did nothing about it but take my sleeping space.

I sat up in Jenna's bed. The more I thought about it, the more I wanted to rub it in Andrew's face what had happened between Jenna and me than merely brag about it—let him know what I did and he didn't do on his first night of college.

I got out of bed and put on my clothes. When I stood up, I was dizzy, and red dots popped up in front of me, spreading the length of my eyes. I needed food before I made that phone call. Best to gloat on a full stomach. I left Jenna a note, scribbling out sentence after sentence before I came up with, "Call me." I was sure she was off telling her friends what we did together and I would hear from her later. I pictured Jenna laughing with her friends in one of their rooms, telling them all of the details, telling them she can't believe that she did it and how fun it was. I even imagined that her friends weren't pissed off at me anymore for the way I acted on the walkway after the dance. Maybe, I hoped, Jenna would smooth things out and tell them that she was glad I made it back to her room. That if they did stop me, she wouldn't have gotten lucky.

Outside, on the walk to the cafeteria, I looked up at the sun and squinted. I remembered that the day before I was at the point of nausea from the hot August sun when I left the peer meeting. But this time, I didn't want to go to my dorm room and hide and crawl under the covers. I wanted to be out and around other people.

People were walking around the quad, some were throwing a baseball around, and some were playing volleyball. I was surrounded by activity and with all of these people outside, I felt like I belonged to something, like there was some sort of community of students, and I was one of them. I wanted them all to look at me as I walked past them,

maybe smile and wave, or maybe even let me know that they saw me kissing that girl on the dance floor. I couldn't have been happier if some of the guys, or even the girls for that matter, came up to me and gave me five, patted me on the shoulder, told me what a good job I did, way to go. As I strutted through the grass, I sincerely believed I was the only one who had ever done this sort of thing.

Once I was inside, I was still looking for that communal acceptance. There weren't as many people in the dining hall as there were out, but when I sat down at a table by myself, I looked around to see if anybody was taking notice. Nobody seemed to be looking. In fact, I was the only sitting at a table alone. Everyone else was with their group of friends, their roommates, people they met at the party or the peer meeting. I saw the girl I tried to talk to after the peer meeting, and she was with two girls and three guys. Even numbers. They were all in pairs; they were in balance. I lowered my head and studied the food in front of me. I was so oblivious to the fact that I was walking into the cafeteria alone, I forgot how it would feel to be sitting at a table by myself. When I was outside, I was going somewhere. At the table, eating, I was stuck.

I looked back up and saw Jenna's friends coming inside, but no Jenna. I dropped my head back down and rubbed my thumb and finger along my forehead. Class hadn't started yet. Until the following Monday, there was nothing for the students to do. And the area that surrounded the college was bleak; it was a wasteland of run down strip malls and rickety houses. One of the gas stations was still full service only. If anybody wanted to do anything outside of the school, they would have to drive over thirty minutes to the nearest town or an hour to the nearest city, and almost none of the new students had a car. The fact that I didn't see Jenna when I woke up, didn't see her outside in the quad, and

didn't see her come in with her friends, left me a little jittery.

The girls sat down at a table on the other side of the room. I wasn't sure if they noticed me, that they planned to sit as far away from me as possible or not. I was pretty sure my theory that Jenna had told them what happened and they were all amused by it had been blown. I needed to know what did happen to Jenna.

I walked over to them, throwing away my food first and lingering around the ice cream dispenser for a little bit, pretending I was trying to make up my mind if I wanted vanilla or vanilla. I looked over my shoulder and could tell they hadn't noticed me yet, or they were doing a spectacular job of pretending.

I made it over to their table and came up behind two of the girls.

"Hi guys."

There was a pause. Nobody turned around or looked up at me. Finally, one of them spoke. "Hey." She went back to eating, twirling her spoon in her ice cream.

"I sure was hammered last night."

"Yeah, no shit," she said, licking her spoon. None of the other girls were talking and one of them snickered.

"Did you all get drunk?" I didn't let anyone answer. "Hey, have you all seen Jenna?"

"Not since last night."

Somebody dropped a plastic plate and metal silverware near the trashcan and the knife and fork sprinkled onto the floor.

"Oh. I think she said she had to go get a bookcase in town. I thought she'd be back by now," I lied.

Again, no response. I stretched my arms out, trying to act relaxed while my heart beat in my eardrums. “Hey, does anyone know where the bookstore is?”

“Just follow that sidewalk to the end and take a right.”

“Well, I guess I’ll see you all later.”

They all told me goodbye, a little more cheerful than they were when I was trying to talk to them. I wasn’t sure why they were acting so weird with me. I knew I had pissed off that one girl the night before, but I wasn’t sure why the rest of them were ignoring me. Maybe Jenna had talked to them and her story wasn’t so funny as I thought it was.

Going back to my dorm room wasn’t the same as the stroll to the cafeteria. I was afraid the people throwing the ball would throw at me—they would yell “heads up!” because the person catching the ball missed it and it would be too late. Right after the warning, the ball would smack me on the head or chest. Or, I thought the volleyball would hit me in the face, across the cheek, on the nose, or even in my eye, and when my face turned red, they would start laughing at me and yell out a half sorry. I felt overly self-conscious; my hair was probably too long for a guy. My glasses were out of style. Nobody else was wearing the same color shorts as mine. I thought they would see the sauce stain on my shirt from the spaghetti I had for lunch. I hadn’t taken a shower yet, so I was smelly, like stale liquor and sweat, and I feared they might start swatting their hands in front of their faces and tell me I stank. I shielded my eyes from the sun and hurried to my dorm room.

When I got back, I paused outside the door before going inside. I knew I had to tell Adam what happened last night. I couldn’t ignore it. He probably figured it out, but

still, he needed to hear it from me. Besides, I believed I'd have better luck with him than I did with Jenna's friends. All was forgiven I assumed. Certainly he wouldn't hate me for what I had done. We had drunk together around the campfire.

But then I remembered how he looked at me when Jenna and I were on the dance floor together, how he just stared at the ground or turned away when I looked over, like he was waiting for his shoe to come untied or some imaginary friend to come up beside him and say hello. And his eyes, when they finally made contact with mine after Jenna ran out of the auditorium, had such a bitter tint to them, like I had taken something he had claimed, what was rightfully his. I was afraid I might find those same eyes looking at me when I turned the knob.

Adam was sitting at his desk, reading through one of his textbooks. When I came in, he turned around, but didn't face me.

"Well, look who's here. Late night?" he asked. He seemed rather calm.

"Whew. You can say that again."

"Speaking of which, Jenna stopped by earlier."

"She what? She did? Where is she?" I was light headed.

"She just said to tell you she came over." Adam was talking with his back to me and his tone was flat. I thought about the first time I saw him, how much he reminded me of a gentle old man, whistling his time away as he went about his chores. I wanted to look at his face, though, into his eyes to see if the old man or the bitterness was there.

"That's all she said?"

"And to call her."

I ran over to my desk and grabbed the student directory and lunged at the phone,

dropping the end when I picked it up. I dialed her number and no one answered. I let it ring eleven times before I hung up and tried again. “Damn it!” The next time I let it ring for over a minute. I was twirling the cord around my fingers and tapping the wall with my foot when I heard a giggle.

“What?” I asked.

I turned around and saw Adam looking at me with a smile on his face. I also saw his eyes for the first time, and though he was smiling, I didn’t see any semblance of the shuffling old man I saw the day before.

“What’s so funny? What?” I was covering the phone with my hand, still expecting Jenna to pick up.

“No answer?”

“God damn, Adam. She didn’t call did she?” I slammed the phone down.

His laughter echoed off the cinder block walls.

“You fucker,” I said in a tone that I hoped sounded like I was just kidding. “Did she come over or not?”

“Huh? She—” he started laughing again. “Yeah,” he said and the smile disappeared from his face instantly. He was looking me in the eye. I wanted to believe him, and he knew it.

“No she didn’t... Did she?” My lips were twitching and I couldn’t keep eye contact with him. I was waiting for the yelling, the fist fighting—I was ready to be shoved around by Adam and told what an asshole I was last night for going after the woman he liked.

“She did.”

“Did she say to call?”

He was laughing again.

“She didn’t come over. Damn, man,” I said.

Adam stood up to leave.

“Where are you going?”

“Huh? I’m going to get my books,” he said and walked out of the room.

When he left, I lay down on my bed and stared at the ceiling. The walls seemed so white and sterile, hard and cold to the touch when I ran my hand across them. The metallic ceiling looked entirely too heavy, like at any minute it would collapse onto me. I was frightened. I had to live with Adam for a long time, and after one night he was already against me.

I couldn’t help but to think the girls I saw in the cafeteria and Adam were in on it together. I didn’t do it their way. I didn’t let Adam go after Jenna. I didn’t stay with them outside the dance like a good boy. Adam was probably talking to them now, I thought, figuring out what they were going to do with me next. I looked over at his desk and saw all of his books for the semester stacked neatly on the shelves.

I got up and again picked up the phone. “Maybe this will make me feel better,” I said and dialed.

“Hello? Is Andrew there?” There was a rustling over the phone and a yell for Andrew to pick up.

“I’ve got it. Hello?” Andrew said.

“Andrew?”

“Hey, man! What’s up! How’s school?”

The enthusiasm of his voice reminded me of Andrew before the coffee shop and made me forget about the pale room and Adam. I walked towards the window and opened the blinds. "Fine, fine."

"So, how's it going? Haven't heard from you in awhile."

"Doing good, yup, yup." For the first time, I wanted to hear his repetitive questions. I welcomed it.

"So, what have you been up to? You didn't call."

"You are not going to believe this." I told Andrew about Jenna, all of the details I could remember. I made her out to be this brown haired goddess who threw herself at me, begging for me to come to her room. I told Andrew that she made the first move at the dance, grabbing at me the first second she saw me. He loved it. After every pause, he would yell out "oh, man!" and explode in laughter.

I loved it too. It was like the last time I saw him never happened. The party at Brian's never happened, either. There was a revitalizing charge to the conversation. Time had healed the scars of accusations instantly and it was like I was talking to my best friend again. There was a desire in both of our voices to hear more from each other, to suck up every spoken word like it was the first time we had ever heard them used.

"Holy shit I can't believe that happened. On the first day, too!" he said when I finished. "So, was it good?"

"What do you think?"

"Better than Aunt Brian?"

My head hurt. "What?"

He made a grunting noise.

“Come on, man. All we did was sleep in the same freaking bed.”

“You told me you weren’t sure.”

“I’m sure, I’m sure,” I pleaded, trying to nail it home for me as well.

“Ha ha, okay.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I realized that this conversation could go on forever. I could tell him I was absolutely positive of what happened that night and he still would get off the phone and not whole heartedly believe me. There would always be that tingle in his mind that would trigger the thought of me sleeping in Brian’s bed every time he saw me or talked to me. There would be no erasing it.

“Nothing, man.” He coughed on the phone.

“So, you believe me? That I just passed out that night.” There was a knock at my door. “Hey, hold on.” I put my hand over the receiver and walked over to the door and opened it. It was Jenna. “Let me call you back,” I said to Andrew and hung up the phone.

I stood in front of the door and gave her a hug, tightly wrapping my arms around her, one on the waist and one on the shoulder. She put one arm around me.

“Hey. Come in, come in,” I said, waving a little too vigorously for her to enter.

She looked up at me when she came inside and I saw a glassiness to her eyes.

When she smiled and said thanks, she sniffled.

“What happened to you this morning? I woke up alone,” I said.

“I’m sorry. I had to go.”

“Oh. So, where’d you go?” She was sitting down on my bed. I sat down next to her and leaned in to kiss her on the lips and she turned her face so all I got was cheek.

“Sorry.”

“That’s okay.”

“I missed you this morning.” I put my arm on the top of her leg. “You want something to drink?” Adam had brought one of those mini-fridges from home and I still had some soda from the night before. I stood up and walked over towards it.

She pulled out a tissue and blew her nose. “I feel so bad about last night.”

“Ohh-kay.” I sat back down. Suddenly I felt stupid about telling Andrew what Jenna and I did.

“I’ve been at church, praying.”

“Why?”

“I feel so guilty. It was so wrong what I did.”

“How can you say that?”

“I was supposed to marry Mike. We were going to try to work things out while I was here.” She wiped her eyes with the tissue.

“Then why did you?”

“I guess I wasn’t sure about things.”

“And now you are?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

“Have you told him?” I don’t know why, but I wished at that moment she would’ve said yes, that she went to a pay phone or something so I wouldn’t hear her talking and called her boyfriend/fiancé up, crying. And I wanted him to have told Jenna she was a slut for what she did, that she didn’t deserve him, and he hoped that I would treat her as bad as she treated him. And when Jenna told him he was right and she would

do anything for him to forgive her, he would say no—even when she would say she would come home and marry him if that's what it took.

“No. That's why I've been at church, praying. I don't know what to do.”

I went over towards the window and sat on the ledge, and watched a car pull out of the parking lot. A couple of people were talking in front of a jeep, probably trying to figure out where they wanted to go. “I can't believe you went to church? God, I feel really stupid. If you didn't want to—“

“I did. I did. It's not you. I was drunk.”

“So was I. That doesn't—So you have no interest in me?” I didn't want to be that guy where I was the one getting used. I thought about the girls who told me how men had used them. They told me they were looking for something more, attached something to it, but the guy was just in it for one thing. I was afraid I was the rare guy where it's the other way around.

“I think you're a nice guy. I wouldn't have done anything with you if I didn't like you. But I have a boyfriend. I love him.”

When she exaggerated the word “love,” it sounded like she was trying to tell herself that, more so than me. “But you said you like me.”

“It just happened. I told you it would just be for the night.”

“But you just don't do something like that.”

“I know. I know,” she said in somber, pseudo soothing tone. She walked over to me and put her hand on my shoulder.

I felt disgusted. I thought she was trying to pacify me with a comforting hand and a motherly tone, like I was a child being talked into believing what I had seen with my

own eyes didn't really happen, that maybe I had a bad dream. And if it did happen, I should forget about it because it was a forgivable accident that adults sometimes make.

"Can we still—" she said.

"Yeah, yeah."

"Uh, don't say it like that."

"Sorry."

"Well, I better go."

"Fine, okay."

She walked to the door and I followed behind her. When she got into the hallway, I didn't close the door but went out with her. I caught up to her and told her to wait. Jenna turned around and I leaned in to kiss her again. This time, she didn't move away in time so I reached her lips. I pressed hard against them, wrapping my hand around the back of her head and pushing it towards me. All I could feel was her teeth. I wanted into her mouth and I moaned, expecting her to take the hint. Jenna didn't pull away, but the more I tried, the tighter she clinched her teeth together. My tongue raced along the front of her gum line. Finally, she closed her lips and ducked under my hand that was clasped against her head.

"Please," she said.

"Please, what?" I smiled.

"You know I can't do this."

"But what about last night?"

Jenna huffed and told me she would talk to me later. I said nothing and let her walk out of the hall and didn't turn around to go back into my room until she was

probably back at her place.

I thought back to when I was about sixteen and met this girl at work. The more I worked with her, the more I saw how much she talked. She would yammer about everything and nobody would listen. Her hair had those tight curls that if it wasn't combed it would look like thousands of thin wires were branching out of her scalp. Behind her back, everybody made fun of her and whispered that she was crazy and why wouldn't she shut up. I never said anything. When I was around her, I let her say what she wanted. I didn't care. Then one night, after the store had closed, it was just the manager, the girl, and me. The manager was off counting money and we were sitting on the floor of the store watching the television. She came up behind me and started giving me a massage. She said nothing; she just did it. Up until that moment, I didn't really want anything to do with her. But when we left the store to go to our cars, I asked her if she wanted to go see a movie with me sometime. She said yes, and when we went, I had to sit in the car on the way to the theater and listen to her tell me everything about herself. I didn't get to say one word. But I didn't care. She wanted to be with me.

After the movie, we went back to her house. Her parents were asleep and we sat on the couch together and watched another movie. I was on one side, she the other. Eventually, she put rested her legs on the cushions and slid down so she was lying on her side. I did the same, climbing in between her and the back of the couch. I raised my head above her and tilted hers towards mine and tried to kiss her. She let me touch her lips, but she kept her mouth shut. Like with Jenna, I was running my tongue across slippery teeth and gums.

And the next day, she told everyone at work what I tried to do. When I came into

work, everybody was making jokes about it in front of me, and the guys were laughing at me for striking out with the crazy girl. She was the one everyone made fun of and I wasn't good enough for her. I couldn't see how any girl would ever like me if she didn't.

After I stared at the hall door for minutes, I went back inside the room. I slammed the door shut and went to my bed. I rested my hand on the top of my head, rubbing my temples, thinking how it must feel to have your teeth licked forcibly, and how ridiculous I would feel for the person doing it.

I grabbed the empty liquor bottle from the night before and threw it against the door. It smashed. Fragments of the glass hit the wall on the opposite side of the door. Shards of it buried themselves all throughout the carpet. A couple of pieces hit me, pinching my skin with their sharpness, scraping the sides of my face, barely missing my eyes when I turned to the side. Big chunks of the bottle lay at the foot of the door, jagged and wet with the last drops of vodka that had accumulated at the bottom of it. The room filled with the potent smell of the emptied alcohol. Smack in the middle of the door was an imprint of the bottle's end, a small ring dug deep into the wood.

I started laughing uncontrollably. "Oh, shit!" I said in between outrageously loud chuckles. I thought about what Adam would say if he came inside right then. He probably wouldn't say anything, I figured, and would stroll over to his desk and read his damn textbooks some more. But I wouldn't let him sit quietly and ignore it. I'd tell him I had an accident, that I was trying to throw away the bottle and it fell out of my hands. I'd go to the door, and before I left, I'd tell him he should probably pick up the mess so no one would get hurt.

I paced the room, surveying the damage. I found slivers of the bottle tucked away

in every corner, every crevice. My desk, Adam's desk, the top of the dresser, on my stereo, and the windowsill, little shards sparkled out of place. Every little square inch of the room had some remnants of the exploded glass. I even found some in my bed, and if I tried to get under the covers, they would cut my hands and legs as they slid down the sheets. I didn't go get the "community" vacuum from the RA. I stooped down and tossed the big chunks that rested at the foot of the door into the trashcan. I swept the glass off of my sheets but not Adam's. I lifted the spread off and checked for any missed pieces. I climbed in and wiped the tears away from my eyes from laughing so much and fell asleep.

When I woke up, I saw Adam sitting on his bed with one leg crossed over the other. In his hand was a tissue he was using to absorb the blood from the cut on his foot. He was blotting it up, and his face betrayed an expression of deep concentration, almost like he was in meditation. He gave no mutters of curse words, no shaking of the head, no attempt to wake me up. He looked peaceful, like he was glad to have the time to spend with himself and study a feature of his body. Adam didn't see that I was awake and I stayed on my side and watched him bleed and clean it up.

When he got up to throw the tissue away, I grumbled, rolled over on my back and spoke. "Hey."

Adam was standing over the trashcan, balancing on one leg and holding the other up to look at the heel. I glanced down at his foot like it was the first time I saw it and could see blood still running down it.

"Oh, man, I'm sorry," I said.

“Mmm hmmm...” He took another tissue from his pocket and pressed it against the cut. “How’d you break the bottle?”

“I dropped it,” I said and turned my head away.

“I was gonna go and get the vacuum.”

“Alright.”

He lingered over the trashcan for a second and sighed before he threw the tissue away and left.

I sat up and rubbed my eyes. It was time to leave. Adam ran out on me after he told me Jenna came over, and I thought I’d return the favor. Besides, I didn’t want to clean the floor. I wanted to see if he’d do it. I ducked out of the room, looking down the hallway to make sure he was gone. When it was safe, I darted out and went to the parking lot in the back of the dorms and made my way to Jenna’s.

I knocked at her door and she answered with the phone in her hands. I knew it was her boyfriend because she covered the receiver with her hand and motioned for me to come in without saying a word. I sat at her desk chair and listened to her tell him he was right and she missed him. I rolled my eyes. She put her mouth so close to the phone her lips were mashed against it and whispered, “I love you too,” and hung up.

“I was gonna come down to see if you wanted to go eat and talk,” she said.

“Oh. Oh, well.” It was hard for me to remember being in her room the night before. It was like I was kicked out of a club or exiled from a country. It was forbidden territory. Less than twenty-four hours before, though, I could have done anything I wanted in the room, or with the girl who lived in it. I had free range, total immunity for my actions. But, as I sat in her chair, after she had just gotten off the phone with the man

she said she loved, I saw that everything was alien. I had no more rights. I was no longer a free citizen. I looked at her bed. I would never be naked in it again.

I realized that nobody would remember me as the one kissing the girl at the dance. I imagined they probably never did care in the first place. I wouldn't have anyone come up to me and say they saw me that night. Even worse, the only people that were going to have a memory of it were Jenna's friends and Adam, and they were the only ones who I didn't want to think about it.

"I talked to Mike," she said.

"Yeah, I figured."

"I'm sorry I put you in the middle of this."

"No, that's okay."

She didn't say anything but walked to her closet and hung up some clothes. I got the sense that she did tell her boyfriend what we did, but not all of it. And that was good enough for her. She could relax. Her conscience was already healing and Mike would forgive her and everything would be all right. I saw a wedding on the beach near where she lived, a flowered grotto that centered the fading sun and sparkling ocean. I heard the sound of crashing waves over the two of them proclaiming their vows to each other on a podium. I would be invited of course, and the story of our night together—the edited version with only the details Jenna allowed her hubby to know about—would be rehearsed to family and friends at the reception as the turning event that brought the happy bride and groom together. Jenna would smile when she told the tale as her and Mike put their arms around each other.

I stood up. "Wasn't it any good for you?" I asked.

She tilted her head to the side and knitted her brows. "How can you say that?"

"Then what is it with me?"

"I told you already."

"So, it was me?"

"No. You know what it is."

"You told him everything."

"Pretty much."

I let out a loud breath. "And that's it?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"I have no chance, then?"

She said my name like I was her son who had done something naughty and needed a spanking.

"I probably need to get back. I still have to unpack some clothes and stuff."

"Okay." She came over and hugged me and told me to come over if I ever needed to talk to somebody about something. I nodded and left.

I went down the outside corridor to the stairs. I passed about a half a dozen suite hallways. Almost every one of them was bustling with noise. I heard a group of girls laughing, some guys yelling. In another, I listened to someone singing along to a song on the radio.

When I made it downstairs and was cutting through the small wooded section that led to the parking lot behind my room, I caught a glimpse of a couple making out on a bench. He had his hands linked across her back and she was rubbing his face with her fingers. I stopped walking and turned towards their direction. They were both straddling

the bench and one of her legs was above his. I kept staring at them. Some people passed by.

“God, at least wait ‘til you get back to your room,” said one of them. “Blahhh.”

The couple didn’t even flinch. Neither did I. I just kept watching. When they stopped to catch their breath and wipe the drool from the sides of their mouths, they saw me looking.

“Sorry,” I said.

“Hey, aren’t you the guy from last night going at it with that girl?” one of them said.

“Huh? Wasn’t me.”

“Oh,” said the girl and put her hands back where they were a minute ago.

They were staring at each other and I walked away without saying another word.

When I made it back to the dorm room, Adam was gone, and the vacuum lay on the floor. It was right in front of my bed, and I had to move it before I could go to sleep.

VI. The Graveyard Shift

“Hello?” The phone swam out of my hands like a slippery fish and I caught it as it bounced off the floor next to my bed.

“Hey chief,” I heard the voice say.

“Huh? Yeah, hey.” I ran my hand over my eyes, digging the crust out of the corners with my fingertips. “What’s up?” I had no idea who I was talking to.

“You never called me back.”

“Oh, Andrew. Sorry, man. I had so much stuff to do this week at school.”

“I hear ya,” he said. “I think I’m gonna come up for a visit.”

“Really? When?”

“Tonight.”

“Wow. Tonight. Are you definitely coming?”

“I think so. I’ll probably leave pretty soon.”

“How long you staying?”

“Just for the night, man. I’ve gotta work tomorrow.”

“Okay. Here...” I gave Andrew directions and told him to call me if he got lost. But, I wasn’t sure why he was coming. Like he said, I never called him back, and after I hung up with him the last time, I felt like my stomach had just finished the cup of coffee I had when we were last together at San Francisco. As I stood up to put the phone back on the dresser, that same sensation of heat and nausea came over me.

And I had no idea how Adam would react to the news of a visitor. Adam and I were trying the minimalist’s approach to coexistence: it was the end of the week, and by

this time, we were speaking rarely, occupied the same room with each other as little as possible—mainly when we were asleep—and never spent any time together outside of our living space.

The vacuum still stood in front of my bed from when I broke the bottle. Each day when Adam came back to the room and found me at my desk or lying around, the vacuum standing in the same space as always, untouched, he would grumble. I couldn't do it. It was too late. Too much time had passed for me to clean the floor. If I did it, I would be admitting something, I thought. Even though I was the one who made the mess, I believed that if I vacuumed the floor at that point, I would be the weaker one. What started out as something I wanted to see just how far I could take it, had become a battle of power, of whose will reigned supreme. Neither of us said anything about it, besides Adam's occasional mumblings. I had no right to speak about it anyway, but he never said a word. He just would pause in front of it, waiting for me to signal to him that I was just about to use it.

It was Friday. One week of school had passed by and I hadn't seen Jenna since I left her dorm room. During the first day of classes, I would poke my head in the door to make sure she wasn't in the same room with me. It's not like I didn't want to see her, but I couldn't handle having meaningless conversation with her. I still felt what we did together was in the end worth more than the occasional chat or dorm room visit. I didn't want to speak pointless words with someone who I had been so physically close to. Besides, I saw myself as someone who was merely an interruption to the schedule she was trying to maintain with her boyfriend. When I watched her whisper "I love you too" into the phone, I could see things were back on track with them, and I could take the hint

that I should just leave her alone.

I yawned and looked at the mirror. I tried to think what Andrew and I were going to do together. As I was putting my shorts on, the door opened. It was Melissa.

On the Monday the semester started, I met Melissa in my first morning class. She was tall and had long blonde hair that was so fine you couldn't make out a single strand. Her face was angelic in its roundness with freckles that framed faded blue eyes. Her lips had sharply defined curves, pointing at the corners of her mouth as well as below her nose. When I sat by Melissa I smelled her sweet, flowery lotion—lavender and vanilla, I thought, mixed with cigarette smoke that had absorbed into her clothes. It was a unique balance, the sweetness of her lotion being subdued by the smoke, yet the delicate smell of her skin refusing to let the tobacco overpower.

I walked into the classroom with shaky legs and tripped over my own toes before I sat down. When she saw me catch myself and try to pretend it never happened as I climbed into the desk next to her, she drew her head back and smirked.

“Whoa there, soldier.”

I laughed and shook my head. I introduced myself, forgetting I had already talked to her once before, and put my hand out to shake hers.

“Hey, I remember you from the peer meeting. I was coming right back. I wanted you to meet my friend.”

“Oh, yeah. Sorry. I didn't know,” I said and pulled my twitching hand away and put in my backpack, feeling around for the right book.

She didn't say anything else to me for the rest of the class, and I walked out of the

room without looking back after the teacher passed out the syllabus. Once I was outside, I lingered around the entrance to the building, hoping to see her. I walked down the steps, back up them, and then down them again, taking each one very slowly. When I made it down, I saw some people watching me so I headed towards the field that led back to the restaurant in the auditorium for some lunch.

The only place to eat at the restaurant was the upstairs hallway that looked down onto the wooden floor where the dance was the weekend before. I sat in the corner, surrounded by two brick walls and far enough away that I couldn't see over the ledge to the area below.

Climbing up the stairs was Melissa. I ducked down into the book I was reading and watched her once she had passed me. When she came back out with a tray of food, she saw me looking and waved. After she paid for her meal, Melissa came over to my table and sat down.

"Hey, where'd you go after class?" she asked.

"Oh, I had—"

"That hungry, huh?"

"Right. Actually, I thought I'd see you outside."

"I was waiting for you in front of the bathroom. Thought maybe that's where you went."

"I was on the stairs outside," I said.

She was dipping her french-fries in the ketchup and I felt safe. It was as if there was a circle around us, a dome covering the table. When I went into the cafeteria after I left Jenna's room the other day, and sat alone, I felt exposed, in danger of something, but

I wasn't sure what it was. Like if I weren't careful, I would be humiliated by someone or something I did. But the dome that surrounded Melissa and I at the table outside of the restaurant was a shield that made me feel invisible to other people. I could relax, and not worry that I was out of place, solitary and easily assailable. For the first time since I had arrived, I felt balanced. Everything was equal and in pairs.

When she finished eating and was getting up to throw her tray away, she said, "You want to go somewhere?"

"Where do you want to go?"

"Well, I have to go to the store and get some stuff."

"Yeah, but it's kind of far."

"I have a car," she said.

"You do!" She was the only freshman I knew of that had a car.

"Yeah," she said, exaggerating the "h."

She told me to meet her at the parking lot adjacent to the cemetery in about an hour. On the way back to my dorm room, I was practically skipping. I had an out. It never even occurred to me that I was trapped at school. If I ever wanted to leave the campus, travel more than a mile or so, I couldn't. Almost all of the other freshmen were in the same predicament, and because that was the case, it seemed normal to me not to be able to leave. But with the opportunity to go as far as I wanted, I was having a taste of the forbidden fruit. I felt I had something so rare, so valuable, that it was an actual tangible object in my possession and no one else's. I had something they didn't.

Adam was on the floor, with his notes spread out around him, reading. The vacuum was still standing on my side of the room, in between the bed and the desk. I

wasn't sure if I moved it there before going to class or he did. I went over to the desk and dropped my book bag on it, moved the vacuum closer to the middle of the room and sat down in my chair. I was tapping my feet and staring at my watch.

"Do you mind," he said.

"What? Oh, sorry."

"Class was that fun?"

"Yeah, right."

"How was it?"

"It was okay. What'd you think?" I wanted to tell him why my feet couldn't keep still, but I couldn't. I was afraid he might try to steal what I had, that the next time I saw Melissa, Adam would be in the car with her, waving to me.

"Well, I think I'll be alright. Except this one class," he said.

"Oh, yeah?" I got up and went to the window, splitting the blinds apart and rattling them at the same time.

"Are you sure you're okay?"

"Yeah, yeah," I said, laughing.

For the time remaining before I had to meet Melissa, I sat at my desk and stared at the same page of the opening chapter of my *Introduction to Biology* textbook. When I wasn't looking at that, I was sliding my finger across my watch's crystal or drawing circles on the wooden surface of the desktop. Finally, when it was time, I stood up, slammed the Biology textbook shut and went to the door.

"Got another class?" asked Adam.

"Nope."

“Where are you off to?”

I couldn't hold it in anymore. “I'm going for a ride,” I said. Besides, I knew Adam wasn't going to take it away from me. He wouldn't do anything like that.

“Uh huh.”

“I am dead serious.” I was just about to close the door and leave.

“Uh huh.”

“Look out the window and when we drive by, I'll get her to beep the horn.”

“Sure. Her?”

“Just wait,” I said and left.

I sprinted to the parking lot. It was at the far end of the campus, and when I made it there, I didn't see her. I checked my watch. “Five minutes early, okay,” I said.

I went over to the curb that separated the lot from the cemetery. I looked past the gravestones. Beyond was a wall of darkness, a forest so dense it was hard for me to imagine how they were able to clear away the trees to build the campus two hundred years before. It seemed that nature and progress were still in battle at this end of the school and it was unclear who was ahead. I felt like any minute the trees would win and envelop the parking area in one swift go. I picked up a pebble and threw it at one of the gravestones, watching it bounce off the granite and into the grass, shaking a few blades on the way down.

“Okay, let's go.”

“Oh, shit,” I said, jumping to my feet. “You scared the hell out of me.”

“Sorrrry,” said Melissa. “You ready?”

We walked about a few dozen feet to a car wedged in between an SUV and an

old, beat-up Honda. It was a metallic red, new Mustang convertible.

“This is your car?” I asked.

She pushed a button on her key-chain and the horn sounded.

“You have got to be fucking kidding.”

“Get in,” she said. “You want the top down?”

“Hell yes.”

We pulled out of the parking lot and I told her to beep the horn when we went by my room. Adam was outside talking to someone when we passed by and Melissa honked.

“I told you!” I yelled

Adam mouthed, “son-of-a-bitch.”

When we were on the main road, I couldn’t stop grinning and my eyes were bulging out of my head. Melissa noticed.

“We’ll take the long way to the store,” she said and lit up a cigarette.

It had been two years since I had taken the driving test to get my license. Back at home, I had my own car and drove everywhere. Some of my friends didn’t have a car and they would always call me to give them a lift somewhere. After a while, I got sick of it and driving became a boring task. But, sitting in the convertible Mustang with Melissa, hundreds of miles from home, I felt like it was the first day I got my license and had just begged my mom to let me go get her some milk or something at the store that was only a few miles from our house.

We pulled into the shopping center about a half an hour later and she said to wait in the car because she would only be a minute or two. She left the car running and the

radio on. While she was inside, I looked around and when I saw somebody walking by, I'd turn up the volume to the radio. I put on my sunglasses and leaned the seat back a little.

Melissa came to my side of the door. "Move over, you're driving."

"What? Can I?"

"Move over," she said.

"Sweet." I got in the driver's side and wiggled the mirrors around and the seat back. I stepped on the gas a little to go backwards and the car's engine roared.

"Whoops," I said and put it in reverse.

When I took that first trip to the store for mom, my hands were sweaty and slippery grabbing the shifter and steering wheel. As I backed out of the driveway, I ran onto the hill next to the basketball goal, tearing the grass out of the dirt and flattening the edge of the torn ground.

"You sure you know how to drive?" asked Melissa and opened one of the bags from the store. She took out a basket of strawberries and put one in her mouth, sucking on it until there was nothing left but a few green leaves.

"Yeah, yeah, I can drive." I pulled out of the shopping center and onto the street. When I took the turn, I pressed down on the gas, hard, and the wheels squealed underneath us.

"Hey!" She was scowling at me. "Watch out."

It was a four-lane road, and whenever a car got in my way, I pulled right up behind it and shifted to the other lane, flooring it and flying by the other driver. When I was still living at home, I had an old Buick I took out on the highway one day and as I

was driving, another car came up behind me and started tailing me. I pushed on the pedal and let the engine roar. I had my license only a few months, and the steering wheel felt so loose in my hands. It was hard for me to keep it straight, and the car behind me wasn't going away. My heart was beating furiously in my chest and I never let up. The car stayed right on my tail and I kept going faster, until the speedometer wouldn't go any further. I knew there were only two outcomes: I was going to win, or the other car was. That was all I was thinking. Either way, I didn't want to stop. I didn't care who was going to get to the end of the highway first, but I just didn't want to lose momentum.

"There's the turn," Melissa said. She put another strawberry in her mouth, sucking all of the redness.

We were coming up to a light, and it was turning yellow. "Run it," she said.

"What? No—Okay," I said, and pushed the accelerator all the way down.

After we went under the red light, she laughed. She bent down and put her hand back into the shopping bag, taking out the basket of strawberries and a bottle of whipped cream. I looked over and watched her put some of it on the tip of the berry.

"Here," Melissa said and put it in front of my mouth.

I tried to take it out of her hand, but she put it to my mouth, letting some of it get on my lips. I opened my mouth and let her put it in. "Mmmm. That's good," I said, wiping some of the cream that got on the side of my mouth.

The race in the Buick ended abruptly. I looked in my rear view mirror and watched the other car veer off to the right towards a ramp that connected to another highway. The man driving the car didn't flick me off or roll down his window to yell. Instead, he smiled at me and waved. I nodded my head at him and waved back. I felt a

quick jerk in my steering wheel and saw the “oil” and “check engine” light flash red in front of me. I coasted onto the exit and into the gas station at the corner. When I opened the hood I saw the radiator bubbling over and it smelled like melted paint. I cared little that my parents were going to ground me and I might never have my own car again. What mattered most was that I had stopped.

“There’s the entrance,” said Melissa.

“Huh? Oh, shit,” I drove past the school’s gate, making little attempt to slow down and take the turn. “God, I’m sorry. I’ll turn around up here.” I didn’t want to go back, to end it. I wasn’t ready to say goodbye to Melissa and return to my dorm room and study. I didn’t want to see Adam, looming over his notes and the vacuum moved back in front of my bed.

“Hey, wait, let me—” I stumbled and leaned up against the wall, buttoning my shorts and grabbing my shirt that hung on the bedpost when Melissa opened my door without knocking.

Melissa didn’t stop or close her eyes but went over to the other side of the room and sat on Adam’s bed. She waited for me to put on my shirt before she spoke. “Have you eaten yet?”

“No, I just got up,” I said, rummaging through the basket on the dresser for my toothbrush.

“I thought we’d go get some food and take it to the park.”

“What park?” I put the toothbrush in my mouth and grabbed the toothpaste.

“There’s one in the city that I went to yesterday.”

“I’d have to be back in a couple of hours. My friend’s coming up.”

“Okay. We’ll just—“

There was a knock at my door, and when I answered it, I saw Jenna standing in front of me. I stared at her and blocked the entrance to my room; I didn’t say a word and watched her mouth, waiting for her to say something.

Jenna looked over my shoulder and into the room. Just for one brief second, I thought I saw her eyebrows dip down for an instant. I tried to imagine what Melissa was doing behind me—was she looking at Jenna, did she make eye contact with her? I was too afraid to turn around.

“Can we talk?” asked Jenna.

“Umm, sure.” I turned around. Melissa was watching us. It looked like she wanted say something, but then she just puffed her lips and shifted her eyes to the floor.

“Melissa. I’ll be back in a sec,” I said and closed the door behind me. I led Jenna out to the breezeway in front of the hall.

“I’m leaving,” she said.

“You’re going back to Florida?” It was like I was living the day after the dance all over again.

“It’s not going to work here.”

“You’ve only been here a week.” I put my hand on the brick wall and leaned into it.

“Mike wants to get married now. Soon.”

“Why? Because of what happened?”

“I don’t know,” Jenna said. “We’ve been talking everyday and I miss him.”

“Then why did—“

Melissa walked past us and started climbing the stairs that led to her room.

“Melissa, where are you going?” I asked.

“I’m just going back to my room for a minute.”

“Are we still going?”

“Give me a call when you’re done,” she said and went upstairs.

“I’m sorry. I’ll let you go call her,” said Jenna.

“What? No. I’ll call her later,” I said. “I can’t believe you’re dropping out.

When?”

“He’s coming to get me tomorrow.”

“Jesus! All for him, huh.” I was looking over her shoulder now. I shifted my body to get a better look. I could see all the way past the quad, past the soccer field, past the parking lot and cemetery, just enough to make out the forest wall. It seemed heavier, like the weight of the darkness had increased drastically since last time I saw and it couldn’t stand on its own anymore; the campus wouldn’t be able to hold it up much longer. I was waiting for it to collapse. At first, I thought, the breakage wouldn’t be visible. I’d hear the wood crushing the headstones, the cracking of the trees bending too far, the roots tearing out of the dirt. The mass would reach the parking lot, denting the pavement. And then, in one quick gush, it would conquer all of the campus and swallow it whole. I kept my eyes focused on the treetops, not moving any part of my body back towards Jenna. “What are you going to do?” I asked

“I’m going—“

“Really.” I wasn’t listening.

"I'll go to school there. Finish up," she said.

"Yeah." The tops were blurring together and it was harder to keep my eyes open.

I hadn't blinked since I started staring at the distance.

"Hey?" Jenna took her hand and put it to my face, turning it towards her. "Hey?"

"What?"

"I'm leaving tomorrow. I just wanted to tell you." Her hand was still on my face.

"Okay, you've told me." I blinked my eyes. I was looking at her feet. She had some tennis shoes on. They were white with blue stripes on the side.

"Look at me." She bent down a little and moved her head close to mine.

"Then that's it?"

Jenna took her hand away from me and nodded her head.

"Why?" I leaned into her a little and she wrapped her arms around my neck. I put mine around her waist. She started rubbing my hair in the back and I squeezed harder.

"I'm so sorry," she said.

"Please." I pressed my eyelids shut as hard as possible and shook my head.

"I should go start packing," she said.

It sounded so ridiculous. We'd only been here a week and she was already leaving. All that stuff to pack up again and drive hundreds of miles.

She moved her arms away from me and I let go of her back. She pressed her lips to my cheek and left them there for a few seconds. "Goodbye," she said and waved right in front of me.

"Yup," I said.

Jenna turned around and headed towards her room. I watched her walk across the lawn. She never looked back and when she was out of sight, I stayed and waited. Even after a half hour or so, I didn't leave. I kept looking, staring at the lawn and the forest in the background. I thought she might come around the corner any minute and tell me she had changed her mind. I looked down at my watch and went back inside. I didn't call Melissa. I didn't want to go to the park. I didn't want to go anywhere. And I didn't want Andrew to come up. I wanted to be by myself because no matter how many people I had around me, be it my best friend from home or Melissa, I still felt alone.

A few hours later, I was sitting at my desk with my head resting in my hands; I looked out of the window and saw Andrew coming towards the dorm. Brian was with him.

I coughed and blinked my eyes rapidly. "What the hell?" I said, standing up and knocking over the chair.

I met them out in the hallway. "Hi guys," I said, trying to think of an excuse that would make them have to go back home immediately... Impossible.

Andrew came up to me. "What's up, man," he said and gave me a hug.

"Hey Brian." I freed one hand and shook Brian's, all the while looking at the ceiling.

"Hello, hello," Brian said. "Where's the bathroom? Andrew wouldn't stop."

I pointed him in the right direction and led Andrew into my room.

"What's he doing here?" I asked.

"I saw him at work and he said he wanted to come. What?"

"Come on. Give me a fucking break. You know."

Andrew shrugged his shoulders. "Yeah, but—" he stopped himself when he saw Brian come in.

"Let's get some food. I'm starving," said Brian.

I exhaled loudly. "Sure."

After I got off the phone with the restaurant, Adam walked in. When he saw all of us sitting on the floor, his mouth opened a little and his eyes glared at me.

"Sorry. I didn't get a chance to tell you my friends were coming," I said, cringing enough to admit my guilt.

He made some sort of gesture of recognition and went over to his bed to grab some things lying on it.

"Wanna stay for some food?" asked Brian.

"Uh, I probably shouldn't," said Adam.

"That's o—" I started.

"Come on. I'm buying," said Brian. He looked at me. "Tell your roomie to stay."

I forced a smile. "Yeah, stay, Adam." There was a black, circular spot in the middle of the carpet. Ash and burnt logs from the first night Adam and I drank with each other were piled above the blackness. I didn't see any chance of that fire lighting up again.

Adam invited one of friends, Hanna, over when the food arrived and we all sat on the floor together. Brian went out to Andrew's car and brought in some liquor and the wooden pipe Andrew and I smoked out of at the party he had. Everybody started drinking but me. I knew if I got drunk, I'd be yelling about Jenna leaving and Brian

coming.

“Come on, have a drink,” demanded Brian.

“No, that’s okay. My stomach hurts, man.”

“I’ve got just the thing,” he said.

I heard glass clinking together behind me. It was Adam and Hanna doing a shot.

Brian brought the pipe over to me and he held it up to my mouth. “Okay,” I said. “Just a couple of hits.” He lit it for me and my lips trembled around it. I took in only a little before exhaling. I felt ashamed for smoking with Brian again, but I also believed I had no choice, that if I didn’t drink or have some marijuana, I’d call too much attention to myself. If there was someone who had said to me, “I told you so,” after the first time I smoked with Brian, that person would be saying “man, you are stupid” this go around. I passed it to Andrew.

“This is pretty good stuff,” Brian said.

I nodded and leaned back against the bed.

“Where were you after the party? I came back for lunch and you were gone,” said Brian. He gave the pipe to Andrew.

Andrew put it close to his mouth and froze. He was sitting across from us and his eyes darted back and forth between Brian and me. I was staring straight ahead, and when Brian finished talking, I moved my eyes so I could see him out of the corner.

“I had to get back.” I stood up and went over to Adam and Hanna who were by the dresser doing another shot. I brought the pipe over with me.

Adam was pushing the bottle to Hanna. “Come on, take on more drink,” he said.

“Okay,” she said and tipped the bottle towards her head.

I didn't want to smoke anymore, so I handed the weed to Adam. He took a long drag off of it and gave it to Hanna.

"What? Oh, I've never smoked pot before," she said and then let Adam light it for her.

For the next couple of hours, everybody drank and smoked, a lot. I was out of place. It was like being in one of those urban landscape pictures, where the camera shutter has been altered so as to make the cars driving by appear only as red and white streams of light. I was stuck in the middle of the highway median, with my shoulders bunched together, trying to avoid being hit. I sat on the floor, close to my desk, my arm leaning on the vacuum, watching the pipe go round and round, bottles empty, and the people in the room slide into their altered states.

In particular, I watched Adam and Hanna. Hanna began having trouble standing up. Adam would sort of lean over her and lend her a hand and the bottle or pipe. She would never turn either down. After a while, she started screaming.

"Get me out of here!" she yelled. "Oh, God, get me out of here!"

I jumped up, tripping on the bedpost. We all helped her to the door. Adam was chewing on his finger and following behind us. Our suitemate, Mark, across the hall opened his door.

"Jesus Christ what happened," he said, swinging his door wide and falling back against it.

"I don't know. She just started," said Adam. "Hell."

"I wanna lie down. I wanna lie down. Please, just let me lie down," mumbled Hanna, moving her head back and forth.

Mark let us carry her into his room. I had said about two words to Mark in my life and I was letting my drunken roommate dump off a load of trouble on him. When we brought her inside, Hanna dropped to the floor and started to twitch, writhing in place on the cold tile of the room. My eyes widened and my heart was beating in my head. I had had little to smoke and nothing to drink the whole night, yet I couldn't think linearly long enough to figure out what to do. None of us had any idea what to do as we watched, paralyzed, Hanna dancing a seizure in front of our exploding eyes. Adam knelt beside the shaking Hanna and tried to hold her hand, like the executioner holding the condemned's after the head's been chopped off unsuccessfully.

"I'm calling an ambulance," said Mark.

Brian and Andrew were leaning against Mark's doorframe, one on each side, their mouths as wide they could open.

"No, don't, don't," Hanna pleaded. Adam was still hovering over her. He was rubbing her forehead and holding down her legs, trying to keep her still.

"It's okay, it's okay," he said.

"Fuck it," Mike said and dialed the number.

I did the only thing in the world I could think of. Inching back out of Mark's room, I motioned to Andrew and Brian and we slipped back into my room and shut the door.

Andrew was pacing around the carpet. "Let's get out of here. What is wrong with her? What the fuck? What the fuck? I mean, holy shit, man."

I took my first drink from the bottle to try to calm my nerves. Hanna's moans and cries were oozing through the walls.

Brian started laughing. "I have *never* seen that before."

"Sssh. What's that?" I asked. In the distance, I heard ambulance sirens. "Let's get the hell out of here, now," I told them and opened the window to climb through.

We ran all the way to the graveyard. When we reached the end of the campus, we sat down next to one of the gravestones. The darkness was overwhelming. Crickets and cicadas vibrated everywhere. We huddled around in a circle together. Andrew was shivering but Brian seemed to be taking pleasure in the whole thing.

"Okay, kiddies. Time to pass the pipe around," said Brian. He lit the pipe and gave it to Andrew. Brian turned around and looked at me and raised his eyebrows.

"Thanks, man," said Andrew. He sucked on it like he was a two year old sucking on his thumb. "What the hell happened to that girl, man? I can't believe we ran," he started smiling, and then laughing. He cupped his hands over his eyes. His whole frame shook and he couldn't stop. "I'm gonna go walk. I... Oh, shit," he paused and rubbed his forehead. "I just need to walk around."

Brian looked at Andrew and nodded.

Andrew started off, and I watched him disappear once he crossed the parking lot next to us. Brian lit up a cigarette, and for a while, neither of us said a word. After he finished one cigarette, he lit up another one.

I hunched over my knees and sighed. "Why did you put me in your bed?"

He laughed and tilted his head back. "When? Oh. You were getting the couch wet."

"I could have slept on the floor."

"Well—"

“And how did I get out of my bathing suit?”

“You were wet. You took them off and changed.”

“Me?”

“Yes, you.” He took a drag from his cigarette, dropping some ash on the pebbles next to the gravestone.

“But why did you put me in your bed?”

“I asked you if you wanted to sleep on the bed and you said yes.”

“I said it?” A breeze rushed through the trees that walled the graveyard, and the leaves shook and hissed. I squinted my eyes so I could see the forest reflect the dim moonlight. But I could make out nothing. The moon rested too far behind the trees, drowned in the depths of the pines.

“Then you just passed out in the middle of the bed.” Brian clapped once.

I was still looking at the darkness. “I said it?”

“What? Yes.” Brian laughed again. “You were so stoned.”

Andrew came up behind us. “What’s so funny?”

“Nothing,” I said. I wanted an answer from Brian that I could give to Andrew and myself. But I realized I would never get it. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah. Much better. I’m still stoned,” said Andrew.

“You guys wanna go back?” I asked.

We walked back to my room in silence. The ambulance was gone and all of the lights were out. We went in through the door this time. Adam was asleep on his bed, snoring loudly.

I went to the bathroom to take a shower and brush my teeth. When I came out,

everyone was asleep. Brian was in the middle of the floor, and Andrew was in my bed. I didn't even try to wake him up. It wouldn't do any good. There was nothing I could do. I grabbed the extra pillow off of my bed and got down on the floor. I knew that the next morning, Andrew would roll out of bed, wipe the sleep away from his eyes, look down, and see me once again sleeping with Brian. It wouldn't mean anything to him that it was the only place left to sleep. He would see only Brian and me in the same sleeping space. Andrew would die an old man thinking of me in the same breath as his one friend who slept with a gay man not once, but twice. He would never visit me again. And I would never go to have coffee with him anymore.

When I woke up, I was on the floor, alone. Adam was sitting on his bed tying his shoe. He looked damaged. His eyes were bloodshot and outlined by black circles, and his face was unshaven.

"You ready?" Adam said when he saw that I was awake.

"Where are my friends?"

"They left awhile ago."

"Did they say anything?"

"No. They just said bye and left."

I turned over on my side and put my hand over my face so Adam couldn't see me.

"Let's go," said Adam.

"Huh?"

"We have to go."

"Where?"

"To the discipline meeting."

“What the hell are you talking about?” I asked.

“Because of last night.”

I turned towards him and sat up. “Why? I didn’t do anything.”

“The hell you didn’t.”

“You were the one who got Hanna drunk, man. Not me.”

“So you’re not going?”

“Fuck no.”

“It’s your fault too, fucker.” Adam was retying his shoe.

“No it wasn’t, Adam,” I said, stuttering out his name.

“Are you ever going to vacuum?”

“What? I haven’t see anymore glass.”

“It’s everywhere. It’s in my fucking bed.” He threw open his sheets. “I’m always finding it somewhere and the vacuum has been sitting here for a week.”

“Fine. Fine. I’ll clean it up later.”

“Are you going to the meeting?” he asked again.

“I said no.” My heart was racing and I was sure Adam could see the redness in my face.

“Alright.” Adam walked out and slammed the door.

I left and went to lunch.

When I was walking back from the cafeteria, I saw Adam and Hanna in the quad. They were both picking up trash and putting it in big plastic bags.

“You should be here,” said Adam.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“Work detail, for drinking on campus.”

“What?”

“You’re in trouble too, man,” he said.

“No I’m not. I didn’t do anything. You and Hanna are the ones who got wasted.”

“So did you and your friends.”

“Shit.” I started to leave.

“You’re supposed to be helping.”

I didn’t turn around. “No.”

Adam yelled, “Did you vacuum yet?”

I didn’t say anything. Instead, I walked past my room and went to the second floor of the dormitories. I didn’t want to go to my room. I never wanted to go back. I couldn’t look at the vacuum one more second. And I knew once I got back to the room, eventually the RA would knock on my door and tell me to go pick up trash with Adam. The worst of it was, if I had gone to the meeting, I bet Adam would have taken all of the blame and I would have probably gotten out of the whole thing. But since I didn’t go, I was sure Adam told whoever was there that I was part of the mess, that I was drunk too. I just couldn’t go with him. I would be admitting something involuntarily, even though I didn’t do a damn thing in the first place. I never wanted to see Adam again.

I knocked on Melissa’s door. When she opened the door and saw that it was me, she let me in without saying a word.

“Melissa. I am so sorry about yesterday. I wanted to go so bad. You don’t know.”

Melissa lit a cigarette and sat on her windowsill with one leg hanging off. “You

didn't even let me know at all. I waited forever. You know, that's just rude." She pointed at me with her cigarette for emphasis.

"Is there anything I can do to fix it? Anything?"

"Forget it," she said.

I sat down on the floor with my back against her closet. "It's been a bad two days." Melissa made a gesture letting me know that she wanted me tell her. "Don't worry about it," I said.

"Who was that girl yesterday?"

"Jenna." The name sounded strange coming from my voice. Awkward. Unreal. Before Melissa could say anything, I said, "I think I'm gonna go walk around. You wanna come?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "Let's go to the park, then."

The park was on the outskirts of the city, tucked away in a neighborhood of Victorian houses and urban restaurants. It was surrounded by a stream and in the middle was a walkway that circled a pond. It reminded me of a place back home that had a lake in the middle of it and a street that didn't allow any cars on it so that people could walk, bike, or skate around. I used to go there by myself and watch everybody, especially during that brief time-span at dusk when the park was the most crowded and right before all of the people started to leave because the sun was fading too far behind the skyscrapers. It was the best part of the end of something. Everybody seemed so fulfilled, and the groups of friends and family members looked so happy to be a part of each other and were savoring every last moment of being together.

Melissa and I strolled around the walkway, both of us either looking away from each other or staring at the ground. I didn't know what to say to Melissa if I did look at her. Every time I thought about speaking, for some reason my stomach would swarm with butterflies. The park was filled with people. They were having picnics on the lawn, some were throwing Frisbees, some were skating around the pond; I saw couples walking together, some sitting on the benches holding each other, kissing. I felt like I was back home, but this time I wasn't alone. I was with Melissa. With her, I was a part of things. I wasn't watching the people from the outside. I was savoring with them. I forgot about my dorm room. I forget about everybody, everything, except for Melissa. As we were walking, Melissa bumped her arm against mine, and our hands touched accidentally. Without saying anything, she wrapped her fingers in between mine.

Vita

Christopher Smith was born in Atlanta, Georgia on December 15, 1976. He was raised in Stone Mountain, Georgia and graduated from St. Pius X high school in 1995. In 1996 he entered Georgia State University and graduated with distinction in 2000; he earned a BA in English Creative Writing with a minor in Economics. In the fall of 2000 he moved to Knoxville, Tennessee to start his MA program in English with Concentration in Writing where he taught literature and composition classes, and in August 2002 he received his MA.

Currently, Christopher is searching for a full-time teaching position at a state university or community college in Florida.