

TEMPORARY GODS

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SYNOPSIS:

After a night of wild partying, Micah blacks out, loses his job, is kicked out of his mom's house and his friends go AWOL. Now living with a pair of junkie drug dealers, Micah must piece his life together, all while plagued by a faulty memory, staggering pill addiction and overwhelming pyromaniacal urges. But when his friends do turn up, they've got bigger plans for Micah – including leading an underground acid cult and taking down the city's power grid.

*Temporary Gods* takes you through the underbelly of the Valley of the Sun, exploring how drugs, religion and technology shape the infrastructure of our cities – and our minds.

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This is a work of fiction. All character names are maybe a little coincidental, but only enough so that you read into things far too much and you start questioning your identity.

*For my parents, for holding me up, and  
for The Boy – I wish you had stuck around.*

*"I think Andy Warhol got it wrong: in the future, so many people are going to become famous that one day everybody will end up being anonymous for 15 minutes."*

-Banksy

*"When there's nothing left to burn, you must set yourself on fire."*

-Stars

*"I want a god who stays dead,  
not plays dead.  
I, even I, can play dead."*

-Courtney Taylor-Taylor

### *A Study In Sepia*

*The RV was the covered wagon of the 20th century, the head of a caravan cutting through the same arid landscape of Manifested settlers. Their foreheads swathed in familiar sweat, both the Modern and the Industrial man knew this expansion was justified and inevitable. Nowhere but Arizona holds fervent dogma like this, even to this day. This land is my land, this land was always my land, this land was never your land.*

*U.S. Route 66 cut The Grand Canyon State in thirds, a cyclic series of road signs divulging “Next Rest Stop 10 Miles.” A washed-out pattern, obsolete and dreary to history, only the neon-glazed words “Chevron” followed by “Taco Bell” followed by “Best Western.” With the construction of I-40, the road and the artificial life along it wilted as quickly as it came.*

*Roadtrips and immigration were always the central issues where the Mojave and the Sonoran deserts collide. What you call Natives were first in line, pissing on palo verde trees, marking their territory like coyotes, then waging brutal wars amongst themselves.*

*Coronado and his posse shoved down the Apache for a rumor, spewing smallpox as a favor. Two centuries and a name change later, Arizona was Mexico’s claim, then Texas took his turn with her. The Mexican-American war ended with the blood of thirty thousand dead soaking the ground, fallen so that an imaginary line could be better defined. The gaps in this border allow once-citizens to crawl back home, propping up their Latino homeland through Western Union, meanwhile keeping Scottsdale’s streets “spic” and span.*

*Back while the 66 disintegrated, desert cities bloomed, interstates unraveled and surface streets coiled around sepia mountains. Civilization pressed against monumental scabs dug with molten blood, boring deeper still. Who says we raped the earth? It seems consensual, the gash we call Grand not more than parted, inviting labia moist with the Colorado River. Copper extraction, a rotten tooth pulled to wire holy iPhones and Nexus Tablets, was doing the soil a favor.*

*Nature is sexy – that’s why mankind takes to jerking off in her face. The collision between human and wild is a violent orgy, one constantly raping the other.*

*Don’t worry! We’re not cruel to our mistress, Mother Nature. Good citizens don’t irrigate manicured lawns like they do back East – here they keep up appearances, hiring Rodriguez Landscaping Co. to drag half-dead saguaros as shade over misty porches with*

60-year old, wilted arms. Homeowners' associations pump gravel yards with pesticides, terminating the invasive Bermuda grass, the immigrated Mediterranean gecko and Oriental cockroach. The pool out back mutates green in fall and breeds West Nile mosquitoes. This is right, this is organic.

*If we could build cities that float miles off the ground, never rivaling nature, I would protest. My home's foundation must be sunk deep, like a rusted barbed wire in flesh, like a tick's vile head. Parasitic, yet symbiotic, I want to feel the earth rumble with murmurs from California fault lines.*

*Who says we aren't one with the earth? After all, landfills will become golf courses where cottontail rabbits will burrow. Mourning doves will scavenge for fluorescent crumbs in littered Flamin' Hot Cheetos bags. Scorpions and brown recluse spiders will much prefer your air-conditioned bedroom to the underside of a rock. Coyotes will eat stray, unneutered tabby cats. When it comes to The Sprawl, Nature isn't complaining, only adapting.*

*A different life cycle, but not lacking vitality. Like Ouroboros, the more the desert is destroyed, the more it becomes soldered within itself. Or, as they say, the more things change, the more they remain the same. It's almost as if ownership of this land never swapped hands.*

*Ancients followed a sorta pseudo-dirt worship, enamored with everything around them. Modern Southwesterners are identical, only crossing themselves to Sheriff Joe, Our Lady of Guadalupe, and Biltmore Fashion Park -- respectively known as The Father, The Son and The Holy Spirit. Penance is given to Chase Mortgage and communion is taken with Indian fry bread and Corona Light. Even the somewhat spiritual drugs remain the same — cannabis sativa, psilocybin-laced panaeolus cinctulus and occasional buttons of peyote.*

*The future doesn't seem so bleak, either. Traffic projections and population explosions seem mild when everything just sprawls out further. Drought hasn't made me thirsty — yet. Rising sea levels won't flood The Valley of the Sun. This land is my land, this land is my oasis.*

*The streetlights contaminating the night sky mean you can literally see the edges of the atmosphere domed around the city. The moon shines all the brighter, just a projection of the sun's rays and it says nothing is real — but nothing has to be. Those hypnotic monsoon sunsets wouldn't be the same without air pollution to tinge the clouds pink and orange. And when that familiar icon of the valley melts into the White Tank Mountains, sending up a few last miraged heat waves before it's gone, that's when I know I'm home.*

*-- From the journal of Jimmy Kane*

## Chapter One

So Jimmy Kane is squatting on my chest, an aluminum Louisville slugger raised above his head and he's demanding to know what happens to us when we die.

Dorian is, Christ, I don't know where Dorian is. Pretty sure Courtney ran off laughing with the bottle of absinthe.

I'm sputtering, blubbing up thick, gooey gobs of spit from all the laughing. Looking deep into the dark pits of Jimmy's eyes, just the whites, none of that chocolate brown color. Next to me in the dirt, a flare is hissing magenta-tinged fire and the ambience all around us is red.

"Jimmy," I spit. "What the fuck drug did we take?"

"Answer the question!" Jimmy fake swings the bat at my skull and I flash the flare in his eyes throwing him off my chest. The light blinds us both, sending us off in different directions and we're stumbling in the dark of the desert. Who the fuck knows where anyone is.

Pretty sure we're on Cloud 9, our name for this old, abandoned mansion atop Shaw Butte. It's been our little hangout since we were in high school and the overgrown desert surrounding it is perfect for drunk hide n' seek.

Again, Jimmy asks, yells, "What happens when we die?" I can hear him swinging the bat around, aiming for me, his human piñata, cackling with laughter like a firecracker and tripping over rocks and creosote bushes. The darkness is swelling, colors jumping out of the black, blues and purples and nebulas and it's the greatest dark I've ever seen. Jimmy got us some acid, but it tasted all metallic and not like LSD at all. I have no idea what's making me hallucinate this way.

If I could see, I'd want to look at the stars again. Out here, they're no clearer than in the city, but they have the ambience of the Valley's light pollution and everything is violet. I can trace the edges of the atmosphere and sometimes I feel the reality of this giant globe. Who wants to be in the pitch-black woods, where everything is suffocating black? Light pollution is much more preferable.

Far off on the mountains, I can hear thunder, a monsoon storm rolling in. A couple yards away, I can hear Jimmy screaming, "Remember! What doesn't kill us makes our existence inevitable."

The sky is lit up with green, red and blue, like some Challenger explosion. Then, I realize it's real -- Courtney is setting off fistfuls of Roman candles from New Mexico and aiming them at us.

My eyes adjust again and I see the flare on the ground. Running, dodging the fireworks, I grab it and chase through the desert, the air hot and sparks shooting all around me. I'm calling barely above a whisper, hissing in the dark, "Jimmy! Jimmy!" Making my voice as eerie as possible, my breathing labors and the desert pulses in and out around me.

"C'mon out, Jimmy," my voice creaks, just barely rising on the wind. I'm holding the flare like a torch above my head, like crypt-keepers in silent movies, shadows long and menacing. Lightning, thunder, thunder. And I can see Jimmy trying to hide behind a large palo verde tree, still clutching the baseball bat like Uma Thurman holds a katana.



This bat, I drilled a hole in it, filled it with water and sealed it. Once you do this and once you swing, that fluid rushes to the top of the bat creating so much force it can cave your skull in with one blow. Fuckin' outright kill you.

"You can't come over here unless you pass three tests," Jimmy calls. "Or I'll shoot you."

"With what? Dorian has the gun."

"Three tests!"

I run at him, neon pink sparks trailing behind me, Courtney aiming more Roman candle fire and I trip over a rusty old barbed wire fence. I can't see shit in the dark. The barbs sink deep into my skin. I'm suspended inches off the ground, leaning so the fence bows in the middle. Then it snaps.

I'm on my feet, the wire still jammed into my skin and I'm chasing Jimmy again. He's screaming, screaming and laughing harder than I've ever heard him.

All I can see is the bat, dipping and dodging through the desert, bouncing in the vague outlines cast by the flare. He's running back to Cloud 9, the front doors ripped off and Dorian's inside, built a little bonfire in the fireplace, except he's burning torn tire treads and plastic bottles and the hideous black-green smoke fills the room.

"Don't breathe this shit in," Dorian coughs. "It'll give you a brain tumor."

Courtney's there and he takes a swig from the absinthe bottle, passes it around to all of us and lights a joint. Dorian stares at me and the barbed wire hanging out my torn jeans. There's a lot of blood.

"Hey man, you've had your tetanus shot, right?" And I pull the wire out skewered with big chunks of Levi Strauss and flesh.

Out of the dark, out of nowhere, Jimmy leaps on Dorian's back, spinning round, still holding the bat. "Tell me what happens when we die, you motherfucker!"

Dorian flips Jimmy on the ground and aims the gun at his chest. His smile, it couldn't be wider.

"You tell me."

He fires and a BB hits Jimmy and he writhes in pain.

"Pig fucker! You shot me in the nipple!" Jimmy throws the bat, Dorian ducks and it hits me, flying-knife style, square on the nose. I can hear Jimmy punching and Dorian yelping in laughter, Courtney must be setting off some bottle rockets, but I'm blind again, seeing nothing but blood.

So that's the last thing I remember for a while. I've had blackouts before, but nothing like this. The more I try to focus on the night, the more it disintegrates. Candle flickers in the wind, first the memory is there, then it's dark, then it's distorted and torn and finally blown out and gone.

I do remember a few things, like Jimmy Kane squatting on my chest, slapping the shit out of me and saying, "Wake up, Micah, wake up." I realize I'm in a truckstop bathroom, covered in blood. Darkness again.

"Oh, good, you're blinking again." Courtney's voice echoing. The sound of puking, flashes of Dorian, ralphing in the urinal.

"That was better than sex," I think I remember saying with that low, blubbery wet voice caused by nosebleeds.

“That was better than anything better than sex.” Jimmy smiles.

A blank. Puke all over me. Puke all over the inside of Courtney’s car. Pulling off my shirt, using it to soak up the blood and vomit. I hear myself say, “Does this look broken to you?”

Parking lot of a gas station, the S burnt out so it just spells HELL. Courtney gassing up, unzipping his pants, peeing against the pump. Me, smoking a cigarette, Dorian pointing to the pump, “I don’t think you should do that...”

Lights out, then on again. The way snow on a TV looks.

Courtney driving, speeding by undercover cops, Dorian sprawled in the backseat, passed out in Jimmy’s lap, groaning. The whole car smells like vomit. The stereo is pumping some M.I.A. song.

I think we’re cruising eastbound on the I-17 to I-10 ramp, the highway lifting us up and above and I can see the Phoenix skyline and a grid of streets edging out forever in the distance. I stick my arm out the window to feel the rushing July air, still a blistering 95 degrees at night, trickles of blood rolling down my fingertips and disappearing into black.

Then we’re at some unlit, empty park on Thunderbird, the one where this old guy was shot once. There’s a big chunk of overgrowth where Cave Creek Wash flows through the middle and rabbits and coyotes and homeless people dwell in the bushes. We sit on the benches, smoking out of a fat elephant-shaped pipe, the ass the carb, the back the bowl and we inhale through the trunk. The weed is OG Kush. People in Phoenix used to smoke weed from Mexico, but then everyone started getting it from California. Now that it’s sort of, half-assed medicalized in this state, we get it from those lucky enough to have decent doctors.

I remember I have to hold a wad of tissues against my nose and lean back while Courtney lights the thing for me, otherwise instead of THC, I’ll inhale a mouthful of blood. The pain in my face lessens and the dried, flaky blood begins to feel like paint.

Courtney says something like “Wait here a second.” Runs to his car and pops the trunk and hurries back carrying a long, pale rod. It’s a bone and it looks human, he’s swishing it around like a wand.

“Is it real?”

“Of course it is.”

Images of Courtney digging in the park sandbox, saying. “That’s going to make the news. Human bone, buried in children’s playground. My fingerprints aren’t on file, of course, so it will go unsolved for years. Later in life, I’ll get booked on some petty crime and they’ll discover the bone thing.”

We all burst out laughing, then, we’re sitting in Chino’s, this cheap hole-in-the-wall Mexican restaurant. It’s open 24-hours and the booths, bursting earwax-colored stuffing and held together with duct tape, are always open to us. There’s a couple of busted arcade games, *Street Fighter* and *Pacman*, a fortune-telling scale and even a sex-drive gauge. Next to the salsa bar is a jukebox that only has Mariachi music, but it plays for free if you kick it. By far, this is the best place to hang out at 3 a.m. This memory sticks out, even if I can’t remember how I got there.

I’m taking big, long drags on a Disciple cigarette and exhaling so slow you can barely see it, but still, the cashier is yelling at us, something in Spanish, probably, “You can’t smoke in here!”

I'm leaning back, sipping a huge cup of horchata, Courtney's poking at some menudo, Jimmy's flipping a butterfly knife back and forth and Dorian is feeling a lot better, eating five burritos so packed, the meat and nacho cheese is just a lava melt pouring out.

"I still want an answer," Jimmy says, flipping the knife. It keeps catching and cutting his fingers, speckling blood all over the table, but he doesn't seem to notice. "It's bothering me. What happens when we die?"

Dorian chews with his mouth full, spit dribbling in long, sticky streams. I can feel the warmth of his breath from across the table. "There isn't an answer," he says.

"Who cares? Why are you suddenly so concerned about this?" I stutter, my head spinning like a Ferris wheel.

Jimmy leans closer and says, "I dunno, maybe it has to do with me wondering where my life is going, maybe it has something to do with the drugs, but honestly, why weren't we concerned before? It's not like we had it all figured out, it's not like we knew shit. I want to know what you think, I don't really give a damn about the truth. Just about how we're finding it."

"I don't actually give a damn about what happens. I don't think it matters and I'm a little too busy living my life to stop and get worried about death."

"That's unfortunate."

Skipping tape, rewind and recorded over so many times it's incomprehensible. Jumps to:

"Why would anyone want to be human? It seems that plankton, floating in the sea, doing nothing, free – that's way more close to enlightenment."

"The Buddhist definition of reincarnation is different," Dorian, his chin dribbled with hot sauce and refried beans, says. "The idea is, there is no self and all compounded things are subject to dissolution, including people and personality. Our souls are bobbing in this big soupy thing called life and death doesn't exist. When we 'die' we dissolve and reassemble into something else."

"Well, that's a start," Jimmy mutters.

Then, Jimmy bursts out laughing. A full five minutes, no lie and he won't shut up and we all join in with him. Laughing, guffawing, then giggling to the point that it's hard to breath or see or hear. Dumbed by our own hysterics. What is this drug we're on?

Jimmy breathes deep and then says, "We're going about this entirely wrong. We can't hold petty debate, we can't just talk about it. We got to experience it. We got to find this like Lancelot pursued the Holy Grail. Like Gonzalo Pizarro searched for El Dorado. Like Ponce de León searched for the Fountain of Youth."

I look at Dorian and then Courtney, then back to Jimmy. "Nobody actually found those things, you idiot."

Jimmy, his smile ripped to both edges of his face, claps his hands and sits back.

Then darkness. A complete, resounding darkness. I don't remember anything else.

When I wake up, it's to the screeching of sirens, three, four, five fire engines right outside my window. I realize, I'm not in my bed, I'm on the floor. My shirt off, my face coated in blood. The sirens blare again. Why is it so damn loud outside? I must've left the window open.

I sit up. The window is smashed. Nothing left but the frame and torn curtains. There's a cinderblock in the center of my room, surrounded by glass and my blood. The

rest of my room is smashed apart, my desk split, my stereo in pieces and my laptop cracked apart. The alarm clock radio is flashing 12:00 over and over and my phone, the only thing not destroyed in this room, says it's 5:43 AM. The mattress is against the door and I can hear fists pounding behind it. My mother's voice, screaming my name above the sirens.

I look outside and see the neighbor's house is pouring smoke, like a sky of smokestacks. I can see black body bags being loaded in the back of a truck by men with blue-gloved hands. I can smell burning flesh. My mom is still pounding on the door, now screaming obscenities with my name. That's how I know when she's really pissed.

And then I'm bent over, hands on my knees and I'm retching up pure, yellow bile. I'm inhaling that dead, flaming flesh smell and choking on the lingering flavor of regurgitated Mexican food and my eyes are swollen shut with tears.

My mother breaks through, knocking the mattress to one side. She stands in the doorway, watching me puke on my shoes and she says, "Get the fuck out of my house."

The fire trucks turn their sirens off, but they're still buzzing in my head.

## Chapter Two

So long story short, that's how I was kicked out of my mother's house. Using my credit card, I checked into a motel up the street and slept for eight hours. When I woke up, I had seven missed calls, all from my boss. I checked the voicemails he left me, the first few asking where I was, the next few threatening me and the final one delivering on that threat: YOU'RE FIRED.

My gig was doing some spam blogging for cable TV companies, something called Search Engine Optimization. It was really easy – just write bullshit for search engines to read so your website starts to rank higher on Google. It paid decently enough for someone with half a college degree.

I try calling Dorian. No answer. So I call Courtney. No answer. So Jimmy's gotta pick up, right? The call goes straight to voicemail. I text all of them, asking what the fuck happened last night. I start to undress. My clothes smell like burnt skin and hair, so I peel them from my aching body, every muscle strung and snapped like guitar strings and notice some oddly patterned bruising on my chest. Tiny bruises in the shape of a circle, like multiple suction cups would leave. Curious.

I shower, then dress myself and check my phone again – nothing.

I gotta figure something out. The grocery bag of clothes and my phone are all I own anymore. I'm jobless, homeless and I have no idea what I even did.

I keep getting Dorian's stupid voicemail. Dorian has that one where he goes, "Hello?" Then there's a pause and "Gotcha! Leave a message!" He still has that third grade sense of humor. Courtney's phone just rings and rings. When I call Jimmy's home phone, an old woman answers in Spanish.

I've texted, I've called, I've crawled Facebook. Not a word from my friends, no explanation, nothing.

I flip on the TV and start thumbing through my address book, looking for someone to call. The news is playing, going through a few immigration roundups courtesy of Sheriff Joe, a fatal rollover on the freeway, some new law making synthetic drugs more illegal... I'm looking at all the friends I have, asking myself which ones I can ask favors from and mentally writing each one off. I borrowed money from this guy, I fucked this girl but didn't call her, I crashed this guy's car...

The news starts on a story about a house fire in my former neighborhood. I turn it up. "... an elderly couple, whose fire alarms malfunctioned, slept through the blaze and died of smoke inhalation... Police are actively looking for suspects, especially any enemies the couple might have..."

My thumb stops on Soup. Good old Soup, the high school freak, who I haven't burned yet. His real name, Alex Campbell, but, well, I guess you can see where he got the nickname.

He has Tim Robbins, David Lynch hair, sticking straight up like a cartoon. In high school, he practically was animated, some acid-washed Vince Collins nightmare that drifted from classroom to classroom. He had accepted his role in life as a slacker with so much energetic apathy. He knew nothing mattered in his life and he found a way to revel in it. He would eat roaches till he puked or skateboard off a roof if you asked him. He'd

be the first to try a new drug or steal a traffic sign. We loved it – until high school ended and I never really spoke to him again, but I'm so desperate to talk to anyone right now.

I call him as I walk down the street to a fast food joint. My package of cigarettes is crushed in half, so I smoke a broken one on the way. The phone rings and rings and then Soup answers, immediately hanging up.

Fuck. There goes my last resort.

I chew on a stack of dollar menu burgers while flipping through the internet. Facebook, Instagram, Flickr, Reddit, the usual. I barely even use email anymore.

But I've seen it all before. I refresh the page. And again. Refresh. Refresh. Still, nothing. Even flipping through my Reader, I get no updates. The internet is like an empty city tonight.

Sigh. It's so much like B. F. Skinner's box. I keep pushing and pushing, getting no reward. But as soon as I do, someone comments on some pithy statement I made, or I read a mediocre webcomic, well, it's almost as if I can feel the drop of dopamine zapping through my skull. And then it's gone. And then I refresh. Refresh. Refresh.

I do this for another hour and I still haven't heard from anyone. Courtney and Dorian haven't been online – Jimmy doesn't have any social network accounts. All my other friends are doing shit, weddings and drunk nights on Mill Ave. and vacations and living with big smiles – these are people I could care less about. I added them as a courtesy, a mutual agreement to spy on one another, but my real friends aren't answering the phone.

My feelings of alienation, hurt, abandonment, I don't know if they're justified. I'm resisting the urge to panic as best I can. Maybe Jimmy was murdered walking home. Maybe Courtney spun out and killed himself driving. Maybe Dorian collapsed from a stroke. Who fucking knows, right?

I feel like a little old woman worrying this way, but I don't know what else to do.

Then I get a call. An unknown number. I answer, breathless. "Hello?"

It's Dorian's dad, Todd. "Where the fuck is my son?"

Shrug. Let me know if you hear from him yourself.

Then, by coincidence, it's Courtney's grandma. "Haven't seen Court in a while. He with you?"

"Sorry, same story."

I don't get a call from Jimmy's parents and I'm not surprised. I doubt they would notice anyway. They're those kinds of people.

There's nothing to do but let my anxiety eat me alive and hope to hear from everyone and refresh refresh refresh. Walking back to the motel, I'm approached by this homeless guy, maybe a hundred years older than me, and he asks me for fifty cents. He's a tall Native, kind of like The Chief in that Jack Nicholson movie, his skin and hair dark to begin with, but coated with so much dirt he looks like a raisin.

All I have is a dollar. "Keep the change."

"No, no, no," the homeless guy says. "I'm giving you your change."

He hands me two state quarters – New Jersey and Wyoming.

"I'm hungry. What should I buy?" the guy asks.

"I dunno. You have a dollar. I'd get a loaf of bread. Cheap, lotsa calories."

The homeless guy leans in close to me and says, "I don't eat bread because once I saw this guy on TV who got his face melted off from some flesh-eating virus."

“He got that from bread?”

He nods solemnly “What happened to your face?” And then he says, “You wanna get high?” He pulls out this little valve, jammed with stems and it’s dry as shit.

Whatever. I fucking need this. I light up.

“Thanks, I think.”

The homeless guy laughs at me and then he just walks away, shaking his head. He calls back over his shoulder, “Where will you be when the towers fall? Where will YOU be?”

When I pass the reception desk, still high, the receptionist says, “What in the shit happened to you?”

Thinking the chick means my bloodshot eyes, I say, “I’m just really tired.”

She stares.

“Oh, you mean this?” I point to my nose. “Nothing.”

“You really oughta see a doctor. This friend of my girlfriend’s, her ex-boyfriend, he got into a fight and broke his nose and didn’t go to the doctor and the bone like, went up into his brain and killed him.”

I say, “What?”

She nods. “There’s an ER down the street over by 51st Ave and Indian School.”

I walk there in about twenty minutes and do the usual when I go to a doctor’s office – fill out paperwork, sit in a corner far from the TV, glance at all the people much sicker than me, practically dying with their dry heaves and whooping coughs and leaky faucets of mucus and blistered lips and I try not to breathe in. I’ve been waiting for like this for three hours.

Some guy is rocking back and forth next to me and as hard as I stare into a four-year old copy of *People Magazine*, I can’t ignore how violently he’s throbbing. He keeps getting up, going to the nurse’s window and begging to be let back in. She says she’s gonna call the cops, then shouts my name.

The nurse is cute, cute enough to make me nervous when she weighs me and checks down my throat. She gently touches my nose, and when I cringe, she looks me in the eye.

“Broken. Who did this?”

“Baseball. Or something.”

She nods, but I can tell she doesn’t believe me. She washes her hands and asks if I smoke or drink often or do drugs and I say, “Ask me something interesting. Ask me if I’m sexually active.”

She gives me a look. “I wouldn’t give you the benefit of the doubt.”

“It’d be an easy thing to change.”

She tells me to lean back on the table and my head goes into the pillow. Then another nurse comes in, a trollish looking woman that you know raids the pharmacy on late shifts, wheeling a tray lined out with needles and all sorts of doctorish power tools.

“Your nose has healed like... well, like a rotting tomato,” the cute nurse says. “For it to heal correctly, we have to break it back in place.”

“Cool, cool. Are you single by any chance?”

She stabs a needle into my nose and without even waiting for the Novocain or whatever to kick in, she snaps my nose back into place. The pain is unbearably sexual.

Then, I'm bandaged up, stitched up with a tampon shoved up my nostril. It doesn't seem very professional, but the bill seems cheap. The doctor comes in, some guy my dad's age, if I even knew my dad's age. This guy doesn't look up from his clipboard as he says, "Get more sleep, exercise, quit smoking, quit drinking like a frat boy and call your grandma." He knows the drill better than I do.

"Yessir. May I have another?" I pull a broken cigarette from the pack and put it behind my ear.

Then he looks me in the eye. "Listen kid, you're way too fucking stressed for your age. Quit smoking and try some breathing exercises."

"Smoking is my breathing exercise."

He gives me a look only my mother could get away with.

"Alrighty, we done here?" I hop off the table.

"Hold on a minute. I need to prescribe you something for your nose..."

And I'm crossing my fingers, praying, "Please be something good, please be something good."

"...Just some basic, generic Valium."

YES!

"But before you get too excited, I think we should examine your ADD medication as well."

"What's wrong with it?" Yeah, I have a prescription for ADD, just like anyone in high school who was smart. All you have to do is go to a doctor, say you have trouble concentrating and you're getting C's (like they're gonna fucking check) and every month you'll get a bottle of study buddies to sell to your stoner buddies and crackhead buddies and maybe even pop one yourself if you gotta cram for a midterm.

"I want to switch you off Adderall to this pill called ----" I blank on the name, never catching it. Something like Methygil or Concentralin. Some fucking meaningless drug name, I think. Not important.

So I nod my head and take the bottle. Whatever gets me outta here fastest.

On the walk to the bus stop, I peel the labels off the medicine bottles, like I always do and pop two of these mysterious yellow concentration pills and two Valium. By the time I get back to the motel, I notice that I have a missed call. It's from Soup.

"Hey! Sorry we're playing phone tag," Soup says. "I was busy screwing this chick when you called. What can I do ya fer?"

"Listen man, you still got that place on McDowell?"

"Uh huh, yeah sure. You wanna drop by? My roommate started growing." He starts laughing uncontrollably. "You need me to pick you up?"

"Absolutely." I say. And under my breath, I say, "Please hurry."

On the drive, I tell Soup the whole story and he laughs the whole time. I'm not sure whether to laugh myself.

"So do you think you started that fire that killed those old fuckers?" Soup asks. He pulls a huge, cone-shaped joint from the ashtray and sparks it up.

"I honestly don't know."

"What you did to your room is fucking hilarious, dude. You can stay at my place until you get back on your feet." Soup passes the joint to me.



“Thanks,” I mumble.

“I’m renting a house – you’ve seen the place. Only, my former roommate, Kyle Whatshisname went to prison, so now I’m living with Trevor. He got himself one of them MMJ cards, so he’s been growing like a motherfucker.”

“Why did Kyle go to prison?”

“He pulled a gun on some cops. They beat the shit out of him afterward.”

“Cool,” I say. “So you haven’t heard from Dorian, Courtney or Jimmy?”

“Nope. Did you kill them too?”

“I sure hope not.”

We pull into Soup’s gravel driveway, littered with beer cans and oil stains and walk around the back. The backyard looks like the rubble of the Oklahoma City Bombing – a swing set on its side, bricks and bottles everywhere, weeds tall enough to tickle your belly button. The first thing that attacks me when I walk inside is the smell – like stale smoke, old cat litter and burnt popcorn. The second thing is a giant Rottweiler.

“Heel, heel!” Soup screams, but too late – the dog sinks his teeth into my elbow. I kick it in the ribs, but it snarls and rips the skin deeper. “Bad dog! Bad!”

Soup pushes the dog outside with his foot and slams the door. I can hear the dog growling and scratching, the door rattling like something from *Poltergeist*.

I hold my bleeding arm up to a busted mirror and swear repeatedly under my breath. It doesn’t look that bad. Compared to my face at least.

“Does that mutt have a rabies shot?” I ask.

“Who? Latoya? I dunno. You’ll have to ask Trevor,” Soup says. “Sorry about that. Don’t worry about cleaning up the blood.”

“I wasn’t.”

I follow Soup into the kitchen where three guys are crowded around the stove. One dude bends and lights his cigarette on the burner while another, with long, dirty dreads, stirs a stockpot.

“Yo Soup, gumbo’s almost done. Hey, what’s your name, dude?” He extends his hand to me. I point to the blood and don’t return the gesture.

“Micah.”

“Trevor.”

“He’s staying on our couch,” Soup says. “He’s an amnesiac arsonist.”

“A what?”

“Nothing,” I say.

“He can stay in Karlee’s closet. Ed here called dibs on the couch.”

I soon find myself sitting on the edge of a piss-stained couch, chain-smoking broken cigarettes while Trevor and his friends inhale their weight in marijuana through a 3-foot bong. Every few seconds, I’m swatting at flies or cockroaches. I can only assume the whole house is infested with bed bugs, ants and brown recluse spiders.

I pop a Valium and one of the yellow pills and suddenly, it doesn’t bother me so much that everyone is watching cable through a hacked cable box and laughing at all the commercials, but not the cartoons. They even give me a personal tour of the grow room. In stark contrast to the rest of the house, the grow room is kept immaculate. Trevor snaps a bud off the top and hands it to me.

“Keep it,” he says. And for the first time in forever, I smile.

All night, strangers come through the living room, buying large bags of Bubblegum Kush, Blue Dream, White Widow and Whatever Else and then they leave. Soup asks me what I'm gonna do next.

"No idea," I say. "Look for a new job, I guess. Where do you work?"

"Here," Soup says.

A few hours later, everyone is passed out, so I go into what I assume is Karlee's room. It's just a naked mattress and a few piles of clothes. In the closet, I build a little nest from her dirty laundry, close the door and try to sleep. I'm woken in the middle of the night by Karlee (at least, I think it's her) coming home, stumbling drunk in the room and collapsing on the bed with some dude. The two proceed to have obnoxiously loud, intoxicated sex and I bury my head in Karlee's mountain of bras and hope I suffocate.

In the morning, without even saying good morning to anyone, I head out the front door and take the bus to Jimmy's, since it's just down the street and I can't wait for him to call me back anymore. I knock on the door and Jimmy's stepfather opens, Wayne or something, holding a beer and a cigarette and I almost want to tell him he's being cliché. Then I put out my own broken cigarette.

"Want somethin' kid?"

"I'm not hear to buy off ya, man. Is Jimmy around?"

"James? Haven't seen 'im. Maybe upstairs." And he swings the door wide.

Upstairs, Jimmy's room is starker than the hospital I just visited. Nothing's there anymore, no more Wilco posters, no more piles of laundry, no more bags of Jack in the Box, nothing. Just the furniture – the stripped-down bed and a desk.

I'm pretty confused. This doesn't seem like Jimmy at all, not the Jimmy Kane I knew. He wouldn't get rid of all his stuff and just leave without telling anyone. I search the desk but all I find is a journal and a stiletto. I feel a kleptomaniac tinge and pocket both. It's collateral for seeing me again.

Wayne stops me at the door and says, "Didja see 'im?"

I shake my head. "All his stuff's gone."

Wayne shrugs. "He ain't gone. If he is, he'll be back. Everyone pops up again eventually. Can't get rid of no one."

I walk to the bus stop and decide, it's not worth going to see if Dorian or Courtney are around.

So I spend the rest of the day in this vegetative slump at Soup's place. I'm snacking on Valiums like they're Jujubes and I almost consider getting a job. Trevor lets me borrow his dinky laptop. Instead of employment, I browse Craigslist for personals, just for fun, but stop after the 15<sup>th</sup> one, all of them begging for a Prince Charming to be "a romantic sometimes because all the time is a little too much sometimes. [*sic*]" Who the fuck writes this shit? I almost want to send them my picture just to find out.

I flip through Jimmy's journal. It's small and leather-bound, the pages thin and almost translucent, like a Bible. Kane has this tiny, spidery handwriting, like he dabbed the ink just so gentle that the letters splinter out.

It starts September 2<sup>nd</sup> of last year and it goes like this:

*Today is a new day like any other. So I started a journal.*

*I want something real, tangible. I don't want a blog that everyone can read. I don't want attention. I want secrets. I want something that won't get deleted or forgotten or buried under spam comments and search results.*

*Everyday, I type in little captchas, meaningless words, typos. Sometimes they spell something like "following" or "finding" or "missing."*

*I am tired of having to verify that I'm human every time I have an opinion.*

*I have a plan to find myself. I don't know what that means, but I graduated high school a while back and I heard that's what you're supposed to do. Mostly, I no longer want to live in a mindset without answers. I can't find satisfaction in distraction.*

*Today Micah and I drove to the wettest, darkest park of the desert during an overcast day. The sky was yellow #6, tinged with red #40 and blue #1. Even sunsets seem fake lately.*

*Fall sets in like nails to the feet.*

I've always wondered what Jimmy wrote in these little journals he kept. He accumulated dozens yet it seems like something any one of us could have kept. Almost expected more.

We all have pretty average lives, I guess.

Still, boredom leads to anger. I fucking hate everyone. Fuck Courtney and fuck Dorian and fuck Jimmy. They can all go to hell, right? I'm going to escape from Phoenix, I just know I am. I've never really left Arizona, except for some trips to California when I was too young to remember. Travel, no, *escape* is all I can think about since I graduated high school.

So I fucking hate Kerouac. Fuck his stupid book about his stupid roadtrip. Same goes for Steinbeck and his dumb travels with his shitty poodle. Whoever wrote that book *Evasion*, about those anarchist kids hopping trains and hitchhiking and eating from dumpsters – fuck you, too.

And fuck all those movie like *Easy Rider* or *Bonnie and Clyde* or whatever. A big fuck you to Robin Lee Graham, that 15-year old kid that sailed around the world alone. Fuck Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn and everyone and anyone who's ever gone on any adventure. Fuck you, because I'm jealous. Fuck you, because I'm tired of reading about it and not doing it myself. Fuck you, because I don't mean it.

And thoughts like these, especially under the guise of Valium, almost make me thankful when Soup walks in and says, "Let's go."

"Where?"

"It doesn't matter."

So the sky looks pissed off, overcast and moody with monsoon rain. The air feels deep like a well, like breathing is diving deep into pure oxygen. Rain doesn't happen much here in the desert, but when it does, it can feel overwhelming, like an answered prayer. We're all so thirsty here.

I'm at a ditch, the kind of dry, dirt canals that run through the city for irrigation. The first people who settled in this ashen wasteland used the same kinds of canal

systems. The desert bloomed and as the city rose from the dust, we built over it, took the credit, even though they didn't even have shovels and we used entire construction crews.

Stealing it, it's really not so tragic anymore, at least not in the same way. It's kind of poetic, really. Makes you appreciate it more, almost. Anyway, we don't bother feeling bad.

It looks like that monsoon storm is picking up and I think about flash floods, how they warned us in elementary school to stay away from these ditches 'cuz they can fill up in minutes.

"What are we doing here?"

Soup finishes rolling a joint and hands it to me, "Will you do the honors?"

"You don't have to ask me twice." I light the end and puff puff pass.

"I went to Jimmy's today," I say. "He wasn't home."

Soup strokes his chin. "Troublesome. How's he been, anyway? I've heard about as much from him as from you. That is to say, not at all."

"He's a nut, man," I say. "He told me once he cut open his finger, inserted a magnet and sewed it back up."

"Why? What the fuck does that do?"

"You can sense electro-magnetic waves. If you run your finger over a power cord, you like, feel it. It's crazy. He's all about feeling things no one else can."

Soup laughs. "He thought it makes sense to cut open your body and shove magnets inside it, just to feel something? Wow. Maybe he's psychotic. No wonder he never told me that."

"But he had to remove it. His body rejected it. Like a splinter. Or a bullet."

"I heard about this guy who went to a dick doctor, a urologist, 'cuz he was having trouble pissing. It hurt like hell and they found these lumps in his bladder. At first they thought it was just some late-stage bladder cancer. They shoved a camera up there and found these swelling masses of humping larvae. Like an orgy. Turns out this guy used to jerk off by sticking the little worms up his dickhole."

I give Soup a blank stare. "What the fuck does that have to do with anything?"

"Well, we were talking about feeling things no one else can."

"Somehow, I don't think that's the same."

Soup shrugs, lifts the grate again and leads us inside. Walking down the sewer, careful not to step in puddles of gunk and careful not to breathe through our noses, there are walls of graffiti that say the usual – CLIT, FOREVER TAGGING PHOENIX and FUCK THE SYSTEM. Krew this and krew that. But something is strangely ominous about the tag that says, WELCOME TO THE TUNNEL OF DOOM. A giant skull is sketched on the wall, using two pipes for the eyes. Kids, fucking around, probably. Probably.

Soup is holding a makeshift torch made from a stick and a roll of toilet paper. He has this little can of butane. He keeps huffing it and breathing it out, making the torch burst into flame. The flashing light sends gangly shadows down the sewer and casts weird contrasts on the graffiti. The further down we go, the more they devolve into simpler pictures. A rat, more skulls, a cock spraying something black in between sprawled legs. Dangling spiders sinking teeth into the heads of fetuses.

"There are lots of cobwebs in this place," I say. "I don't have a phobia. Just saying."

Soup looks up. The spiders crawling along the ceiling, running from the blazing torch, their asses have that perfect red hourglass.

“Black widows aren’t really as poisonous as everyone fears,” Soup says. “Besides, aren’t they kind of beautiful?”

Soup raises the torch and lights the webs, they streak with flame like dynamite fuses and the little black balls of poison shrivel up and plop into the water, making horrible hissing sounds.

“We press on,” Soup says. His eyes have this glossed over look, so you can hardly make out the pupils. He doesn’t smile.

“What are we doing here, anyway?” I ask impatiently. “I thought we were gonna hang out. Go bowling or see a movie or something.”

Soup looks back, with those same eyes and no smile.

“What day of the week is it?”

“Monday. I think.”

“We can see a movie any other day of the week. I am of the opinion we better do something pretty fucking exciting with our Monday night,” Soup says. He points the torch at me with an air of self-importance. “We’re here to do something meaningful.”

Soup smiles and while it seems off-base, the uncanny part is I have no idea what that smile means.

“We press on.”

The puddles get deeper and it gets harder not to splash it up on ourselves. The smell, it gets so pungent we can hardly breathe. And the graffiti, it’s just scratches in ash and umber, so minimalistic they’re almost cave paintings. We must have walked a mile already. We round the corner and the tunnel suddenly shrivels up and becomes too tight to continue.

“Here’s good,” Soup says. He leans the torch against a wall, kneels down to open his backpack and pulls out a color palette of spray paint. He tosses me a can and says, “Write.”

I haven’t done graffiti since high school. I barely remember what to do, but I guess vandalism is like riding a bike. Hard to forget.

“We’re here because it’s so far down, no one will think to ever remove it,” Soup says, glancing around. “When the nuclear apocalypse happens, when civilization’s clock is turned back a billion years in a matter of seconds, when the English language is forgotten and indecipherable, these paintings will be all that’s left. Forget the Sistine Chapel, forget the Mona Lisa, forget Guernica. Even the ruins of Pompeii will be covered in ash again. It’s our job to leave something lasting and memorable. Underground.”

I look down at the can in my hands and back at Soup. For paint that costs less than a dollar, he makes it seem everlasting and significant.

“If you don’t know what to paint, don’t worry,” Soup says. “We’re going back to our caveman roots after all, so do what they did. Paint everyday life. Paint a mural of the boring, mundane shit that everyone does. Bowling or movies, or something. In twenty thousand years, it will seem like the most amazing thing anyone has ever done.”

Soup starts to draw and I have to laugh and say, “It’s all a big fraud. We’re inflated with our own imagined self-importance. You can’t say something is important just because it’s historical. I could care less about cave paintings or leaving my mark, even on a post-apocalyptic future.”

Soup looks me up and down and sighs. “I’m not going to argue importance of a greater nature with you. If you believe it all boils down to nothing, fine, I don’t disagree. But you define your own meaning in life. God is a choice. It’s your decision to be all glum about it.”

Soup turns away again, cracks the top of a can and continues drawing the city’s skyline. He sketches out the clouds, tinting the sunset orange and pink, complete with planes and birds and space shuttles scuttling through the air.

I shrug and start a single sketch. A giant fist clutching an eye, gripping it with a kind of anger. There’s a swimming pool’s worth of blood. I sign the bottom with an epitaph. A quote. “If God has made us in his image, we have returned him the favor.” Voltaire. It’s what I used to draw back in high school, all over my textbooks. It feels strange doing this all over again.

Soup is putting the finishing touches on his skyline. In the background he’s drawn huge mushroom clouds, the same elegant orange and pink. His vision of the future. Soup shakes up the last can and tosses it down the tunnel. Empty.

Finished.

As we’re leaving, walking careful not to step in the puddles, I feel some kind of closure and relief. I can’t remember the last time I did something that lasted. And I guess I feel a little less lonely.

Then I smell something rotten. There’s a rushing noise, like the sound you hear with a conch shell pressed up to your ear. It’s getting louder and louder.

Soup looks at me, the torch still giving him that glazed over look. “Shit,” he says quietly. Then he gives that loose-toothed smile again. “Run.”

We don’t get very far before a huge wave comes pouring down the tunnel, too fast for us to even move and we’re swept under instantly. I’m tossed and twirled around in the pure, disgusting emptiness that has bear-hugged me into senselessness. My senses are contaminated and overrun with pollutants. Sensory deprivation. It’s almost liberating. Maybe I’m hallucinating, only I can’t see anything. I want to sink down and float away, into this pure sewage, sucking it deep into my nostrils and coughing on it. The filth of this generation is just mixed with the excrement of every generation before it.

Random, senseless drowning thoughts. I blame the Valium. Maybe those marigold yellow pills.

As I’m fighting for breath, I feel a hand grab my collar and pull me up. Soup found this tunnel leading out of the tunnel, leading up, and we’re crawling out of it on hands and knees. The spiders, they’re lining the entire thing and we’re squashing them with open palms.

At the end of the tunnel is a grate. Soup kicks it open and we’re free, choking on the stale oxygen.

Soup just won’t stop laughing.

I’m gagging something awful and say, “Man, fuck that shit.”

Soup slaps me on the back and says, “What are you talking about? That was one of the greatest experiences of our young, pathetic lives. Get over it. It’s already time to press on.”

So dripping wet, I follow Soup down the street and hop the light rail without paying, our clothes drenching into the seats. People stare. Soup nods that it's our stop and we lift off the benches. It makes a deep sucking sound.

We're in some dilapidated shithole neighborhood, the kind where if your yard is just a clump of dead, brown weeds, you're fucking rich. But poor people are sometimes more friendly than the upper middle-class. On every corner is a bumping party and strangers outside invite us in.

We walk through masses of people, our wet shoes squeaking against tile. Half the time, people are giving us foul looks for our wet clothes, the others are laughing with us, not at us and handing us red cups of whatever. I smile toward Soup and he nods. We're fucking kings.

By the time I'm three and a half beers deep, talking to some random skanky girl about the weather, how it's more wet than last year, how I want to make *her* wet, Soup taps my shoulder and says, "We gotta scoot."

I look at him, feeling at a loss, feeling so comfortable around people again, but he insists and I follow.

Outside I say, "What's going on?"

"Were you listening to that crap music they were playing?" Soup scoffs. "All these people, stuck in bullshit conversations, sucking their own dicks."

"What are you talking about? Were you even at the same party?" I'm thinking, what a cockblock. Maybe I coulda scored with that hoodrat.

"I can't stand this. Let's go find somewhere else. We press on."

We walk block after block, but can't find any parties now -- they've mysteriously died. The only thing we see is a bunch of frat guys smoking outside. Dorian steps up and asks if we can join them. They nod.

Inside, it's just two other guys, sipping bottles of Bud Light, standing ankle-deep in an inflatable swimming pool. His friends have to keep running to the kitchen with pots of water and wait for it to boil so it stays warm.

"We got this thing for like, a buck, and we decided to set it up inside," the lead guy says. "Pretty funny, right?"

Soup rolls his eyes and then we're on the street again. Searching again.

Around the corner are a bunch of teenagers in togas smoking Reds and chugging Steel Reserve. Soup approaches them and says, "Hey."

A sorta fat girl, too fat for TV at least, says, "Wanna come inside?"

The party is so crowded we can hardly breathe. There's a beer pong table and the two frat kids playing are screaming at everyone to get back, but no one listens, until the whole table gets knocked over. Someone pushes up against the tab of the keg and it spews beer all over the floor, so we're standing in sticky puddles, smearing it into the carpet. We escape outside, where it's just as full, but at least we can smoke.

That is, until the host comes running outside, yelling, "Everyone's gotta be quiet or come inside. The cops are on their way!"

I look to Soup and we immediately get up to take off. Three dozen kids follow us, scattering on the streets. We're halfway down the block, not seeing any cops or hearing any sirens, when we realize, those kids probably lied to us just to get us out the door.

"It was a boring party anyway." I shrug.

Quicker than before, we're walking again, down alleys, down street after empty street. It's getting late. We turn the corner and the one house with music playing from it isn't a house at all – it's a reception hall.

"That one!" Soup shouts and runs for the door. Suddenly, we're in the middle of a Mexican wedding. Mariachi pop chortles from cheap karaoke speakers, there's lots of Tecate in an ice cooler and an angry groom and a tubby bride and their family and friends are all glaring at us.

We're standing, absorbing all the shock from the situation, then turning and running out the door laughing.

"What the fuck are you looking for, man?" I ask Soup.

"Something meaningful, useful," Soup says. "I don't know."

"Fuck house parties anyway," I light a cig. "Let's do something illegal."

So first we head into a corner liquor store, and Soup grabs a half-dozen bottles each of the fattest forties he can find, cradling them in his t-shirt. He then walks up to the cashier, a pizza-faced kid and Soup says, "We each have 50 pounds of dynamite strapped to our crotches. We're prepared to blow our balls off for this shit. You wanna lose yours?"

The cashier shrugs and we walk out. I'm kinda shocked, never having done a beer run before like this. We find a stray shopping cart, toss all the bottles inside. I get on the front, hands backwards, leaning into the wind. Soup runs, hops on the back and pushes the thing downhill. We're flying, weaving in and out of traffic, bouncing over speed bumps and skidding around corners. Soup opens the first bottle, chugs half of it and tosses the rest at a parked PT Cruiser – *smash!* – right through the windshield.

At the bottom of the hill, we skid to a stop, climb on the roof of a pool repair store overlooking I-17 and drink and drink and drink. Every bottle we finish we toss high into the air, watching it soar down and crash on the empty freeway.

We're all staring at the stars, Orion, that only constellation we can recognize and Soup says, "Is this the best anyone can do?"

"Don't tell me you want to do something else now," I say. "It's four a.m. It's too late to turn back."

"No, I mean, in all of humanity, civilization, whatever. Is this the best anyone can do?"

"Well, I've settled for it."

"I'm saying that even the greatest achievements in history can be summed up as an attempt to make something mean something," Soup says. "But I'm not sure any of it was worthwhile to begin with."

"OK, now you're being stupid. What about great art?" I ask. "What about *Canterbury Tales*, what about *The Third of May 1808*, what about *The White Album*? Van Gogh said all art leads to God. More or less. It's not even really about humanity."

"No, it really is," Soup says. "Art is just a mirror to our emotions. What makes our feelings so important? I hate confessing like this, but I'm sick of everything. Art. Music. Culture. Whatever. I haven't found any purpose in it or anything else for that matter."



“Sure, whatever.” I’m regretting seeing this guy again and I feel like an asshole for thinking it. People say that when you’re drunk, the real you comes out. I’m suddenly a little unsure if this who I want to be.

“Man, now you’re such a fuckin’ downer,” I say. “Just drink some more.”

“I can’t stop thinking like this. Questions like this won’t leave me alone.”

“Why are we here?”

“Deeper than that.”

“No, why are we on this roof?”

“Oh. I don’t know. So we can forget for a moment,” Soup says. “Just one. We need distractions and those people, laughing and drinking and smiling, it just kept reminding me. . .”

I go quiet. I’ve heard a hundred times, everything is terrible, everything is broken. I wanted to see things get more busted up. I used to want to smash what little was left. Now I’m too bored.

“All I’m saying is, what were we looking for?” Soup says. “How was this meaningful?”

“I thought tonight was supposed to be meaningful.”

“It still isn’t,” Soup shrugs. “But you won’t forget it.”

“Drink some more, asshole.” I take my own advice and finish the last couple bottles ‘til I’m spinning drunk, ready to collapse. The whole world is wet and blurry. The sun is coming up, bright, flaming orange and for a minute I smell smoke and believe the whole city is on fire. I wish.

## Chapter Three

*Oct. 15*

*I feel loneliness like a hunger. I crave others like a shark after struggling fish.  
Yet, being around people doesn't help. Same conversations, different day. Always  
stopping short of something. We're all so unenlightened.*

*One must always apologize for stupidity and never stop.*

*I thought of Ms. Mansfield today, my English teacher that committed suicide.  
Wondered why she pulled the trigger. I sometimes want to interview all the folks I know  
that have offed themselves (and the number seems so high!), so I could see if they really  
missed it here.*

*Every suicidal thought is an attempt.*

*Yet, I long for the moment when the dove gives in, falls and says, "Let me be one  
with the Earth."*

*If my life produces no fruit, I at least hope someone can pick my skull clean and  
find something useful.*

*-Jimmy Kane*

So while recovering from my hangover, I read more of Jimmy's notebook. I feel myself relate a lot. So many thoughts and things I experienced with the kid, but forgot completely. Friends we knew, adventures in the desert, long alcohol binges. The things I forgot sadden me, the things I never knew almost scare me.

I almost start talking to the journal. Almost start feeling like Jimmy is still around. Courtney and Dorian can go to hell at this point – I just want my best friend back.

I can't recall last night at all. I wake up on Soup's couch, but have no idea how I got there. My clothes still smell like sewage, so I rifle through Trevor's closet and steal a ripped up skateboard t-shirt and a pair of ugly gray shorts.

I try to recover on the couch, chewing Valiums and these buttercup yellow pills like they're Flintstone vitamins, nursing more weird bruises in suction cup shapes. I don't like that I blacked out again.

Soup walks in the living room, apologizing if he came off as abrasive and weird last night. Not the best way to make an impression after so long.

"Can I make it up to you?"

"Uh, yeah, sure. How?"

Soup smiles.

So this thing's at this big hotel downtown with a revolving restaurant and tons of kids from our graduating class will be there. Big whoop.

Soup is outside, sucking on a lollypop and I spark up a cig. "What's new with you?" he asks.

"Me? Nothing. I've just been thinking."

Soup nods, making a big sucking sound.

"Hey, at what point do you assume all your friends have died?"

“Don’t ask me. I’m not sure I’d notice,” Soup laughs. “Death doesn’t move me. It’s just a thing.”

“Yeah, I used to say that too, until I knew people my age that croaked.”

“I guess, yeah, I’m just jaded.” Soup shrugs. “Just never see it beyond the end of a long chemical reaction.”

“Wait,” I say. “What about our old English teacher, Ms. Mansfield? I’m positive you were at the funeral. You were choked up.”

“Oh yeah. Shit. She committed suicide, didn’t she? That came out of the blue. I don’t think I knew her either. I don’t think anyone did.”

“Didn’t Jimmy have a crush on her?” I ask.

“Who didn’t?”

“Her death kind of choked me up,” I say. “Like, for a couple days I had trouble sleeping. She once told us our lives are like writing a novel and we get to be the authors of our lives. She explained how most stories, most novels and movies and TV shows have three acts. Youth is act one, where the problem is introduced. Adulthood is act two where the problem is resolved and middle age and retirement were the falling action, the resolution. Back then, I took that metaphor as an excuse to be lazy. Let my story write itself. She was always telling me to live life to the fullest, get good grades and shit and then she went and sucked on a gun like it was nothing but a cigarette.”

Soup busts out laughing.

“What’s funny about that? Are you even listening?”

“Hey, remember my cousin Donny?” Soup says. “He drank a bunch of pills dissolved in vodka and asphyxiated on his own vomit.”

“Uh...”

“So isn’t that stupid?”

“Well, yeah...”

“What about my ex-roommate Tobias? After his girlfriend broke up with him because he accidentally killed her cat, he had a breakdown. He thought he was God, locked himself in his room for two weeks and starved to death because he Gods don’t eat, I guess.”

“Why didn’t you help him?”

“We didn’t notice,” Soup squints at me. “Anyway, those were the first people I knew who die. It was pretty bizarre and ever since I’ve never taken death quite seriously.”

“Everyone I’ve ever known that died committed suicide.”

There’s silence. I’m reminded of those Darwin awards that celebrate the demise of unlucky idiots, cleansing the gene pool or whatever. I never found those funny – curious, maybe. More than anything death is just awkward.

“Anyway,” Soup says. “Let’s get wasted.”

So I follow Soup down the hall to the very end. We must be six floors up and I can hear pumping bass and high-strung tempo pounding behind the door. I’m already plugging my ears. How the other guests aren’t calling the cops is beyond me. My generation tends to have these hotel parties a lot, given most of us still live with our parents.

Soup knocks on the door and turns to me, grinning. Like he has some awesome surprise inside. I'm giving that same blank stare. I wish someone else were around to back me up on this.

Stepping inside is such a trip, I feel I'm going back into high school, but the only real thing that's changed is everyone looks older. More stressed, more exhausted, more defeated. The room is filled to the walls with people, almost everyone I can recognize from our mutual enslavement in school. Everyone here, mutual history and a mutual goal – get fucked up.

This is one of those big hotel suites that cost a couple grand a day. And it's crowded as all fuck. I think I hear one of the kids scream how he bought this place with his tuition instead of buying textbooks. Good choice.

I start to notice all the familiar faces and it's dawning on me how many people I sorta just forgot. I notice Marc, Eric and Sara. Jason and Chelsea and Holly. I haven't seen these people since we walked, garbed in black, through a packed auditorium. Since we accepted black cases with nothing inside.

It's hard not to notice Lynn, stumbling around the suite, telling everybody how not drunk she is. She's spilling a red plastic cup of whatever all over some hipster guy wearing an "ironic" Michael Jackson zombie shirt and this guy says, "Your boobs don't look real to me."

I've known Lynn since middle school. She helped a lot of guys experience sex for the first time. And regret. She stalked Friendster and MySpace and Facebook and now, Google Plus probably, so much that she made those pedophiles on that TV show about catching predators look mild. Anyone who'd been between her legs knew she would make you regret every damn minute of it with how much grief she'd give you. And no, ignoring her didn't work, because then she'd just go after your friends.

Now Lynn lifts her shirt and the hipster cops a feel, squeezing and saying, "Alright, I'm convinced."

Lynn comes up to us, telling us how undrunk she is and she sips her cup and smiles lopsided and says, "See? Not drunk."

In the bathroom, I find some kids snorting white shit off a mirror and they look up, asking if I need something, angry and paranoid. I shake my head. Some guy is sprinkling it on his eyeballs and he says, "Feels good, man." And they shut the door.

I notice Brandon and Abby and Kayla. Brian and Vincent and Matt. Cassie and Leah and Andrew. And Soup seems to be making friends all over again, everyone happy to see the class clown again. Won't be long before they have him going on some stupid dare, taking his clothes off and covering himself in Nutella or something.

I start to wonder if it wasn't me that forgot about that freak, forgot about everyone else. Instead, it's the other way around. Maybe everyone forgot me. No one's even asking about my face. It still feels pretty swollen.

Lisa, who was Jimmy's latest girlfriend, hugs me from behind and the first thing I notice is her eyes look pepper-sprayed. Most people know, as indicated by her passive-aggressive status updates, Lisa's thing with Jimmy was strained. Her eye sockets are swollen and red and they won't stop watering. She pushes a blue-tinted shotglass in my hand.

"Want some?" Lisa says, holding a bottle of something alcoholic, something cheaper than water.

“How many are you on?”

Lisa throws back her head, downing something that smells like horse urine, her black, curly hair flying back. It looks recently permed.

“Five. No, six. Maybe seven, but not eight.” Quivering, she pours another drink and smiles halfheartedly.

I shrug. “What’s new?”

Lisa says, “Me? I got a text message. Jimmy broke up with me.”

“Wait, you’ve heard from him? When?”

“About three days ago. Now he won’t return my calls at all!” She sniffs. “I said we could still be friends, friends with benefits even, but I guess he found someone else.”

“Shit, three days ago? That’s when we had that night in the desert…”

“Oh, so where is he tonight?” She’s trying to hide her desperation, but not well.

“I don’t know. I can’t get hold of him now, either.”

“The funny thing is, at that moment I heard, I was listening to that Arcade Fire song, ‘My Body is a Cage.’”

“Um, I’ll have to torrent that one. Is that his favorite song or something?”

“I don’t think so,” she says. “But *Neon Bible* was one of Jimmy’s favorite albums. He always said it was symbolic of our generation. All that paranoia and isolation and shit.”

“Every generation feels that way, don’t they?”

“Jimmy said ‘Windowsill’ was our generation’s ‘Wish You Were Here.’”

“Is it? I thought our generation was too estranged to have a song. I don’t know what ‘our generation’ even means anymore.”

Lisa smiles and turns away, starts to put the shot to her lips and then sets the glass down. “I’m just remembering all these stupid things he said to me because that’s all I have left. I want him, *all* of him, but now all I have are just pieces.”

I’m wondering if that’s all Jimmy ever will be. An accumulation of his opinions and beliefs and if he’s gone, he’s just dispelled, dusty memories. Like you need other people to be fleshed out, to be three-dimensional. Seems like something he’d write in his journal, anyway.

“Anyway,” Lisa shudders. “How’re you?”

I shrug again. “Are you still dealing?” I ask.

Lisa hisses at me, “Keep your voice down.”

“Sorry.”

“What do you need?”

“What do you have?”

“Just some Molly. Pure shit, too. And cheap.”

“Yeah, but I don’t do that shit. I was hoping you had some Xanax or something.”

“Not at the moment.”

Lynn walks by still telling everyone how not drunk she is and again some guy says her boobs look so plastic they could be made in China. So he has to squeeze them and she lifts her shirt again.

I tell Lisa I need to piss and she grabs me and says I’m looking good tonight. I laugh. “Yeah, right.”

I push through people, try to find the door but there's a line so long, it's like everyone's waiting. Turns out, some idiots are copulating in there. We can hear them groaning.

So Karen, the girl from math class, sparks a blunt and passes to me, but she doesn't look me in the eye. Everyone's talking to someone else, but they still seem most interested in themselves, either texting or showing off new SmartPhone apps or whatever. All except the hipsters who are feeling up Lynn.

For one, incredible moment, I'm aware of how much these people meant to me, even if I haven't seen them in years. The more I talk to people, the more I'm noticing how little I'm actually a part of their lives. Yeah, we're friends online, but we don't really talk. Something about my short absence in college has made me miss everything.

I learn Mark is gay, has been all through high school, but something about community college gave him courage to come out. After graduation Sara, got pregnant with Chris and they have a little girl named Whisper. I don't tell them this is a stupid name. Brian's got a military buzzcut and has this hollow look in his eyes. I think he went to Afghanistan or something. Cassie says she's dropping out of Arizona State University and she's gonna hitchhike up to Canada and meet her father for the first time.

There's a cooler and it's mostly just melted ice now, but I find a few cans of Natty Ice, pop one and try not to gag. A minute later, a total stranger and I pop holes in our cans with a ring of keys and suck them dry.

Dexter, this kid I used to have Spanish class with, screams at his ex-girlfriend Lynn about how she'll never see him again, how she's gonna regret this. She starts to puke in the sink and she just laughs. I feel so uninvolved, like watching through a veil, like watching reality TV.

I don't know anything about these people and I thought I did. I thought occasional comments on pictures and statuses meant involvement in their life. I'm not sure if I could get back into this, if I could patch things up, if it would even be the same.

Yet, there's a heavy connection in the air, how we're all here for a reason and yeah, there's nothing to do but get fucked up, but whether we disagree over the Left or the Right or the Stones or the Beatles or whatever, we'll always agree that drugs and alcohol are the best substitutes for personality. And unlike what MADD or DARE will tell you, we don't do drugs because it makes us cool or popular – we do them the same reason hikers climb Everest – it's there.

Soup joins me on the bed, sighs and says, "Who's paying for this place?"

"I think I've committed social suicide."

Soup laughs. "Don't be melodramatic. Speaking of suicide, I knew a guy who slit his wrists and then wrote his note on a typewriter. His brother's here, that's why I thought of it."

"That's . . . dark."

"Yeah, except he got so much blood on the note, his parents could barely read it and he lost consciousness before he finished it." Soup laughs again.

"Hey, Micah, right?" A kid comes by wearing a gas station uniform.

"Yeah. Who are you?"

"It's me, Zach. You don't remember me? I just saw you the other day."

"No, you didn't."

“I totally did. We had like a ten minute conversation about free will. It was at the gas station where I work.” He pointed to his shirt.

“Wait, you mean Saturday night?”

“Friday night, but sure.”

“Was I with Courtney, Dorian and Jimmy?”

“Uh, you were with three guys, yeah...”

“What else? What else?”

“Uh, that’s it. You guys came in, bought some beer and drank it all in the store, even though I told you not to... Then we talked about free will and how you think it’s all an illusion and life is just a hologram created by aliens or something.”

“What? Don’t fuck with me, man.”

“I’m not. Look, I don’t have time for this.”

“Thanks for nothing, dickweed!”

Zach gives me the finger and walks off. The stereo is playing some punk cover of Bowie’s “Five Years.” That hipster kid in the zombie shirt who kept molesting Lynn comes and sits next to us.

“You guys got any weed?” he asks.

I shake my head, fake feeling my pocket so he doesn’t think I’m lying.

“Too bad. This party blows. I had a much better one to go to, some local bands were gonna be there too, but I heard more chicks would be here. Not true. But now I’m too drunk to split.”

“Oh, you should risk it.”

“No way man. I’m still recovering from my first DUI. So fucking expensive. Arizona sucks. Anyway, I guess when the zombie apocalypse ensues, none of this will matter.” He gives a fake laugh and nudges me.

“If you’re one of those World War Z hopefuls waiting for zombies, you should relax,” Soup says. “They’ll only be looking for people with brains.”

Hipster kid laughs, indignant. “You’re a fucking asshole. I like your style.”

“Kiss my ass.”

I find Lisa again and take the whole bottle from her, glistened with tears and down the rest. She kisses me on the cheek and gives me a smile that indicates she understands.

This drama is starting to suffocate, so I step outside onto the empty balcony. I pop a Valium and a yellow pill, which I know I shouldn’t do with alcohol running through me, but then I roll myself a little joint and start puffing away. Suddenly, Dexter and some girl come outside. Dexter’s talking, babbling and waving his arms all around, blathering about something I’m barely able to follow. Maybe I’m just really fucked up, but I can’t keep my eyes off the girl.

She has thin-rimmed, bug-eyed Ray-Ban Aviator sunglasses nestled on her tiny nose, which has a piercing on the left and below that she’s gnawing on a juicy wad of Hubba Bubba. Her immaculate neckline, wreathed with a hefty pair of Skull Candy headphones, the cord leading down to her cleavage, her breasts tucked under a plain white shirt wrapped in a black hoodie. She has red shorts that hug the butt and even if she probably thinks her thighs are too big, her legs are the perfect length. Her shoes are white, soft slippers.

Then, it clicks. It’s Olive.

“What happened to your face?”

I haven’t seen Olive in years, not since graduation for sure. She got a full-ride out of state and I never told her how I felt about her. She was my high school crush, the apex of my misplaced teen angst, that “one that got away.” And I’d be lying if I said flutters of those high-tension emotions didn’t remain.

“Hey, did you hear me?”

I blink. Olive’s voice cutting the air.

“I said, what happened to your face?” she says again.

“Oh. Nothing.” Me, the world’s most brilliant conversationalist.

“It’s been ages since we’ve talked.”

I nod and smile and hope I wasn’t staring at her tits too noticeably.

“Anyway, I know, I know,” Dexter says, turning her back from me. “People are starving, the world’s blown to hell, whatever. Yeah, but why aren’t my problems still relevant? They’re still my problems, ya know?”

Olive nods and glances at me, a look of knowing, knowing how stupid this drama is. We both knew Dexter in high school, endured his over-the-top emo phase and besides ditching the clothes, he never really grew out of it. He still feels he’s the most important, most sensitive person in the room. Really, that just means he’s an emotional hazard.

“I only cheated on Lynn once or twice,” Dexter says. “We were still living together for Christ’s sake. She didn’t have to parade her new boyfriend in front of me.”

“Well, you know,” Oliver rolls her eyes so only I can see. “Look, can I be honest?”

“Be brutal.” Dexter nods his head too eagerly. “I need it.”

“Lynn’s new guy did have a car and a job that wasn’t at some pizza joint called Mellow Mushroom and doesn’t freak out when he’s drunk.”

“I don’t freak out when I’m drunk! Fuck!” Dexter’s drink sloshes onto my shoe. “Look at her! She’s the one being a fuckin’ slut, falling all over the place. I’m gonna go check on her.”

And then it’s just me and Olive.

“What a guy,” I say.

“What a fucking asshole,” Olive says. “I can’t believe he still hasn’t grown up. Soon enough, Lynn’s gonna come crying to me. There’s no way I can deal with this right now. I’m taking off.”

“Um, listen, can I get your phone number?”

She stares at me. “How fucking stoned are you?”

“Enough.”

She laughs. “Lightweight. Here, let me spell it out for you, Casanova. That was an invitation. Finish your drink. We’re leaving.”

So we stroll down downtown streets, such eerie contrast to the roar of the party, but it’s relaxing. My drunk, stoned, soupy head has a chance to slightly recover. Olive passes under each streetlight, her eyes glowing like fiber optics, in a surreal hazel hue, her lips glistening a neon pink shade I never knew existed. Her blushing cheeks tinted yellow, a weird jaundice that’s turning me on.



Something about my stupor gives me confidence. “How much do you remember from high school?”

“That was years ago,” Olive says. “Next to nothing. I blocked those memories out.”

“That’s a good sign.”

“I kinda remember you being a little asshole.”

I turn to her in mock surprise.

“Still are,” she says.

“You wouldn’t know.”

“You treated me like shit half the time, then acted like some sort of angel the rest. You took Kayla to prom and like, I never gave a shit about that kinda stuff, but remember how I bought us those tickets to see Interpol and you blew me off? I think you kinda owe me for that bullshit, don’t you?”

I shrug. “This isn’t what I want to remember.”

We wander into a neighborhood and she grabs my hand in the dark and pulls me down an alley, finding two sticks and handing me one. She runs down the alley, tapping against all the fences she jogs alongside. I follow her blindly, the alley darker than ink, rapping each fence post that slides by.

In seconds, every dog in every backyard is awake and barking at us. Other dogs listen up and bark back. Dogs in other zip codes are howling, like in that Dalmatians family flick. The entire night is heavy with barking, yapping, snarling canine voices.

In seconds, every person in the neighborhood is wide-awake at some ungodly hour, yelling and pissed. No one can sleep through this noise, even in a Nyquil-induced coma. When Olive and I meet the end of the alley, we drop our weapons, and run as fast as we can down the street. A few incoming cop sirens lacerate the night, investigating the noise.

We pause, out of breath and Olive says, pointing, “That’s my work. That building over there. A pizza joint, where the tips suck and my boss leers at me all day. There, that’s his car. The cloth top Jaguar XK. He runs a drug dealing operation out of this ‘fine dining establishment,’ I swear. How else could he afford that? During the interview he asked me if I had a problem delivering things ‘other’ than pizzas.”

She wants me to check out the car, wonders why it’s parked here so late anyway and then pushes me against the hood. Soon we’re kissing and I’m grabbing fistfuls of her hair and pulling her ass into me, and then she pulls back.

“Ow, this is jamming into my hip.” The girl pulls out a flask, takes a swig and passes it to me. “Scotch. Classy girls drink scotch.”

I clumsily try to roll a joint, but she says, “I have an idea. Follow me.”

Taking a brick, she throws it through the glass door and I’m so fucked up I just laugh. Olive grabs my hand and leads me inside, running through the back and up a flight of stairs. She kicks at a door and it swings wide to reveal the roof, waking up dozens of sleeping pigeons, taking flight, leaving pillows of feathers behind.

The sky is slowly starting to ripen with sunlight, that whole blue, lace-like time outside of time. It feels different not experiencing it alone.

Downstairs, the alarm goes off and the sound of sirens gets ever closer. The girl grabs a cinder block near the door and runs to the side, throwing it off and onto the Jaguar. It crushes the soft-top and shatters the windshield and the car alarm is shrieking.

She screams, “I quit!” and kisses me again, over the sound of the dogs, the building alarm, the car alarm and the ominous sirens and that’s when the door closes and we both realize that cinder block was the only thing that was gonna prop it open. We’re locked out up here and just as we catch our breath, the sun breaks over the mountains and the day arrives. Below us, an entire world of turmoil is at war with its own paranoia, crying like a child afraid of the dark.

And the haze – of marijuana, of pills, of booze – it becomes a thickening cloud, arms reaching out to me and embracing me tighter than the girl with her arms around my neck.

So I wake up with a start and realize I’m still surrounded by the noise of sirens. Some alley, next to some dumpster. While checking to make sure I still have my wallet and cell phone, I notice flames rising out of the building in front of me. The Hyatt I was just at. The sixth floor is just one sheet of orange blaze.

Is this fire my fault, too? This can’t be – I was with Olive. Where the fuck is she? Fire trucks are pulling up all around me, aiming hoses into the sky and it feels like it’s raining. It still feels so hot.

One kid from the party, he’s sitting on the curb wrapped in a blanket from the hotel. He keeps coughing.

“Dude, what happened?”

“Smoke inhalation something,” he coughs again.

“No, to the building.”

“Oh. I dunno. We just came into the hallway and it was filled with smoke. Someone set some stuff on fire in the elevator or something.”

“Everyone get out?”

“I think so.”

“Have you seen Olive?”

“Who?”

I try calling her, but end up getting her voicemail. I leave a message, something about calling me back and we should get together again, but I doubt she could hear anything over the sound of the commotion behind me. I sigh. Some cops come up to ask that blanket kid some questions and I sneak off, round a corner and start jogging until the sirens are out of earshot.

## Chapter Four

Nov. 5

*Depression, a constant companion. Take her hand to the grave. Time to settle down. First the career, then the house, the bitch like a trophy, the kids like clones of my problems, insecurities, shortcomings. My strengths, passions, virtues, still unrealized. Installed in offspring like the knee-jerk reaction to Pledge Allegiance to the Flag of the United States of America and to the Republic, for which it stands... The fear of drugs, violence and crime. The creation of drugs, violence and crime. The high-definition reports splattered across the 6 o'clock hour, the inherent love and hate relationship with drugs, violence and crime. And also, war. The destruction of a foreign place with foreign ideas, foreign books, foreign food, foreign houses, foreign people with foreign careers, foreign wives, foreign kids... One Nation under God. Only one. Push those chips forward. If you're channeling Thompson who is channeling Kerouac who is channeling Hemingway who is channeling ... Who are you really stealing from? Take it in stride. Hold her hand, take it to the grave. Cold mornings when you wake up in sweat and cannot drift off again. Sun's barely out there, it feels. Every shadow is hollow and you could get lost in that deep, stabbing gray. Neutrality. Total isolation and no stimulation. Not leaning left or right. Impartial. Nonpartisan. Indifferent. Indivisible. Unemotional. Depressed. Depression, your constant companion. Take her hand... Channel McCarthy channeling Faulkner channeling Melville channeling Hugo... Liberty and Justice for all.*

Jimmy just left two entire pages jammed up like this with zero paragraph breaks. Strange. I'm lying on my back on the couch, recovering from the previous night's hangover and reading his journal while Soup is prepping his fifth bong rip in an hour and Trevor is banging against the TV the way old geezers having heart attacks pound their chests.

"They scrambled all the cable signals or something," Trevor says, collapsing on a loveseat pocked with cigarette burns. "Man, I fuckin' hate this new technology."

"Let's play the 64," Soup says. "I'll kick your ass in Super Smash."

"I sold that, remember? To that Mexican kid down the street."

"That was mine! How much did you sell it for?"

"Ten bucks. But don't be mad. I bought that coke from Gabe with it and shared that with you."

"That coke was bullshit," Soup says. "It was mostly flour."

Trevor laughs. "Oh yeah. It was."

"I fucking hate you, man." Soup grumbles, walking to the fridge, pulling out a beer and popping it open. He kicks over a bunch of laundry and throws a bottle at the wall, but Trevor doesn't seem to notice. The front door slams open and the summer heat rushes in and I scream at the silhouette in the doorway, "Close the damn door, you're letting the cold air out!"

“What cold air?” The shadow says. It’s Karlee, holding two armfuls of grocery bags. “It’s hot as dog balls in here. Can you at least help me with this?”

Everyone groans, but Trevor eventually gets up. “What is this?” he says, lifting one of the bags. “How many things of cough syrup is this? Is this muriatic acid? What are you doing with all this PVC pipe?”

Karlee looks Trevor dead in the eye and says, “What about it?”

“You are not cooking meth in my house!” Taylor slams the bags on the floor.

“Shut the damn door!” I yell.

“You can’t tell me what to do. I pay rent, too,” Karlee says to Trevor.

“Not on time! And not in my house!”

“Fine! I’m fucking moving out!”

At this point, I use all my strength, get up, go outside anyway. Soup follows me. I light a cigarette and he asks if I wanna deuce one.

“You stupid bitch! You can’t move out! You know how much you owe me? Oww, oww, stop pulling the dreads!”

“I can still hear them outside,” I spit, passing the cigarette. “I don’t know how you stand living with them, not to mention this filth. I have bug bites all over.”

Soup laughs. “This one time, Karlee had this guy living here who didn’t pay rent or nothing, but he thought it would be funny to flush a bar of soap down the toilet.”

“Smart.”

“It flooded the whole back bathroom, but no one took care of it, so the baseboards rotted away and this weird mold started growing on all the walls. It would’ve taken the mold dudes weeks to take care of it, not to mention the huge cost, so Trevor took care of it by lightly torching all the walls with a homemade fire thingy.”

“A flamethrower?”

Soup nods and hands the cigarette back to me.

“Somehow, I don’t envy your landlord.”

“She doesn’t know, so don’t tell her.”

“I keep blacking out, man.”

“Yeah? What are you gonna do?”

“Something I haven’t done in months – go sober.”

“Really? That’s too bad. We’re going to a party tonight.”

“Well, I’ll be DD.”

“Sweet.”

A crash as pots and pans and cough syrup came flying through a window, glass shards littering the dirt. Karlee storms out of the house and out the gate and screams that she’s calling the cops.

I yell after her, “Does that mean I can have your bed?”

I end up driving us all the way to Mesa, which is like an hour drive from Soup’s place. By the time we arrive, the entire block is packed with cars and we can hear music from two blocks away, where we end up parking.

“So no weed, no alcohol, nothing?” Trevor asks.

“Nope. Micah says he’s going sober,” Soup says.

“Lame.”

“I can speak for myself. I just fuck up when I’m blacked out,” I say. “I’m punishing myself with sobriety.”

Trevor says, “I just need to get away from Karlee.”

“Whatever. You two will be having makeup sex all day tomorrow,” Soup says. Ick.

When we reach the front door, three chollo kids are sitting on the doorstep. They look half our age, but have twice the tattoos and I can see the outline of a gun underneath the youngest one’s baggy t-shirt.

“You can’t go in, mang,” the tall one says. “We don know chu.”

“I know Louise,” Trevor says. “I’m Watermelon to him.”

“Whoa homie, you’re Watermelon? You’re his guy?”

“Yeah. If you need shrooms, you call me.”

“Nah mang, that shit makes your brain bleed and you go crazy.”

Soup laughs and says, “And marijuana is addictive.”

The next moment we’re inside. We spread out immediately and Soup goes for a giant fishtank of jungle juice. Trevor goes upstairs to sell large quantities from his backpack filled with Afghany Goo, Jack Herer and Sour Diesel. I just sit on the steps of the stairs and check my phone, but nothing’s going on in internet land. Some kids next to me are smoking shake from a crushed up beer can and I say, “Don’t do that, you amateurs. Inhaling the burning aluminum is terrible for you.”

The oldest looking kid with the thickest, hipster glasses says, “Do you have a pipe then?”

“No. Does this place have any apples?”

“Eww, who eats raw apples?”

“Raw apples?” I say.

“Yeah man, apples are gross unless they’re in something.”

After that, I decide the next few hours are best spent not trying to make conversation. I keep going outside to smoke and try and make eyes with a girl or two, but I’ve let my hygiene slide so much and my face is still disarranged a little. They won’t give me the time of day.

I see Lisa there, tears all dried from her face now and I approach her, but she’s so busy talking to some hipster with a beard, she doesn’t even say ‘hi.’

“I don’t need women anyway,” I mutter. I think about texting Olive, but she hasn’t responded to the last three I sent and I don’t want to overdo it.

Jesus, did I kill her, too?

Soup somehow stumbles around, double fisting Solo cups and he says, “Dude, how’s it going?”

“I’m fine.”

“Why are you shaking so much?”

He’s right – I am shaking. “It’s cold,” I say.

“It’s the middle of summer,” Soup says. “Dude, you’re getting worse.”

“Am I having alcohol withdrawals?”

“I dunno. Here.” Soup puts one of his half-finished beers in my hand. I finish it in two swigs.

“Didn’t work,” Soup says. “Follow me.”

We go into the kitchen and I proceed to down three shots. Soup matches me for every one and we stumble back into the backyard.

“Still nothing,” I say. I’m really beginning to shake now. My knees are clacking.

Soup snatches a joint from a scenester kid with Hot Topic tattoos and hands it to me. I inhale it so fast my face glows.

“Hey!” The scenester yells. I hand him back the roach.

“You saved my life, man,” I breathe through the smoke.

But no dice. Ten minutes later and I’m still shaking.

“I don’t get it,” Soup says. “It’s like you’re withdrawing from something.”

“Maybe it’s nothing. Maybe I just have the shakes. Maybe I have shaken baby syndrome.”

“Have you been taking any drugs beside the Valium?”

“Wait, how did you know I had Valium?”

“I found it on you when you were sleeping. Hope you don’t mind I helped myself,” Soup grins. “But that’s not important now. Take whatever pills you’ve been taking. Now.”

I pop a Valium and one of those highlighter yellow pills.

“What are the yellow ones?” Soup asks, snatching the bottle from me. But of course, the labels are still missing after I tore them off.

“I don’t remember.”

“It looks like some kind of meth or something. Desoxyn maybe? You should look it up.”

“Sure”

But that’s about all I remember.

Again, my memory dissolves into puddles of black ink. I see myself kissing a kind of fat girl, too fat for TV anyway and then I see myself holding back her hair as she pukes in the bushes then I see myself on the roof of the house and kids are jumping into the green pool water and now I’m wet and I don’t know how and then darkness, then Lisa’s deep, brown eyes, she blinks and she’s gone and my memory lags like a broken video game. The blue screen of death.

Jump to: swerving all over the I-17 as Trevor pukes out the window and I try to light a joint that’s gone out and Soup is fiddling with the radio and juggling a fat sack filled with fast food. Red and blue lights ahead. Another blank.

Then, I find myself on the couch, I jump up and knock over a pile of beer bottles and they spill into some risqué magazines and the TV is the only light in the room, but it’s stuck on snow and I realize I’m safe and they’re aren’t any fires.

I peek outside and Soup’s car is there, intact and I smell my clothes and they don’t smell burnt. I let out a big sigh and fall back asleep.

I’m woken up by my phone ringing. The phone is all wet somehow and it’s making weird sounds, but I can just barely make out the caller ID and it’s Olive. She must not hate me after all. Good, at least she’s not disappeared forever. I’m still barely awake, but I try to hold a conversation anyway. It’s not going so well.

She says, thanks for the good time the other night. She told her boss she quit today and the cops came by, but they can’t pin shit on her. Not yet, anyway.

“I’m glad to hear that.”

“I was really moved by what you told me. I mean, *really* moved.”

“Uh huh.”

“I’m going to make some drastic changes to my life because of you.”

“Sure. Wait, whaddya mean?” For some reason, I think she means she wants to get pregnant.

“All that stuff you went on about. It really changed the way I look at life.”

“What did I say? What are you talking about?”

“I can’t really put it into words,” the girl pauses. “Something about living for today, but not as preachy. Like how Jesus or maybe one of those guys would say it. Mystical. I dunno. You were really fucked up. I could tell. But it made a lot of fucking sense and I’m really grateful.”

I can’t remember a goddamn thing from that night with the girl, not after we busted that convertible. I have no idea what she’s going on about, but I say, “Um, ok.”

“I just hope you don’t forget. You owe me. For all that shit you pulled in high school. You agreed to pay me back.”

I gulp.

“With interest.”

“Um, sure, I guess.”

“So get your ass over here. Things are just starting.”

So on the bus, I’m trying to think if I fucked Olive or not. I decide I didn’t, a kind of negative reinforcement so I’ll try again and maybe remember what I did with her this time. I’ve already taken half my prescribed dosage of painkillers and these highlight yellow pills, so I’ll just avoid those and avoid the blackouts, right? Right.

When I get off at my stop and walk the block to Olive’s house, I can already see the smoke. She’s got a huge barrel on fire on the front yard, the kind homeless people gather around in old, dystopian films. Smoke spews out, a fire raging inside. Olive yells down the street, “You’ve got to help me!”

All I’m noticing is how the orange radiates in her platinum blond hair, her eyes little blue lighter flames. I’ve never seen anyone smile like she is now, kind of desperate and confused and ecstatic.

And Olive has this big stack of books and CDs and notebooks and papers next to her feet and she hands me a binder and says, “Go for it.”

“Wait, why?”

“I’m destroying my outside self,” Olive says. “I’ve spent my entire life reenacting scenes from movies, my choice words are lyrics from songs. I have entire volumes of literature, but none of that is *myself*. So help me. Burn it.”

I give her a look, trying to tell her she’s overreacting. She’s giving me back that big, eager smile.

“Wouldn’t you do this?” Olive asks.

“I don’t really get it. And no.”

“What’s to get? My Facebook page doesn’t represent who I am. My personalized ringtone is a song I heard in an iPod commercial. My identity doesn’t represent me at all. My current persona is nothing! It’s fake, it’s a simulation!” Olive is starting to scream

and I'm getting worried about the neighbors. "I have to destroy it and create an enigma of myself."

She looks me dead in the eye. "Really? You wouldn't do this for yourself? I thought you were a pyro or something."

"What are you burning here?" I ask. "Journals, photographs, just some shit like that?"

"Everything."

"No. I can't. When we die, our personal accounts are all we're gonna have left." I pull out Jimmy Kane's journal. "If Jimmy's dead, this is all he has left. This is it."

"Burn that too!" She tries to grab it from me.

"Are you fucking crazy?" I step back.

"Why is it we don't want to end up like all those dead people who have no mark on history? Why do we see that as a bad thing? Maybe it's a blessing. It's a relief. All the equity taken out on your mistakes is earned back and you're given one last party and no one remembers you. Let's become anonymous. Not asshole YouTube anonymous. Nothing. Let's burn out like humans are supposed to. Become extinct like ghosts or anonymous, temporary gods."

Olive lifts a huge stack of her shit over the bonfire and then says, "I can't do it."

I sigh. "Are we done here?"

"No. You have to do it. Do it for *me*."

"Why?"

"I'm obviously too attached. I confess, I'm scared. You have to. This is that favor I asked you for."

"Is this some way of getting my attention?" And I'm thinking, what in the fuck did I tell her the other night?

"Just do it."

"Are you drunk?"

"No."

"Stoned?"

"I'm sober. Will you do it?"

I laugh, shaking my head. Hell no. This is a trick.

Enraged, Olive throws the pile at me. I'm hit in the face with a photo album the size of a dictionary. Immediately, my nose busts open. Her papers, kindergarten art, poems, awards and certificates, it all explodes and floats down the street. She jumps on me and pounds me in the ribs and screams, "What's wrong with you? Just burn it! Destroy me!"

I'm bleeding everywhere, too stunned and hungover to fight back and I just have to laugh. Olive struggles to hold me down, kicking over the barrel and it's not only burning her stack of personal history – all her report cards, her macaroni necklaces and finger paintings, her love letters and receipts – it's burning her fake, irrigated lawn, her neighbor's lawn and her clothes.

"It all happens so fast," Olive says, and she calmly smothers the fires out. For good measure, she takes the garden hose and sprays the lawn down. She dumps what isn't fried into the recycling.

"Well?" I say.

"Well, that was either the most brilliant thing I've ever done or one of the stupidest," Olive murmurs. "Either way, my mom's gonna be pissed when she sees the



lawn.”

So I ditch Olive and she doesn't even kiss me goodbye or acknowledge anything about us before. Whatever. I'm on top of Shaw Butte again, squatting inside Cloud 9. I suddenly had the idea to check for Dorian, Courtney and Jimmy where we partied last, but I don't find them. I just find my blood on the floor.

This little abandoned mansions is creepy enough to earn *Amityville Horror* status. In every corner, there's a piece of furniture draped in a dusty white sheet, like strung-out, passed-out ghosts. And nearly everything's on fire.

I'm holding a rag to my face, trying not to breathe in and I'm talking to the ghosts in this place. I'm talking to Jimmy, like he's really there.

“I'm losing my mind, man. And you were always the one that kept me on the straight and narrow. Why did you disappear?”

Surrounding us are flames twice our size, groping up the curtains and ripping the whole ceiling to shreds. Jimmy's telling me to run for my life.

I'm screaming, laughing, standing at the very top step and yelling, “I can't believe I did this! This is like some backwards cry for attention!”

Those flames, they're getting higher, the smoke is a fog and I'm thinking of how more people die from smoke than fire, I'm thinking which one will get me, I'm thinking about my charred, burnt neighbors and the burning hotel and how I just want to know I started one fire. Just one. This one.

“I didn't kill you, did I, Jimmy? I didn't burn your body with Dorian and Courtney in the desert, did I?”

But this fire has gotten out of hand already I can't resist fire – it's so sexy. Just watching the flames twist and twirl around is better than any striptease. I wish I could wrap my hands around it, coat my body in it and fuck in it.

“We owned this house! Jimmy, do you remember?” I'm screaming, laughing, I'm scaring myself. “Do you remember how we found this place?”

Jimmy's still yelling, “We gotta go!” But now I'm thinking of it, how we found this place.

This was just before high school, freshman year. Jimmy takes us on a hike, me, Dorian and Courtney up the mountain, the moon barely lighting a trail, using our cell phones as flashlights and we climb for an hour, passing a single blunt between us, so stoned, barely wary of rattlesnakes and scorpions. At the very top, Jimmy reveals this mansion. It's three or four story, thousands of boarded up, busted up windows. Probably built in the '40s, probably haunted, Winchester House style.

Jimmy says this old married couple, the Brady's, used to live here. Her husband was an eccentric, rich, old bastard. Thought he was God and his mansion was like his throne. He built his castle on a hill, overlooking Sunnyslope and Phoenix's developmental boom of the 1950's. Mr. Brady watched the whole city rise from the ashes.

The flames are getting higher all around me and I'm still laughing my stupid head off, screaming, “That motherfucker! That motherfucker!” Did I mention I had been drinking? Again, combined with the pills, I know I'm not thinking clearly.

That rich, old bastard died, so they say, at the hands of his wife. She took a long, slender butcher knife and while he slept – stab, stab, stab – through the neck. She wanted his money, wanted her life back. Wanted to be God.

Problem is, they were so isolated, no one ever visited them. The car was old because it was so unused and wouldn't start. And poor Mrs. Brady had some health condition, she couldn't walk the three miles down the mountain.

Mrs. Brady slowly starved to death in this house. A gas man only came by to check her usage and found her agonized skeleton, curled up in bed with her husband's corpse. The bank could never sell the place, so they just locked it up.

Anyway, that's the story I heard. The story Jimmy told us. I'm yelling to him, trying to remember all this with him, but I'm vaguely aware he's not actually there.

"First blackouts, now hallucinations?" I scream at the flames surrounding me.

When we found this place, Jimmy opened the door to this house and he says, "This is Cloud 9. Given the circumstances, there's no doubt this place is haunted, but now this place will be ours."

The fire is blooming the way ink spreads through wet newspaper. The way blood pools into gutters. The way I once burned my cousin's porno mags, pious little me, saving his soul with fire. And yet, the heat peeled back the centerfolds and I couldn't resist watching. I gave into lust. Lust and fire.

Jimmy shows us around. He's already been here a dozen times alone before sharing it with us. At the end of a long corridor is a busted mirror, hundreds of cut up little reflections.

In Cloud 9, I was given an identity. I had so many first experiences in here. My first time smoking cigarettes, smoking weed, drinking, but those aren't important. Not as important as who I became.

I was baptized here and I was given communion.

And I got chills, a lot of the time. Doors closed on their own, when there was no wind. Even saw a few words, REDRUM and HELL AWAITS and all that bullshit, scrawled in what looked like blood, seeping through walls in the master bedroom.

None of these things bothered us. We busted holes in the ceiling and let the light in. When there was a chill, we broke a window. We took the doors off the hinges and used them as kindling. We spray painted our names over the blood.

Me, Jimmy, Courtney and Dorian -- we haunted this place now. We lived in its corridors and halls, becoming so lost in the arteries we never found the heart. Searching for minotaurs in our labyrinth.

And Jimmy said, we could never give it up. Only we could own it, own it forever. If something happened, if it got resold at auction in this miserable housing economy, if some other teenage punks squatted in it to hide from their parents a couple days, anything, we had to destroy it. And if three people died and there's only one left, he has to make sure no one else takes it.

And so I felt that's what I had to do. Only now I was hallucinating my friend was here to help me. We started the fire in the living room and stood at the door, just watching it swell.

And now, the fire, it's cutting deep, dark holes in the roof and the smoke is escaping. The stars are glowing through, rippling in the heat. I'm still laughing as I

calmly walk down the stairs and out the door. Like it's nothing. I turn to Jimmy and he's not there and I start to stumble a little.

A little down the trail, the mansion collapses behind me and a swarm of sparks bursts into the air.

## Chapter Five

*Dec. 3*

*Read something about this 16-year-old girl, Brenda.*

*One day she shot up a school, Grover Cleveland Elementary, from across the street, injuring eight kids, killing the principal and the janitor.*

*Brenda barricaded herself in her house for seven hours. Said she would come out shooting, but eventually surrendered peacefully. The cops took her away and the nosy press asked, "Why'd you do it, why'd you do it?" Brenda answered, totally sober, totally straight-faced, "I don't like Mondays."*

*All I can think of is, what motivation. What ambition, what drive. I would kill for that kind of dedication to something, although I hope it'd be something less violent.*

*Maybe Brenda just needed a friend.*

My phone is still acting up from the party. Now the screen is completely dead and it keeps buzzing in my pocket, someone calling, but when I answer all I can hear is garbling anyway. I spend another half the day stoned on Soup's couch, reading Jimmy's journal.

"Do you have an extra cellphone I can borrow?" I ask Trevor.

"Nah man," Trevor says, picking the jam from his toes and smearing it on the loveseat. "You can check Karlee's old room."

"Did she come back?"

"Not yet. I think she's staying with that Omar dude."

"Did he get out of tent city already?" Soup asks, setting the bong on the coffee table, knocking a pizza box on the floor.

"It's been six months already."

"Oh."

In Karlee's room, there's just that naked mattress, but all the clothes are gone. The window is blacked out with a black plastic bag and the only light comes from a bent lamp in the corner. I can barely see anything. The closet is empty except for empty bottles, a bent Michael Crichton book and a number of used condoms. I can feel my stomach curdling at the thought that I was sleeping on this filth not long ago.

"She doesn't have a phone," I say, trying not to gag.

Trevor sighs and grumbles and gets to his feet. "I guess we have to go get one for you then. You can't live without your phone, can you?"

"Probably not." I shrug.

Soup says, "I'm comin' too."

We walk six blocks to a strip mall on the corner of McDowell and it's probably 110° outside today and I didn't realize how blazed I was until I had to attempt to walk somewhere. I notice I have more unexplained suction-cup shaped bruises on my legs.

"Can we stop inside QT real quick for a drink?" I beg.

"Please," Soup gasps.

Inside, the waft of air conditioning hits us like the Great Blizzard of 1888. But I would rather suffer in this intense desert heat any day than actually face a blizzard. I may have only seen snow once or twice in my life, but I hate it.

I'm so busy enjoying the cool air, I hardly notice the cop standing by the door, glaring at everyone that walks in. This gas station gives free coffee to the local police, either out of intimidation or half-assed patriotism, but either way it equals free security. I look long and hard at the officer's jagged, stoney face with my dopey, red-as-a-fire-hydrant eyes and smile. This is one of my favorite hobbies: when I'm stoned out of my mind in public and around the local authorities, but have no drugs on me, so I can't get busted. It's not illegal to be high in public. Not exactly.

The cop scowls back at me but does nothing. If he arrested me or frisked me, nothing would happen, but he knows I'm on something. "What do you want," the cop growls.

"Just wanna say 'thanks,'" I say.

"For what."

"For doing such a good job." All three of us burst into giggles and head off to the soda fountain, stretched out to the ends of the walls and fill up cups three times the size of our head. In the checkout, a fat woman with three kids is buying six bags of Nacho Cheese chips, a case of coke and an armful of pastries. Naturally, she whips out her EBT card, the 21st Century version of food stamps.

"Oh c'mon you stupid, fat bitch," Trevor mumbles. The cop shuffles and the woman turns.

"Excuse me?"

"Sorry. I didn't know you were hard of hearing. I said, you're a STUPID FAT BITCH."

The woman's jaw drops and she pulls the smallest child to her side.

"I can't believe you're wasting my tax dollars on that bullshit. I have to support your diabetic coma, you know."

"Don't call me a bitch in front of my children," the woman says. "I'll buy what I want with my cash."

"It isn't your money, you cow."

Soup and I are just rolling laughing at this point and one of the kids even starts bawling. Even the cop starts to laugh a little.

"You gonna do something about this?" The fattie says to the officer. "I can do what I want with this card. It's legal."

"And it's legal for them to say what they want," the cop retorts.

"I don't believe this," the walking butter tub says and she pushes the junk food on the floor and storms out with her kids in tow. "Pig!" she shouts at the cop. "Fag!" she shouts at Trevor.

We watch her get into a mini-van and drive off and outside we're dying with laughter. "The best part is," Trevor grins, reaching into his wallet and pulling out an EBT card. "I don't even pay taxes."

We walk on past Roosevelt Row and I realize it must be Third Friday or something because all the art galleries are open and there's crowds of hipsters everywhere. I find myself wishing I could be in one of those galleries, I mean, have some kind of visual art hanging on the walls. I'm so lost in thought, I barely notice when we

walk right past a used cell phone repair store with big orange signs that read “WE BUY GOLD.”

“Here’s good, right?” I say, pointing to the door, but Trevor and Soup keep walking and turn into a thrift store. “Where are we gonna find a cell phone here?” I ask. No response.

But sure enough, in the electronics section, there’s a small crate filled with old cell phones. Trevor starts digging through it and pulls out one, turning it on. A few seconds later, he’s flipping through the pictures. “Goldmine,” he says, holding up the screen to us. It’s a pair of tits. “Self-shot porn. The best kind. I can’t wait to post these online.”

“That phone is so old,” I say.

“Yeah, but remember how popular it used to be six years ago? Isn’t that strange?” Soup says.

“Yeah, back then it was novel just because it had a camera,” I say. “Now it doesn’t even have internet access.”

“You don’t need internet,” Trevor grunts, shoving the phone in his pocket. He rifles through hanging garden of chargers and finds one that fits. “Let’s go.”

Outside, a dirty looking dude is drinking a malt liquor and he asks me, “Got a dollar?”

I shake my head, but Soup gives him a handful of change.

“Thanks man,” the dude says. “Do you know what bus will get me to 19th Avenue and Peoria?”

“Well, using all the incredible knowledge at my disposal,” Soup says, tapping his brain. “Probably the 19th Avenue bus...”

“Oh, goodie, ‘cuz I know these filthy ass bitches over there that’ll do anything for me. That’s why I call it Sunny *Slop*.”

Right.

Back home, I switch SIM cards. All my contacts are erased, but my phone starts exploding with missed calls, texts and voicemails. I just can’t tell who is who. Sigh. The first voicemail is my mother. I recognize the voice and she says something about the cops stopping by again and again and they just want to talk, they just want to know the whole story and can’t I just come home please?

Sorry, Mom. Not till I know the whole story first.

The rest of the voicemails are from Lisa. I recognize her voice, too. She just keeps saying, “Call me back, sweetie.” No word from anyone else yet.

My phone rings. I’m expecting Lisa again, but surprise, it’s Olive.

“Hey, how are you?”

“I’m feeling like a switchboard operator,” I grumble.

“Fun. Did you know the dial tone was invented by an undertaker? I read that online. He worked in a small town and made a killing. His business started to fail when a competing undertaker started dating the town’s switchboard operator and she gave her boyfriend all the good dead people. To get even, the undertaker invented the dial tone, putting the operator out of a job.”

I cough.

“My point is, I wish I could feel that kind of revenge,” Olive says. “Makes me feel unproductive.”

“There was once a guy who got screwed over by the city, much like your undertaker. So he encased a bulldozer in cement, welded himself inside and went on a rampage. The ‘Killdozer,’ as it was called, this one-man demolition team, was able to plow right through buildings. Tore through walls like butter. I wish I felt *that* kind of revenge.”

“Nice. What happened to him?”

“He accidentally drove into someone’s basement, got himself stuck, so he blew his brains out.”

“Ouch. Listen, you still owe me a favor.”

“Whatever. I somewhat helped you burn your lawn already.”

“That was an accident. It doesn’t count. I need a real favor.”

“I should probably lay low.”

“Why?”

“They’re after me.”

“Don’t be dumb.”

“Whatever.”

“But you *owe* me.”

Sigh.

“Where are you?”

“Citizen’s Cemetery. Come quick.”

Somehow, this cemetery feels like it’s evaded the summer heat. Some places in the Valley are so over-irrigated, they’re soaking in cold, swampy humidity. The morning monsoon rain makes it worse. It feels like fall. I’m reluctantly trudging through puddles, accumulations of soggy pine needles and dead leaves. It feels like inescapable drudgery.

I’m still slightly hungover, unamused, at the very least tired. My buzz has worn off and like the sky, I feel overcast. Olive is waiting for me near the gate, holding an orange juice crate full of flowers.

“These were left over from my mom’s catering job,” she says, raising the box to my nose. The perfume, all these strong pollens and pheromones, they overwhelm me. It almost stinks.

Olive starts placing the brilliantly-dyed flowers, the stems hacked off and dripping wet, onto any graves that look lonely. The plants are fake-colored anti-freeze green, canary yellow, amethyst and opal.

We go to each grave, one by one, gently adding color to the grey stones. I’m ignoring any new or military graves, looking for markers placed in Citizen’s Cemetery that are for normal people, people so long dead they never knew what electricity was or chemical warfare or strip malls or nuclear holocaust or ATM’s or any of this. Their pain, centuries old, long buried, seems more justified than this. Maybe it shouldn’t be forgotten.

“What are you thinking?” Olive asks me.

I shrug. “Nothing.”

“How do you want to die?”

“Fire. I wanna be cooked like a sausage. You?”

“Quietly. I don’t want to make a fuss. Or a mess.”

“Yeah, but who cares if you do? You can leave giant stains on the interstate or stink up an apartment for three months and no one will get angry. They’ll forgive you. You can get away with anything when you die.”

“Sometimes death is the only way to apologize.”

“Don’t talk like that. That’s not true at all.”

She shrugs, shuffles off, sprinkling blossoms on graves as she goes, like some macabre flower girl. I keep exploring. Brushing back dirt and leaves, I hunger for causes of death, some kind of excuse, but there are none. Almost like it’s too embarrassing to mention. For every dead person, it could have been drowning or smoke inhalation or executions or heart attacks or suicide or anything. My thoughts can’t connect, can’t even guess.

I search for the graves of children, babies with the same birth and death date. I find pairs, two brothers who died before they were half my age. I find those tombstones for married couples, the one side already etched deep with two dates, the other with just one, the ground below empty and patient.

Olive drops the rest of the flowers at her feet. She’s crying. Hard. Raw.

I run to her, brush the hair out of her eyes, strands sticky with tears.

She sobs, “I’m sorry. I don’t mean to freak out. It’s just –” And she points at the headstone near my foot. It has her name, OLIVE PAGE, in bold, but the dates are already filled out. Just a coincidence.

“This was kind of it,” Olive says and she dumps the rest of the box on the grave. “Coming here. It’s part of my whole process, my change. I googled myself – I’m not the only Olive Page to have existed. I found where she was buried. God, think about it. She’s been here thirty years, probably barely dust down there now.”

She sits down and pulls me to her. “Being here makes death more real. And that’s healthy, right?”

My head is stirring, searching for words of comfort and she kisses me, hard, on the mouth. I’m too dazed to even kiss back.

“Well, wait, what does that mean?” I’m trying to act all cool, not let on that this is all I’ve had on my mind for the last two days.

“I don’t know what it all means. No one does. We can only guess and that’s fine, I suppose...”

“No, I mean what does the kiss mean.”

“Oh, shut up.”

“No, I’m serious. Don’t fuck with me. I’ve had a pretty long week and--”

“It means I wanted to kiss you.” She sniffs. Her tears are already drying and I feel stupid for selfishly changing the subject. People kiss you more when they know you’re not looking for meaning in it. “We’re adults now. We have to decide love isn’t real if we ever want to experience worthwhile relationships. So don’t take it the wrong way.”

“You don’t believe in love? I mean, not like ‘bubblegum pop radio’ love, but not even ‘old couple in the park’ love?”

“It’s a cliché.”

“Yeah, well, so is not believing in love.”



“Love isn’t a plot device. Love leads to monogamy which leads to breeding which leads to divorce which leads to suicide. Furthermore, breeding is overpopulating and that’s also suicide. Only stupid people are doing it.”

“So you’re saying love is suicide.”

“In a way, yes.”

“Well, thanks for removing your genius from the gene pool.”

She rolls her eyes and walks away, saying, “Take the bus home, asshole.”

And of course, this makes me miserable. “Don’t take it the wrong way” can only make you suffer. She doesn’t believe in what I want from her and as I watch her thin frame walk away, the sound of her shoes crunching through dead leaves and the dirty ground, I find myself desiring something more than a kiss goodbye.

Then my phone rings. I have no idea who it could be, so I answer it.

“Hey.” It’s Courtney’s voice.

“Well, well, where the fuck have you been?” Despite gnawing on a cigarette, popping another Valerie Yum, plus another yellow pill all while rolling myself a joint while leaning against a headstone, I can’t hold back how passive-aggressive I sound. “I guess I didn’t murder you, did I?”

I can hear Courtney sigh. “Don’t be mad, OK? I’ve been on one hell of a trip.”

“Do tell.”

“Well, come pick me up. I’m at Banner Behavioral in Glendale.”

“Wait, that sounds like a psych ward.”

“Good guess. How long till you get here?”

“You gotta be fucking kidding. Are Dorian and Jimmy in there with you?”

“What? No. I have no idea where they are. Tried calling them, too.”

“This is a fucking joke.”

“C’mon, man, come get me the fuck out of here. I’ll explain.”

“This better be good.”

So I take the bus, but realize that I’m passing right by my mom’s house. It’ll be faster to borrow her car. When I get to my old neighborhood, it’s pretty much the same, but my bedroom window is now a couple of plastic bags taped to the frame. I try the front door, but it’s locked. So is the backdoor and when I lift the mat, the spare key is gone. Hmm.

I end up ripping the plastic and slipping inside that way. My mother works nights, so I know she’s asleep. I take her keys and jump in her ugly blue Crown Victoria and speed off down the I-17 to the 101. I pull into the hospital, which isn’t shady or picturesque at all, not like these facilities’ you see in movies with beautiful, rolling grounds for you to relax in. It’s just another fucking hospital.

Circling the parking lot, I see Courtney waiting on a bench next to a single bag, his hands knuckled around a simmering cigarette as if he were praying, floaty jellyfish blobs of smoke twisting apart. He doesn’t smile as he gets in. He doesn’t say anything.

I don’t know where I’m going, so I just head further and further south. I’m still really pissed.

“Well?”

Courtney says, “Hmm?”

“Why the fuck did you get thrown into a mental hospital? Did they finally crack you?”

Courtney says, “Your face looks better. A little.”

“Shut the fuck up.”

“One of the second things I learned in there is how to control your anger. Don’t be pissed. It’s OK. It’s all part of your development.”

I want to punch him so hard. I want to crack his face open like that one comedian smashes watermelons. I’m pushing the pedal deep down into the floor, hoping that maybe a devastating car accident, triple rollover, whatever, would take out this fucker and spare me.

“One of the first things I learned was,” Courtney takes a cigarette without asking and lights it. “Don’t tell doctors at the hospital you were abducted by aliens.”

I look at him for a long, long time, then have to brake sharply, turn the wheel quick and change lanes to avoid hitting an SUV in front of me.

“What. The. Fuck.”

“I know, right?” Courtney says. “Fucking hospitals, man. Don’t tell them a goddamned thing. Lie about fucking all of it.”

“But you were lying, right?”

Courtney laughs.

“You could have at least called to tell me you were there,” I say.

“They wouldn’t exactly let me make personal calls.”

Right.

“Anyway, I’m sure I was fired from Circle K and now I’m completely fucking broke. Can you drop me off at my place? I need to get my car. Then we’re heading to Cloud 9.”

“Sure, what for?”

“I haven’t even begun to tell you what I’ve got planned.”

So later that night, the sun just barely gone, Courtney picks me up in his little Suzuki *Esteem*. On the back, written in permanent marker, it says “Low Self” in Jimmy’s handwriting. His marks, his little reminders, his scattered pieces are everywhere.

I suddenly remember some anecdote, something Kane said to me about how when he was six, his parents gave him a cassette tape with songs that sung his name. Every refrain or chorus, it’d say “James” in a distinctly different tone, so the song sounded offbeat and weird. In toy stores, there were walls of these things, every “personalized” cassette with the same songs, just different names.

Jimmy laughed and described how stupid this all was. How it built up an ego bigger than was healthy.

I told him about some VHS my mom ordered, some basic story with me as the hero, so I can be the one that slays dragons, races cars, fights Darth Vader, whatever. You just mail in a portrait of yourself, somehow they glue it in or whatever and it moves around, the expression never changing. I watched that tape, I watched myself, until the heads in the VCR wore it down to nothing. Over and over. Pure narcissism.

Jimmy said that self-esteem is unimportant. Everyone is told they’re good at everything. Everyone is equal. Everyone can be anybody. Everyone was lied to. We

played sports for fun. We all got a trophy the same size. We weren't taught to work toward goals. We weren't taught rewards were important because rewards came easy.

Look at us now. We were given idealism and we turned it into waste. Our goals are arbitrary. Most of us, we don't even have goals.

Having low self-esteem is freedom, Jimmy said. It gives you something to work toward. No matter what, you'll never be good enough. And he scribbled "Low Self" on Courtney's *Esteem*, which I now climb inside. I kick over a giant can of MACE.

"Careful with that. It'll blind you for hours," Courtney says, "Did you bring a knife?"

I produce Jimmy's stiletto, the one I stole from his empty bedroom.

"That'll do."

"Did you bring weed?"

Courtney fishes out a dime bag and a small aluminum pipe.

"This is Afghany Goo."

"That'll do."

After ten minutes of hot-boxing the *Esteem*, we're up to our eyeballs in drooling, sloppy smoke, smiles pasted to our goofy faces. I've forgiven Courtney a lot. Maybe more than I should have. "This is some potent shit," I say and exhale.

Next thing I can remember, we're on top of Shaw Butte, standing among the burnt, ashen ruins of Cloud 9. We're looking out over Sunnyslope again, out over all of Phoenix, Glendale, Scottsdale and you can see all the way to South Mountain. It's all glowing, like a circuit board, like something out of a sci-fi film.

Courtney says, "What the fuck happened to Cloud 9?"

And I shrug. "Crazy kids."

"Alright, before I tell you all this, we have to do something." He takes out the knife, flips it open and says, "We've gotta become blood brothers."

I laugh. I'm thinking of blood-borne diseases. I'm thinking of pain. I'm thinking, I'm no cutter, I'm not emo, I don't need pain to get attention. The moon is fat and full and disintegrating into the White Tanks. I'm thinking about how it got associated with crazy people, how German's call insanity *mondsüchtig* or "moonsickness." In English, it's lunatic, the word *luna* meaning, no fucking duh, 'moon'.

All this is just some dumb shit I read online and can't forget.

"I'm serious," Courtney looks me in the eye. I can barely see his pupils. "We've been friends since forever. Since before our balls dropped. I don't want some shitty online application telling us we're friends. I want something real. Something so real it hurts."

He hands me the knife and says, "You first."

My decision-making skills are muddled in THC and I laugh again. And then I take the knife and dig into the palm of my hand, drawing it deep down my lifeline.

In French, madness is *avoir des lunes*. Italian is just *lunatico*.

I give the blade back. The knife glistens. I watch Courtney do the same, the blood already starting a trickle, turning my pale palms black, sucking in all the darkness around us. It's darker than the dirt.

We clasp our hands together and squeeze, squeeze so hard we're almost making fists and the blood is spurting through our knuckles, spilling down our wrists, ebbing into every hair and pore, until our hands are nothing but each other's blood.

It doesn't hurt at all.

Courtney pulls his hand away first. It makes a sucking sound.

"Is that all?" I ask. "I mean, shouldn't we say some secret voodoo words or something?"

"Nah, that's it." Courtney is looking down at his gushing wound. "We probably shouldn't tell anyone about this. They wouldn't understand."

After a moment, after wrapping my fist in my shirt, I say, "What now?"

Courtney says, "Here's what happened."

I take a deep breath. The air is sacred here.

"I was driving home, after that night in the desert. Then I wake up on the side of the road, middle of the night, middle of the desert, my car door open, no clothes on, a giant fucking cut on my forehead." He lifts his hair to show me the wound, fucking green and yellow already, one nasty-ass infection.

"It won't stop gushing, so I go to the ER. I'm sitting there in that waiting room so long the sun rises. I think long and hard about this dream I had while lying in the desert and I tell the dream to the doctors. Then I start thinking, it wasn't a dream. It really happened. The nurses think I have some kind of concussion, but nope, I'm fine, so they refer me to a shrink and I tell him the story and he throws me in a psych ward for two weeks, until I 'decided' it was just a dream and I was driving drunk and hit my head a little too hard. You know, I just said that to get out."

"I'm no Freud, but..."

"Well, the dream was a recurring one, one I've had all my life. About visitors. Alien visitors. Not like Martians or xenomorphs or fucking greys. They're just these semi-humanoid glowing beams, stoic faces, seven fingers, that kind of thing. For years, I've dreamt about them, about them taking me. And you know what's a major sign of alien abduction?"

"No fucking clue."

"Weird bruises or markings all over your skin that you can't explain. I'm not talking some mysterious mark you got from partying too hard. I'm talking, like tribal shapes, like some kind of bizarre vacuum against your skin, weird bumps that aren't just skin rashes or ingrown hairs."

I finger my own bruises, but think, that's stupid. My blackouts are from drinking like Bukowski in a drought combined with these pills. I say, "C'mon Courtney..."

"OK, OK, so I never gave these bruises another thought, OK? Those recurring dreams were vague. I always felt like someone was watching me, visiting me, doing weird, unexplainable things to my body. But I never really had enough proof to be convinced it was *aliens*. Not until that night. I could finally remember everything about an abduction."

"Are you sure it wasn't a dream? I mean, really sure?"

"It felt like one, but it felt like so much more as well. I never told anyone about these because I thought they'd throw me in a mental ward, which they did. I also knew you wouldn't understand, but we're blood brothers now. You don't gotta believe me, but you gotta trust me. Does that make sense?"

I look down at my bleeding hand and think, maybe this whole thing was just a trick. Fucking Courtney *would* make me sign a blood contract before I knew what I agreed to, just like those 'terms and agreements' things online. I really don't want to be

around here anymore. Courtney's making me really uncomfortable, the way he's changed.

"Listen, I thought a little bit about Jimmy's question," Courtney says. "About what happens to us when we die. Do you remember him asking that? I was supposed to have my life figured out by now, OK? And I didn't and now I do. I guess it only takes a week."

"What figured out? You lost your job, you've been avoiding me, avoiding your best friends and now you've lost your fucking mind."

"The Visitors, they told me to take down The Grid. Save our brains. Then we can be as enlightened as they are. And that's what we're here to do tonight," the lunatic says. "Something about them encouraged me to finally act on my beliefs. The first one was the blood brothers thing."

"Ok, fine, can we go now?"

"That's not the only belief I want to act on tonight." From his pocket, Courtney produces a pomegranate-shaped lump. I recognize it to be some sort of grenade. He holds it up and grins. "The second one is this."

"Oh fuck. You still have one of those?" A few years ago, Jimmy and Courtney were reading the *Anarchist's Cookbook* and they decided to make their own grenades. We set them off in the desert and it was kickass, but we promised ourselves never to hurt anyone with them. I feel stiff with shock, like how rigor mortis must feel to the dead. The drugs are swimming so deep in my head that I can't tell if this is real. I'm so high, the earth vibrates, sending off yellow beams of pure energy into my prefrontal cortex.

"Courtney, what're you doing with that?"

The moonlight catches it perfect. I'm thinking about how our bodies are 80 percent water. Just like the ocean's tides, we're affected by the tug and pull of the moon. Everyone is susceptible to this celestial illness, to this moonsickness.

Courtney smiles, waving the bomb at me. The pin is pulled and I watch him toss the thing, high, high, high. It lands in one of those electrical substations, blowing the whole thing into a fierce ball of flame. Purple fingers of electricity shoot through the smoke and flames, destruction being oddly beautiful.

We watch as the power goes out, block-by-block, down through Sunnyslope. A small chunk of the city is in darkness now, a sweet, consuming darkness in such contrast to the rest of the Valley. I start to feel tingles of distant fears of the dark, when I was a kid and I had to sleep with a nightlight. I'm still in awe at what Courtney has done, still swimming in my head, still not sure what I'm witnessing.

"C'mon," Courtney says. "We're not done yet."

So Courtney's driving slow, slow, 15 miles per hour, through a dilapidated trailer park nestled up against the mountain. Hi-View Haven or something. Some kind of inner-city redneck trash compacter lot.

"When was the last time you experienced a blackout?" Courtney asks me.

"Well, the other night was pretty bad. I woke up outside this hotel, couldn't remember a damn thing –"

"No, a power outage, moron."

"Oh. Two, three years ago."

“What did you do?”

“I went outside.”

“Exactly.”

I look around and there are all these people, neighbors and friends, coming out for an impromptu block party. There are bonfires and barbecues and kids chasing each other around and singing. No fucking shit, people are singing together.

I look up and I can see the stars, exposed like they're naked. I can't count them anymore. I've never seen them so bright. Menacing, almost. And this planet is so dim, those stars can't see us.

Courtney says, “How many things that you do, day to day, that you think are memorable? Are you making every moment count?”

I shrug. “I don't want to be convicted right now, man.”

“Too bad,” Courtney spits. “You're *being* convicted. Don't be afraid of guilt, man. It's good for you, makes you improve yourself. All I'm saying is the average person spends nine hours a day looking at a screen. TV, computer, cell phone, whatever.”

He looks at me in the eye. “We're losing our lives to computers. We just gotta get plugged in a little bit more and we'll have fulfilled every awful futuristic scenario Hollywood has ever produced. We don't need The Matrix for everything to be fake. The Visitors made me realize this.”

“Alright, maybe so, but it's not that drastic.”

“Sure it is. The machines we've created are replacing us. I'm not talking assembly lines, I'm talking pure existence. They are becoming who we are. They see for us. Sense for us. Give us our opinions and filter results to fit those opinions. Tailored search results equal tailored reality. The internet thinks for us more and more each day. And no one seems concerned.”

“I guess so. I'm not sure I care. I'm not sure I want to give this up.” It suddenly becomes very hard to resist checking my phone. I swear I felt it vibrate in my pocket, although it was probably just one of those ghost vibrations.

We make another lap around the trailer park, kids playing tag and middle-aged NASCAR fans drinking Keystone Light next to flaming grills. The smell of grilled meat, steaks and burgers, permeates the air. They're dragging pallets and breaking down fences to use for firewood. Everything is dark and the bonfires cut out their faces. Jagged, half-faced jack-o'-lanterns.

“Do you know what they call our generation?”

“Millenials.”

“If the generation before us was X, we're Y. As in Y2K. As in yes, Millenials. We're the ME generation. We have no great causes, not even 9-11 or Bush or global warming because we don't care about anything about ourselves. We're over those things like they were fashion trends. And speaking of which, dressing emo to get attention, holding cameras above us in our underwear. This is what we were in high school. Now, we're hipsters and we dress like the best bits of every generation before us and flaunt our apathy, our cool, our excellent tastes. Too bad no one will remember our self-indulgence but us.”

“Look, I'm disgusted with my generation too, but I'm not about to go blowing up power transformers.”

“Why not? We’ve freed these people. For a couple hours, at most. They’re gonna always remember this day. They’re making friends, laughing, enjoying life. They’re meeting their fucking neighbors. They can’t hide in their bedrooms, tethered to their screens anymore. They have to think and socialize and live.”

“They’re gonna sweat their asses off tonight when there’s no air conditioning.”

“Well, maybe they’ll actually do something about the other problems surrounding them and stop living in such comfort. So what if I blew up something? I didn’t hurt anyone. I helped them.” Courtney sighs. “This is what happens if you turn off the power.”

“What about some kid who was in the middle of a term paper? What about hospitals?”

“Hospitals are immune to power outages. Don’t be stupid.”

“Well, maybe it’s OK if our generation doesn’t have some cross to bear. Maybe we don’t need riots or movements or violence. Maybe apathy is actually freedom. After all, *where ignorance is bliss, ‘tis folly to be wise.*”

“In the last ten years, our government’s power expanded like a giant balloon. The Bill of Rights became irrelevant, our economy deflated to lows we haven’t seen since Hitler and no one put up a fight. No one gives a fuck that it’s legal to spy on people, that wars are being fought for no reason, that drones are killing innocent people in foreign countries, that our debt is going to swallow us whole. I mean, I hate to get on some political high horse, but this isn’t about Left or Right. It’s about Right or Wrong. And your solution is to continue sitting back?”

I pull out a cigarette. The people in the trailer park are having such a good time. I wish I was out there instead.

“So maybe our generation is on the fringe of collapse. Maybe we’re looking at a major revolution. Maybe it’s all a powder keg ready to go off,” I say.

“We have to turn the power off first,” Courtney shakes his head. “The internet has pacified us all. It’s almost exactly like *Brave New World*. The government has created a system that consumes our lives, entertaining us constantly, until we’re too pacified to do anything.”

“What are you talking about? The internet has freed us!” I shout at him. I can’t help it. “We can talk to anyone, anywhere. It’s an overflow of information at our fingertips. You’ve heard the clichés.”

“We’re not using the internet as an informational tool, not really. It’s for porn and videos of cats playing keyboards. C’mon, it’s like you’re defending television as ‘brain food’ just because it has The Discovery Channel. You have to admit, life was easier when Apple and Blackberry were just fruits. When Google was just an obscure number.”

“And I’m supposed to be the pessimist. I like social networking. I like the constant stream of attention. Every time that red number appears in the upper lefthand corner of the screen, I’m reminded I’m loved. It’s not perfect, but what’s so bad about it?”

“Books changed the way people think,” Courtney says. “So did newspapers, radio, television. Admit it or not, but the internet is changing the way people think, for better or worse. Media just doesn’t supply thought, it molds it.”

“That doesn’t mean it’s making us stupid.”

“Wrong. Mayflies outlive our attention spans. Before the web, our thoughts were like books. At worst, magazines. Now our thoughts are like blogs – quick, shallow and regurgitated. We think in tweets and posts and status updates.”

“Fine,” I say. I’m really not in the mood for this. “What’s your big solution?”

“You know how everyone was sorta worried about the end of the world in 2012 and Y2K and a dozen other times?”

“Yeah, it’s a fucking shame that didn’t happen.”

“We survived all these apocalypse predictions. So what doesn’t kill us makes our existence inevitable. It’s time the world really ended. We have to make it happen. But first we have to wake up.”

We make our last round through the trailer park. I look up at the stars once more, then notice the whole mountainside is on fire, bright orange and black, spreading away from the busted power transformer. The sky is filled with news and police helicopters and the sound of sirens almost drowns out the music from this trailer trash party.

I exhale. I didn’t even realize I was holding my breath and it feels like a piano has been lifted off my chest.



## Chapter Six

So we're at Chino's again, eating tacos, sipping horchata, the high subsiding. Luckily, this place hasn't lost power yet, so their greasy stove can fry us up munchies. I'm at least considering what Courtney has to say, but first I have to pop another Valium. Then one of those goldenrod pills.

"So you haven't heard from anyone else?" Courtney asks.

"No idea. Everyone seems to be dropping off the planet lately."

"It sucks when you can't keep in constant contact with everyone, doesn't it? You start to actually miss people."

I catch him up on everything he's missed. Getting kicked outta my mom's house, moving in with Soup, the fires, the blackouts. I tell him about Olive, about the cemetery, about the burning shit on her lawn. I leave out the kissing and everything.

"You've had one exciting week, amigo," Courtney says.

"Yeah, same to you."

"But shit, man. You and Olive? She's crazier than in high school," Courtney laughs. "You gonna bone her or not?"

"Fuck off. I mean, I might've already. I can't fucking remember."

Courtney laughs again. "Every girl you've dated since Diana has had a wire loose. So you must really be into Olive."

"You think every woman is nuts?"

"Pretty hard to prove me wrong," Courtney smiles. "Olive's different though. Probably the smartest girl I've ever known and the only one I've ever been afraid of."

"Oh yeah? Why's that?"

"She's the only one I didn't think I was good enough for."

I shrug. "I'm not looking for anything serious."

"You and everyone else. Commitment is like a disease. Love is like a mental illness."

A cop car pulls into the parking lot. Instinctively, I tense up, but relax when I realize I don't have anything on me. Courtney laughs.

"Did you know me and Jimmy used to chase cops?"

I shake my head. "How do you chase cops?"

"He had a police scanner, ya know? One night, he gets fucked up on Xanax, cheap beer and that Spice Gold shit and says, 'Let me drive.' He goes speeding up and down I-17 till he finds a highway patrol car. Then he follows them, edging in and out of traffic."

"Did he get pulled over?"

"Then he rolls down the window, blasting that Inner Circle song, that COPS theme, 'Bad Boys' and the pig just stares, confused."

I laugh, but it makes me miss Jimmy again. "That sounds like something he would do."

"The best way to deal with police is just to stump them. They follow a set of codes. They don't know how to think, how to handle it when something unusual happens, so they won't get it when you throw cats into Burger King drive-thru windows or stab

pineapples on sticks. You're mocking the foundation of social order and that's worse than what most criminals are capable of."

I nod, checking the time on my cell phone. "Is it too late to get a bottle of something?"

So it's nearly 4 a.m. when Courtney drops me off at Soup's, drunk as fuck. The house is dark, and I flip a switch, realizing the power is still out. No idea when it could come back. I sleep in the dark. Hot. No air conditioning. But it's quiet. I forgot how quiet things are without electricity.

I wake up to the sound of Trevor screaming. The power is still off and I follow his voice to the grow room. He's standing there in his boxers and nothing more, his dreads draped across his back and he's screaming.

"The plants are wilting, man! Whoever that fucker was that cut the power, he's killing the plants!" Trevor bends down and picks up one of the pots and runs for the door. I follow him into the backyard, where he sets it up in the direct sunlight.

"Aren't you afraid someone will notice that?" I ask.

"Shut the fuck up and help me!"

In a few minutes, all six of the plants are outside in the sun, but they still look wilted. "Goddammit, I'mma kill those sons of bitches at the power plant," Trevor seethes.

"Where's Soup?"

Trevor is pacing around the plants in circles, still swearing, lifting up branches and inspecting them. I check my phone. The screen is now cracked a small amount in the corner. No idea how I did that. It's nearly dead and there's no way to charge it, but it starts ringing, so I push accept.

"Hey man, you got a minute?" It's Dorian's voice.

"Whoa! What the fuck man? How are you?"

"Listen, I know I haven't talked to you in a while. I'll explain everything. Just meet me at that burger joint on 19th Ave."

That offer works, so I drop my mom's car off and somehow avoid her and take the bus a couple blocks, the driver apologizing for the air conditioning being busted, turning the whole carriage into a sauna. Sitting across from me, a drunk Native, the same one with the bread and the weed, offers me some of his bottle. He smiles, his gums streaming with blood, sticky gobs of it.

"Hey, white man," he says. "I'll forgive you for taking my land if you take a swig with me."

There's dark, bloody gobs of saliva floating in the bottle. I can see the guy got in a fight or fell down some stairs or something. I shake my head.

A guy next to me says, "C'mon, man, take one for the team!"

Instead, I pull out Jimmy's journal and pretend to read. I wish I had my iPod so I could be deaf as well.

*Jan. 1*

*What a great way to start off the year.*

*I'm on the bus, drunk, taking the long way home from a New Year's party in Tempe. It's late, my iPod is dead, my phone is dead. I don't have a book, a newspaper or a magazine. My journal is at home. Nothing to distract me.*

*This is how I meet Lunette. She's overweight, saggy like an old armchair and her hair is an artificial red, red like glowing taillights.*

*I can tell by the way she staggers onto the bus, feeling the sides, stumbling slowly forward, she's blind. Her wall-eyed gaze is glazed in cataracts. But she must sense I'm alone because she sits right next to me.*

*She looks in my direction and introduces herself, saying she's a psychic. Not the kind that reads palms or tea leaves or goat entrails. I mean, she's blind. Instead, she scans people. She reads them like they're open books. Auras and shit.*

*She's silent for a while, then she says, "I can feel you. I can scan you. You have a spirit of darkness crouching over you. And you need to fight it."*

*I remember something like this at church camp ten years ago. A "prophecy tent," they called it, and a bunch of those über Christian folks, they'd pray over you and tell you what God wanted of you.*

*Lunette is pretty much doing this same thing to me. "Fuckin' relax," she says.*

*She tells me I'm a prophet. Or I could be at least. That I have a unique ability to hear the voice of God. Something like that. I don't understand most of what she's babbling, frothing at the mouth, whatever. She's probably missing a circuit.*

*But she touches my shoulder and gets off the bus. I didn't say much, but then I puke. I must have had too much to drink.*

*What a great way to start off the year.*

At my stop Dorian is waiting, smoking a cigarette and squinting in the summer sun. The first thing I say is, "I gotta get out of this fucked up city."

"Sprawl's suffocating you?" Dorian keeps looking all around us, but not at me. Sorta nervous.

"Somehow. Everyone seems to be a junkie. The public transportation sucks. There's no action, no culture, no life here. But somehow, I still love it. It's like I'm addicted to it."

"What happened to your hand?" Dorian asks.

"Nothing. Tried to punch a window and cut it."

"At least your face looks mostly healed."

"Thanks," I mumble.

We walk to a restaurant with a banner, not even a proper sign, that says "Burgers and More 'R Us." We marvel at the stupid name, shrug and go in.

"There's only one way to fix a broken city – add your own mark," Dorian says. "Don't blame everyone else, blame your lazy ass. Don't be one of those people that has everyone else doing everything else. Art as entertainment instead of expression – go fuck yourself."

I shrug.

A sign says "seat yourself" so we take a dark, isolated corner booth. Our waitress comes up, this baggy, old woman who I swear I've seen before, peeking through blinds

and locking her car doors whenever she sees a black person on the sidewalk. She has that paranoid twitch.

I look around the restaurant, empty except for us, which is kind of eerie. A big sign by the kitchen proclaims, "If it walks or flies, we'll barbecue it!" Next to us is a vintage advertisement of a pig with the words "People eat People's™ Meat!" The walls are trimmed with flame graphics.

"This place almost seems cannibalistic," Dorian whispers, giving me a skeptical look. "I'm sorry, I'm still freaking out a little."

"Where've you been? I haven't heard from you in almost a week. I thought you died."

"I was on pilgrimage," he says. "That's the best way I can explain it."

I say, "What, like religion or some shit?"

"I've decided to take those beliefs, those Catholic ideals I was teethered on, take them one step further. I mean, what's wrong with religion?"

"Everything."

"Exactly. I mean, not the ideas per say, not the love and service and shit, just the way it's practiced. Fuck these closed-door rituals, fuck those exclusionary bullshit churches. Where's the action, the commitment, the peace, the love?"

I shrug.

"I was in the desert for three days. Not quite forty days, but whatever. I lived off the desert and the desert fed me and I realized, this planet needs something that's tangible. A religious organization that acts on what it believes."

"I don't understand."

"You will. It's so hard to explain. It's more than 'judge not lest ye be judged.' It's showing, not telling. It's speaking, not screaming. It's trying to save people, but not from a mythological afterlife or hell – save them from a hell on earth. I'm gonna start a movement of people committed to loving everyone. Fags, blacks, Jews, liberals, everyone. You know, without the hippy bullshit, without the free love and idiotic spiritualism."

I was gonna tell Dorian about how Courtney seems to have lost his mind, but now I'm not sure if the idea would translate anymore.

"Something that anyone can pick up. Pragmatism, not idealism. Actions, not beliefs. Communes that are more than just free housing and sexual liberation."

"What are you going to do?"

"Well, for starters, I sold all my possessions."

"Are you kidding? You got rid of your Wii and laptop and everything?"

"All I kept was a week's worth of clothes."

"Won't your dad freak?"

Dorian just laughs.

"How are you gonna get internet access? I mean, can you really live without the internet?"

"I did when I was a kid. Besides, Burton Barr, the library, is right by my house. An hour a day is what I get. That's how much I used it as a kid, not this eight hours a day crap. I have the freedom of time again. Do you remember what that's like? Anyway, I need that hour, 'cuz a bunch of people on Facebook agree with me. We're gonna start a church. A church that does it right."

I stare. I don't even mean to. "Well, I support you and all, but still, don't you think this is a little nuts?"

"Not as nuts as this," he says, pulling up his right sleeve to reveal a fresh-looking tattoo burned into the crook of his elbow. It's a phoenix flying through a ring, with crosses for pupils and its talons making peace symbols. "It's the symbol of this whole religion thing. My religious experience especially. I'm really dedicated to it. I think it's gonna be big."

"Wait, wait," I say. "Just start at the beginning."

"OK," Dorian sighs, leans back and says, "Let me think about how to start this."

I flip through the desert menu and smoke starts pouring out the kitchen, big, dark clouds. Out of that smoke comes our frumpy waitress, holding two paper plates with fat, greasy hamburgers.

"Enjoy," the troll woman says and then she shuffles back into the kitchen.

Warily, we both bite in. It's boiling hot and the meat is still bloody. So bloody and thick. Meaty beads of blood pouring out our mouths. We both start gagging and the smoke detector in the kitchen goes off as the whole restaurant fills with smoke.

"We need to leave. Now." Dorian bundles up his burger, stands and heads for the door. The baggy woman comes running out at us. "Where the hell are you going?" She asks. Her hair is singed and she's holding a fire extinguisher.

Before I know what's happened, Dorian throws the rest of his meal in the old woman's face. She looks panicked, confused until – *smack!* – the burger hits her and she crumples to the ground.

Dorian and I sprint down the block and pause by a dumpster. Dorian starts to dry heave and then pukes, Dry heaving on that smoke and half-cooked hamburger.

"Burgers and More 'R Us, eh?" Dorian says. He spits blood and bile, his chest heaving and he grins. "Scratch that place off the list."

"What the fuck is wrong with you?"

"I'm still buzzed off that whole desert trip, man."

"We just dined and ditched. I've never dined and ditched before. Except with Jimmy at Chino's, but that doesn't count."

"That woman, she was gonna kill us, chop us up and serve us to her next customers. Those cannibal graphics, dude. Why do you think that place was empty?"

"I doubt it, man." Huffing, puffing, doing little breathing exercises, I pull out a cigarette.

"No way. She had blood running down her face and her hair was on fire. She was holding the skulls of children!"

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

"Aw man, I'm still tripping." Dorian sits down in the puddle of his own puke.

"Tripping on what?"

"Maybe I shouldn't tell you. Maybe I should just *show* you."

Maybe he starts to say more, but I can't hear him because the sound of a fire truck racing by drowns him out.

So we take the bus to the light rail and take the light rail for miles and miles, all the way out to Mesa, the last last last stop. We walk in silence for several blocks. It's too hot and I'm too dazed to ask where we're headed. Dorian says it's some doctor's house.

"OK, so this guy, his name is Dr. Hamilton," Dorian says. "As you know, my dad, Todd, is a pharmacist and they went to pharmacy school together. Only, get this, Hamilton grows up to be this clandestine chemist and my dad casually mentions this to me. Says that he's a nut job and a criminal and still lives here in The Valley."

"Sweet," I say.

"So I look him up online. This was weeks ago. Turns out, he's known in most alternative chemistry circles as some kinda drug manufacturing genius. He helped make MDMA, you know, ecstasy, popular in this part of the country. And in his backyard, he's got a thick garden of penis-shaped mescaline cacti."

"Are you fucking kidding?" I've never done mescaline, so it's hard to hide my excitement. Even though certain types of peyote originate in this part of this world, mescaline is one of the rarest things to find sold on the street. Most people these days aren't interested in it anyway.

Dorian shakes his head. "Not kidding at all. I've seen the garden myself."

"Really? When?"

"When I bought that 25i-NBOMe stuff off him."

"Bought what?"

"It's a research chemical. I hadn't ever heard of it before I did it with everyone. What do you think that drug was that we took that night we last saw each other?"

"You gave us experimental drugs you've never heard of before? I thought it was LSD!"

"So did I. So I came back to Hamilton's late at night, pounding on the door, but he doesn't answer. So I hopped over the fence and stole a bunch of his cactus."

Dorian leads us into some 50-year-old old neighborhood, each house having a different look, color and landscaping, unlike those cookie-cutter mansions in other suburbs. We stop at a blue-gray house, overgrown in weeds and vines and various imported plants and Dorian rings the bell.

"What happened next?" I ask.

"I was still really fucking high, alright? I went out to the desert and tried this shamanistic ritual bullshit I read on some drug forum. Only, I ate too much mescaline and it mixed real bad with the 25i. I crashed my dad's Bronco in a ditch with no idea where I was. So I wandered, no water and no food. I was so hungry, but all I could eat was more cactus. Which, you know, escalated my problems."

I kinda chuckle, kinda give Dorian this "what the fuck" look. Dorian rings the doorbell again.

"What was the trip like?"

"Beautiful. Fog covered the ground. I floated above it, like a misguided lace fly, through a forest of groping skeletal fingers. I drifted until I came upon a cave and gazing inside, I saw the deep jaws of eternity. I gently descended into the throat of the cave and every inch of the cave was bookshelves, filled with thick volumes of literature, history, whatever."

Dorian rings the doorbell again.

“Anyway, every one of these encyclopedic books was filled with every ounce of information that ever existed in history. The weight of the moon. The length of Julius Caesars’ fingers. The lapse of time between every earthquake. How many hairs you have on your head. Not just history, like who murdered who for why, but every mundane, mathematical thing you could possibly ever know about anything. A library of omnipotence.”

Dorian rings the doorbell once more and swears under his breath.

“Then, I reached the bottom. The end of time. My scalp was peeled back and the sweet lower symphonies of my brain were raked clean until a plot of dirt was left. Then, a single seed was planted, which grew three leaves and an eye that could gaze into the very realm of geometry. Octahedrons and cubes and spheres spinning so quickly that they became atoms, which became molecules, then cells, then living things and then the very trees I floated through. We had come full circle and the fog was my breath, my very soul.”

I search and search for something to say, and just shrug. “Wow man, that’s really...”

Then the door swings open, caught on a chain lock and a bearded nose peeks through the crack. The nose says, “I was taking a nap and don’t appreciate being interrupted. You had better hope this is urgent.”

“Dr. Hamilton?” Dorian says. “It’s me, Dorian.”

No response.

“The kid you sold LSD to but it was actually 25i-NBOMe?”

The door unlatches and we’re ushered inside. The doctor is all smiles and apologies, saying, “I thought you were kids, trying to sell me life insurance or lemonade or something. Welcome to my humble home.”

Dr. Hamilton waves his arms around a cluttered living room, filled to the ceiling with books, newspapers, magazines, a dusty record player and piles of electrical equipment. On the walls there’s a portrait of the old man and some wrinkly woman, probably his wife, and a bunch of chemistry charts. Periodic table, ions and shit.

Dorian says, “Uh, this is Micah, my old friend. I came by to introduce you and thank you for the cacti.”

“So you’re the one!”

Dorian nods. “I’m hear to apologize and offer you some money.

The doctor shrugs. “It’ll grow back. How was it for you?”

With a pause dramatic enough to make Oprah weep, Dorian says, “I’ve seen God.”

Hamilton nods, and seats us at a table cluttered with filthy dishes, chemistry textbooks and issues of *Scientific American* meshed with *Playboy*. “Do tell,” the doctor says.

And I say, “Whoa, whoa, whoa. You take a bunch of shitty drugs, get lost in the desert and suddenly you’re religious? Dude, do you realize this makes you seem like a fucking nutcase? Why didn’t you just go to Burning Man or some shit? You’re just as bad as some smelly hippy that thinks LSD can cure cancer and make you communicate with the dead.”

“First of all,” Dorian says. “I was raised Catholic, I’m just acting on those beliefs—“

“May I interrupt?” Hamilton says, so polite it makes me sick. “A psychedelic experience is nothing to just dismiss. Neither is a religious experience. Both should be studied for their psychological, sociological and physiological contributions. Many great things have been accomplished thanks to these experiences.”

“Whatever. I mean, I’m far and away from being anti-drug, but nothing I’ve done has been spiritual or beneficial.” I scoff, but Dorian has his head in his hands, all cute-like, absorbing everything this guy says like a sponge.

“You probably aren’t a spiritual person to begin with,” the Doctor says. “It’s your brain that’s to blame, not the substance. These experiences, like the one I provided for Dorian, are fundamental to our growth as a species. Want proof?”

I throw up my hands. “Whatever.”

“Let’s start with Kary Mullis, first, shall we? Mullis was awarded a Nobel Prize in chemistry for inventing polymerase chain reactions, a way of amplifying specific DNA sequences. How’d he get there? He was heavily experimenting with DET and other hardlined psychedelic amphetamine. Mullis claimed that LSD was more important than any college course he ever took and seriously doubted his ability to invent polymerase chain reactions without it.

“Now, almost everyone knows about Francis Crick, the biophysicist infamous for his all-night acid orgies. He’s also known for discovering the double-helix structure of DNA. But, if you want to talk religion, psychedelic mushrooms played a huge part in ancient religious practices. The Aztecs and Mazatecs regularly ate them, calling them ‘genius mushrooms’ as they allowed them to communicate with their gods. The Conquistadors suppressed use of these plants, saying they gave the natives associations with demons and replaced the fungi with the Eucharist. Peyote and mescaline follow a similar storyline.

“And the areas surrounding Mt. Sinai are known to grow types of psilocybin-laced fungus. It’s very likely that Moses ate a few before traveling up the mountain, coming down with ten of the most important laws in history.

“Furthermore, those Eleusinian Mysteries so whispered about, those ancient Greek ceremonies held for hundreds of years that Cicero described as the penultimate secret to living joyfully and dying with hope, well, there’s a theory that the Kykeon drinks they served used ergot as an active ingredient. The chemist Albert Hofmann first synthesized LSD from ergot. And when he did, he lay bare a 4,000 year old secret.”

“That’s great,” I say. “But a drug distorts reality, not enhances it. And that can be fun, but it isn’t reality. You’re not about to tell me any of the examples you used aren’t steeped in insanity.”

“How wrong you are,” The doctor breathes, looking hurt by my comment. “Few if any psychedelic experiences have ever led to insanity in a person that did not already show a history of mental illness. If you’ve tried any entheogen, as some of us like to call them, you might remember there’s actually a bit more clarity to your thought than before.”

“Yeah, but I still don’t think it’s a good idea to base life decisions off an experience on a hallucinogenic experience.”

“People could do much worse,” Hamilton says. “Some people change the entire course of their life after having a so-called ‘moment of clarity.’ Bill Wilson, the founder of Alcoholics Anonymous, compared his experiences on LSD with the extemporaneous



religious revelation that led him to sobriety. I'm merely saying is that much more good has come from psychedelic experiences than harm, if there is any harm at all. From a scientific standpoint, little harm has been proven."

"I'm still not sure this makes sense to me," I say.

"Oh, Micah, ever the cynic," Dorian says. "I have an explanation. See, you can look at all of life like it's just a series of well-concocted, coincidental chemical reactions that burst from the maw of the universe all by itself. The Big Bang plus primordial soup plus *homo erectus* plus Socrates plus MTV brought you to today. That may be true, but that doesn't mean those reactions are meaningless. If our perception is purely chemical, then of course all spiritual connections would be associated in the same way. How else would you communicate with a being outside of our world if not through an altered state of consciousness? Drugs don't falsify a spiritual connection, but confirm it."

I just kinda stare. The silence is long, but Hamilton and Dorian are both looking back and forth at each other and then back to me and grinning.

"I've had enough," I say. "What do you want me to say?"

So back at the light rail station, we wait and wait, but the train doesn't seem to be coming. It's boiling hot outside and we keep going into McDonald's to get free water. Some guy in a security vest comes up to us at the station and says, "Line's closed, fellas."

"What? What do you mean?"

"Some jackass blew up another power transformer in Tempe. Trains can't make it out here or back. Whole thing's shut down."

The security officer walks off and I say, "I can't fucking believe this. He's really doing it."

Dorian says, "What?"

"How are we gonna get home? We can't exactly walk."

"Buses, I guess. It'll take a few hours, but what can we do?"

We walk by two cop cruisers that have a single mini van pulled over on the road side. A Latino family is sitting on the curb, everyone in handcuffs. They're sitting next to a sign that says "Re-elect Sheriff Joe."

"Fuckin' disgrace," Dorian says. "Who votes for people with that kind of psycho attitude?"

Jimmy used to remind us that Sun City West is 98% white and the average age is 73. These are the fuckers that elect the leaders that persecute the rest of the population. Most of Metro Phoenix's problems could be solved with a can of gasoline and a match.

So by the time we even reach downtown Phoenix, the sun is setting and I'm starting to pass out, when Dorian shakes me awake. "We need to get off."

"What? Why?" But Dorian's already at the door, then on the street. I dart after him and catch up to him looking through a hole in a fence wrapped in green mesh.

"Here it is," Dorian says. He points to a tall, art deco bank building. Most of the bottom windows are boarded up and the ones up top seem smashed out. You can peak in through the cracks and see how wrecked the inside is. The plumbing and copper wiring are yanked out of the walls, the floor covered in broken bricks and trash.

“The Valley Bank Building. During the housing market crash, this bank had to declare bankruptcy. And it had been here over 70 years. Crazy huh?”

“So what?”

“So it’s abandoned. So it’s no one’s. So it can be ours. Like a new and improved Cloud 9. This is an icon of the greatest financial disaster of the last 75 years and we can move right in.”

“You want to squat here? In this heat?”

“Here’s as good as any.”

“Why? I thought you didn’t mind living with your parents?”

“This isn’t for me, weirdo. This is gonna be The Church.”

Inside, the building still bare of carpet or furnished walls, the concrete feels cool like a cave. A slight breeze whistles down the naked hallways and through my hair, all gentle and relaxing.

“Wow, this is Heaven right now.”

Dorian pulls over some bags of concrete from a dusty corner, shapes a makeshift couch and we sit on it. Comfy enough.

Dorian coughs and I pull out a little bag with barely some green dust in it and say, “This is all the weed I got left. Some Northern Lights shake. It’s not much, but we can share it.”

He rolls it into a J for us and lights it, sucking it and passing the torch to me. I hold it in as long as I can, trying to get as much smoke as possible. It does its job, thank God. Weed is so great, even in small quantities. By the time the roach is extinguished, I’m a mess.

“You know,” Dorian coughs. “I’ve always secretly wanted to be homeless.”

“Yeah? Me too. I don’t think for the same reasons.”

“It’s the ultimate taste of freedom. Ever been camping? The best cigarettes are under a naked night sky. I never want to go back.”

“Yeah, but isn’t that patronizing, condescending, you know? You’d be homeless, but only as a tourist. You can escape tomorrow if you want.”

“Even if the experience is fabricated, it still means something. Have you ever seen *The Motorcycle Diaries*? That movie about the guerilla leader before he became evil?”

“I think so.”

“Yeah, well, when he was living in that leper colony, why did Ché ever go back? He was all about helping people and living on the road. It doesn’t make sense to me why anyone would want stability, familiarity, routine. Safety is its own trap.”

“Speaking of which, I should get going home,” I say. And we walk back to the bus stop.

So later that evening, I’m text Olive a few times but never hear back. I think she’s still mad at me. Lisa’s trying to get a hold of me again, but I still ignore her. I think of calling Courtney, but my hand still smarts from his whole blood brothers thing and I figure that’s a bad idea. So when Soup stumbles in the living room and says, “Let’s go for a drive,” I don’t argue.

We jump in his busted up Volvo, the front end bent in like a crushed Jack-O'-lantern from how many times he's rear-ended people. You always know when he's coming home 'cuz you can hear the car's brakes from a mile away.

When I get in, coughing over the smell of stale fast food, I say, "Thanks for getting me out of the house. It's so fucking hot without air conditioning."

"No prob, Bob." Soup puts the car into gear and it stalls. Soup turns the key and pounds the dashboard, finally getting it to go again. "I thought we'd tag some walls the city just painted over near Cactus and 51<sup>st</sup> ave. Make their shitty work useless again."

I shrug. Whatever gets me out and about.

So we're spraying the shit out of these walls, Soup still aiming for some deeper message by drawing a crying girl's face and lots of these broken hearts. It looks decent in terms of technique, but still reminds me of that cholo artwork they sell on T-shirts at flea markets. All he needs is some faux-Catholic bullshit, praying hands and crying Virgin Marys.

Me, I'm kinda in a pissed off mood, with both my best friends taking off without me and coming back all crazy. I almost groan thinking of what Jimmy's gonna be like when he returns. If he *ever* returns. So I pop about two of those Valiums, balance them out with two yellow pills chasing them with gulps from a 40 while chomping on a cigarette, doing my version of breathing exercises, as I spray paint the most obscene shit I can think of.

There's Sheriff Joe eating a turd and the governor taking it up the ass from the turret of a Nazi tank. I draw two Phoenix cops making out while a dog pisses on their boots. And my caliber of artwork is shit compared to Soup's. This whole wall, filled with his art and my pornography. I get sick of thinking of what to paint next, so I just write the word SHIT SHIT SHIT SHIT SHIT over and over and over.

There's an explosion. Like a gunshot, only much louder. Soup turns and looks at me. "Did you hear --?" I nod.

He looks at my drawings. "What the fuck is this?"

The sound of sirens. Fuck. We drop our cans and take off along canal flowing with water. We run alongside it until we get to a fence that says "NO TRESPASSING" and we squirm underneath it. The moment we do, about two dozen kids dressed in all black and wearing ski masks, hop the fence above us and race off.

"C'mon!" One of the kids yells back at us. "Do ya wanna get busted?"

I can see red and blue lights reflecting off the canal water, the cops are that close. Soup and I pick ourselves up and race after the kids. I hear another explosion and one by one, the street lights die down and the power everywhere goes out completely. We're in complete darkness in this alley and the cops drive right past all of us.

Soup and I are huffing and puffing, wheezing and I say, "I gotta quit smoking if I'm gonna be doing any more of this shit."

One of the kids laughs and I notice he's a lot taller than the others. He takes off his ski mask and surprise, it's Courtney.

"How'd you like that little stunt?" The bastard grins. "We taped some makeshift bombs to some telephone poles, toppling them and taking down another power grid."

Soup says, "You're the fucker that's doing this? I oughta kill you for destroying my roommate's plants."

Courtney says, "Oh, you'll be thanking me later."

“Thanking you? For what?”

Courtney yells, “Gotta go!” And all the kids, all his little minions, scatter. Courtney flashes one last Brad Pitt-worthy smile and disappears, leaving me and Soup to catch our breath. The sounds of sirens still surround us. And as I stare, incredulous, I can see smoke and fire off in the distance, as an entire neighborhood starts to catch on fire.

## Chapter Seven

So the phone rings, waking me up and I realize I'm not in my bed. I'm in some motel room, sprawled backwards over the bed. The motel phone rings again and I pick it up, trying my best to sound awake, when my whole body aches with the worst hangover of my life. I still feel fucked up.

"Hullo?"

The phone clutched in my hand, pressed to my ear, I hear: "It's about time you called. I'm bored to tears here. So anyway..."

The motel TV is flopped on its side, tuned to the Travel Channel, some B-roll footage of boring people visiting beautiful places I've never heard of and will probably never visit. Not like they will, anyway. It's not the same. Never the same. Travel journalism appeals to the envious. Man, I wish I could get out of this shitty state.

One of those little green lamps that most motels have, it's broken on the floor, surrounded by empty bottles and cigarette butts extinguished right in the carpeting. I look under the bed. Someone tied bathroom towels to the legs, using them as makeshift bondage straps. Ugh, I slept in the bodily creams of whoever fucked on this bed.

"I have no idea where I am," I tell the phone.

"Don't worry about it." The voice, it's female, that much I can tell, but I'm too dazed to concentrate. Maybe I'm still drunk.

"I have no idea how I got here or what happened last night. At all." And as soon as I say this, I feel panic hit my body like a truck. "Holy shit! Holy shit! What the fuck happened?!?"

"Micah," the voice says. "Relax."

I glance over at the set. Beautiful beaches and cobblestone streets and art and shit. I want to check myself for more of those weird bruises, more evidence of alien abductions, but I think I'd really have to check myself into a mental institute if I did uncover them.

"Wait, before I forget, there's something I think you should know," the voice says. I think it's Olive, but I'm not sure yet. I have this habit of forgetting to ask who I'm talking to when I can't rely on caller ID.

"Shoot," I say.

"Today, I'm depressed, I mean, *still* depressed, I'm always depressed, but the difference is today I like it."

"Of course you like it." I sit on the bed and try to replay memories, but I keep getting blanks. Error 404 – file not found.

"It makes me feel important," the phone says.

"Most drugs do, as depression is just serotonin-related substance abuse."

"I've heard that about happiness, too. Technically, serotonin and dopamine are all you enjoy."

I sneeze, suddenly and I'm seeing spots. My busted nose still hurts like fuck and my hand is now covered in blood and snot. I wipe it daintily on the mattress. I search my pockets and luckily still have some pills. I pop one of each, a yellow and a Valium.

"Depression is powerful. It's fun," the phone says. "I'm thinking of the great irony in birds taking down jet planes. Kamikaze-style. The beauty of loose screws dismantling entire space shuttles. Poisonous snakes devouring careless owners. Advancing fault lines. You know, other staples of the anti-suicide society."

"Big deal. That's what I don't get about existentialism. What's the point? If there's no point to anything . . ."

". . . What's the logic in bitching?"

"I guess," I mumble. "Like most widely held beliefs, I suppose it lessens the pain of living. Also, it gives a great excuse to be a pretentious dick."

"And you like that?"

"You like being depressed."

"Can I ask another question?"

"Shoot." I stir around the room, trying to find my shoes. One is in the closet, one is under the bed.

"Is solipsism any fun? I'm a little afraid to try it," the phone giggles.

"Only if you like watching people suffer. Try chaos theory. It's more logical. Can you hold on a second?" I feel a sudden urge to puke. I rush to the toilet, but don't make it in time – I spew all over the shower.

Holding the phone away from ear, I can hear the voice say: "How do you live your life based on mathematics? It sounds like a bad Ryan Reynolds movie. The world needs less theories and more . . ."

"More what?"

"I don't know, I forgot. What are we talking about again?"

"You tell me," I say.

"So that's basically how the party went last night? Nothing *fun* happened that you recall?"

The way this voice says "*fun*" it makes me feel tense.

"I'm telling you, I don't remember a goddamned thing. Were you there? What did I do?"

"Was I there? Ha." Laughter.

"I'm serious. This is bothering me."

"Relax. I'm sure you didn't kill anyone."

"Pleasant thought."

"I'm full of those today."

"I'll bet you are. Tell me another." I pull back some skin on my finger. It starts to bleed. I clamp down on my fingernail and suck.

"I've been cloudwatching."

"Boring."

"Wait, it gets better. I've been doing it to relax, but all I can see are dead things."

"*Sixth Sense*?"

"Not people really. Mostly animals. Puppies, ducks, cute things like that. I watch them and the wind blows and rips them to ribbons. Slow-motion, terrible and silent."

"Perhaps that's the winner. That's the greatest excuse you've got be depressed."

"Perhaps."

I pause. "Who is this anyway?"

Laughter, then the phone clicks dead.

Through the blinds, the sun is reflecting off the pool so harsh I'm seeing spots. I can barely make out all the patio furniture, plus a microwave, sunk to the bottom of the pool. A couple cop cars are parked nearby and one officer is talking to what looks like the hotel manager.

I realize what time of day it is, and how the room must look, with the peeling wallpaper and a busted window. The clogged toilet, the needles littered around the sink. The TV is now some documentary on head lice. I switch the channel and it's the news. The image of an exploding power line glows next to the head of some reporter. Before I even hear it, I know she's talking about my friend, only she says words like "terrorist" and "serial bomber" and mentions how the police want to wring his neck. and then the power cuts out. Fucking Courtney.

I go to the motel room door and make sure that little knocker is on DO NOT DISTURB. I turn the TV right side up and adjust the rabbit ears. Then I pick up the phone and dial room service asking for more to drink. They say something about the power, but I just hang up the phone.

I pop open the window, kick out the screen and look down. It's a two story drop. Shouldn't be too bad. Seen this repeated a hundred times on YouTube, so I jump. Halfway down, I realize, none of those videos ended well. I crash into some bushes and scrap up my torso something awful, twisting my ankle ever so slightly. I limp to a wall and pull myself up. Looking back, I see the cops descending the stairs and make a beeline for my room. I quickly hop over the other side and hobble away.

So soon I realize I'm in downtown Tempe on Mill Avenue, a pretty long bus ride from home. I'm walking up Adams and First Ave, noticing how deserted and quiet the city streets are. A light rail car is stopped in the middle of a street, no passengers inside and I finally get it – the power in Tempe is completely off.

I stroll by some of the college bars and overpriced hipster clothing joints, the streets completely trashed. The windows are caved in, mannequins are strewn in gutters like cosmopolitan Mai Lai massacre victims. A few storefronts are nothing but shells. Destroyed by, I can only guess, looters. The whole city looks like Pleasure Island the day after, everything up for grabs, if there was much left.

I peer through tinted windows into offices, but no one's around. It's completely dead, like everyone just evacuated, everything left where it was, like images of Chernobyl, minus the decay.

I wander from store to store, finding cash registers torn open and jewelry display cases crushed and scooped clean. It would be nice to take whatever I wanted, if I could, but there's slim pickings.

And I'm very aware how alone I am. The feeling is like that guy in *28 Days Later*, or any post-apocalyptic film of choice. But this is the anti-climatic apocalypse. No zombies or horsemen or any of that.

I just feel comfort knowing that security cameras are out. I'm not being watched all the time. There's peace knowing that security tags on racks of jeans, all bare by now, aren't gonna burst and squirt ink all over me.

Curiously, some stores are untouched, the windows not even scratched, the doors still locked. I look around, thinking if I should kick in a glass door, but think better of it.

Down the street, I notice a pair of patrol cars slowly prowling over the trash. And then I almost bump into a kid in a graduation gown.

“Excuse me,” the kid says. And he picks up a wooden plank and a hammer and nails it over a window, boarding it shut. Then he grabs another plank and another and does this to all the windows surrounding a lingerie boutique.

“What the fuck is this about?” I say.

“Light Brigade work,” the kid says. “Just doing our part. Go down there and ask the lead guy if you have any questions.” He points and in the shade of some palm trees, there’s some kids, also dressed in graduation gowns, surrounding a lemonade stand.

These kids are handing out free water and lemonade to anyone passing by and they give me a cup. Some kids are handing out fake Chic tracts, those cartoons about how you’re going to Hell, but these are instead about how Evangelicals can fuck off. Other kids are taking over walls with wheatpaste, a type of homemade wallpaper glue, and they’re putting up posters that say “Light Brigade Loves You” or “Spread Love, Not Memes” or stuff like that.

“What the fuck is this about?” I say again.

A hand slaps me on the back. I turn and see Dorian. He gives me a bear hug, spilling my lemonade all over his deep black graduation tunic.

“Don’t worry about it,” he says, sopping up the spill. “Good to see you, man. What do you think of all this?”

“I’m totally confused. What’s with the weird get-ups?”

“Just costume. For now.”

“You look like you’re in a weird cult.”

Dorian laughs for a long time, long enough to make me uncomfortable.

“Plus,” I say. “You’re handing out drinks like some kind of weird college promotion thing. I don’t get it.”

“Well, I’m sure you’ve heard about those jackass punks that are blowing up power transformers and things like that...”

“Vaguely.” I shrug.

“... Well, they took out power near where we live, Sunnyslope, most of Scottsdale and north Tempe. So far. Luckily, they’re leaving areas near hospitals alone, but that hasn’t stopped looting and vandalism. So the Light Brigade is here to counteract that.”

“Excuse me? What the fuck is a Light Brigade? Is this your religion bullshit?”

“It’s not a religion. Don’t even utter the word. It’s not really even a belief system and it’s not like Universal Unitarianism because it’s apolitical. It’s a movement. Belief systems are passive, we want to be active. Fuck, the only reason we have a name at all is so people can remember what the fuck we’re doing.”

“What name?”

“We’ve settled on Light Brigade for now, but some members, including myself, think that’s a little too violent. That word, ‘brigade.’ I mean, normally, I’m not one to be P.C. about shit, but you know, what’s in a name and all...”

“I still don’t understand.”

“Don’t worry if you don’t get it yet. Just watch us. Hey, Soup is here if you wanna go talk to him. I gotta go help protect some more buildings. Talk to you later.”

Sure enough, Soup’s sitting on the corner, chatting with some of these graduation kids. He hands me a warm beer and a brick-sized walkie-talkie.



“Remember these?” Soup says. “We all used to use them to run around the desert. Before cell phones. We’d go out in the brush and hide and chase each other with sticks and shoot each other with air soft guns and use the walkie-talkies like we were wind talkers or whatever and call up truckers on this thing and fuck with them.”

“Hey, I did shit like that, too. Man, way more fun than swearing at 12-year-olds on Xbox Live. Jimmy even had one he modified to pick up police channels.”

“Ha, these things are great. One time, around Christmas, my radio was getting picked up by this little girl’s doll radio thing. So I started pretending I was the Devil and scared the fuck out of her until her father came on and started swearing at me.”

“Why do you have this?” I ask.

“We found a box of these old things in a dumpster,” Soup says. “And the Light Brigade has been handing them out like candy to anyone that needs one. You know, since cell phones aren’t really working at the moment.”

Soup switches the walkie-talkie on and rolls the volume dial up slowly. A chorus of stacy voices rises up, one voice, then another, everyone taking turns and conversations making progress, slow and deliberately. No one tries to talk over anyone, no rushing to get the words out, like we realize we have time for conversation again.

I take a sip from my piss-warm beer and say, “This is really weird.”

“Shh, just listen.”

It’s kind of like one of those social media experiments that come out every once in a while, public speaking boxes and real-time Twitter feeds and shit like that, except this isn’t lame, this isn’t forced. This is real.

I hang out with these kids most of the day, learning their names, helping a few board up abandoned restaurants and hotel lobbies. I give out lemonade to dehydrated homeless people and pedestrians and cops and even people that have obviously just come back from looting. Everyone deserves our charity, I’m told.

These kids all seem to have one thing in common – a thirst for truth. When the lemonade and water finally starts to run out and the sun begins setting, I’m swilling the last of my 9th or 10th beer and I’m not sure if you can find deeper humanity in altruism, but it’s a start, I guess. At the very least, it feels alright, especially when you’re buzzed.

I see Dorian again and I say to him, “Hey, why didn’t I ever volunteer before?”

“Because you’re an asshole,” he says and then he laughs. “No, not really. I don’t know. Who gives a fuck? Get over yourself.”

“Well, thanks, I think.”

“Are you coming to the service?”

“What service?”

But Dorian’s attention is focused on one of the kids in graduation garb and they both walk off. Everyone, the entire group of freaks in costume and a lot of the folks that we helped out, they all start heading in the same direction. Every single street we walk down is protected and covered in wheatpastes celebrating the Light Brigade.

When everyone stops, I realize we’re at the Valley Bank on Central, Dorian’s repurposed worship center. The sun starts to recede and some people start campfires. Soup whispers in the walkie-talkie, something I can barely understand and soon, even more of these Light Brigade weirdos enter this abandoned complex.

They sit at the entrance, surrounding campfires and Dorian leads them in a song, some wordless, vibrating chant, eerie echoes ricocheting out into the empty city. Some

people tap drums or sing psalms or pray or whatever. It feels very calming, like memories of a hushed heartbeats descending into my mother's womb.

Then Dorian stands up on a stack of pallets and starts to speak.

"The modern-day church is a pot," Dorian says. "Calling the world black."

I half expect the crowd to whoop with amen this and amen that, but everyone is silent. It's kind of eerie the hold that Dorian has on his followers, like I've snuck into some Branch Davidian gathering. All he's missing are the ceremonial robes and Dorian's a regular Jim Jones. Whatever those graduation garbs are for are close enough.

"We must first remove the telephone poles from our eyes if we want to pick out the splinters in our brother's eyelids," the preacher continues. "This applies to everything from gays to drugs to war. If the church thinks it can march around pointing out the flaws in everyone else, it should first scrub off it's own blemishes. I'm talking about the basics, like the Seven Fucking Deadly Sins.

"Lust and envy are pretty much taken care of, but how about wrath? How can Pat Robertson call for the assassination of anyone, let alone speak for God himself on the actual causes of natural disasters? I'll give you a hint – Hurricane Katrina was caused by a tropical depression. God wasn't punishing anyone for anything except being dumb enough to live below sea level near the ocean.

"And how about pride? That whole 'don't make yourself an idol' thing has nothing on the towering churches, statues and monuments modern Christians use to brag about their righteousness. News flash – God doesn't care how big your Jesus statue is, just that you don't give that money to starving AIDS victims in Uganda instead.

"Speaking of size, what about wallet size, what about greed? How can Joel Olsteen actually encourage a love of money? I guess that whole verse about serving two masters, how that doesn't fucking work, doesn't apply to him. How was it the Prayer of Jabez was turned around into a clever marketing ploy and people bought it?

"Go to any church in America that doesn't let gays near the altars and count the corpulent fatasses taking up entire rows of pews. Have they forgotten the definition of gluttony? And every year that Bible Belt goes up another notch, it tightens on the neck of decent believers."

Dorian steps down and starts to walk among the crowd. Everyone's eyes follow, silently. "But those are just the Evangelicals. What about the other types of churches, like Jehovah's Witnesses or Mormons, who will come to your door, but won't invite you into theirs. They'll preach all day and all night about the peace, love and godliness that you're missing out on, but they won't show you an inch of it.

"What about the non-denominational and the Universal Unitarians? Well, I say, they've got greased palms. They'll shake your hand at the door, show you to your seat and hand you a tithe bucket, but they won't be your friends. They preach love, nothing but love, but they won't dare touch sin. And you can't ignore one or the other.

"Yeah, yeah, look, everyone sucks and everyone's a sinner. Boohoo. The sooner we can admit this to ourselves, the sooner we can move on. We shouldn't ignore that a Hell exists but instead realize that Hell is really just a world without love. Without God.

"We need to stop these endless conflicts amongst ourselves and against the world and instead shine as silent, humble examples. Stop trying to push, prod and mold the world and just let things shape as they will. Always remember, that Christ never raised a stone against or demanded change from anyone. Nor did he stand on street corners or

shove tracts into people's hands. People came to *him*, because he acted like someone that people actually wanted to know.

"Before Jesus, emperors and kings said they were gods," Dorian says. "After Jesus, politicians and presidents said they heard the *Voice* of God. There's an important distinction.

"Anyone who claims to speak for God what is not written in The Word is a liar. Which is why I am claiming no such thing. This hollowed out, shell of a building, this is not really a church. I am not your leader. I am not even a guide. Christ is your leader and the Bible your guide. You don't need another preacher; what you need is to think for yourselves.

"So argue with me. Let's agree to disagree and let's possibly even get along. Without any bitterness or resentment. Without being assholes. That's all. Go in peace and treat your brothers and sisters better than yourselves."

The applause is overwhelming and several disciples pull out cases of beer and blast champagne all over and some people pull out guitars and bongos and other acoustic instruments and it's all rocking and soon it's a drunken mess, but everyone cheerful and discussing and debating the merits of Dorian's message.

There's even some food and a punch bowl. I take a few finger sandwiches and a kid in graduation garb holds up a cup of punch to me.

"Want communion?"

"Isn't that Kool-Aid?"

The kid grins. "Jim Jones or Thomas Wolfe. You decide." And shoves the glass in my hand. I look into the cup, but don't see anything. So I drink it, quickly.

It's a long line to talk to Dorian, but when I finally get up there, all I can say is "What the fuck, man."

"I know. This is already something I'm not sure I can handle. I didn't really get to touch on the Seven Virtues. I mean, I don't want to drag any Catholicism into this really, but it's something to focus on. So we can, you know, practice what we preach."

"Well, if you can actually make a successful, non-violent religion --"

"Ah, ah, ah. Not that word."

"Well, whatever, man. Just..."

And then he's pulled away, talking to dozens of other people.

"...good luck."

I don't see Dorian again for the whole night. Soup's disappeared too. I start to miss Jimmy again and sigh. I wonder if he'd think this religious stuff was crazy or bullshit or what. He'd probably just shrug and say, "No harm, no foul."

Some kid in graduation garb passes me a joint, saying weed is God's gift to man and it says so in Genesis. I wait for the punch to kick in, nervously standing in the corner by myself, but it never comes. The people around me are dancing and singing and acting like morons, but I don't feel a damn thing. Maybe my synapses are completely shot at this point. Maybe I got a bad glass. I try to focus on the message, but it isn't working.

So I pop a Valium and a yellow pill and drink a lot and stare into the raging fire for a long, long time, until I feel the muscles tugging my eyes into darker and darker dilation, until I black out.

## Chapter Eight

So in the morning, I find myself sleeping on a bag of concrete. My whole body is aching and I have to pop a Valium and a yellow pill just so I can move again. Dorian's over by the campfire, stirring it out and talking to some chick in a graduation gown.

"Oh, good to see you're awake," Dorian says. "You were doing some weird shit last night."

"Like what?"

"Finishing drinks that weren't yours, spitting everywhere, naked dancing, giving people bizarre nicknames. You called me Buttercup."

"No, I didn't. I fell asleep before anyone else."

Dorian looks to the girl and she giggles.

"Courtney's on his way over here," Dorian says. "I haven't seen him since I left. I told him about this Light Brigade business and he wants to meet Dr. Hamilton."

"Really? That's good cuz I was thinking about it..."

"Yeah?"

"...I might want to try something like you ate."

Dorian's smile couldn't be bigger. He gets up and shakes my hand awkwardly, and he says, "I knew it, I knew it. I knew you'd be willing to take the plunge with me."

I give a nervous smile and then hear Courtney's car pull up.

"Let's go," I say, dropping Dorian's hand.

So we're at Dr. Hamilton's house, his power still intact since he's so far out, but he's not home.

"C'mon, we drove an hour to get here," Courtney says. "Let's just hop the fence."

"OK," I say.

"Wait, wait, you guys. I don't think that's such a good—" Dorian starts, but Courtney's already over the wall and I'm halfway behind him. "—idea."

In the backyard, it's mostly a garden with stone benches and knee high desert plants. We wander down a stone path, across a small, wooden bridge to Hamilton's laboratory, a dumpy, old garden shed constructed of rusted aluminum plates and the odd bit of plastic trimmed with a bunch of chemical warning signs on the side. Shit like CAUTION: RADIOACTIVE MATERIALS. Patches of phallic, mescaline-filled cacti are clumped around the sides.

I look at Courtney, who shrugs and lights a cigarette and Dorian is looking nervous as hell. But I'm remembering how Jimmy got us all into smoking cannabis the first time. We were back at Cloud 9, slouching in that dead couple's old, dust covered couches draped in ghost-white sheets. Jimmy was going on some extension of that peer pressure speech he had.

"This will free your mind," he said. "Right now, there are millions of cannabinoid receptors in your brain. They're turned off. Just sitting in your skull, waiting to be flicked on, waiting since the day you were born. Waiting to be used. Throw the switch, Dr. Frankenstein."

Out of all the plants on earth, few have as close a symbiotic relationship between human beings like marijuana. It's almost as if these plants exist solely to get us high. Few plants make as good medicine. Or food. And it's some of the strongest material around for paper, clothes, paint and dozens of other things. But mostly, it exists just to get us high, right?

"Go on," Jimmy said. "It turns your mind from a highway to a river. You can just float downstream, collecting stimuli as you go. You don't have to be stuck in traffic anymore. You can just relax."

My first puff on Mary Jane gave me a headache, as did my second a month later. But my third turned me into a singing, dancing nightmare. I was lost inside my own head, looking out through a dark vignette as things went on in the world without my control. I was dreaming that I was dreaming. I swirled through vortices and halos, I sang and kissed the ground. I dreamt of a field of golden tulips with one eyelid each, unblinking and they said, "We are watching you." I told them I am a painting, I am worthless. They wouldn't stop watching me. I felt I was three people at once, a fourth maybe, space being the blackness in my eyes and in my throbbing heart. If reality is an illusion, what's the point in putting up with it? But then I went back.

After that lucky, magic third try, my head was free to think whatever the fuck it wanted. It was like, fuck the freedom of speech. I want the freedom of thought. No wonder this is illegal.

Courtney and Jimmy were there with me and I swear that weed was laced with something.

I remember, after that first time I got high, I mean really high, I went home and rifled through my mother's spice cabinet. I took basil, thyme and rosemary and went into the bathroom and smoked it all. I thought I was so cool.

Of course it didn't do shit and I had a lot of explaining to do.

The shed is locked, naturally.

"What now?" I whisper.

"Let's just leave," Dorian says. Then, *crash!* Courtney already put a rock through the window and he's crawling through.

"Courtney! What the fuck!" Dorian hisses. And then the door unlatches and the asshole leads us inside.

The lab is dark with a mess of chemicals lining every dank, dusty wall, a tangled chemistry set in the center and on the blackboard, scrawled in chalk, are the spiny formations of recently discovered psychoactive molecules. Courtney is already rifling through the vials. There are literally thousands, some of which Hamilton created, some of which get mailed to him by other chemists, asking him to sample them. This one is MDMA mixed with mescaline. This one is DMT mixed with psilocybin. The entire 2C family, the entire NBOMe family and so many phenethylamines and tryptamines and so many other research chemicals. There are hundreds of different potencies of LSD, LSA and hundreds of other chemicals I'll never be able to wrap my head around.

Dorian is relating his mescaline experience again, saying something about how every one of these vials is like a small doorway to God and Courtney scoffs.

"You want to know what god really is? Google." Courtney snorts. "Google comes closest to being a verifiable god. The amount of information it processes makes it nearly Omniscient. Google is Omnipresent. It's in your TV, your phone, your fucking dreams.

Google is as infinite as the internet itself and we worship Google with every question we ask. Every search we submit is prayer.”

Dorian just has this look like, you’re a fucking idiot. “Just cuz Google knows a lot, doesn’t mean it knows all. Google doesn’t answer prayers.”

“Not exactly. All Google does is show you the way,” Courtney says smugly. “You have to find the answer yourself. The internet itself is becoming a religion. It’s our Tower of Babel, it’s our attempt to reach Heaven, it’s our attempt to replace God with ourselves. And when one idol dies, becomes obsolete, we move onto a new religion. We went from Usenet to Friendster and Friendster to MySpace and MySpace to Facebook. Ask Jeeves to Yahoo to Google. Internet Explorer to Firefox to Chrome. We are users of an elaborate mythos, one centered on self-idolization. We are temporary gods.”

“Uh, temporary gods?” Dorian is pretending to be interested.

“Yeah, see, the Greeks didn’t believe the gods created the universe – they believed the opposite, that the universe created the gods. The Big Fucking Bang. Us Millennials believe exactly the same. And as a whole, what does our generation worship? We worship ourselves. We’re quick to raise idols in entertainment, politics and everything in between and just as quick to defame, defile, disgrace and discard our deities. Only, we aren’t infinite, we aren’t omnipotent, we aren’t upright or holy. We’re as one-time-use as condoms, as Q-tips, as toilet paper. And our names will never be remembered. We are anonymous, momentary, temporary gods.”

I think this might be a joke, that Courtney’s just fucking with him, but I’m not sure.

“My religious experience was real,” Dorian says. “I’m not trying to sell you anything. I’m not trying to convince you. I just want to share that feeling with you.”

“No offense, but it was probably just psychedelics fucking with you. They do that you know,” I say.

“No way, because I’ve heard that same voice sober and on weed before,” Dorian says. “This time, it was louder. Surrounding me, wrapping around me. It was warm and it was lovely. Like, the epitome of love.”

“Yeah, well I’ve never felt anything like that,” Courtney says. “Just saying.”

“Try it. That’s why we’re here.”

“Meh. I got things to do later. But maybe.”

Dorian looks at me instead. I shrug.

“I hate this. I hate how deep anti-drug bullshit has been wormed into your brains,” Dorian says, throwing his hands up.

“What are you talking about?” I protest, laughing. “I drink like a chimney and smoke like a fish.”

“Have you ever done anything harder than ‘shrooms?” Dorian looks at Courtney.

“Just whatever we did that night,” Courtney says. “But I still didn’t have a spiritual connection. And I’m not afraid. Just not all that interested.”

“See, exactly. No one is interested. Rebelling against D.A.R.E. was just some childish angst thing. Now we just use drugs to feel good. We need a new psychedelic revolution. It used to be, long enough ago, people were trying to obtain a higher state of consciousness.”

“The best way to do that would be to read a book,” Courtney coughs.

“See, you can say that, but you don’t know. I do know. Drugs are the only tangible substance to understand the composition of the human mind. Perception itself is subjective. Spiritual in its own way. Enhanced perception is as well. I want to go back and I want you to come with me. Too bad you’re being pussies.”

That peer pressure bullshit speech is coming back. I’m compelled to take the plunge now, but glancing at Courtney tells me he’ll be watching from the sidelines.

“That whole myth about only using ten percent of your brain seems more believable when you consider how few people have had a legitimate psychedelic experience,” Dorian says, grabbing the closest vials he can and hands one each to me and Courtney. “Drink it.”

Courtney tries to read it in the dim light when the door crashes open. Dr. Hamilton, leaning on his cane and holding a gun, says, “What the fuck are you bastards doing in my lab?”

The sudden intrusion scares Courtney and he trips over the chemistry set, sending it smashing on the ground. All those vials and beakers and Bunsen burners begin smoking. I don’t think, I just swallow my vial. Maybe I want to get rid of the evidence, I dunno.

Hamilton dives beneath the sink after Courtney, while Dorian and I run toward a small window in the back and squeeze out. We run to the far wall and I hop over. Saddled on the wall, we look back and see the shed, smoke pouring out all the windows, and Dorian says, “I’m going back for Courtney.”

“I can’t afford to get caught!” I scream. “I’m in deep shit!”

“Then get out of here, you jackass!” Dorian yells over his shoulder.

I take a shortcut through an alley, but immediately feel guilty and double back toward the house. Sometimes, I don’t even know how I have friends.

Then, right in front of me, Hamilton’s lab explodes, sending a mushroom cloud of flame hundreds of feet into the air. Fire worthy of the most expensive CGI in Hollywood. Smoke that sucks in all the light and blows out nothing but heat. The sky darkens and I keep running and running and running.

The more I run, the faster the drug kicks in. I can feel all color around me exploding, spilling all over the place. My world becomes completely geometric, nothing but a sea of cubes and circles, pixels, clustered together. But still I keep running.

Running east, jumping a wall and through a wash. Running till the wash becomes gravel and the gravel turns to pure desert. Running till the landscape widens and the desert swallows me whole.

## Chapter Nine

So I'm sun tanning near the pool of an abandoned Best Western. Courtney is idly sitting in the Jacuzzi, smoking a cigarette. Dorian is next to me, reading from a notebook. My notebook.

I'm barely sweating, my breathing has returned to normal and somehow, I'm surviving under the 110° weather. A couple hours ago, Courtney picked me up at Encanto Park. After waking up in one of the ponds, my head in the mud, I called him from a payphone. I had no idea how I got there.

There was a notebook. Jimmy's notebook. It was soaked, but still legible. I wrote upside down over his earlier entries in red pen, so you can still kind of read both and this is what Dorian is reading.

Multiple times it's dawned on me that I have no idea what kind of drug I took. No one really does. Something with a huge adrenaline rush and a massive psychoactive undertow. Something like a hundred times more powerful than anything my tongue has ever touched. It could have never been tried before, except maybe by Dr. Hamilton. It could be a rare, wild animal. My head is still sloshed and I'm popping those little Valiums, balanced out with yellow pills, like crazy. The bottle is running low, but my nose is healed now. My palm is still scabbed from becoming blood brothers with Courtney and making a fist is painful.

Dorian tells me I was absent for three days. The date on my cell phone agrees. A couple dozen missed calls, mostly from Lisa and Olive and my mother. Wonder if they'll believe I have no idea what happened in the last 72 hours. Like, all over again.

"What'd I miss?"

"Well, after the fire got bad, Hamilton passed out from smoke inhalation and Courtney and I carried him to safety and resuscitated him. He said he wouldn't press charges if we never, ever saw him again.

"I can imagine he's pretty devastated. He lost an entire lifetime's worth of research."

"Well, I hope not. I think he kept a copy of most of everything." Dorian goes back to the notebook. I've already read it. I don't remember any of it happening and it's not in my handwriting. But I had to have written it. There's no other explanation. This is what it said:

*Sky, colored with blushing highlighters, shredded ribbons of burnt carrot and lemon chiffon and cherry blossom pink. On fire with energy.*

*Surrounded by gangrenous mountains, nothing else, rutted walls closing in on me. Porous monoliths of Camelback. Ghastly terrain of brittlebush and saguaro. Jumping cholla and sticky Mexican palo verde. Rattlesnakes wound up like power cables unravel in my direction. Scorpions dig into my feet. In whole, the glorious Sonora.*

*Mouth is septic, drooling all over myself. Baptized in sweat, heart rate a revving Mustang, my breathing brawny and nauseated. My tongue, a mashed, pink banana, dried out leather car seats in direct sun.*



*The desert aflame. Foaming rivulets of lava stream all around me. Ground exhales bursts of steam, engine of the earth churning at full speed. Savage. Philistine. Precambrian.*

*Whole landscape echoes. Low, reverberating drone. The essence of sound. A speaker on the fritz. Didgeridoo. The ultimate white noise.*

*Feel the throat of the earth calling to me. Move slowly, head dissolving in air, face drooping. Only once do I raise my eyes to the glistening skull of the sun.*

*Feel the swirling vortexes of Sedona. Rock formations, a circle crossed twice through the center. Stumble into one and it rearranges into a grinning smiley face.*

*I become ant-like. Earth stretches further and further away from me in every cardinal direction. Sand becomes an hourglass, the sky a globe over me and the searing sun, an eye sullenly gazing downward.*

*Streaks in the air, beams of smoke and exhaust, airplanes, space shuttles, ancient satellites crashing through clouded atmosphere. Meteorites, wishing stars. Every ray, like every blast of brilliance shooting through history. Every significant event, movements for freedom, movements for peace, movements for better living. From deforestation to the Holocaust to deep sea drilling. The Cotton 'Gin, the invention of music, the complete works of Shakespeare, the birth of Rome.*

*Everything we're dependant on. Air conditioning and Netflix and Dr. Scholl's and power plants. Nothing is wrong, not really. Civilization feels neither like chains or wings. Government isn't the necessary evil – society is.*

*I merely feel insignificant underneath these glowing bars of so-called progress that I may never be a part of. Will I ever have a light that shines this bright?*

*Walk on, head filling with more and more bleak fluid. Waterfalls of crystals cascade in front of my eyes. Kaleidoscopes of lizard eyes and Gila Monster scales and crocodile fingers. My breathing is reptilian. I feel a surge toward lower and lower realms of consciousness, until my movement is sluggish and I myself slither alongside legless serpents.*

*I worm in the desiccated dust and the more I am swallowed in humiliating soil, the more comfortable I become. Age becomes a crutch to hold up my withering eyes. Fantasies of purpose evaporate like moths to bug zappers. My dreams dissolve into associated memories, liquefying into 8-bit medleys and barcodes and pixels, my '90s childhood, until I cannot tell the two apart.*

*My feet touch barren, black asphalt. Smoke rises off the blacktop, cracks form and weeds rise and wither. Back in civilization. The last parking lot before the desert. The border between man and nature clearly defined.*

*The parking lot stretches out many more miles. Then, a single, lonely department store. No cars outside.*

*Inside, the brisk rush of air conditioning. My mouth still gaping open, tongue lolled out, dribbling slime on glossy linoleum. Convenience and progress are suddenly equivalent to The Gardens of Eden and Shangri-La.*

*The only cashier looks up at me. Not smiling, her voice the bleakest of greetings. Repetitive and dull. In her eyes, that ghastly, hallow stare given from endless merchandising and fronting and organizing items by barcode.*

*I duck through aisles splattered with fluorescent light, cleverly counterfeiting the sunlight. The walls seem to grow taller and entrap me. Everything seems heavy and ready to fall on me. I run. The edge of the store, the toilet, is my refuge, my succulent oasis.*

*The bathroom is coated in graffiti. Others marketing themselves. Corporate radio plays over the loudspeaker. Every safe, peaceful song in one convenient playlist. Music to spend by. Buy, buy, buy.*

*I collapse on the cool, seductive tile. The music swarms over me and I can still hear echoing, droning vibrations, the essence of sound.*

*Now I'm writing this down. Trying not to forget. A deep sense of fear swells in me as I push ink to pulp.*

*My head collapsing in on itself. A box, folding smaller and smaller and smaller. A mirror is held up to my subconscious self and I realize, every major decision I've ever made was done out of boredom.*

*I'm technically rich and I'm going to be fat and I'm stupid and I'm bored.*

*My nationality doesn't matter. This is who I really am.*

*I watch TV out of boredom. I shop out of boredom. I do drugs out of boredom. I surf the internet out of boredom. I play video games. I go to concerts. I subscribe to magazines. I masturbate. I'm very, very bored.*

*I always feel so busy in life, always wanting more free time. I want to have more time to be more bored. I want an RSS feed directly into my head, giving me a constant river of meaningless info-tainment. I want my stream of consciousness replaced with some machine's mind. Thinking is too much work, it's too boring.*

*I'm so bored I ask questions like, what kind of clothes define me? Aware I'm drowning in consumerism, but too apathetic to do anything about it. It's easier to give in. That old question, nature versus nurture. Do I want the things I buy or am I just told to want them? Why do I want the latest version of Call of Duty? Why do I want a new cellphone? Why do I want? I'm too bored to figure out.*

*Everyone is so good at making excuses. It seems like our only reason for living is to make excuses for living. The search for the meaning of life is an excuse in and of itself.*

*Sometimes, when I'm cruising down I-17, I feel like screaming at every billboard I see "You can make me buy your shit, but you can't make me care!" But that won't stop anything.*

*Besides, being a consumer is unavoidable. I'm not even employed and I'm stuck with the mindset that I must earn money to earn enjoyment. A reward system based on boredom. A Skinner box we've overloaded with marijuana and pixels and status updates.*

*If there is a God, we're here out of boredom, too. The Bible may say, "God created the Heavens and the Earth," but it doesn't say why. What was God feeling? Loneliness? Sadness? Anger? Fear? I say, boredom drove that creationist touch.*

*Or maybe, crawling from that boring, primordial filth was all we needed to get here. Boredom itself is our Creator.*

*The tile against my head feels cool as glass. The ceiling wavers, back and forth, endlessly. My drooling won't stop. I have to get out of here.*

*Outside the store, a pair of tweakers ask me to take some shit in and return it for them. One of them, the female, she has dark, purple circles under her puffy eyes. Her cheeks are covered in quivering sores, her gum line made of Indian corn.*

*“Our state ID’s have been rejected,” she pleads with me, but I’m too fucked up to really understand her story. Her vibrating hands, clutching that receipt, like it was her ticket to redemption.*

*I want to find Jimmy. I’m sure he’s still alive, but no one else seems concerned he hasn’t popped up. I imagine him wandering the desert, like me, his head unscrewed and his fluids spilling all over the place.*

*Then, I do see Jimmy. He’s walking ahead of me, on fire, but still put together. I chase after him, chunks of burning flesh dropping off him in the street, but he doesn’t disintegrate and I yell, but he doesn’t turn around and then he’s gone.*

*Wandering further, deeper into the heart of the city, I run into that homeless Indian guy who smoked me out a week ago. Long time, no see.*

*I ask him, what did he mean about those towers falling?*

*“The towers man, the towers. The ones all around us!”*

*He disappears or maybe I just don’t notice when he moseys along. The world is a rainbow, everything flashes and bleeds and I see people but they’re dark shapes, far away, like in that screaming Munch painting.*

*I find myself in the alley behind a convenience store. Parked near the dumpsters is a Suzuki Esteem and written on the back is “Low Self.” Courtney’s car. I’m staring at it, trying to figure out if it’s really there or not, or if I’m just frying. I rub my forehead, feeling the veins throbbing like bacon in a skillet.*

*I look up and notice a giant, metal post with fake palm tree fronds at the top. A cell phone tower, trying to camouflage itself into the rest of the city. A city which is filled with imported palm trees, also trying to camouflage themselves against the desert.*

*I watch in stupefied, stoned amazement as a gigantic ball of flame blossoms from the palm tree. The tower sways and leans and falls over, landing, propped up like a tree in the aftermath of a storm, against the roof of a parking garage. Another tower, not far away, explodes and I can hear explosions all around me.*

*I run and hide in some oleander bushes, diving deep inside until I’m jabbed all over and the poisonous, white milk of the leaves drips all over me. I watch as Courtney calmly gets into the Esteem and drives away.*

## Chapter Ten

So we're at some local bowling alley called Sunset Lanes. It's crusty and old, maintained by pure, obsessive hobbyists now that most people would rather get strikes on a Wii than in a lane.

Courtney's the only one really playing, getting strike after strike. He took a class once or something. Dorian's just now finishing going through my notebook a third time.

"I still don't know what to say yet," he mutters. "This wasn't anything like what I experienced. Do you think you found God?"

"No. Probably because I wasn't looking."

"What do you think it all means?"

Courtney looks up. "Nothing. He was just bitching." With his left arm extended, Courtney steps up, pauses and nails another strike.

Dorian looks at me. "Nothing?"

"Well, it gave me something in my life to decipher. My head was caged and free at the same time, if you know what I mean. The experience broke my reality down into bite-sized pieces and constructed a new, nonsensical realism."

"Like a dream."

"Yeah, exactly like a dream. And reading a lot into it is too Freudian for me. But I dunno, maybe I should."

Dorian nods. He seems so much more excited about this than I am.

"Or maybe I should call Olive back. Too bad I still don't have cell phone service." I glare at Courtney and he laughs. Dorian looks at me, confused.

Across the alley, on a TV near the bar, some reporter is talking and talking about the recent explosions all over The Valley. Sheriff Joe, looking as pissed and senile as ever, grumbles about terrorism, blaming it on illegal Mexicans and insecure borders. The President is calling these events domestic terrorism and that while yeah, no one has died yet, it's still crumbling away at what our Founding Fathers wanted. The freedom of electricity and cell phone reception, I guess.

They're comparing these bombings to those flashlight IEDs that occurred a few years ago. Someone, no one knows who, put some homemade bombs in some flashlights and left them around the city. Whenever people turned them on, they exploded, but luckily, no one was seriously injured.

Luckily for Courtney, no one has been hurt by his bombs either. Heck, maybe he was behind the whole flashlight thing. Who knows. Security footage has produced nothing in either case and no witnesses have come forward. Police presence has shot up around power plants, transformer stations and anywhere else that's at risk for being shut off. A dozen composite sketches have been produced of the ringleader of this "terrorist cell" but none of them look remotely like Courtney. I swear, half of the characters are wearing turbans or look Mexican.

"Well," I say. "At least now you're somewhat famous."

"Wait a sec, all that shit is your doing?" Dorian says.

Courtney grins, bows a little and says, “Half the city hates my guts. The other half will learn to thank me. The best part is no one knows who I am. I want to remain anonymous forever. Let my body never be identified.”

The power starts to flicker and people all around us groan. Brown outs and surges have plagued the city all week, thanks to my fucking friend. He’s dickish as usual, but a little more than proud his plan is going into action. I look down at my phone. Still zero bars.

“You’ll be caught,” Dorian says. “They always are. And you’ll be remembered, alright. But not as some savior of society or some bullshit. More along the lines of J.T. Ready or that guy who tried to shoot that politician in Tucson. If you’re lucky, the Baseline Rapist.”

Courtney gives Dorian the finger.

“It won’t be long before everything’s rebuilt. It’s a minor inconvenience,” Dorian continues, snapping my little notebook shut and handing it back to me. “You’re such a dickhead.”

“It should be enough to remind people how things used to be. Recall the taste of simplicity.”

“People want complexity,” Dorian says. “They think it gives their life meaning.”

“Fuck that noise,” Courtney snorts. “You can put all the meaning you want into something. It doesn’t change what it is.” He tenses and rolls yet another strike.

“That’s not gonna stop anyone,” Dorian says. “Self-destruction is in our nature.”

“That’s true. At least I’m not trying to prevent the inevitable.”

Dorian seethes.

“Hey, did I tell you about *my* trip?”

“Which one?” I ask.

“I guess you didn’t notice. I took something crazy in that lab, too,” Courtney says. “I just didn’t write anything down.”

“C’mon, tell us.”

“If you want.” He takes a deep breath and lets it out fast, all at once.

“Standardized consumer culture has sedated the mass majority of the planet’s population. We once went to war for religion, now we fight for government and soon we will all be soldiers for the glory of a corporate world order, dying in masses in the world wars to come. We fight because the purpose of every human is to die alone, to die out of our own dread of the unknown. Our fear of death drives our every desire. Our goal is to preserve ourselves by pumping our bodies full of plastics and preservatives. On the plus side, we’ll fossilize real nice.

“That’s right, our bodies filled with silicone breast implants, metal discs in the spine and porcelain dentures, we’re gonna make the victims of Pompeii look like cow shit. Those almost perfectly preserved bog mummies will have nothing on our ball joints and pacemakers that will outline our skeletons. Not to mention our piercings, gauges and other little additions that will immortalize us into petrified remains. We’ll be like Egyptian pharaohs – the same dead, rotted breed of temporary gods.”

Dorian laughs. I don’t know what to say, so I’m rolling bowling balls back and forth in the ball return. Some inane animation plays on the screen, cartoon pins and balls dancing around all stupid.

“Don’t take it too seriously,” Courtney says. “I was just bitching, too. It was like speaking in tongues almost. I’ve had that on my chest for a long time.”

“Write it down,” Dorian says. “A new gospel.”

“What’s the point? Fuck all of this. I’m bored with searching for answers. I found them. I want action.”

“Well, that’s arrogant. No one knows every--”

“And you know what else? That whole question Jimmy was asking, what happens when we die, well, I don’t give a fuck anymore. I’ve left a mark, maybe not a lasting one, but a deep cut. And The Valley is just the beginning. Not that I can rely on you two idiots for help.”

I feel my bones tense with a sudden resentment. “Shouldn’t you be blowing something up right now?”

“Actually, pretty soon.” The power flickers again and Courtney gathers his stuff to leave. “I’ve gotten a bit of attention from some anarchist group in the valley. They’re not really anarchists, they’re just little punks in black costumes, but I’m meeting with them anyway. We’re gonna finish taking down this grid and maybe move on to some other cities.”

“Have fun.” I watch him go and turn to Dorian. “What else did I miss in the last three days?”

“Did I tell you I got caught by the cops?”

“What the fuck?”

“Shit, well it’s old news by now. They asked me a bunch of questions, but there was nothing they could pin me on. They didn’t even know I was at the scene, so I told them I was just running away from the explosion. I was sober, anyhow.”

“Well, I’m sure it was fun. Put that on your list of unique experiences.”

“It was miserable. Are you kidding? But I cooled off by going to church. A Christian church.”

“Oh yeah? How was that?”

“Boring. But peaceful. It felt good.”

“What did they talk about?”

“Love. Forgiveness. Boring, routine shit,” Dorian sighs. “Church is supposed to be for fuckups. I mean, even Jesus said sick dudes need church, not the self-righteous. Nowadays, sermons are all about an inflated sense of acceptance, but only if you’re clean-cut and respectable. A typical worship center is filled with fuckups, but none of them wear it on their sleeve.”

“What, are Christians supposed to flaunt sin or something? ‘Hey guys, I just stole a bunch of shit and burned down an orphanage.’”

“Not like that, but to a degree. Without sin, we wouldn’t need a savior and I guess God just wants to feel needed. Modern believers act like their shit doesn’t smell and still don’t go out into the world, acting out with benevolence or anything. Church just wants to keep you coming.”

“Hey, isn’t there some verse about not trumpeting your prayers or charity on street corners or something?”

“Better than nothing.” Dorian laughs and shakes his head. I can notice a difference in him, a real, deep peace. He’s just glowing and has been ever since he returned.

“Come to church with me,” he says. “It’s not perfect, but you’ll understand.”

“Bowling is more like real church to me,” I say. “It’s loud, full of fatass, middle-aged men, swearing and drinking cheap beer.”

“C’mon.”

“Didn’t I go enough when we were kids? I don’t like going ‘cuz it makes me feel guilty.”

“So start feeling guilty. A little guilt every now and then is good for you.”

I snort. “Whatever.”

“It gets you moving, man. It gets you doing something to stop feeling that.”

I smile, kinda fakely, but I don’t have anything to say. The power flickers again. I pick up a bowling ball. Courtney has one frame left, all the ones before it filled with X’s. He just needs one more strike to get 300.

I step up to the line, pause dramatically and purposely roll the ball right into the gutter. Then the lights die out completely.

So Dorian takes the bus south and I take it east. The bus has the air conditioning switched off, so I’m sweating my ass off in the heat. My balls dewed with moisture, I try to itch them without making a scene, but it’s next to impossible. Some woman, maybe about 40, dressed in a green tank top and holding a can of cheap, piss-flavored beer grins at me, her teeth like an old scratch-and-win ticket, some eroded completely, some still hanging on.

“Your balls need a rub?” she says.

I stop for a minute and say, “Um, yeah. What?”

“Twenty bucks, hombre.”

I shake my head.

My stop won’t come for another ten minutes and me and the prostitute are just sitting there awkwardly until she gets off. I look out the window the whole time, noticing all the hand-written closed signs on all the businesses, hanging over useless LED signs. It’s worse than the effects of the recession. I notice people wandering the sticky, hot streets aimlessly. I notice the police, parked next to any major power source, guarding it, looking bored, drinking free coffee from QT.

I notice the hooker leaves a wet stain on the seat that reeks of piss.

I settle back into the ugly, green and gray seats and pop open Jimmy’s journal once again.

*Feb 2. – Groundhog Day*

*Vermin, shadows, fear, six more weeks of this shit.*

*The value of secrets increases with each year. It’s weird to do, but I google myself every now and then. There’s so much about me that everyone can know. Keeping something confidential these days, it’s priceless.*

*Hell, I even looked up my old counselor, the one I went to when my parents divorced. I told her everything and she started a blog and put all those stories online, in an anonymous way. Disturbing behaviors I had as a kid that I never told anyone. I’m a freakshow to her. She changed my name, but still. These days, anyone will sell you out.*

*On a whim, I got a tattoo on the sole of my foot. It's small, yellowish, unnoticeable. You'd have to look hard to see it.*

*I'm not telling anyone what it is. It's my last chance at having a secret and not oversharing with the public. My sole is a secret.*

*Ha ha. Bad pun.*

Home. Well, Soup's home anyway. I open the front door, which isn't locked, and my silhouette is cast like a big, stalking jaguar, running up the far wall. I turn the light on, but the switch doesn't do anything. Something feels misplaced. Trevor is sitting on the couch and I think he's crying.

A window is broken, things are thrown around the floor and Trevor's TV and laptop are missing. The house is somehow even more trashed than before.

"Fuck man," Trevor says. "My iPod, my Xbox, my speakers, every little distraction I once had is now entertaining someone else. First the plants die and now this."

"How'd they get past your dog?"

"They let him out. I have no idea where he is."

Not knowing what to do now, I sit on the couch, staring at the wall where my Trevor's HD plasma screen once hung, next to Karlee's missing Wii that she used for yoga. I think about the Rottweiler running free in the streets, chewing on stranger's legs.

"Should I call the pigs?"

"They'd just come down, make a report and that'd be it. Nearly all the neighbor's houses look busted into as well. What's the fucking point of calling the cops?" Trevor wipes his tears away. "I've been thinking about this whole month, anyway. The drugs, the bloodshed, the dead plants, the fires and blackouts, it doesn't bother me that much my possessions walked off. I can always get more. Who robs someone during a week-long power outage anyway?"

I pop my last Valium. I'm gonna miss these guys, but I still have plenty of these stupid yellow pills. I pop one of these too. I sit down to smoke some weed, the crumbs that are left in the ashtray, anyway, but pick up the bong and find it's smashed in two. I end up rolling a joint with some newspaper, but it's so harsh, it totally kills my buzz.

Soup comes home and the two argue over and over about this, but I just kind of zone out on the couch and pretend it's a soap opera. I can't help myself from laughing so hard until the two turn and glare at me.

"What's so funny, jackass?" Trevor says. "Rent is due tomorrow and without those weed plants, we can't sell shit. We don't even have anything to pawn. But fuck me, right? You don't even pay rent!"

"Yeah well..." Then Trevor lifts up a baseball bat and lunges at me and I scream, jumping over the couch and hopping out the broken window. The door is kicked open and Trevor chases after me, but I trip, falling on my ass.

"I'll get you money! I'll pay you, I fucking swear!"

"Leave him alone," Soup says, calmly walking outside. "Where would you get money?"

I wrack my brain until it clicks. Lisa. She still deals, right?

"Let me call this chick I know. I think I can score a bunch of pills and we can sell them for double the price."



Trevor lowers the bat. "I like the way you think."

So six hours later Soup and I are down to our boxers in the mostly packed parking lot of a Hispanic banquet hall, a neon sign that says "Dos Hermanos" on the front. It's built like a warehouse, fitted in an industrial part of town older than my grandparents. Until the economy picks up or the power outages stop, hundreds of buildings like this will stand empty, except for the occasional weekend bash like this one. Luckily, this area of town hasn't burnt out. Not yet, anyway.

Soup and I, we're mostly hidden behind Lisa's bulky Honda Element, the doors swung wide open and the stereo blasting Crystal Castles and The Prodigy. She's biting off short pieces of electrical tape and attaching them to dimebags filled with multi-colored pills.

"Thanks so much for doing this, guys. Once I'm off papers, you know, off probation, I'll do this myself," she says. "And nice to see you in your boxers, Micah." She pats my arm, telling me to lift and she attaches four baggies under my armpit. I pretend not to hear her. She's been flirting with me all day and I finally realized why I've been ignoring her. Besides not being attracted to her, she's Jimmy's ex-girl and something about the whole thing just feels wrong to me.

Lisa tapes another eight baggies under Soup's arms, then tells us to turn our backs to her.

"The ones in green bags are worth \$10 each, blue is \$15, red ones are ketamine. Don't forget. Have you guys ever been to a rave before?"

We both shake our heads no.

"What an experience. First of all, think of all the money you'll make," she says, popping a piece of gum in her mouth. "Second, well, I dunno. My first rave was life-changing. For me at least."

I nod, but I don't really believe her. She tapes a fistful of pills to my knee pit, lingering, her head against my ass as she slowly strokes her long fingernails up my leg. I jerk and she stands up quickly.

"I've never had ecstasy before," Soup says. "I hear it rots big holes in your brain. Like a sponge against a cheese grater."

Lisa laughs. "No way. Ecstasy is the drug of the future. Well, more like the present." She tapes a half dozen more bags behind Soup's knees. "It's a community of love and happiness blended with a sci-fi boner for technology. MDMA is synthetic, like all our drugs will be one day. A rave is just like a bar scene out of *Heavy Metal* without all the violence and sex. Well, actually, the sex is about the same."

I give Soup a look. He was skeptical about coming at first, but I told him I wouldn't do this alone. "Ravers have this glossed over outlook on life. Mostly, they won't shut up about how great raves are," he said. I agreed, but asked him if he had a better idea.

"In the '50s, a rave was one of those crazy Bohemian parties ripe with acid and orgies," Lisa's smile just keeps getting broader. "The first time the name 'rave' was used to describe a concert, it was the 'Million Volt Light and Sound Rave.' In a way, Paul McCartney was the DJ, you know, with that mysterious 'Carnival of Light' recording.

Anyway, it's like a hippie colony. Everything in there exists to make you feel good and happy and wonderful."

"And now a rave is just an underground concert in a rented building," I shake my head. "The future is bleak."

"How come these things don't get busted by the fuzz?"

"Look at that building!" Lisa points. "It's totally owned by a drug lord. Who else would allow a rave in their building? Who else supplies most of the drugs? Cartel leaders don't have to sweat – they're untouchable. You know what kind of blood bath that would be if a SWAT team moved in there? I mean, well, cops do show up, they just don't shut the whole thing down. Usually."

"Guess so." Soup starts to pull his jeans back on. Lisa tapes a couple more baggies to my chest for good measure and looks me in the eye. I clench my teeth, tense up. "Let's go," I mutter. Lisa's face drops.

"Hey, isn't that Olive's van?" Soup says. Olive's car is one of those classic Volkswagen Type 2 buses. It's pretty distinct, covered in an acid bath of swirls and cliché psychedelic imagery.

My stupid heart, the pulmonary valve, the aortic valve, everything opens and closes rapidly. Skips a beat. My body floods with blood, rapidly gushing under my skin. I'm suddenly hot from just the thought of seeing Olive again. I pull on my clothes faster, shoving my feet into my shoes and barely tying them.

"Whose van?" I say. The last thing I want is Lisa jealous. "Let's hurry up and get this over with."

At the door, we pay admission, a bored security guard asks us to empty our pockets, remove our shoes and pats us down. He misses the important parts. I have my useless cell phone, lighter and cigarettes, a pen and notebook and a small wad of cash. Walking through the door with hundreds of pills feels like winning the lottery, sneaking out of prison, beating the system.

"I wanna try this at the airport," I tell Soup on the other side. He smiles, nods.

"Totally. I heard they finally got rid of those backscatter things, too."

"Took them long enough, the fucking perverts."

We head straight to the bathroom, barely glancing at the dance floor, barely able to hear anything over the minimalistic, monotonous music.

In the stall, I drop my jeans down to my ankles and peel back strips of electrical tape, painfully pulling out hairs all over my body. Soon, my body is striped in long red bars. I roll the tape into a ball and toss it at the base of the toilet next to a stack of empty, stolen wallets with their useless contents, business cards and frequent shopper cards, strewn about and soaked with piss. I flush the toilet with my foot.

At the sink, I pretend to wash my hands and watch people through the mirror. Guys are talking to each other in the urinals, laughing, shirtless and half-dressed in bright toddler's clothes, draped in glow stick necklaces and bracelets, like chemoluminescent royalty. Everyone is laughing.

Soup joins me at the sink, nods that he's ready and we head out.

Standing on the dance floor, the music is just stripped down to dumb and brash drum and bass, pure shockwaves of noise jolting my skeleton and pounding against my organs. It feels like maybe my bones could dislodge in their sockets and I could crumble

to pieces. I'm trying to resist clogging my ears with these pills while casually looking for Olive.

This banquet hall is bare bones, nothing more than a couple stages and a dancefloor. There's supposed to be a theme tonight – Christmas, Halloween and Easter, one for each stage. It seems like nothing more than holiday decorations bought on clearance, but a few juveniles are dressed up like zombies or slutty elves or gigantic rainbow egg-laying rabbits.

Raver kids in kindergarten garb sit in lines against the walls, getting their own personal light shows from peers with multi-colored LED flashlights taped to their gloved fingers. They pass around vibrating stuffed animals, playing with glow-in-the-dark lightsabers and hula-hoops and yo-yos.

It's weird being surrounded by a bunch of 12-year olds trying to act like 21-year olds without the beer. But what's even weirder are the creepy old guys with long beards standing in the corners and watching 15-year old girls shake their asses in lingerie.

Everyone but me and Soup are dancing and grinding and making out and groping each other. The whole room smells like sweat and grease, heat moving off the floor in ripples. Whoever this DJ thinks he is, his name something like DJ Skittles or DJ Scrunchie or whatever, he's throwing blips and beeps and dial-up tones onto a distorted, sped-up, old funk beat and calling it original. It's almost hilarious.

"Well, this is fun," Soup grimaces and nods towards the smoker's patio. The state's fascist anti-smoking laws really just narrows down to extra accommodation for us nicotine slaves. And I do mean fascist. After all, Henry Ford campaigned against cigarettes, writing a collection of anti-nicotine pamphlets called *The Case Against The Little White Slaver*. Hitler called tobacco the "wrath of the Red Man against the White Man, vengeance for being given hard liquor." So hating on cigarettes is totally fascist, right?

Anyway, outside, we can breathe better, even if our atmosphere is mostly second-hand smog. I look down at my phone. Still zero bars.

I take out a cancer stick and deuce it with Soup, leaning against a makeshift gate formally used for holding cattle. It feels fucking great to be destroying my lungs, but not my eardrums. I can still feel them ringing.

Ravers come up to us, asking us for spare cigarettes and complimenting our t-shirts and asking our names. They won't stop talking, shaking hands and smiling. Sometimes they ask for hugs and I awkwardly receive them.

In the space of ten minutes, I've met eighteen people and given away half that many cigs. Every single girl is dressed in lingerie, Wonder bras and laced up corsets and booty shorts plastered with the word "PINK" in bold. Pink what? Oh. *That* pink thing. Nevermind. Some girls are dressed in themes, with Santa hats tipped over their tie-dyed hair, big bows in place of bras, with fishnet stockings hanging like spider-webs from bulbous asscheeks.

Other chicks are just jean shorts and torn tank-tops, dripping in fake blood made from corn syrup and cherry Kool-Aid, complete with white contact lenses that give their eyes a milky, dead look.

The Easter stage is just a disaster, a combination of Furrries and Frederick's of Hollywood clearance-rack.

Everyone has a stupid raver name, like Smiles, Sunshine, Primary, Mucus, Lily, Mumbo Jumbo, Footprint or Party Favor. It's kind of like having a new identity, if you wanted to become someone named by abusive hippie parents.

Soup and I have been helping out anyone who asks for it. We shake hands and bump fists, but we're exchanging more than just touch. I've sold dozens of pills already.

Lisa comes up to us and asks us how we're doing.

We shrug. "Making it happen."

"Be careful, there's a lot of narcs here tonight."

"We're looking out."

"Are you having fun at least?"

I shake my head and Soup laughs sarcastically.

She looks us both in the eyes. "Are you rollin'?"

"What?"

"Have you tried anything I've given you?"

"Uh, I guess we didn't think about that."

"Do it, you idiots. No wonder you look like someone pissed in your Cherri-O's. E's the only way to enjoy a rave. Now I'll see you later."

Reaching into my pocket, I can feel the fat bags of ecstasy. I'm not sure what to do. Soup shrugs, says, "Well, it's free."

Gulp.

For another hour, nothing changes. The music is still grating, the people are still fucked up and annoyingly friendly and cigarettes are still the only comfort to this mess. There's nothing to drink, nothing illegal to smoke, nothing to feel.

All night we've noticed the cops, dozens of them, combing through the parking lot and arresting anyone who looks suspicious to them. They're in the crowd too, waiting for someone to hold up a pill or a wad of cash before they strike, twisting an arm clutching contraband behind the back and escorting them out to a waiting police cruiser. I trade another dimebag with a stranger and light another cigarette, strangely calm. Paranoia just doesn't breed here.

Slowly, I'm starting to sweat even more, my skin glistened like steamed vegetables. I start smiling involuntarily and chattering my teeth. The drug snaps inside of me like breaking a glow stick. I turn to Soup and he nods, his smile fluid.

"Whoa."

The more the drug boots up, the more everything around me makes sense. Energy surges through my nervous system, then my anxiety system and my angst system. I could run for miles, just let loose and let my legs fly. It's not an overwhelming euphoria like with marijuana; it's more a childlike exuberance. I feel like a kid again, living through sticky hot summer nights, catching Palo Verde beetles and making them fight, throwing rocks at other kids or traffic, racing on my bike around and around the Laundromat until my tires bald and I skid off the road, slicing up my head and shoulders and knees.

This explains why everyone is dressed like a five-year old, wearing fluffy, bright clothes and holding stuffed animals. Somehow, you can feel yourself reliving your childhood, back when your brain chemistry was more unstable and exciting. It follows that you'd dress and act with a brain-damaged mentality.

The music switches from aggravating to a sort of chemistry, components of acid and "basses." Everyone around us is making out, courting and fucking faster than speed

dating. We're all mayflies, the pill's effects our lifespan, but I ask myself, will this ever end? I convince myself it won't.

Every feel-good chemical in my head torrents out at once, the valves cracked open and pouring dopamine, serotonin and endorphins over every crevice in my foamy gray matter. I've entered a cerebral casino, placed a quarter in the biggest slot machine, pulled the one-armed bandit down and won everything. My reward system is overloaded and I can look at my life as a simple series of good and bad decisions. I'm undecided about the final outcome, but I'm deeply happy I've made it this far.

I tell all this to Soup and he's telling me his life-story, too. He's babbling on about his relationship with his father and his mother, how they tried to shelter him from everything and that just made him confused about life when it finally hit him. So maybe all the drugs and sex and stuff was just searching for answers or closure or release from the pressure cooker of reality. But mostly he just says, "Dude, it feels like it's 2030. This is the future and shit."

But it feels so ancient at the same time. The flashing lights, the dancing in circles, it could just as easily be some primeval tribal ceremony around a blazing bonfire.

I've been such a Chatty Cathy my jaws ache. They're grinding like the dancers inside, hot and raw. There's the taste of burning metal, like I'm sucking on nickels as my fillings grate against each other. I can feel a light dust on my molars.

"Are your teeth supposed to grind like this?" I ask.

"Yeah, man, that's what I heard. Don't you have any gum?"

"No. But that explains why everyone here is suckling a pacifier."

"Here, chew this." Soup picks up a dusty guitar pick and I crunch it up, passing it over the tongue and back until the plastic is a malleable wad of comfort.

"Thanks man."

Soup himself is chewing on cigarette butts and ads for future shows.

People keep coming up to us and buying drugs off us, and they look in our eyes, our fucked up faces and they know. The question of the night has become, "Are you rollin'?"

We nod eagerly and each person we ask, they nod eagerly too and we all laugh together, arms wrapped around one another in instantaneous brotherhood. Spotters, the photographers and promoters for the event, take picture after picture and hand us fliers for upcoming raves. My pockets are soon emptied of drugs and filled with ads.

"This is fucking insane!" Soup shouts. "And a little bit disgusting!"

"I'm out of pills!" I shout back.

"Me too!"

"Let's get a light show," I say.

Soup's too fucked up to argue, so we sit against the wall and just wait. Soon, some tweaked-out kid with septum piercings and ironic pin-up tattoos comes up to us, his fingers nothing but streaked rainbows of light and color. His fists spin and twirl, every light growing a tail, swimming in backwards whirlpools. It's a chemical orgy, a praise and worship of LED and neon and lasers. It has a funny logic to it, but deeper through the spiral it makes sense.

I enter my own head with a renewed sense of introspection. I start making hundreds of plans, filled with jets of inspiration and ambition. I think of how I'm going to change my life for the better now, fix this shit I've done to myself, stop blacking out, stop

my friends from destroying the city and I'll get a new job and my own place and and and...

And I think of Jimmy and how strange it is I still haven't seen him and I start to miss him again, but I can't. The drug is holding me back like a leash, like a shock collar. But Soup can tell there's a hint of concern in me and he asks about it.

"Where is Jimmy? Did he abandon us?"

Soup nods slowly, but won't meet my eyes.

"I think that's why I miss him so much," I say. "Because he was my hero. He influenced so much in my life and all I want to do now is continue to share this with him and it's like he didn't agree. It feels weird missing him this much, but I thought we were closer."

"I gotcha," Soup says and bums a cigarette off me. "Have you been reading much in his journal?"

"Yeah. Mostly what I'm learning is he was very much a loner. I didn't know him at all. He was super secretive and everything. Maybe if he just exposed himself a little more --"

"I think he knows what he's doing. He's in complete control. He'll come back and it's gotta mean something."

"So far it still doesn't." But I smile. "Oh well. I feel great anyway."

We get up and Soup goes off to the pisser, skipping the whole way. I get a tap on the shoulder and it's Olive. This time, I can't hide my excitement.

"Hi! How are you! You look great! Where'd you get your shirt! I like your glow stick necklace! How's your night been!"

"Dude," she lowers her voice. "Are you rollin'?"

"Hard! This is my first time! How about you!"

"Nah, I'm not into that shit. I'm just here because Lynn dragged me out. She wants me to make sure she doesn't get date-raped, which she's one hundred percent sure almost happened before, but thankfully she woke up and consented just in time."

I look over to see Lynn pressed up against one of the speakers, getting felt up by someone I don't know. Olive bends her neck, indicating we should go outside.

"Lynn says a rave is the best place to find yourself, so I'm trying it. I'm not impressed."

"I guess you have to be in the right state of mind." I'm feeling myself up, checking in every place I stored pills, desperately wishing I had one left to give her.

"I can tell your high. If you're looking for pills for me, you're wasting your time," Olive says. "There's no way I'm trying ecstasy. That shit eats holes in your brain. Like that scene in *Alien* where that bile shit burns right through the floor."

"No way, that's an urban legend, I swear."

"Whatever."

We sit down on the asphalt, among the spent cigarette butts, ads, gum and filth. I tell her verbatim what I told Soup and she nods and listens and understands. I tell her how I feel like I've come this far and I have so much further to go and I'm deeply happy. I'm not concerned about anything. I look into her soft, accepting eyes, so warm and inviting.

She says, "How come you're fucked up every time I see you? Are you ever sober?"

"What?" I wasn't expecting that.

“I can’t take someone seriously that can’t take reality seriously.”

“I take reality seriously,” I protest. For some reason, I’m not mad.

Olive rolls her eyes. “Look at you. You’re a fucking mess.”

“It’s like... Being drunk and stoned is the only way I can concentrate on other people. It’s more than a social lubricant, it’s a civil crutch.”

“That’s pathetic.”

“Well, at least I’m working on it. Or realize it. I mean, at least it’s a fun flaw to have. What’s fun about being grouch about everything?”

Olive looks at me with an expressionless face and starts to get up.

“You’re right,” she says. “It is fun. I think I really like you around, even if you act like a sociopathic alcoholic, smell like smoke all the time and all your friends are losers. At least you call me out when I need it.”

“You don’t need it that much.”

She kisses me and I kiss her back hard. Holding her hair, pressing her lips against me. Then she pulls back and I’m looking into her eyes when Soup comes up and says, “C’mon, let’s go. Dexter’s starting a fight with some guy.”

“Lynn’s ex?” I say.

Curiosity overpowers my hormones and I allow myself to be dragged to this spectacle. Already the fight is over, the kid Lynn was lip-locking sitting on the ground, his nostrils oozing blood and Dexter, his gums glossed in pink, is cuffed in the arms of a burly bouncer. Both boxers are still yelling abuses as Dexter is dragged off and thrown out the door.

Back out on the smoker’s patio, we see Dexter yelling to the crowd of clueless, fucked up ravers that he’ll get revenge.

“Tonight! It’s going down tonight!”

And the bouncers chase him through the parking lot. Not long after, a police helicopter cuts through the sky with its blinding spotlight, exposing us all underneath it. Some people raise fists, others give the finger. Everyone cheers like they’re on some Jumbotron. Then Lynn comes up and starts dry heaving against the fence.

“I’m fine, just a little dehydrated,” she slurs and then she pukes.

Olive rolls her eyes and says, “I better take her home. We’ll talk later.”

Inside, I find Soup looking exhausted, standing near the water fountain, splashing water up into his face. “I’m fucking done, man,” he says.

It’s been a long night and the pill is wearing off for me, too. The voodoo feelings left me like getting the wind knocked out, like waking up from a surgery. The only way I know it wasn’t a hallucination is my teeth are like bald tires, rubbery and worn smooth from all the grinding. My feet are feeling like I’ve been kicking rocks for three hours, but mostly soggy and damp from all my sweating.

And then, as a sudden fuck you from God or Courtney, the power dies. The lights, the music, it all falls apart. Emergency lights fill up the dancefloor with barely enough light to see. The magic is ruined.

All I can think of is how Courtney is directly responsible for this.

Motherfucker.

I can’t feel the MDMA at all anymore. The clock has struck midnight, my Cinderella dream zooms back to dull reality and all that cliché bullshit.

Immediately, half the crowd pulls out iPods and headphones and plugs in. A silent rave. Everyone still dancing and making out.

The other half of the crowd walks out. Not us. I give Soup a knowing look and he smiles and says, “I love it when you get that *burning* look in your eyes.”

We start scooping up as many of those raver ads we can find. We get a nice, neat little stack and then set them all on fire, dropping them right on the dance floor, filling it with smoke.

All those cops in the parking lot, grabbing the occasional buzzed raver, they’re now running inside and trying to put out the flames, but already the stage is ablaze and flaming ceiling tiles are crashing and the whole building is smoke.

We run out to the parking lot and find the spot where Lisa’s car once stood. Soup’s backpack, filled with clothes and books and shit is dumped on the ground.

“Think she’s mad at us?” I ask.



## Chapter Eleven

So after running several blocks away from our own crime scene, we have to stop. Panting, out of breath, hands on our knees, Soup says, “Where are we?”

“No idea,” I huff and puff and check my cellphone. No reception, the battery almost dead. The entire area around us is darker than I’ve ever seen the city. We trudge a few more blocks, but we can barely see where we’re going, let alone street signs or any sign of life. A few beams of light pollution glow in the distance, so we head toward that. It’s our best guess.

“We press on,” Soup mumbles.

Across the sky are streaks of light, hovering in circles, spiraling into smaller and smaller chemtrails. I don’t tell Soup about them, so I’m not sure if he can see them. Maybe I’m just having an acid flashback – if so, it’s pleasant, like watching someone spell their name with a sparkler. Or maybe it’s Courtney’s aliens, the ones that are maybe abducting me during my blackouts and leaving these bizarre bruises all over my body. Maybe they’ve been waiting up there in the sky for years but we could never see them because of all the light pollution.

Then, they flicker out and they’re gone.

We stumble to the gates of a rundown apartment complex. A few folks have large candles lit on their porches and they’re sitting up there, smoking, drinking and holding large rifles. Their eyes follow us.

Near a darkened Laundromat we find a vending machine.

“Fuck!” Soup pounds his fist against it. “I am so goddamn thirsty.”

“Me too,” I wheeze and then I lean over and puke in an ashtray. I wipe my mouth and say, “Stand back.”

I run at the vending machine, throwing my shoulder into the side and it rocks, but doesn’t move. I look on the side and notice a sticker with a little stickman getting crushed by a tilting vending machine. Soup runs and throws his whole weight into the machine and since he’s taller than me, it keels over, then leans back. Soup dodges out of the way just in time, but the machine splits and spills cans all over the ground.

We sit, drinking warm orange-flavored goo from dented cans until we see lights. Red and blue flashing lights. And they’re headed toward us.

Soup doesn’t waste any time – he drops his soda and darts into the darkness, leaving me there, too dazed to move, when the cop shines his flashlight in my eyes. I can barely see his nametag in the blinding gas station lights, something like Officer Klyser or whatever. Klyser’s eyes are shielded by pristine reflective aviator glasses, his upper lip furred with a trim moustache curled up above coffee-stained teeth.

“Alright, stand up,” he growls. “Put your hands where I can see them.”

“For what?”

Klyser grabs me by the back of me shirt and pulls me up. My soda falls to the ground, spilling nuclear-waste orange on my Converse All-Stars.

“Don’t talk back, you little prick,” Klyser barks. “I can cause you a lot of pain, so if you’re smart, you’ll empty those pockets.”

I pull out: an empty box of cigarettes with two joints inside, a lighter, Jimmy's notebook, Jimmy's stiletto, something like \$400 I made from selling pills, but never had time to count, my nearly dead, worthless cellphone and my bottle of yellow pills.

"What are these?"

"I have a prescription for them," I say. Klyser hands them back to me.

"Then they're probably boring," he says. Then, he opens the cigarette box and smells it.

"You smoking reefer?" The cop smiles. "I could put you away for a long time for this."

I start to sweat, panic and hear myself mumble, "I wanna talk to my lawyer."

"No, you don't," Klyser says, placing one of the joints behind his ear. "I'll just keep this" – he holds up my money – "so you won't be in any trouble."

Klyser pockets the cash and I watch him drive off, feeling dumber than shit. I walk another mile or two in the dark, calling Soup's name, but he never answers. Finally, I find a streetlight that's working and underneath it, a payphone.

I immediately call Courtney, out of breath and out of cigarettes. By some miracle, his phone picks up. Guess he didn't blow up the cell phone towers near his house.

"Where are you?" Courtney asks.

"I think I'm near 7th Ave and Southern."

"Find the Taco Bell and I'll pick you up there." *Click.*

I wait an hour for my friend, the terrorist, to pick me up and he's pissed as hell that I woke up him in the middle of his beauty sleep. Dorian is with him, chewing on something and he says, "Did you black out again?"

"Not yet," I say. "That reminds me..." I pop a yellow pill. I feel like I need it right now, more than ever.

"OK, so if you remember your shitty, fucked up night, would you mind telling the rest of us?" Courtney speeds off, running a red light and nearly creaming some homeless dude on a bike. "Were you smoking meth? Killing hookers? Profiteering off illegal gun sales to drug cartels? Hmm?"

"I was at this rave and Lisa and then Dexter fought someone and then the cops and I lost Soup..."

"You lost him?" Dorian says. "How did you –"

"You fucking idiots," Courtney snorts. "You guys were at a rave? That's even worse than I thought. Eww."

"What was it like?" Dorian asks.

"Oh man, oh man," I moan. "Lisa's gonna freak the fuck out."

"You shoulda called me earlier," Courtney says, holding up a giant spray can. "I woulda taken care of that cop with this gallon of MACE." He tosses it on the floor near my legs.

"Let's not talk about it. Where are we going?" Dorian asks.

"To find Soup. Turn around."

"Let him find his own way home. I'm sure he'll be fine," Courtney says. "I'm hungry."

"Where to? Everything's closed in this neighborhood."

"What has no soul and never sleeps?"

Dorian laughs. "Where else but Wal-Mart?"

We pull into the massive blue building's lot. It's nearly 4 a.m., the parking lot still bright as a football stadium, defying Courtney's wrath, still filled to the brim with SUVs and beat-up little imports. Walking through the door, past the sad, crippled greeter in a wheelchair, Courtney shakes his head and says he still can't believe me.

"Shut the fuck up," I say. "It was a job. I needed the cash. You don't get it."

"What's not to understand? Raves are for kids who can't get into bars."

"I thought so too, until I went to one. Then, it's like this wave of brotherhood and love and shit."

"Give me a break." Inside, we head straight to the liquor aisle and Courtney snags a six-pack, pops a can off the end and starts to guzzle it. "Fuck, I forgot I'm driving. Not that I care..."

"Raves are like Disneyland," I say. "It's a place of happiness and magic and shit."

"Have you been to that shithole since your balls dropped? Disneyland, I mean."

"Not exactly."

"It's happiness, sure, but it all comes with a lead pricetag. And I'm sure you've heard that cliché about buying happiness ...."

Dorian interjects. "I think you're missing the point."

"If Disneyland was really the happiest place on earth, it would be free admission, free everything. Pleasure Island. Homeless people, junkies and fags and the Hells Angels could come and sing and whatever. The same with raves, which are just the Hot Topic crowd regurgitated. It's not some hippie colony because drugs are passed around freely in rainbow gatherings. Everything, from the overpaid DJ's to the entrance fee to the perpetual making-out costs something. It's drowning in consumerism, worse than any other subculture."

"It's like this childlike happiness thing," I start to say, while stuffing a bag of beef jerky down my pants. "Have you ever even tried Molly?"

"If you think ecstasy is the drug of the future and raves are our present day hippy colonies, then fine. I've heard the argument a dozen times. First, you must reject money as your god." Courtney downs a second beer and pockets a flask, some LED flashlight keychain and I start grabbing whatever's around me, stupid shit like pencils and flares and wrap a belt or two round my waist, not even trying to be subtle. It's like everything is up for grabs. Dorian just stands there with his hands in his pockets. Something about acting on those beliefs he has.

"Believe it or not, it's a life-changing experience," I say. "I mean, for me personally, not so much, but I'm not against the whole scene on principle. I mean, people are discovering themselves there."

"Yeah, Courtney," Dorian says. "MDMA has a long history of successfully being used in therapy, especially victims of shell shock or post-traumatic stress. It was even used in marriage counseling for a while. You can really learn a lot about yourself from Molly, if done clinically."

"Fuck that method," Courtney says. "Listen, the invention of fire was the invention of the soul. Once we realized we could burn everything to the ground, primitive man had to balance those consequences. The fact that we can live day to day without just setting everything on fire is what makes us human. Animals can't do that. If you want to quote-on-quote 'find yourself' you gotta do things primal. You gotta use fire."

“But Courtney,” I say. “Self-immolation does nothing. Barbecued Buddhists aren’t the same as what you’re doing. You’re suicidal. You’re ruining what you want to save.”

I can’t believe we’re having this conversation in a Wal-Mart. We walk by so many drifting meth heads and insomniacs, wearing their burnt-out lifestyles on their sleeves, and they’re giving *us* looks like we’re crazy. In some parts of the store, the lights flicker on and off from the brownouts, like haunted house strobe lights.

“Fine, disagree. You’ll see.” Courtney starts on his third beer, placing the empty cans on a shelf of footballs, bicycle pumps and other sporting goods. “But it’s all just beginning. I couldn’t stop it if I wanted to. Yesterday, down on Central, someone tied a steel cable to their truck and tore down a row of telephone poles. All over, people are cutting cables and yanking out wires. Just tonight a bunch of kids not even associated with us threw some Molotov cocktails at some vans in Paradise Valley. They were just some government workers minding their own business, trying to repair some gutted electrical boxes and barely got out alive. It’s quickly becoming war.”

Wandering through aisle after aisle, everything navy blue contrasting with flickering lights, everything trying so hard to convince you the more you spend, the more you save. I remember when Courtney would talk about things like slave labor and China or India taking over our economy and we’d laugh and he wouldn’t get so serious. Not this serious.

“You want martial law?” Dorian asks. “You want Sheriff Joe to bring out armed street patrols? Or the national guard? ‘Cuz he’ll be happy to do it. That’s what’s gonna happen. You’re freeing people from something some folks don’t want to be freed from. You gotta convince them gently.”

“Yeah, I thought about that, but I don’t care. I know what those extraterrestrial messengers told me and so far, they’ve been right. Seems there’s no other way to wake people up. Or do you think world peace can still be achieved by thinking about it, Dorian?”

Dorian gives Courtney the finger and walks off, grumbling.

“Stop going back and forth. It doesn’t matter what I think. I mean,” I hesitate, trying to be diplomatic. “How much have you thought this through?”

“Enough. This is only the beginning. The Apocalypse is the only way for the human race to experience world peace. But I don’t just want to see the end of the world – I want to cause it.”

I have to stare. This isn’t the Courtney I used to know.

“No generation should feel so suicidal as to want or believe the apocalypse will happen to them,” I say. “Just let it happen if it happens.”

“You sound so zen. And you forget that every generation *does* want the end to happen in their lifetime, in some small way or another. Every ten years or so, a new scenario pops up. Y2K, The Branch Davidians, Heaven’s Gate, all that Mayan bullshit. And what do you think global warming is?”

“I guess, but fear isn’t the same as proactive destruction, Strangelove.”

“Do you know why disaster films do so well at the box office?”

“Because they’re made with inflated budgets so marketing teams try to shove it-” Courtney interrupts me with a wave of his beer.

“Because human beings like to watch their neighbors die in blizzards. Hurricanes. Twisters. Volcanic eruptions. Floods. We almost get off on it. Why not see it for real?”

I don't feel angry or upset that anyone would believe what Courtney's spewing, but it's kinda sad.

“Listen, don't tell Dorian this,” Courtney says. “I don't want him to read too much into this, but those messengers gave me a vision. I could see into the future. I could see the Brave New World that's been whispered about so long. And it truly is a dystopia. Someday human beings will be able to control their production, reproduction and resources down to an exact science. For that to happen, there will be no room for freedom, for anomaly.

“Until the sun bursts, human beings will be enslaved by their own progress, fed to be stupid and drained of any spirit. A Matrix built by their own hand, not by machines. So if there is a God, we have to tear down the edges of the planets ourselves. If our only options are Hell or the Apocalypse, we have to choose the hydrogen bomb.”

“Where's your fucking hope? Statistically, it's better to gamble for sustainability and intellect than to quit while we're ahead. Well, if we are ahead.”

“The house always wins, brother. I'm tired of crossing my fingers for a better generation. The only decent thing about causing this ending is we'll be the ones remembered for destroying each other. To ending all the fuss.”

“Remembered by who?”

“You know who. Maybe even God.”

“You won't shut up about how stupid you gotta be to believe in God. And don't start with the aliens again.”

“Right, well, if you don't think anyone will remember us, why not pull the plug anyway?”

Courtney's logic, if you want to call it that, is infuriating. “Let's go,” I say.

“Get Dorian. Maybe I am being harsh on the guy.”

“I've had a long fucking night. Can he meet us in the parking lot?”

Courtney shrugs and we walk nonchalantly towards the exit. We nod to the greeter in her wheelchair and stroll through the security buzzer. The sound of marching, then running boots rush past us, cutting us off, three men, black, Hispanic and white, each built like a gorilla, dressed in street clothes. They produce I.D. cards claiming they're “inventory control” and each security guard is smiling, on the verge of laughter.

“You'd better come with us.” All three grin.

Speechless, we're led to a room in the front of the store, tucked away so you'd barely notice it, but we walked right by on our way in. The door slams. Mantras about integrity and good character are etched onto the black walls. A single computer sits on a desk next to two hard, dark benches, flicking through various security cameras.

“Where'd your friend go?” The big black guy asks.

“Who?”

“Don't play games with us. Cooperate and this will go a lot smoother, a lot less *painful*.” The black guy tells the Mexican to check the store for someone else and the Mexican leaves.

“Let's be friendly,” the black guy says. “I'm Cedric and this is Bart. Now, take everything out of your pants.”

I pull out the wad of beef jerky, the pencils, the flares and unwrap the belt. Courtney takes out the stolen flask and five packages of gummy worms, some cheap pocketknives, a gas siphon and another beer.

“Can I ask why you guys did it?” Bart asks.

Courtney and I are tight-lipped.

“Well, it was kind of a rush, wasn’t it?”

“You’ve done this before, haven’t ya? Gotten away with it?” Bart nudges me. “Just remember, the house always wins.”

Courtney groans and puts his head in his hands.

“Listen, talk to us. We’re not mad, we’re just doing our job. Do you have IDs on you?”

I shake my head, cross my arms and start doing breathing exercises. Courtney coughs.

“Let’s start with your names and social security numbers.”

“I’m Dexter Hammond,” Courtney says and spits a number.

I say the first name that comes to my mind. “I’m James Kane.” And I suddenly feel dizzy. I tell them my grandma’s phone number.

Cedric writes and Bart says, “What the fuck were you guys thinking, anyway? Someone tell you it’s easy to steal from us? Well, it’s not.”

Courtney snorts. “No, what I was doing was civil disobedience. I don’t support criminal organizations. Wal-Mart is a place of evil. By protesting with my dollar and my pockets, I’m slowly bringing them down.”

“Oh, little wannabe anarchist, are ya? Dream on, you little snot. We’re not evil, we’re capitalist.”

“Besides all the subsidiaries they accept, besides their impact on the environment, the way they invade a neighborhood and flatten it’s diversity, besides their blatant, dogmatic censorship, well, the place just *feels* evil,” Courtney says. “Horror films these days are shot with a blue tint. Going inside Wal-Mart just feels so gloomy, so anxious and violent.”

Cedric clears his throat and says, “Whatever. This is how this works. You guys get to --” An alarm goes off above our head.

“Now what?”

Glancing over at the security cameras flickering between screens on an old Windows XP computer, I see Dorian running, running, running for the exit. Then the alcohol aisle, with Courtney’s littered cans and then the sporting goods, all of it’s on fire.

We’re led outside, a gorilla each holding our wrists. “Just ‘cuz the fire alarm goes off and we have to evacuate doesn’t mean you two are getting away,” Cedric pauses and says, “Jimmy and Dex. Mind if I call you that? Alright, good.”

I’m scanning the parking lot, seeing so many other Wal-Mart employees and a few bored customers crowding just far enough away. The fire department arrives and there’s a tense, eerie ambiance of blue and red.

Then I see Dorian leaning against Courtney’s car and he’s casually smoking a cigarette. I nudge Courtney and he reaches his hands into his pockets real casual.

“Just sit tight,” Cedric says. “The cops are on their way.”

When the two apes aren’t looking, Courtney throws his keys as far as he can and they land with a jingle not far from Dorian.

“What was that?” Bart says. “Don’t be fucking around.”

Courtney laughs. I watch Dorian pick up the keys, start the car and no one notices because there’s smoke and flames pouring out of the Wal-Mart and the fire fighters are all freaking out and attaching hoses and telling everyone to step back.

Dorian swings the car around, braking right by the guards and he leans halfway out the window, producing that huge can of MACE from under the seat and spraying everyone in the eyes. Everyone, including me, screams and flails about, until Courtney grabs me and pulls me into the backseat. The car peels away, hitting the curb and nearly mowing down a firefighter, ramming a shopping cart and hitting a parked police cruiser head-on. The cop’s airbag deploys, throwing the officer back and blinding him with white powder. Dorian shoves his own airbag down and stomps on the gas, not even stopping at the street, narrowly missing an oncoming semi and then we’re down the street and gone.

## Chapter Twelve

So Courtney's furiously rubbing his eyes and saying fuck over and over. It's nearly five a.m. when we reach our exit, pull off the freeway and into Dorian's parent's driveway. The sky is that same relaxing, soft blue nothingness, except for the occasional drone of police helicopters, so I can't calm the fuck down.

Once parked, Courtney crouches down, inspecting the front bumper, while I sniff and rub my eyes some more. Dorian's arms are raw, hunks of meat from airbag burns and he's covered in blood and he's shaking like it's below freezing out.

"Fuck," Courtney mutters. "I'm so fucking paranoid about shit like this. This'll mark me. They'll identify the car and the plates from some obscure security footage. They'll scrape paint from the front of that cop car and this thing is so old, it'll stand out. I can't even call my insurance company or they'll match it up there. I'm a dead man."

"Let's drop it," Dorian says, lighting a cigarette. "You'll figure something out."

"You think it'll work if I register for vanity plates?"

"I need something, anything, I gotta take the edge off," I'm prattling, Courtney's rolling his eyes and Dorian's telling me to shut up. So I pop a yellow pill.

"You're gonna wake up my dad. Remember what happened last time?" Dorian moves to the edge of the yard, fumbles behind his fence for the latch and pulls the gate open. "Shit, I haven't been here in weeks..."

"Which time? You mean when he busted that window throwing shit at us or when he called the cops on us and we hid in the attic?" Courtney laughs.

"Your dad needs to chill the fuck out," I say. "I mean, remember how he made you get rid of all your skater clothes, just because they said 'Billabong' on it? And he thought some palm trees on one of my Hawaiian shirts were pot leaves. He's drug paranoid, man."

"If he's a pharmacist, can't he prescribe himself something?" Courtney adds.

"Yeah, and why is he so anti-drug if he's basically a drug dealer himself?"

"He knew a guy that got shorted some dude on a dimebag," Dorian says.

"And?"

"And these drug dealers threw him off a three-story parking garage. On his head. Dad always blamed the drugs."

"The lesson there is 'don't fuck people over.' Not 'don't smoke weed.'"

Dorian shrugs and flicks his cigarette butt in the bushes. His backyard is huge, full of thick-bladed, unnatural grass that always smells wet. The house used to be farmland until the expanding city swallowed it up, but every once in a while the ground still irrigates till it floods. It's always moist and humid, a suffocating dreamlike haze compared to living in the desert. To add to the surrealism, a canopy of bamboo grows ten yards high near the end of the property. Yeah, bamboo grows pretty well in the desert for some reason.

There's some rusted patio furniture near a chicken coop and a huge tank filled with distilled water. Dorian had to explain to us a long time ago that his parents believe the Rapture is gonna happen soon. Having a steady supply of eggs and water was gonna help them survive when the shit hit the fan.



It was back in high school when we wanted to hack through that bamboo in order to hollow out a smoking cubby and I asked if Dorian had a machete. We also planned to tear down a bunch of those mid-term election signs.

“My dad probably has some sort of ax or tomahawk or something. He splurged and bought one,” Dorian said. “Explained it was for when the Russians invade, gas us with nuclear radiation and we’ll all need to harvest bananas. Or something like that.”

I could tell his dad listened to a lot of Rush Limbaugh, Glenn Beck, Michael Savage, that whole circus. When we asked about the chickens and the warehouse worth of camping supplies, Dorian waved his hands.

“Tell us!”

“Some kind of tribulation thing. I understand it, but I don’t,” he said. “So they have chickens, a pantry full of rationed food and gallons of purified water in the shed. I want to say they never much moved past Y2K, but they were doing this way before then.”

And for years, I kind of envied him. Didn’t my parents love me enough to prepare for some far-off apocalypse scenario? I always questioned my folks’ sanity when they tried to stay together for my sake and then divorced anyway. Kind of a conflicting message of love, if you ask me.

So now we’re slouching in Dorian’s patio furniture, all of it crusted in bird poop, just reeking of some freakish avian flu strain and Dorian’s packing a bowl into a three-foot bong we nicknamed Bongzilla. He keeps in hidden out here in the bushes and his father never notices. It’s so gross back here he never ventures into the backyard. Dorian lights it, sucks deep, puffs up his cheeks and exhales frothy clouds like a fish.

“Dude,” he says, pointing to his cuts. “Everything feels better already.”

“Would it have really been so bad if we had just gotten arrested or something?” Courtney’s still grumbling.

“What are you talking about?” Dorian says. “I saved you! I was the one who started the fire in the sporting goods section, I’m the one that got you free!”

“And now we’re way more fucked!” Courtney snatches Bongzilla from Dorian. “Better enjoy this while I can. I’m going to be in prison soon enough.” He sucks and sucks and sucks on the mouth of the bong, his face turning blue, his eyes lit up by the lighter flame.

“You were blowing shit up all around town and you’re worried about one small fire?” Dorian says. “They always catch guys like you on something small. Ted Kaczynski, the Unabomber got caught ‘cuz of his distinct writing style. Timothy McVeigh got caught ‘cuz he didn’t have license plates on his getaway vehicle. You were gonna get caught for shoplifting.”

“Now I’m going to be busted because I have a busted front end!” Courtney yells. “And don’t compare me to those jackasses. I haven’t killed anyone. Yet.”

Dorian shrugs. “Doubt the cops see it the same way. Just don’t say I don’t look out for you.”

“Furthermore, the biggest problem I have with ol’ Ted there is that he was mailing bombs to universities and airlines. If he was so against industrial society, what he should have been doing was blowing up power plants and uprooting power lines.” Courtney grins and points to his chest. “Like I am.”

Shaking my head, I take Bongzilla and rub the lighter, inhaling like holding my breath before a tunnel. I hold it in as long as I can and when the smoke rushes out, I'm seeing stars and feeling like I'm floating away. I feel at home inside my body.

My pocket vibrates and I check my phone. Suddenly, I'm getting bars and a couple text messages and two voicemails pop up. All the texts are from Lisa.

"Well, that's disappointing," Courtney says. "How'd you get service?"

"Satellites, man, I dunno. Are you gonna shoot those down, too?"

"I should."

I flick the phone off and toss it on the table. Maybe everything really is better without it.

Dorian's cell phone rings and he answers and says, "Hello? Why? I'm at my place with Micah and Courtney. How'd you get this number?" Then Dorian closes his phone.

"She hung up. That was Lisa," he says. "She's coming over, apparently."

"She probably wants her money back. Stupid bitch shouldn't have ditched us then. Fuck it, let's just get out of here."

"Hell no," Courtney says. "I'm not driving with my car marked like that. I'd sooner paint myself with 'Take me to prison.'"

It's not long before we hear screeching tires and a car door slamming. Lisa comes stomping through the back gate, like she's done so many times before, only calmer, and holding Jimmy's hand. Right now, I've never seen her so pissed, like a menstruating rhino.

"Where's Soup?" She demands.

"Lost him," I say. "I can't keep track of myself, let alone anyone else."

"Give me the cash." She holds out her palm but I just look down. "Now! Give me the money now!"

"You're not gonna believe this, but. . ."

"Oh, C'mon!"

"We got stopped. A cop cleaned us out," I say.

Lisa looks at us back and forth and says, "You're kidding, right? You just let some cop intimidate you? You didn't ask for a warrant or anything?"

"That's the Maricopa County Sheriff's Department for you," Courtney laughs.

"You," Lisa points at Courtney. "Shut the fuck up."

"First of all, there were like, twenty cops and ..." I trail off. Dorian looks at me, like lying won't help.

"You fucking disgusting idiots," Lisa spits, she actually spits, like that helps anything. "How am I supposed to believe you? You know what, fine, fuck it, I don't care. I trusted you and you fuck up on me. I'll just explain to my dealer that you can't pay him back and he'll kill you. Good riddance."

"Waitwaitwait," I say. "I can get the money back. Soup still has half of it."

"I don't care at this point. I wouldn't have even come down here except I really wanted to do this." She punches me in the nose.

"Augh! What the fuck was that for?" I'm seeing those stars again.

"I saw you kissing that slut. I saw you fucking grope her. I hope she gives you AIDS and I hope you both die."

"Hey, shut the fuck up, ok? What, you had a crush on me? So what? We're not in high school anymore. Grow the fuck up."

That shuts her up. She puts her hand in her mouth and bites down hard. Then she sits on the ground and starts crying. "I can't believe you're treating me like this. I fucked you, you asshole! I let you do everything to me and you don't even care about me."

Courtney and Dorian look at me. "What?" I say. "What? No, I didn't."

"Yes, you did. You called me and I met you at some motel downtown. Don't lie to them. You've already lied enough."

"I don't remember shit from that night."

"Shut up. You snorted Xanax with me, shot up with me and you tied me up and you did horrible things to me because I asked you to." Tears are running down her face and her upper lip is collecting a swab of snot. "I called you! In the morning, on the hotel phone."

Fuck. I remember the straps on the bed. I remember the call, I remember thinking that was Olive. I don't remember pills or heroin or anything and I'm hoping I didn't make this mistake. Jimmy did the same thing and he spent two years trying to get Lisa out of his life. It tore him apart.

Lisa stands up, wobbles away screaming curse words and giving me the finger. She slams the gate, slams her car door and from the backyard we can hear her wailing, she's so loud.

"Is she on some kind of bad trip?" Courtney asks.

"Maybe it's some new medication or something."

"If she wakes up my dad, he's gonna be pissed," Dorian says. "Go deal with her."

I shrug and as I walk out to the car, I'm thinking how the melodrama, all of it, it's just an extremely long history for Lisa. Every phase of her life was some enormous transformation, from her punk phase to her emo phase to this new raver phase. And all that angst from high school still escaping, the only thing changing being the drugs and the clothes.

I tap on her window and she shoos me off, wiping tears with the other hand, saying how it's fine, how she doesn't care anymore. I shrug and start to walk away and she jumps out the car, slamming the door and screaming at me. Her fists barrage my back and I hold her off, pushing her against the car.

"What the fuck are you doing?" I'm so stoned, I'm fighting back like in dreams, when my soupy arms are useless in defense. This can't be real.

"You fucking drugged me and then you raped me! That's what I'm going to tell everyone! I'll call the cops and tell them you have weed! I'll tell them about all the drug dealing, everything. I'll fucking tear you apart!"

She tries to shove me to the ground and I drag her down with me and she pulls out her slender fingernails and jams them into my ribs. Then she starts digging them into my neck, trying to slice an artery, but she can't carve them in deep enough.

"Stop it! Stop it, you dumb bitch! Why are you doing this?"

"You fucker! You fucking can't treat me this way! I thought you cared about me."

Lisa sits back and starts bawling.

"Can't you just have a normal conversation with someone?" I say.

She cries and cries about how she's gonna kill herself and in this moment, I can hear Dorian's dad screaming at him in the backyard. I leap to my feet and see Dorian, still holding Bongzilla, jump the fence while Todd attempts to kick it down. The gate crashes, hanging at an angle and there's Todd, dressed only in his boxer briefs. He's in

his early '40s, ex-military and still built like a T-9000. Half naked, he's even more terrifying. And he grabs Dorian by his collar and starts punching him in the ribs, spewing threats to the beat of his fist.

"Listen you little fucker, I told you what was gonna happen if I caught you with weed again! I don't even see you for two weeks and this is how you repay me? Now get the fuck out of my house and if I ever see you again, I'll beat you so bad there won't be anything left of you!" To get out of the grip, Dorian swings, connects with his father's jaw and both fall backward. Todd grabs Bongzilla, raises it like a baseball bat and crashes it into Dorian's skull, three-inch thick shards and water exploding everywhere. Then Todd calmly walks inside. Lisa slams her car door and screeches away, Courtney dodges through the bushes and I drag a dazed, bleeding Dorian to the Low Self-Esteem.

"Should we call the cops?" I say.

Courtney gets in the car and fires up the engine, screaming, "Fuck no!"

Todd returns with a golf club, chasing us down the street with it raised, smashing up Courtney's car, tearing out the brake lights and shattering the back window.

"Drive, drive, you idiot!" I'm screaming at Courtney, slapping Dorian's face, trying to keep him awake. "You're ok, you're ok, don't go to sleep."

"Shut the fuck up!" Courtney yells, the car shifting and leaving Todd screaming behind us. "Where am I even going? I don't know. What the fuck is going on? I don't know."

"Shut up, just go to Soup's house!"

Dorian pushes my hand away and sits up. "I'm fine," he says. "Can we get some water? There's a QT up the street."

"No way, too many cops there," Courtney says.

"Need to be ... somewhere calm," Dorian whimpers. He wipes away a film of blood from the large, growing gash on his forehead. "Typical ... dad."

"Shh, it's fine," I say.

Easily going 80, we screech into Soup's driveway, but Courtney's probably still having trouble seeing from the MACE, ramps the curb and dents the mailbox. This is where we park, run up the walk and pound on Soup's door.

"The lights are out," Courtney says. "Maybe no one's home."

"The power's out, you idiot," I say. "Because of you!"

"I know," Courtney grins. "That was the joke."

Karlee swings open the door, groggy, yelling with squinted eyes, "What the fuck do you losers want? Soup's not here and neither is Trevor."

Then she sees Dorian, his face swathed red on one side like Two-Face, his arms cut up from the airbag explosion, leaning on my shoulder and bleeding all over the floor. Courtney's eyes are swollen shut and I'm just my normal, miserable self. We all reek of sulfur, sweat and skunk weed. I smile with what I hope looks something like Jack Nicholson.

No hesitation, mother-bear urgency, she ushers us in through the immense clutter, Dorian's head dripping all over pizza boxes and records and clothes. I trip over a stack of VHS tapes and spill the incense on top of it everywhere. I light some candles and the room glows in this weird, cave-like way. Karlee holds a dishcloth against Dorian's head and he keeps muttering, "Fuck."

"Should we take him to the ER?" Karlee asks, checking her nails.

“That’s not a good idea,” Courtney shakes his head.

“Why, don’t you have health insurance?”

Dorian shrugs.

Karlee shakes her head, stomping to the bathroom. “I’ll take it from here.”

She fumbles in a cabinet, coming back with an armful of medical supplies.

Holding Dorian’s burned arms over the sink, she pours saline over them, then spreads Vaseline over the burns and wraps them up with gauze. She does the same to his forehead, first picking out tiny shards of glass with a pair of tweezers.

The makeshift nurse fumbles in a large toolbox, finding a flashlight without dead batteries and shines the only working one in Dorian’s eyes.

“Well, no sign of a concussion. What the fuck happened?”

No one speaks and Karlee stands, throws her hands up and says, “Just because the power’s out, doesn’t mean I don’t have to sleep. Give him some of the percocets I have in the cabinet and tell him to change his bandages tomorrow. G’night.”

Percs? Awesome. I rifle in the cabinet until I find the bottle and pour two into Dorian’s fist. “These are for you,” I say and he dries swallows them. “These are for me.”

I pocket the bottle and head back to the living room where Courtney is searching for weed.

“You are the worst junkies ever,” Courtney says.

The door is kicked open – it’s Soup! And Trevor! Trevor slams a case of beer on the coffee table, sending beer cans and TV dinner trays scattering. “Drink up, boys!” He yells. “It’s a party!”

Soup points at me, “There you are! Where have you been?”

I explain my side of the story and Soup jabbars on about how he made his way to the 17 and thumbed a ride way south with these chollo-looking fellas. “They sold me this!” Soup holds up a big bag of green herbs.

“Then,” Trevor butts in. “This fucker calls me from a bus station somewheres and I go pick him up. The power is out everywhere and it’s just chaos. Dozens of car wrecks at intersections, little fires everywhere and people running in the streets like they’re mad. So we decide, let’s go loot the local Wal-Mart.”

“But the first one we drove by was on fire!” Soup says.

“The second one, we barely got out alive,” Trevor says. “Luckily, we snagged this case of beer, plus a gas grill and some survival supplies. We got some chorizo, eggs, cheese, tortillas...”

“Can you guys say ‘breakfast burritos?’” Soup grins.

All of get incredibly excited as Trevor starts cooking. We bust out beers, some weird German beer I’ve never heard of before and Soup passes the bong around. Soon, we’re all fucked up, chomping into tortillas and grinning.

“Have you heard the news?” Soup asks.

“How could we?” Dorian says.

“Well, this area of town still has cell service. Look at this.” Soup pulls out his smart phone and looks up some local station. He starts reading headlines off to us.

“Downtown Scottsdale In Flames as Power Outages Ravage Valley...”

“Power Lost In 5,000 Tempe, South Phoenix Homes...”

“Sun City West Burns To Ground...”

“You always said, the majority of this city’s problems would be solved if Sun City just burned to the ground,” Dorian says to me.

“I guess our problems are just starting...” I mumble.

“It’s the end of the world!” Trevor says. “Finally! It’s every man for himself. We gotta fight to survive. It’s *Mad Max* meets the *Monkey Wrench Gang*!”

Soup dashes off to his room and returns brandishing a handgun. “Anyone tries to rob us again, we’ll blow their brains out!”

“OK guys, how drunk are you?” Dorian asks.

Courtney is jumping up and down with glee. “I can’t believe how well this going!”

I watch as Soup and Trevor talk about how they’re gonna take on this whole neighborhood if it turns against them and the candles flicker faster and faster. Courtney leans back and breathes deep, sagging into the couch. “We’re safe. I can hardly believe it, but we’re safe.”

I look at Dorian’s head and out the window at Courtney’s car and I’m so tired and stoned and disorientated that ‘safe’ isn’t coming to mind at all. I doubt I’ll ever feel safe again.

“Will you excuse me?” I say. And I head to Karlee’s room and flop into bed with her. She wraps her arms around me, still half asleep, like she understands.

I wake up and Karlee’s gone. I check the house and everyone’s gone. There’s still some weed left, so I load a bowl and jump in the shower. In the mirror, I can see the bruises all over me are starting to cover everywhere, breeding like bad tribal tattoos on scene kids’ chests. I wish I could say for sure I wasn’t abducted.

The house is still dark. I hold up that bottle of yellow pills, only a few left and decide, I’ll just get this over with. I take them all at once.

I have absolutely nothing to do. Boredom drills into me like little termites, but not much I can do about it. I need to lay low for my own good. Courtney still doesn’t want to risk being apprehended, Dorian’s busy with his religious followers, Jimmy’s still gone. It’s not like I can get in contact with them anyway. Courtney didn’t think that through – if he thinks we’re trapped by technology, we can’t just destroy it. We can’t take any steps backward or we’re *still* gonna be lost and confused.

I pull open Jimmy’s journal once again. It’s comforting, like he’s speaking to me, like he’s still here. He could have been the voice of reason we all needed right now, yet for the first time I feel consolation with his disappearance. I can accept it if he had to get out of here, if it was too much for him to stick around.

*Feb 28.*

*The weather. Gloomy. Me too, I guess.*

*Wanted to try it out, so I went to confession. First time. Man, that feels good to get off my chest. My whole life feels like it was nothing now. I’m relaxed. I’m complete. God is good.*

*I burned all my other journals but this one. Threw all my poetry and fiction on top of the bonfire. I realized I was just writing all my pain away instead of dealing with it. My writing was just my confession. Just a big, fat confession.*

*But most of all, no one cares. Nothing is novel. I'm done with it all.*

*Burning everything is a relief. Everyone should do it.*

*It is human to want to leave everything.*

I can't remember the last time I really took time out of my life to just sit and write, not counting emails and text messages and mindless blogs about my feelings and current mood and status. Judging by the thickness of his journal, Jimmy did it a lot.

So tonight I write for hours and hours in a composition notebook, till my hands are cramped and the words are cramming together in the margins all funny. It's therapy. The best closure with anything I've gotten in years. Like a trapdoor in the floor of my head where I can dump out all the shit and just get my bearings again.

It's nightfall by the time I'm even halfway done catching up. The living room still a darkened mess, but eerie quiet. I almost feel like I forgot what quietness is. There's candles lit everywhere, making the shuddering light look like Swiss cheese holes in the solid, surrounding dark.

I spark up a cig and stare at a crooked painting on the wall as the smoke wells up and disperses through the dark. I pick up Jimmy's journal again and dwell on the newfound closure over his disappearance. I realize, if he didn't come back, then I'm dead to him. And he's dead to me. I can accept it. Hold onto it, touch it without singeing my fingers, without cutting myself open.

The cigarette whittles down enough to fry my knuckles. I extinguish it against the couch cushions and head back to my room. I'm suddenly overcome with lingering horniness, but of course, the power is out and that means even if my computer wasn't stolen, it would be dead, even if the internet still functioned. Fuck.

I wonder why I don't keep any porn magazines or something classy like that. Can't I go down to the dime store and pick up something raunchy and awful with a cream soda and a package of Ding Dongs? Ha, forget it. My own sentimentality for the past disgusts even me, but physical things are much more useful.

My boxers down to my ankles, I lie back on the bed and think of all the naked women I've jerked off to, accessing my "spank bank," starting with the latest I can recall. On my hard drive, I kept a folder labeled "Excess Copy" and in that is another folder called "X" and in that is all the porn I've ever seen, from the very beginning, ever since I discovered masturbation.

In my head, I'm browsing through these folders, trying hard to visualize hips and eyes and labia and legs and lips, but my dick is barely getting hard. My brain has these porn stars splattered against the walls of memory, their faces distorted and blurred, their breasts and splayed legs undefined and warped. Even trying to think of Olive doesn't help, she's always standing above me, fully dressed, smoking a cigarette and looking off somewhere else.

In short, I can't get it up. I need some kind of visual, some kind of instruction manual. Without it, my willy is useless.

So fuck it. Fuck jerking off, fuck sex, fuck cum and fuck orgasms and fuck it all.

Despite being taught abstinence by my mother, I gave in to my hormones when I was 16. Everyone says your first time will either be weird or awkward or really great but it wasn't any of those things. It just was. It almost didn't feel like anything changed until I told the guys and Dorian shrugged and Courtney slapped me on the back and Jimmy gave me a cigarette. Her name was Charity.

Ah, fuck it. Fuck it all. I wish I had listened to my mother and not given in to what my shitty, pubescent body was yelling at me to do. Losing virginity is almost akin to that "don't break the seal" theory associated with drinking and pissing. Ever since that autumn, I can't stop thinking about fucking and how to fuck and how to get fucked more and who will fuck me and who won't fuck me and thinking about the four or five or six other people I've fucked. All I want to do is get off. At least before all this started I didn't know what I was missing.

And it was so easy, too. Getting started, I mean. It's something you do, it's never about love or whatever we called it back then. Everyone back then was so bent out of shape about love, but I think we knew it wasn't as deep as that.

I can sum it up with how Courtney lost his virginity. He's unwilling to admit it, but both Jimmy and I deflowered young women long before he did. Dorian was waiting on account of his half-assed religious beliefs, which really only meant he took longer than us. Everyone succumbs eventually, like it or not.

But Courtney was having no luck, so he went for a girl by pretending to be in a band called Cross My Heart. He dyed his hair black, let it grow in his face and then made up this elaborate lie. Whoever she was, I forget her name, but it got really messy. Suicide threats, cops and ambulances constantly called, some arson and finally, restraining orders. Courtney has more restraining orders than anyone I know and he keeps them framed in his bedroom.

That was love? I hardly think so anymore.

After Charity broke up with me because things were "moving too fast," I went after any ass I could find, but didn't get far. Once, I ended up jerking off next to some girl while she was overdosed on painkillers, spread eagle on the floor naked. This was after I threw up all over her house, passing out near the toilet (did I mention I was drunk?) with her next to me. I ended up never speaking to her again.

My other sexual encounters followed a similar pattern, it's unfortunate to say. I've kind of given up on sex since then. It happens when it wants to. It's rarely something I want to look back on.

So the doorbell rings, sounding off and filling me with relief that something still works. I quickly yank up my pants, check through the blinds to make sure it's not Lisa and then there's Olive, dropping by to say hello, she says. She steps into the living room and flops on the couch in exaggerated exhaustion.

"Last night was too intense. Lynn cried for hours, but she was still high on ecstasy so she would laugh uncontrollably at odd intervals," Olive sighs. "And I drank too much to the point of puking, so I was hardly any comfort. Soup's living room looks post-apocalyptic. Or, is this your attempt at being romantic?"

"Want anything to drink?"

"No thanks, my whole body aches."



“Hair of the dog –“

“Just shut up.” She takes one of my cigarettes off the coffee table, lights it and closes her eyes. The smoke rising out of her ribcage rides on her lips like wind to a sail. “I’d ask you to put on some chill music, but, well, you know. This whole lack of power thing is starting to really suck.”

I shrug. “I’m just getting used to it. It’s like when I was growing up and didn’t have TV. I don’t know how I got so surrounded by entertainment. It’s like I never realized how many screens I look at in a day.”

“Yeah, I know, boredom is a gift, whatever, it’s just I have this song stuck in my head and I really gotta hear it again. To get it out again.”

“Get a radio, maybe? Then if you randomly hear the song, it’ll be special. Like, serendipitous.”

The girl drops her feet off the couch and gives me a look. “Didn’t I say my whole body ached? Why don’t you offer me a foot massage?”

“I’d rather rub your back.”

She smiles and plants herself on the floor, right between my legs. My rotating fingers find her tense shoulders and I can almost feel her purring in my grip. “Maybe you are good for something,” she says.

“I’m just gonna step out and say this then,” I clear my throat. “College doesn’t really change all that much, not like there’s not still drama, like people still don’t know how to control and be honest about their feelings.”

“Is this about you dropping out? Do you still want to go back?”

“No, I mean, sure, maybe I should have given it more of a shot, but I realized I was only killing four years to figure out what I wanted to do. I want to do nothing, exactly like that guy in *Office Space*. All my friends that didn’t go to a university ended up working retail jobs, just like all my friends who graduated from one. But that’s not my point.”

“Go on.”

“My point is, no one our age really acts responsible for how they feel. So I’m saying unrequited love is for morons. If someone doesn’t return your feelings, walk it off. Have a cigarette or a drink and just walk it off. Stop moping and wasting life and don’t veil your feelings and – yeah. I say, stop being a hopeless romantic piece of shit.”

Olive raises her cigarette hand to my mouth and I take a drag. “I like it when you ramble.”

“I don’t care if you don’t care,” I say. “I don’t care if you don’t believe in love or whatever. And yeah, I’m only going to say this once.”

I tilt her head back so she’s staring upside down into my eyes. She’s smiling the way models do, her top lip pulled up high to her gums. Her cigarette smoke stabs into my eyes, irrigating them, but I don’t blink.

“I have feelings for you.”

She laughs, extinguishes her cigarette and turns around to face me, crouching on her knees. Then she sighs, her eyes glazed with a daydream look and she says, “The truth is rarely pure and never simple.”

I sit up. “Oscar Wilde quotes? What’s that supposed to mean? What did I just say about veiling emotions?”

“Well, I’m just not in a good place –“

“Fuck.”

“I’m just being honest – “

“Fuck.”

“Right now, I’m still on that whole ‘finding myself’ kick. Maybe you think that’s immature or inconvenient or something but –“

“Fuck!”

“Goddamn it, Micah. Seriously, what did you just say all that shit about unrequited love for? Hear me out, then walk it off, alright?”

“Is this about Lisa?” I stand up and start pacing, lighting a cigarette just to put something in my head. I start ranting faster. “If it’s about her, well, I didn’t mean to screw her. She’s just always fucking things up. I mean, she was even stalking me at Dorian’s house, attacking me and shit.”

Olive stiffens. “When did that happen? The sex, I mean.”

“I thought you knew. Uh, a while ago, I don’t really remember, it’s not important.”

Olive runs her fingers through her hair and seems to be staring into the candles. I try to touch her shoulder, but she pulls away.

“You really don’t have any standards, do you?”

“We were all loopy on Xanax and I don’t even really remember much and–“

“That’s not making me feel better.” She stands up and brushes off her jeans. “I can’t handle this. This month has been nothing but bullshit. Between you and Lisa and Lynn and whatever the fuck your stupid friends are doing, I can’t handle it. I’m getting the fuck out of here.”

“Wait, wait, we can talk about this.”

At first the girl looks defeated, like no, we can’t, then she breathes in deep, like she’s sucking back any emotion that might be trying to seep out of her. And then it’s gone.

“Don’t go, this is stupid.”

“I’m taking you with me,” she says. “As far as I’m concerned, you still owe me a favor.”

I’m stunned. It’s the easy, isn’t it? Walk it off...

“How do I still owe you?” I say.

“You barely helped me burn anything. The cemetery thing doesn’t count, either.”

I want to say that’s not true, but something compulsory tells me to help her regardless.

“You know how if someone gets too drunk, you hold their hair back as they puke?”

So the next thing I know, I’m clutching a quivering battery-operated hair buzzer, wondering how to use it and Olive is leaning over the sink, telling me, “Do it.” We’re downtown, in the looted remains of an abandoned hair salon, all around us the mirrors smashed and shampoo bottles leaking and chairs turned over and trash everywhere. And Olive wants me to plunge this buzzer into her hair.

“I don’t get you at all,” I say. “Your hair is beautiful.”

“Do you know why neo-Nazis buzz off their hair?” Olive asks.

I shake my head no. “You wanna be a skinhead? So, what, you’re gonna start wearing steel-toed boots, kicking Jews in the balls, burning crosses and all that?”

“Because hair gives you identity. Because hair is feminine. Because hair is alive and hair makes you *you*. I told you, I’m recreating myself. I’m losing my identity.”

“Your hair will grow back. Your face won’t change. Your stupid attitude probably won’t change either.”

“In the military, they shave their heads so enemies can’t pull your hair back to take you prisoner. I mean, it’s one less place to grab at you. I don’t want to be a prisoner anymore.” She pulls a cigarette from her pocket and sparks it up.

I sigh. This is getting on my nerves. I wanna say, do this yourself, but by now I know Olive isn’t one to do anything by herself. And the fact that she’s ignoring everything I confessed to her makes this all that much more worse.

“You’re not gonna help your own friend, Micah? Just imagine I’m hurling my guts out and you’re helping me not get barf on myself.”

“I don’t think that’s how they do it in beauty school.”

I look at Olive’s eyes in the broken frames of the mirror. She’s so serious. I look at her platinum-dyed hair, the edges tinged strawberry red and black. What a shampoo company would call frail, damaged hair, but I don’t care. It’s sensual in my hands.

For however long I’ve known her, Olive has never had the same hair color twice. I don’t even know what her original hair color is and I don’t think she knows either. She’s that Tangerine girl from that *Spotless Mind* movie. She’s that girl that every woman wishes they could be and every guy wishes they could erase. So maybe I will.

I push the trembling buzzer into her starched, platinum hair and it leaves a big sinkhole in her scalp. I can already imagine how terrible she’s gonna look. I’ve never had a thing for Sinead O’Connor look-alikes.

“Well?” Olive says. “Keep going. You can’t stop now.”

I dig the razor in again, gouging out chunk after chunk of soft, beautiful hair. Killdozing acre after acre.

When I’m done turning her into a cancer patient, Olive turns to me and says, “You have no idea how much this means to me.” She wraps her arms around me and then, rifling through her purse, she produces a ticket. “This means I won’t see you for awhile. I’m going to miss my bus if I don’t hurry.”

I sigh. “How am I supposed to get home, anyway?”

“You can borrow my van until I get back. If I come back.” She tosses me a ring of keychains with two keys attached. I remember Olive used to be one of those keychain girls, having a ring-load so heavy she could kill someone with it. She had surfboards and LED flashlights and bike keys and bottle openers and now it’s all gone except for one.

“So I guess that’s it.”

“You’ll have Dorian and Courtney.”

“Yeah. And Soup, I guess.”

“Fuck that guy.”

“What’s wrong with him? I mean, besides his whole... I dunno.”

“Look, I’m just saying maybe you should get out of town, too.”

“Sure. Where are you going?”

“Nowhere.”

“Why aren’t you taking your van?”

“Maybe I don’t want to come back.”

“Just promise me this isn’t about Lisa or you and me.”

“Relax.”

“Is this about Jimmy then? You want to disappear just like he did? Is that why you’re taking off, not telling anyone where you’re going?”

“Yes and no and probably not.”

“Do you even think he’s still alive?”

She shrugs. “We’ll see. Can I get a light?”

I pull out my lighter and give it to her. “You can keep it.”

“A pyro giving me his lighter? Maybe you really do feel something for me.” She puts out her cigarette and the smoke lingers between us. She leans in, almost as if to kiss me and then says, “Never mind.”

I watch her walk out the broken door, slinging a backpack over her shoulder and not looking back.

## Chapter Thirteen

So in the parking lot I'm looking at Olive's keys, then back to her van. Olive's car is one of those classic Volkswagen Type 2 buses and it used to have all these intricate swirls and psychedelic imagery, a typical hippy van, but everything's been sanded off down to the base metal.

I head home in silence. It's a strange drive where half the traffic lights are darkened, a couple cops are making themselves useful by directing traffic, but mostly, no one's even driving. No one has anywhere to go. The streets are dark, the shops are dark, the whole city that used to glow so bright it made the sky teal, it's smoldering like an extinguished campfire.

I motor back to Soup's place. Dorian's sitting outside, thick bandages on his forehead and arms and a huge grin on his face.

"Wondered when you were gonna come back."

"Where were you all day?"

"Scavenging. Helping out. Thinking about my dad. I feel like an orphan now."

"We're in our twenties. We can't be orphans. And our parents aren't dead."

"Fuck it, man. I'm calling myself an orphan. I never asked to have parents. Now I'm free!"

"Sure. Where's Soup?"

"Fuck if I know. There's no food in the fridge except spoiled milk and shit, all the stores are closed and I can't call anybody."

"So are you living here now?"

"Not much longer. Soon as I can, I'm moving in with the Light Brigade fulltime."

My stomach growls and I wipe a thick swath of sweat from my face. "We should find an apartment together. I think this means we have to get jobs."

Dorian shakes his head.

"Well, you got a better idea?"

"Of course I do," Dorian grins. "Let's 'Occupy' some shit."

So I find myself downtown again, but this time the streets aren't deserted. Cop cars are lining every block, red and blue lighting everything up for miles and there's a huge crowd of people outside City Hall, near Washington and 2nd Avenue.

I ask Dorian what's going on and he says, "Some sort of demonstration. People against the power getting turned back on versus people that want their cable TV to work again. The Light Brigade is already here, handing out water, keeping the peace, the usual."

But that's not all. As we get closer, I notice that the police are pushing everybody back and it's not just religious nuts and electrical terrorists – there's skinheads, hipsters, Latinos, anarchists in Guy Fawkes masks, hippies, bicyclists, members from the Tea Party and people from Occupy Wall Street.

I say, "I meant, why are we here?"

Dorian gives me a look until I shrug and say, "What?"

“C’mon, Micah. The whole time I’ve known you, you’ve stood on the edges. Find something to believe in. Some kind of action. I don’t even care if it’s violent like Courtney’s whacko crusade or...”

“...Or kinda nice and weird like your whacko crusade?” I add.

“Yeah, whatever. I mean, someone told me Courtney believes aliens told him to do all this bullshit. Who cares how wrong he is, at least it’s something. What the fuck have you done?”

I stare at my feet, shuffling them casually. I can’t look Dorian in the eye and I know that means he’s won. He’s hit me somewhere hard. But still I say, “I’m still looking for the right thing, the thing for *me*. So for now, the only thing I believe in is burning everything down.”

Dorian gives me a sad little smile and shakes his head, turning his back to me.

We get to the edges of the crowd and we’re quickly shoved by the cops inside the corral. The cops are keeping us in and a few photographers and reporters from *The Republic* and *The New Times* are being told to leave. I see a camera or two get smashed by some thug in SWAT gear and then the press scatters, running in the opposite direction.

Everyone is yelling, sometimes chanting in unison, but it’s hot as balls, probably another 110 degrees and the heat is making everyone even more pissed.

“I still don’t get it!” I yell to Dorian. “Why is everyone here so angry?”

“Because they finally have nothing better to do!”

I can’t tell if everyone is nuts or not, but it doesn’t seem like any groups are fighting amongst each other anymore – now it’s just a battle between citizens and the police.

As the screaming gets louder, the barricades of police get tighter. Some police chief looking guys stands on top of a police SUV and holds a megaphone to his face. He says some stuff about having the crowd disperse, but it isn’t long before a flurry of bricks rains on him. He’s knocked off the truck and the cops move in, beating people with night sticks and then, they start shooting tear gas into the crowd.

Everyone runs.

The streets are wide, but it isn’t far before the crowd surges against another barricade. Dorian and I are in the middle, ducking whenever things get thrown near us. Both of us have this stupid, panicked grin on our faces, like this is so much fun, but it’s terrifying as well.

“I’m still in a lot of pain, dude,” Dorian points to his bandages. I pull that bottle of Percocet from my pocket and pour a few in his hand. The rest, I take. More teargas is fired, but I see Light Brigadiers pick up the canisters with their robes or kick them down sewer grates. By this time, any window anywhere is getting smashed. Thick chunks of glass and bricks are thrown back at the cops, some of which are now aiming fire hoses into the crowd.

The water certainly cools everyone off, but doesn’t stop people from fighting. Bricks bounce off SWAT helmets and bust windshields everywhere. The more teargas that gets shot into the crowd, the more everyone runs down side streets, cops on bikes and cops on horses mowing everyone down. People are getting arrested all around us, screaming and being thrown in the back of vans, but this only angers the crowd all the more.

Then there are small fires being set everywhere. Flaming racks of jeans and naked mannequins are thrown into the streets, melting down to their wire bones. Some kids kick in the front of a convenience store and begin pulling out everything into the crowd. Free chips and beer and candy bars and condoms and cigarettes for everyone. Some people, you can tell that's all they came for. The sound of sirens is barely audible over the sound of everyone yelling, mostly insults and stubborn cries of "Fuck no! We won't go!"

Some people brought or find spray paint and coat walls with anarchy symbols and embittered slogans against whatever it is that people are against at the moment, adding to the Light Brigade posters already there, telling folks to love one another.

I'm not really sure what to do. Dorian starts rolling a joint and I shield him, thinking, should I throw a brick for solidarity? When Dorian lights up, passing to me, I decide that I'd rather just passively observe. It's what I'm best at.

The mob starts moving down the street again and I can see the sheriff's infamous SWAT tank, a turretless vehicle with gigantic wheels. The tank is used mostly for publicity stunts, parades and autograph signings, but once it was involved with some guy by the name of Kush, when he had his house in Fountain Hills surrounded by a SWAT team. They shot teargas into his home, which set it on fire. The deputies moved the tank, fearing it would catch on flame, only they parked it on an incline and the electronic brakes disengaged when the engine was turned off, causing it to roll down hill and squash a Mitsubishi. Kush's home was considered a total loss and his dog died in the fire. His crime that warranted a SWAT team? He failed to show up in Tempe Traffic Court.

That's why, as the tank edges closer and closer to this throng, I don't want to be anywhere near it. It'll probably crush a hundred rioters. I pass the joint to Dorian and someone else snatches it, making rounds through the crowd so fast I can't even yell insults.

"Forget it," Dorian says. "I'll roll another one."

"Nah, dude, let's take off."

"You can if you want. I want to be here when things get *really* bad."

"You mean, 'if,' right?"

Dorian shrugs. The sound of someone screaming bloody murder, and he gets up and runs off. I head in the opposite direction, skirting the tank and see the police beating the shit out of some stragglers. I walk up to the barricade all casually and politely ask some boys in blue if I can leave.

"You wanna go home?" One of them asks. I can't tell which. They all sound like Darth Vader with their gas masks on. I nod, solemnly.

"Sure." The two cops step aside and I hop over the barricade. I'm surprised how easy this was. Maybe everyone else should just go home as well. "Right this way."

I'm led to a police paddy wagon, a big van for holding multiple prisoners. Two cops throw me down, grab my arms, wrapping my hands with zip tie handcuffs and toss me inside, slamming the door. I run to the door, pound on it and scream obscenities.

"What the fuck! I thought you were letting me go!"

One cop opens the door and sprays MACE in my face and I scream and flail frantically while another one hits me over the back of my head with his nightstick. I don't know if I black out because of this or if it's just another thing with me. All I know is I lost consciousness and my last thought before the lights went out was I really wished I had my lighter.

## Chapter Fourteen

So I wake up, still in the back of this paddy wagon and I'm not sure how long I've been out. The sun's still up, so it can't be that long. I'm on my back, rocking against my bound wrists and start kicking at the back doors, again and again. I'm screaming till my throat is ragged and then someone opens the door. Whoever it is, I kick at their face and they grab my foot.

"Hold on, hold on!" the stranger shouts. "I'm one of the good ones! Wait a fucking minute – Micah?"

It's Soup! We share a moment of "what the fuck is happening" and then I say, "Quick, break me out of these!"

Soup whips out Jimmy's stiletto from my pocket, cuts me free from the zip ties and we both step out into the street. It's empty, but not far down we see a mob of SWAT cops chasing the rioters. We run, jump the barricade, and start chasing after the cops.

"What have you been doing?"

"I've been having the greatest time ever! I threw a brick at some pigs, I choked on tear gas, I broke a lot of windows. I feel like I've finally found a purpose in my life!"

I shake my head. "What the fuck are you talking about?"

"This way," Soup yells. "We'll shortcut through this alley and catch up to everyone on the other side!"

"Wait, dude. I need a cigarette," I say. Soup hands me his lighter and runs ahead. And that easily, I feel like I have the life put back in me. Still running, I see a dumpster full of cardboard and shredded documents. I set it on fire and try to catch up to Soup. I pass a dried out bush. Fire. An idling police cruiser. Fire.

By the time I reach the crowd again, Soup's disappeared. Out of breath and my cigarette dwindled to nothing, I stop inside the looted inside of a library. Books are thrown all over the floor and shelves toppled like dominoes. And in the center of this jumble a bunch of Light Brigadiers are surrounding people lying down. I get closer and realize the people on the ground are badly injured and the Brigadiers are treating wounds.

I get a slap on the back and it's Dorian, saying, "Glad you're in one piece."

"What'd I miss?"

"Oh, I dunno. Riot stuff. Lots of people getting attacked and arrested. Olive is over there if you want to talk to her."

"Olive?"

As soon as I approach her, bald, but still beautiful, she says, "I've been looking all over for you."

"Didn't you skip town?"

She gives me a sarcastic tilt of the head. "Figures no buses were able to leave this hell hole if the gas pumps couldn't – you know, pump."

I smile, not even trying to hide that I'm glad she's stuck with me.

"All this chaos is kind of fun, no?" I ask.

Olive smiles and nods. "I've never been to anything like this before. No way am I gonna get in any trouble, but it's fun to witness."



We move to a window and look down the street at the riot. Smoke rises from small fires all around, but people are too far away to hear their yelling. I'm tempted to call it beautiful.

"I'm back at the beginning of it all. Of what you said that night we met again," Olive says. "I've realized my identity is not subjective. The only time my self-perception fails is when it clashes with the expectations others have of me. I am who I am in any given situation and I also have the ability to define what that is. I feel free and easy, like I can pick up the pieces again."

"That's a really deep conclusion."

"Really? You think so? 'Cuz I get the feeling it's kinda selfish and shallow."

"But that's OK, too."

"Yeah. At least it works."

She reaches for my hand and takes it.

At that moment, Lynn runs down the street, completely fucking naked, screaming with laughter. I look at Olive. Her eyes tell me she's gonna go save her friend's ass, this time her buck naked ass, one more time.

"Wait," I say. "Meet me somewhere later."

She smiles. "I can do that." And she jogs down the street.

I go back inside, walking past Brigadiers treating tear gas victims by pouring water in their eyes, washing off exposed skin and in some cases, giving them asthma inhalers. Broken bones are set, ice packs held to black eyes and gauze wrapped around gashed legs. I see Dorian and he's helping out Lisa, picking broken glass from her forehead. I do an 180° and she shouts, "Wait!"

Dorian grabs my arm.

"Listen," Lisa says and I almost laugh. That's the last thing I want to do. "The meds I'm on are getting adjusted again. I don't know if this time I'll be all better or not, but I got boo-boos on my brain that make me do things to you that later I regret. Anyway, I'm sorry."

I say, "That's one of the most childish apologies I've ever heard."

She smiles weakly.

"I'll accept it." And we shake hands.

At that moment, the far wall shakes and shudders and bookshelves and picture frames come tumbling down all around us, then the wall breaks like a chicken hatching and the SWAT tank rumbles through. Everyone in the makeshift hospital scatters.

I find myself on the streets again, running deeper and deeper through the crowd of people, everyone fleeing from cops shooting tear gas and rubber bullets and most of all, the tank, which is advancing slower than I can run, especially as it rolls over a few parked cars, but it never seems to get any further away.

I've lost Dorian and Lisa. And suddenly, this protest isn't fun anymore. Cars, even cop cars everywhere are getting torn to shreds. Buses are tipped over and set on fire and a light rail car goes sailing down the street aflame. Every building is smashed open and people throw things from the top windows. Molotov cocktails are tossed left and right, at buildings, at cars, at cops.

I see that one officer, that Klyser guy that ripped me off, sitting on a horse and looking at the crowd. And I realize I found an excuse to join the fray. An empty tear gas

canister, still piping hot, is sitting next to my feet. I lift it and chuck it – a perfect pitch – right into Klyser’s head.

The fat bastard is knocked on his feet and the horse takes off, but then Klyser sees me laughing my ass off and gives chase. I run through the ruins of a post office, jump the counter and out the back. Then, I sprint through the looted shell of a bank, cash all over the ground and people scooping it up into their arms. Next, a cell phone store, the cases smashed and the new iPhone whatever crushed and trampled. Through all of this, Klyser is catching up and I really begin to wish I wasn’t a smoker.

My lungs are inflating and deflating like bellows to a fire and I nearly collapse next to a bus stop. Klyser grabs me by the throat and begins beating me over the head with his night stick, then jabs a Taser into my ribs.

The pain is something so incredible, I almost start crying. I piss myself. I’m on the ground, my head drooling and now bleeding and I piss, my dick leaking the sweet mercy of humiliation. I can’t even say to Klyser, “I give up, I give up. I’m sorry.”

And I don’t have to. Several protestors run to my rescue, spraying a fire extinguisher in Klyser’s face. He stumbles and falls back, twisting his ankle and my saviors take his gun, beat him with the stick ends of protest signs, then use his own handcuffs to tether him to a stop sign.

Then they run off down the street, the one rioter with the cop’s gun firing it blindly into the air. I’m shocked, but not shocked enough.

“Get me the fuck out of here,” Klyser says. “You’ve committed so many felonies, I’ll make sure you get locked away for the rest of your fucking life and you’ll be butt-raped in prison from morning to night.”

“You’ve committed just as many felonies as me,” I say. “It’s just that you have a badge and a gun, so you can get away with it. But, you don’t have a gun right now.”

I lean down and rip Klyser’s badge off his chest.

“And you don’t have a badge anymore.”

Gingerly, I pull his Taser from his belt and zap him once or twice. He whimpers, like a fucking scared little kid and I start to feel bad.

“I’m better than this,” I say. “Or maybe not. But I don’t even want my money back. Just remember my name.”

I lean down to eye level with the bastard and say, “My name is Jimmy Kane.”

A pickup truck full of rioters zooms down the street, blaring music by Rage Against the Machine or something equivalent and it screeches to a halt in front of a flaming Chinese restaurant. Kids in bandannas, looking like punk desperados, jump out the back with a rope and tie it around the axle of a cop motorcycle.

“Micah!” Standing in the back of the truck it’s Courtney, waving to me. He takes his gas mask off and gives it to me, saying, “You need this more than I. Get in. We’re going for a ride.”

The truck takes off and I hold onto the edge. The motorcycle drags and flips and bounces over broken pavement until the mirrors, the lights, nearly everything has snapped off and we’re mostly dragging an engine, the siren still going off.

I want to ask Courtney how playing tugboat with a motor bike, how destroying the streets of downtown, how all of this fits into his plans of mental liberation, but I see him standing on the cab of the truck, screeching his heart out and I get it. He’s intoxicated in the moment. Maybe drunk on power.

He screams to me, “This is an incredible rush, isn’t it?”

I don’t have much time to think, as the truck turns a sharp corner and the bike catches on a street light, making the truck spin, ramp a barricade and crash into a power line. I’m thrown out of the back of the truck, landing in some murky corporate fountain. It’s enough to soften my fall, but not by much.

The others aren’t so lucky. I see several of the kids laying in the street, aching with road rash and slowly picking themselves up, obviously feeling every bit of pain they risked. One kid has a bone sticking out his arm and the others crowd around, asking if they can touch it.

I stumble out of the fountain, soaking wet and see that Courtney’s crushed under one of the truck’s wheels. The front end of the vehicle is smashed into a power line and the middle is bowing, shooting sparks and looking like it’s going to fall at any moment. It’s plugged into the grid somehow, I guess, in some unaffected part of the city.

A circle of blood is growing underneath Courtney and he’s breathing, but not moving. I limp as quickly and desperately as I can to him. Already, there’s a small crowd around the accident and I push some kid aside, telling him to call an ambulance, but he’s like, “How?”

I slap Courtney’s face a couple times, saying in panicked, distressed cries “Wake up, man, wake up!” I’m staring into the blank eyes of my best friend, his blood all over me and I hear a loud crunch and a car alarm goes off. Down the street, the tank is advancing and rioters are fleeing, but Soup is standing right in the middle, Tiananmen Square style and I’m terrified that this is his idea of “standing for something.”

I slap Courtney some more and get some groaning out of him, and I’m saying nonsense, babbling like, “Come on, man. I need you. I need you around. I can’t lose you.”

The whole time I keep glancing back to Soup and the tank advancing on him, not even close to slowing down and Soup isn’t budging.

Courtney wakes up and groans with agony. “What happened?”

“Just an accident. Stay awake. Stay with me.”

Courtney’s silent for a moment, then says, “I’m not sure if I’m the kind of guy that believes in death bed repentance. I guess I should’ve figured that out a lot sooner.”

I’m watching Soup, the tank a few feet away from him and I want to say to Courtney, “You aren’t on any death bed.” But even with my limited experience with death, I know that his crushed organs aren’t going to make it. Somehow, when these things come to you, you just know.

I see some cops on top of the tank raise riot guns and aim them at Soup, firing point blank at his head. He flies back, a geyser of blood squirting in the air.

Courtney says, “My death bed. Ha. I shouldn’t be surprised it came to this. In fact, I’m not.” And he starts laughing, uncontrollably, spitting up blood and giggling like a madman. I try to say goodbye or something, but I’m choking up on tears and can’t get a word in.

There’s a loud crack above us and the power line teeters, so I jump back and it collapses on the truck, shooting sparks like a fireworks display and sending electricity jolting through Courtney’s body. A few seconds later, he doesn’t move anymore.

I can’t help my terrorist friend any more so I run, too shocked to think, to the body of Soup. He’s lying there, surrounded by another group of rioters and he’s smiling

like a crazy person. Some rioters throw a few Molotov cocktails at the tank and the drivers jump out, running off on fire. The tank, flaming like a bonfire on wheels, still advances toward us and I drag Soup to the sidewalk. I tear off a section of my t-shirt and use it to sop up Soup's busted head.

"I have to tell you something," Soup says. "Before I forget."

I just saw Courtney die, right in front of my eyes, I think, but say nothing.

"You really can discover yourself in a riot. Your true nature does come out, whether you're the one throwing the bricks, getting busted, helping the wounded, stealing or ducking beneath a hail of beatings. Nothing proves character like a situation like this."

Courtney was so happy... All I can think of is what Jimmy asked. What happens when...

"I saw my life flash before my eyes," Soup says. "And I realized, the meaning of life is that it ends."

I nod, taking in the whole scene, the city that I love, destroyed. I'm not able to shake the horror, but I feel that if anyone wanted to die in any way, nothing could be more perfect for Courtney. And the numbness I feel sets in even deeper.

## Chapter Fifteen

So it isn't long before we're all rounded up, surrounded and herded by the cops – “kettled” is the term they use. I guess I could have run away, but I'm not leaving Soup this time. Dorian finds us, and he shares a cigarette with me. Olive eventually wanders by too, and I explain, as hard as I can without crying, about what happened to Courtney.

We sit on the curb in defeat. The cops have us cornered and they're arresting people one by one. It won't be long before it's our turn. We've been sitting for almost an hour – it's getting boring. And I decide to read Jimmy's last few journal entries before it gets confiscated by the pigs.

*So they call it Camelback Mountain because it looks like a camel that's dead. While hiking a month ago, I saw a man sprint and leap off the edge.*

*By now you probably realize I no longer want to be a part of this world. The endless streams of information, the vast amount of media consumption, the suffocating overstimulation, it's got too great a grip on me. Faster and faster, everything becomes obsolete. I can feel it in myself. Already my thoughts feel curdled and dated and heavy.*

*Hourglasses should be filled with wine, not sand. Time is liquid and I am drunk on it to the point of vomiting. I've been thinking of Ms. Mansfield a lot. Her motivations, her dreams, ended with a bullet. That man on Camelback, he fell down and then jerked back up unexpectedly by his parachute. But I don't have anything to catch me.*

*But I'm not going out without a bang. I want to make some kind of statement with my death, yet not a suicide bomb, not some kamikaze bullshit. Yet, something involving fire. Maybe I'll become just another barbecued Buddhist, in this case, a charred Catholic, but maybe not.*

*Sorry for any pain this will likely cause you, but I'll see you on the other side. So goodbye.*

Shocked, I drop the notebook on the ground and it soaks into a puddle, oil and water and blood. I pick it up and dust it off and realize, no fucking way am I going to prison now. I can't throw everything away just yet.

I stand, looking around frantically for some way to escape. It's useless – we're in the middle of the street, surrounded on all sides by walls of cops in SWAT uniforms. Sometimes people will try to break away, but they'll just get beaten down and arrested more roughly.

Two paramedics come and escort Soup to an ambulance. I walk through the crowd, the tension in everybody getting tighter and tighter. They don't know what they're doing here anymore. Maybe they came here looking for an answer, but they sure as hell didn't find it tearing up their own goddamned neighborhood. And now their leader is dead.

I'm in the middle of things, listening to griping, fear, paranoia and anger, but the one thing I don't hear people muttering about is responsibility or direction or solution. I hear shouting and turn, seeing Dorian getting carted off by two cops. The Light

Brigadiers flip out, yelling and trying to hold him back, saying that they're non-violent and this is undeserved. The cops beat the shit out of them, breaking noses and beating skulls and ripping robes.

I sneak back to Olive, grabbing her hand.

"I'm going to get you out of here safely," I say.

"Give me a break," she says. "What's the big deal? We get booked, we get released. Maybe my mom has bail, I dunno."

"That's easy for you to say – you haven't been committing serious crimes all around town."

She gives me a condescending look and I just kind of smile. I look down at my feet, notice I'm stepping on a sewer grate. And an idea forms in my head.

I search around, then find some kind of metal pole and shove it in the grate, pulling it open. Still holding Olive's hand, I snatch a bullhorn from someone and yell into it, "Follow me!"

Maybe it's time I took some responsibility myself. Maybe I can step up and lead people. I climb down the sewer's ladder and Olive is close behind and so are dozens upon dozens of protestors, rioters, punks, and looters. At the last rung, I jump off, grab Olive's hand and we run, run, run. Our feet splash in puddles and we're covered in gunk by the time we reach the end, about a mile down, that opens up in a wash near a park.

The riot disperses, but we can already hear the sounds of helicopters overhead and sirens and police boots pounding after us.

Olive and I quickly double back several blocks to where we parked the van. I gun the engine and we head out toward the freeway.

"Where are we going?" Olive says, out of breath and nearly as exhausted as me.

"South," I say. "I have nowhere else to go."

She nods. And I hit the accelerator to the floor.

So we find ourselves at the top of South Mountain, sitting on the curb of a dusty road that hasn't seen love since Reagan. Next to us is a beige stucco building, the east side burned away, but the rest of the building still stands intact, untouched except where the heat melted and blacked the edges of the windows like jack-o'-lantern eyes. Like Dorian's church, the base is wrapped in a rent-a-fence like a mint green scarf. The sign says this is the Arizona Inn.

"There's not much here," Olive mutters.

I shake my head. I just want to sleep. I want to glide into a coma and breath in and out and never come up for air again. I want to be nothing and sleep forever.

We walk to the edge of the mountain, the perfect view and look north to the city. The sun is setting, the whole sky melted into golds and reds, like the state flag. Downtown is a pillar of smoke. The desert on fire.

"This feels like the end of everything," I say.

Silence.

"Do you remember Ms. Mansfield?" I say. "How before she offed herself, she once told us our lives are like writing a novel and we get to be the authors of our lives."

"Yeah," Olive nods. "Back then, I took that metaphor as an excuse to be lazy. Let my story write itself."

“But now it seems like a joke,” I say. “I mean, besides the fact that Ms. Mansfield couldn’t even take her own metaphor seriously. I just know so many people with unresolved storylines. My best friends were my antagonists. My life is not complete and never will be.”

More silence. We just watch the city burn.

“We can’t go back,” Olive says. “I’ve tried before. We’ve both tried before. It doesn’t work.”

“I don’t want to go back. I was never able to leave before. Now, I have to.”

“About Ms. Mansfield. About her story metaphor.”

Olive takes my hand as we walk back to the van.

“We can start over,” she says.

She kisses me on the lips, then pulls back when I don’t reciprocate. She starts the van and we head away from everything. This time for good. We press on.

## Acknowledgements

This book is a drawn-out dream fantasy of mine. The stories are mostly true, except for the violence. I don't advocate violence unless it's for a good reason. There aren't many good reasons.

I love my hometown and the people that make it unique. Thanks for letting me live here.

To the cops: stop prosecuting people for useless bullshit and maybe my generation will start to trust you again. I know you're just doing your job. Sorry to make you the bad guys so much, but you don't give me a lot of choice.

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