

In Those Ancient Days

Introduction by Flounder

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We would like to acknowledge Judy and Pete, in whose cabin we wrote most of this book over the course of several years. We also acknowledge God, through whom everything is made possible.

In Those Ancient Days

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“Books are the memory which does not die”

- Alexis Kennedy

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Introduction

By Flounder

In Those Ancient Days

Sing muse, sing of those ancient days, when childhood ended and
the summer of youth was at its zenith!
That ancient valley, nestled between the hills of dusty Southern
California where the rosewood trees bloomed.
Beside the rustle of the desert winds and the lairs of the fierce
mountain lions lay the city of little Saint Clare.
Between the desert and the sea, the wind was low and the sun was
hot there, at the onset of the end of the age.
Tall were the tales and old were the legends which here were made
in those ancient days.

And of those who made them, what can be said?
Men who laughed, men who loved, and men who experienced all
that which the idolatry of youth can bring.
These men were youth who embodied the spirit of their age and
ages past.
The ambition and hunger of the faustian man tempered with the
clarity and presentness of the apollonian.
They were the fiercest of competitors and the finest of friends.
When the time came to say goodbye to an age of youth and the
comfort of home,
immortality through deeds they sought,
so as to leave a piece of themselves behind for every future
generation that would be reared,
in the dusty hills where the rosewood trees bloomed.

Now hear of Erik S____, first of the three.
A black haired Armenian, his mirth in life expressed clearly on his
face and his eyes blue like the great Aegean.
He was lord of the odorous, an assembly of men dedicated to the
smoking of the sacred herbs.
Such herbs indeed provided them with the ability to sing majestic
songs of glory and honor.
But the heart of such a man lay with the sea, as he was found
swimming in the waters of the great aquatics center of the city
quite often.
As the time for graduation came nearer, legendary deeds he aspired
to leave upon his succession.

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Now Maquoi M____, the giant from the north.
Tall of stature and gentle of spirit, a lover of trees, horses and all
hardy things.
Skilled with the mind and fastidious with the coin, there was not a
book or a craft to be left unstudied by his keen mind.
As the path before him lay uncertain he sought to make a glorious
finale to the youth that had given him so much.

And now of Tzames O____, the perfidious schemer and leader of
the Rebel Alliance.
A man whose imposing presence could stun even the fiercest of
his enemies into silence.
Sharp of mind and sharper of tongue, he would lead bold
adventures against the onslaught of bureaucratic tyranny and the
struggle between good and evil.
And now as the age prepared to end, an ingenious plan he crafted
for his final goodbye.

Now begins the tale of the three who believed they could conquer
the death of youth.
What plans, what plots could indeed occur between the heroes and
the denizens of their age?
As the end drew near and the clocks transpired toward the final
hour
The time had come to make an end of those ancient days.

In Those Ancient Days

Part 1

PROLOGUE: PLEASANTRIES

“Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast ye your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn again and rend you.”

- Matthew 7:6

Much of the reason why floral wallpapers and other mid-century furnishings are unpopular these days is because people eventually refused to match the quaint dignity of their dwelling in their personal presentation. Untucked shirts, poor grooming, and indifferent manners will cheapen any finely manicured antechamber into a gaudy antique store’s corner lot. Whether people like it or not, a refined dwelling is only beautied by a refined presentation of self; both in couture and decorum. Since many of our parents’ generation have seemed to dispense with this sentiment, what transpires herein is set within a civilization of incredible grandeur just before its descent into shabbiness. You will observe the austere nonsense of characters running amok within a society of careful cultivation, like a family of critters running freely in a Dauphin’s abandoned palatial garden.

The following account contains the elements necessary for a true explication of this central concept. I wish I could use the word “necessary” with some reticence. I don’t want to put out my fellow co-authors by saying their testaments are just superfluous, but I also don’t want the reader to make the mistake of assuming they properly remember any of what happened. A decision will have to be made in your heart. I will be derided by my counterparts. I will suffer the slings and arrows of misunderstanding. The truth must be told. I will endeavor to conjure great detail; this recollection and its successful execution is

dependent on factors unquantifiable and therefore partly a consequence of—for all intents and purposes—magick. Be warned: the drafting of this gospel belongs within the same category as alchemy, divination, augury, and ancient spelunking.

The city of Santa Clarita in the mid-2010's was the last era of youth raised under the anachronistic shadow of true Romantic ideation. You may think that this account can be reproduced by teenagers today, but it can't. This took religion and years of plenty and tremendous sureties and the exact relation between the classes and races that existed prior to the cultural deluge of the current day. You would have to have a whole-souled sentimental equipment going back further than the teen today could recollect. You would have to remember cul-de-sac Turkey-bowls on Thanksgiving, and Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2 chat lobbies, and the family voicemail on your home-phone, and your trips to Blockbuster, and the quiet buzz of your analog TV. There was a century of middle class love spent there. We were beloved youth of no responsibility. For the actors who were brave enough to walk the tightrope of such vast freewill and openly invite trouble, there was green pasture as far the eye could see. Limits were abandoned by the quick, and heeded by the dead. Only those who knew were there. Those who weren't, or couldn't, or wouldn't, were elsewhere. Now whether these events unfolded due to the insular charm inherent of this valley, or the nostalgia engendered within the following characters, is for the reader to decide.

The idyllic nature of Hart High School could only be matched in rarity by the temperament of the students. This Southern California high school resembled its attendants. The campus was an open layout. Being the oldest in its district, many of the buildings were constructed with brick. The grounds were well maintained. The faculty was mostly seasoned. There were multiple nationally recognized extracurricular programs. The parking lots were filled with well loved hand-me-downs. The prevailing middle-class sentiment created a breeding ground for the last unusually genuine student body. That being said, the shadow of impending cultural regress was maturing its tendrils. Social media was completely ubiquitous amongst the student body. Almost everyone owned a "smart" phone. Petitions were circulating which proposed a re-branding of the school's alleged racist imagery and mascot. Some misguided students began to busy themselves with the frivolities of "-isms." In spite of these thorns, the stalk shown

strong. The seed had been well-planted. Yet, the cracks began to show. Not much later they would grow into chasms. And with that, the last licenses of youth were revoked with no chance of reinstatement.

It is not my place to say exactly when this taproot to Eden was severed. Only to speak of what I know: we did love there, once. Any other place I visited didn't have it. While at a Calabasas High senior prom, I was astonished to learn from my date that most of the seniors didn't dare approach the dance floor unless it was known amongst each other that they had been drinking. The majority just sauntered about, waiting for the "after party" hosted on an entire rented floor of a Marriott Hotel before they could finally let loose. Many of them were great company, but needing an excuse to dance was suspicious to me. I observed the same mistrust as a fly on the wall at a party amongst West Ranch students. I was warmly welcomed by friends of friends and brought into the fold immediately. Yet, the night had only grown into its adolescence when former friends began to slight each other at surfaced rumors and unresolved tension. Drama was fanned by jilted exes and posturing lotharios. Now that's a bummer, man. Perhaps this isn't a sufficient sample size, but it's enough to convince me. Only one thing mattered to me and mine: a good time. There were no quarrels, there were no fights, there were no "dramatics." Sure, we all had something to hide, but none of us were ever any good at subterfuge. In fact, the best part about these characters was that you knew exactly what was wrong with them the second you laid eyes on them.

As will be verified in my co-author's gospels, many of my escapades lay betwixt bong hits. I preface this account by assuring the reader I wince at this behavior, and do not condone it. However, I regret nothing. A close friend's mom said to me earlier that year, after discreetly inviting me to her kitchen in private, "My son is going to college. He doesn't need bad influences offering him drugs." I was a "bad influence"? Bitchin'. As far as I was concerned, a little free-form herbal jazz never hurt anyone. However, it wasn't just the fact that I could procure these goods, it was the fact that they came with my couch. Under my father's roof, I had the keys to the castle and was held responsible for its occupants. Separated from my father at this point, Mom vocally disagreed with this lack of oversight. Nevertheless, provided I walk the tightrope without misstep, she bore a patient shrug. Extending

beyond her reach without cause would only incite further rebellion. And it was so that by the time senior year had transpired, the smoke was thick, the beers aplenty, and the company always at home, much to the ire of parents and teachers, and to my immature glee. After all, *what could go wrong?* Whether it was teepeeing, going pudding-ing, hosting a little soirée, or just the 46th premiere showing of *The Big Lebowski* in my living room, the invisible hand of stoke guided the not-so-rational actors of this story towards a good time.

My telling of the last week of high school may not be as thorough as my co-authors due to my aforementioned penchant during this period. However, I will sacrifice breadth for depth. Vignettes shall be conjured of a time long gone. The waning day harkened; the last went forth. So, it begins at the point where any great fall must. It begins at...

1. THE PRELUDE TO ECSTASY

*“Be not afraid; the isle is full of noises,
Sounds and sweet airs, that give delight and hurt not.
Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments
Will hum about mine ears, and sometime voices
That, if I then had waked after long sleep,
Will make me sleep again: and then, in dreaming,
The clouds methought would open and show riches
Ready to drop upon me that, when I waked,
I cried to dream again.”*

- Caliban, *The Tempest*

It was just before the real heat set in. Around 12:15 pm to be exact. Santa Clarita was clear and sunny about 350 days out of the year, and the summer heat would easily raise a thermometer past 100 degrees within the hour. I stood leaned up against my desk chatting with other seniors in my class, eventually sauntering up to Ms. K_____ to exchange goodbyes and tell her about my plans for the summer and where I was going to university next fall. It was hard to get through any conversation without seeking its end—every hour was like waking up to Christmas Day for a whole day straight. After finally thanking her for the great year one last time, she gifted me a note she had written from my presentation on the broad literary topic: what were you expecting out of life? What weren't you expecting? In response to my rather dark speech, she commented: “Don't dwell on the past; we are all very lucky.” I smiled as I walked to the door. I shot one last look at her as she was saying her goodbyes to some classmates, no doubt tendering the same gracious pleasantries and promising future

correspondence. As I took my first step out of the classroom, I saw my friend James already waiting out in the hallway with a placid look on his face. For a moment, Mrs. K____'s eye contact broke with mine and drifted to my friend; a slight spasm formed on her upper lip.

"Are you still saying 'bye' to mommy, or can we go?" The banter began and the Santa Clarita heat made itself known. "I don't have any idea where he is, but everything on Matt's end is a go for Sunday; are you gonna be able to help set stuff up on Tuesday night?"

"I don't know, man," I replied, feigning contemplation, "it's really not in my wheelhouse to associate with those on K____'s blacklist," quietly trailing off and shifting my eyes, as if considering reporting the conversation to administration while we waited under the H building's awning.

"Yes or no—also Sunday will be at your place, right?" I assured James I'd come straight by his place after commencement and confirmed Sunday night's venue. "Good." We began our walk to the quad. "Dude, K____ has to be the furthest up her own ass out of any teacher I've known, kicking me out a week before the year ends."

Once we were out of the shade it was easily ten degrees hotter. You could literally see the heat refraction emanating from the asphalt if you looked far enough across the campus. I asked James to recant the events leading up to his final spat with her, both out of amusement in hearing him gripe and out of hope it would develop into a full-blown rant against America's educators. Just as he began, Sidney, Jake, Ali, and Tommy trotted out of the classroom and joined our procession only a few paces behind, having shared more brown-nosed goodbyes with our instructor. No further than five steps were taken before Ali broke rank upon hearing James' disparagement of K____.

"Mad we didn't get picked to give the graduation speech, are we?" Ali rifled to James, striding up beside us as we continued our walk, pausing only briefly to give me a sweet greeting. "Maybe if you weren't such a shithead you would be giving your graduation speech right after mine." Those within earshot had "ah jeez guys" written across their faces.

"Okay, here we go—" James announced without even making eye contact with Ali, "These fu—"

Before I proceed, a brief description of these two is worth sharing. As a diligent private school transfer student who behaved with an absolute disdain for all educators, James proved a novel contradiction when I met him my Junior year. Mere weeks passed before I deemed him vital to any good time. He held two superlatives amongst my closest friends: he could drink anyone under the table, and had a contrarian opinion on everything. A Greek ancestry held sway over his features: curly hair of dirty blond, hazel eyes, and a stout frame coming in at six feet tall with focused eyes fixed on an impassive countenance. Ali—on the other hand—couldn't conceal distaste if her life depended on it. An exceptional student-athlete mothered by an elementary school teacher, she had no qualms unsheathing a sharp tongue if she felt her mom was implicated in James' rants. In those impassioned moments, I'd swear her strawberry blond hair would change hues to an inflamed red, and her pale freckled complexion along with it. Both of them were as brazen as they come. Yet even in their most passionate duels, there was never any doubt of an amicable conclusion. I could tell they loved every minute of it. James had a phrase he would use to describe these epochs in emotional dialogue. They were instances of "hand-to-hand nuclear combat," as he called them. I found it best to be a spectator during these encounters. There are a bevy of anecdotes between these two, but I'll share them in due time.

After a short exchange amidst snickering spectators, they soon mellowed out as we strolled to the quad. I think that there was a mutual understanding between the two of them since it was the last day of senior year, much like the soldiers on the Western front during Christmas of 1915. There would be plenty of time for the two of them to duel later. James would always feel the need to exhort the failings of America's educators, and Ali would always seek to defend the reputation of educators as represented by her mother, but failing to observe our last day on campus in favor of this multi-volumed discourse would be a sore mistake. They wiped the blood from their mouths. We assembled in the quad. Flights of seniors joined from every direction.

"I don't know if my mom is gonna be happy with me staying out that late." Said a certain Kelsey, another prim and proper girl of Ali's ilk.

"Yeah, they asked me if there was gonna be alcohol at the party, and I said that there was no way, right James?" asked another.

“Tell your parole officers that I wouldn’t dream of hosting such a grad party,” replied James. They didn’t know what to make of this comment. Seemingly out of nowhere, Matt materialized in the quad beside us. James immediately greeted Matt before anyone could ask for him to elaborate, giving him a nod as per our earlier conversation. Matt turned to me completely stoked at the good news. Perfect—Sunday was set to launch. We continued to exchange stories and plans with the rest of our class, everyone passing around yearbooks and sharing smiles. Before too long, there was business to attend to between me, James, and Matt. While Sunday and Tuesday were adequately planned, tonight’s entertainment had to be deliberated. We bid farewell to the many faces of A.P. Literature., and I gestured to James and Matt to join me on a trip to my car, Bonnie. We approached the Q parking lot.

Matt partially resembled James in appearance; curly hair of dirty blond, hazel eyes, but taller than James and wiry in frame. Reserved in manner, and enthusiastic in step, Matt possessed a genteel eagerness. I remember I first met Matt during my insistence that a “High-Fashion Friday” be added to the scheduled Spirit Days within our student body. Matt expressed amusement to my suggestion — he walked up to me in the campus quad on a Friday afternoon all while dressed in as much of a respectable manner as I was. He made an impression on me of a man in a permanent state of stoke. A purveyor of “good times,” if you will. With the exception of California flower, if Matt could conceive the execution of a good time, it was on the table. This virtue of his was embroidered with a modest disposition; I never heard him speak poorly of anyone, and never witnessed an air of smugness even when met with pedantic or vapid characters. Matt could add colors to the chameleon, but it never seemed disingenuous. He found novelty in all, and as of consequence, won the familiarity of almost all he encountered. Matthew M___ was, similarly to Ferris Bueller, a “righteous dude.”

“Dude, how on Earth did you manage to bag your Mom’s place for Sunday?!” Matt gushed as I finished packing a bowl in the back of my car, looking around in various cup holders to find a lighter that I knew I had been holding in my hand only seconds ago.

“Dumb luck. She is out of town with Jeff that day.” He held up his open palm at my invitation to smoke. “More for me,” I

thought, taking another lung-full and blowing it in James' face, "There's *cough* gonna be *back* five of us, *wheeze* I think."

"Are you gonna make it, Eric?" James ribbed while waving through the smoke and grabbing my pipe from my hand, "There are whispers of Cory throwing a party, you should grab some of the Stink Squad and bring 'em with us." Matt chimed in agreement to his suggestion.

The words had barely left James' mouth before I got a text from Julian. I gave it a quick read and looked back up at James and Matt through the top of my eye brows. A subtle Grinch-like grin growing on my face. "Oh yeah." James returned the favor and blew some smoke in my eyes.

"Do I still get to drown you if you don't fuck a girl with big titties on grad night?" he chirped to me through suppressed coughs. Matt scoffed at this challenge.

"Yeah man," I laughed, remembering my ill-conceived declaration as I fiddled with Bonnie's CD player, "just please don't kill me."

"Even Jesus had his moment of doubt, Eric.", James tendered to me. Before I could quip back, Matt's incredulity gave way to curiosity.

"Woah woah woah, when was this decided!? You guys aren't serious, are you?". James immediately seized the initiative as I was preoccupied trying to skip to "Burning of the Midnight Lamp" off of *Electric Ladyland*.

"Yes, after Eric decided dry ice and anti-freeze were the same thing he threw down the gauntlet for my grad party." Matt let out an audible *pfffff* and shook his head. James never missed an opportunity to invoke my previous silly "high" questions as banter.

"I said it in jest, but yeah I think the stakes will be a good motivator." I answered back. "Damn," I thought to myself, "was it track 7 or 8?"

"Well Ali might have something to say about that," Matt joked to me, "Here, I'll do you a favor and bed this prospective lass for you so you can play house with your admirer."

"Ha-ha," I regained my footing, "like you would know what to do with a chick," finally finding the song and turning up the volume, drowning out their teasing as I waved their virginity at them. This may or may not have applied to Matt—as the years went on, getting to know him better proved the latter. I fancied myself quite the ladies man, but in the spirit of honesty I had more

luck than guile. Regardless, I was able to get them off my back, it was a rather desperate attempt to deflect from this unresolved dilemma, but I'll get back to the "Ali-question" later.

We passed around the bowl for a bit longer before getting back on topic. James' only concern for that night was that a new *Superjail!* and *Metalocalypse* would be airing at 1 am which he couldn't miss. I completely understood: the early 2010's was a golden era for Adult Swim. Other than that, we agreed that Cory's party was the scene tonight. After a few more laughs we parted ways. Matt and James had some errands on the docket and I had to meet up with Julian and the guys at my place.

As I backed my car out of my space, I couldn't help but linger a little while longer after I threw my gear into drive. The graduating class ushered out to their cars while onlooking students peered through classroom windows. Suckers. It was difficult to not be sentimental. I could tell you about how I thought about what college would be like on my drive, or about what I planned to do later that summer. I could fib and say that my mind flashed through a carousel of memories: teepee'ing operations, nervous first dates, swim finals against Valencia High. But I'd be lying. What I was thinking about was playing the keyboard solo to "Call Me the Breeze" by Lynyrd Skynyrd on my dashboard. I opened Julian's text again: "when the sun sets, we shall rise."

Once Julian entered my house, I knew it wouldn't be too long before the rest of the brain trust would gather. Of all the friends I had in high school, Julian R_____ was the man with the morning in his face. I opened the front door and welcomed my guest.

"Good to see you, old sport." Julian warbled in an anachronistic WASP-y accent.

"My man, come on in."

Julian made his way into my living room and settled in like a faithful patron strolling into their routine pub. Standing in at just a hair taller than me, but easily a stone heavier, Julian's stature could give a passerby the first impression he stood firmly in the camp of "strength" opposite of "speed." They would be right in that estimation of strength at first glance, but Julian was one of the few who had the "green light" on the Varsity baseball team. This meant that he needed no permission to steal a base: his speed and instinct was a surety. Also, since Hart High baseball regularly churned out

MLB prospects, this achievement bestowed a confidence most commonly found amongst fighter pilots—constantly toeing the line with hubris and reliability.

“So I assume news of Cory’s party tonight made its way to you?”

“Yeah, I was talking with James and Matt earlier about it—they requested I bring a few of you degenerates along for the revelry. I take it that you’ll make an appearance?”

“I’ll be coming by at some point, I got some things I need to take care of.” Anyone who knew Julian knew this was code for “I have to pay a visit to so-and-so girl.” I rolled my eyes and started to pack another bowl. In anticipation of my line of questioning, he laid a tried and true decoy. He began to set a glass of water down on the floor while we sat on the couch.

“So who is it this time?” I asked while picking the bud apart, carefully concentrating on my handiwork. Julian’s glass ever slowly descended.

“I swear dude, you are gonna catch someth—” I caught the blatant act of profanation out of the corner of my eye. “Julian if that glass touches my carpet I’ll send you to the big baseball diamond in the sky.”

Julian laughed as he withdrew his glass and put it on a coaster, both amused at my familiar threat and happy with his deflection. My phone buzzed with a new text.

“Don’t you worry old sport, I’ll be there at precisely the right time. When will Jesse and Aiden be over? Should we queue up *The Big Lebowski*? Maybe we will be able to bring Jesse back into the fold.”

“One could only hope,” I lit up at the possibility, “I can’t even remember the last time we shared a bowl. But yeah throw on *The Big Lebowski*. I think they should be over pretty soon.”

Julian took the remote to set the perennial ambiance of the house. In the first moment of silence, another missing element became immediately obvious: Schatzi politely barked and shook me from my inattention. Julian chided my absent-mindedness. I went to let Schatzi in from the backyard and opened my phone before my impropriety slighted another friend. It was Ali asking if I was going to the grad party. Oh boy. In the whirl that followed, I finished setting the pieces to this haphazard dining set while my mind harped on Ali’s text. Aiden entered the house, cajoling his way to my living room in the same ironic blue-blooded caricature

that Julian greeted me with. Jesse joined us not too long after. Luckily, Schatzi took my place as temporary host and ingratiated our guests, only modestly asking for pets and pats in return from Aiden and Jesse.

My living room filled with incense while Sam Elliot's narration of *The Dude* set the séance into its proper conditions. I hushed the natives.

The familiar Stranger began his story,

"Way out west there was this fella... fella I wanna tell ya about. Fella by the name of Jeff Lebowski..."

"Damn, this has got to be the best part of the whole movie." Aiden interjected with glassy eyes. The Stranger's deep droll ensconced its first viewer.

"Yeah dude, Sam Elliot is the man." I trailed off in agreement, slowly being lulled. Julian seized the pipe from Aiden.

"Jesse," Julian whispered as he laid out the bait, "here, hit this."

"Julian, shut the fuck up." I scolded. The Stranger's monologue continued over our bickering. Jesse let out an almost inaudible sigh as his eyes slowly shifted to Julian.

"I'm just asking—"

"I'm fine right now Julian, thanks." Jesse stated sheepishly as he turned his gaze back to the movie. Julian maintained his position, patiently waiting for a bite.

"You can talk after the scene ends." I voiced to Julian in irritation, not picking up on the ploy. Julian sat still with the pipe extended, counting down the seconds until the first nibble. In classic style, Jesse took the challenge.

"Dude, this is the best part of the whole movie." Aiden repeated to no one.

"...They call Los Angeles the 'City Of Angels.' I didn't find it to be that, exactly..."

"No, I don't want to smoke." Jesse declared with a little more confidence. Julian silently raised his eyebrows incredulously. Upon hearing these specific words, I picked up on the game and slowly turned to Jesse, akin to the Manchurian Candidate hearing activation phrase. The shit-slinging began.

“What, would Megan-Mundi¹ not approve?” Julian pressed the first button of many.

“...So I can die with a smile on my face, without feelin’ like the good Lord gypped me...”

“SHUT UP Julian her forehead isn’t that big,² I do what I want.” I suppressed my laughter as he fell hook, line, and sinker.

“What is it Russell?” Julian pressed on, never breaking character, “Are you not...” He slightly tilted his head, “man enough?” Jesse boiled. Julian still held the pipe to him.

“I love this part so much man.” Aiden thoughtfully noted.

“...I lost my train of thought here. But... ah, hell. I’ve done introduced him enough...”

This went on for about another twenty minutes before Jesse fought off his three opponents. I should probably say two, since Aiden was elsewhere. Some say he is still “there”. In hindsight, he was where we all should have been. We didn’t actually have any problem with Jesse not smoking with us, it was only a pretext for ribbing. Before his departure from the devil’s lettuce, he was widely known throughout our friend group as “Sheriff Russell”, or just “Sheriff”. This specific moniker was inspired by one occasion, where Jesse donned a cowboy hat (from where in my house, I am unsure) and brandished a nerf gun, before committing to his spaghetti western persona for an entire night.

There was no shortage of absurd weed-induced episodes such as this one, but it seemed that “Sheriff” encapsulated all of them: when Jesse was high, it was his world, and we were all just living in it.

The ritual, and all of our silly stoned antics, eventually transformed venues. Cory’s party beckoned. I took stock of the boys and sent some texts to James and Matt. They were primed to depart and make their way over to Cory’s as well. Exactly on cue, Julian left to pay some girl a visit, promising to make his way back before too long. Soon we were walking up to a rather large residence with hollers and laughs emanating from it.

Footnotes:

[1] An unflattering nickname coined for Jesse’s girlfriend, Megan, by the principal characters of this story. Megan had a large forehead seemingly reminiscent of the fictional Star Wars character, Ki-Adi-Mundi; a humanoid life form with an additional heart above his brain, significantly extending his anatomy. Their names, and peculiar anatomies, were jointly fused.

[2] It was.

It had a clear side entrance and an expansive backyard. A nice covered stone sitting area sat in the middle of the backyard, neatly adorned with patio chairs and tables, now obscured with impetuous youth. However, the night had seemed to be incomplete. The issue lied in the cooler, and its apparent emptiness. Cory had run out of booze.

Amidst the carousing and courting, I continued to enjoy myself among familiar faces, happy to bring together the two groups of friends. The more thirsty of us, notably James and Jared, set out to find more loot to plunder. I consorted with more party-goers, before I encountered James at the center of a formed circle, booze in hand, taking his familiar posture.

“When I say, ‘we should go back to the Middle Ages’, what I’m saying is,” James’ timbre began to coalesce as he stood with beer in hand, “is that the average medieval’s existence was more fulfilling than our’s today.”

“James, they call it ‘The Dark Ages’ for a reason, do you really think you would be happier living through plagues and constant wars? People were illiterate and had to live winter to winter.”

“First off, the label ‘The Dark Ages,’ is a completely misunderstood pejorative. If we are talking about directly after the fall of Rome, then sure, but that’s not what I’m talking about. The end of the early Middle Ages through the High Middle Ages existed before the Black Death and the Reformation and the *really* bad wars. The common medieval peasants’ biggest concerns were cultivating their land, nourishing their family, and seeking communion with God. And yes, even with the lack of modern medicine and literacy and ‘human rights’ they were happier; they struggled in pursuit of purer priorities, and escaping literal death made it all the more fulfilling. If man is going to spend all day running in circles, then I would rather it be on what matters.”

“What’s your point, dude?” I chirped to James.

“My point is —”

“What’s your point?”

“Shut the fuck up, Donny. The point is that we are all victims of a great lie. Now if you’ll excuse me.” James took a long drink. Towards the end there he did seem a bit parched. I shook my head, but I’d be lying if I said there wasn’t a faint tell of interest. Perhaps it was equal parts of James’ persuasiveness and my insober suggestibility, but he was right about the timeline. Maybe minus the

God part, my communist inclinations did desire a world where communities were closer together and freer from the capitalist.

After not too long, we exited the party in favor of James' house, ripe with beverages and better tunes. I corralled my friends while James and Matt marshaled their forces, and we met back at James' redoubt.

"What's up, dude?" Matt exclaimed in a perfect SoCal cadence, quickly taking notice of me as I sauntered into James' living room.

I replied with my usual remark, "Same old song and dance," a staple in my catalogue of conversation. With that I exchanged greetings with the remaining members of James' and Matt's lunar squadron. James threw me a cold one. Coor's. Rocky Mountain Gold. There are few things finer in life than a good light American beer. As I took the first few drinks I tuned back into the conversation, and took a look around the living room as if I was paying my respects to each of the shrines which hung on his wall. The W____'s adorned their house in Ohio State University memorabilia. Jerseys, rugs, ceiling fans, couches, pillows, glasses, and other trinkets served as a not so gentle reminder that the price of profaning an institution such as Ohio State would find the instigator under immediate punitive expulsion. Perhaps not so surprisingly, college football was not a subject of discussion in the W____'s. Before too long, I found myself revisiting the topic of higher education with Matt, more intent on showcasing my bleeding heart than persuading my friend.

"How on earth could you not think everyone deserves a higher education, how else are they supposed to support themselves?" I spoke boldly.

"It doesn't matter how much money anyone makes if they can't get their expenditures down and investments up, Eric. Take your beloved 'grass' for example, you never find yourself for want because even a fiend like yourself is more measured in his consumption. But if you were inclined to reach the likes of Cheech and Chong over here," Matt gestured to Jared and Julian, "then you would consider yourself needy in that department. Modern man needs restraint. Read *The Wealthy Barber* and you'll see what I mean."

“Whatever man,” I retreated, “the workers of the world need to unite...” A voice called from upstairs, interrupting the final installment. A voice called front the great beyond.

“James, did you take the trash out?”

James’ famous stoic countenance now belied worry. “Mom the garbage isn’t going to be picked up for another two days!!!”

“Well you missed it last time so now I have to remind you!”

“I said I’ll do it later, I have friends over!”

At the third exchange, James smartly made a hurried exit to placate his mother face to face instead of shouting. The night was on a timer now, but hours had passed at this point, and I was rather tired. I took a seat next to Julian and reopened my phone, staring at Ali’s text. I had never answered her.

“Staring at your phone isn’t gon — oh, your talking to a honey aren’t you?” Julian had studied the mirror well enough to take a guess at my hesitation.

“No man I’m just—” But before I could begin, Julian softened his tone.

“Yeah you are, don’t lie, is she sweet on you or what?” He started at the top of the list.

“Yeah man she only has eyes for me, but that isn’t the poi—”

“No dude that is! Remember *Fast Times*? If you know you have a bite then all you need is the attitude. Like Damone says. ‘you don’t care whether she comes, stays, lays, or prays. I mean whatever happens, your toes are still tappin’.”

Lightning struck me. It was seldom that I was schooled in my own movie recommendation. Julian was right. What worried me was the fact that this age-old ethos was something I needed to be reminded of. What had me so worked up over this girl? Julian slapped my shoulder.

“Gimme that,” he said gesturing to the pipe, “you’ll know what to say—you got this.”

I picked up my phone and texted Ali back.

“I’ll be there.”

INTERLUDE

“I am afraid that when we learn to live, we won’t have enough time left.”

- Kyriakos Kapakoulak

We walked along the paseos for about fifteen minutes before I knew my fidgeting would give me away. I planned to make her my girlfriend as the sun was setting, and I was behind schedule. My gait became irregular and wandering. Ali’s started to match mine. I felt her eyes resting on me as we shuffled on. I turned to meet them—the sun’s warmth was fading.

Taking one last gulp of air before I willingly shot myself into the stratosphere, I grabbed a line Julian had coached me. “Listen Ali,” I began, “I think it’s pretty obvious that we have chemistry...and I think I want to see where it goes instead of waiting around any longer. I was, uh...wonderi—”

“Yes Eric.” Ali spoke without a moment’s hesitation, blushing. She put me out of my misery before I could meander any longer, thank God. “It’s about time.” My walking turned to floating. Her’s did too.

“James and a few friends want to grab some Marco’s Pizza later on,” my confidence had returned, “we should go meet up with them after we finish walking.”

“Sure, maybe a movie afterwards?” Our hands met and stayed bound.

We spent the rest of the day exchanging furtive glances and subtle sweet gestures while visiting with our friends. We weren’t attempting to evade their suspicion; I’m sure our infatuation was beyond obvious. It was just fun to play the

conspiracy. She had these big blue forget-me-nots that would wrap me up instantly.

Our company eventually settled back at my house. I put on *Fantastic Mr. Fox* in the background as the evening wound down. After an hour or so our friends made their way back home and I was left with Ali to finish the movie. I took the opportunity to steal a kiss. She eventually departed on account of her parent's curfew, and I spent the rest of the night with her on my mind.

2. THE TRANSVERBERATION OF MATTHEW M_____

"Forgotten to any man, to any time, forgotten to any god or devil, forgotten even to the sea...for any stuff or part of Winslow, even any scantling of your soul, is Winslow no more, but is now itself the sea!"

- Thomas Wake, *The Lighthouse*

One can only imagine what it must have been like to gaze up at the first skyscraper in a hundred mile radius. To step off a curb and see something that rivals the horizon. Even then, a "scrape" is all we can muster. For all of our bluster and brash, is man's mastery nothing more than a quick touse of nature's hair? I don't know much, but I would say that looking back now at what man has wrought since those early innings of hope and splendor would turn any stride to a crawl. We will come to wish we never stepped off that curb to begin with. However, I guess you still gotta cross the street.

"So, how exactly did you get a hold of this stuff?" I finally broached the most obvious question of the day after about twenty minutes of painful anticipation.

"That's what I've been wanting to know;" James chimed in, "don't tell me you got this from some yahoo who roofies themselves for fun."

Jordan raised an eyebrow, "Who roofies themselves for fun?"

"Who could say." James replied.

"I got it from a friend of mine. She's a nurse and I'll probably marry her someday—"

"How do you know a nurse?" James asked incredulously.

“Is she hot?”, I followed suit and dug into Matt’s response.

“What?” Aiden joined the conversation.

“I’m asking if Matt’s drug dealing nurse friend is hot.”

“Oh, proceed.”

“I will neither confirm or deny that, Eric.” Matt gathered the goods from his backpack, “I met her at summer camp, James.”

“So you got raped at summer camp and this broad is your dealer, got it.”

“Shut up James.”

“I bet she’s fine.”

“I can’t wait for James to drown you, Eric.”

“Woah can I help?” Jordan chimed in.

“What’s her cup size?” Aiden posed the relevant question.

Matt cast a silence upon us by carefully unwrapping the small tabs of acid. We eagerly looked upon the little sheets like individual promissory notes ensuring a day’s worth of pleasure. I had done acid before at Coachella with Aiden and Jordan a couple months ago, but this was different. Music festivals offer a nearly unlimited variety of stimuli. You could spend your whole trip outside of yourself, enjoying this and that, never spending a moment in contemplation. Our present venue—on the other hand—invited introspection. I knew that could lead to some undesirable realizations, but at the same time, no one sets sail hoping for storms.

We gathered in the living room, ate one tab each, and waited. After about 45 minutes had passed I felt a strange euphoria in my Adam’s apple and gut. I had been doodling with Aiden, Jordan, and Matt before the complete absurdity of my best attempt at drawing SpongeBob sent me into a fit of laughter. James sat unperturbed, lost in apathy like some stoic philosopher. Not too long after, colors became brighter and bolder. We convened in my backyard to see what nature held.

Unlike my father’s house, my Mom’s house was illuminated with mostly natural light. Large windows lined the floor plan, creating the most pleasantly framed portraits of our backyard. A big oak back there courageously shrouded the leafy green beneath it from the noon heat. Every once in a while I’d sit and confer with the flowers or consult with the oak. During golden hour you could see millions of little gnats flying in its orbit. We probably looked like we all walked off the short bus as we meandered into the well-manicured wilderness, each of us in awe. One by one, the usual

suspects took a load off. Jordan begat Aiden, and Aiden begat James, and James begat Matt, and Matt begat me. So there we were: finely tuned Ferrari's gearing up for a demolition derby. Finally in the full grasp of the trip.

"Dude, thank God your parents are cooler than you. This is the perfect spot." Matt elbowed me while he beheld the backyard.

"Now that I can give 'thanks' to as well. Jordan did you bring the artsy-fartsy stuff?" The sensation at the back of my neck jumped at the prospect of taking a dive into the new saturated colors that shone around me.

"Do you even got to ask?" Jordan delivered.

Colored pencils, paints, and pastels were strewn across the grass under the big oak's shade. I didn't bother with the pencils—much too exacting. I required something more forgiving. Alternatively, paint and water colors seemed too messy and also required learned proper ratios of combination. This was unappealing to me: I needed something I could pick up and use, but was distinguished and fitting of my new found confidence and artistic prowess. Crayons and markers were beneath me. I took to the oil pastels. Perfect. Within minutes I knew that I would be able to create something truly beautiful, moreover, I was making discoveries unique to this medium that I was certain my friends weren't aware of. I had figured out that if you dragged the pastel across paper sternly enough, residual pastel piled on top of the initial stroke. Once this was done you could smear the extra residue with a finger tip, and give the impression of a dried brush stroke. Conversely, you could leave it alone and have a raised texture on the paper. I was elated; I was making art. I didn't need a brush. I didn't need line, or proportion, or symmetry. As I lay on the ground I had convinced myself that needing utensils or tools to create pieces of art only created unnecessary degrees of separation. There was power in being able to touch what was in front of you, I was absolutely certain. About an hour passed before I realized I was finger painting.

James sat talking with Jordan and Aiden while Matt and I continued to make "art." Their conversation paused and I noticed James looking at Matt's creation. I broke my concentration to investigate.

"Matt..."

"Yeah?"

“What the hell are you drawing?” He asked through stifled laughter, staring at his canvas while Aiden and Jordan’s conversation turned to the topic of Rush.

“Honestly, I think this needs more Sedona.” Matt replied, still focusing on his latest creation, probably with the same intense certainty I had only moments before.

“What the fuck is a ‘Sedona?’”

“What? You’ve never been?”

“Okay, so it’s a place?”

“Yeah, why?”

James held a short pause before looking at me.

“It’s over.” I busted up laughing at this familiar tag-line. The Matt we knew was indeed “over.” His piece of paper beheld a crude desert landscape with two soup can-like plateaus standing in the foreground.

“I’d say Rush has an aesthetic.” Aiden said with confidence to Jordan, the both of them having missed the exchange.

“What does that even mean, ya dingus.” Jordan took the one-liner hovering over us, the exact one that James would usually swipe.

“I mean that some bands—in my opinion Rush is an example—make songs that simultaneously tell a story, evoke a certain mood, and set an ambiance.”

“Huh...” Jordan paused alongside us all in an attempt to thoughtfully engage, he began. The normally inarticulate Aiden had me flummoxed.

“So do the Beatles have an aesthetic?”

“Not usually, I’d say that Sergeant Pepper’s approaches what I am trying to describe.” I sat in confusion as James and Jordan began to pick apart what Aiden was trying to articulate. The soup cans grew taller. Jordan shifted his head from side to side somewhat unconvinced.

“What about Zep?” I suggested.

“Even less than the Beatles,” Aiden said decisively. Before I could be offended the conversation continued.

“Nah, I see what Aiden is saying.” James interjected, offering up an example for confirmation, “How about Steely Dan?”

“Yeah, definitely.”

“How do I make this more Sedona...” Matt was determined.

Before Matt could achieve the adequate amount of Sedona, just then, a soft acoustic made itself known, taking the same effect as the Stranger did just the other day. We all sat deliberating whether or not certain musicians had a specific, detectable aesthetic, but Matt grew wide-eyed at the sonorous voice telling its perennial tale. Not long after him, the trip broke our dialogue and demanded we listen.

The continent of Atlantis was an island, which lay before the great flood in the area we now call the Atlantic Ocean.

The song's self-realization immediate: the ancient myth swept across my backyard, but while we all sat intently, Matt was cast into its tide. Emoting as if heard the most renowned, yet most intimate story only he would know.

So great an area of land, that from her western shores, those beautiful sailors journeyed to the South and the North Americas with ease.

James broke focus and shot me another, "it's over" look. Matt was submerged, way down below the ocean, as it were. I probably would have laughed at Matt if I wasn't as transfixed by the song myself.

Eventually the track finished. Matt returned to his soup-can Sedona modern art masterpiece and the rest of us deliberated further on the prior topic. I lobbied to have Led Zeppelin added to the list out of pride for my favorite band, however, I was eventually persuaded otherwise after James explained that their exclusion by no means denigrates their legendary status.

Once we tired of creating art and listening to music, we went back into my house and decided what to do next. As we were deliberating, we noticed a member of the cosmonaut squad was missing. I wheeled around and saw out my backyard window that Matt was still outside. We all gathered around the window, unsure of what we were watching.

Matt lay prostrate before a presence, reaching out with his hand in an attempt to touch nothing. We watched him from the living room window—the chuckles we had at our friend's expense turned to eager, deadened silence, unsure of the intentions of Matt's specter. His fingers were slowly closing and opening around the sunlight that broke through the soft canopy of an oak tree. I

didn't know what exactly he was doing, but looking back to that moment, I sometimes get the same feeling. The feeling you are reaching out to something that already has grabbed you. Like a newborn baby whose hand is touched but closes too slowly to latch onto whatever had poked it. We watched from my living room, unable to understand the particulars but sensing the gravity of the situation. After minutes under what I could only assume was the heaviest of weights, Matt dropped to the grass. Like a fall leaf finding rest—spent, but in grace. He was lost and found at the same time, and was never the same after. Years later I had asked him what had happened to him that day and he said he finally understood what trans people have to experience on a daily basis. Very jarring.

As the peanut gallery held a steady satisfaction of the substance's novelty, I had retreated into my kitchen to fetch water for my guests. I looked into a mirror and beheld my own visage in muddled pastel. I distinctly remember forgetting whatever I was intent on grabbing from my house and staring at this stranger looking back at me. Of course this was hyperbole, I was under no impression that I wasn't *me*. Still, I remember that for some reason, the first time I looked into that mirror while tripping, was the first time my sight didn't wander to my scar. It just held affixed to my normal brow. This strange self-awareness cascaded upon itself: why did I always instinctively draw myself to my scar? None of my friends did. Perhaps maybe once or twice on my first encounter with them, but never after. I even remembered how I was told on multiple occasions how someone would earnestly forget I even had a scar. Provided I was right in this assessment, I thought to myself something new. Although it took me the rest of the trip to form to myself, and years after to enunciate coherently to others. It is as follows.

When you truly see someone, and know their goodness of character, their soul transcends their outward appearance. This essence shines through like the cloud break, and the flesh becomes porous to the soul. Man's eye can see more than hue and tone. It can perceive essence directly and pierce through material.

The rest of the night included another primal capture of another soul: Aiden's. This ghost, or rather, his ghost, awakened. He took up my guitar and began shredding as I have never seen before, alternating between effect pedals with balanced ease and rage. Whipping across the strings in wonderfully wanton violence.

Aiden confided in me much later of the experience and its impact on his desire to pursue music as a career. It's quite incredible to witness the wild passion taking the heart of others, most notably in Matt and Aiden. Although in Matt's case, he held his epiphany to himself, I like to think that his collapse in my backyard indicated something he might have held onto for some period of time. Maybe it does to this day, maybe it doesn't. The transverberation of Matthew M_____'s soul, and the rest of our novel pseudo-enlightenment came to an end. Gently coming out of the trip while floating in my community pool, like alphabet noodles in a tomato soup.

INTERLUDE

"If the rule you followed brought you to this, of what use was the rule?"

- Anton Chigurh, *No Country for Old Men*

It was the summer before our Junior year of college, only a week after I had gotten back from a trip to Europe with James. Ali sat in my passenger seat as we pulled up to her house in my car. I had resolved to break-up with her after a month of soaking in my suspicious mind. The worst part was that I was never more sure of a decision than the one I was about to make.

I had no idea where I went wrong. The girl I won had vanished. I looked upon the eyes of one who's gaze beheld no expectation, only spite. Those big blue forget-me-nots now drowned me. All of the love and lust was spent. She knew me, and who she knew was not worthy. I sheepishly suggested that we should take a break.

"I don't know what that's supposed to mean, Eric." Ali spat out to me, "Are you saying we should break up?"

I was surprised that this angered her. Surely this was something we both wanted, but she was indignant. I was undeterred and tried my best to explain.

"All we do is fight now, these last few months have been awful, and I feel like we are just trying to fit a square peg into a round hole at this point. I have tried to become something for you, but whenever we—"

"So, that's a 'yes'." My wandering added to her irritation, "Eric, every couple has fights. We've both talked about how our parents have gone through rough patches. This is just something we have to get through. I love you."

“Ali, I know you love me, but most of the time I can’t feel it.” I had finally voiced my feelings succinctly.

That was the last time I saw her well up with grief. Even in contempt, my admission of solitude struck her briefly. It was her turn to break her gaze with me. Only seconds passed before she regained her haughty tone.

“Fine, I’ll wait for you to work your way out of whatever this is.” she said. Her certainty was grating. My head buzzed with anger. Every romantic gesture I labored to show over the past years accounted for nothing now. Exactly when and how she decided this was concealed from me. How could it have been that the first girl I doggedly pursued couldn’t stand me, while I held the hearts of past girlfriends with wanton carelessness?

“Oh, you’ll wait for me? Well don’t bother. I am finished trying to unravel you and dig myself out of this hole. I’ve done all I can.” I sputtered convulsively under the weight of what I thought I was owed.

“What is it that you’ve done?!” She matched me.

“Everything you’ve asked!”

3. THE ENANTIODROMIA OF JAMES W_____

“Yes, stand a little out of my sun.”

- Diogenes

At first, in an entry dated February 14th 1884, Teddy Roosevelt wrote a large “X.” That was it. A man who, during his stay in office, wrote so copiously—eventually totaling ~80,000 pieces of correspondence, more than any other president (the next closest being Thomas Jefferson)—had nothing else to say. Then, he mustered a little more courage and tried to add just a bit more description to the day his wife and mother died, two days after his first child was born. Perhaps it was for his own posterity, maybe not. On the line right below that “X,” he wrote, “The light has gone out of my life.” I suspect he never did revisit that entry. I think he ran as far away from that entry, that day, as he could. From running past bullets on San Juan Hill, to bullseyeing charging Grizzly bears, to traversing trail-less tracts of the Amazon, he took flight. In desperate retreat from that choked wick. I’m sure a second glance would have killed him. Now, I don’t mean to imply that his exploits were in vain, or that he successfully circumvented his devastation through distraction. I bet Alice’s face was the first he saw while captive in malarial fever dreams, in the deepest recesses of the jungle, even if he hadn’t touched that journal in decades. I bet he heard the mortal cries of his comrades in the storm of steel at San Juan Hill’s summit and his mother’s soothing visage met him. Yet, for some reason, these specter’s did not inspire his rest. They did not beckon from the clouds on high. They helped him cling to life. To push forward. To sanctify their memory through action, not lamentation. This is all to say that I

think some losses are so crippling, they can never be reconciled through deep contemplation. There are some wounds so mortal that they can only be healed through amputation. What would be lambasted today as a negative male callousness or insensitivity, is actually a sensitivity too great for words.

I woke up to Christmas again: Graduation Day. Floating with the faux-enlightenment of yesterday's adolescent spirit quest, I walked into the kitchen with rub-less eyes and cleared throat. It was time to don the gown and cap. To fill a day with rarities I approached the first: my father sitting coolly at our breakfast nook with newspaper in hand, waiting for me to awake.

"Good morning son," he said warmly.

"Morning Dad!" I replied with well-veiled curiosity, opening up the refrigerator.

"I have something to give you that I think you'll like."

I put a hold on breakfast and sat with him at the table, somewhat confused but eager with interest. A long thin leather case rested under his hand. I had never seen it before, but I knew from his posture that it was no gift of mine: it was guarded like it was a gift of his. Quieting my mind before I began to wear my thoughts, I settled in and he put his paper down, giving an adequate pause to look over me. He wordlessly slid the case over and gestured to me to open it: in laid a watch. Embossed with the softest white lines and modest gilded dials, the watch gave me the impression that the time it told was more exact than any product of modern science. It even illustrated the moon's shifting phases to its bearer. I beheld not a timepiece, but a conversation piece.

"I give you the mausoleum of all hope and desire," my father began. His trained charisma gained from years as a salesman took the stage, yet with tender eyes you'd only show a son. In spite of my provincial teenage intellect, these words staggered me.

"I give it to you not that you may remember time, but that you might forget it now and then for a moment and not spend all of your breath trying to conquer it."

"Dad, I...this is beautiful." I spoke while fixed to the watch, "Where did you get this? And what was that speech from? You shouldn't give this to—"

"Your mother got this watch for me while we were on our honeymoon. I'm so cheap I had never invested in a good one, so she squirreled away some money and got me this as a surprise. Even though she's a spendthrift, she's got good taste. So now I give

it to you—I don't have any reason to keep it or occasion to wear it." He nonchalantly picked his paper back up and gave himself a grin I would only see in the mirror.

"And those words?"

"Faulkner."

A simple "damn" under my breath was all I could muster. I sat in shock before I noticed how late I had slept in. The watch read four! I looked back up at him in panic.

"Wait a minute, it's four o'clock! How did I sleep in that late?"

"No it's not, it's close to noon. What are you talking about," he glanced back at me with mild annoyance. "Oh, yeah the watch is broken. Not too sure why. Make sure you go easy on the breakfast, we are having dinner tonight with everyone."

Before departing to the commencement, my family planned a dinner at Macaroni Grill with all our relatives. My mother and father navigated the whole evening with restraint and good-will between each other. Awkward hugs and small talk with my folks across a dinner table would soon turn into photos and smiles on the football field. But that was for later. After my Dad dropped me off at the College Canyons football stadium, I made my way to the lesser gym.

I entered the gym and looked into the face of youth itself. The lively sight of the students dancing on polished paneled floor transfixed me. Glossy gowns of red and black paraded around and around like a kaleidoscopic carousel. Every few seconds a group of three or four would elect a member to hoist their phone and catch a photo. I immediately found James standing amidst the usual suspects. In the sea of gowns he stood out like a sore thumb; even the formality of graduation day couldn't get him out of his Levi's and New Balance sneakers. Alas, unlike many of the other Square Squad members, my gown was black. My mediocre academic performance over high-school was brought to bear on me.

"Eric, if you want, you can have some of my tassels!" Jake tendered to me, adorned with one accolade after another. I shifted between my feet with slight embarrassment, hearing some of the snickering from my classmates.

"No thanks," I quickly replied, feigning amusement, "I think I'll be fine, man."

It didn't really matter to me whether or not the powwow of students knew I wasn't up to snuff, my reputation certainly didn't cast any well crafted veils. However, it was one of the first times I cringed at myself on account of Ali. And that was a whole different yardstick to measure with.

"Well I think it suits you." Ali shyly consoled me, "You look better in black anyway."

Kelsey and Katie snickered at Ali's obviousness. I grinned at her awkward blush and thanked her. The conversation flowed on as more seniors joined the mix.

As for Mr. J____. Jake J____ had sat next to me for all of A.P. Lit. Let me tell you, there is no other person I knew of who could have made that remark with more innocent sincerity. In the catalog of famous excuses to abstain from drinking, Jake holds what I considered to be the piece de resistance. If I recall correctly, he dared not touch the naughty water on account of his father's brother's former girlfriend's current roommate being an alcoholic. Not very compelling stuff in the estimation of this Ganja-man. Nevertheless, before long I was marching in column along the precession. The last went forth. First, at a walk across a field, then through a crawl across no man's land.

James' house was done up in impressive fashion. He even had a couple doormen posted at the entrance, just to make sure no underclassmen wandered in. Two big men by the names of Kevin and Eddie stood with shades and crossed arms. Admittedly, Kevin didn't have an ill-meaning bone in his body, but he certainly looked the part. Eddie, on the other hand, would fly into loud Korean expletives at anyone he didn't recognize. The power of the square squad dawned on me at that moment. His square squad, largely uneasy at the idea of drinking themselves, took to creating the ambiance of the party, desperate to be of some service. They even created a bar, manned by those with the most right angles about them. I joined the party, astonished to see its success. Everyone was there. I made my way past its attendants.

The night had begun. I took to imbibing beverages, and before too long, I saw her. Ali stood in a circle of her friends, and I'd be lying if I said she looked anything other than Helen of Troy to me.

I gave a look to James and then gestured to Ali and her friend Emily H____ to join me in the backyard by the pool. They

knew the score. As they followed me past the other party-goers, I was tickled with the idea of getting them stoned for the first time. While I do frown on the juvenile nature of my past behavior, I absolve myself upon remembering that there wasn't really anything better to do and that the consequences of such behavior were non-existent. We took measured steps to the far end of the backyard. Ali and Emily had stood there as I took an expertly rolled joint out of my pocket and searched for my lighter. I could sense the anticipation between the two of them. *What will come over me? Will I get 'munchies'? Will I go schizo?* All of these scenarios were a distinct possibility. Just as I found my lighter...actually wait. I'll get to the rest of that later. What is more important is the fact that joint-rolling methods are not only hotly contested, but simultaneously completely unique to the user. You can tell a lot about a person depending on how they roll a joint.

The thing about rolling joints that no one I encountered seemed to understand were the tools and technique needed in order for it to both properly burn and be of sufficient length. I had seen countless mistakes: a failure to roll the paper into a proper cone, the absence of a pencil or pen to adequately pack the free-form herbal jazz in order to mitigate canoeing, licking the paper too much. All of these sins can not only result in a "critical mission failure," but also leave the culprit forever uncool. What was even worse were people with apparatuses specifically for rolling joints. This would be like someone congratulating themselves for drawing the Mona Lisa with a stencil. With this in mind, my senior year was spent perfecting this craft. In any case, I had successfully convinced Ali and Emily to take a drag of my funny pot cigarette. They must have taken notes from good ol' Billy Clinton, because I was sure that neither of them inhaled, but I wasn't mad. The mere act was enough for me.

I had replenished my drink and rejoined Noah W___ and Ali on the landing of the stairs. I can't remember exactly what we had been talking about, but I do vaguely remember that it was about summer plans. Just then, a lightning bolt had struck Ali and she looked over my shoulder to meet the approach of Alex Cardia. Alex inserted himself in our circle with the regal splendor of a newly appointed Grand Vizier, only to immediately deflate when he met Ali's scowl at his presence. Noah stopped speaking and we all turned to greet our new guest, who had by this point turned his

gaze to the ground and stood wringing his hands. He was going for broke.

“I’m sorry, but I have to do this,” said Alex without making eye contact with anyone, but as bold as a lion. He leaned in for a kiss with Ali.

There was only one other time I remember seeing someone in such a dire situation, and that was about two years before when a very high Aiden Scott had postured to meet the oncoming threat of what he thought was a massive assailant, but what turned out to be the silhouette of a back-lit cactus in my front yard. Ali’s revulsion was comparable to God’s appraisal of Sodom. But whereas I doubt God was never really surprised by man’s capacity for evil, Ali was in disbelief at Flounder’s apparent assertiveness. Alex’s puckered lips only traveled a few more inches towards her before she turned heel and ran away from our brave hero’s ill-conceived pronouncement of love. As Alex peeked to see his Juliet run away, he shook his head in disappointment. What I will say for Alex is that although his plan—and its execution—was certainly destined for failure, he acted on his desire instead of brooding. As Alex then slinked away from the decisive defeat, Noah looked at me as if he had just been told the Sphinx’s most indecipherable riddle.

“What the fuck.”

Between drinking and passing around a joint I had become aware of a growing disturbance within the party. It seemed as though James’ guests were startled; pointed whispers and serious eyes began to infect one party-goer after another. There was no mistaking it. The cops had been called. Ali, Noah, and a dozen other people were immediately shuttled to the second floor in an attempt at an evasive maneuver. I grabbed a couple beers and put them in my pocket on my way. I refused to let the program begin without procuring a sufficient amount of concessions. If only I had known what would befall James during this encounter, I am sure I would have been stricken with a grave solemnity instead of excitement. We sauntered into the game room of James’ second floor. This was a choice room since there were two large windows that gave an almost complete view of the driveway. After watching James spar with the cops from the game room, we eventually saw people leaving the party in droves. I went down to investigate and found James sitting on the stairs with a furrowed brow.

“Hey man, what’s going on? Why are people leaving?” I popped another Coors I had snaked from the kitchen and saw Matt chatting up Katie in the living room.

James’ eyes didn’t leave the ground. He was in some sort of melancholy daze I had only ever witnessed when Desperado by the Eagles was on. This had to be some strange bit that I wasn’t privy to. Then again, I knew he had been dueling with the police and wrathful mothers for the last hour.

“Let me get you a drink James, there’s still a lot of night to go.” I tendered to him.

“No, I’m fine. I’m just tired.” muttering while still in deep contemplation, “Everything’s going to be fine.” He briefly looked up at me and then averted his gaze.

“Are you sure?” I pursued, “What’s got you down?” I began sipping my beer a bit slower, catching Matt’s eye and relating my worry. He shrugged his shoulders and gestured to me to do some detective work.

“It’s just too much...” He trailed off into mumbling.

I put down my beer at his admission of despondence. There was definitely something off. Could James have possibly been defeated by the wrath of Kelsey’s mom? Was his desire to helm the graduation party proving too much to handle? I sat beside him on the bottom stair, ready to console my friend. Matt slipped away from Katie and walked over to us.

“Why all the worry, James? The cops are gone and people are filtering back in.”

“Yeah I know Matt,” he replied in slight irritation, “I just don’t know what I’m gonna do after all of this is said and done”. Now it was time for Matt to put his beer down.

We waited while James still searched for words. It was rare for him to reveal some serious doubt or visible uneasiness. Hearing him this way made me jump into my own anxiousness. The joint I toked earlier creeped up on me.

“C’mon man, you don’t mean that. We are going to have a great summer and get up to no good. You got everything lined up—”

“It’s not about that Matt,” James replied, “I remembered something that I have to do tomorrow and it’s weighing on me. I’m gonna regret saying this, but I’m scared”.

Matt and I stood perplexed, exchanging looks of confusion. Scared of what? Before we could dig any further, James

got up. I got up with him and took my beer with me. If this was the way the night was going to go, then I'd need it. He took a couple steps forward and turned around as we stood in place.

"Anything you gotta do, we will be right there with you."

Matt and I assured him. He nodded his head in silence.

"I know you will, we will do it together." He put a hand on my shoulder and looked into my eyes.

"So are you gonna tell us what 'this' is?"

"Drowning you after you lose." During the whole encounter, this was the one line he couldn't let slip without a wry smile.

Shit. Now I was definitely going to die, or at least be held at the mercy of James, which was a death in and of itself. The only issue was that I was caught between an Ali and a hard place, and I didn't have the stomach to abandon her, try as I might. Her other friend, Lizzie, had fallen victim to the Mexican burglar Jared. Many years later, we had asked our mutual friends about the encounter. Lizzie recounted that Jared was a "tender lover." Jared said he had "whiskey dick." I don't know how that disconnect could have occurred, it is more likely that one or the other was trying to save face and plant a lie.

In any case, the night ended with me being nursed by Ali after having one Coor's too many. I knew that my drowning was at hand due to my drunken constitution and Ali's dove eyes, but I didn't care. The firing squad could wait. Underneath heavier and heavier eyelids, the dwindling minutes lasted forever. She watched me pass out from my stupor, and it wouldn't be the last time. All I knew was that at some point, I was going to have to ask her out after the sun came back up.

And so, my story is finished. No one knows what became of Kelsey's mother, or of Alex after his last stand. No one could guess which way the wind blew our hearty doormen, or the fate of Jesse's rather large-headed girlfriend. I didn't like seeing James subtle break in morale, although I am pleased he came to rekindle his resolve. Watching Matt dancing and carousing to his heart's content helped assuage my sorrow at the perilous depths of his trip. Regardless, the flight has reached its end; the glue is melted through, and Daedalus can make out only a plummeting speck on the horizon, waiting to hear a splash that never comes.

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Part 2

1. BEGINNINGS

*“As I stood there, I saw all those who’ve died
And even kings among those darkened souls
Have none of their remote and former glory.
All earthly greatness was forfeit
And I entered then into the house of death.
Others who have been there long
Did rise to welcome me.”*

- The Aeneid

The first decision I made of any real consequence was choosing what high school to attend. This was not deciding between the skatepark or the dirt jumps, a ham or a turkey sandwich for lunch. This would change the next four years, an effectively infinite timescale for a thirteen-year-old boy. My mother preferred I go to Hart High School but after I gave her much grief, she afforded me the option of West Ranch, the new high school where most of my Jr. High friends would attend.

Now in possession of this newfound agency, I secretly wished for her to impose a heavy-handed decision on me so I would not have to own up to the consequences of my choice, to have a convenient scapegoat for all my troubles over the next four years—a nice way to lazily absolve myself from responsibility. After an agonizing fifteen minutes spent deliberating in the dining room alone, I called my mum over and told her it was to be West Ranch. She stated her confidence in my decision with equanimity.

Her respect for my agency only plunged my mind further into chaos. After several hours biking around the neighborhood, mulling it all over, I returned home to announce a change of plans: “I think I’ll go to Hart.” With the same deference as before, she reiterated her support for my decision, whatever it may be.

To this day, I cannot explain what went through my mind on that bike ride. There were certainly no utilitarian tabulations ongoing as to which school would make more sense to attend. It’s funny, even as an adult, as I find myself attempting to be rational in most of my choices, the big ones, the really big ones, somehow still always come down to this same kind of intuition that I had as a kid. An intuition that was, perhaps, even better back then. These decisions are made imperceptibly, almost all at once, by “going with one’s gut,” and no amount of information allows one to make a truly rational decision about the things that matter most. All of this is to say, I have no idea why I made the decision to go to Hart, but I am glad I did, in retrospect at least. Thirteen-year-old Matt, however, was not happy with his choice when he was dropped off for freshman year orientation months later.

A dauntingly pretty upperclassman was tasked with checking me in. With braces removed and an unwieldy retainer jammed into my mouth, I attempted, without much success, to say my name. I had to repeat it twice, wiping spittle off my chin between tries, before she could decipher my speech. This was teeing up to be a long four years at war. I trudged through the trenches for the remainder of the day, getting lost in the unforgivingly sprawling campus, amongst a sea of unforgivingly unfamiliar faces. I dearly missed the company of my friends.

But as I would later come to realize, decisions would be made for me by others or by time if I refused to make them myself. The larger errors of my life tend to be those of omission, and not of action. I suspect this is the case for most people. It seems far rarer to meet a man who regrets having done something than to meet one who regrets dreams unfulfilled, goals unrealized. The milieu of my youth offered a sort of low-stakes proving ground for such lessons. For better or worse, the events of this book would

not have precipitated had time or his mother made thirteen-year-old Matt's decision for him.

When reflecting on the days of my youth, my thoughts always converge on the infamous week leading up to high school graduation, culminating in the booming crescendo that was the Graduation Party. These glorious five days are thematic of our entire four years at Hart. But there is no doubt that the purported glory of which I speak is hard to untangle from our teenage hubris at the time or the hedonistic nostalgia of the book's current authors. But the journey to manhood is neither linear nor without mistakes, and the reckless abandon of youth is an integral part of the process. With all that said, I implore the reader to take no lessons from this book and perhaps to even put it down right now and do something more useful, which really could be almost anything else.

2. ONE GENERATION COMETH

“And unto man he said, Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil is understanding.”

- Job 28:28

There is a certain egoism associated with autobiographical writing. This is even more so when the author is not of advanced age, for the young author is not handing down to his progeny the saga of a long life lived and the sage wisdom that comes with it. He does not even have progeny. The easy answer to dodge the egotism label is to say that one writes autobiographically to understand the self. In that case, I would be writing for an audience of one: myself. But this is obviously untrue. I am not addressing myself in my prose, I am addressing you, the unidentified reader—and somewhere buried within me lurks the hubristic desire to share this work with others. I must look elsewhere to convince myself that I am not driven by ego, and I seem to be running out of excuses.

Maybe I am writing about myself because I do not know what else to write about. Maybe my imagination is handicapped. It is that of a 26-year-old, not a 6-year-old. How I yearn for that capacity to dream once again. But despite my longing, year over year, I replace the fantastical notions of childhood with the facts and figures expected of any self-respecting adult. Adults love facts and figures. But in this process we cut ourselves off from those other, essential worlds that cannot be grasped directly through any sensory means, and so, to the adult of modernity, do not exist. No amount of math, geography, history, or chemistry can reveal those

other worlds. These disparate facets of knowledge fracture the whole. Unfortunately, I realized this too late. I have been thoroughly lobotomized by my education which has successfully installed within me—like some computer in need of a software update—“employable skills” and “technical mastery” and a “well-rounded education.” All of this at the expense of the ineffable. With each passing year I sink deeper into the quicksand of numbers, of facts, of figures. Into the whole rotten milieu that has soaked and stained every fiber of our society.

I write about myself because I cannot imagine anything better—any world more fantastic or story more beautiful or myth more True that lay outside the minuscule bounds of my own life. Positivism has my brain in a vice. A positivism that my “educators” so diligently taught from kindergarten through college—most without even knowing it. The two years I spent at a Christian school were no exception to this rule. And so I care more about the orderliness of my house than the delicate beauty of the geranium in my front yard. More about the state of affairs in Syria than those of my neighbor. I am a product of my time.

There you have it. A plausible excuse as to why I write about myself. I am not an egotist! I am a victim! Of school! Of my teachers! Of William of Ockam! Francis Bacon! Auguste Comte! My parents! Administrators! Bosses! Society! There!

Fortunately, I have the work of my coauthors to temper my ego and thrust humility into my lap. Sure, much of what’s written by all of us is fairly masturbatory. But I see a great depth in their introspection that I simply have been unable to muster. I see I see growth, I see fear in their reflections. My ego reels. I worry I have not assimilated the events of my childhood, my adolescence, my coming of age into a cohesive framework with which to forge forward. It is as if my intellect has run up against a great gate, impervious, beyond which a wealth of understanding lay. No matter what I try, I cannot make it budge. Maybe I never will. Maybe a lifetime of failed writing projects and other vain pursuits will offer some hint as to how to open this gate. Seeing Eric’s and James’s pieces develop over the last few years has made it obvious

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that this project enabled them each to nudge it ever so slightly ajar. I am proud of them for this and have a sense that I will never tire of reading their tall tales.

3. FRIDAY

*"She said oh no
Guadalajara won't do, now
Well I did not think the girl
Could be so cruel
And I'm never going back
To my old school"*

- My Old School, *Steely Dan*

The last day of high school was a notable one. Like other notable days—think New Year's or Christmas—we tend to want to start the day off right. So I was up at dawn to go mountain biking with my buddy of seven years, Daniel D_____.

Daniel was a childhood friend with whom I maintained close contact despite attending different high schools. Certainly, my going to eight different schools over twelve years carried its share of benefits—one of which was having friend groups that spanned districts, cities, and states almost by default and certainly through no foresight of my own.

So it was with attending Hart High School. Without knowing a soul at the school when stepping onto campus for orientation, save for my older sister, I took to meeting folks wherever I could. I skipped between a few groups, making and maintaining loose acquaintances all over campus—the Koreans, the Mormons, the Newhall-13 gang members, the golfers, hockey players, and so on. It was not until junior year that I ended up finding a core group that I would consider my best friends, most of

whom fell under the umbrella of what we endearingly called the “Square Squad.”

After my bike ride, I spent that last school-day roaming about campus, visiting all the nooks and crannies where my friends and acquaintances resided. We signed yearbooks to etch our names in stone. I still have my yearbook, crammed with notes, jokes, signatures, and crude depictions of male anatomy.

A few friends and I ditched fourth period to beat the rush to the local burger joint that would inevitably be stormed by seniors celebrating their past four years of conquest or, depending on who you polled, their release from prison. This was the Mormon crew, and by the end of lunch, I found myself in my van with Kaiten, who hastily admitted that I was her senior crush before bashfully bidding me adieu. If I was her crush, she either did a good job concealing it, or I tended towards aloofness with girls. I think it must have been the latter, given that there were a few confessions of interest in my yearbook from girls who I thought wholly out of my league. I didn’t know it at the time, but that would be the last time I saw Kaiten. There are so many friends that I held dear at one point who have all but vanished from my life as the years turn. But enough with all this, I had to be off, there was a far more important meeting of minds to be had. I could not afford to be distracted by the ever-distracting trivialities of love and girls in high school.

Eric, James, and I were assembling. We had a monumental five days laid out before us, and there was much to get in order. We did as much planning as a group of high school kids could muster, and the rest we left to fate. These were my best friends, and while acquaintances had their place, the lion’s share of my time was dedicated to Eric, James, and, of course, the greater Square Squad. We were to meet at James’ place, which housed more than just the W____’s and their stuff. It housed legends—an abode as infamous among Santa Clarita’s youth as the Nichols’. I parked my 1999 Sienna out front, entered the living room, which was adorned with all sorts of Ohio State football memorabilia, and greeted the usual suspects. I hugged Eric.

Eric S____ and I first grazed paths freshman year, while I was still cautiously wading my way through a new school's foreign landscape. On Fridays, I noticed a few daring folks dressing up quite formally. It turns out that there was no better way to stand out from everyone else attempting to stand out than by being intentionally un-cool in dress. These guys had it all figured out. After some asking around, I found out that Eric was at the helm of this weekly operation. One Friday I donned my most formal attire even though I knew none of the people dressing up. I introduced myself to Eric with a business-like handshake, and after minutes of painstakingly ironic formality, I seemed to have earned his respect. I was struck by how open he was; he spoke to me as if we had known each other for years. Not only was this guy dressing intentionally un-cool, and actually pulling the damn thing off, but he was also nice to random nerds who approached him? Eric defied it all, probably without even realizing it. Though we did not become close until junior year, we spent all of freshman year exchanging approving nods about each other's attire on Friday's. The only person I distinctly remember meeting that year was him. While the rest of us submitted to various conformisms in desperate bids to taste popularity, Eric chose a different route entirely and did so with style. He seemed to remain distinctly himself, all the way down to the scar resting on the right side of his face.

Our friendship finally cemented itself junior year. We had 4th period AP Language Arts together with Ms. A____, who regrettably to us at the time became *Mrs.* halfway through the semester. The class was comically unstructured and seemed to be some sort of tiny prototype for an anarcho-capitalist state. But what what AP Lang lacked in curriculum, it made up for in character. Also fraught with character at the time was Eric. He had grown in many ways since freshman year, but still had relatively juvenile world views of the hammer and sickle variety. I guess even he could not defy all trends that were in vogue while growing up.

Part of this may have been due to a very special plant he and his cronies had become particularly fond of.

On the other side of the spectrum, but equally juvenile, was my position as a staunch, yet largely ignorant, libertarian. Its economic tenets seemed to make arithmetic sense, and still do, but I had yet to consider the morally vacuous nature of its political philosophy. All political questions are moral ones, and what does a libertarian have to offer in this realm? A vague statement about the Invisible Hand's ability to inform morality?

I was inadvertently an expert reductionist and would make ill-formed arguments about taxes, welfare, foreign policy, and education frequently in class. One day I was spouting something off about the corruption of higher education and the predatory nature of student loans with as much tact as a monkey operating a firearm, and Eric had something to say. With his Lenin and Bernie backpack pins in tow, he espoused the necessity of more guaranteed higher education. I retorted back that not everyone can or should go to college, that in its ideal form it is, and should remain, aristocratic, and that its democratization would spell disaster for the western world. Being that this argument took place squarely in the middle of class and bore absolutely no relevance to A____'s lecture, she told us, "You two either need to stop talking or take this outside."

Realizing that neither A____ nor Eric seriously expected us to accept the latter option, I seized this opportunity and said, "Well, then we'll go finish this outside."

I scooped up my backpack and Eric followed. What ensued was well over thirty minutes of heated but good discussion, or at least as good as it could be for our age. From that day onward, a true friendship was born, implausibly out of politics. Our encounter was less about its content and more about its form, which was predicated on earnestness. I had already gathered from freshman year that this kind of earnestness was thematic of Eric's character, but that day's encounter cemented the notion in my mind.

After hugging Eric, I turned to James. He labored out of his lazy-boy chair, hoisting himself onto his pristine white New Balances for our embrace. James W_____ was hard to miss. This was only partly ascribed to his hearty frame, which clocked in at over six feet tall and well over two hundred pounds. The larger part of his presence rested on his surety. He was anomalously confident for someone his age, especially as a sophomore transfer. This sentiment was well founded, as he had an exceedingly deft touch in argumentation and articulation. His wit was hard to match, and so too was his ego. His combination of intelligence and bravado intimidated some teachers, many of whom saw him as an adversarial and subversive student, an existential threat to the institution. This was a label that many were envious of—he did not carry out low-brow crime around campus. Bullying kids, vandalizing bathrooms, and skipping class were banal to him, though he was known to skip class frequently. He focused his efforts on true institutional subversion, and naturally I saw this as a noble pursuit. We exchanged pleasantries for the first few months of AP Language Arts, but attained proper status as friends at James' birthday party that year.

I had just been dumped by a girl named Sam Southerland. She and I spent a summer together as camp counselors, and all it took was a few mornings herding cattle on horseback together to have me swooning. I remember her glistening blonde hair and delicate frame emerging ahead of me through groves of ancient Black Oaks, the air thick with dust thrown up by horses and cattle as we ran them to the corrals each morning. We spent our days together, bucking hay, cleaning barnyards, and teaching campers the art of horsemanship. It was a dreamlike summer. Sam was a beautiful girl with a warm heart who I, in typical form, thought sat squarely out of my league. Turns out that she enjoyed our romps on horseback through the golden hills of the Southern Sierras as much as I did, and we effectively dated (though I've never been one to know how exactly to classify these things) through the summer. This was my first romantic encounter with a girl that even vaguely approximated a real relationship, and I was well out of my depth.

Our relationship ambled along confusingly for a couple months after our return to civilization. Things change when you leave the ranch, and Sam's intrigue in me faded, eventually culminating in her ending our run together. This was my first experience of properly being let go by a girl; I was in uncharted emotional and metaphysical territory, and was that ever something for sixteen-year-old me to navigate.

Fortunately, just a day after the tragedy was James' birthday party. That night, we sat side-by-side in the living room's row of lazy boy chairs as I laid out my teenage woes to James. He patiently lent me his ear and simply let me talk. How refreshing that was. And after some short but well-thought input, he allowed us silence to think. Eventually, he turned our focus to happier topics and had me feeling as good as I could be, all things considered. In contrast to his grandeur and proud contrarianism in the public eye, in private, he was patient and thoughtful. James was a good friend.

James was also not one to back down from his word easily, even if spoken in jest. The same went for me, though certainly to a lesser extent, and we put each other's resolve to the test when we joked publicly for five months straight that "we are going to drop acid for the AP Physics C test." To me, whose virgin lips had never touched a drop of alcohol and whose brain had not the slightest idea what acid even was—other than a drug that allegedly made people put cats in ovens and jump out of five-story windows—carrying out this task seemed implausible at best. But as the exam approached, the joke became the plan. We shifted the goal posts a bit and resolved to try this forbidden fruit *after* the AP exams were over, honoring our word, at least in part.

After exchanging hugs, it was down to business. We had much planning to do regarding the next few days. On the docket were three parties, one delightful day dedicated to dabbling in psychedelia, a road trip of sorts, and copious amounts of sleep deprivation. A few members of the Square Squad were at James' house and more trickled in as day drifted to dusk. It is worth at least briefly introducing the Square Squad. This group was an

innocent bunch, which is not to say they were incapable of inciting a good time. It included the likes of Alex, Vlad, Ali, Luke, Amanda, and Max, to name a few. To complement the Square Squad, as a sort of yin to the group's yang, was the Stink Squad. This name is, of course, an homage to the plant that was so central to the group's ethos. The two groups mingled with ease, and while I enjoyed the company of both, my puritanical view of weed and alcohol landed me well within the jurisdiction of the Squares. Residing in the Stink Squad were characters like Jared, Noah, Julian, Michelle, Jacob, and Jordan—all good folks who brought a bit more quintessential teenage angst to the mix. Eric mainly resided in the Stink Squad, but fraternal and romantic interests alike pulled him towards the Squares. James, ever challenging to classify, came off as more fitting in the Squares but nonetheless held substantial sway over the Stinks.

Later in the evening, we were graced by the presence of the Stink Squad. We ate food, drank booze, exchanged stories of the past four years, and tried to classify at exactly what number of attendees a kickback turns into a party. James, Eric and I had already concluded our planning for the next five days, and all that remained was action. After an hour or so of fraternizing we readied ourselves to head to Cory R____'s house for a party. Cory and I were on the golf team together. He was extremely short, maybe five feet tall, and a very good golfer.

Before leaving, Jared E____, a character to whom no written description will do justice, became hell-bent on bringing a particularly nice wine glass belonging to James' father to the party. Jared, among other things, was a kleptomaniac. He was also less than sober at the time. We all said it was a bad idea, but James would allow it, given that Jared accepted the following terms: if the glass broke, Jared would have to carry out an *Agua Dulce Exodus*. The exodus is an extremely arduous and near-mythical feat well known to the group. It involves a long walk, among other things, but is perhaps too complex a backstory to warrant explanation here. Jared accepted the offer.

Hours later, I found myself crouching next to Jared at Cory's house, in a fit of hysterical laughter after witnessing him fulfill the prophesy we all knew would come to bear. Even with all of the precautions we took to preserve the chalice, one of which was carefully duct taping it to Jared's right hand, there was no interfering with Fate. The delicate rim of a fine crystal wine glass was simply not made to remove the cap of a beer bottle. I am not sure if Jared ever walked the Exodus after losing the bet. I hope he did. Carrying out pointless feats like that usually result in some form of character building and at the very at least are always produce a good story. The wine glass debacle was by far the most exciting aspect of the party. Also pleasant was interacting with the traditionally popular kids in attendance.

Hart was unique in that most cliques seemed to get along. Geeks, jocks, gangsters, freaks, squares, and preps all seemed to jive better than one might guess. Our group in particular—that strange mix of nerds and angsty potheads—garnered at least some level of respect, or tolerance, from the traditionally popular at school. Behavior that kids consider “cool” is always at least a little bit baffling to adults and outsiders. It is also extremely transitory. One decade it might mean engaging in promiscuous sexual relations with the right person in the social hierarchy and the next it is recording yourself eating a pod of laundry detergent and posting it on TikTok. I suppose decade is the wrong timescale to use, now “cool” is a target that shifts on the order of months, or even days. This unbearable psychic load of this new lightning fast reality goes a long way in explaining the neurosis currently possessing our youth. All of this is to say, my peers and I are extremely lucky to be part of the last generation where life was lived at the pace of our footsteps, our breath, our conversation, and not at that of light.

Our group was wise or out of touch enough to avoid the more deleterious of popularity games. Things that garnered respect within our group were esoteric schemes such as creating an official student group called *The Alliance to Restore the Republic* in order to wage war on the school's administration from the inside.

This student group was used for schemes like rigging senior superlatives, where we turned a classroom into a forgery sweatshop during lunch. We had swaths of underclassmen filling out stacks of photo-copied polling forms with absurd entries that we projected onto the whiteboard as a key. We assigned best hair to a bald student, most likely to succeed to a deadbeat, and so on. There was a mole in the group who tipped off the authorities, and after all was said and done, only three of the fixed entries got through, which I still hold as a respectable outcome. *The Alliance to Restore the Republic* allowed us to exchange blows with the administration regularly through institutionally sanctioned means. It was a watered down version of Pablo Escobar's election to parliament. And of course, its inception was James' idea.

My favorite memory of the club took place on the day we had a school-wide drunk driving awareness event. It was compulsory. All students were to spend the day looking at fake car wrecks and photos of mangled bodies that would hopefully scare us straight. The school exit points were locked up and surveilled like never before. We also came to the unhappy realization that day that if we wanted to get our club listed in the yearbook, we would need to submit photos by the deadline, a mere twelve hours away. Not only did we lack photos, but we also had no idea how to present the club in a way that seemed at all legitimate. We decided that we were obligated to escape campus to take these photos and preserve (or rather create) the history of our club. We hopped the fence by the portable buildings and made the long trek around campus to our cars. Once there, we celebrated our escape only to find that it was premature. My keys were missing. We had to retrace our steps. We drove Alex's car around to our jump point and, to our elation, saw my lanyard dangling from the fence we had jumped, sparing us from having to sneak back onto and off of campus another time.

We drove to a remote one lane road on the edge of town that we frequented for the purpose of towing skateboards behind minivans via a long rope we fashioned with a PVC handle. While

swapping drivers, skaters, and photographers, we saw a crane operator who yelled to us, “Be careful!”

We stopped to chat. He was loading up a huge crane onto a forty foot truck bed and told us about his line of work. After our chat, we asked if we could take a photo with him; this photo lives on in our yearbook with the caption “Members of the Alliance photographed with their Grand Chancellor.” When sitting on the toilet, or otherwise in an idle state without distractions, I often wonder if this crane operator will ever know the noble position he once held. By the end of the day, we had an impressively diverse portfolio of photographs to supply the yearbook team with. To our surprise, not only did they give us a spot in the yearbook, but we were graced with a two-page spread comprised of dazzlingly confusing photos, notes, and quotes, one of them being “I’ve been in this club for two years and still have no idea what it is” from Kelsey F_____.

Our odd pursuits, like the *Alliance*, are partly why we found ourselves detached from our school’s social pecking order. Some of our peers appreciated that our popularity games simply involved who could have the most fun rather than who could be the coolest or the sexiest or the smartest, which is why membership in the *Alliance* ballooned senior year. Our exploits were relatively arbitrary, but they played a nontrivial role in our development. Friendships were forged and good times were had. This certainly beat piddling away the time on social media, painstakingly curating appearances, or other pursuits that were also trivial but perhaps far more pernicious. I see a lot of adults still playing these games without realizing it. I sometimes suspect that we spend the latter half of our life either subconsciously living out or desperately trying to shake the habits formed in the former. That idea scares the shit out of me. Because as my adolescence gave way to manhood, I found myself guiltier and guiltier of playing certain games in pursuit of career advancement, of respect from my peers, of status. This misguided striving is the default mode of our culture as it gulps its dying breaths with nothing better to cling to, and so we piddle the time away on these facile games. It is no new

insight to acknowledge that we laud Christian virtues like humility, poverty, charity, but reward pride, wealth, greed. I'm sure I will always look back and wonder why, instead of spending time with friends or family, I squandered so much on these trivial pursuits, like writing this book.

In any case, due to our group's aloofness and our latent Epicureanism, we got along with most, and the popular crowd at Cory R____'s house that night was no exception. Unfortunately for those fond of drinking, Cory ran out of alcohol fairly early in the night. James, being fond of drinking, was not pleased and convinced Cory to give him the liquor from his father's stash. He drained Cory's supply and we all left. Without planning on it, we attracted a sizable crowd back to the W____ Manor. I think Cory was more shocked than angry at us showing up, drinking his alcohol, and stealing his guests. While we had spent countless hours together on the course, he had never met many of my friends, and I don't think he quickly forgot them after that night. The dying hours of the night were a run-of-the-mill good time, but a long road still loomed ahead.

4. SATURDAY

"I remain restless and dissatisfied; what I knot with my right hand, I undo with my left, what my left hand created, my right fist shatters."

- Günter Grass

Saturday morning, I slept in. After hauling myself out of bed, I met Daniel for a long ride at Los Pinetos. He too was graduating, only from West Ranch. We met at the foot of the mountain, as we had so many times before, and took off for what would be our last pedal together for some time.

While climbing, we reminisced on nearly a decade of friendship. The conversation eventually converged on stories from our recently completed senior year. I mentioned that no account of my year would be complete without touching on the topic of Flounder, or more specifically, the saga of getting Flounder to senior prom. He prodded me for details. I told Daniel this was a very long and complex narrative, but he was interested and mentioned that we did have a very long climb ahead of us anyways. *Well Daniel...*

The Flounder problem is a timeless one, it will never be fully solved. It deals with our friend, Flounder, who was more of a project to us in high school, or a child of our own who we were steering through the trials and tribulations of adolescence. Our kinship—or rather, our care-taking—was a thankless job. The most effective way to describe Flounder is simply to introduce the origins of his nickname. It comes from the character Flounder from *Animal House*. The name describes his essence so perfectly, so

completely, that I haven't used his real name in years, and many people don't even know it.

Flounder was horribly inept in the social sphere, and this is without introducing girls into the mix. But he wanted to attend senior prom, and not only attend (which would be an achievement in its own right for Flounder), but to do so with a date. We were not wise to it at the time, but Flounder's heart was set on one particular girl for the big night. This had the potential to be a monumental step in Flounder's development or a blunder of catastrophic proportions that would rock all of Santa Clarita to its very core. Of course, he would need help, but more than that, he would need an incredible amount of help, careful planning, subversive scheming, and a robust codex of backup plans, A through Z. In short, Flounder would need James and me. It was a fitting task for the *Alliance to Restore the Republic*.

This task would require several months *at minimum* to even come close to having a non-zero probability of not completely flopping. So, James and I got to work—and as much as I moan about taking care of Flounder, we did get a certain satisfaction from it. Our labor was an extraordinarily palpable demonstration of the importance of effort and compassion in friendship. These virtues are foundational to any kinship, but usually lurk implicitly, under the surface. With Flounder, one had to consciously invoke these daily in order to keep him from self-destruction.

Perhaps more than enjoying the responsibility, I felt I owed Flounder one for having an exceedingly brief fling with Sabrina S____, who he at one point had the hots for. Sabrina was an intelligent girl, and was also quite well endowed by her creator. Through the smoky haze of poor memory and wishful remembrance, the author gives his word that he was more intrigued by the former trait. Our romance was a short and confusing one, but I suppose I am wandering from the subject at hand. Flounder's prom story, and especially its outcome, is one that may be told for aeons.

Due to Flounder's total ineptitude at literally any aspect of the process of attending prom, James and my resourcefulness and

cunning would be put to the test. We started by asking Flounder for a list of girls he would consider asking. I knew even this task could be botched by Flounder, especially given the list of colleges he applied to.

As a bright guy whose intelligence didn't quite translate to stellar grades in high school, a few mildly conservative backup schools should have naturally fallen on his list of colleges. To my dismay, but not surprise, perhaps the most conservative school choices were the likes of UC Berkeley and Brown. His list of prom dates was much the same, total A-listers. This was our first hurdle to tackle, either bring his expectations down to Earth or throw a doggone Hail Mary. Being our senior year, our last hurrah, we naturally threw the doggone Hail Mary. This was no time for conservatism. We asked Flounder who the absolute top pick on his list was. He confided in us that it was none other than Ali, a gal who is perhaps best introduced by James or Eric. To at minimum provide some context, Ali was loosely part of our gang. Tall, thin, intelligent, quick to anger, and nearly as angsty as a seventeen-year-old girl could get, she was going to add one hell of an element of uncertainty to the plan.

Things were about as bleak as they could be. Not only did we have to get Flounder to do so much as to ask Ali to prom, but she had to accept? This could prove be our most exacting challenge yet. First on the docket was to bring this news to Flounder's mum. We absolutely needed someone like this on the inside to help in areas where we were lacking, such as the financial sector. We could take Flounder to a tailor, fit him in a tux, explain to him the nuanced world of corsages and boutonnieres, show him how to pick a bouquet for the proposal, but we certainly could not foot the bill. His mum was more than happy to help, and though a little oblivious in some regards, she proved to be instrumental in our preparations.

James and I rolled up to Flounder's house while he was still at school one day to let his mum in on the plan. She was ecstatic that we were helping with the noble pursuit of coercing Flounder into talking to the opposite sex. James and I got her phone number

to keep her privy to the ever-dynamic state of affairs and were off with the wind before Flounder arrived home.

We spent a significant portion of these two months embroiled in a spirited debate over which method for asking Ali to prom would yield the highest probability of acceptance. After chewing on dozens of ideas, we agreed upon one crucial criteria: *he had to ask Ali in a very public setting*. The moral implications of putting Ali on the spot like this weighed heavy on our hearts, and we exhausted significant cognitive bandwidth in making sure we were okay with this decision. In the end, we were. Another gating function on this proposal was that *it had to be in a setting in which they commonly found themselves together*. Flounder could not be trusted to locate or coordinate any type of meeting with Ali, so it had to be done in an environment that they shared. This environment would turn out to be AP Literature, a class they had every day together right before lunch. The course was headed by Ms. K____, an old lady who, upon meeting, seems either on the precipice of insanity or genius but who, with time, reveals herself to simply be a well-meaning older lady with lots of charisma. She was a decent teacher in my eyes.

The mission's complexity once again bloomed. We would need to get K____ in on the plan. James had a tenuous relationship with K____ at best, while I had an okay one. Surely between the two of us, especially in the name of love, we could garner her support. And garner her support we did, though all we required of her was three minutes at the end of her class on a random Thursday. She would end up outdoing herself with respect to her part of the plan, which made the whole proposal more absurd and memorable all the same.

With Flounder's mum and K____ on our side, we were amassing a small but respectable army for the cause. The next challenge we had been putting off. This was the challenge of getting Flounder to do the deed and actually ask Ali out. We met him at his house one day for our first round of coaching. We told him that it was to be done in AP Lit at the end of class; this would maximize the chances of her accepting the offer but still leave him

a path for hasty retreat should anything go awry. Worst case, he'd get out of class a couple minutes early. Best case, he would have the date of his dreams for prom and get out of class a couple minutes early. We said there must be flowers. So, without leaving us any more time for explicating, he was off to the backyard with a large mason jar to pick a flower. He returned with a single rose, sloppily pried from its bush, looking comically small, dwarfed by the size of the large glass jar it rested in. Quintessential Flounder. We gently tried to convince him that he might want to consider buying a bouquet or that he may want to pluck a flower closer to the date of the proposal so that it did not have time to wither, but he could not find fault in his singular rose. Eventually, his mum's return home punctuated this debate. We chatted about prom and she exclaimed how excited she was for Flounder to go. She launched into a lengthy dialogue reminiscing about her senior prom, all those years ago. She spoke of her high school prom with grandeur and with grace. It all sounded surprisingly radical to us, save for the fact that she ended the story with her and her friends rising early for "6 am mass the next morning."

I was quick to marvel at what a coincidence that was because my parents had in fact just reminded me that we have "7 am church service the morning after prom" that I had to attend. Flounder's mum was not aware that I hadn't been to church in years save for holiday services. But my quick cover passed, and she was none the wiser that we had some less wholesome post-prom activities in store for Flounder.

After departing the house, James and I immediately crafted a tactful text message to Flounder's mum. In it, we implored her to take Flounder to the florist to get him a proper bouquet of flowers for his proposal. She said she would take care of it, again proving her extreme utility to the operation. Flounder was blissfully unaware of our careful coordination. The day before the proposal, she complimented Flounder heartily on his creative flower-in-mason-jar bouquet for Ali—the rose at this point clung on to no more than a handful of browned, wilted petals—but insisted she take him to get a proper bouquet. He accepted this offer. The next

morning, armed with a real bouquet of flowers, a collared shirt, and as much confidence he could muster, Flounder walked onto campus ready to do the deed. James and I were dubious of the outcome and started a small betting ring on whether or not Ali would say “yes.”

We agreed to meet outside of the classroom for the proposal five minutes before the end of class. We had to do this with tact so as to not tip anyone off to the plan. Fortunately, I wasn't in AP Lit, and James apparently ditched class that day, so all Flounder had to do was leave “for the bathroom” and we were set. With K____ privity to the plan, she would be on the lookout for our faces through the back door of the room to give her the signal. When the time came, Flounder got up and walked slowly out of class as casually as he could, which wasn't very. I was waiting just outside of the room with the bouquet. James was there for moral support. It's hard to say who was the most nervous out of the three of us, for James and I had put in an incredible amount of work into this, orders of magnitude more than Flounder had realized. That being said, he was still about as red in the face as the roses I handed him. We gave K____ the signal and she immediately diverged from the classroom topic at hand, mentioned some schizophrenic non-sequitur about Romeo and Juliet, and pointed to the back door. Flounder walked in with a steely resolve and headed for the front of the class. Ali was sitting in the back. Her stiff posture gave the impression that she knew something was up. She was on guard. I watched Flounder approach the front of the room for what felt like hours, the whole class frozen in time, icily awaiting what was about to transpire. The flowers in his hand gave the students some parameters to their guesses as to what was about to happen.

For most boys in their senior year, the choice of who to ask for prom is either obvious (a crush, a girlfriend, a best friend) or at least well-bounded (a small pool of girls that will definitely, or at least probably, say yes). For a person like Flounder, the choice was neither obvious nor well-bounded. Armed with a bouquet of flowers, he could literally ask *anyone*. I was obviously aware of who

he would ask, but I quickly realized the entire class had no idea. And once I realized this fact, I started to notice that Ali was not the only girl with a tense and guarded posture—virtually every female in the class was expecting the unexpected. Even a few of the boys in the class were starting to worry. It was Flounder after all. Hell, he could wheel around on his heels and ask Ms. K_____!

And so, after what felt like days, Flounder got to the front of the room. He faced the class, a stoic look forced upon his countenance to conceal his anxiety. His eyes scanned the room: left to right, left to right. Ali sat nervously awaiting her fate. He took a deep, deep breath in. Exhaled. Flounder lifted the bouquet out parallel to the ground with a fully extended arm, like a marine would do with a rifle in a military ceremony. I don't remember that being how we explained to him how to hold a bouquet of flowers. The bouquet was now at shoulder height, pointed directly at Ali. I was just outside the room at this time, observing through the narrow glass part of the door, so her face was obscured to me. Perhaps it was better that I did not see. Perhaps it was better that I did not bear witness to what would no doubt be her agonizingly visceral reaction. Flounder bellowed, "Ali F_____, will *you* go to prom with me?"

Silence. Silence. Silence. Still silence. I couldn't believe how long the entire room stood in incredibly tense silence for. Five seconds? Ten? It felt like nearly thirty. But finally, with all eyes on her, Ali uttered her response. The response that would determine if our countless hours of work were all for naught. The response that would determine who won the bet in our gambling ring. The response that would dictate the trajectory of Flounder's future. The response that would dictate her future...potentially the fate of the entire world! Or at least it felt that way to me. Unfortunately the door was quite soundproof and so I didn't catch her response. I ended up skipping prom anyways to go to a mountain bike race in Fontana. I wonder how it all turned out for Flounder in the end.

Daniel punctuated my saga and said, "Oh yea, we were at that race together. I think that's the one I got first and you were second, wasn't it? That was sick."

I agreed, it was a sick race. Daniel beat me by half a second. We usually shared the podium together, which makes sense given that we trained together almost daily. Eventually, we got to the top of Los Pinetos, a beautiful summit overlooking the sun drenched Santa Clarita Valley. We took in the view for one last time together as high schoolers and dropped in on the trail we had ridden so many times before. The number of rides Daniel and I went on must have been pushing a thousand. We were constantly on our bikes together, riding trails, building jumps, and sharing podiums. But even something that is damn-near daily ritual has to come to an end, and boy did we feel that finiteness on the last ride. You see it coming, and you know it is coming, but you're never really prepared for when it does. It is kind of sad. But at the same time, the door opens for new rituals to fill this void. Maybe that is growth, or maybe that is just the way things are. Daniel and I still ride together. But it is more on something like an annual cadence. I miss those near daily rides with him, but it still feels like we are eighteen again when we get up in the mountains together for a pedal.

5. ATLANTIS

*“The continent of Atlantis was an island
Which lay before the great flood
In the area we now call the Atlantic Ocean
So great an area of land, that from her western shores
Those beautiful sailors journeyed
To the South and the North Americas with ease
In their ships with painted sails”*

- Atlantis, *Donovan*

riverrun through the city square. Blueteal vibrancy. The water flows within itself overunderside thissus sprawling metropolis. A momentarium ago, one found twoself using colors. On paper. Now one finds threeself in the city. In colors. A beautiful city. Real? Real. beyond the pillars of Hercules. He was not looking for it when he found it. Music. Music. Musick. He was using color. He was hearing color. He was thrust into color. Here he was! Here! The Antediluvian World. Vibrant. Near perfect, but not. Distracted by the color? The grandeur? To what end? Questions. Abound. Not Walden, hyper-technical, aquatically hyper-technical, B.F. Skinner would be happy, would he, would he, would he, maybe – mechanical engineering over behavioral, but maybe not. What lies behind the veil, or is he behind it already already already, are foundationations made of concrete here or cardboard or sand or silt or loam or wood or salt or mud or bauxite or aluminum or grass or skulls or bones or nothing nothing nothing, would B.F. Skinner be happy, or does he dream as Nebuchadnezzar, dream,

dreamy dreamy dreamy, oooooohhhhhh aaaaaaahhhhhhhh Water, guitar, waaaaaaay down, below the ocean. But is it where I want to be? Is it where? Is it? Is. Is. Is. Waiteeee a shlimshogin minute, minute, sixty, emit – emit, emit, emit. All wrong, backwards. Not all wrong, just one thing. Mostly good, cool colors, cool, warm feeling. Cool color, warm feeling. Relaxed, don't need to command a relax, already have the -ed. Glad he is sitting, glad he is sitting, glad he forgot about the soup cans. Soup cans? Mountains look like soup cans. Red rocks red rocks, red red rocks, this is Sedona, emit, long time ago long long time ago, cognitive adhesive, Sedona, soup cans, soup cans. They look like soup cans! No time, emit. No time, forget Campbells, forget it. Here is story, mythos. Here is the veil, veils are not not not bad, not not not bad. Wood salt mud, Ante, delluvian, wor, ld, war, old, before war? No, Athenian assault. Color. Color, before war? Yes, color. Vibrant, water water water, cool cool cool color, warm warm warm feeling Not too warm, just right. Forget the soup, listen to the story. But no commands. He listens to the story. Story turns to magic. Magic. Magic! Strings do that? String create it? Magic? Apparently. They put him there. Where? Yes. Riverrun all the way through the city. Beauty, At what cost he asks, worth asking? Though. Practicality is irrelevant here, *hold onto that thought*. Ohohooohhh shoot. There it goes. Flying flying flying. A ballalloon just out of reach, one has a single moment to react when the string evades his grip, one moment, don't miss it. Too late, gone. Oh well, there are lots of balloons. That one might have been special. There are lots of special balloons too. Well, it was still special. All the same if you effectively never had it. Time dulls, did it exist? Emit. I can't even remember. Can you? You? Oh, hello there. Can you remind me what *we* were talking about. No matter, I am looking for something. I? Oh. I. i. Hm, that has never occurred. Well, now it has. But the balloon is gone. No matter. Color remains. Immediacy. Grasping time. Yes, minutes, ah yes. I! Of course, who else but me? Well, here I am. What a pretty city. The music is beautiful too. I faintly remember a fellow voyager. But it must have been long ago. I am a sole visitor here. I like it here, beautiful. I wouldn't live here though. For

starters, I breath air. So it seems unsustainable to bring oxygen down for a lifetime. Plus I don't know how I got here or how to get home. Home? I don't even know where that is. Maybe I do breathe water. I could probably live here. Man, this music is beautiful. Strings can do this? More than groove, more than funk, rapture. Not anymore, but before, before, before. Wow, ow. Color. I am holding color. In and holding? Now just holding, but still a bit in, transverse waves. That's how I am, it feels good – like the string. It would be weird to be longitudinal. Strings, balloons have strings. Weird. Well, I guess they don't *have* strings, but people tie strings *to* balloons, so balloons are sometimes attached to strings, or strings to balloons, don't let go of that string though, I've wanted to work as a balloon seller and just let go of all the strings at once and see all the balloons just float away, I would probably lose my job though, balloons are important, well some of them are, so I probably want to try to hold on to them, long enough to be appreciated at least, hm, hm, hm listen to that music, I just had a good thought, very clear, very crystalline, but wherever did it go, Pooh looking for hunny, Pooh is always alright though, better than alright, well, kind of beyond alright, that's a good place to strive to be, isn't it? Oh, yes. But hunny, hunny is tasty, yea but I'm not hungry, I've also never really craved hunny, has anyone really craved hunny? Maybe something with hunny in it, hunny hunny hunny, fortunately I don't have to spell when I think, I am here, which is good, I is pretty good, This is taxing, lots of balloons. I don't mind balloons, I wish they were made with an organic material, or something compostable, think of how many balloons people release into the world that just float off to somewhere random and are forgotten, or a bird tries to eat the balloon and gets sick, or some other thing of that sort happens, we should be cognizant of balloons, I could really innovate in the balloon industry, why am I thinking about balloons? I. Hm, too much I. Five minutes and three seconds are over, I am holding a vibrant color in my

Paris 1922-1939

6. HOTH

“Com-Scan has detected an energy field protecting an area of the sixth planet of the Hoth system. The field is strong enough to deflect any bombardment.”

- General Maximilian Veers

I am brought to my hands and knees in the blindingly bright snow. Everything around me is whited out. Marginally different shades of white allow for the discernment of very rough shapes, a crude depth perception at best. My eyes have been getting better at seeing as the years pass, much like they do after some time adjusting to darkness when all the lights are off. It is cold. I hardly notice anymore.

It feels like I have had years without progress, getting no closer to figuring out how I got here or how the hell I'm going to get out. But today I have stumbled upon a sign from the gods, slight, yet unmistakably real. This is what has me enraptured. Decades of ultimate solitude and isolation in these sub-zero temperatures with no signs of life—human or otherwise—have steeled my resolve. They have also delivered me to the precipice of insanity. No man can survive these conditions indefinitely. But here I am, humbled by the wonderment that lay before me, entranced by this anomaly—*life*. Life? Here? No! There is no life on Hoth.

It is impossible to say what they are, most closely resembling small gnats from back on planet Earth. But Earth is a long way away. They are tiny little creatures. You could fit several on the head of a pin. Alone, they appear to be nothing special,

barely perceptible, but together—and there are thousands, maybe millions—these creatures fly synchronously to form beautifully complex patterns, geometric yet somehow perfectly organic. What could they be but the terrestrial manifestation of God? I reach my right hand out, slowly, trembling like someone blindly fumbling about in total darkness, using his leading hand to feel for obstacles. This is my attempt to join their cosmic dance.

I feel their power as they swirl about my hand. Their incomprehensibly perfect flight paths adapt, arc, incorporate it. I am pulled into their oneness. My journey into the cosmos has culminated in this moment...I let my being ooze into the ether, it washes over me, I start to fade.

All is laid bare.

7. RETURN TO EARTH

“I saw in their eyes something I was to see over and over in every part of the nation—a burning desire to go, to move, to get under way, anyplace, away from any Here. They spoke quietly of how they wanted to go someday, to move about, free and unanchored, not toward something but away from something. I saw this look and heard this yearning everywhere in every state I visited.”

- Travels with Charley

It had been an exceedingly long day. It felt as if I had rewritten *Finnegan's Wake* and taken a lonely voyage to Hoth. I had actually spent the past few hours rolling around in the grass like an infant and staring dumbly at a bunch of bugs in Eric's backyard. But those ventures were over, and hard to make sense of, so I walked inside and watched *The Big Lebowski*. It seemed the natural thing to do. Man, what a movie. The guys told me that they all enjoyed the day too. I was glad to hear that.

The chief challenge with psychedelics—if one is trying to use them for anything other than recreation—is brining the fantastical experiences back to sober reality in any sort of useful fashion. My voyages that day proved challenging, if not, impossible, to apply to my life in a meaningful way. What I came away with was a crazy experience with my friends, not a revolution. Certainly experiencing something so powerful and so profoundly different than our normal experiential state leaves a subtle, ineffable impression on us. But so does television. I would not be

so bold as to call the experience life-changing. The only friends of mine who had trips with lasting impressions discernible to others now live in mental institutions.

This is not a critique of psychedelics so much as it is one of human nature. We often long for shortcuts that will cure our afflictions—*if only I had this, or went here, or could do that, then all would be set right*. But this is just a naive hope that any sort of change will come without resolve or time. I am not claiming that psychedelics are useless, or that the subjective experience of an acid trip is trivial. But a trip cannot be the foundation for one's sober reality.

Lately, there has been a resurgence in the perceived power of these drugs. I suspect there is a general over-indexing on their ability to do good for individuals. Nixon's war on drugs swung the public's impression of psychedelics into the realm of paranoid teetotalers. But equally radical is the current wave of psychedelic optimism. Research seems to be perpetually on the verge of bearing fruit. I imagine the public will remain in a state of bated breath for some time before eventually realizing that these chemical compounds are not capable of rendering true the vision of some sort of futuristic psychedelic utopia.

If this class of drug really was as powerful as its proponents claim, then it would stand to reason that the psychonauts among us would be so obviously enlightened, have so clearly found "the answer," that all of us would fall in rank and follow, or at least recognize their cognitive and spiritual superiority, even if failing to fully understanding it. These psychonauts may object to this by saying that the average man is so bogged down by the mundane, the truth is so obfuscated by his sobriety at work and his alcohol-soaked half-consciousness at home that of course the public cannot see the purity and truth of psychedelia. But this stance is just a watered down, toothless version of the hermetic Christian ascetic, who spends all day spinning plates on his head while reciting esoteric riddles to the field mice passing by his forlorn desert cave. If one's philosophy, one's doctrine, ultimately does not come to bear on the lives of others, what is its worth?

And so while the faux-spiritual psychonaut may scream from his multi-million dollar retreat in the foothills of Berkeley with John Lennon's "Imagine" blaring in the background that all we need is psychedelics for the masses, ultimately these substances will fail to bring about the revolution he fancies. This movement, ironically, fails to deliver a compelling shared vision. Let us not forget that the consumption of peyote or ayahuasca in native societies of the Americas was only one small part of a robust ontology, complete with its own myths, rites, traditions, and responsibilities. One might be well to remember that the main change Timothy Leary and his free loving followers brought about in the sixties was Nixon's war on drugs and a new form of vapid individualism.

8. MONDAY

“A world in which the sexes know less about one another than they used to; in which many women no longer know men as companions and protectors, but only as predators; in which many men know women mainly through the narratives they absorb in watching pornography, which has become a default stand-in for social learning about women and sex.”

- Primal Screams

The idea for the party itself started as a daydream in AP Physics C, nearly a semester before graduation. Daydreams turned to plans, and we eventually resolved to have not just a graduation party, but *the* graduation party. Either by happy accident, by impressively erudite parenting, or by a bit of both, Mr. and Mrs. W____ were to be out of town until Wednesday following graduation. Once this information was gleaned, planning commenced. One of my primary tasks for the semester was fundraising—traipsing across campus from group to group, to every nook and cranny, spreading the word about the party and attaining financial support for alcohol. I took great pleasure in this job. On Monday, I was ready for the most crucial aspect of my mission.

The day was exceedingly critical. The party’s fate rested on the successful execution of Monday’s tasks. At 8 am, with over four hundred dollars of crowdsourced funds in my pocket, Alex, Vlad, and I hopped into the P____ family’s CRV and headed north. All according to plan. Alex B____ and I had met through a shared

interest in mountain biking during our sophomore year. We dug trails, raced, and rode constantly, even founding the mountain bike club at school together. He had a tall, wiry build that made even me look stout and enough energy for me to suspect that his blood content contained sizable sums of sugar, Adderall, and caffeine.

Vlad was a man of solid constitution and one you want on your team, being that he was from Belarus and presumably fought Grizzly bears for sport before coming to America. Vlad had a good heart, though he always had a way of finding trouble, be it with his parents, bureaucrats at school, or the law. When the two were together, they had a dangerously entertaining synergy, egging each other on in almost any pursuit. One that comes to mind was a race they crafted between each other to down a “shot tower”—a pyramid of six shots—on what was an otherwise a markedly tame weeknight with a few friends at the P____’s apartment. Needless to say, it was not a tame night for them, and Amanda, Alex’s girlfriend, was less than pleased.

That same night I drove Emma K____ home, a girl who was undeniably *cool*. She donned tattoos, short black hair, a mysterious aura, and, most intriguingly, unparalleled confidence. I couldn’t quite place what she was at the time, but I can put my finger on it now. Emma K____ was a woman. This was unbelievably intimidating to me. And given my utter lack of suave with girls (let alone women) up to this point, I was destined to fumble my way through this too. One lesson I learned that night was this: when it comes down to it, in the here and now, not a single song in Taylor Swift’s discography constitutes romantic music. A song of hers coming over my car speakers drew a laugh from Emma that punctuated our kissing. I lurched for the *next* button on my console—and another lesson learned that night was that a cover of “Teenager in Love” by *The Red Hot Chili Peppers*, especially with a *woman* who was also undeniably *cool*, is a much better choice than Ms. Swift. Emma and I had a brief and confusing relationship that summer. It petered out, not by some dramatic falling out of any sort, but by the quiet of indecision, the inability of either party to make some sort of choice. We

exchanged the odd drunk conversation on the phone well into my freshman year of college, but those eventually stopped too. I'm not even sure when.

Future relationships of mine had an similar tune. In the confusing haze of adolescence—muddied by insobriety, the perpetual thought of what greener pastures may yet lay in wait in the form of other women, and chronic indecision—relationships with women tended to come and go. It seemed to be what everyone was doing, and I failed to admit to myself that with each flame I failed to nurture, each flame that was not decisively either snuffed or kindle but instead slowly burned out to nothing from a lack of care, people were hurt, left alone, used. Those who consider the effects of the sexual revolution as some sort of unmitigated good for women have likely not reflected for more than a minute on its seismic effect. For these fumbling relationships, careless and deleterious, would not be possible without the social and technological changes wrought by this revolution. And much like the fish who has no concept of water, as I grew up, I never thought that relationships between the sexes could be healthier, more meaningful, more serious than those I saw all around me, those produced by the invisible but all pervasive ethos of the sexual revolution. And so with the painfully crystalline view of adulthood that I have looking back on my youth, I do sometimes still wonder what might have been with Emma, with any of these flames that could have persisted, could have been cultivated into something as eternal and beautiful as Hestia's flame. But this is no time for daydreaming, such longing and wondering can only spell ruin.

Our destination on Monday was Bakersfield. I had a friend there who was to help us with the booze acquisition. She was a practicing nurse, and former counselor of mine from summer camp. Never close while I was a camper, we spent one year on staff together where our friendship was forged out of the finest steel there is. She was the first person outside of my family that I truly loved. I still do. To feel this was elucidating. It reminds me of the perception of sex before and after having it for the first time—the

act, the all-important first act, completely revolutionizes one's perspective of the concept. Love was nothing like what I imagined it would be for most high school. There was no doubt as to its reciprocity.

She's married now. And has a kid. I went to her wedding a couple years back. The quiet nagging of what could be with Megan that had lingered in the back of my mind for so many years died violently that night. But I digress, the *really* important thing here was that she was over twenty-one.

We showed up to her apartment just after she got off work. After introducing my buddies and catching up in brief, we got down to business. We drove to the grocery store, and though it seemed like a pretty sure thing, my heart still pounded as if I was shortly to hold up a bank.

Vlad and Alex loitered about the getaway car as Megan and I headed into the store. At the booze aisle, it was game time. This was it. Suddenly, I was gripped by horror, like a student showing up to class only to realize that the exam he thought was next week was actually today. Having only come to this aisle in the past with my dad for racks of Bud Light or my mum for a bottle of wine, I was drastically unprepared to be at the helm of the operation. *Damn it! How could I have forgotten to ask? What was I supposed to buy?* I was sweating like a whore in church at this point, having just realized our entire group's oversight with regard to this part of the plan. They sent me, *me!*, the booze-drinking neophyte, who had no idea what to buy. Fortunately, I had a seasoned veteran in tow. Megan offered sage advice: given this was a large party, we should get lots of hard alcohol and lots of light beer, and that we could take care of buying chasers back in Santa Clarita. This seemed to be a sufficient amount of technical jargon, and I thoughtfully concurred with a furrowed brow, as if I too were a dispassionate expert. In my head I theorized about what a "chaser" could be. I slapped the cash in her hand, and she shooed me off so she could make the purchase.

We left the store. I was triumphant. Megan was tired. She was, after all, just off a twelve-hour shift in the ICU—work almost

as important as that which she was carrying out now. Vlad and Alex casually popped the trunk of the CRV to accept the contraband. Vlad opened the spare tire compartment, which was carefully lined with towels to preserve our bounty. We, of course, had to keep it all well hidden since every cop in Southern California would certainly be on to us. We bade our accomplice adieu and paid her a hearty thanks. Vlad drove home with a steady hand. This was a modest operation for the battle-hardened Belarusian.

Upon our safe arrival to Via M____, we were greeted by our compatriots, James, Max, Amanda, and a few others. Vlad had to pick up and bring over his little brother, who we'll call Vlad Jr. as his real name escapes me, to babysit for the afternoon. I think Vlad Jr. was about six years old. We were more than happy to accept the extra hands with the party setup. As we got to work, everyone was generally helpful except for Max, or as we affectionately called him, Brick, who was busy interrogating James about different mixed drinks in a desperate last-minute attempt to cram enough knowledge into his head to bartend the party. To give a flavor for how prepared Brick was for the task, his first question had something to do with what mixes well with beer.

Vlad Jr. proved to be my right-hand man for the preparations. We spent many an hour covering all the particularly fragile and stain-susceptible furniture with thick plastic sheeting. Downstairs, the crew was meticulously preparing the bar. James made sure to let me know that I had committed a severe misstep by getting Coors Light instead of Coors Banquet. I told him that he should be thankful we had anything at all. In my later years, I came to learn that Coors Light is actually a better beer at parties for reasons of economy and consumptive sustainability.

The hatches were battened, the bar built out, the beautiful analog surround sound system at the ready, and we had a full twenty-four hours to spare. The Square Squad could rejoice. And of course, it was just the Square Squad, for the Stink Squad wouldn't dare help set up a party. They would only show up to one, and even then, it was always fashionably late. Judging by the wholesomeness of the group, it is safe to assume that after tying up

loose ends we all headed to our respective homes for family dinners. It was our last dinner as high schoolers, after all.

Though it didn't take much more than maintaining a pulse to graduate from our high school, it did feel like a relatively important night. My parents were happy, and I hope proud, to see their youngest finish high school. I had navigated the past four years with relatively few hitches, and any significant misstep of mine was almost exclusively a fault of my own.

I rarely have trouble sleeping, but I don't think I slept well on Monday night. This was due to a few obvious reasons. I was graduating from high school in less than twenty-four hours. More importantly, the graduation party was in less than twenty-four hours. Funnily enough, I didn't lose any sleep over the distant future, as one often does when a big chapter in life concludes and another looms on the horizon. Though the next chapter of life, college, was yet to be written, I did not fret over it. I was more concerned with what soon was to be written about the graduation party. All else paled in comparison.

9. EXHORTATION ON FLOUNDER

“Would my friend rather stay behind? No, we will go down together into the heart of the forest. Let your courage be roused by the battle to come; forget death and follow me, a man resolute in action, but one who is not foolhardy. When two go together each will protect himself and shield his companion, and if they fall leave an enduring name”

- Epic of Gilgamesh

Some time ago I went to my girlfriend’s college graduation. I left the ceremony with a vague sense of distaste that I couldn’t quite place. It was hard to discern what had perturbed me so. Was it the banality of the speeches? Certainly, they lacked any trace of vigor, vitality, or honesty. They were speeches carefully written and curated by committee in order to ensure the use of the current and proper nomenclature. They all sounded as if they were delivered at gunpoint. *Best not go off script.*

The whole thing was grossly sterile. Empty platitudes clanged about rudely in the audience’s heads as a final reminder that higher education had indeed died—murdered at the hand of bureaucratic swell, mediocrity, and human resource departments. These distinguished guests’ messages were pruned and primmed and washed and sanitized three times over so as to sound as palatable as possible to as many as possible. But somehow also washed from them was everything human. When you write something for everybody, you are writing it for nobody.

But I realized that the real disgust-inducing injustice was the song performed by the school’s quite talented a cappella group.

It was none other than the little number written, recorded, and produced for The Walt Disney Company's \$3.3 billion mega-hit movie franchise *Toy Story*—"You Got a Friend in Me." I chuckled when it came on. For it so perfectly represented the apex of this nebulous concept that the whole ceremony came to represent, an impotent credo of the flailing West: *do what feels good*.

Do what feels good. At first pass, the song and the credo seem innocuous enough—pleasing to the ear, and on their surface, carrying a theme that seems laudable. Many of the newly graduated cohort received innocuous enough offers from Bay-area companies—compensation packages pleasing to the ear, and on their surface, mission statements that seem harmless, even laudable (after all who can disagree with a mission like "to give people the power to build community and bring the world closer together"?). It is easy to let it all rush past without much scrutiny. It feels good. And despite the hollow calls to action of the speakers that day, the university had succeeded only in equipping its students with the power of specialized automata at the very best, and on average probably financially and mentally handicapping them more than anything. As Randy Newman's cheery lyrics ricocheted around the stadium—*you're gonna see it's our destiny, you got a friend in me*—I meditated on how much more friendship, brotherhood, demands of an individual than the song, and the creed of *do what feels good*, imply. It was in this same moment that I thought of Flounder.

Flounder and I did not become brothers until college when he moved in with me Junior year. He had just transferred from city college. College, and in particular, our cohabitation during college, strained our relationship in every dimension. In high school Flounder was of course a friend, but I looked down upon him with a sort of benevolent paternalism. I struggled to witness day over day as Flounder grew into my peer during college. The term brotherhood implies a lack of hierarchy, an equal footing, and my ego struggled to allow this change to manifest between us. A less charitable interpretation of the past was simply that Flounder continued to do Flounderesque things through college at a velocity that I did not think possible. Acts he committed that

once would have made me chuckle, now induced a sort of psychosis. In any given week these could include things like him almost burning our one hundred and forty-year-old house down, not showing up to his own birthday party that he planned for himself, and pursuing almost every woman with whom I had previous relations. James once said that Flounder is the guy who not only wears his pants backwards all day without realizing it, but who also, when told his pants are on backwards, looks you straight in the eye with complete sincerity and says, “No man, this is how you wear pants.”

When I graduated, the rift in our friendship was formalized to the point where we didn’t speak at all for several years. I felt a deep of injustice had been committed against me that time could not remedy and my ego would not permit to be reconciled.

Years later, I received a text from him. *Hey Matt, it’s been a while, we should get lunch.*

I agreed.

We met outside his new employer’s office. He was chemical engineer for a biotechnology company in Berkeley. He met me on the sidewalk. Rocking back and forth from heels to toes, hands in pockets, he said, “Hey man. It’s good to see you.”

“You too, man.”

We walked to a taco truck he liked around the block. As we kicked our way up the sidewalk he let out, “Look, I’m sorry for everything that happened. I did a lot of stuff I’m not proud of, and I’ve grown a lot.”

“It’s okay. I could really be a huge ass back then too.”

We got burritos. Flounder paid. We sat on the curb and talked about everything we had missed in each other’s lives over the last few years. The passionate anger I held towards Flounder did not recede until that very day when it suddenly vanished in its entirety. Oddly, it was this unabating anger that made me realize long ago that we would at some point make amends. If I cared about him less, anger would fade to indifference and Flounder would fade to irrelevance. But brotherhood does not allow for this

kind of apathy. I am proud to engage with Flounder as an equal, and in a number of dimensions I actually find myself looking up to him.

In a lot ways, Flounder has done the best of our crew from high school. He was the first to move in with his girlfriend, now fiancé. Has maintained the steadiest work. Has overcome severe injury and other perturbances to life's equilibrium with resolve. Perhaps with all the time we spent chiding Flounder for his ways, we could have been interrogating our own actions and asking if we were living virtuously ourselves. Despite all this, Flounder can never escape his nickname. He can never truly outgrow the role he bore in high school, and I hope he never does because it is some of those very characteristics that make him my best friend and my brother.

After inhaling our burritos we walked back to his office. I got in my car, yelling as I drove off, "Later!" I paused, biting my tongue, then finally added, "...Flounder! I'm still going to call you Flounder!"

He grinned.

10. TUESDAY

"Who is there, my friend, can climb to the sky? Only the gods dwell forever in sunlight. As for man, his days are numbered, whatever he may do, it is but wind. Here are you, afraid of death!"

- Epic of Gilgamesh

I rolled up to the College of the Canyons parking lot for the graduation ceremony in the family's Toyota Sienna. This car had gained notoriety across generations at Hart, as my brother (eight years my senior), my sister (two years my senior), and I had all learned to drive in it and used it to commute to school. Many a good time was facilitated by the van, be it my brother ditching class and driving to a honey tasting with his buddies in Fillmore or my friends and I also opting out of many a day of school in favor of literally anything else.

It sputtered to a stop at COC where I met up with the other graduates behind the stadium. We were briefed on the ceremony and patted down for air horns, beach balls, and other disruptive paraphernalia. They missed a few beach balls. The whole graduating class fraternized with each other for one last time. Hart, as I have mentioned, was a unique place where the graduating class all somehow operated as family. As we queued up for the ceremony, friction and tension that once existed between individuals and groups yielded to nostalgia and reverie. This was it. Perhaps the only tension that remained was the slight awkwardness of the fact that the top fifty students of the graduating class

donned red gowns while the rest wore black. The Square Squad was entirely fitted in red, while most of the stinks wore black.

The sun retreated, families poured into the stadium, and the ceremony commenced. We marched onto the field and into our seats, stealthily blew up a few obligatory beach balls to toss around, and listened to administrators, teachers, and some students drone on. I was hoping to see one of the graduation speeches delivered by James, but unfortunately his endless mortal combat with administration prevented this from happening.

Two students were allotted time to speak, and tryouts for these slots were held a couple months before the ceremony. James delivered a moving speech to the selection panel that brought two of the teachers to tears. While there may be the odd fabricated detail or embellishment in this tome, this is not one of them. The speech carried a gravity that spoke to James' power as an orator and, more importantly, to the fact that, even at his young age, he was a deep thinker who could identify what was worth taking seriously. He had the chance to not leave his peers with a magnificently forgettable speech but rather to charge them with a sense of duty, to not bolster their egos but to urge reflection on their role, not in the nebulous notion of "the world," but rather in the concrete place of the family and the community. Unfortunately, a teacher of ours named Mrs. H____, displaying less maturity than the children she was purportedly educating, barred the panel from selecting James in order to avoid "an incident" at graduation. And with that, we were left with Emily H____ and Ali as our speakers.

The entirety of Emily's speech evades my memory. Ali's was essentially a bullet point list of ten trite takeaways from school. It was a kind of proto-Buzzfeed article: easy to digest, easy to forget. The content was also narrowly addressed to the highest performing academics of our class, omitting the majority of the graduating seniors from its scope. This is not intended as a slight against Ali, but rather the whole academic milieu in which we were entrenched. We allege as a society to espouse the power of egalitarianism, a vague notion we hold in the highest, most unassailable of regards, yet obvious, natural hierarchies of various

forms emerge. Those of innate skill, drive, wealth, culture. And so, implicitly knowing these hierarchies make for a functioning society but afraid to acknowledge them publicly, we silently stratify our world along the same lines humans always have: amalgamating our elite in Advanced Placement classes, in the finest universities, in the wealthiest, most opportune cities, all the while inculcating within them the fallacious idea that all are “equal,” not in the eyes of God, but in some obviously fake material sense.

And so one does not have to wonder long why the class was divided, red and black. One does not have to wonder why Ali accidentally omitted ninety percent of the graduating class from her audience. The speech was not for them. Unless, that is, the myth of absolute equalitarianism has been drilled so deeply into one’s subconscious through decades of “education” that he lacks the faculties to realize that the concepts held so foundational to his life are simply an imagined order.

I don’t hold it against Emily or Ali for not having particularly engaging speeches, but I do wonder what could have been had James been allowed to speak. Could his words have touched a few students in such a way as to leave an impression? Could they have grabbed one of them by the shoulders and wrested him from his slumber? In all probability, the answer is no. I have seen and forgotten too many “famous” and “life-changing” graduation speeches by Steve Jobs, DFW, and the like. Perhaps their speeches, or James’s, would light a fire of ambition in someone’s heart for an hour or for a day. Inevitably, the normal patterns of thought creep back in and reassert their monopoly, and one returns to business as usual. But since the speech was never delivered, we can never be sure and thus have the luxury to wonder, *What if?*

The ceremony drew to a close, and the field was rushed with friends and families. I hugged my mother and shook my father’s hand. James and I took a photo together that I have kept to this day. We look like respectable high school graduates, save for the minor detail of James’ diploma being proudly held upside down. James, always the contrarian. Congratulations were wrapped

up, and it was time to get down to business. I bade my folks adieu and made my way to the W_____ household.

It was around 9 pm when I and a few others showed up. We made sure the house was all set for the night, and then started welcoming friends as they trickled in. It was finally becoming a reality. Months of blood, sweat and tears were beginning to pay off. Sometimes, events of such magnitude, requiring herculean efforts to organize and bring to fruition, seem less glorious as they come to pass.

Often, the idea of something is better than the actual thing itself. The graduation party shattered this rule, for it far outstripped even our most fantastical expectations. What the three of us put to paper in this work is only a small sliver of the whole story. For every page I write, another hundred exist, unwritten, in the memory of each party-goer from that monumental night.

As more folks showed up, James wanted to have a couple of our larger friends posted at the door, just to make sure no underclassmen or other undesirables tried to make an entrance. He put Kevin M_____ and Eddie L_____ out front. Kevin was intimidating at first glance, but a sweet guy once he opened his mouth. I'm not sure how many brain cells he had kicking around upstairs, but his big, warm heart more than made up for any deficiency he may have had in intellect. I'd take a loving person over a smart one any day. Besides, there is no shortage of autistically brilliant computer scientists thoughtlessly pushing society to the brink of destruction, and we could use a few more loving mothers, caring friends, good people. More people like Kevin M_____.

Eddie was a very Americanized Korean who knew how to have a good time. Koreans in our town existed on a spectrum between a FOB—fresh off the boat—holding fast to one's cultural mores on one end and a perhaps too well-assimilated American turning his back upon the homeland altogether on the other. Eddie was probably as close to the center of this spectrum as could be, suspended between two worlds. I wonder if he struggled with this. I wonder where Eddie is now.

Having those two at the door enticed me to hang out front for a bit. I realized it was actually pretty fun to man the door. We had the keys to the castle. Collectively, we were the all powerful bouncer.

Kevin and I would stand intimidatingly at either side of the door with arms crossed, severe looks on our faces, peering down on our potential guests from upturned chins. Eddie sat in a chair between us, arms and legs crossed, leaning back all too casually. The breezeway leading to the front door was dimly lit. As people rounded the corner to gain entry, they were greeted by three shadowy figures. They'd approach slowly, cautiously, and Eddie, as rehearsed, would explode from the chair with a combative diatribe in Korean, rendering the guests completely disarmed. They wouldn't know how to react, stunned by the crazed Korean screaming at them, his faceless sentinels backing him up. Some would stumble to find words, others attempted a nervous laugh. Some just fled. We never held up the act for long, Kevin would usually break character first, bursting into laughter, all of us soon following. We'd emerge from our shadowy posts into the light of the breezeway and our friends would recognize us, breathing a sigh of relief and embracing us heartily. We'd let them in and wish them well, then it was back into character for our next victims. It was good fun.

Eventually, when the party seemed to be sufficiently underway, I joined the festivities. The first person I saw inside was Terry M____. Terry was one of the few non-seniors we allowed in the party, as he was an absolute riot and universally revered among us. I had tutored him in math, science and history over the past two years, and we had developed a rewarding relationship as student and teacher. I tutored twelve students throughout high school, and while Terry wasn't in any advanced placement courses and fared poorly in some classes due to a few attention deficit issues, he was the most curious and intelligent of my students. He learned in a unique way and, when taught right, would grasp concepts with ease. Terry is a kid who, in today's high school, would be loaded full of SSRIs and amphetamines—goggled, muzzled, sedated by a

panel of child psychology experts. But fortunately for all involved, save for the healthcare industry's coffers and the egos of a few clueless psychologists, Terry escaped this fate and retained his soul. Us bumping into each other at the party provided him with a sort of graduation of his own. Our work together was finished. Now we greeted each other as friends.

To celebrate this next chapter, Terry yelled "Matt, we're taking a shot!" I obliged, without telling him that I had never taken one before. We poured ourselves each a shot of Smirnoff and linked arms, me crouching down to match his height, which was about a foot shorter than mine. "One, two, three!" he commanded.

I didn't know what to expect as we violently threw our heads back. *A little like rubbing alcohol, but not so bad.* Terry unwittingly became the mentor at that moment, how quickly the tables had reversed. Us seniors liked to think we were leaving big shoes to be filled, but with the likes of Terry in the new guard, it seemed we had nothing to worry about. We exchanged a hug, both feeling the electricity swirling in the air around us, and the booze swirling within us—I felt so alive, so on top of the world. I think everyone felt it that night.

As the party progressed, it all seemed to be going too well. I didn't think this at the time, but looking back, I'm surprised something hadn't happened sooner. But there was always Kelsey F____ to shake things up. She had tipped her mum off about the party, who was the last person we wanted privy to our plans. We weren't aware of this fact ahead of the party, but quickly wised up to what had happened when an angry Mrs. F____ rolled up to the house around midnight. We heard some shrill screams from the front yard, which turned out to be Mrs. F____ yelling at our sweet boy Kevin. He of course had done nothing to deserve this berating, but Mrs. F____ needed someone, anyone to release her rage upon. Some find an outlet through boxing, or gardening, or running. Others involve themselves in their child's high school drama as a form of release.

Kevin came inside, located James and told him about the situation. Being the host, James had decided to stay sober for the

party, a wise decision that allowed him to deal with issues big and small throughout the night. I saw Kevin whispering to James in the living room while the rest of us were getting down to *Aja*. A room of motion and joy spun around a still and concerned James W____. He was caught off guard, as he even had the foresight to approach Kelsey the week prior to ask directly if “her mum was going to be a problem” at the party—Kelsey assured him she wouldn’t. That meant nothing now, the gears were turning in his head, plotting his next course of action—the captain of a ship headed straight for the eye of the storm. James seemed concerned, but I knew he deliberately sought out these kinds of challenges. He enjoyed the pressure and, perhaps, the spotlight that come with them. But I really don’t know, in any fundamental sense, why James sought to put himself arbitrarily into these situations of strife. He still does this today, but at what seems like a far lesser frequency and magnitude. Perhaps he did it for the story, for the ability to tell it to an audience that waits with bated breath to hear what happens next. Maybe now there just isn’t an audience anymore. High school kids inevitably think it is the stuff of legend to down bottles of liquor, to take LSD and keep up appearances of sobriety for ten hours, to crash your dad’s Thunderbird and survive while trying to navigate a corner faster than a professional driver who couldn’t and who died. But these feats don’t age well and the James I know today has realized this. Maybe he struggles to think of what James, the man, can do to inspire awe in his friends like he once did. Maybe he is finding this a much harder proposition than it was in high school. But this is something that only he can know in his own soul.

Anyways, at least at the time, Mrs. F____ would prove to be yet another exacting challenge that James was prepared, and maybe even a little excited, to meet. James walked outside and approached the door of her car. Mrs. F____ venomously accosted him. “James, you wreak of alcohol. What the hell is going on in there? I’m reporting this to the police! Even you are hammered!” This was all in spite of James’ complete sobriety.

James asked “Do you want me to get your daughter for you to bring home?”

“No, everyone needs to leave the party immediately!”

Her motive seemed to be spiting us for no substantial reason as opposed to being a mother to her daughter. Kelsey got too drunk for her own good that night, and we ended up taking care of her and finding her a ride back home—an escapade that was entirely preventable had Mrs. F_____ simply picked her up when she drove by. Some mother she was that night.

James rushed back inside, already having formed his plan. He announced that everyone had to leave for just a short time in order to prevent an untimely visit by the authorities.

“Mrs. F_____ just needs to see people leaving, go on a walk for twenty minutes and come right back.” He quietly informed the closer friends that they could all stay. The majority of the partygoers funneled out the front door, most of them relatively drunk at this point, which was the least safe thing for everyone’s wellbeing. We have Mrs. F_____ to thank for making this risk a necessity.

Looking down on the scene from the second floor, it appeared apocalyptic. Zombies stumbling around in droves under the flickering streetlights of a cul-de-sac otherwise shrouded in the peaceful darkness of suburbia. Bodies falling to the ground, some sitting on the neighbors’ lawns, others listlessly wandering in circles. Vomit began materializing on sidewalks.

Satisfied with her victory, Mrs. F_____ sped off into the night, barely avoiding collision with the minors she forced from the safety of the W_____ manor. The core group remained inside, chatting about the absurdity of what we were seeing, and exchanging opinions of how the night was going. On the whole, everyone was pleased, with the obvious exception of James.

I walked downstairs to find him sitting on one of the steps, head in hands. It was then I realized that even Xerxes bleeds. It was the first time I had seen James commanding anything less than near-complete control of his environment and mental state. He usually handled conflict and tribulations such as these in stride.

Since that moment, I have always had a nagging worry about James in the back of my mind. I suspect there is an almost unbearable pressure inside of him that demands he maintain an air that proudly states “I am in control!” An air he has so well preserved over the years. But he refuses to give even his closest friends and his family a window into his soul’s struggle for a firm footing. When I tell him that I worry about his weight, his health, his drinking, about the fact that I don’t want to lose my best friend before the age of forty, he steers the discussion elsewhere with all the conversational tact that he is so capable of. I worry that his intellect is some sort of a curse, that all the external composure and all the control are counterbalanced by an equally immense inner disequilibrium, demons yet unconquered, and perhaps ones that will remain so until he permits someone, or even himself, to know that he too bleeds.

James sat on the steps, pondering his predicament. He was dealing with hundreds of kids partying in his parents home. Broken furniture. Crazy mothers. A literal army of drunks that he was forced to release into the wilds of Santa Clarita. Control of the situation was far beyond his grasp, we neared the eye of the storm. I patted him on the shoulder and assured him that we were all here to solve whatever problems may arise. We were his crew and would never abandon our captain even if the ship was torn to shreds and swallowed by the wine dark sea. He appreciated my consolation and said he only needed a minute to sit and process everything. After a short time James was back on his feet, making sure that what was in his control was taken care of. We were all soon back to having a good time. Some of the castaways even began to trickle back in.

That’s when the cops showed up. James, having gathered himself, did not hesitate to walk straight to the front door, greet them cordially, walk outside, and ensure they didn’t have an opportunity to enter the house. The cops had gotten calls from several people in the neighborhood claiming there were drunk kids “just kind of roaming around.” The cops would not have been called had Kelsey’s mum never bothered showing up. James

handled the situation with a deft touch, but watching from the upstairs windows with the lights turned off, we had no way of knowing how the conversation was going. It was an intimidating scene: three cruisers, a handful of policemen, and James out there going to bat for us. One of the cruisers had even dramatically made its approach from over the cul-de-sac which linked the next street via a sidewalk and some grass. It was aggressively situated where a car certainly had never been before, making the scene look more like that of a homicide than a high school party. Most everyone upstairs was in a hush, barely peeking over the window sills. And then there was Eric who stood shirtless, his hairy, sweaty, aromatic Armenian chest proudly covering the entire area of an open window. Beer in hand, he yelled defiantly, “Cops go home!” A mixture of awe and horror was felt by the meager many hiding around the room. I respected Eric’s brashness, I saw the same confidence then as I had when we met on “casual Friday” all those years ago, this time with a little more disdain for authority. Oh, to be eighteen. Soon we saw James shake hands with one of the officers, and turn back for the front door. The cops returned to their cars and cruised off. Slightly perturbed grass and black tire marks staining the sidewalk were soon the only evidence that they ever existed.

James came back inside, and was greeted by a roar from the crowd. The music resumed and the dancing was back in full swing with even more vigor than before. Eventually, most of our castoffs returned and here we were, on the far end the storm. James had done it, dealt with a crisis of higher stakes than he had before seen, and his ego was all the better for it. This may have been his first dealing with the cops, but it certainly wouldn’t be his last.

Now the reader may be slightly curious as to how the authors fared with the fine young party-going women of the night, given that this was our last high school hurrah. I had made no designs for the night. Being that it was my first huge party, I approached it with no expectations. But with Steely Dan cooing from the speakers for most of the night, it was impossible to not to

ask a girl to dance whenever I found myself in the living room. And given the sheer size of the party, I found myself swinging with close friends and strangers alike. It was all so new and exciting to me. At some point I found myself upstairs chatting with Sophia, with whom I went to elementary school and hadn't seen since. We caught up and eventually she made advances on me. I was happy to oblige. After a few minutes of fooling around, we parted. An acquaintance of mine warned me of her treachery and I was careful to avoid her the rest of the night. There ended up being another couple notable encounters, but they'll be addressed in due time.

As I was doing my rounds, I had the great fortune of stumbling onto perhaps the most legendary moment of the night. It, of course, involved Flounder. He was leaving the party far before its conclusion, as he couldn't muster the courage to ask his folks if he could stay the night. This was after I even provided him the convenient alibi of "7 am church service with my family the morning after graduation." But I will never understand the inner-machinations of his mind, and any attempt to do so would no doubt be fruitless. He bumbled nervously down the stairs as I walked down the hallway. He approached Ali, Eric, James and Noah who were at the foot of the stairs chatting. Flounder remained a couple steps above the group, putting him about on par with Ali's height, directly across from her, with the others completing this circle. Flounder always had a look of slight apprehension on his face and generally carried himself in a nervous fashion, but he looked even more tense than usual. Something was afoot. I loitered casually in the hallway, watching the interaction from a few feet away. He said a couple nervous goodbyes, then a long period of silence punctuated the group. Anticipation hung in the air. He looked at Ali and said "I'm sorry, but I have to do this." Flounder leaned across the center of the circle, eyes closed, and attempted to plant a kiss. She wheeled around and ran away, bolting out the front door at an impressive clip. Everyone stood paralyzed in disbelief of what had transpired. Flounder hung his head and left.

Noah bellowed, “What the fuck just happened?” Indeed, the same thought was on my mind, *What the fuck just happened?*

Our four years of high school were filled with unlikely stories of success and failure. Events transpired that feel dreamlike, almost unreal to this day. But there is no doubt that the highest density of this type of event revolved around Flounder. The failed kiss was no exception. Its details are still hotly debated today, the story has become as much myth, folklore, legend as it is history. But there is almost always more Truth in myth than in fact. In any case, after the initial shock was overcome, we were subsequently overwhelmed by a fit of laughter. Flounder never failed to outdo himself.

I continued on with the night, for there was much to see and more to do. *Can't Buy a Thrill* called me to the living room. Katie and I shared a dance and chatted a bit. I didn't think much of it, but later in the night as I went to sleep, she wound up at my side. We innocently slept next to each other on the floor of the game room when the party finally wound down. I never thought about Katie in a romantic sense, so I was a bit surprised by how it all transpired.

My confusing journey with the opposite sex through high school continued well into college and beyond. I guess love is complicated. High school was largely exploratory: understanding how to interact with and understand (in a very limited capacity) women. In college and beyond these exploits and explorations taught me more fundamental lessons: how incredibly hard it is to improve and enrich someone's life and how easy it is to cause pain. I learned through my fumbblings the importance of sacrifice in relationships. Things get complicated when emotions, sex, love and hate get mixed up into one big pot. It can seem impossible to follow the virtuous path, especially when that path is foggy at best during the transition from adolescence to adulthood. I can only hope that my decisions in high school aided in attaining clarity with respect to the virtuous path. Even now, it seems unlikely that the dust will ever settle and I will be the man I hope to be for my wife. But I suppose there is always room for growth. There is always

time. Until there's not. But enough with my eternally unresolved musings on the opposite sex.

As I drifted to sleep, the party over, my mind entertained no great reflections of the past four years as one might have expected. There was no sentiment of sadness or longing for more. There was really no sentiment at all, except for the thrill of successfully surviving my first huge party, one that we planned and hosted ourselves. Classes, exams, hockey games, golf tournaments, bike rides, parties, kickbacks, friends, fights, dates, break-ups, early mornings, late nights would all be molded by time, some forgotten or otherwise lost, some embellished and modified by imperfect memories, others still retaining a crystalline clarity. But I dwelled on none of this at the time. Neither did I think about, look forward to, or fret about the future.

These days, I have to intentionally push thoughts of the past and future from my mind. Back then, it was effortless. Perhaps this is the great implicit wisdom of youth, a wisdom that is inevitably lost with age. Some may simply call this a naive lack of foresight or a sort of reckless abandon that we grow out of with time. But I would be lying if I said I don't sometimes crave that simple conception of life that I had when falling asleep on the floor of James' game room that night.

11. TUESDAY'S GONE

“No one has studied the psychology of a dying party. It may be raging, howling, boiling, and then a fever sets in and a little silence and then quickly, quickly it is gone, the guests go home or got to sleep or wander away to some other affair and they leave a dead body.”

- Cannery Row

Many came to the party. Fewer slept over. Fewer still stayed to clean. But this small group made short and surprisingly enjoyable work of the task. Despite the impressive numbers at the party, the damage was not so bad, barring a few minor exceptions.

While James and I were cleaning the backyard, something caught my eye in the pool. The continuity of gentle blue ripples in the water was punctuated by shimmers of gold. There was a mysterious item at the bottom of the pool, glistening in the light, its shape distorted by the water's refraction. We eventually identified the object as a bottle of Corona Light. A closer analysis revealed that this was no ordinary bottle of Corona, for there were several anomalous traits associated with it. Traits that remain unexplained to this day.

For one, the bottle's cap was not a twist-off, just a standard pry-off cap. This is a normal enough attribute on its own, but the cap was untampered with, and yet the bottle, though fully sealed, was mostly empty. It was about a third filled with beer. The upper volume of the bottle was air: roughly 78% nitrogen, 20.9% oxygen, 0.9% argon, 0.03% carbon dioxide, and 0.17% other gases, while

the lower volume contained beer made up of barley malt, corn, hops, yeast, ascorbic acid, and propylene glycol alginate. *But how could this perfectly sealed bottle be partially empty?* A plausible explanation eludes us to this day.

Beyond this, the beer sat at the bottom of the pool, erect, the cylindrical surface of the container's bottom lying flush with the pool's floor. I thought to myself *Certainly the buoyant force on the bottle should be high enough to cause the beer to float.* Unsatisfied with this simple hunch, I sought a rigorous mathematical approach to validate this hypothesis. But for a moment, I hesitated, seriously considering the option of leaving the question unanswered for fear of what I might find out. My entire understanding of the universe could be upended. What if the beer should float? What then?

Would this prove the existence of the divine? This I was afraid to find out. Ultimately, James and I decided we needed to confront reality.

And so I pulled out a piece of paper and got to work. Drawing a free body diagram and armed with the knowledge of Archimedes Principle, which states that the buoyant force exerted by a fluid is equal to the weight of the fluid displaced, I was able to figure out what *should* happen, physically speaking.

Given that the bottle was static, the acceleration was set to zero, and so the force due to gravity and the buoyant force should cancel out, or in other words, be equal and opposite. We ultimately discovered the unsettling truth: according to classical Newtonian mechanics, *the beer bottle should be floating.* The buoyant force was very slightly higher than the force due to gravity. Therefore, even if placed intentionally at the bottom of the pool, the bottle should accelerate to the surface—in a word, float.

I reeled for several hours.

We bore witness to what we perceived at the time to be a miracle. It probably wasn't and I probably shouldn't have been waiting so passively for a miracle to come along that would convince me to take religion seriously. Of course a kid raised in the 2000's would be waiting for some empirical validation, some rational basis to justify belief. But faith is irrational, even anti-

rational. One does not need faith to believe in rain when he can step outside and feel it patter down on his shoulders. But believing in something that transcends, and will always transcend, our understanding requires a humility and a faith that almost looks absurd in the post-enlightenment west where everything can be measured, conquered. Perhaps therein lay faith's power.

After recovering to some extent from our discovery, we got back to straightening up the backyard. The clean up crew, unsurprisingly comprised of recruits from the Square Squad, eventually finished its duties, and the W_____ abode was as clean as it was going to get. We had no hope of cleaning so well that James' parents would not suspect a party had transpired, but we could do well enough to ensure that their approximation of its size was orders of magnitude lower than what it had been in reality.

We headed to Denny's for a late breakfast, satisfied with our work. We ate voraciously and exchanged stories from the night. The party's content and chronology were hotly debated, as history and myth were already becoming difficult to untangle. Time has only softened this distinction.

Breakfast at Denny's would be the last time this group sat together. Of course, this thought crossed none of our minds that morning. Some of these people—people I considered that morning to be my best friends—I have not seen or heard from since that breakfast.

Some of our friends from high school are married. Others divorced. Some doctors. Others burnouts. Some have kids. Some are dead. That beautiful state of becoming that one exists in during high school is now long gone. Back then, our teachers, parents, friends, the world told us we had infinite potentialities laid at our feet. A sun that promised never to set. Now, we have all become. We age, and that never ending list of potentialities shrinks and shrinks until we become just one thing. As the infinite lines of potential futures approach us, we are forced over and over to pick one, and a singular line is all that we leave behind.

I don't know why we wrote this book. It originally served as an excuse for us to get together more often than we had been. It

made us carve out time to talk, share meals, drink beer, and write. It was a way to exchange stories about our shared past. To laugh at our naiveté. As I wrote, it became a way to relive that time when my life was pure becoming. I suspect James and Eric felt this way too. Now, I have become a man, and while I appear to have no shortage of life ahead of me, I leave behind me a growing share of life that has already been lived. At some point, I will have more left behind me, that singular line, than I do ahead. I may already be passed that point. I have found out that the sun, indeed, does set. In high school, these kinds of thoughts never emerge.

Senior year, James crashed his dad's Thunderbird while attempting to navigate an off-camber corner at eighty-five miles per hour. It was 3 am and he was alone. James walked away from it alive, miraculously unscathed. The next week at school, we lauded him as a hero. He spoke of the night with a cool arrogance. If that happened now, there would be no hero. There would be no arrogance.

In Those Ancient Days

Part 3

A.

“Are all the revolutions which nations have been agitated, all the efforts of great men be they warriors or legislators, to end in nothing? Are we incessantly moving in a vicious circle, where light succeeds to ignorance, and barbarism to civilization?”

- On the Opinions and Policy of Napoleon (III)

Straight lines do not naturally occur in nature. I forget who exactly taught me that, I think it was in boy scouts at one point. I distinctly remember visiting some civil war battlefield, probably Gettysburg, and my father pointing to a perfectly straight line of oak trees. “See, that’s how you know those trees were planted by man, nature doesn’t make straight lines like that!” Now I’m sure there is some particularly psychopathic biologist out there scoffing because some cell architecture displays perfect lines, but I still think it’s a pretty good rule.

Plenty of straight lines could be found on James’ desk as he stared intently at it during a particularly irrelevant period of class. It doesn’t take a genius to know that school desks are fake, but one obvious sign is just how straight the age lines are that mark the fake vinyl desktop. This technically wasn’t even James’ last class but it may as well be, since only a fool stays on campus past noon in their senior year of high school, and James was no fool, just ask him.

He wore a particularly garish pink Tommy Bahama shirt, and jeans identical to those he wore every day. I’m not sure exactly what he was thinking in regard to his wardrobe. I suppose he had never heard some saying similar to another my dad used to always say, “You can either be a victim of fashion or the paradigm of style.” James would never call himself a victim, but he was certainly no paradigm. It is particularly lucky we even find him in class at all

today, misplaced confidence extended beyond just classes. Now that he was eighteen, he could sign himself out of school and he used that privilege liberally.

The bell finally rang, well not so much a bell, more like a drone. I'm not sure when exactly schools abandoned traditional bells, but I think it was a poor decision. Real bells are loud and shrill enough to really wake you up. The modern drone just doesn't have the same energy. Perhaps it was just a self-aware change, keeping students in some transitional state between awake and sleep. If they kept the old bell someone might be violently awakened enough to question the theft of fifteen years from each participant. Instead, the drone is more like when a sound in real life becomes some element of a dream. A barking dog while you sleep becomes an itch on your neck in a dream, or a distant light, a low drone. People have been complaining about the education system for at least 100 years, but I think criticisms like *The Wall* that portray it as some torture chamber are hyperbolic and if anything downplay the real problem in service of the author's ego (ironic I know). The drone is just emblematic of the gestalt. Apathy, incompetence, institutionalization. The drone is not fifteen years of abuse or torture, it's fifteen years of sleep paralysis. A man can grow from pain and suffering, but every second you sleep is gone forever. If we returned to the traditional bell, if the students were forced awake by it, would they still choose to go to the next class?

In any case, this drone might as well have been an air raid siren because James immediately rushed out of the class. See, this wasn't just the last class of the day, it was the last school day of the year. James frantically searched for his collaborators. The best laid plans would now take motion.

Immediately he found Eric, who was just in that last class with James. He wore khaki pants and a band t-shirt. A good one. Eric stood just a few inches shorter than James, a fact the latter never ceased to remind Eric. He had black, well kept hair, almost Italian. It certainly compared well to the curly mess James had.

The ancient Greeks fought in a distinct way. They would form a tight line of men called a phalanx. Each man would carry a shield in his left hand and a spear in his right. Contrary to common sense, the more important tool was the shield. It covered not just the left side of the bearer but also the right side of the neighbor on his right. Where exactly the spear fit through is a matter of some debate. Some theorize it may have even been wielded overhand.

What this functionally means is that the man on the far right of the line had nobody to cover his right side. One might think you would put your craziest hardest fighter there, since it was by far the most dangerous position. On the contrary you usually want your most level-headed, reliable person on the right side. The phalanx was strong but if even one part broke, the entire scheme failed. That man on the right was the lynchpin of the entire formation and the most vulnerable. If I was a Greek strategos I would put Eric on my right end. I think James saw him in a similar way. Eric also had quite the scar on his eye.

Now that Eric had been gathered the quest for Matt began, and a quest it always was. Most people had their spots, places you could be pretty confident you would find them. For some it was a habitat, others a lair, and still others something like a carnivore's hunting grounds. This, however, in most cases—apart from the lair—implies a distinct clique of friends. The problem and virtue with Matt was he managed to be friends with everyone. One could imagine basic outlines of a person you had one class with, and Matt could instantly produce a name and profile. By senior year he had four hundred contacts in his phone in a school where our class had about five hundred students. This was after he lost his phone during junior year. In many ways such a lack of discrimination in choosing friends is something of a vice. It is usually the sign of a lack of character, a failure of discernment. A friend to everyone usually stands for nothing. Yet somehow with Matt this was not the case. Despite being friendly with everyone Matt managed to keep a tight circle of friends distinct. He had discernment but left room for opportunity. That circle was far from easy to get into paradoxically, and Matt had the tendency to determine your place quickly on his instinct alone. Luckily, both James and Eric were part of that circle, but it did not make Matt much easier to find.

Once the three were finally united the weekend could begin. This would not just be any weekend; however, it was the last weekend. They graduated on the following Tuesday. What would come next was half careful, adolescent planning and another part chaos.

B.

*“Rage—Goddess, sing the rage of Peleus’ son Achilles,
murderous, doomed, that cost the Achaeans countless losses,
hurling down to the House of Death so many sturdy souls,
great fighters’ souls, but made their bodies carrion,
feasts for the dogs and birds,
and the will of Zeus was moving toward its end.
Begin, Muse, when the two first broke and clashed,
Agamemnon lord of men and brilliant Achilles.”*

- The Iliad

One could never accuse Konrad of being apathetic. While it's true that he could sometimes take a topic too seriously or too personally, and one might even call him a bit quick to anger, in an age of crippling apathy I will always choose the man who cares too much. He cooled off in later years, but never lost the intuitive understanding of principles that spurs such strong emotion.

Quite a few years back I had a particularly interesting conversation with Konrad. We were caught, as we often are, reminiscing with a few drinks when the mood quickly changed. He spoke about his character when he was eighteen. Looking back, he regretted how he treated others, his rashness. Particularly he regretted how rude he often was to the opposite sex. I was the same way and I told him that. I'm not sure where I first heard it but I recounted a quote that “part of becoming a man is reconciling the person you were when you were too old to be a boy but not old enough to be a man.” As good friends do, we spent a few minutes in silence thinking.

Anger and Pride are the particular vices of men. Well not quite. Specifically, they are Wrath and Hubris. Anger alone is not a vice. There exists righteous anger and even constructive anger. In some part it is anger that inspires many great deeds. Some things rightfully create anger, and it's man's essential anger at the sight of evil which makes him more than an animal and can transmute the common to the heroic. Wrath is none of these things. It is inherently both destructive and arbitrary. There is a reason the first word of *The Iliad* is rage. Rage not just corrupts its puppet, but also any of his works and more importantly his dependents. No wrathful king long keeps his crown.

Similarly, we have Pride and Hubris. Pride in many ways can be a man's greatest virtue. It gives him the confidence to both know what is right and to act on it. In this knowledge a man can paradoxically be deferential. The source of true pride is not found solely in who a man is but rather what he has done. It is also based on respect for the triumphs of his collective past. The most remarkable accomplishment of this sort of pride is its ability to instill responsibility. Pride in the past and in yourself demands a future responsibility to preserve and improve. A standard which uplifts all men. Every great monument, conquest, and sacrifice was born from some Pride, both personal and collective. The will and duty to insist on more that bends reality in its image. Hubris on the other hand has none of these qualities. It has no time for the ideal, or responsibility because the arrogant man sees the ideal already immanentized in himself. Right and wrong begin and end with their whims, and dependents are tools not responsibilities. This is another vice associated with Achilles, and is the singular fatal flaw borne out in much of Greek art.

The presence of either one of these flaws for any extended period can already ruin a man. The incidence of both usually results in disaster. This is why that singular period, after boyhood but before manhood is so dangerous for man. Most are confused between pride and hubris, anger and wrath, freely floating between the two. The person this confusion produces is one a man will always have to reconcile with later in his life. A reconciliation which can sometimes result in fatal apathy, abandoning the founding virtues in a case of throwing the baby out with the bathwater out of regret from youthful indiscretions.

As Konrad and I explored this topic both together and privately we soon jovially thanked God that the worst this period

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produced in us was a bit of unkindness and rudeness. As if that was the whole story. It is into these waters Eric, James and Matt set sail during their graduation weekend. Three soon to be graduates, but far from three men.

C.

“You French fight for money while we fight for honour.”

Surconf replied, ‘Each of us fights for what he lacks most.’”

In the evening after school, a notable throng converged at James’ house. Not quite a party but perhaps too much to be a kickback. The semantic debate over what sort of gathering was occurring filled the thoughts and dreams of trivially socially conscious eighteen-year-olds. Eric enjoyed Newcastle as this semantic discussion continued. While the venue that night might have been James’, Eric himself was no small architect of the gathering taking place. At least a third of the people present only knew James because of him. Luckily in this particularly good-natured set of friends there was little jealousy over who brought who. Everyone just wanted to have a good time, with the greatest amount of people.

But this was just a staging ground. They enjoyed some Newcastles as they tried to get information on where the real party was that night. An infinitely complex web of informants, phone calls and inquiries played out until, as usual, Matt knew a guy. Cory was hosting a party, his house a stone’s skip away. The Troop gathered supplies for an expedition.

One notable member of this expedition was a certain Jared and he was engaged in quite the debate with James before departure. Jared was a full bodied Hispanic man who was one part minimum wage Santa Claus and one part spaghetti western extra. If he ever tried the job of Santa, he would likely come down the chimney and bring you a great gift, maybe even exactly what you

wanted but he would take two things with him. Not your TV or your jewelry but rather a portrait of your family or your favorite belt. To be clear, Jared suffered from some form of kleptomania only targeting personal objects, but with just enough charm to talk his way out of it until it became serious enough to ruin relationships. Today, Jared wanted to take a glass, one belonging to James' father. Despite many vociferous protests and refusals, Jared used his inexplicable ability to not take no for an answer. An absurd covenant was formed, an oblivion compact. Jared would be allowed to take the glass for the night to the party, however if it broke or was lost, Jared would have to complete the Agua Dulce Exodus. The glass was taped tightly to his hand to ensure he would not lose it. They finally left for Cory's house.

I suppose it bears explaining exactly what an Agua Dulce Exodus is, considering everyone thought the deal insane to take on Jared's part as he was essentially guaranteed to lose the glass given his history. When I was in high school I attended a party at a friend Kc's house. This house was seventeen miles out of town in a rather rural area. If you have ever seen a western movie produced since the beginning of this civilizational cycle then you are familiar with the sort of topography and environment that punctuated this area called Agua Dulce. That is because almost every western was filmed around this area. Hard, dusty ground with dry scrub, rolling hills. The quintessential chaparral that defined the image of "western" in the American mind. Both Eric and James also attended this party at Kc's house out in the suburban living room dream of the west. A dream too striking and nostalgic to obstruct reality. For his part, Eric had just broken up with a long term girlfriend. He drank tequila on the way there and was already far too intoxicated by the time he arrived having carpooled with James. He threw up and passed out within an hour of getting to the party. My showing was far worse. My drinking is like a steam engine. It takes a while to get going, but once the engine has started it will consume all available fuel sources before it shuts down. Unfortunately in this case the fuel source was extremely volatile, vodka gummy worms. Much later in the night I had an argument with Kc which somehow resulted in me declaring I would walk home. Allegedly it was because upon declaring I could, and Kc doubting my ability to make the seventeen-mile trek out of the west, I insisted on proving my Hubris. It is a true miracle I was not arrested. I was visibly drunk with torn and burned clothes walking

over seventeen miles in a conservative middle-class community. While the trek may have started in the lawless west of our cultural dreams, about ten miles in I reached the outskirts of the Santa Clarita suburbs, the all-consuming behemoth to whom that western chaparral only looked like the next housing development. I stopped at Fosters Freeze, passed out at a table, threw up in the women's restroom and left. Sort of like the dashing western drifter came to town, swung upon the tavern doors and tripped over his spurs accidentally blowing his brains out with his half-cocked revolver. Not my finest hour. Yet somehow after five hours and seventeen miles I made it home. The tale made the rounds and rather than being chastised I was venerated for the affair. The act of walking that seventeen-mile trek was henceforth known as the Agua Dulce Exodus. Perhaps we had forgotten that Moses' forty years of wandering was a punishment, not some heroic act.

They all quickly arrived at Cory's. Unfortunately, as soon as they arrived it was clear a critical error had been made. Cory had a great house. It had a clear side entrance and an expansive backyard. Perfect for parties as one could simply close off the house and contain everyone outside. It even had a nice covered stone sitting area with a cooler in the middle. The issue laid in the cooler, or more specifically what wasn't in the cooler. Cory had run out of booze. It wasn't even late, and we were the bulk of the population there that night. Nevertheless Cory, whom James had never met, raided his own parents' stock to give him specifically. This strange behavior, to not just Eric and Matt but James in particular, was becoming increasingly common. Looking back, I suppose it makes sense, they were throwing the grad night party next week and James was hosting. It's good to know the host of the biggest party of these people's lives beforehand. Unfortunately, I don't think James saw it this way. To him a tribute like this was more like a tax owed to a liege. An eighteen-year-old thirsty tyrant. This was not the first flight of hubris, and it would not be the last. Eric was happy to have a nice drink, but the supply shortage was an undeniable issue.

Before we come down too hard on Cory, one must remember that acquiring alcohol in high school was like performing rituals to summon rain, there was no guarantee. There was one store, privately owned that would occasionally sell to me. When we first tried in early high school we would just go to every independent liquor store in town and say we forgot our ID. Sometimes it even worked. As we matured, so did our methods.

Vlad, an exceptionally resourceful and technically minded Belarusian who shared many classes with the trio ordered around fifty bucks of equipment from Alibaba. Leave it to the Chinese to openly sell forging equipment to the west. This of course was back when the California ID was far simpler, its magnetic band merely encoded a birthdate and license number, it was not holographic. Nobody ever ran into trouble with these ID's except Eric, but given his story I think that had more to do with him than the ID. Vlad made fake ID's and sold them for thirty dollars, a great price. James got his for free since he was one of the first. Bit of a waste since others usually would get the booze anyway. Before the ID's, liquid catering was far less reliable and always required outside parties cooperation, or at least apathy. A former wealthy programmer, turned mentally ill vagabond named BlueTooth haunted the loading dock of ralphs near James' house. He was now relegated to living with his parents' house in suburbia with nothing to do since his break. He would often buy for us if he was around. Eric had an amenable father. A good natured man, if a bit troubled by things outside his control. With his father's help, Eric never came empty handed. Matt knew a nurse who would buy for him. Her price was something every high school boy usually has to work to give away, something that became less of a point of bragging as we grew up and reflected on it. This questionable relationship would be of consequence in the days to come, but James, Eric and Matt were unusually well connected. Some even resorted to stealing. It is amusing now to think back at how such a terrifying, solemn deed was taken so seriously by the juvenile perpetrators, as the stores themselves hardly cared. It was considered rightly a mark of shame, a failure of clout and connection to resort to such idiocy which is why Matt, Eric and James were never known to do it. Not everyone had the same chance, and while Cory was no slouch it's understandable that he might have had logistics issues that night.

It was all just another trivial, low stakes rubik's cube for the adolescents to test their budding social and intellectual skills. Something not to be encouraged officially but natural, essential, and mostly constructive nonetheless.

As for that Friday night at Cory's with no booze, the solution was obvious, if a bit childish. They would combine the parties and return to James' where the booze was plentiful. One has to wonder what Cory really thought about all this. I didn't know him very well, or Eric or James, but I know Matt did. They

played golf together on the school team. Hours out on the course with just the two of you. It has a way of refining the personality. You need a bit better than small talk to fill that kind of dead air. I heard he was a funny guy, preserving a vital part of himself despite a shift to more mundane friends. I wonder if he was angry that night. Someone shows up, drinks his drinks then essentially steals his guests. Perhaps his restraint is a virtue. I know I would not have accomplished the same feat in his place at that age. Cory and Matt used to grab a bite after class at a sandwich shop Cory's mom owned near school. I wonder what they talked about. Would I have fit in with them had I been there? I probably would have gotten a meatball sub, love those. There are so many people from high school or even after that I had an opportunity to know and experience like Cory that I didn't. I wish I had. That sandwich shop is gone now.

And just like that the party moved back to James'. Furthermore, the promise of drinks had been fulfilled. The new faces from Cory's kept things lively. James was rather proud of himself, having in his eyes saved the night. It is at this point we must introduce a new group. Believe me that if it was possible for me to omit them from this story, I would. Unfortunately to do so would be like taking Caliban from the *Tempest*. Comic relief whose sheer incompetence and unlikability forces himself onto the plot like a poor date.

Near the high school which James, Matt, and Eric attended there festered a certain private classical school with a small student body. Let us clarify one thing right off the bat. A classical education is one of the best things you can provide for your child, and it goes together with religious studies like peanut butter and jelly. The private school in question was actually rather competent in this regard in its elementary school. It's when it attempted a high school that the train left the rails and crashed into the world trade center, pentagon and In-n-Out headquarters. The problem was largely two fold. The first was the student body itself. Because the school billed itself as a college prep school (despite questionable academics) it only offered honors courses. This motivated parents with unmotivated children with less than exceptional intelligence to enroll because given the choice of courses at a regular school their spawn would likely choose poorly. This meant regardless of a child's intelligence, parents could be comfortable with at least an honors GPA since it was the only option at this private school, and

the standards lowered to those students' level. It was the laughable situation of a private, pricey school paradoxically not being elitist enough. The second issue was administrative. The teachers were not terrible, however they labored under a megalomaniacal queen who had them teach subjects they were not qualified for. This crackpot Tyrant also meticulously micromanaged the social behavior of the students without ever instilling in them the actual values which might preclude that poor social behavior in the first place. Thus a general malaise of frustration, skepticism and superficiality infected that private high school at every level. It was the perfect example of suburban parents who refuse to uphold traditional values in their own conduct, alienating their own children away from those otherwise essential values by hypocritically and bluntly imposing them on others. One cannot be a divorcee, a consumerist, a materialist and tyrant and then expect your children to respond to your short-sighted heavy-handed demands to conform to good traditional values with anything other than rebellion. There is no virtue without suffering and sacrifice, and the suburban lifestyle makes this impossible. Thus, a cycle of hypocrites is born that harms the children as much as the parents. Children see the comfortable hypocrisy of their parents and so rebel just to spite them by living unsustainable, degenerate lifestyles. The problem was never with the traditional virtues, it was with the people advocating for them and their methods. You cannot have your cake and eat it too, if you want your children to embrace these values you must live them yourself as a lifestyle. You cannot teach your children the value of hard work perched on your three thousand-dollar La-Z-Boy watching football. This school and its students taught me this lesson loudly and clearly.

This student body served as half comic relief and half terror at any party they were mistakenly informed about. Henceforth, I will refer to them as Boetians. And let's also be clear about another thing. This was not an issue of class. If it was not obvious already, Santa Clarita was a relatively affluent upper middle-class community. While it had a working-class core in Newhall near the high school James, Matt, and Eric went to, the problem with the Boetians was not that they were significantly richer or more privileged because they were not. It was an affliction of the heart borne by the incompetence of their stewards both at the Boetian school and at home.

The only reason the Boetians even found the party that night was due to the fact James had briefly attended the private school in Junior high and had invited a small handful of his friends from that time who stood fast against that school's corrupting influence. Unfortunately, the rest had stolen that information about the party, and soon some of the worst of their number arrived. Their activities included drinking too much and ensuring we were all informed of this fact, involving everyone else in their insipid Boetian drama, the sort which can only be spawned by such an incestuous congregation, and finally, total disrespect for the house. One individual of their group deserves detail. He was the son of the queen herself. Ian was exactly what you would expect having gone to a school literally owned and actively ruled by his mother. He was a bit short, with fair skin and shifty eyes, unfortunately not disabusing ancient stereotypes regarding squinted eyes. As James dealt with and managed the crises of the other Boetians, Jared, our kleptomaniac friend from earlier, called out for James. He brought the host of the house to the landing between the front door and the flight of stairs to the second floor. There, at the top of the stairs Ian towered, more drunk than he had ever been in his life. He let loose a 21-gun salute from his pants as if an admiral had arrived and began urinating down the stairs. This was ironic considering his later admission to the Naval Academy. James was not happy. Jared helped James physically remove Ian from the house. James yelled that he and the Boetians would be banned from the Grad Party on Tuesday.

As James began to calm down, he looked over to Jared to thank him. It was then he noticed that while Jared's hand still had tape, the glass was lost. Matt would later inform him that Jared broke it at Cory's. James had a seat.

Considering how much he complained about the Boetians and also the visible stress from hosting that seemed to affect James, you may wonder why he continued to do it. After all this wasn't the first time and it was far from the last. Honestly, I think he took a sort of perverse pleasure from it. After all, despite all the incidents, he still let the Boetians inside in the first place. I think maybe when you are surrounded by chaos, crisis, and responsibility it might be like being at the center of a storm. Time stops, anxiety disappears and the feeling of empowerment knowing you are, and need to be, the man of action. Being the host means you have no competition for this position. I think that primal,

metaphysical feeling intoxicated James, despite its obvious dangers. It feels good when you break a wild and spirited horse, but in that euphoria it's easy to forget that had he been just that much harder and stronger, you would be thrown with a broken neck. Let's hope James keeps control over his pet devil.

A party ending is a lot like trying to get to sleep. You never remember exactly when you fell asleep or the act itself. Similarly, one can never point to a moment exactly when a party ends, and yet it does, and yet you sleep. Alcohol also tends to extend the period before you sleep that you forget just as it extends both the length of the party while diminishing how much you remember. It's interesting how we consume something which causes forgetfulness during an event that is meant to be fun, fulfilling, essential. I know I for one barely remember the rest of that night, and it was a good time I think. I think memory is the worst thing you can take from someone.

D.

“This Great Evil, where’s it come from? How’d it steal into the world? What seed, what root did it grow from? Who’s doin’ this? Who’s killin’ us? Robbin’ us of light and life, mockin’ us with the sight of what we might’ve known. Does our ruin benefit the Earth? Does it help the grass to grow and the sun to shine? Is this darkness in You too? Have You passed through this night?”

- Private Witt, *The Thin Red Line*

I never understood the concept of “drinking to forget.” I suppose this speaks more to my privileged and charmed upbringing more than anything. I, for one, especially after high school, rather drank to remember. The only times I drank in High school were at parties like the one that last Friday night. Later in life when I drank, mostly alone, it was because it remained the only element, albeit the least important element of that past I could pluck out and recreate.

I have always been a naturally nostalgic person. I have spent more time thinking and feeling about the past than I ever did living it. It isn’t even new; I was always like this. Back in high school I would wax poetically about my time at my previous school. A school I didn’t even really like very much. It isn’t a trait that is all bad. It made me drag old friends forward in my life. Integrate them with my new friends and make one big group. The problem lies when that chain is broken, and there is nothing to drag forward. Atomized.

I therefore associated drinking with a very particular and overwhelming time in my life, to my own detriment. I wonder if I will look back at myself now and feel that nostalgia I always did for my past self every time before. I don’t see how I could. The

implications inherent in the idea that future me would look at my current self with fondness is terrifying in such an existential way. I want to do nothing but banish it.

I drank a lot in college and immediately after but I don't think I was ever addicted to it, the only thing I have ever been addicted to is the past because it can be everything to everyone, and it never really ends so long as you let yourself get lost in it. That being said, I think this is a subject for a later chapter.

Some silly nihilist in an overrated TV show once said that "Time is a flat circle." Everything we have ever done we are going to do again and again. I pray to God he is right and that things will come around back to where they were again soon.

But I know that is a lie, things only change, assuming they ever really do, at the ignition of personal will and action even if its end is eventually cyclical. That's the truth, no matter what some philosopher with syphilis says. The wheel turns at the hands of God and man, not Destiny, and so far I have failed to pull my weight. The fumes of a fake, past self can only take you so far before it is time to refuel and break the wheel itself. Is this feeling Pride, or Hubris? If it is Hubris, it cannot be any more severe than the nature of this entire rotten tome.

E.

“So spake he, and a black cloud of grief enwrapped Achilles, and with both his hands he took the dark dust and strewed it over his head and defiled his fair face, and on his fragrant tunic the black ashes fell. And himself in the dust lay outstretched, mighty in his mightiness, and with his own hands he tore and marred his hair.”

- The Iliad

It was now Saturday morning. Cleanup was quick despite the party the night before. This was the benefit of half the party being regulars. The few messes made, like Ian’s contribution, were cleaned fastidiously.

Eric, James, and Matt commanded a certain respect from those who attended, earning in the case of Eric and Matt and inherited in the case of James. I like to think they were worthy of it. I certainly respected Eric and Matt, but children often lend their respect for the wrong reasons.

Saturday was mostly a day of rest, in preparation for a highly anticipated party that night at Grant’s house. Grant was a short stout goblin who lived comfortably in the gated and most wealthy part of the already wealthy Santa Clarita Valley. He fancied himself a disk jockey but had only gotten as far as making a playlist and pressing play. Due to his physical appearance and delusions of grandeur, James dubbed him DJ Penguin.

The party was anticipated primarily due to the opulence of DJ Penguin’s yard, not out of any love for the host himself. Like many parties it was an unspoken exchange. The attendees get a nice place to drink and be stupid. Meanwhile the host gets the prestige of having thrown a party. A big deal to the class of bored,

privileged cretins who inhabited Santa Clarita and longed for some tinge, some aftertaste, of risk.

It was in perfect character and hypocritical for James to be so hard on DJ Penguin as he himself had essentially made exactly this exchange just a year before. Back in September of Senior year James had his first party at his house in celebration of nothing less than his own birthday. It was like watching two worlds collide. Like seeing a Victorian British officer meet a Zulu warrior. On the one hand it was attended by Eric and his friends. People who knew the score brought their own drinks and had the requisite attitude. On the other it was attended by honors students who brought pizza money, had a 9 pm bedtime and had gift baskets. Needless to say, the entire event would have been impossible without Eric. It was a notable event for numerous reasons. It was the night I solidified my friendship with Konrad, after he brought the liquor I had requested and he promised. It was also the night James and Matt really became friends. It really was a chance thing. Matt had just been broken up with by some girl. Now normally this wouldn't be any cause for anything. Matt kept his relationships as fluid and lubricated as my glass on a Friday night. But Matt had really cared for this girl, and he had always had and still has a soft heart. Despite all his experience it was Matt's first real breakup and it showed that night in September. That was the eternal contradiction with Matt. He had seemingly external social confidence with people, especially women. It's how he got the reputation of knowing pretty much everyone. At the same time, however, he was deeply sensitive.

There is a modern, insidious trend which criticizes the traditional virtues of masculinity by appealing to a supposed lack of sensitivity. What this critical movement fails to recognize however to the detriment of the men it influences is the difference between sensitivity to the essential and the frivolous. History is replete with standard bearers of so-called "toxic masculinity" who openly fall to their knees in tears, crying like children over loss, memory or ignorance of the essential. Is Achilles weeping over the body of his best friend Patroclus in full view of both the Achaeans and the Trojans not "sensitive" enough for you? The problem the critical theorists have is that this is male sensitivity to the essential rather than the frivolous. The idea that things like brotherhood, faith, justice or a metaphysical understanding of love should be the essentials for which public loss of composure is healthy is now

somehow toxic. They would have men cry and complain over the material, the mundane and the frivolous, a lot like I do.

Matt was first developing this distinction all men do at the party in September. James sat with him late into the night. Fewer than forty words were spoken between the both of them but they became friends for life. When friends look at each other, after knowing each other for years, who do they see? The teenager who sat with them during a breakup when they first met. Or the man they became? I'm not sure about James, but for my part I hope it's the former.

The result of this party in September was that James had manufactured a reputation for throwing good parties which carried him through the year. He could attribute many good times and new friends to this reputation, not entirely deserved and earned by himself alone. A year later Grant was attempting the same trick with far less success.

As described before, DJ Penguin's house was in an extremely wealthy area and his house did not disappoint. Unfortunately, we didn't get to see much of it. Either due to fear, disdain, or wisdom beyond his years, DJ Penguin closed off his entire house and confined the party to his backyard. I say wisdom since his backyard was more than large enough, and the lawn was easy to clean. His massive area was bounded by a slope with a gazebo on one end, and the locked house on the other, with a single side yard gate as entrance. Grant imposed another restriction out of fear or wisdom, one which on its own would already be onerous but when combined with the locked house quickly sparked rebellion. He forced everyone to empty any bottles they brought into cups. No bottles in the backyard. The fact Grant would be so lazy as to be protective against simply picking up bottles later the next day was insulting, and annoying, to everyone.

Past the side gate was a table. A station like at the airport to empty your bottles into cups. Forgetting a bottle opener, Julian, friend of Eric and James and the anti-hero of his own story, borrowed James'. Because it was attached to his home key, James reminded Julian to return it. Julian left the opener, and the key on the table.

Eric and James canvassed the party. Turnout was better and more varied than expected. Matt was absent. I would love to tell you where he was, but it has been lost to time. One might assume therefore it wasn't important to him where he went at the

time but that is often not the case. There are thousands of things which were of supreme importance to me in the past I have forgotten. Physics equations for the AP tests, names, birthdays, grumbling apologies and promises both to others and myself. I forget them not because they weren't important to me at the time, but because I failed to keep them important to me afterwards.

James, having brought no drinks of his own, began moving between cliques superficially catching up until he could request a sip from their cups, a sip which turned into a gulp. Just as with Cory, the others saw it as an act of goodwill but James undoubtedly enjoyed it as a form of petty tribute. More warlord than liege.

While I was at this party, I ran into an old friend I hadn't seen in years. I went to elementary school with Logan, I last saw him in 6th grade at the age of twelve. He was the quintessential hyper ADHD kid back then. He found himself in trouble not out of maliciousness but just excess energy. We had become close friends in elementary school, his family were rich oil barons and lived in a house which made even DJ Penguin's look quaint. I changed schools in middle school, and we lost touch. As I gulped down his drink I had perfidiously obtained, we caught up. The years had not all been good for Logan. He was still tall and skinny, but his clothes were baggy, his once blonde hair dyed dark and his eyes sullen and deeply set. His energy was gone, replaced with a cynical, exhausted, medicated rebelliousness. His parents had divorced, his father became vindictive and cruel. Logan had found and repaired his own Camaro over the years. One day his father told him to drive it, how it was going to be the last time he saw it. The sudden punishment for some perceived slight. As we talked I got Logan's number, made promises to keep up which were extremely important to me at the time. Promises I failed to keep important to me. Forgotten promises. The Logan I had known was functionally dead. If someone who hadn't known me since high school met me again today I think they might feel the same way. I just learned recently that Logan had passed away from a drug overdose. It didn't matter how important that old promise was to me again now that I remember it. It was too late. Just because you are asleep doesn't mean the world stops.

If you go watch protest and riot videos the one thing that always surprises me is how fast an otherwise normal crowd can completely turn. At Grant's party, it was just as quick, but looking

back, wasn't entirely unpredictable. DJ Penguin stood perched, safe and secure, on his balcony that overlooked the backyard. From there he commanded several thousand dollars of audio equipment, tools for him to ply his skill of pressing the play button. The backyard was under control, nobody was having too much fun and nothing had been vandalized. Despite this ideal state of affairs, however, DJ Penguin began to panic. He began yelling from his balcony, telling people to quiet down, to calm down. This was finally the last straw. Grant successfully incited the chaos he had only imagined before.

The backyard contained a garish artificial pond at its center. Terry, a fun sized and pathologically likable drummer, leapt to a rock in the middle of this soon to be diluted body of water. He began a chant of "Fuck you DJ Penguin." As the adolescent crowd joined in, people began relieving themselves and their drinks in the pond. Bottles got thrown and the party finally started.

The nebulous concept of morale is perhaps the most interesting aspect of ancient warfare. At Gaugamela, Alexander was outnumbered, and in many ways outmaneuvered. As his flank began to fall, he led a charge of his companion cavalry to save it. While I doubt the charge alone physically killed that many Persians as compared to the whole army, its ultimate effect was devastating and total. The charge forced the Persian King to show his back, and this shattered the army. As if someone snapped their fingers, hundreds of thousands of armed, rugged men began to flee in a disorganized hysteria. With a few exceptions, most premodern battles resembled this one. Armies did not crash into each other until one was destroyed. They battled until a singular moment where one side gave up the field, usually in similarly sudden, hysterical fashion. The real battle thus was an invisible one. Man's rationality and charge for keeping order against a creeping miasma of fear, uncertainty and animal flight instinct. When that miasma wins it does not do so slowly, but all at once, consuming instantly.

The realities of modern warfare have in many ways diluted this phenomenon on the battlefield, but we can still see it at an individual level in times of crisis. At this moment in the party Grant was routed. The miasma had all at once consumed him, chaos had won. I go on this tangent to try and explain or rationalize what happened next as at a glance, it is so ridiculous and irrational to be unbelievable. Grant, a gibbering mass, called the police on his own house and on his own party.

Now let's be clear, his party was rebelling but nobody was hurting anyone or trying to break into the house. Yet giving that as an excuse for why Grant should not have broken is like chastising the Persians because Alexander's charge alone didn't physically kill that many in an army of hundreds of thousands. Of course it didn't make sense, it was a decision by Grant the animal, not Grant the person. Kids can be cruel however and Grant would never live this capitulation down. As the party marched out in a single file line, directed and flashed by Police they condemned and mocked Grant for coming up short in an invisible personal battle nobody would ever understand except him. James, his party three days away, took more laughs than lessons.

F.

“Magna Servitus Est Magna Fortuna”

- Seneca the Younger

After the suicide of Grant’s party, the night was still young. We did what we usually do when it’s time to wind down. Eric and James, alongside a usual cadre of ten or so people regrouped at Eric’s.

Eric’s was a special place. A homeland. Its native people consisted of Eric, his group known as the “stink squad” and when I was lucky, me. The stink squad earned their name by a certain undeniable musk that followed them which could only be produced by two things, a startled skunk or a pseudo medicinal plant. Eric was likewise known in this group as the “Ganjaman.”

The Ronpound, as Eric’s place was known, named after the Ganjaman’s eccentric father served more purposes than just a venue to treat the crippling fibromyalgia that inexplicably afflicted the entire stink squad. It was a fallback, a redoubt, a bivouac, a home. Common adolescent anxieties of lurking drama, parental recrimination, and finding a place to sleep it off were vanquished by this controlled environment.

It was also a sort of toddler’s symposium. In *The Republic*, Plato describes discussions in a similar setting on topics like the moral foundation of Justice. It produced such genuinely brilliant, insightful and contentious discourse that it became a foundational epistemological text for the civilization that would conquer nature, rationalize the metaphysical, land on the moon and fall into contemporary twilight when it had no more worlds left to conquer.

Let us just say that the discourse in the Ronpound did not reach this level. While occasionally sincere, it more often resembled a competition of appearance. The few times conversation did finally deviate from the favorites of pseudo-intellectual teenagers, music, relationships, superficial party politics, etc., it became a race to see who, through usually confidence alone, could manufacture the aesthetics and illusion of wisdom with none of the substance.

These discussions are no more than rhetorical sparring matches. The real gain is in form, style, and strategy. Learning the technical art of rhetoric while they waited for the actual wisdom to deploy it that only comes from years. A sort of special Olympics in preparation for the real thing.

In this contradictory way, these facile chronic infused discussions both served an important purpose and ultimately revealed nothing.

The worst offender at the illusion of intelligence while revealing nothing was eventually James. Known for having a “rant on anything,” this title was a product of showmanship not introspection. More radio shock jock than Socrates. While I myself also occupied this position, James was not even a true native of the Ronpound. Despite his friendship with Eric, he was not a member of the stink squad. I think he only frequented the place because the stoned group provided a mostly compliant audience. It was all very silly looking back now.

My first time at the Ronpound was a prescient fable in itself. I loomed at the glass sliding door that served as an entrance. Dressed well, hair done, I had convinced myself I had a limited time to make an impression, drinking a few beers was customary at the Ronpound, but real drunkenness was rare as the clientele was usually more focused on their prescription plants. Me, in my infinite wisdom, decided a feat of warped fortitude was in order. Upon being shown the liquor I returned with a tall glass of pink lemonade. I’ve always had a talent for hiding how much I am drinking, for better or worse. In a setting like this I didn’t even have to try. Eric didn’t realize he had been cleaned out until it was time to go to his show choir performance and we all stood up. Needless to say it was a rather potent pink lemonade. At the time the social impact of such a display was nothing but positive. It is interesting how warped our perceptions are at that age. Replace a high school me with the adult writing this doing the same thing. Arriving to a new group, drinking all their liquor and being driven home before

the actual event and it goes from innocent, even humorous, to sad. If you didn't catch it, the purpose of this story was to highlight that Eric was in the show choir at high school, the incestuous unlit closet of school activities. At least those in the band have the dignity to simply be uncool unlike the show choir which pretends at more while playing romantic musical chairs like a Zoroastrian royal family.

The line between endearing and pitiful is porous and lethal. Walking seventeen miles home, clearing the liquor cabinet or totaling your car on a dare at the time exerts confidence and maturity to a boy but fails to hold up in retrospect.

It's hard not to look back at that time with painful longing. When confident stupidity was rewarded, trivialities towering like monuments in the emotional infants that teenagers are. Even those who understand that adulthood means responsibility are lying if they insist that even in their most tranquil moments of anxiety, lying awake in the dark at 3 am when their alarm is set for five, they don't at least sometimes indulge the venality of nostalgia for those years before their entire lives could be tabulated on an accounting sheet between responsibilities and liabilities. Longing then as they fall asleep, dreaming of their own personal Ronpound, an intoxicating, childish Neverland until they wake up in the morning, a man once more. All of God's gifts come with a test, and the gift of memory is an aftertaste that bites back your entire life.

G.

"I know what it means, the fight against culture. When I heard of the fires in Paris, I felt for several days annihilated and was overwhelmed by fears and doubts; the entire scholarly, scientific, philosophical, and artistic existence seemed an absurdity, if a single day could wipe out the most glorious works of art, even whole periods of art; I clung with earnest conviction to the metaphysical value of art, which cannot exist for the sake of poor human beings but which has higher missions to fulfill. But even when the pain was at its worst, I could not cast a stone against those blasphemers, who were to me only carriers of the general guilt, which gives much food for thought."

- Nietzsche in a letter to his friend Carl Von Gersdorf after the events of the Paris Commune and the destruction of the Tuileries palace, 1871

In 410 AD after three rebuffed sieges and in response to treachery by the Roman Emperor Honorius, who hid safely in Ravenna, Germanic barbarians entered Rome through the Salarian Gate by way of treachery within the walls. They ravaged the city for three days, plundering the mausoleums of Hadrian and Augustus, as well as carrying off the Emperor's daughter. Many Romans were tortured to reveal the locations of their valuables, including a certain Saint Marcella who had no valuables to give. Her piety may have helped her survive the moral ravages of prosperity that still existed in the Capital of the World even near its end, but it did not help her survive her injuries. Rome had not been sacked for 800 years, nearly four times longer than the reign of our current Empire. The event was so inconceivable in the mind of a Roman at the time that when told about the sack, safe in Ravenna, Honorius believed the report referred to his favorite chicken whom he had named Rome. The Empire in the west would limp on for some

time longer but with the ashes of its heroes cast from their urns, its bronze and marble colossuses toppled, the forum and senate demolished, its aqueducts destroyed and much of its population including the great senatorial class dead, the psychic gestalt which bound that civilization together had well and truly been metaphysically slain. This is why to this day we have a crime called Visigothism, after the Visigoths who sacked Rome in 410 AD.

Yet we don't, do we? We call it Vandalism, because 40 years later the Vandals also sacked Rome. In this sack, Pope Leo the Great made a deal with the Vandal king. He would be let into the city and be allowed to pillage its wealth, so long as he left the churches and primary cultural monuments intact, and most of all left its people untouched. And so, unlike the Visigoths who entered Rome by internal treachery, the Vandals entered through gates willingly thrown open. They chiseled the gold off buildings and carried away their fill of treasure, but the holy places remained untouched, and the human cost was low as far as the sacking of cities go. Ironically the Vandals would go on to largely replicate Roman government and Latin culture in North Africa, emulating and carrying on a phantom of that civilization which patronized such minds as St. Augustine until it was snuffed out by another, perhaps more deserving people, who also called themselves Roman.

1200 years later, writers such as Edward Gibbon and others who made up the burgeoning "Enlightenment" upon rediscovering the classics lamented this second Sack of Rome. They especially focused on this Sack rather than the first partly because the final fall of the empire soon followed, an event these empirical revolutionaries bemoaned as casting Europe into 1000 years of religious dark ages. Naturally they disregarded the church history crediting Pope Leo with negotiating a far less onerous sack as clearly politically motivated history by closed minded clerical dogmatics, something they could never fall prey to with their nominalism, empiricism and "authority of History." They were the "Enlightenment" after all, a name for a movement with perhaps as good historiographical marketing as naming Vandalism after the

Vandals is bad. It is especially telling that they associated this crime with the Sack which destroyed property, and not the one which destroyed a culture. In Visigoth-ing their own past by disregarding the millennium of the church, one that created the very society which allowed such “Enlightenment” thinkers to flourish, these visionaries set off an intellectual movement which would eventually birth a new culture which rather than suffering from Vandalism by outside barbarians, operated through it by design. A Vandalism which would start grand and dramatic in the destruction of churches and art in the French revolution, to the burning of the Tuileries palace in 1871, to mustard gas shells in 1915 to the implosion of orthodox cathedrals in 1925, to the nuclear bombing of a 500 year old city in 1945, to the “deconstruction” of gender and heritage, and eventually degenerating into petty graffiti, toppling of young monuments a mere 100 years old and other acts of self-mutilation. All done consensually without a Visigoth in sight.

This long and circuitous preface exists to explain how when James and Eric left the Ronpound later that night, with toilet paper and bleach in tow, they would be engaging in culture by way of Vandalism, or perhaps Vandalism in search for a culture, against the only remaining target in a suburb that hasn't been already purged, the home lawn. The fine art of juvenile lawn vandalism contains three tiers of escalation. This exists by necessity to give the perpetrator degrees of proportionality in line with whatever the shallow pretext is. For example, in the case of the band director, or show choir director, it is common to use the lowest level, the simple TP. Eric in particular was quite the artist at this tier, the only time it snowed in Santa Clarita were the nights he went out with a few boxes of toilet paper, his Toyota sienna having ample room for enough to create a winter wonderland. Ultimately TP-ing is not all that hard to clean up, something, again, Eric knew firsthand after being caught once at the Choir director's house, or perhaps it was at Julian's girlfriend's house. Either way this tier is not for any message, or serious ill intent and thus demands little pretext. The second Tier is the egging. Egging is not only harder to clean, but if

not cleaned thoroughly can create a foul smell. It can also damage some paints used on houses. Such an action demanded more than a mere ceremonial pretext and called for an actual grudge. A parallel action, one employed by Eric, was the Pudding. This involved Eric driving with a few accomplices in the back of his Sienna. He would then drive up on someone, the back door would slide open, and the target would be pelted with lunch sized pudding cups which exploded on impact. This action perhaps belongs more in the category of assault than vandalism. The final most extreme tier, the Defcon 1 of high school Vandalism, was the bleaching. To dump gallons of bleach on someone's lawn killed it, and anything that grew on it sometimes for an entire year, with little recourse. As stated at the outset, that Saturday night Eric and James went out with bleach.

So, what justified this Massive Retaliation tier response, what possible pretext would call for this? The explanation is High School politics. I have mentioned before how the acquiring of alcohol, or the discussions at Eric's house serve as basically skills and rhetorical training for adolescents in a more or less safe environment. Spinning wheels essentially, something for kids to do so they are only TP-ing some of the time, not all of the time. They are replacement activities as the prescient Ted Kacynski called them. "Student Government" is the quintessential replacement activity. It attracts a certain kind of person that is very good at following directions and ingratiation, while discouraging leadership and virtue cultivation. Perfect preparation for later adult political participation, which itself is one of the greatest replacement activities in our society alongside the functionally identical professional sports industry. Our school, like most others, had its own student government. One day, probably for no reason at all other than hearing the school presidential election was going to be held unopposed, James decided to throw his hat in the ring. To be clear at the outset, he had no grand plan, no desire to actually head the student government, a position with as much authority and actual policy power as one of those Indian princes during the British Raj that technically held some title or another as a British

protectorate but did nothing else. No, the reason he ran was because an unopposed election just didn't seem right, but mostly because he was bored. At this point the best option from the position of the administrators would probably have been to simply let him run, it was extremely unlikely he would win, and it would help the student government serve its purpose as a replacement activity funneling the energies of bored teenagers like James. Instead, they chose the most shortsighted and baffling option, the one that would guarantee controversy, and the only one that would make James actually care about the election. They said he could not run. To be clear it was not James' otherwise unopposed student counterpart that said he could not run, a likable if subservient Ricky. It was the adult administration, they claimed that according to the "Student Government Constitution" one had to take Student government as a class for at least one year before they could run for office. James, or really anyone else for that matter, had never heard of such a document. The problem with this requirement is that not everyone who applied for the student government class was guaranteed a spot, it was determined by a teacher in charge of the program, mostly based on recommendations. Specifically, the recommendation of the teacher in charge of the middle school student government. Essentially if you hadn't been in this pseudo-masonic cult since middle school, it was impossible to get into it in high school, and therefore impossible to run.

James asked for a copy of this so-called constitution, a request which for some reason took an entire week to fulfill. Upon reading this document, one nobody had probably read in decades, he noticed that yes, indeed, this rule existed. But so did a host of other rules that were not being followed, including a sort of council of students drawn from each class that was meant to share nonexistent power with the president. James therefore made the argument that if these other provisions were not being followed, they had no right to cite this other one to bar him. James then collected four hundred student signatures and seven signatures from AP class teachers in support of himself being able to run,

perhaps the only time he ever attempted to show any respect to the teaching profession. Through a strategy of stalling, the superintendent put off meeting with James until a day before the election, then essentially thanked him for the information, said the unfollowed provisions would be reformed but that he could not run in the election since it was only the next day. The result is that Ricky ran unopposed as they wished, and other than a few acts of vandalism on James' behalf at the polls, and write in votes, the incident was over. Except James did not let it go. When denied his replacement activity he decided to fashion his own. He founded a club called "The Alliance to Restore the Republic" which in its constitution explicitly called for the end of the student government and began having secret meetings in a sympathetic teacher's classroom. Eventually the student government found these meetings and began sending its own members to spy on it, something which only revealed their insecurity to the entire school and did more damage than any scheme the fake club could ever contrive. Ultimately the club was little more than a prank society. They rigged the senior superlatives by filling out hundreds of copies to grant the titles to the most ironic and insulting students. They infiltrated the yearbook club in order to have an entire two-page section of it dedicated to their fake club, filled with bizarre photos taken of construction workers, dogs and skateboarding stunts. The final prank played by the group, though one executed by James alone, will be recounted later.

What does this all have to do with the bleaching? Well months after the election, James shared a physics class with the much less likable than Ricky, universally despised vice president. A tall skinny ankle biter with a boxy early 2000s video game haircut named Jackson. In said physics class James was arguing with the teacher over some minutiae as usual when Jackson took his shot and sardonically made some comment regarding James being denied the election. I do not recall the exact words of this comment, but I doubt James does either, it was pretext enough for him and that's all that mattered.

The consequence was that Saturday night, James and Eric

dumped three gallons of bleach on Jackson's lawn. The result was a single completely dead lawn flaming out, impossible not to notice among its neighbor's meticulously manicured green contemporaries. It would take almost two years to grow back. Nobody felt much sympathy for Jackson, as I said he was not much liked and maybe some thought he deserved it for digging up the election fiasco months after it finally had blown over.

Looking back, the most baffling part of the whole affair to me now is the fact that in the end it wasn't really Jackson who was punished, beyond the social disdain he already had engendered. It was his parents, the actual owners of the lawn, who would suffer the scorn of their neighbors for a dead lawn. So ultimately, what "message" if any was sent? Be a better parent? I am actually not really opposed to the idea of parents suffering for the crimes of their children to some degree, but I don't think I would extend the crimes this applies to the mere bruising of James' ego. Maybe it is not so surprising that a generation that could not even respect a lawn much less the heritage of its own culture would see the swift end of that culture. But even if so, the vandalism of that lawn was just another in a long line going back to long before our high school was even founded.

One day there will be no more cheap immigrant farmers to do the jobs kids like James should have been doing, like caring for lawns. The sprinklers will rust and corrode like the Visigoths knocking down the aqueducts of Rome, letting more than just Jackson's lawn die in front of crumbling suburban stucco McMansions turned into mausoleums. Perhaps then we will finally have nothing left to vandalize and be forced to create a culture once again. One that will again be likewise vandalized until someday the eternal metaphysical truths every great culture's art glorifies will come back down to Earth itself. Never to be sacked, defaced, critiqued, deconstructed, rationalized, cast down or bleached ever again.

H.

“Seen from another point of view, the Great Stereopticon is a translation into actuality of Plato’s celebrated figure of the cave. The defect of the prisoners, let us recall, is that they cannot perceive the truth. The wall before them, on which the shadows play, is the screen on which press, motion picture, and radio project their account of life. The chains which keep the prisoners from turning their heads are the physical monopoly which the engines of publicity naturally possess. And is it not pathetically true that these victims, with their limited vision, are ‘in the habit of conferring honors among themselves to those who are quickest to observe the passing shadows and to remark which of them went before and which followed after, and which were together?’”

- Ideas Have Consequences

Not wishing to waste any time, the plan was for James, Eric and Matt to take acid on Sunday. The source of such a silly little piece of paper was a friendly nurse who had statutorily raped Matt.

I’m not really sure exactly what each of them wanted from the experience. Maybe Matt wanted to get the sort of transcendental experience you can’t get from other people. Maybe Eric wanted the answer to a relationship question that would later define much of his early adulthood, or maybe I have no idea what I am talking about, playing the mind reader for people long gone.

The only one I knew for certain was James. I believe he only participated because the fear of a bad trip was far surpassed by the fear of shame by being the only among the three not to try it. A silly reason to do such a thing, but a reason nonetheless. Shame has motivated far worse, and some might say, including

myself, that perhaps shame should make a comeback in our current day.

We gathered at Eric's mom's house which, for one reason or another, was vacant all day. Art supplies were bought, activities planned. While the three went off on their trip, I had a conversation with the sober Alex and Amanda. Alex was a skinny, mostly friendly kid with a natural talent for playing the sycophant. He couldn't decide if his family was poor or not but I find it hard to criticize him too harshly as he was a fellow Eagle Scout.

His girlfriend was a down-to-earth person with an aggressively Scandinavian appearance. Sometimes when I am sitting on the toilet with nothing to read or otherwise am forced to think introspectively, I like to entertain the idea that Amanda and I were only kept apart by a fluke of timing as I was one day late asking her to junior formal to Alex who, at least for high school, she ended up with. Then I usually laugh to myself because this is generally a limiting and self-destructive way to think about women. As my father told me, "There's always more," which seems a view adverse to the female race till you remember how many women and others have died because some young man got it into his head he only had one shot with one soulmate and missed it by chance never to find love again. In any case she was always good to have around for these things as she was a truly dutiful friend, made good conversation and was always sober to drive.

With little else to do I struck up a conversation with the couple. We first discussed plans for the next few days. Recall James' ill-fated graduation party was only two days away, on Tuesday night. Alex told me about how the next day, he and a few others would be driving to Simi Valley to meet Matt's nurse rapist/friend. James had given them a long, comic list of refreshments to have her buy for the party. James, Alex and others had collected money from the class to help pay for the booze like some primitive, delinquent version of crowdfunding.

Around this time back at Eric's house on Sunday, Matt was lost on Hoth and Eric was watching *Fantasia* deep into their trips. I continued my discussion with Alex and Amanda. College plans, career goals, excitement, fear. What else was there to talk about days before the juvenile apocalypse? If only I knew how much of adulthood would be spent endlessly talking about plans. If only I talked about what mattered, the fear, what sort of person I would be. If only I knew that within four years they would be broken up,

and I would have lost contact with them entirely. Hindsight is as comforting as it is dangerous. It can become a life-consuming god if left unchecked. Knowing this doesn't dispel it. Eventually you sacrifice your confidence, your revolutionary essence at its altar. Eventually the old you dies before you even get to know it.

At this point a comedy of errors mobilized the half high group. At Grant's party the night before, James left his bottle opener to Julian. Julian left the opener at Grant's house on the airport security de-bottling table. Unfortunately, that opener also carried James' keys. Amanda therefore drove Matt and James, still tripping, up the gold plated hill to Grant's house in Circle J Ranch. I tagged along. While superficially stoic to this point, it was becoming clearer at this point on the ride over that James was beginning to feel the paper. As they entered the palatine hill of Circle J, Matt and James had a short trivial dispute over if they should visit a mutual female friend who also resided in the heights. Luckily reason, or something, prevailed and they didn't. When we finally arrived at Grant's mansion James went out to meet him on the driveway alone. He got the keys back. Not satisfied with this, however, he engaged in the most shameless display of two facedness I can ever remember. James asked Grant for his number, complimented his coat hanger aborted party and made pointlessly loquacious promises to keep in touch over the summer. He deployed his disgustingly natural talent of appearing sincere to suggest real friendship with Grant. Let us remember that this James was the same one who came up with the telling nickname for Grant, DJ Penguin. This went beyond some joke, there was no clear tongue planted in cheek. Even at the peak of this supposedly transcendental chemical, there James was. Enlightenment hadn't replaced that child.

We returned to Eric's mom's. Picking everyone up, Amanda drove us to the community pool to finish the trip. Being under water while tripping is a weird feeling. But at the end of the day that's all it all was. The boys talked about their trip experience for weeks, months and years after. Blinding lights, esoteric geometry, inspiring visions and feelings. But at the end of that day, it was still the same three boys that remained fundamentally unchanged apart from another good story to tell. The man-made chemical provided no transcendence. Their flawed humanity survived. And so, this adventure was a great sound and fury, ultimately signifying nothing.

I.

“Most people do not really want freedom, because freedom involves responsibility, and most people are frightened of responsibility.”

- Civilization and its Discontents

Monday was primarily a day of logistics. Much ink has been spilt in this record regarding the acquisition of alcohol and yet unfortunately we must spill even more. Our threesome of Matt, James and Eric split up this day. Matt ventured to the prophetic Simi Valley for the libations, while James prepared the house for the coming party. The way Eric spent this day I do not remember, but I promise by the end of this section I will invent something for him fitting to his own perilous imagination. Luckily these two tasks are involved enough that by the time I finish recounting them I will surely have come up with something for Eric to have done.

Regarding the libations we return to Matt and the case of the rapist/friend. This label may seem harsh to those that know the circumstances of its birth, but it is technically accurate. The nurse in question was in her twenties and had become friends with Matt much the same way Matt makes many of his friends, through a combination of congeniality and circumstance by which he falls into many of his female relationships. She took a liking to the legal minor and either as a result of their relationship or perhaps in exchange, provided us both with a buyer that Monday and with the acid on Sunday. To tell the truth I never met the woman, I know only three facts about her. 1) she bought our drinks for the party. 2) she was a nurse 3) she took Matt's virginity.

Pondering back now it's remarkable how despite these being the only three facts I really know about her, the vision in my mind of this nurse is so much different now than back then. As a teenager she was a distant godsend, making both planning for the party immensely easier and enabling our trip on Sunday. Even her sexual relationship with Matt I viewed ambivalently as you might expect from a teenage boy. Now I can only imagine what sort of woman provides drugs and alcohol for her virginity stolen boyfriend and his friends. On the other hand, considering these are literally the only facts I know about the person, perhaps I am letting them monopolize my view on them, not to mention it is very easy for me to wax poetic about the irresponsibility of adults many years down the line. Ultimately any long-lasting effects of her influence can only really be found in the mind of Matt, and only to us if he ever chose to share them.

In many ways the sort of irresponsible ego that might make such a person buy hundreds of dollars of alcohol for minors or give them acid might also motivate the authorship of this very record. A sort of pathological and delusional vicarious living, sort of like when a shitty stand-up comedian tells stories about his ridiculous drunken exploits thinly veiled as "warnings" when really, he gets high on the idea some youths in the audience might look up to him as "complicated" and "cool." It's only later those youths grow up and realize those stories didn't make the slob cool, they just make him look like an idiot with nothing else to speak to his character, and in the case of the standup comedian, most of the time aren't even that funny in compensation. To sum up this rambling interlude, it's very easy to be the coolest person in the room with a bunch of high schoolers. It's even easier when you buy them hundreds of dollars of booze or talk about how stupid you were in high school, and if someone has a bunch of stories about how stupid they were in high school, it might explain why they need to use them or even have a desire to now look cool to high schoolers as an adult. Keep this in mind both in relation to this chronicle and the next time you watch a cool teenage coming of age film. No other civilization or culture in history has felt such an obsessive need to lower themselves to appeal and look cool to teenagers, and it certainly didn't reward those individuals' immature enough to try. The debauched frivolousness of Prince Hal's youth in the *Henriad* exists to show how much he changed and rose to his

apotheosis as monarch, not as an appeal to the “youth market” in the audience of the Globe Theatre.

The actual purchasing of the alcohol was simple, Matt went in with the nurse and the money and they bought it as simply as you would buy any other groceries. Of course, at the time in the minds of us as children, this now stress-free interaction took on a far more unnecessarily immense drama. There was an argument in the car between Alex, Vlad, and Matt about who exactly would go in, whether their list tabulated correctly with the funds on hand and whether the cashier would ask for the accompanying youths ID as well despite the nurse being the purchaser. Worries all for naught as everything went smoothly, the list had already been debated and checked and rechecked, and a California cashier is not paid enough to check the ID of every single person in line over what ultimately was just a routine, if large, purchase of drinks. It all seems so pedantic now, like when you hear parents fret and worry over a toddler’s first step, then the unimaginable ecstasy when it finally happens, something I suppose you can’t understand until you experience it. I would trade having experienced that feeling in my life over a thousand stupid high school stories.

One may have noticed I keep referring to the hundreds of dollars of booze we purchased, and I use that number intentionally because while Santa Clarita was, and still is, a quite affluent town, none of us throwing the party had parents myopic and apathetic enough to just give us free reign over money, especially not to buy alcohol for a party. Or this can at least be said about the parents of those throwing this particular party, I highly doubt DJ penguin was saving up birthday and tooth fairy money for the full DJ setup he had for his murder/suicide party. I won’t be outrageous enough to try to claim any of us were poor or lacking access to money, but I have always found it interesting how much the various teenage cliques follow a sort of logic around whose parents are profligate and whose aren’t. I refer to these people’s parents as profligate rather than rich because while on average the kids who had unlimited access to money tended to be from the richest families, they weren’t always. I knew many who were very wealthy but did not live like it, and didn’t expose their kids to it, even amongst my closest friends. I also knew some kids who always had money to pay for things but who were from families where the money would be better spent on the principal of loans rather than just their interest. Ultimately, real wealth, the kind that can survive a

generation like ours, is less about having the most but rather needing the least, or so Plato said. Usually, the children of profligate parents tend to attract towards each other as they seek those who have a similar lifestyle and access as themselves, but in some cases where someone is particularly isolated, either due to some core insufferableness of their personality, one even money can't cure or due to some taboo, they tend to lead a clique of their own. Surrounding themselves with children of less childish parents in an almost purely transactional relationship, almost like the roman client system of old, or the modern client systems practiced in modern Latin American countries. Teenage Caudillos, too dull or annoying to make it amongst children of an elite descending the stairs in silk slippers, nevertheless pay for the drinks enough times, and anyone can end up with hangers-on of some variety. DJ penguin was of this latter variety, the former however would have their own part to play in the party to come.

For the Grad Party at James' house, it took some industry and a little bit of fraud to garner the money. When I say fraud, think less Bernie Madoff, 2008 mortgage crisis, COVID vaccines, Iraq War WMDs, the opioid crisis, the war on drugs, universal wisdom teeth removals, the piss dossier, the 2016 democratic primary, the USS Liberty explosion death incident, Monsanto field cross pollination, the Russian oil pipeline explosion, whatever happened on January 6, the Affordable Healthcare Act (from either direction), Deflategate, Gamergate, Bonusgate, Emailgate, Pardongate, Pizzagate, the Brett Kavanaugh confirmation, the hunter Biden laptop thing, "mission accomplished," PPP loans, the bank bailouts (2022, 2008), Sneed, \$5 footlong at Subway, and think more community run raffle or poorly executed Kickstarter. Now that I think about it, I guess we were sort of a generation raised and immersed in so much open fraud that it helps explain why these kids, some with almost no money to their name would give it to us in big collections at the promise of "guaranteed and early access" to what was a public party. I mean it's not like we had security, as you will soon hear even James's ability to throw people out was tenuous at best in his own house. In actuality I think people gave us money of their own free will on semi-fraudulent promises because they wanted to feel some level of ownership of the enterprise. The problem is ownership involves responsibility, and while a lot of these people might have been happy to go around and say they helped make this party possible, only a small

handful really took responsibility for it, sort of like a company issuing stocks. Which was fine by me, without those people we never would have been able to buy the drinks, and the cleaning supplies that would soon be critical. Because that, in many ways, is always the driving engine of the twilight years in every great civilization, a big party everyone wants to have ownership of, but not responsibility for, that owes its existence to a little bit of fraud and a chronic inability to budget the cost of cleaning once that party is over, and every party ends eventually.

As for Eric on Monday, as stated, I honestly don't know, and the Ganjaman existed in such a tropical haze at the time that he doesn't either even when I tried to ask him. So, despite my arduous and academic attempts to keep this account True and Honest I can only speculate. If I had to guess, he was probably smoking weed and watching *The Big Lebowski*. I love Brandt in that movie, an excellent actor playing against type as a character completely out of place and time doing his best in a situation the audience can't understand much less himself. Eric has always modeled himself after the Dude, even after he grew up and the chronic lost its luster, but sometimes it seems like it's all a ruse to hide the Brandt in him. But just like in *The Big Lebowski*, it's The Dude I always want to come to a party but it's Brandt I keep rewatching the movie for.

Meanwhile on Monday, James spent the time with family, paying forward the fact the house would be vacated come Tuesday night for the Grad Party. He had dinner at the Odyssey with his family and a close friend, but the details on that, how would I know?

J.

“One day the last portrait of Rembrandt and the last bar of Mozart will have ceased to be—though possibly a colored canvas and a sheet of notes will remain—because the last eye and the last ear accessible to their message will have gone.”

- Oswald Spengler

The Odyssey is a fine dining restaurant in the San Fernando valley located on a hillside right next to the 405. If you have been to Los Angeles and driven on the 405 North for any distance outside the city you have almost certainly passed it, if not seen it while you are trying not to be brutally murdered by the homegrown psychopathic race known as the average L.A. Driver.

I suppose he picked it for his graduation dinner (a day early) because it was the only fine dining restaurant he had ever been to, and his ego would not allow some dinner at Macaroni Grill for what I am sure he thought was a really momentous occasion. I also think its because the Odyssey gives you something a lot of far better, far more deserving of the term “fine dining” locations can’t give you, something to look at while you eat, something to look at while you have nothing to say, something to look at when you want to escape from having to listen. It really is a great location and has a great view. It’s only from a distance that cities are beautiful, physically or temporally, when they are gigantic, monumental shrines to human pride literally lighting up the sky and the world. Only when you get close to them, really look at what that individual street looks like, and what it holds, that you realize all those lamps, candles and fires just washed out the real lights in the sky at night God placed there that make even the biggest city just look petty.

But I guess with cities it's best to have the cake but never eat it. Enjoy the view from *The Odyssey* but never mistake it for the reality of what you're looking at. The Israelites didn't really learn about God while living in Egypt in the world's biggest cities, they learned about him wandering the desert for forty years. For a more secular analogy, it was the rural farmers that conquered the world for the Roman republic, until the city of Rome conquered those farmers, their land bought out after so many campaigning seasons unable to profit from them. They were replaced by latifundiums filled with slaves owned by that urban roman elite. I think about this whenever someone tells me how much money, or theater, or "culture," or opportunity I could have if I just moved to a city. But bitching about the immorality of cities was an old game even in Roman times, Tacitus dedicates significant time to it. If there is any lesson to take from this entire account it's that me and my generation were never taught or expected to create anything original, only to consume, and so I continue in that tradition by bitching about cities. It isn't an excuse, more should always be expected, but it is indeed the truth.

James had his dinner with his mother and father, as well as his paternal grandfather. That grandfather is an interesting contrast alone. He was from Ohio; he had not been to California in years, and only ever went for the sake of his son and grandson. He worked his entire life for Norfolk Southern railroads, he had tried to retire three times, but each time found himself with a job again as he grew bored and started helping his gaggle of friends out at their respective businesses. He sired his son, James' father, almost immediately outside of high school. To say there was a generational gap, not just with his own son but with James would be putting it mildly. This gap never manifested negatively, but as has been written and told by many other better writers, America is the unique place where you can have a blue collar, midwestern grandpa who has had the same friends since school, an upper-class, high-ranking officer and sales executive father, and whatever potential James would waste all sitting at the same table. But everything has its pros and cons. That steelbelt-turned-rustbelt generation lived and worked during the most prosperous time in human history for the average person, they worked jobs which only required a high school education but could buy a house in five years, and when that world fell apart, they could never let it go. Go to small towns in Ohio now and walk into a bar and it's still 1968; the music is the

same, the people are the same, just superficially older, the drinks are largely the same and the prices might as well be the same considering everything. They never left high school, never grew out of being eighteen, and it shows both in their energy and decisiveness but also in their naivete. It shows in their divorce rate but also their ability to love deeply and quickly. Drive around the middle of Ohio and you will see the most immaculately kept homes and lawns, more so than anything I ever saw haunting the rich houses of Santa Clarita with their entire team of immigrant gardeners. But it just isn't 1968 anymore, economically or socially. That dream was killed, the factories and jobs that built an American middle class which conquered space are gone, the music learned that the medium is the message and those well-kept lawns, well, to many of that nation of people they are the only thing left they feel like they have any control over. The nation of James' Grandpa still exists, it still votes, it still buys and it still, in many cases, works for a new nation aggressively trying to replace it. An ancient trope is the King under the mountain, the idea of a leader taken too early, whether it's the Cymru King Arthur or the Roman Constantine XI or the Portuguese King Sebastien. Their people, forgotten and left behind by history, always tell the same story of this King being whisked away at the last minute to live under a mountain, or turned to marble or to live on an island only to return some day and return them to glory. Go to a bar in Ohio with James' grandpa, get a beer and a meal for a few dollars, talk to the people left behind there and you will start to understand this perennial tale. You will start to understand their seemingly schizophrenic voting record, and you will start to understand how such wealth and opportunity worked for half a century to buy a dinner at The Odyssey overlooking a new city, a new nation, one filled with nothing but disdain and impatience for that same increasingly phantom demographic which labored to build it.

The odd one out at this dinner was a very old friend of James', Nick. He was the only non-family member there, and one of James' closest friends. You may recall when I spoke of the Boetians, you may also recall when I said that many of James' friends were among the less depraved of the Boetians. Nick was one such friend. In actual fact his origin was far more primordial. James knew him before the latter even arrived at that private school. He met him in the once virtuous institution of Boy Scouts. Together they conquered some of the greatest outdoor features of

the American west, from the Sequoia to Death Valley, two weeks and one hundred miles at Philmont, and one thousand bug bites in Yosemite. They earned their Eagle Scout together, the award he is still to this day the proudest of, the only certification he has ever paid to have framed. An Englishman, Lord Baden Powell, founded the Boy Scouts in the country once known as the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland before it resigned its empire to chaos. A short time afterwards, the American newspaper salesman W. D. Boyce found himself lost in the infamous London fog on a business trip. That impenetrable wall which hides the werewolf of London and foreign mayors alike was broken by one of Lord Baden Powell's scouts who led the lost American to his lodgings. When Boyce tried to tip the young boy, the boy refused, stating that he was only doing his duty. This experience had a profound effect on Boyce who when he returned to America he founded the BSA. Some have cast doubt on this story, but I still remember the smoke and ashes of the poorly constructed campfire I sat before when I first heard it, and the warmth of that memory speaks more truth than any pseudo historian correcting the record. We can only speak of this organization in the past tense, its original purpose and mandate sacrificed on an altar of a changing and declining culture. I thank God whenever I can that I was among the final generations of Boys who could take advantage of the BSA as it was originally formulated. An organized refuge that allowed young boys to compete and make mistakes in safety, but never underestimated them. While its effectiveness largely varied troop by troop, when it was run correctly it taught boys that leadership is not about a higher pay grade or indulging in greater authority, it's the duty of being responsible for others. A boy who assumes a position of leadership in a well-run boy scout troop learns this very quickly whether the overall tenure of that position is positive or otherwise. I won't belabor this account with the literal hundreds of studies and statistics that show boys without some male oriented group activity involving positive role models tend to either get themselves killed very quickly or fail to become men at all. I would say to just look at social media and learn about the young men who die criminal thugs who are useful idiots for older, fundamentally evil gangsters whose taproot to Eden has been cut, desperate extremists lashing out a world of broken promises or having given up on manhood entirely in a directly literal sense, becoming nonreproductive either by custom or consensual mutilation, but I

refuse to recommend social media to anyone, even for instructive reasons. Not anymore, the internet has well and truly metastasized. Even as these trends continued to exacerbate and compound, even beyond the traditional demographics they infested, the BSA was castrated into its current form of the pangender “Scouting.” An organization that includes everyone but serves nobody. Someday the lesson of why we once had mannerbund organizations like scouting will be learned again, and it will be forgotten again, and learned again, each time collecting its human and civilizational cost. The BSA wasn’t assassinated, it resisted calls for dissolution for years, but compromised again and again. It adapted and followed the money in a quest to stay relevant, but its founding virtues were always fundamentally timeless and never needed adaptation. Following that money, whether it be the Mormons or the gender activists, led it to the head of a pin through which it could not pass. It died in a nursing home of old age, neglected with all its most principled advocates long gone, replaced by pseudo politicians trying to run a company, not a movement.

In the same way James’ friendship with Nick died. They saw each other over breaks and the summer less and less after high school, quickly developing and focusing on new spheres and interests in college. Broken promises to see each other and reconnect over years. Distance letting the mind write the script of their relationship out of absence rather than reassurance. In half a decade the same brother, who would be the only non-family member to attend James’ graduation dinner would not even invite him to his own wedding. And just like the BSA, once that tradition, that movement and that friendship of even one-hundred years, or in their case fifteen years, is well and truly broken, it can’t be put back together again until the rest of the Kingdom is restored and there are no more hard lessons to relearn.

K.

“Wherever the typical mass character becomes universal, all higher values are as good as lost.”

- Hermann Rauschnig

History is not an authority, it's a process. History is the process of trying to conquer the past in the service of the present. Go ask your parents if somehow, they still have any of their history textbooks, or ask them for details about what they were taught about really basic events. Ask them how they feel about those events, likely primarily learning about them from those textbooks. If you are comprehensive with your questioning, and blessed enough to still have elders in your life to ask you will quickly realize that history changes. What I am saying here is not just the popular trope that “history is written by the victors” because that is demonstrably not true in as many circumstances as it is true. What I mean to say is that nobody who writes history lives in a vacuum, and their own life, circumstance and why they even write history inform the history they write.

If you think perhaps, I am being excessively post-modern, and trying to suggest Truth doesn't exist or it doesn't matter that is definitely not what I am trying to say. History, like science is procedural, it uses tools, and best practices to make educated guesses about the past. Cite the right primary sources, read the right books, look at climate and archaeological data and you try to make a good guess at what happened. The difference between History and Science is that for the most part, Science is filled with data points, absolutely filled with them. Things which can be

measured once, almost always can be measured again, and again and again, but not really with History. History is neither replicable nor is it filled with supporting data points. Alexander the Great, one of the, if not THE, most famous person in history other than Jesus Christ, has only a single primary source, which is a dedication carving on a temple in Anatolia. None of his general's voluminous firsthand biographies have survived, only secondary descriptions of them. Charlemagne, the first true European in a metaphysical sense, does not even have a confirmed birthday despite being the heir apparent to the most powerful tribe soon to be kingdom in the Western Empire at the time of his birth. Now I don't mean to suggest that Alexander did not exist but keep this distinction in mind when considering how much mental authority you give to "History" and "Historians." It is not Science (for as good science even is anyway), and it is not some dispassionate empirical study.

Rather than trying to conquer the past, and measure it by way of History, it is far wiser in my opinion to seek understanding of the past. Many things the procedure of History discounts will help you understand the past far better than archaeological data or climate studies. The past is mythology, it's a tale literally as old as remembered time. If you understand how stories are told you will understand more about the past than any number of ancient arrowheads washed four-hundred miles down a river will teach you.

Facts and Truth are different words for a reason. It is possible for something to be factual but not reflect much truth, like the facts of historic solar eclipses. It is possible for something to be True without it being factual, like the founding myth of Rome, that story about the founding of the BSA or the lesson of Cato the Elder ending every speech with "Carthago Delenda Est." With these words ringing in his ears, whether they were really said in every speech or not, Scipio Aemilianus sailed for Carthage in the Third Punic War. His grandfather had already defeated Carthage in the apocalyptic Second Punic War, when more than half the armed freemen of Rome had already been defeated and the great city itself was almost taken, but despite it all, Rome still found victory. This new Scipio on the other hand was sailing towards a city already all but defeated after being completely disarmed before the war began. Again, we see that even a figure like Marx can display wisdom at times when he said everything first happens as a tragedy and then again as a farce. I hope the parallel to my own generation is not lost on you. Once the siege had been won, the Carthaginians

retreated to a final defense of the hilltop the city was originally founded. They died to a man for this hilltop where almost a thousand years before—and a hundred years before the founding of Rome itself—the exile Queen of Tyre, Elissa, famously called Dido, beat the landowner of the hill at his own game when he said she could have all the land she could cover with a single hide, and cleverly cut said hide into strips and surrounded the hill. Those men, fighting a war lost before it was declared, died for this myth, this nonfactual story. This Truth. As the hillside and the rest of Carthage burned, destroying all their written records, forever foreclosing their perspective in the minds of the authority and procedure of History, Polybius recounts what the lesser Scipio did. He cried and dreamed about the fall of Assyria, Persia, the Macedonians and even Rome's mythological founder, Troy. Quoting *The Iliad* he said:

“A day will come when sacred Troy shall perish,
And Priam and his people shall be slain.”

Scipio Aemilianus in this myth, himself acted upon a myth and a dream of his grandfather's miraculous victory, and his grandfather acted and dreamed on the myth of Rome. He cried not for his ancient enemy Carthage, but for the truth that Rome would eventually share the same fate as all things and all civilizations. He cried because it was all True, and I admit I cry myself sometimes when I hear this story as all good stories not because it is perfectly factual, but because it is True, and the procedure of History would have you disregard it or call it “just a good story.”

Every seemingly silly Greek myth you were forced to learn in elementary school, every fable, every Bible story, and every childhood dream you try your hardest to remember when you are too anxious to sleep are all True. They are all as much a part of the past as that arrowhead. The modern study of History, and therefore the current culture it informs, disregards and deconstructs these things because, like every great society and work of man, like Icarus getting so close to the sun, it thinks it can conquer the past. The mystery and the memory of the past is inherent to its nature, its understanding, and it's a frontier that empiricism and the procedure of History will never be able to conquer. Ultimately the only way to really understand our past, or understand your own past, even one as trivial as this account, is to

give up trying to conquer it and allow yourself to be subjugated by it.

L.

“The man of culture finds the whole past relevant; the bourgeois and the barbarian find relevant only what has some pressing connection with their appetite.”

- Ideas Have Consequences

I hate graduations, and for once in this epistle I don't mean in some conceptual or abstract sense. Both of those aspects are mostly fine, what I dislike is the ceremony itself and it's almost entirely just a dislike from annoyance. Even carefully scheduled ones are too long, we never hear from the people we should and hear a lot from the people we shouldn't. Assuming we should hear from anyone at all. I wish they would just put the diploma in the mail with a gold star or something and it would be over. Considering how moving I find other ceremonies, like coronations or communion or the national anthem or the rules of toasting, it is sort of a black sheep for me with no rational basis. Fortunately, I am mostly alone in this feeling, and it seems most people, and especially most families, love graduation. I say fortunately because I can't really justify my antipathy towards them, and seeing the profound effect my later college graduation had on my grandparents, who traveled at an advanced age five thousand miles to attend it, confirms in me that this antipathy of mine is just wrong. But it's just a feeling, and it doesn't need to be anything more than that. It's why I have dressed up and attended every graduation I can, for myself and others. Because it's one thing to have a poorly justified feeling about something like this, it's another to act upon it in the face of something far more powerful like a duty.

I had already crystalized this feeling by high school. I only really had two interests in that graduation ceremony. One, my interest in seeing James give the speech and two, my interest in it as a staging point before the party afterwards. James meanwhile had to play in the band, the same song over and over. The best part of that is the scowl that engraved itself on the Band Director, Mr. Bailey's face as he conducted his band. This scowl was born from a similar antipathy I had towards ceremonies mixed with over a decade of fawning worship, and genuine professional achievement. To put it simply, in Mr. Bailey's mind, his duty to have the school band play *Pomp and Circumstance* was a waste, because this wasn't the school's band, it was HIS band, and HIS band played only on a national stage and in competition. Even the football games played second fiddle (or trumpet) in his mind. It was a completely arrogant and insufferable attitude he took with him everywhere; it was also entirely justified. For all his ego, unreasonableness, genuine delusion, and vertical impairment he really was one of the best band directors in the country and was the primary reason our school's band was nationally recognized. So yeah, maybe a few chairs get thrown at children, and woodwind players pass out from heat stroke during months of eight-hour summer rehearsals, but that's the cost of greatness in the world of man.

Our graduation was on a football field of the local community college. The wealth of Santa Clarita speaks to its size; it is even larger now, but despite being merely a community college, it was a similar size to some full-scale universities. Your surprise at this description, however, likely has more to do with where in the country you are from than your economic background. I have been in cities where the official football field for the local high school is literally just the field in the nearest park. On driving across the country, I have also passed endless golden grasslands once ruled by the Lords of the Plains punctuated by giant football fields as large as a college. When I pass through these places, in Texas, in Oklahoma and in the Midwest my first thought is what our great grandchildren will make of them. I don't mean morally, I mean practically. Did the Germanic tribes huddling in the ruins of former Roman metropolises understand what the vaulting arches above them were once used for, and simply had no need for them given their lower intensity lifestyle? Or did they dream about those arches holding up the sky itself? When our Great Plains again become a depopulated wasteland, waiting to birth a new nation as

steppes often do, will the giant Texan high school football stadium be a structure of irrelevance, or misplaced reverence? In any case the perspective was funny, as the graduates themselves sat on chairs set up on what ended up being a relatively small part of the field, with the parents and family sitting up high in the bleachers as if to watch a game. I can only imagine what the sound situation was like, as the podium hilariously faced downfield despite again, the parents sitting on the home side. The entire student body consistently hovered around twenty-five hundred, down from its peak about a decade and a half previous. So, our graduation class made up approximately five hundred. Approximately. Even at a pretty safe and good school like ours not everyone graduates, and in most cases “Deserve’s got nothing to do with it.”

Speaking of what was deserved, and its incongruity with reality, let's discuss the graduation speeches. There was an open tryout for the graduation speeches about a month beforehand. I have mixed feelings about this, on the one hand just having the valedictorian do it feels deserved, on the other hand, given the rote and incompetent nature of non-classical education, the valedictorian at many public schools is a person who while usually quite rich in raw intelligence, is as poor as a member of the “urban camping” community in Los Angeles in anything requiring them to project confidence and speak in front of a crowd. As a result of this quandary, and given we are unlikely to revolutionize our education and teach the basics of rhetoric in public schools any time soon, perhaps tryouts for the speech are a good alternative.

But, the lack of a solid qualifier like valedictorian means politics can intervene in the process. When I say politics, I don't mean big-P politics, like the category headline on the Great Stereopticon, or the filter you can apply on your social media app of choice to be more directly demoralized. I mean little-p politics. The politics of “I just don't like that guy” or “he didn't pick me for kickball team, fuck him.” The kind of universal personalistic politics that has ultimately marked and directed every big-P political process through all history, circumstance, and superficial ideology. I am giving this much preamble to try to explain how James gave the best speech in the tryout, a speech that made two of the five judges cry, how he could shake hands with each one and be directly told he would almost certainly have his speech chosen and then get beaten out by “top ten things we learned in high school” and “ohana means family” as the final graduation speech topics. Now,

maybe James is exaggerating about the effect his speech had on the judges, how could I know, I wasn't there. But I saw the speeches we got, and finally after many years I have managed to magically conjure a confirmed written record of the speech James presented (which will follow this chapter) and I know where I stand, but I might be a little biased. It also doesn't help that the speech James gave for the tryouts was not the same speech he planned to give once he was finally given an open microphone and opportunity to say anything he wanted but because of a tale of little-p politics this remains a purely hypothetical concern.

So, let's say we believe James' account of the judges responses (I do without any doubt), why then was it not chosen for the grad speech? Well, the reason why, of course, requires the retelling of a different tale, one that helps explain why the school administration would never allow James to have an open microphone or any control over the graduation process.

To the dangerous combination of child and adult mind that is the high school adolescent male, prom is much like the experience of having sex for the first time. Either you fear it immensely, but know you have to do it and it's miserable out of fumbling inexperience, or you have been anticipating it based on tall tales and mythology your entire life but when confronted with your own same clumsy naivete and the reality of the thing are again unsatisfied. Prom, like first time sex, is for most people either all fear, or all expectation both leading to the same Candyland end square of dissatisfaction. A feminist might say that for a woman, the first time is a painful and deeply physical experience, often one of endurance rather than the confusion, and in some part humiliation it is for men. They would be right. But this is an account written by three men and our current fleeting era does not lack opportunities or funding for women who wish to express their regret for physically unrepairable high school mistakes. Some men, in a combination of both fear and expectation, attempt to upend the board completely and take control of the process themselves. This is the strategy James pursued at our High School prom. While he had his own date, one of his choice, this was not enough and the amply apportioned teenager found a space to bring in ground up laxatives. Despite our school being rather provincial and mundane in recent years, back during the general American, and especially Californian, crime wave of the early 90's there was racial and criminal unrest at the school. A phenomenon I am certain

current cultural and demographic trends will make sure could never happen again. Thus, were instituted policies that were still in place to the day we attended prom, specifically metal detectors and pat downs. I'll just say this, given how safe, and again, provincial, our town was at the time, there was only so far a minimum wage private security man was going to pat down, given he had hundreds of students he tiresomely had to molest. And so, looking back it is not so insane James was able to bring in this small bag of laxatives, again considering his frame. Even given our prom had the immense, almost comical privilege of being hosted at the Reagan Library.

The Reagan Library is a very big place. An entire political movement was drawn, quartered, and sacrificed on the altar of its namesake. Or perhaps the better analogy would be the peer pressured kamikaze pilot, filled with so many promises and lies of a new cultural revolution and victory in Japan, or America, that they literally buried him with the plane itself. I say this because the main gallery hall of the Reagan Library is overlooked with a real replica of America One itself. The people older than my own generation, on either side, who wax poetic and nostalgic on the political generation of Reagan, or his successor, Clinton, might pass these halls smiling and chuckling at the documents and the various missives reporting on the many failed states of the Warsaw Pact as they fell. Victorious, and arrogant, they might look upon that Airforce One, Dread Flagship, and even perhaps not being a Reagan voter, themselves take credit for what they would surely see as the greatest victory America ever won. A Cold War of apocalyptic considerations that funded the warm heated blanket they now enjoy in old age. How happy it must have been to eat dinner and, as they say “watch Walter Cronkite and just get the real news,” to eat the consensus so agreed upon it was the only thing broadcast, to eat the racial and economic “utopia” of Johnson's Great Society, to eat the promises of a new cultural revolution promised by Reagan himself, to eat promises by Clinton of a total reform of the Great Society, to eat the Patriot Act, to eat a housing sector where the average home could be bought in five years wages, to eat what was promised to be our final existential enemy, to eat our industrial sector for a healthy 401k, to eat a 50% divorce rate, to eat God, to eat, to eat, to eat, to finally devour the American Dream, a nightmare of consumption. Learning about the past—even the recent past, and the mistakes of our fathers and

grandfathers, the Reagan Democrats and the currently laughed at boomers—doesn't free us from the future, much less grant us absolution about the present. If anything, it humbles me because I know that if I was in that same position, the most prosperous generation in human history, I would have made exactly the same mistakes, disregarded exactly all the same things that matter. There is so much rhetoric and rage in my generation against the former generation, the "boomers," but they were not exceptional. They were regular people thrust into the most comfortable period of Empire, as Gibbon called it, and did what they thought was best within that system for their own children and ultimately, themselves. There will ultimately come a day when there are no longer any people left to nostalgically reminisce as they walk through the halls of Reagan Library, remembering a political culture and national enemy that no longer exists. As that happens the relevance of the Library itself will fade and eventually diminish away either naturally or by force and desecration as some symbol in a future political war. I temper my resentment, my anger at this generation out of love for my family and my parents and grandparents. Only such love will allow any of the good parts that stalk those halls, that fill the Grounded Air Force One, to eventually kindle the smoldering coals of a new American Dream. Not found in the victories or ideology of some international uni-party, not as a reaction out of hate for greedy boomers, but out of love for our kin who managed to morally survive the ravages of prosperity and inspire those who survive the aftermath. Those few.

So, this increasingly irrelevant political and cultural monument is in such hard times it has to host a high school prom. James sat at a table with a few couples, but specifically that of the student body president, the one he opposed in an election and was disqualified against on a technicality. James said, "Well yeah, I said my sophomore year if I ever got to go to prom, I would put laxative in the fruit punch, and everyone knows I always keep my promises." Did the unbreakable, piercing eye contact he gave to the president as he said this indicate a dedication to the joke, or resolve about the implication of the statement? I have reason to believe it was the latter personally. James was nominated for Prom King, this was a ridiculous consideration for two reasons, first he had organized the campaign to elect a mute genius for the role before the event and was certain he won, and two he was ineligible since he was already Winter Formal King. Despite this silly

demonstration of false suspense, they had the runners-up line up on the stairs, which James was one of. A year before Thomas Hubbard had swung a victorious Roman salute upon winning and was thus unpersoned, and I can only imagine James fantasized about doing the same if it wasn't for his already ongoing prank. The aforementioned genius mute won and soon after the last stages of the prom began. It was then that James was abducted, not by the pitiful and obvious high school security, but by the top-secret black ops Reagan Library security itself. Apparently, they had heard from a guy who heard from a guy who talked to a guy in the bathroom who left a note on the toilet paper used by a teacher's wife who shit out the claim that James had put laxative in the fruit punch. James convincingly feigned ignorance until he was brought before the Superintendent himself. He demanded to know if he put laxative in the fruit punch, and where and when. James asked a simple question, "why are you asking me this?" The Superintendent, wise in his six-figure doctorate and decades of experience, carefully considered his mastery of literal child psychology and explained that someone at James' dinner table said he had put laxative in the fruit punch. James asked if he was "beholden to the rumors of random high schoolers" and then refused to say much else. The omnipotent superintendent pored deep into his mastery and understanding of child psychology and made dire and apocalyptic promises about "testing the prom punch" and "following up this Monday." James was let go, much to the hapless astonishment of the Reagan library staff. The mistake James had made was warning too many people about the punch, fearing his friends might fall afoul of it. It is good we have things like religion otherwise life might teach us being merciful is almost always a mistake. That next Monday James was called in and interrogated, he was told they "tested" the punch and found nothing, but despite that they still suspected him. James sighed a deep motion of relief that a random Southern California high school was not able to gain time on the LAPD's toxicology machine. Wild to think even the respected and imperious influence of this random Southern California Superintendent could not command time on the machines in those forty-eight hours. Luck had surely saved him from the brilliant machinations of this all star intellectual stormtrooper hit squad of school administrators. The Superintendent, along with the Vice President who had led the investigation behind the scenes, told James that there would be no

such incidents at graduation, and they shook hands. James had gotten away with his stupid prank, even upon being caught. But he had been barred from any role in graduation.

It didn't matter how good, or interesting, or even bad James' graduation pitch was. Believe what you want about crying judges because he traded it all just to make some remedial students shit their pants that night of prom. A stage traded for a chamber pot. A great prank traded against an even greater opportunity. It doesn't matter how clever you think you are, how good you are at confusing or tricking your way out of something, such pettiness and immaturity always tolls a cost. Not unlike that Reagan generation who won the Cold War but lost their country. If it was up to me, looking back, I would trade one hundred prom pranks for that speech, even if only I was the only one who remembered it, just like today.

M.

“The world is a beautiful place but we have to make it that way. Whenever you find home, we’ll make it more than just a shelter. And if everyone belongs there, it will hold us all together. If you’re afraid to die, then so am I”

- Getting Sodas, *The World Is a Beautiful Place & I Am No Longer Afraid to Die*

30 April 20XX

Graduation Speech

Our generation has been told since our earliest memories that we as a society are on a natural course of progress. As children, the sacrifices of our parents and grandparents have given us what felt like an easy life filled with winners and a bright future. A world whose problems were supposed to be solved by the time we came of age was our inheritance. Now that we enter that world, transitioning from the heirs apparent to those that ensure that inheritance we now truly see what has been laid before us. We are faced with a world where a yearly slightly improved iPhone, where an eighth announced *Fast and Furious* sequel and another Third World government toppled are all the definitions of an unstoppable march of progress. Progress is defined as “forward or onward movement toward a destination.” If we claim to be on a road of progress, I only ask, what is this destination? Is it a slightly better iPhone, a more exciting movie, or a marginally less brutal dictatorship halfway across the world? Instead we are faced with

the same problems and dangers as we were one hundred years ago. Just as in 1915 the world peters on the edge of a knife, where extremists rule through terror on one side, and politicians worry more about reelection than the continued existence of the nation on the other. Where we may have progressed much in technology, we have remained frighteningly stagnant in humanity. In one of my favorite movies, *Interstellar*, the main character makes the observation that “we used to look up at the sky and wonder at our place in the stars, now we just look down and worry about our place in the dirt.” Let us not be fooled by our modern illusion of “progress” for it is us just finding our place in the dirt. Rather I would say that our generation must find our place in the stars, and be more than simply “the change we wish to see in this world.” We must make the change that we need in this world. A generation that “does what it can” rather than “suffers what it must.” Never before has a youth been so well equipped to institute radical and epoch defining transformation than ours, if only we would move past the fear of being anything other than “the next thing.” I of course am not speaking of a hollow and politically strategic “change” but rather actual, permanent change that fundamentally transforms how we see the world. If it is not us who do this, then we leave it to chance, a powder keg ready to explode, either way, it will happen eventually, either by us peacefully and rationally, or by the universe painfully, just as the Great War did so a hundred years ago. At the end of the day we are faced with two choices, either take up the mantle of responsibility and potentially be hated by those that came before us in the process. Or resign ourselves to being yet another middle generation, finding our place in the dirt, willing to pass this stagnancy onto our children and be forgotten, doomed to oblivion by the silence of history.

N.

“Human science fragments everything in order to understand it, kills everything in order to examine it.”

- War and Peace

Why are you reading this? You, right now? We wrote this for ourselves and for nobody else, and if you are reading it right now it's a mistake. Well, if you are still there then let's say as a hypothetical you somehow found one of the handful of copies of this petty novella soaking in a gutter, a homeless person with nothing else to read. Well, then let me pitch you the argument about why you shouldn't read this, and why reading it is a waste of time.

I mean come on, it's basically just an elegy of three upper middle class, if not upper class privileged white guys on just how frivolous their childhood was compared to the normal American. I haven't even gotten to the graduation party yet but let's be real, there is going to be nothing there that is too radical or edgy or provocative in what is essentially among the protected suburban communities of America. I can only hear now the howling urban critics whining about how *dramatic* and *privileged* and finally, *white* our plushy accounts are. On the one hand they are completely right, you aren't going to read anything here that relates to any truly desperate or deprived populations, the few that truly exist in America. On the other, if experiences like ours illustrate that of the future middle and upper class of our country, you can bet they, and their anxieties, are going to bleed downwards to everyone else.

This isn't me trying to defend this tome, like I said I am trying to convince you not to read it. I am just saying that even in an absolute best-case scenario where it manages to resonate some sort of commonality with the generation it's written in, like the Lost Generation, etc., it's literally too late and is too limited in scope. The juice simply does not justify the aspartame ridden, low calorie squeeze. I guess in a sort of double reverse proxy way, the idea of three white guys writing about their privileged and sheltered upbringing might be novel, but again, that's only in some crazy future scenario when Disney or Paramount has finally exhausted the stories of our more diverse and economically challenged peers.

The point I am trying to make here is that by most strictly traditional qualifiers, the ones that are left, like race and household income, the authors of this story literally have nothing new or novel to say. But this very reality, this attitude is exactly why we are going to, and already are starting to have a new literary generation from this demographic. Me and my peers can't tell you about the particulars of poverty, and we can't tell you the particulars of race from the perspective of the new majority, but our final grasp of that excess, of comfort and promise, our unwitting position as the cultural survivors or an eroded civilization rather than the new one coming, well, I guess that can only be for us. Which is why I say to stop reading this. Because reminiscences like this really only have value from our position. It would be like trying to relate to a Sumerian in Alexander's Army. Sure, maybe you have some respect in a historical sense, you recognize these people and culture once existed, even at the very end. But it's gone. You replaced it, you are the future, and the future is bright...right?

The degree and extent to which our racial and economic generation was coddled, as demonstrated by this story, is not incidental to its replacement, it's a direct cause. The critics who rightly would criticize this account on it being myopic and privileged, if they somehow found one of the handful of copies, would rightfully point out that the sheltered, almost delusional nature of our upbringing was the exception not the rule. I know a colleague of mine would say it was not once so, and once most American high school lives were like this, but that's not really relevant, the fact is we had the luck and privilege to experience such a life in the absolute twilight and final era of its existence. I am reminded of that Lost Generation writing so poetically about

the world before the Great War. The world described was entirely irrelevant and pointless by the time the account was written. I like to dream and fantasize that we are like Fitzgerald describing Europe before the Great War when he remembered that:

“this western-front business couldn’t be done again, not for a long time. The young men think they could do it but they couldn’t. They could fight the first Marne again but not this. This took religion and years of plenty and tremendous sureties and the exact relation that existed between the classes. The Russians and Italians weren’t any good on this front. You had to have a whole-souled sentimental equipment going back further than you could remember. You had to remember Christmas, and postcards of the Crown Prince and his fiancée, and little cafés in Valence and beer gardens in Unter den Linden and weddings at the mairie, and going to the Derby, and your grandfather’s whiskers.”

- F. Scott Fitzgerald, “Tender is the Night”

But we don’t have a cataclysmic Great War to blame, nothing to romanticize after the fact, just the same old civilizational entropy that usually misses the history books.

This collective screed was written for nobody other than the authors and not for the people living when it was published. It has no historical value. This account is an era, a culture and a feeling that is out of touch, irrelevant, offensive, elitist, classist, racist and pointless to the real world we live in and thus as a member of that brave new world you shouldn’t read it.

There is nothing new here in this account, by any point of analysis. The world described was already about gone when we experienced it and far more now, and our description isn’t even incidentally entertaining but rather mangled by our own inability, our own optimism, my own insecurity, and my own anxiety about comparisons to the past. I suppose the best you can hope for is something authentic, like the speech posted which is completely unedited from when it was written, or from Matt’s immense thoughtfulness as he seamlessly integrates these silly trivial experiences into the enterprising man he has become, skilled, able, and stepping on the precipice of greatness. Or Eric’s light and addictive descriptions and interactions that belie the Grey

Eminence he has evolved into, fitting whatever job or role he chooses. You will only ever know the privileged suburban white guys, dime a dozen, “dudebros” teepeeing the choir director or jumping the curb.

So, stop wasting your time reading this reactionary, false radical, privileged, suburban, trivial, frivolous, muddled, poorly conceived, arrogant, little book. Because while you will see all the mistakes and weaknesses bred by this generation bear itself out in our upcoming history and this account, you will never know these men the way I do. Writing will never do them justice.

O.

"Everyone gets the experience. Some get the lesson."

- T.S. Eliot

When I was a child, I had a very strange habit. On Christmas, my favorite holiday, I always managed to wake up before my parents. Not so early to spoil Santa Claus, but early enough that I was the only one awake. I would carry myself to my parents' door, or my grandparents for the years I was blessed enough to spend such a holiday with them, and sit at it, like a good and faithful dog. I would sit and wait for them to wake up. Sometimes because I had woken up early or, as I understand now, because my superiors wished to sleep from work the days before, I would sit for more than an hour, more than two. Imagine that I knew our gifts were feet away under the tree. I knew they were within reach, but still I sat by the door waiting for my parents to wake up. Mere feet away all my gifts lay, I could have had them alone, if it was only about the gifts. Without thought, by instinct alone I knew even my most wanted toy or gift could not exist without my family to present it to me. The patience, the restraint, the wisdom, and the faith of my child mind humbles and devastates me to this day. I would trade a thousand skills, a million hours of learning and every minute I have wasted just to have the self-discipline of that child I once was, sitting at the door of his parents on Christmas once again.

The child sitting at the door is how I felt at graduation, because the ceremony was my door, and the Grad Party was the gifts after. The second it was over, after I finally shook the hand of

the superintendent and I was free, I rushed to take the couple of pictures my patience would allow, one with Matt, and got to my car. I hate pictures, not the concept of them themselves but particularly the pictures specifically taken at special events. I hate posing, I hate the smiles, and I hate the purpose behind them. The best stories were always inspired by feelings, not pictures. My memory will always serve me better.

It wasn't all just excitement, getting to the party as soon as possible had its own benefits. Arriving before the need for a door man, arriving when the drinks were being sequestered and placed. Early arrival itself could earn you an unspoken loyalty and class that might serve itself later. It is a very simple principle and one that a great many members of the graduating class understood.

James' house was two stories, with two staircases, one in the front and one in a TV room to the right of the front door, for a total square footage of about twenty-five hundred. The front door was approached by an enclosed entry. It was covered with the intent of a garden, but none existed. This meant it was very easy to control entrants to the party as the actual front door was not visible from the street. Upon entering the front door, immediately ahead was a carpeted staircase up unto a landing and then leading right. Right of the staircase was a hall to the TV room, all hardwood floor, on its way to said room was a bathroom and passage to the garage on the right. To the left of the front door was an open living room, the back of which led to the kitchen which connected to the aforementioned TV room in its rear. This first floor was the primary action zone for the party to come, both as the entrance and as the primary source of music in the tv room. The kitchen in the rear led outside to the backyard. The backyard was small, just barely larger than the medium sized pool it contained. It had two wooden tables, with one being already almost rotted away. James and his friends had blocked up most of the rooms upstairs with the exception of the game room connected by the second stairway, the office, and James' room itself.

There is no "inter" party. One minute it's just you and some close friends who set everything up and within twenty minutes the house is filled with one hundred people. Therefore, in an effort to maintain at least some level of control over who got in, James deputized two door men. Despite the haphazard nature of the event, this proved remarkably effective because of the enclosed nature of the primary entrance and because of the people dubbed

to fulfill this role. Nobody wants to sit at the door of a party but not be in it, it's why clubs have to actually pay bouncers, so if you are going to pick people for such a role at an event like this you need to pick people who can have fun with it. Firstly, James assigned Kevin to the street in front of the house. This position's job was to direct people looking for the house to the location, give early warning for unwanted cars (which will be doubly relevant later) and be the first friendly face anyone sees. Kevin was a robust, full-bodied Cuban appropriately with an open shirt and friendly countenance. He was not academically gifted and yet signed up for every honors and AP class regardless, meaning he knew both sides of the high school. Kevin did not do well in these classes, but he went to college simply because he had the confidence to sign up for them and attended. In this way perhaps his naiveté belied a divine wisdom too powerful for the deteriorating higher education system that cannot decide what it wants. It is without exaggeration that I say without Kevin, the party would have been ruined, a fact that will soon become apparent. At the door itself, below the overhang, occulted past the walkway I assigned Eddy and Andrew. Eddy was the poster child for intelligent, sensible, merit-based immigration. His parents were educated and Korean, recent enough that Eddy himself had the special combination of valley California accent when speaking English, along with a fluency in his blood language. He also inherited the powers of observation and wit that anyone who has spent any time with Koreans will immediately notice. Eddy was the perfect doorman because he wasn't from our high school, but his powers of sociability meant he knew everyone. He was at once a foreign face to those who had no business at the door, and recognized almost everyone. Even funnier, his mastery of Korean meant that when the awkward moment of refusal came, he could simply begin yelling at the unfortunate reject in that scholarly tongue until they fled. Andrew, on the other hand, sat on the other side of the door as your classic Italian with a chip on his shoulder. The younger brother to Nick from my graduation dinner. The one with something to prove. Andrew's service, however, was part time, and unfortunately the few times he took a break would ultimately be extremely consequential for the course of the party. The instructions were simple. No outsiders from our high school unless they arrived with someone from our graduation. No underclassmen. Finally, NO BOETIANS. One might recall my ban of Ian after his 21-gun piss

salute down the stairs but this ban was extended to his entire brood. The only Boetians allowed were personal friends of James.

Everyone talks about waking up to watch the sunrise, but have you ever woken up so early for work that you catch it right at the end, you see the glow on the horizon after the sun has just risen, or perhaps just fallen, and you think and mourn if you had just looked outside, just woken up or gone out a few minutes earlier you would have seen the event itself but now its gone. That's how a party starts. You welcome a few friends, you go to get a drink, and you walk back and suddenly there's a hundred people at your house. There is no cherry to be popped, no dramatic moment of acceptance, you now have this nuclear weapon set in your heart and the timer is already going. You can't disarm it. Just make sure when it explodes you have the bomb suit on, your friends are away from the blast zone and the losses are acceptable. The minute James knew this wasn't just going to be another of his parties at his house where his friends and maybe some friends of friends showed up was when Brady arrived. James had played football with Brady through elementary school and high school. He was one of his chosen linemen, or perhaps I should say his father's chosen. Because Brady was a specimen bred and raised for a single purpose. It was almost like in Plato's *Republic* where he assigns society into different metals, classes, of people who are taught and forced their entire existence into only this possibility. Brady was not stupid, nor was he incapable of anything else, but his entire life had been football, by intention, and constructing the career of a future professional meant his father was always searching for teammates. James had, for a time, been one. While James had since moved on from football, Brady was the star of our high school team, and so seeing him at the door meant that the word on this event had well and truly broken even the confines of Eric, James or Matt's contacts. Brady never did end up going pro. After being recruited by a top ten college football program as their new starting quarterback he broke his leg on his second play and his career was ruined. One bad play and his parent's entire plan was destroyed, do not pass go, do not collect 200 dollars. I suppose in a way of thinking, this broken bone liberated Brady. Now with professional football off the table he could become his own man. He transferred to a small college, married his high school sweetheart and became a small town hero playing for them and even got his

masters degree. A less wealthy but far richer future than his parents had ever envisioned.

In any case, Brady's presence meant that the party had gone "mainstream" so to speak. This helps explain why, over the course of the night, at least two hundred and fifty people eventually filled that house, of which only around sixteen hundred square feet were open at its peak, and by my estimate, around four hundred came and went throughout the night. If this sounds like a disaster waiting to happen then you misunderstand the nature of these things. So many people, especially teenagers, in such a place do not gestate a single disaster, it spawns a hundred concurrent issues that, if not tended to like a garden, become a single, giant uncontrolled reaction. So let's hear about some of these issues and why there was no Via M_____ Incident akin to Chernobyle.

Everyone is here, where is the music? James says hello through a group of recent arrivals past the hallway into the TV room. The cabinet with the record player opens out, it takes up half the room. It's full. James starts walking back, pushing the crowd, the cabinet opens just long enough for the player to be pulled out. Now to the records. He turns around to the crowd, "check out my collection guys" he booms firmly, and points across the room to his vinyls, the mass moves with him. There is no room to bend over so he glances slightly. Black binding, *Aja*, perfect. He barely stoops to pull it, holding it above his head over the crowd, he booms "CALL ME DEACON BLUES," those who know cheer, and he pushes his way back to the player. *Aja* makes its way onto the player, the needle falls. Mission accomplished. "Where the fuck are the drinks, why is the kitchen blocked?" James looks across the TV room to the kitchen entrance and sees it obstructed by a table. Fucking Max. Max—"figuratively literally wide butthole" Max—was an extremely sensible person, perhaps too sensible, enough so that one wondered who programmed him. This was a guy who had wanted to practice bartending, a flight of fancy, and at a previous party had tried to do so by blocking off the kitchen. Here we go again. "Max you can make drinks but you can't block the kitchen, everything is there." He was too busy to hear. James pushed his way past the table.

"Look man, I know you like to make drinks, make them here on the counter," James wipes everything on the kitchen counter into the sink, "Don't block the way and let people get at the drinks 'cus everyone is bringing stuff."

“But dude, we collected all this money and we went and bought this stuff so I could make drinks.”

“Then start making your drinks and stop blocking the way because this is the only way out to the backyard and it's already getting too crowded in here.”

“But my Ba—”

James opened the back door, people began pouring outside to get more space, the highway was open.

“James, the bathroom near the front door is locked and nobody can get in.”

What? How did someone lock themselves in? James went through the kitchen, through the living room back to the front door and it immediately became apparent what the problem was. The Boetian infestation had already gained root. James saw a group of male Boetians having just entered through the door.

“Where the fuck is Andrew, he wasn't supposed to let you idiots in.”

With the door still open, Eddy said quickly “Andrew is getting a drink since he heard the kitchen is open.”

James sighed. Andrew was a Boetian, which is why James put him at the door to stop them by recognition. The problem is this tight cult was small and traveled together, so a small window let some ten of them in.

James pointed to the left of the front door from the living room. “Why is the bathroom locked?”

James soon learned that because Ryan, a friend of his who was Boetian, was here, his ex-girlfriend, a daughter of an administrator of the private school had come here on the warpath, and as is the Boetian nature brought with her the entire congregation. Her name was Jacey.

James went to the door and found a screwdriver on the ground, it appears the spoiled hen had tried to deconstruct the lock itself in order to get in. James knocked, told Ryan it was him and the door was unlocked. Fearing such an issue would occur again, James took apart the door lock so it couldn't be locked again from the inside. At this point Jacey, Ryans bane, was already lost somewhere else in the house. Before James could find her, take her to the other Boetians and expel them from the house he heard another cry.

“WHERE'S JAMES” a jolly cry was heard from the back of the house.

Konrad. Yes, our old friend. He wouldn't have missed this for the world and being of pure temperament wanted to celebrate and bestow gifts soon after arriving at the party. James followed the voice out to the backyard dodging a crowd dancing to "Deacon Blues" in the TV room, now having been filled with people for some time since he opened the passage. Perhaps James supposed it was time for a break, so he headed out back.

Konrad met him with a strong and hearty clasp of hands. In his other, he held a bottle of Crown Royale. It was the ancient Copt in him that remembered this was the first drink James ever told him he liked and he had brought to his first ever party, and it was the Yamato in him that broke the decrepit wooden table as he set it down. Such bizarre cultural combinations are only possible in the eschatological social framework of Southern California. Before anything could be done, the crowd outside threw the top of the table into the pool. James desperately appealed to Konrad to help him set aside the parts of the table, including the one now in the pool, before they could be used for destructive ends. Konrad instantly accepted this plea for help, simply asking permission to jump across the table in the pool once first. James nodded in assent, it was only fair for the help.

Konrad, with the Crown Royale still in his hand, jumped onto the floating table, then to the other side of the pool without fault.

With this feat accomplished in front of everyone, he helped James fish the table out and set it aside where it wouldn't be misused.

James declined the drink Konrad had initially intended to offer him. James was not drinking or indulging in any substances that night, as the party itself would occupy all his senses. I can say with absolute certainty this was the first party or kick back or anything of that nature James had ever attended and remained sober, and it was a wise decision.

James cast a glance to the back corner of the back yard, where he saw a vision as inevitable as it was hilarious. There Eric stood, glistening bowl in hand as if it was the basket of loaves and fish itself, handing it to none other than Ali and Emily. Ali was a dancer who towered over them both, a woman who set for herself a standard higher than her own physical height and eventually sacrificed real virtue for its appearance. She sought the now wholly conventional vision of my generation to be verbally and

superficially challenging while submitting to the very regime she pretended to hate in actual action and lifestyle. She was a woman who would later speak passionately about tampon equality and the abolishment of distinctions while building bombs for Northrop Grumman. Emily on the other hand was a far more conventionally studious and academic girl in our class. She had dreams of Harvard that her grades might have enabled if not for her wholly conventional race and background. I now consider everyone I know denied from the Ivy League having dodged a bullet. Ironically, these were both the people who gave the graduation speeches. They now took a puff of the soon to be legalized devil's lettuce from Eric's outstretched hand like that of an emerald missionary. James chuckled as he regained his mental energy at such a baffling sight.

Walking back into the kitchen James walked right into another crime in progress. Quickly acknowledging its genius he quickly moved out of the way and observed. As demonstrated by the previous scene, one of the best chemical reactions of this social experiment was seeing very different, never before interacting social worlds collide. Andy was a half-hearted trombonist who liked drugs. He was the one who had been partially strangled by low brass section leader John, the classturbator. Here he was, with high school social royalty Michelle and her retinue. Michelle was at the top crust socially of our high school. I spoke before of rich kids (or rich among the rich as we were all well off) and their followers, Michelle was the blonde attractive stereotype of the stereotype I already presented. And there was scum of the earth Andy with a little bag of white powder setting out lines for the queen and her handmaidens. James raised his eyebrow and looked behind Andy towards his cupboard where he saw his pancake mix container moved and half open. Andy sold his IHOP mix to these silly people like he had a debt to pay. Knowing no better, they snorted it up and were ready for a first-time experience. James had to marshal every atom in his soul to stifle open laughter and not blow the prank, a feat only possible due to his sobriety. Michelle and her Linebacker hanger-on waxed poetically about how crazy skiing was for the first time, but Andy and James looked at each other askance, silently acknowledging they were the only ones getting high on such a once-in-a-lifetime goof. James took a right, and passed by Max mixing his drinks for anyone who would grab one. Next to him was Alex and his

girlfriend, Amanda, who had helped James make the party possible. Seeing all was in hand James moved back to the front of the house to the front door, just in time.

Andrew was back at his post but it was too late, Boetians had dispersed throughout the house and infested the party beyond repair. This was like a control rod being removed at the reactor, it doesn't immediately blow but you can see it from there. As James approached that open, heavy wooden front door, he saw Eddy rolling a cigarette as a number of band underclassmen approached. Before Eddy could unleash a torrent of aggressive oriental dialect in their direction James merely pointed at them and commanded "No!" Message received and the group of underclassmen turned around before even crossing the threshold of the passage leading to the front door. Standing in the front door threshold James turned around at the perfect moment to witness what would become a highly disputed and much argued event.

Now facing inside the house, directly in front of James was Ali, having made her way from the back yard, beyond her on the landing of the stairs, enhancing his figure by a foot was Flounder.

We called him Flounder after the beloved character from *Animal House*, as at that time he exemplified both the good nature and the overwhelming naiveté of that archetype. While this mental virginity earned him great ridicule and disrespect from his teenage male peers, his combination of attributes ultimately aged very well. I say this because while Flounder may have been late to get his license, ask out a girl, or learn how to do his own laundry or take care of himself, eventually all these things would be learned but he still maintained that core willingness to simply believe which had already turned to cynicism in his peers. This allowed Flounder to remain confident in the Myth of what he could and believed himself to be until he actually became it. And so while it meant that Flounder was relentlessly made fun of, even bullied by others, including myself, for his inexperience in all worldly things, by the time he eventually caught up in those experiences after high school he ironically ended up further than just about all of us. It is more than just "fake it till you make it," one has to truly believe, not just as a put on or even as some kind of self help tool, in the platonic image of what they can be and ultimately that takes at least to begin with, the sort of good natured naiveté that Jesus himself praised in children. Even as your more experienced but ultimately

immature peers might punish you for it. This particular incident was perhaps one of the most naive things Flounder ever did, an event for which he received much ridicule at the time and for a few years after.

Flounder went to prom with Ali a few months back. It took James and Matt weeks to conspire this outcome as without their help it's unlikely Flounder would have gone to prom at all, and it was determined that such an experience would be good for him. What was known to literally everyone except Flounder was that Ali was infatuated with Eric, who she probably would have been presumptuous enough to ask herself had he not already had a girlfriend, and had he not chosen to go to Coachella instead of take said girlfriend to prom (a remarkably long-sighted, shortsighted decision). The ultimate result of this comedy of errors love triangle was that Flounder asked Ali to prom, with the help of Matt and James, and because she had no way to go with her preferred candidate anyway, and was essentially coerced by James and Matt conspiring the Promposal to be in public among her peers, she said yes. I suppose having Flounder ask her in public was a bit coercive as I said but everyone needs to learn how to say "no" eventually, and better it be in a low stakes situation and environment like Prom dates. Flounder's unique character meant he thought he had a real shot, and he was oblivious to the overwhelming apathy Ali had towards him through prom itself and its aftermath.

Returning to the party, with the year ending and with some liquid courage Flounder saw this as his best and final chance to win over a girl he never had any chance of getting from the beginning. It was "over before it even began," as they say. Flounder descended the stairs from the landing towards Ali, uttering the ill conceived "I'm sorry but I have to do this." Before his lips could meet hers, she turned around and walked past James out the front door. Her contribution to the party was as short as it was memorable. As Flounder scurried off like a batter after three consecutive strikes, he could at least console himself in the undeniable fact that he had at least swung the bat.

A nearby bystander, Noah, his exasperation revealing his genuineness, said "What the fuck just happened?" Whatever had just happened, the future trajectories of both these people showed Flounder learned far more from this humiliating experience than Ali. Ali later squandered the genuine relationship she once could only fantasize about, meanwhile the later Flounder

would never dream of apologizing before proposing to his soon to be wife. Everyone is made a fool eventually, better it be sooner than later.

At this point the Boetians had fully infested the party for at least an hour if not two and, continuing with our reactor analogy, said reaction was out of control. One might recall the incident with the Boetians' headmaster's son from the Friday before graduation. James had originally banned him and all Boetians from the party due to this incident, but once it became clear they had made their way into the party anyway, he tolerated their presence. This now proved itself to be a catastrophic and consequential mistake. James was now being dragged upstairs. Despite the avowed values of the private institution Ian's mother ran, it was he who had become the most intoxicated and belligerent person in the party, to such an extent that the Boetians themselves could not contain him. Ian was so drunk that after having his advances onto a woman clearly and overtly rebuffed, he continued. Upon James confronting him about this, and hearing what had happened by the many people who had witnessed this, Ian went on a tirade insulting multiple women from his own school, including the aforementioned Jacey. In a hilariously out of touch example of cowardly nepotism, it was only after this tirade that the Boetian upperclassmen laid hands upon Ian. James told them to throw him out of the party, and take themselves with him or he would bring their wrathful matriarch here himself to account for their entire institution. Ian was quickly dragged out of the house despite significant resistance. Perhaps it was this display of resilience in the face of his own misconduct that helped his mother garner the congressional recommendation that would eventually send him to the Naval Academy at Annapolis. One can only hope he treats the Chinese navy in some future conflict with as much contempt as he did James' house, the woman he nearly assaulted, and his own female colleagues he harangued.

The fear now became a possible reprisal where the expelled Boetians informed their fair-weather parents about the party, highlighting its size and access to alcohol but forgetting their own part as the most disruptive element eventually leading to some police response. However, as much as I would like to blame the Boetians, while the police would eventually arrive, it was not at the behest of them, but rather a source far closer to home. Kelsey had been a friend of the trio for a while now, especially with James who

met her early on upon changing schools and also was part of the school band. While she herself could sometimes be a bit naive (she once coined the term “third hand high” fearing chronic intoxication simply by being in the same place marijuana had ever been smoked) and her defense of provably incompetent academic authority often rubbed her peers the wrong way, she had no malicious bone in her body. To cut to the chase, Kelsey could sometimes be annoying, but I would now find everyone involved in this story to be an annoying teenager. This is to say, if Kelsey was slightly more annoying than the norm, that gap was only noticeable to her peers and did not speak to some fundamental defect. No, the problem with Kelsey wasn't Kelsey, it was her mother. Had it not been for her mother, she likely would have had a significantly more positive and constructive high school experience. Kelsey's mother was an angry divorcee with a grudge against the entire world. She was not content to simply ruin her own life, or that of her daughter, and sought to impose her misery on anyone she could, to the extreme detriment of Kelsey. She was infamous for shutting down parties, ones with or without alcohol. She viewed any gathering of teenagers for any purpose not under her direct supervision as a pest to be exterminated. She had an especially fearsome reputation in the band where she served as a perennial volunteer chaperone, her section always just happened to be reported for being out of order. It was because of this that many were far harsher on Kelsey herself than they otherwise would have been. Just a week before graduation she had shut down a party, which led to James issuing an ultimatum that Kelsey would be immediately banned from the party if there was any sign that her mother had been informed about it. Kelsey, of course, promised that she would do her part to quarantine the knowledge out of a genuinely feared social excommunication due to the pathetic immaturity of her mother. In hindsight, this ultimatum is ridiculous on its face. The party took place immediately after graduation, had been prepared for weeks and hundreds attended. There was no way, even given Kelsey's complete silence that her mother would not know about it. Holding the girl responsible in any way was completely unjustified. But teenagers are not known for their justice, something the only adult in this parable—Kelsey's mother—had no excuse not to know.

So after the party had been going for a few hours, and the Boetians largely expelled, when James was informed that Kevin

needed him outside right now because someone's parents showed up, James had every reason to expect one of the Boetians. They, however, likely fearing the wrath of their own delusional matriarch, made sure nobody older than them found out about the party that night. Instead, as James walked outside, he could hear from ten feet away Kevin being scolded and yelled at by Kelsey's mother with the force of a failed marriage. Kevin deserves immense credit for keeping this spinster outside in her car by jumping into the line of fire. Had she been allowed to enter the party itself, it would have been well and truly over. She would have seen how large and well stocked the event was, even possibly getting into a fight as the night would have spelled oblivion for everyone, especially the host. If James was some third world country dictator he would have undoubtedly bestowed Kevin with some Revolutionary Dude of Excellence award for this great service. Instead, James took over for him at the car window and told him to tell the party to expect police, hide upstairs and quiet down.

She made her position clear.

"I want everyone under the age of 18 out of this party right now or I will call the Sheriff."

James replied that the party was for the senior class, and that almost everyone there was already eighteen anyway. He furrowed his brow and looked directly into her abyssal eyes, saying, "Will you be the one to drive everyone home? Or should I just throw them out? Your daughter is here, I can get her for you if you like."

"No I won't, shut this party down or I will call the Sheriff."

"Are you sure you don't want me to get your daughter at least so you can take her home?"

"You are drunk! I can smell it from your breath!" she pointed a shaking hand at him desperately.

James let out a scoff. The one party he doesn't drink and he is being called a drunk.

"I am not going to throw a bunch of high schoolers out at midnight at the request of a mother who won't even take care of her own daughter. Call who you want, just know when she gets home safely later it was in spite of what you are doing, not because of it."

James turned around and walked back to the house as the interloper drove off. He understood that he had about thirty minutes before the police arrived. By the time he had got back to

the house the entire party also knew this fact, and furthermore knew it was Kelsey's mother who was causing it. This caused the usually well-put-together and sober Kelsey to drink heavily. James had to find a ride for her a few hours later, which was difficult at 4 am, but he did fulfill that promise at least. Luckily most of the work preparing for the police had already been done because of the message relayed by Kevin, and by Matt moving as many people as possible upstairs and keeping them quiet. The problem came from the people in the backyard, who were impossible to hide. Thinking quickly, if not entirely wisely, James told those people to leave the house and take a walk around the Paseo walkways that connected the various suburbs and come back in an hour. While this did solve the issue of the easily visible crowd in the backyard with drinks, unleashing fifty drunk high schoolers to walk around the neighborhood guaranteed some level of collateral damage. Driven by genuine fear, some even climbed the wall of the backyard to get to the Paseo, which set off a panic that James had specifically tried to avoid.

Just about twenty minutes later, the police arrived. While by this point the house itself seemed completely desolate, the fact that three cars came, including one that jumped the curb between two streets, to surround the house made it clear that the wandering nomadic horde of teenagers had already been clocked. When the knock came, James walked out the front door and closed it behind him to talk to the two officers. The first thing they said was they had gotten calls from people about teenagers walking around drunk coming from this house. While James had spoken to all his neighbors before the party and gotten them on board, his former patrons had undoubtedly gone past this protective ring by now, inspiring complaints. With his abilities to extemporaneously craft pure convincing bullshit put to the ultimate test, James calmly explained the situation.

“Yeah I was having a little get together to celebrate graduation, just me and a few friends. But then about an hour ago a bunch of people I don't know showed up with alcohol. I explained to them we don't drink and didn't know them so I told them to leave. I guess they just left and walked around.”

It is hard to know to what level the officers actually believed this story, we know it could not have been entirely but they must have believed it just enough because they simply took

down James' name and birthday, then told him to keep things under control so the next visit isn't from the ambulance.

The minute the cars were no longer visible from the window upstairs, the house erupted in cheering. James sent a runner to go out and find anyone they could on the Paseo and tell them to come back. While the police had run into some of the wandering party goers, and scared some of them, ultimately nobody got arrested and about half made it back to the party. The Party would go on.

P.

“In those days, in those distant days, in those nights, in those remote nights, in those years, in those distant years; in days of yore, when the necessary things had been brought into manifest existence, in days of yore,”

- Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Nether World, 2100 B.C.

It had now been over four hours since the party began with one escalating crisis or problem after another. I, back near the front door after sending the police off, was mentally exhausted. While everyone else celebrated the resumption of the party I took a forlorn seat at the stair's landing. The same place as Flounder's Folly, which felt like a week ago but had merely been an hour. With each crisis dodged and dealt with, maybe deep in the recesses of my heart, I was secretly hoping that the party would just implode and end, no more problems to deal with, a good story at least. For every problem solved another was spawned in what seemed like an endless gauntlet of teenage stupidity. I would not be at the calm eye of this storm for long however, as soon Matt and Eric sat and stood around me. Ultimately it was a bit delusional and selfish for me to think I was holding this entire enterprise on my own shoulders.

This account has made clear that every step of the way from preparation to the party itself there was a core group of responsible and good friends, centered with Matt and Eric that didn't just hold the party up, but held the idea of me up. Through the entire course of that party each of my close friends was putting out fires of their own. I already mentioned how Konrad helped clean up the table, but he also prevented people from executing a

plan to jump into the pool from the roof. Yes, that was a serious idea that almost happened. Matt had largely singlehandedly organized moving everyone upstairs and keeping them quiet when the police arrived. I might have put *Aja* on, but it was Eric who flipped it over when one side was finished, and kept records on the phonograph. Alex and Amanda tirelessly cleaned up the party the next morning with me, and we decompressed at Denny's early that morning. Vlad had come and helped me move all the furniture and breakable objects to the garage earlier the day of graduation with his little brother. My own parents had done the immense help of trusting the house to me, knowing I was throwing a party. How could I let myself be so arrogant in the face of such trust by so many people? Why do I still crave this confidence and arrogance I now can see to be so manifestly unjustified? I would later talk about how being the center of a giant storm in a party like this, to be the man of action solving crises as they arrive, was exhilarating and as uncomfortable as it was euphoric. But taking stock of it all now, realizing the other angles to this story and all the other responsible people who kept things under control, even down to the simple individual telling his friend to forego that extra shot, it's clear that I was more attracted to the *idea* or perhaps the delusion of being Atlas, not actually being Atlas himself. Creating such a complex is worse than just denying the essentialness and input of others. It can spiral into a sort of fragile invincibility. It can inspire decisions, and a conception of the self that demands and expects invincibility using an ideation of a past strength that, even if it did exist to some degree, was never alone. I mean just compare this account to the others. Even with some years of thinking and separation I still have managed to make my entire section obsessed with myself in comparison to my peers which have rightly focused more on either the actual events or our dynamic as friends. My ego rules me to this day, trying to keep the barrier between Pride and Hubris. Often I look back at the person I was in high school, the person at this party, the person who walked home from Kc's, the person who treated his friends as tools, the person who got too drunk at Eric's the first time, the one who put laxative in the fruit punch on a whim, the one who destroyed his father's car that he loved, the one who took everything seriously except himself, the one who forgot some promises and remembered others, and see a strength and self confidence that I wish I had now. But when I really consider and try to piece together the whole picture, even

this narrative of decline is infested with the rot of an ego implicit in the idea that there was once a golden age. The lie that I really did hold the entire party on my own shoulders alone. This self-deceptive paradigm has even infected the way I look at the past and history in general, whether it be impotently seething at boomers or ideating the great people of distant ages. I am obsessed with this idea that at some point, sometime, everything was right and good and of needing to know how we got here. Even the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the oldest written work, calls back to a long degenerated golden age as it begins with “in those ancient days.” The myth of the past MUST be real, because without it I can’t find myself. Maybe it is just an extreme overreaction to the implicit idea now that everything is getting better. Even in my own account I have tried to separate myself now, the one writing this, from the James of the past, making grammatical distinction before now between the good and bad stories even when it was obvious they must be about the same person. I am not trying to say people or even civilizations do not change as they age, the teenager at that party, the one in this story, is not the same person that I am now in both good and bad ways, but you can see the me now looking at him in the past, and it’s not just because he once supposedly could single handedly stand in the eye of the storm and steer the ship. It’s the belief back then that I was actually doing such a thing in spite of the truth which directly led to the man now who knows that he didn’t, he couldn’t. The question of whether that fundamentally means I can’t actually be that man someday will be a question for me in another decade or so. A time when perhaps I can combine the introspection that a crumb of age has granted me, with some of the confidence I once had to believe such an egotistical delusion of greatness in the first place. A time when my dreams of the past can inspire a future surpassing my pessimistic expectations. A time in the very far future when the actual intended audience for this text beyond myself, my own progeny, can read it and feel some communion across eras, to know in some small way I too have passed through this night. A time when me writing this right now will join me in high school as being in “those ancient days.”

In Those Ancient Days

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

The guy in high school who always pushed more boundaries than you, did more drugs than you, had a better time than you but somehow is the most sober guy in the room twenty years later when you run into him at the DMV because he hasn't re-registered his car since then is who wrote this book.

The guy who never had a real girlfriend in high school but had more sex than you before you (or him for that matter) knew exactly what it was; The guy you should have punched when you had the chance before he became too likable, the guy who puts the ASS in white Anglo-Saxon protestant, wrote this book.

The guy who has a chip on his shoulder he put there himself in desperation for a real cause, the guy who dreads the reunion, the guy who loves the idea but not the actual work, the guy who wrote this blurb. He wrote this book.

A wealthy, record safe, sequestered suburb; a relic of a dead, surpassed, immediately succeeded, pre-Enlightenment, problematic; now improved, replaced, reconstructed, changed silly southern Californian boomtown wrote this book.

Launching puddings at bystanders from the Sienna sliding doors wrote this book. Everything you hate wrote this book.