

TEN TOES DOWN



ASHER CONRAD

ten toes down

asher conrad

CreateSpace (2012)

Rating: ★★☆☆☆

It's so easy to be a bad boy when you no longer have to be good.

Sebastian Behr used to be a good boy. Hot shot, high flying call centre executive, he had a little piece of everything: respect, a huge paycheck, beautiful wife, high-end cars, and a big house. The only things left to get were a couple of nice kids and that happy coast

to a comfortable retirement. Nothing was supposed to get in his way. Instead, his wife got a boyfriend, his job got downsized and he's taken in some new roommates. And now, with nothing else to do, it's all boobs, booze, and rejection letters. Sebastian knows what it takes to be good, but does he have what it really takes to be bad?

Ever wonder what a man thinks when he picks a woman out of a crowd and convinces her to sleep with him? Ever wonder what he thinks about himself when he does it? Sebastian Behr can tell you.

Riotously funny, refreshingly honest, and deceptively insightful, *Ten Toes Down*

is a spirited personal odyssey that follows Sebastian Behr as he searches for his place in the world in the wake of an unexpected divorce, countless hangovers and endless available women. Venturing boldly into the heart of the contemporary male, *Ten Toes Down* wallows just long enough in the libidinous antics and bad boy manners of Sebastian's post-divorce regression to deliver the reader a boisterous ride to the dirty side of town.

Review

Reviewed by Maria Beltran for Readers' Favorite

"...a whirlwind ride..."

The book is a never-ending series of adventures. Getting into a man's head, seeing what he thinks while handling the repercussions of divorce - Asher Conrad hits it right on the spot. ...a breath of fresh air to know that not all divorce stories are from the female perspective, and that it can be insightful without dropping the comedy, which makes it a great read. In addition, the characters have such depth to them, making them even more believable.

About the Author

Nature sometimes conspires against

mankind in her distribution of talents; such is the case with Asher Conrad. We are two, each with a distinct talent, and between us we make exactly one writer.

Brian is an American call center executive with an innate genius for story construction. Bettina, a Canadian, was gifted with the talent to understand what the hell Brian is talking about and turning it all into a wonderful collection of words. Each is indispensable to the other.

Having met in the corporate world, we share neither domicile nor country, using the tools of modern communication to break the barriers that distance once imposed.

We continue to write together, currently working on "Daddy Date Night", a novel that our mothers won't be embarrassed to read.

TEN TOES DOWN

By Asher Conrad

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Table of Contents

Prologue

Chapter One – 'Red Light'

Chapter Two – 'Do'

Chapter Three – 'Wild West Show'

Chapter Four – 'Resignation

Superman'

Chapter Five – 'Driveway'

Chapter Six – 'Time Won't Let Me Go'

Chapter Seven – 'Love Removal

Machine'

Chapter Eight – 'Bang, Bang, Bang'

Chapter Nine – 'Bad Luck'

Chapter Ten – 'Let's Go'

Chapter Eleven – 'Simple Kind of Life'

Chapter Twelve – 'I Just Wanna Live'

Chapter Thirteen – 'Givin' Up the
Nappy Dugout'

Chapter Fourteen – 'Voodoo Child'

Chapter Fifteen – 'Here I Come'

Chapter Sixteen – 'How You Like Me
Now?'

Chapter Seventeen – 'So Much to Say'

Chapter Eighteen – 'Lost Art of
Keeping a Secret'

Chapter Nineteen – 'Time Like These'

Chapter Twenty – 'What It's Like'

Chapter Twenty-one – 'I Don't Care'

Chapter Twenty-two – 'You Make Me
Feel Like a Whore'

Chapter Twenty-three – 'One Way or
Another'

Chapter Twenty-four – 'Back Against

the Wall'

Chapter Twenty-five – '9 Crimes'

Chapter Twenty-six – 'Happy
Birthday to Me'

Chapter Twenty-seven – 'Little Lion
Man'

Chapter Twenty-eight – 'I'm Moving
On'

Epilogue

About the Author

FORWARD

Most of this happened. It had to happen to somebody at some point. The stories are real, but none of the people are; they're borrowed, watched or re-arranged, to tell this story. And while you may wonder what actually did happen and what we made up, the important part is that it's all happening everyday around us – people searching, digging hard, in often rocky places, for a place to call home for their hearts.

PROLOGUE

My name is Sebastian Behr and I just woke up in the back seat of my pick-up. I've a pounding headache, I can hear the sounds of a jack-hammer in the distance and I'm not entirely sure if they aren't actually in my head. My pants are at my ankles, my mouth is like a cat's litter box -- dry and with a taste that I hope will go away with gum. The words "*I think I may have a problem...*" keep coming to mind.

I've woken from a nightmare, a long, twisted journey through bizarro world in which I'm forty, divorced and unemployed; but as my eyes relearn how

to focus I remember it's not a dream, it's been my ever-expanding reality for the past three years.

Last night I celebrated my fortieth birthday and the distance between where I am right now and where I was three years ago is oceanic. My life used to be normal, the perfect version of the American dream – well planned, tightly executed and running neatly on schedule. It went off the moment my wife left me, bent out of shape a whole lot more when I lost my job and has lost all recognition of anything I wanted by today. So here I am: part time alcoholic, jobless, divorced and probably a little fat.

I have accomplished the trifecta of all

male miseries; the only thing worse would be if my dick fell off.

That troublesome appendage -- thinking of it reminds me to spot check. I'm intact, all of my major parts are attached and apparently still working, but how the hell I ended up in my truck instead of in my bed is still a mystery. Usually only nighttime cold medicine leaves me waking up naked in unintended places.

This much I know, last night a friend of mine thought it would be a great idea to take me out to celebrate my birthday. Obviously things got way outta hand and when I remember them all I'm sure that I'll just wish I hadn't.

Right now I am sure of exactly *four*

things, and in my newly emerging clarity, sweaty and hung over in my truck, they're things I'm hanging on to with all my might:

One: I'd rather do porn than continue to sell my soul to everyone in the attempt to find a new job

Two: That, "Age is just a number and I'm not going to leave anything undone before I go" is *not* a motto to live by

Three: That I used to be a good guy and vaguely remember how to function like one

AND....

Four: I really need to pee.

ONE – ‘Redlight’ – David Nail

Climbing into the truck I can hear the door slamming behind me despite the hammering of my heart and the echoes of my wife's hollering. She's mad and I'm leaving. It's Thanksgiving and I'm pretty sure that the loud crashing noise back there was the implosion of my marriage.

Any other time I'd try to talk, try to work us through this but I can't, just haven't the stomach for it. Besides, we have visitors and untangling what just happened in their company is unthinkable.

Leaving now is a bad move,

potentially sending five years of marriage permanently down the drain; but at the moment I can't do it, line my head and heart up to tackle the conversation I ought to be having.

Here's the thing, marriage is something I always wanted and I'd calculated very carefully. There're a hell of a lot of women in this world and I figured it was my responsibility to evaluate who I was and what I needed from marriage, so that I was only going to make that choice once. After I got married I didn't ever want to be "that guy" who had a wandering eye, who was unable to commit financially, emotionally and physically and I wasn't going to get married until I was sure I

could do it. My plan was simple: choose well, get married, spend some time alone together, have kids, raise them the best we could and in the process, grow old and wise together. And most importantly, *only do it once*.

That was the plan.

And until this moment I'd never contemplated that it was going to be too much to ask. In all of my planning, I've never planned for this.

So instead of tackling the problem head on like the man I think I am, I'm following my violent urge to flee. I head down the road, beginning the mental dialogue of the phone calls I'm about to make, conversations I'd rather have than the one I need to have with my wife.

I dial the number I've known from childhood. The best I can manage when the phone connects at my parents' is: "It's me, my plans have changed. I'm heading up to hunt and have Thanksgiving dinner with you. I'll tell you why when I get there."

It's lame, not nearly close to the truth and certain to cause pandemonium, but it's as much as I can admit to in a phone call. I cut off my mother's questions, "Mom, I promise I will tell you later," and hang up.

Next breath, shallow and tight, dialing Ty's number. Ty Downing is my best friend, has been since high school. Ty's a bit of a dick, but he's my boy - wingman, confidant - and he's never

failed me when trouble shows up. He's earned his position, but I have to admit that Ty is slick, slicker than I've ever had the courage to be. Nothing sticks to him, not trouble and definitely not women. He may not be the best man on the planet, but he's the right man for this job.

Mustering the energy to start the conversation, I listen to it ring and when he answers all my words come out in a rush.

“Dude, I think my marriage is over and I don't want to talk about it. Clear your schedule, get your gear together, you're going hunting Saturday.”

Ty, in classic form and why I truly love him, responds exactly as I expect,

no questions, no “but it’s Thanksgiving,” just action.

“Hot damn, let’s go. And we won’t just go huntin’, we’ll kill something too. Man, for sure it’s not that bad, you’ll see, it’s just a fight, whatever it is. Tell you what, hunting’ll take your mind off it and we’ll talk, after that we’ll go drinking and forget about it, then I’ll send you home with a big hangover to help you ignore it. It’ll pass, everything does.”

“Alright, I can live with that. See you then.”

Second conversation, exhale and done.

Yet, saying “I think my marriage is over,” out loud for the first time, heaves

my breakfast up and as the truck stops at the light, so do I: heart, mind, my ability to move, everything in suspension, and then it all just starts to hurt as the last half hour comes into sharp focus.

Some things in life you can't prepare for. One moment everything is good, people are showering, plans are being made and phones ring...

Now, normally, I don't answer my wife's phone. We've always had a healthy trust and respect for each other's privacy but today, of all fateful days I figured, since she was in the shower and it was a holiday that I should probably answer it, must be family.

And this is how the world ends:

"Hey, Michelle?"

“No she’s not available, can I ask who’s calling?”

“It’s Bob...who’s this?”

I am really not liking this guy’s tone and can hear it in my voice, “It’s her husband. Who’re you?”

“Me?” Low and easy laugh, “Nobody... *real* close kinda friend you could say,” another low chuckle filling my ears. “You know how it is sometimes. How’s that fancy travelin’ job of yours, anyway? Shame to be away from home so much.” And he laughs again, like he thinks I’m an idiot.

Knees buckle, animal instinct takes hold and the phone lands with a clatter against the nearest wall.

Don’t know who he is, but I know I

hate this guy. Conversation over, whatever still needs to be asked of the voice on the other end will not be asked today.

I'm suddenly sick, furious, thoughtless of anything but what the call implies, "Really? Then screw this, dammit. I'm outta here."

My plans have just radically changed.

Hunting is my thing. I love it as much as I've ever loved anything and a four-day weekend in the middle of hunting season is heaven to me. Thanksgiving, schmanksgiving, fall is for killing things. Years ago I consciously negotiated a settlement around Thanksgiving; I hunt, she cooks, I do the dishes -- all of them. In our deal it's

never as much time off as I want, and never as much time on as she wants, but it works. Now set deals are off and I negotiate my own new deal -- I am hunting ALL OF IT.

A day ago, what began in my bag as a change of clothes, now becomes packing for a weekend; a flight out of reality into as much breathing space as I can gain, to figure out what the hell just happened. I need to get out of here as fast as I possibly can.

Suddenly Michelle is over my shoulder, warm and wet from her shower, watching me unconcerned, oblivious as yet to the seismic shift in the time/space continuum that is our life. I know she's counting the pairs of

underwear I'm furiously shoving in my bag and that she knows it's more than one.

"You aren't going hunting 'til tomorrow," she begins, wandering casually past the bed, toweling dry her hair.

"Why are you packing now? And do you really need four pairs of underwear for two days? I know you're always prepared like some crazy boy scout, but four pairs?"

Walking further into the room she looks around, "Where's my cell phone?"

"I threw it." I answer, not bothering to lift my head from my task.

"Where?" she asks.

"And why?" follows after.

Turning my head, looking her straight in the eye and answering only the first question, “I don’t know, I don’t remember, but why don’t you call Bob and see if he can help you find it.”

“*Your turn*” I think as her face goes slack and grey. In that split second, all my hope dies, and I know that what I feared to believe must be true. Then, horror upon horror, the damn phone rings again.

She recovers quickly, sprinting to where it lies emitting its awful noise, answering it herself this time and, damn her, tells the caller she can’t talk, but she’ll call back when she can.

I can’t resist the opportunity, “Let me guess...that’s Bob again, huh?”

She ignores me, hiding her face, answering instead with what will ring for months afterward in my head, “It’s not exactly what you think,” she manages.

“What did he say?” tossing back her hair and exposing the tiniest upturn of her mouth.

“He said he was a real close friend.”

And a frown resumes as she starts to chew her lip.

“Well he’s...umm...I don’t know... its... ahh... nothing happened in the house.”

“Oh genius, as if that makes any of this better” I think to myself as she continues.

“You can’t be packing to leave?”

Some guy on the phone and you're just packing and leaving? But you can't just leave," recovering a little more, saying in a matter-of-fact 'what will the neighbors think?' sort of way, "We have company, what am I supposed to tell them?"

"Ten minutes ago that would have mattered to me, now it's your problem. I just intercepted your lover's phone call, you figure out some plausible way to explain that to your guests. 'Cause that's who it was, wasn't it?"

I don't wait for the answer, not even looking at her face for what might be visible there, heading straight for the stairs instead.

"I'm not having this conversation in a

house full of people; people I don't even care about, people who are your friends. You figure it out, I'm going hunting," I finish as I hit the bottom stair and look back at her, daring her to argue with my logic.

Maybe not smart, definitely not proactive, but damn it, management training never taught me how to handle this difficult conversation. Right now, I just want to get away from her.

Michelle's face changes again as she contemplates facing social embarrassment.

"I can't believe that you're going to leave me alone to deal with this!" She says, instantly and loudly on the offensive. "You're going to ruin this

whole weekend for me. Can't we talk about this when they're gone?"

"When they're gone?" All self-composure evaporating, "Your lover just announced himself to me over the phone. Your lover Michelle. Tell me that's not who it was."

Blank face in response.

"Exactly. I'm your husband, *I'm* supposed to be your lover. Forgive me, but I'm having just a little trouble getting my head around that, and carving a turkey and drinking some wine is just not a priority at the moment, no matter how it makes you look."

"But you know what Michelle. Sure, we can talk about it when they're gone, but right now I can't even begin to know

what I want to talk about; and I'm going hunting to figure that part out."

"I will talk to you on Sunday when I get back," I finish as I slam the door behind me.

TWO – ‘Do’ – The White Stripes

An endless, blank, forty minutes later I pull up at my parent's house. My childhood home, like my parents, is unassuming, a simple split level ranch; more concerned about getting the task done than having others talk about it, in a regular middle-class suburb not too near or too far from anything important. We are ordinary people.

I'm a southern boy, born and raised below the Mason/Dixon in a city large enough that every modern trouble was available to us as kids. I lived here as long as I could and when circumstance took me away from my home town, I

found myself the most similar city in the state I moved to, and settled in to repeat the experiment.

Sitting now in my parent's driveway, I can't help but hesitate. This isn't going to be easy and I'm pretty sure that I'm not really prepared for any of it. Up until now I've been the golden child, the one they never had to worry about, the one who always found his way and knew why he was going in that direction.

Now I am walking into uncertainty and limited self-knowledge and even with forty minutes behind me, I haven't been able to design a map or a plan. My capable brain just will not organize itself. And the part I really hate is walking back into this house with my tail

between my legs, sore of heart and entirely unsure of my next steps. This is a homecoming unlike any I have ever had; going home to lick my wounds is not something I do.

I suck in my breath and remind myself that *I am* that golden child and even this is a sales job: control their concern, get their advice, figure out what the hell to do next.

My mother meets me at the door, her face the portrait of a mother's concerns and I know that nothing that's going to transpire next is going to resolve any of her fears. I fake a smile and kiss her on the cheek.

"It's ok, it's not that bad, I promise. Just let me unpack my things and maybe

give me something to eat.”

My mom, bless her, knows that's code for 'I can't talk about this yet,' directing me into the kitchen where she has her preparations for Thanksgiving spread all around her: potatoes, yams, stuffing in abundance, pots, pans and utensils.

The greatest thing about my parents, and what I value most in times of crisis, is that they don't get emotionally caught up in a situation. As a team they evaluate everything objectively and because of that my parents have been married for over forty years with the quintessential marriage that most spouses hope for. They are full of love and admiration for each other, extending with it a great deal of leniency towards

their children as they make their way through life. My parents understand that life is hard and often not clear in the moment.

“Son, you okay?”

“Sure...no...not sure at all,” with a mouthful of sandwich obstructing my words and thoughts. “Gimme time, let me eat, let me organize.”

“Ok honey, but move out of the way and let me get to the yams.”

I’ve always known that my parents were going to love me no matter what, but that doesn’t mean it comes without the consistent urging to do my best, to be good, to live my life with honor, and when I fall short they know it’s their job to say something about it.

Watching my mother prepare dinner in her careful way, I realize that they were never the type to say ‘My kid, right or wrong.’ Instead, my parents always asked me, ‘What is right and what is wrong and how did you measure up?’ And for extra measure my father always threw in ‘You lie to me, you lie to God’ just to scare the piss out of me anytime I stood in front of the parental tribunal.

My folks aren’t extremely religious, but they function as believers, leveraging a belief in God that defines what our values are as patriots and ordinary folk trying to make it to heaven. My parents are good people and they set the expectation that I be ‘good people’ too.

I grew up knowing that my parents

would protect me and take care of me and that in any challenge I faced they would walk beside me with guidance, correction and encouragement. It gave me a strong independent streak and a burning desire to test my limits and capacities.

But I planned and predicated every element in my life so I'd never have to pull this trigger with them where I was lost at sea, where all my plans had turned to water and I was no longer sure of what to do. I had always intended to reward their confidence with my own perpetual certainty.

My dad joins us, coming in from the garage, wiping his hands on the towel my mother offers him before seating

himself across from me. She, knowing that the time has come, sits at the head of the table to my left.

Here we finally sit, just me and him and her.

They've been gracious, waiting almost two hours as I've wandered about, stopping here and there to help peel potatoes or take out the garbage, eating my sandwich, trying to stay helpful but out of the spotlight. I've pushed the questions off as long as I can before my grandmother joins us for dinner, and now the moment of reckoning is upon me.

I take a deep breath, smile and nod in the direction of my mother and wait for the volley that is coming.

“Can’t say I was expecting to see your face today son, it’s a little concerning.”

My father looking squarely at me, is more direct, “What the hell are you doing here?”

Before I can even provide the simplest answer, my mom picks up the thread, “You’d planned to show up tomorrow and hunt on Saturday. Instead you’re here in time for lunch and have added yourself to our Thanksgiving table.”

“If you’ve had an argument with your wife, no matter what it’s about, this plan isn’t going to help you out. Thanksgiving is important to Michelle, her way of building herself a family with you. You know that.”

I don't have an answer so I sit there rather stupidly and it's back to my dad with, "It's not like you to solve a problem by creating a new one. Your mom's right, Thanksgiving's a big deal to Michelle, she's going to be plenty mad you left. Must've been a pretty big fight. Wanna tell us what happened?"

Finally, finding my voice, keeping as much of my dignity as I'm able, "Thing is, it wasn't even a fight. She got a phone call this morning, I picked it up 'cause she was in the shower, and it was some guy making it sound like he and she have a thing going. I was so surprised that I didn't really ask any questions, just threw the phone at the wall to make it stop. I hardly even got his name. But

she didn't even deny it or laugh it off, just said it wasn't what I thought..." my voice suddenly catching in my throat. "So I left, I just took off."

It's the truth but hardly enough information to fill the gaps, so my parents continue lobbing questions and I toss back answers.

"Are you sure that's what he meant?"

"Sure enough. He said he's a real close friend, the kind I'd know about."

"Ok, but you seen any signs that she's stepping out on you?"

"No."

"Then how do you know that you're not overreacting? Just because some idiot makes a phone call doesn't mean it's true."

“Cause of the look on her face when I told her Bob called.”

“So you think she’s unhappy? Unhappy enough to be cheatin’ on you?”

“I dunno, I didn’t think so, apart from complaining sometimes that I’m gone an awful lot. But maybe she must be.”

On and on the questions go until my parents get the level of understanding they need to press me and my thought process. I answer stupidly, realizing I have few answers even for myself.

“Well,” my father says at the end, slowly drawing in his breath, “even though you seem hardly to have any clue what’s going on, you still have choices. First, you could go back and ask some good questions to fill in all the gaps

before you decide anything. Second, take what little you do know and the assumptions that you're making and already decide what changes you want to make. Or third, you can just assume the worst and cut your losses."

Part of what I love about my folks is their ability to see things clearly when I cannot, and provide me with options that might take me hours to discover on my own.

"And I have three questions you can think about," continues my father, "while we go pick up Nanny for dinner. It should take you at least until tomorrow to think through them carefully, then we can tackle this again. One: If it's true, do you have it in your heart to forgive her?"

Two: Are you willing to seek professional help to seal the cracks?
Three: Will you be able to trust her again?"

"Until then, son, you're welcome to stay here. I know it's an awful shock and you're mad, but be smart and call Michelle to let her know you arrived all right. Tell her that you need time to get you head and heart lined up, that you'll have tough questions for her but that you are coming back to ask them. Above all, have faith."

"Alright Dad. I'll think on it. But right now I have no idea yet what I'm going to do except that I'm going hunting on Saturday with Ty instead of your gang. You know he always has a unique

way of clarifying an issue,” I close with a lopsided grin.

Lightning the mood, my dad laughs, “Always good to get age appropriate responses.”

My mom, forever the voice of reason, raises her eyebrows, “Ty? How about reaching out to your brother instead before you hit the dirt level for advice on marital matters. Why not try someone who’s actually succeeding?”

I hate her momentarily for that. I may be the golden child, but my brother still sometimes supersedes me, especially with his beautiful wife, ten-year marriage and his two point two beautiful daughters. But she has a point.

“Yeah maybe, just not sure that I want

everyone in my business. I'll think about it."

I nod and smile as I watch them leave, the stewardship of the turkey temporarily assigned to me. Now comes their time to re-group as they fetch my grandmother; time to compare notes and discuss strategy. My heart fills with gratitude watching the car pull from the driveway. Some of my blind panic is subsiding knowing that I don't have to carry this all on my own.

But I do not call Michelle and apologize. I'm too angry and embarrassed, simply texting, "Made it safely where I was going," while heading to the living room to watch football instead.

Thanksgiving dinner follows in its usual pattern, five hours of careful cooking and thirty minutes of horde like consumption that leaves everyone groaning to head for the nearest couch.

Conversation over dinner stayed blessedly neutral. Nanny, herself perfectly capable of sharp questions and observations, kept still, not even pressing for an explanation from me regarding my wifeless presence on this high holy American feast day. My mother, bless her again, must have been busy, for whatever she has told her on the ride over has gentled Nanny's mouth and I'm spared another painful review of my circumstances.

My spirit is not quiet but my mind

settles into blankness as I watch the rest of Thanksgiving football and sit late into the night watching every movie I can find, touching carefully at the edges of the questions my father has posed to me. Shock has set in. Endless hours pass as numbness seeps into my senses, stilling my brain into meeting only the basic functions: breathing, scratching, peeing. Those I can manage.

That's how my parents find me in the morning, bleary and red-eyed from lack of sleep, still parked in front of the television where they left me the night before.

“Enough for now,” says my mother, “get up, come into the kitchen and have something to eat.”

“And since you’re here I have some work for you to do,” she adds, twenty minutes and a breakfast later, handing me the string of Christmas lights she expects to be attached to the front eaves in short order.

“After that, we’re heading out to face the Black Friday crowds. You can be my bulldozer in the front and your dad my rear defense; there are some things I want to pick up for the grandkids and I’m not paying full price if I can help it.”

Her energy, that moves me to action, and the sharp air that hits me as I step outside, stimulates my mind into some semblance of serious thought for the first time. I begin to contemplate my father’s questions: can I forgive her, will I get

help, and can I trust her again?

“no, No and *NO!*” my gut immediately answers screaming loud to my startled mind. Not sure I like this new me, so sharply overruled by such an instinctive emotional response.

I’m a creature of mind and yet when I try to examine the questions my spirit will not cooperate.

I’ve been married five years, together with my girl for seven, and to my thinking I’m a good husband. I don’t cheat or give any cause for concern. I work hard and I’m keeping all the promises I made the day I got married. So no, I don’t want to fix it. I’m mad, I’m hurt. In fact I can’t friggin’ believe she did this and, worse, I can’t even

figure out what THIS is.

In the quiet of the day, with only the occasional car rolling by to disturb the noise of my thoughts, for the first time I realize that by leaving without talking I don't even know if I have enough information to answer my father's questions.

“Did she? Is she? *‘It’s not what you think.’* How the hell does she know what I think? What should I think?” Those are the questions I don't have answers for, even before I find the answers to the rest. I do know that I can feel my injured pride and that nobody cheats on me and gets away with it. That much I got, I grimly concede as I head back into the house, Christmas lights

now firmly where they're supposed to be.

I wade into the next practical ordeal as we head into the Black Friday crowds a few hours later. By the time we've been at it about twenty minutes, I just feel besieged and bombarded by noises, bodies and voices. If it was too loud in my head earlier, now it's too loud outside my head and I can't find space to think in as I stand like a fool while my mom chooses underwear sizes for Christmas stockings. I feel a bit like Alice down the rabbit hole, always the wrong size or shape from what I need in the past two days and in an adventure land I really, really don't like. But I've got to get thinking. My dad asked good

questions and telling him when we get home that I still have no clue is just not going to cut it; at least I have to have my feelings in order, if not yet my intentions.

So I start again in the toy aisle, “*What do you want?*” I shout to myself over the noise everywhere, listing all the questions I need to ask myself. “*Do you stay, go, keep running and not answer the questions? Is it worth the effort to try and fix this?*”

“*And how am I supposed to figure this out in an outlet mall?*” I holler in my head as the questions continue to line up, one after the other.

“Do I want to be married to her anymore” says the new thought that enters as my irritation rises and I begin

to think about Michelle and how she is with me. “Is she worth it? Why stay with her when after a week of travel all she wants to do is go out and play, even though all I want is to be alone at home with her, eating my own food?” I rise to the tug of my hurt, give vent to my anger, “I do my own laundry, I place no burdens on her, she just has to put up with me being away, and instead of getting a dog to fill that space, she’s gone and got a boyfriend.”

“Fuck her.”

By the time we get home I’m mentally worn out and only one step further ahead. I’m now firmly angry, angry about my messed up weekend, about having to drag my tail to my parents,

about having to comprehend how some man has potentially intruded into my reality. Like a frustrated child, my spirit has risen up against Michelle, that she has brought us to this place. In my anger I make no effort to call her and reassure her that I am thinking and, at least, preparing for conversation.

But I am resolved on this: to make damn sure that I'm hunting all day Saturday and not showing up until well after dark on Sunday. "Let her sweat a bit. Why should I be the only one afraid of losing my marriage?"

It's this feisty mood that my father meets when he circles back around to our discussion from yesterday and as he confronts me, parked again in front of

their television, our conversation is brief and unproductive.

“So, have you had a chance to think about those three questions?”

“Yeah, sure Dad,” I reply sharply, “in between hanging Christmas lights and fighting crowds, somehow I haven’t really thought much about anything else and you know what I...”

He interrupts “So...any insights?”

“Hmmm...let me think how to answer that...not really. I did think though, in my generous mental spare time, that I might have come up with a way to fix that cock-eyed tree stand you built last year.”

My dad’s face tells me he’s not amused, but in my frustration and anger I

continue on nonetheless, too agitated to care that I'm striking out against those trying to help me.

“Aw Dad, lay off. I'm honestly trying to think this through and to think that in one day I'm going to have all the answers is crazy. Hell, Rome wasn't built in a day; but I can tell you this, I'm sure as shit that it burnt down in a hurry. This won't be fixed in a day or a week.”

“And I'll admit this, assuming that I choose to go back, it will take a long, long time to get back to that level of trust.”

Smiling, my dad turns to walk away, “Fine, but I think you'd be better off reading, or doing something else to help you wind down. Filling your head with

more of the useless crap on that idiot box is not going to get you there.”

In the end, we agree that, like a petulant child, I’m over tired and in need of sleep and my parents, to add to my humiliation, essentially send me to my room. Mad as I am, as I hit the pillow I can feel the intense weight of my body and know that I’m worn out from panic, worry and anxiety. They are right again; sleep seems like a reasonable plan.

THREE – ‘Wild West Show’ – Big and Rich

Sleep, what a fantasy. On this, the second day of the rest of my life, I discover the first lesson of my new reality: sleep is the property of the still in spirit, a possession, I've begun to suspect, I may not own again for a very, very, long time.

I've tried to sleep, I've pretended to sleep, I've told myself I don't need to sleep. I've watched the clock and finally reached the point when I'm thirty minutes from reveille at 'o'dark thirty'.

In an effort to avoid thinking about the future or at all about the immediate past,

I begin to amuse myself by going over my favorite Ty and Sebastian stories.

Ty and I became friends under typical circumstances during my last year of high school: we were chasing girls, the same three girls, as luck would have it.

Standing in the parking lot of the biggest mall on the strip, my buddies and I were making good time with three cute girls from a near-by high school. They hadn't met us there, we just found them in the parking lot and I say three, but the bossy one, the leader of the group held no attraction for me at all. Still, she was the one I wanted to talk to because what you could get *her* to do, everybody would do. Convincing her to hang around with us was my plan.

“Like I said...I know this guy who’s havin’ a party, you ladies want to hang out there with us?”

“I don’t know, who’d you say it was? Does he know anyone from Northside, like Chris maybe? He’s the quarterback, you know.”

“No idea...but I do know this corner store that’ll sell me beer. Any chance that’ll make up for not knowing Chris?”

“Well...I don’t know,” as she starts twirling a strand of hair ‘round her finger and canvassing the parking lot. I feel myself failing, struggling to find the next line when a big suburban with the music blasting rolls up fast and dumps itself into the spot next to mine.

Three of them spill out of the vehicle

and break into our game with one powerful advantage immediately clear, they already know these girls.

“Hey y’all...fancy meeting you here.” All three boys ignore us and everyone’s attention turns towards them as they enter our circle.

“Hey Ty.”

The bossy chick answers for the girls and thankfully doesn’t seem any more impressed with Ty than she is with me. But the other two girls are a different story if big smiles and furtive glances are any indication. I’m not happy about it since the brunette making eyes at the other two is the one I’m after.

“Hey Tammy,” is all Ty says as he walks right past her to stand beside the

little blond with the big giggle, “Hey Amy, what’s up?”

It’s starting to look like its Amy’s big night because suddenly she has the full attention of two boys – my friend Chase and now Ty. Chase, none too happy with the turn of events moves in a little closer to her and so in turn does Ty until she’s the filling of a boy sandwich. She’s ecstatic, turning her head to look from one to the other and giggling while Chase fires daggers at Ty over the top of her head.

I get back to my task; competition is not good for business and if I want to land this deal and secure some time with that brunette, I better get busy.

“So Tammy, whadda ya say?” I say,

jamming my hand into my pocket all casual like. “I mean, if you don’t want to go to that guy’s house I think I can get us into this little bar I know, get a beer maybe? The guy knows my uncle, he’ll serve us.”

I am lying out my ass by now, I have no idea if the guy will serve us, but I desperately need to separate these girls from those guys. Its high school, we travel in packs and if Tammy does not go with my plan I am SOL on the brunette.

Ty’s friend, picking up on my strategy, ups the ante saying he thinks he knows about a college party, suggesting he already has alcohol at his disposal, if only they care to join him. The other kid

joins in too, offering up some relative's liquor cabinet and a pool as an alternative.

Tammy looks around the parking lot again, appearing to ponder our offers. Our future sits on the knife edge, tensions rising as we put in as much time with the girls as we can before learning our fates. Only Ty just stands there, watching me watching her, nodding just once in my direction.

The decision comes suddenly, "Forget it. Let's go. My sister Dana is having a dorm party at the U, she said we could come. See ya."

Within thirty seconds they were gone.

So there we stood, six dejected boys, hormones up and running wild at the

possibility of sex, only to have it ripped away by one bossy girl. We had to find something to do to compensate and so it began. Succumbing to the old adage ‘boys will be boys,’ things quickly got out of hand with yelling and pushing to settle whose fault it was that we stood there with busted egos and no girls.

In the midst of the noise and rising tempers, Ty took me aside and said the most remarkable thing.

“Hey, do you want to hook back up with those girls? One of them gave me her number and told me that if I could get you to go along she’d make it worth the effort.”

Looking at him and listening to the collective shouting of our friends in the

background I did the only thing a hormonal boy would do...

“Hell, yeah,” I replied, looking at him standing there all calm and cool, already moving on to the next opportunity. It was simple math really: one guy you don’t know with access to a girl, versus two guys you do who have access to nothing.

It turned out that he was easy to like and we became constant companions after that evening. Confident, easy going and already a risk taker, Ty was a great friend to chase girls with. He never took defeat personally, always knew there was some other girl around the corner that would give up what he was looking for, and he had a thousand strategies to

get to it. I wasn't terrible at getting girls when I first met him, but he was better, and I was a quick study. Over time, as reputation spread that we were good at getting laid we drew to us a collection of young guys hungry for sexual combat and feats of strength. They added to our reputation and extended opportunities for mayhem broader and broader afield. The more boys you know the more sisters, cousins and best friends they've got.

Tyson always led the pack in trouble. If we ended up taking target practice with too much beer in our belly, it'd have been Ty's idea. If we drove too fast down a dark mountain road, missed a turn and ended up in the ditch, it'd be

Ty that was driving. It was never boring when Ty was around. And even better - Ty beer goggled - even before he'd had any beer to goggle with. He had the uncanny ability of being able to indentify sober, what he would find irresistible, plastered. Much as he could focus on his game and get any girl he wanted on a good night, he also always knew when stepping into a room, what girl he would settle for, once the beer goggles were on.

Case in point: one night in college, we went to a party, typical boy/girl 'let's get it on' play time and as we walked through the door, he elbowed me, begging, "There, that girl in the green top, that will be the one. Whatever you

do, *do not* let me hook up with her.”

She was one of those girls on the low end of the alphabet who played hard to beat her natural odds, and was already playing hard and fast with every guy as we walked in. Girls like that were easy to attach to in the immediate and very hard to shake loose after, and Ty had had enough experience by now to know it.

Now, I'm a good wingman, upstanding, worthy of the trust placed in me and I solemnly promised to make sure that didn't happen for him. Wingmen are important in any man's life, they're the ones that help you get into, and out of, trouble. Like a soldier we never leave a man behind. It's our job to make sure you get home when you

no longer can ensure that for yourself. We help you play every good thing that comes your way and will even take one for the team by separating that ugly chick from the hot one, so that you can get your chance to score.

But time presses in any night, and the hunt moves on. Unfortunately for Ty, I being a red-blooded boy on the prowl, had the momentary notion of chasing a beauty that I had missed the opportunity with a week ago. His fault, by the way. He'd dragged me from her with promises of a sure thing that had turned out to be neither sure nor better. And so I took my eye off my man and left him alone for little more than thirty minutes in pursuit of my own happiness.

I liked this girl, I yearned after this girl, and when I left him, he was doing all right with a hot blonde.

Go us.

Conscience clear, I pursued my own agenda. Her name was Jenny and she was all the things I liked in a girl: tiny, athletic, a little shy, but full of fun. I approached with caution as I headed across the room knowing that my previous departure had been hurried and not well disguised. I knew that I would have my work cut out for me.

Now usually, the truth will set you free, but I fully realized that this was one time it'd be a terrible strategy. So I adapted, keeping to the spirit of the adage.

“Jenny! Hey baby, I gotta apologize for takin’ off so fast last week. My buddy was driving, he’d found his dream date and unfortunately, he was my ride and I had to go too.” (There were a lot of truths in that statement. He did drive and he had found a date. I just left out the part where he’d landed me one as well.)

I am accompanying all of this with lots of frowns and shrugs, “And girl I am so sorry about it, I was having a great time with you and I felt so bad.” I finish this line with a big sigh and a sad face.

Jenny smiles up at me and moves in closer, touching gently just at the elbow, “It’s alright, I understand, I know it happens sometimes.”

And...I'm in.

Now I lean in close to her ear and lay on one of my best skills, the ability to remember the slightest detail and leverage it in later dialogue.

“And you looked great in that blue sweater, the one you said you bought ‘cuz its your favorite color. Hey, they’re saying that movie you talked about is really cool. Did you ever get to see it?”

Smiling, apparently delighted that I remembered our last conversation, “No.”

“Oh great...good, then how about I pick you up tomorrow around seven and we’ll go.”

“Does that mean you’re asking me on a date?”

“Ah Jenny...you know that it does.”

“Kay, then I’ll say yes.”

And she smiled in her Jenny, Jenny way, I kissed her on the cheek and set off into my cowboy sunset, date and number in hand, to turn to look for Ty as a good wing man should. But he wasn’t where I’d left him.

Searching room after room I couldn’t find him anywhere. Asking around I finally got the inevitable answer. “Ty? He left with some chick in a green top about ten minutes ago,” says the last drunk guy I speak with.

Failure is upon me.

But the thing with being a wingman is that ‘failure *is* always an option’ and much as you’d like to prevent it,

sometimes it just means you have to find your own way home. We were both big boys by this time and Ty was already an expert at getting into the proverbial jam and just as accomplished in exiting it. Some days it's every man for himself.

And that was that, or so I thought until, dead asleep at three o'clock in the morning, I was interrupted with the insistent ringing of a telephone call from a strange number on my caller ID (a brand new invention at the time).

“I need help.”

It's Ty, his voice all distorted as if he's squashed in some confined space.

“I have no idea where the fuck I am,” he continues on in a loud whisper, “I can't find my underwear, half my clothes

are missing, and I only got one shoe!”

“Where are you? Why do you sound so weird?”

“I told you – I don’t know! Oh, right... in the closet so that she can’t hear me. Look on your phone thingy and tell me where the fuck I am.”

As I look at the call display, I stifle a laugh. The beer goggle gods have done their work and Ty is about to become a punch line.

“You with the girl with the green top?”

“Of course it’s the girl with the green top. You took off, I was defenseless. And she snores.”

“You get laid at least?”

“Ten toes down man, ten toes down!

But then she told me she thinks I should come for dinner tonight; that ain't happenin'. And right now I just need to get the hell outta here."

"You're on the north side of town."

All practical, I tell him, "Forget your underwear. If you have your pants, your shirt and the keys to the pick-up, you're good to go."

The muffled noise in the background confirms his scramble, and in a few minutes he's back on the phone, "I still can't find my other shoe!"

"Fuck the shoe, it's summer; get the hell out before she wakes up," as I wonder to myself how the hell you can lose one shoe.

"Okay, I'm heading home," and he

hangs up.

I hear nothing from Ty for fifty minutes, on a journey that shouldn't have taken more than ten; and as I finally get back to sleep, he suddenly hits my bed, full force, landing spread eagle at the foot of it with one shoe in his hand.

“What the hell?” I shout as he crushes my feet, “You should’ve been here an hour ago, where the hell’ve you been?”

Beer goggling disaster is where he’s been.

“So she starts snoring and I’m lookin’ at her, and she ain’t even that hot once that green top was off. Man, why’d you let me leave with her? I told you!”

“Only so much anybody can do, Ty.”

“Whatever...shoulda tried harder. So

she's snoring, and I'm thinking I gotta get out of there and I start looking for my gear. I just keep stumbling over shit – one shoe, my shirt, the phone – that's when I call you.”

“From the closet.”

“Yeah, from the closet, ‘cause I’m slowly realizing that I don’t even know where the hell I am, and I sure as hell ain’t gonna wake her up and ask her.”

He stretches out on my bed and taps himself on the head with his shoe.

“So like you tell me, I find whatever shit I can and head for the stairs; them, I still know where they are. But I gotta admit that I’m noticing for the first time all these family photos on the walls as I sneak down stairs. All I saw was her

ass on the way up, you understand.”

“‘Not good,’ I’m thinkin’, but I hit the bottom, grab the door knob and BAM!”

“It was chaos, man! I’m just trying to get the hell home and suddenly there’s lights on and this alarm is ringing. I just ran, didn’t even close the front door behind me.”

“And I can hear them shouting in the house by now but I can’t for the life of me remember where I parked the damn truck. I’m hiding behind a tree and looking up and down the street and I can’t figure where the fuck the truck is until I can already hear the popo coming with their sirens wailin’.”

“You’re an idiot Ty.”

“Well I ain’t that much of an idiot

‘cause I ran like hell and dove under the tarp in the back of my truck just as they peeled around the corner. And if I was a total idiot I wouldn’t have had a tarp, now would I?”

I give him that point.

“You should have heard them all, must’ve been a bunch of them and they took their sweet time, I can tell you. Thirty minutes I had to wait not barely movin’. And I had to pee so bad it hurt.”

“What’d you do?”

“Peed in the truck.”

Which prompts me to shove him violently off the end of my bed.

“Hey man, I aimed away from myself,” comes his muffled answer from somewhere down on the floor.

Drunken boys and our dubious conquests.

What an outcome. Not one of his best moments, but one of my favorite memories; and I can't help laughing to myself as it spills over me.

Classic Ty, jammed up hard and still coming out all right in the end. Ty can be an idiot but he is also the one guy you always want on your team. For every dumb self-sabotaging thing that he has done, he's also always, on most nights, the taxicab waiting when you are piss drunk, and the guy that will fight your fight with a bunch of guys bigger than you even when he knows that you started it.

When you are at your lowest point,

he's the one that cracks the joke, can see the absurdity in the situation and tells you not to sweat it. Ty believes that every problem has a solution and that the solution is not going to make him look bad, even if only in his own head. In his mind's eye, life *is* like a box of chocolates; you may not know what you're biting into but, if you talk to yourself right, it will always be sweet and delicious.

Over time, Ty's become a great friend and somebody I can count on. He's doesn't pass judgment while he always still feels your pain. And truly, with what I know about him, who's he to judge anyone? Ultimately, Ty is fantastic for me in crisis for the simple

fact that I don't actually expect him to help me understand what I'm going through. His best asset is that he makes an excellent sounding board. I think at him and he listens, volunteers a few choice, if silly, solutions and in doing so I can almost always figure out what it is that I should do next. Ty is almost like a reverse 'What would Jesus do?' Whatever Ty says to do is the opposite of what anybody should be doing.

The biggest disadvantage to being friends with him is that he's still stuck in our twenty's and he's not moving past it, even though by now he is capable of some objective evaluation. He understands the difference, and at the same time he understands that he hasn't

matured, and he seems okay with it. Ty's a walking contradiction, mimicking the stepping-stones of his peers. While successful in business, he's engaged to be married at some long distant, indeterminate date to a nice girl that does not fully understand him and is certainly unconscious of the risk she is taking. For now, she's still oblivious, but I know that the cracks are already widening. Poor girl.

He's waiting for me when I finally get to his place and without a word, throws his gear in the back of the pick-up, climbs into the front seat and says, "Let the slaughter begin. We'll talk about the rest when you're ready."

Ty in his wisdom fills the drive with

anecdotes from his recent life: work, girl, plans for vacations as he waits for my silence to give him clues. But I'm not offering much in response. Suddenly embarrassed at my circumstances, my heart hurting as it beats, I resort to grunts and growls, turning myself into a redneck archetype.

It's still quiet in the morning darkness before dawn as we clear the long, broad cornfield to enter the woods where we hunt. The husks left behind smell of decay as I step on them. The air is sharp with frost and nothing moves in the silence before sunrise. I like it here in the darkness. Walking along the pillaged furrows I feel anonymous and covered by the sky, heading for the tree stands we

constructed at the beginning of the season. As much as I invited Ty along for company while hunting, the reality is that we will part soon, assume separate locations along the old logging road and use text messaging from here forward to communicate. All the same, it's comforting to know that he's out here with me, sympathetic to the mounting mad scramble in my head.

My head really is still scrambling, even after the sorting my parents have attempted over the past two days. Today I'm even less sure why I bolted instead of standing my ground, why I assumed the worst and didn't ask even some basic questions to find out more about 'Bob' and the close 'friendship' he has

with my wife. Why didn't I stay to find out what I needed to know?

Hunting is one of my favorite things in world. I love sitting in the woods thinking and watching the life that moves all around me. Today though, the quiet is just too much open, free space in my head and I discover quickly that I've begun to play another kind of sorting game with myself, searching for signs, evidence in Michelle that I missed that would confirm or deny the nagging ache that she's been physically unfaithful to me.

There's a man in the picture alright, but I run back and forth from elation to despair weighing 'It's not what you think' against 'nothing happened in the

house,’ each a hundred pound weight of potential joy or sorrow in the face of my information gap.

‘It’s not what you think’ lifts me to hope while settling in again on my hunting stool an hour or so into the daylight. If it’s not what I think, then maybe it’s only a passing flirtation, a man in pursuit of her that she’s amused herself with for a time, not one that she cares about. It heartens me and validates my theorizing as to why he’d be so bold on the phone with me.

“That’s it,” I think, *“he wants her for himself and can’t get her to move on it.”* And I sit back, smug in the knowledge that pushing Michelle to move ahead of her own plans is a recipe

for disaster, “*I know my wife better than he does, and whoever he is, he just made a mistake with both of us.*” I grin in sudden sense of victory.

“I’m going to find that guy and kick his ass for ruining my weekend,” I conclude in irritation at the resurfacing knowledge that I have bolted from the confrontation available to me and potentially not helped my situation at all. If you can’t push Michelle to move before her time, crossing her up is just as problematic and she can be fierce in her vengeance. A daunting prospect even though I’m a tough guy. And a little panic rises in my belly.

Circles of thought roll and wrap in my mind and with the panic comes, full

force, my second meager piece of information: ‘*nothing happened in the house.*’ That one raises much different reactions in me, first trying to figure what Michelle would consider ‘nothing’ if she was conducting an extra-marital fling. “What is ‘nothing’ in that case? Are they just holding hands in the dark, sharing secrets and whispers? Has he only slightly touched her? Has she withheld the whole enchilada? Hell, has this jackass been in my house?”

This second thought, of him in my house with access to my wife and my bed, constricts my mind as the mental pictures surface unbidden and I can see them, drinking out of my glasses, sitting on my couch, living my life while I earn

our keep.

Suddenly deer come into the clearing, instantly filling my thoughts. Two young does are coming directly towards me not two hundred yards off. They're not very big and should really be left for next year, but leaning out of the stand with a ferociousness uncommon to me, I pull the trigger anyway and destroy the smaller, closer of the two, with one shot. It's a clean kill, but not a righteous one. It wasn't a difficult shot or a huge distance away; it didn't require any skill. But I took the shot because I wanted to kill something.

The second doe is now standing broadside looking at the other on the ground. She's not much bigger, but still

overwhelmed with fury I squeeze off the second shot and kill her as well. I pull back, my breath in ragged gasps to look at them both lying there not two hundred yards off. Shaken, I lean out to vomit over the edge of the tree stand.

Killing in anger is not a lot of fun.

I pull myself together. Exchanging texts with Ty, we decide to put the deer into the pickup so he can get back on the stand as quickly as possible. This is one of those few days that we get during the season where you can put the deer in the truck and the meat won't spoil, and much as I'd like just now to go home, I'm also hungry to make a good kill to take the stain off this first one.

Hauling even the smallest of deer is

an exercise. It starts with field dressing by emptying the internal organs to prevent contamination, then dragging anywhere from one hundred to two hundred plus pounds of dead weight over hill and dale from where they died back to where you left your truck. It's hot and sweaty work even in the cool November air, and I'm glad for the distraction of the effort. It's almost like penance for the unsporting kills I've just made.

I manage to get back on my stand without spooking anything, hoping that the coyotes will come to the smell of the steaming gut pile that is the only remaining sign of my does.

Coyotes are a menace to farmers and

livestock, and while I've reached my bag limit for deer, killing a few coyotes will help the owner of the property and make me feel better. But not ten minutes later, just as I begin again at the same torturous sorting, I hear "Crack" and my cell phone starts buzzing. It reads, "I got one. Nice buck. Waddya want to do?"

"Get started. Be there in ten to help you finish drag out n' head to the Johnsons."

Our hunting is over. We've done enough damage and with two does and a buck with a decent rack for a European skull mount, I realize, with some relief, that at least now I'm spared the torment of quiet time alone with my imagination.

We head home, stopping off at a local

family to deliver the deer. Much as I like venison, I've stopped eating most of it a long time ago. We've found a much better way of putting the meat to good use: we donate it to poorer families to fill their freezer in the winter months. It's our southern version of charity. Hunting culls the herds and helps the farmers stop crop losses and providing meat to the hungry means none of the effort is wasted. It may be the 21st century, but not everyone eats everything from supermarkets just yet.

The Johnsons are delighted to see us. We are in fact, a Godsend for them and they drag us into their modest home offering us multiple varieties of moonshine in thanks. Their house

specialty is a pineapple blend, potent and sweet, and nothing pleases them more than to have you take a sip, relax and enjoy it. I can hardly relax, the conversation is a mental chore, still there's a particular companionship in passing around the jug a couple of times; the shared drink a ritual of our Southern heritage. It makes me think back, as the alcohol begins to warm my brain, to what it must have been like in the thirty's and forty's when everyone had to rely on each other to make it through. I take comfort in the connectedness of the exercise and its ties into my identity.

We make some idle small talk while I enjoy the moonshine's slow filling of my body as it takes the edge off my nerves

for the first time in days. It's probably the first pleasant moment I've had. At least one good thing has been accomplished in my endless waking hours. By the time we hit Ty's place and store our gear, I'm able, also for the first time in forty-eight hours, to seek sleep on Ty's big couch in the living room. I sleep the blind, deep sleep of the exhausted, waking to the coming darkness and the dinner that Ty has prepared.

“Where's Jill anyway?”

“Her parents. I begged off the visit to hunt with you, but never mind that. Eat, shit, shower and shave; and then we're gonna head out to tackle this beast you're carrying on your back. Enough

time in your head, we're gonna go out and have a couple of drinks. Get ready to talk."

FOUR – ‘Resignation Superman’ – Big Head Todd and the Monsters

It's Ty's call where we go and he's chosen a local bar he knows will be lively on this Saturday night of a long weekend. And he's judged correctly, the music already thumping even though the promised crowds have yet to show. It's dark and slightly smoky, a decent place to remain obscured if you wish to and a good place to be noticed if the urge strikes you.

If hunting was the first order of business today, drinking to lubricate the mind is the second. We order our first beer at the bar and Ty starts off easy,

“We had a pretty good day today, the weather was perfect, very little wind and with the way the deer were moving the whole time, I think the rut is about to start. That’s why we had all the activity.”

I agree, cautiously looking around for a quiet corner, “Yeah, I like sitting in the woods and watching nature at its finest, even if you are intending to kill some of it.”

My words stick slightly in my mouth knowing that today I killed in anger but I plug gamely on.

“Only good thing was not having to kill anything by slitting its throat, I hate doing that. ‘If you can’t pancake it, don’t take it,’ is Dad’s mantra, at least

we managed that.”

“You have to admit it was great to see the Johnsons get all excited when we dropped the deer off,” says Ty, dropping hard onto the bench in the corner I’ve chosen, letting his softer side show. “I know the last coupl’a years’ve been rough for them. This way we helped them fill their freezer without making them feel bad. It felt kinda good,” he closes, taking a long pull to finish his beer.

He waves the waitress over and, grinning, whispers in her ear. In moments she arrives with a shot of tequila and another round of beer and I, sensing a turning tide, remind Ty that it’s way too early for a shot of courage.

“Speaking of courage,” Ty moves on, completely ignoring my statement by making the universal drinking motion, “do you think that we’ll ever tell Pete that we both slept with his wife before he met her?”

I laugh, take my shot like a big boy, and think back on the four or five times I attempted to approach the fact of Meaghan’s easy virtue with Pete before he got serious with her. Pete’s a friend we’ve known since high school and has been a close one since our twenties. He’s a good guy, soft and kind at heart.

I remember when we’d run into them, out together as a couple for the first time, and she’d greeted us with familiarity announcing, “Hey, I haven’t seen you in

ages,” with kisses for us both.

Now, with our reputations already firmly established, Pete should have immediately started asking questions about how well we may or may not have known her. But in fact, he ignored her statement altogether as if it hadn't been said and moved on to the other introductions at the table. He never went back to ask the questions you would have expected either, and avoided any hint ever after that I might have information he might need to acquire.

Everybody has a place in the order of life, and Pete understood where he was in that order and never fought against it. He was a ‘settler.’ Pete would always

settle for second best so he wouldn't disrupt the natural order of things. Average height, average weight, average build, average prospects. Sometimes in life you do have to choose the course of least resistance and there's nothing wrong with that; but it was his consistent desire and practice. If two girls were available, one a ten, the other a six, Pete would choose the six because in his mind the effort made had a better chance of payoff.

I can't tell you how many times he lost out through the years because, while he could establish contact, he couldn't convert because those sixes were more cautious than he was. He never caught the subtleties that most of us are just

naturally able to observe. Sometimes he was able to attract girls out of his league because he was such a nice guy, but would miss that they were hitting on him because he'd already set his sights far lower.

It resulted ultimately in the fact that Pete's choice for a wife was a loose girl who paid the most attention to anyone who paid attention to her. The problem was that she was a restless soul, the type that really doesn't want to settle down. The kind that knows that it has to happen, but would rather it be later than sooner. He caught her by consistent application of attention and a dogged determination to make it happen. She'd originally been way out of his league,

but after falling in the ranks through a period of hard living, he saw in her an opportunity to score, for once, above his self estimated target range.

“Well, ok. Let’s think about that for a moment,” I answer. “First, why the hell would we...and second...who’s gonna fight him first when we do? He’d lose his mind now.”

“I know that he got some sloppy seconds from us before, even volunteered a few times for the honor, but her? I think he prefers to think of her as mostly clean and tidy before he got her. Don’t we all tell ourselves that about the women we end up with in the end?”

“So you think that telling him just to

see the look on his face is a bad plan?" Ty answers with a sly smile. "Meaghan's a good sport, she'd forgive us, don't you think?" He adds, breaking into a loud laugh.

"Why didn't we invite him out, anyway? Oh yeah, he's out of town at his in-laws, poor bastard. Next time we'll drag him out with us 'cause I am beginning to think there are a whole lot of 'next times' in our immediate future."

"What the hell gives you the idea we're about to spend regular Saturday nights out in bars?" I bristle in response.

"Simple. You haven't said one word all day about what happened except to tell me on the way across the field this

morning that your wife has found herself some refreshment on the side while you bust your ass working for a living. That, my friend, is man who hasn't yet decided what he's going to do. My answer is simple: the best way to fight competition is to get some of your own. Which is why I brought you to this Shangri-La of primal competition." He concludes, sweeping his arm wide enough to encompass the new collection of young bodies that's slowly filling the bar.

Like I stated earlier, Ty is the anti-'What would Jesus do?' And before I can even finish rolling my eyes and collect my response, our third round arrives. We're stepping it up. It's Jameson and ginger ale, signal indicator

that we are in need of Ty's version of serious dialogue.

“Tell me what happened, don't leave anything out.”

“There isn't much to tell. I answered her phone on Thursday and found some asshole on the other end who told me he's the guy that's taking care of her, while I take care of my career. And I got pissed and left. No, I didn't ask any questions, no I didn't try and fix it. I just left with her hollering after me about how embarrassing it would be for her to tell our houseguests that I'd gone.”

“Wow. Didn't see that coming. What're you gonna do? You gonna go find him and kick his ass? Or are you going to go back and find out what's

really going on? You love Michelle, Sebastian, although I've never seen the attraction myself."

"I don't know what I'm going to do. I can't just walk away and yet, the fact that she might have been lying to me all this time is hard to take."

Leaning in close, a wicked grin on his face Ty says, "Remember when I first met her? I pissed that girl off something awful and I was just trying to be friendly."

"Remember?! What kind of a welcome did you think you were going to get with an opening line like 'Michelle, pleased to meet you. You're a lucky woman, just like a hundred other lucky women that have tried to get their

hooks in him. You must be good in bed’,” I remind him as he continues to look at me stupid with that big grin still on his face.

“And it would’ve been okay if you’d just stopped there,” I keep going, “but instead you had to take us both out into shark infested water by sailing right into that stupid story where I hooked up with both those girls in one night. You have no idea how much explaining I had to do after you left. You’re damn lucky I still talk to your sorry ass. I didn’t get sex for a week.”

“Well I was just trying to show her your sexual prowess.”

“My sexual prowess? You don’t think she didn’t know by then whether or not I

had any talent in the sack? What are you...nine?"

"I thought it might help you. I've been a stone's throw away a dozen times when you've had sex with girls. We didn't always have money, if you remember, and some of those hotel rooms and cottages had awfully thin walls. I *know* how you have sex and I think, over the years that we've hung out, that I saw that lily white ass of yours almost as much as I saw my own."

"Actually, I don't think I've really ever looked at my own ass," his voice now coming faintly from somewhere over his left shoulder as he turns to look at his hind end. "But I figured, if you weren't at the top of your game with her

yet, that she'd be patient if she knew you were an expert at it once you hit your groove," turning back again to face me head on.

"Sure, Ty, thanks for that." I laugh, pushing ahead to my point. "You still put us both in deep hot water in your misguided attempt to 'help me out'."

"I know," says Ty with another laugh, "but I made up for it with those box seats to that concert she wanted to go to. You know," he finishes with sudden observation, "that was the minute I knew she was self-centered. She still hated me, but she took those tickets like they were an owed prize. That, and because anytime we tried to have a boys weekend she always found some way to

either come along or make sure you didn't go."

"At first I thought it was an insecurity on her part, the way some girls are; that she thought that I would lead you back into our horn dog ways from before you met her. And it wasn't until Pete's wedding that I knew that it wasn't that she didn't trust me, it was something else that made her need you constantly in her orbit."

"I figured out at that point that she needed constant attention and company, that she needed you to validate her with your attention. She was like that dumb dog you had that could never amuse itself for more than ten minutes at a time. If you weren't providing the

amusement, Michelle didn't know what to do with herself."

"What are you implying? Are you suggesting that she's got some guy on the side because she doesn't know what to do with herself while I work all the time?" I answer as his words plow into my gut.

Ty leaning in with that long, serious look that only rarely crosses his face, "Maybe. You're gone an awful lot. What do you think?"

"I think, if that's the case, I've played this marriage all wrong and I may have even picked the wrong girl. And if you don't want me to be sick you'd better get me another drink."

"My job? Working hard can do a

guy in?" This is a brand new thought.

I'm a vice president in contact center operations for a major Fortune 500 company. It's the job that I've always wanted and I've finally made it to the level I think I deserve. I run the customer service division for the east coast and have five different sites to handle calls, plus a handful of outsourcing companies taking the overflow.

Yes, I'm that guy that decides that you'll be having that conversation with 'Chandler' in the Philippines at eleven o'clock at night. I know you hate him, but I love him; he keeps my costs down and doesn't mind working evenings and weekends like the rest of you do.

I'm the road warrior of the company, the guy to send into any crisis, the guy to make things right after everything's gone wrong. My travel schedule has been so bad lately that I know more about the folks at the airport and airlines than I do about any of the neighbors on my street. But I always come home, I always bring flowers. I've constantly told Michelle that we'd work hard now and play hard later...well, I've told her that I would work hard now and we could play hard later. We'd agreed, we'd negotiated a settlement, and I'm keeping my end of the bargain.

Drink four lights through my veins as my mind burns with this new information and I force my eyes to wander around

the room. Why, when it's been years since I've been on the open market or in search of a date? Because I suddenly want to know if any of it has changed. How are they dressed? Are the same drinks still popular? Are the women sending different signals? Bad thoughts tumble through my head, revenge, spite for all those lonely nights in hotel rooms paying our way to freedom, when I chose not to be 'that guy' and ease my loneliness in momentary advantage.

I immediately check myself, "*What the hell're you doing! You're still married.*" My conscience assaults me and I know in that moment, that I finally have a decision. Michelle and I will talk about this tomorrow and see what

we can do to fix it. “*Yep. We’ll fix it tomorrow.*”

It’s simple really, looking around the room: I do not want to start all over again with the mating ritual, I do not want to learn another woman; I haven’t got that kind of time left. I can fix a job problem. I can fix an attention problem. I did not work this hard or this long to get beat by some, as yet unquantified competition. That is not who I am.

The answers to my father’s three questions come hard at me: Will it be hard to forgive her if she has actually done it? Yes. Can I trust her again? I can try. Can I let someone in enough to help us fix this? Probably.

“*But that one’s kinda pretty...*” I

think as I look with curiosity at a girl at the bar, and then reigning myself back in, “You’re fixing this tomorrow; you have no more room for bad decisions.”

Ty is too fast for me, noticing my wandering eye, and can’t help but try and pinpoint what caught my attention. I wave him off as he starts to pester me, “A look is not the same thing as a want,” I get out of my mouth while getting up from the table to head for the men’s room.

“And...never, ever, leave your wingman alone when you go to the bathroom,” I conclude as I return to an empty table five minutes later, “especially when it’s Ty on a mission.”

It doesn’t take much checking around

to finally spot him across the room standing at the bar, and of course, talking with the girl I was just looking at. *“Damn him, why’s he talking to her? Idiot’s engaged and technically, I’m still married.”* I think to myself standing there, making eye contact that is repeatedly and intentionally ignored.

Of a sudden, the courage of an hour ago hits me as was always intended, and I head over to the bar. *“Mountain/Mohamed, what the hell, there’s more than one way to settle this,”* as I pull up beside him and am promptly introduced to Bailey and Angela.

Bailey and Angela, that is who it turns out they are. Two girls, nice looking, creating a fair amount of attention, well

behaved and still in possession of themselves. “*What can it hurt?*” I argue in my head, “*My wife has a lover. Surely I qualify for some break on this one?*”

And I tell you the girl I was looking at, the Bailey one, she looks a little like Michelle.

I step into my assigned spot helping continue that heartless first chatter between “Would you like a drink?” and the “Oh man, not this one,” that so often concludes these natural versions of speed dating. Unfortunately, this time it’s not working and the “nah...” never comes. These are nice girls, girls I would have dated before I got married.

Damn, this is not good. And before I

know it, my ever so helpful wingman has, with faked casualness, wandered off with Angela to request a song and I'm left with Bailey all by myself.

The flight instinct kicks in hard again for the second time this weekend. But I hate to be rude and I can't manage to do it to this nice girl. It's not her fault Ty's an idiot and I'm a basket case. And nice girl she is; tiny little thing, well built with dark hair framing a face who's compelling feature is the most incredibly soft and inviting mouth making a whole lot of intelligent conversation.

"Whoa!" Screams my conscience again, *"Where'd that come from?"*

"Shut up," I tell it with the lower functioning order of my character, *"I'm*

on a roll here and I deserve to have a least one woman this weekend be nice to me,” continuing gamely on with all the sparkling, witty and astute dialogue I can muster. I am on, I am good, I am working it for all its worth as I slide my left hand casually into my pants pocket.

In short order I find out that Bailey is an events coordinator at a local hotel. She's good at her job, a college grad and that unusual variety of woman that appears to have a firm understanding of how boys and girls function in the nasty 2000's. She engages well in our conversation, providing political opinions that are well reasoned and backed by facts, even if they don't line up with my own positions. It's easy to

converse with her, easy to move from serious to silly and back again as I tell her some of the ridiculous stories I've collected working in call centers.

Suddenly it comes to me as she throws her head back, laughing at some sarcastic comment I've made, "*Holy shit, she digs me!*" This girl has totally bought into my act, my shallow attempt to pretend for a moment that I am someone else, that I'm still a winner in the game of life.

I'm not so far off the market that I can't tell anymore when some girl likes me. In fact, to be honest, travelling alone has forced me to sharpen my radar after more than a few conversations to fend off boredom have resulted in

embarrassing offers of casual sex. And though this girl is not that forward, she finds me interesting.

So I continue to stand there, my mind now racing, screaming *“What the hell are you doing? You just decided not to give up on your marriage and yet here you are chatting up some chick like you might do just that. What’re you doing, you dumbass?”*

It pulls me up short, wildly snapping my head over my shoulder to locate Ty in effort to escape. She reads my instant discomfort and totally misunderstanding its nature, tries to ease my sudden uncertainty, “You’re kinda cute, Sebastian.”

Oh, so not helpful.

I groan inwardly, but outwardly hear myself say, “You’re not so bad yourself,” realizing of course, in that instant, that this has now officially become a serious flirtation, which feels horrible and makes me want immediately to vacate the premises. But Ty has completely disappeared from view and that means that I’m not going anywhere, anytime, soon.

“And you seem so confident and sure of who you are.”

“Oh girly, you have no idea.” I think to myself, *“it’s not confidence that you’re seeing, its good tequila, beer and several Jamesons.”*

What can’t break you will make you stupid, and in my current emotional state

her compliments and niceness are accomplishing just that. Smiling and loosening my tongue, “You have no idea how one hundred percent opposite of that I feel at the moment.”

“Really?” her eyes, suddenly soft and full of empathy. “Then you’re faking it awfully well.”

Damn women and that empathy they carry like a weapon. As the last of my reserve crumbles, it seems that a few compliments and some attention are all it’s going to take for me today.

“Well...” to my horror I find myself proceeding, suddenly deciding to reveal what I really shouldn’t be sharing with anyone. “Three days ago at this time I was sitting with my wife and her friends

reminiscing about our summer vacation to the islands. And today, albeit still technically married, it's over. My wife's probably cheating on me. Right now, I have no idea about any of the where's, who's or what's, or if I can even fix it but...she's there and I'm here."

One more breath, "But I do know this...you're a very pretty lady, I've had more than my limit and my buddy has done his usual and disappeared on me. What I really should do now is go home to bed," I conclude as I realize that I've made one further mistake and allowed the implication that I've actually left my wife.

Bailey has taken a micro-step back,

her face now watchful and a little grave, all the exciting tension gone.

“Oh, yeah...I can see how that might cause some problems.”

I can feel that she's evaluating the situation and now business like, she presents her conclusion: “Look, you're very cute, and you don't know how sorry I am to hear that you're married. You seem like a really nice guy and I appreciate the honesty, but guys who are recently separated are all crazy. You don't know it yet, but you are, trust me. It will take at least nine months to figure it all out and during that time you won't recognize who you are, or who you were.”

“I'll tell you what,” she concludes to

my crestfallen face, “I like you and you seem like a good guy; I’d be willing to listen to you but, there is no way that I’d date you in this state. I’ll give you a blow job though, if that would make you feel better right now,” she suddenly grins up at me.

“You serious?”

“Sure, but that’d be it.”

“*So that’s how it could work,*” says my startled self, but even in my drunkest hours I still generally have a recent moral compass that keeps me on the straight and narrow.

“Thanks, but it’s probably better if I pass.”

But looking at her face again I make a second decision. “Any chance you’d

give me your number just in case I change my mind?”

Pocketing the number, still slightly confused as to how a simple conversation led to the possibility of dating and, more importantly a blow job, Ty finally comes again into my sightline. Maybe she just felt sorry for me.

“Who knows...I may need a female perspective in the days ahead,” I think, to justify my actions, heaving a sigh of relief as we exit the bar.

And at least for tonight, the last bad decision has been made.

FIVE - 'Driveway' - Great Northern

My head's fuzzy in the morning when I wake up but I'm energized by my newfound determination to save my marriage. I feel like I passed a test. I've stared down temptation, chosen my path and am headed again towards my goal. I'm going home to throw our guests out early, well, ask them politely to leave, and lay my plan at Michelle's feet.

I can't quit my job. We've both become accustomed to my income, by now it's part of our lifestyle and our identity. But I can give up my goal of

retiring at fifty, cut back on my long hours and post for that internal position that will keep me at home more.

Ty may be right that Michelle is self-centered. I can give him that, but there is much more to her than that character flaw. She's also an intelligent woman, a good money manager, lively and a lot of fun to spend time with. Who am I to judge harshly? Maybe in my single minded pursuit of achievement and my need to manage everything, I haven't included her enough in what we want to accomplish for our lives. Maybe it's only been my agenda that I've been in pursuit of and I've treated her too much like an accessory, not a partner.

My parents, participating in my

departure, help me review my plans. My mother's face shows the marks of the past days and I sense her relief and pride that I'm reaching the conclusions they have taught me to seek.

I leave with their blessing and their prayers. And it feels good.

Seventy-two hours since my world as I knew it ended. The same forty minute journey of four days ago seems only half the time as I prepare myself, my conversation, and the points I'm willing to concede. The fact that I may have serious competition for my wife's affection no longer bothers me. I've competed with plenty of men for the attention of the woman that I had my eye on, and I remind myself that I have

always won when I intended to.

Besides, who gets beat by a man named Bob?

The fact that my wife has most likely been unfaithful to me is much harder to bear. It burns in my belly and itches at my soul. I'm still clinging to a hope that she's going to tell me that she hasn't actually done the deed yet, even if she might have wanted to. It'll be much harder to think away if she has.

But yet again, who am I to complain? How many times before I settled down with her had I served the same rotten facts to a woman? They say that 'revenge is a dish best served cold.' Maybe this is the cosmic payback for every time I've made someone else eat

this same hard, mean meal.

I am a man on a mission, my heart brave and full of courage as I pull into my driveway. I leave my truck on the asphalt, my gear in the backseat and burst through the side door into the kitchen. I am home, and like Superman, come to save the day.

Only to be met with silence.

Dishes in the sink, last night's glasses on the counter, a bag of bread by the toaster and a sheet of paper under the magnet on the refrigerator.

It's covered in words in Michelle's handwriting that I can't read, that are written in an alphabet I can't comprehend, as my heart sinks into my stomach. Blindly, I shove it into my

pocket as I race for the stairs, up two steps at a time, to our bedroom.

Empty bed.

“Brunch? Visit with the neighbors?” I think, wildly heading for the dresser and yanking open the drawers. All hers and all empty, except for the one that holds only the bra and panties I gave her for her last birthday. Signs and portents of things to come.

“Oh God.”

I make my way back towards the front stairs and can now see that her favorite picture, hung in the hall, is only a blank spot on the wall; and as I stop and stare out the second floor window with the note, now a stone in my pocket, I know that she is never coming back.

I headed out early this morning with a plan in my mind about how the conversation would go. I had never stopped to think that she might have a plan of her own as well.

Dragging myself through the rest of the house surveying the damage, my mind is blank, unable to comprehend how I missed it all. The guest bedroom is completely empty, half the sheets in the linen cupboard gone, loved pictures missing...almost half of all we have amassed together vanished, along with her, my wife, my lodestar, my beloved.

Pausing for breath, so hard, so shallow, I reach for the hundred pound weight residing in my pocket. Finally reading the note, I realize that she's been

unhappy for some time. My misguided drive to put everything else aside to provide a better life for us in some distant future was not in her game plan. She no longer has the patience to wait for me.

And any question as to whether or not she would have accepted my plan is gone in the reality of this blank and awesome outcome.

The note drops from my fingers, untended, onto the floor.

What do you do with a note like that? Keep it for your life's scrapbook as a 'Remember when?' Post it back on the 'fridge under that magnet so that you can keep looking at it? Burn it so that it never existed, this one last thing of your,

now suddenly, past, life?

“What in God’s name do I do now?”

I think as I sink onto the last stick of furniture left in our formal living room and survey the laying waste of this four thousand square foot altar to my American dream.

Phone calls is my conclusion. Endless phone calls to announce a bereavement for the undead. Phone calls to introduce the fact that we will now grieve for plans unlived, the babies unborn and the milestones never passed.

I have died, I am dead and yet my breath, heaving and straining, demands notice that I am unbearably still alive.

SIX – ‘Time Won’t Let Me Go’ – The Bravery

Grief is a tomb. A solitude of longing, of hopes buried as you move in slow motion meeting the tasks ahead of you. Exercises in going to work, calling lawyers, laying out your last will and testament as you prepare the coffin that contains your past life. Every action muffled by the closed air of the grave.

I wake everyday now into uncertainty, knowing only that it will begin or close in waves of grief. I often cannot discern between the water of the shower and the tears that run uncontrolled down my face.

I am a man bereft but I work like a daemon, focused fully on every quantifiable goal in front of me. I tell no one but volunteer for every dirty task and hard sell that no one else wants to take on. I beat myself with every available failure, every team that is not working, every business partner in frenzy at the lack of outcome, in an orgy of punishment.

At the end of every day, I come home to the same empty space, which is no longer inhabited by her breath and force. I am like a man amputated, my aching phantom limbs reaching continually out to connect with the lost half of myself.

Happiness is fleeting but pain is slow

to leave the body.

I work through the holidays into the new year.

“Keep working,” I tell myself. “Pay no attention to this pain,” I urge and in time it eases, this acute mourning for her, for me, for my lost hopes.

By late March, I finally have an opportunity to see Michelle again over the paperwork of our quickie divorce; and as I sit in the lobby of the lawyer’s office I can’t believe it’s come to this. I have exchanged exactly three e-mails with her since her departure. Two were to get her to agree to the lawyer I selected to handle this case on consent, and one telling her that I had some of her mail and that I’d put it in the mailbox on

a Sunday (her choice), so she could pick it up.

She won't talk to me and won't offer anything more than the note she left. No dialogue between two people who'd planned on spending their lives together and it aches.

I sit in the lobby and I have no idea what, if anything, I'll say to her when I finally see her again. I left, and I guess for her that was enough to decide to wreak her revenge on me. To do me one better and leave me permanently for all the days and hours I made her live alone.

Asking the receptionist where we'll be meeting, I think I see Michelle entering a room down the hall and think how odd it is to be granted only

glimpses of the person that was your life. The irony is that Michelle works here. Eighteen months before I helped her land a job as a paralegal in this very law firm because of my connections to the man who will now help me dissolve this, my most important relationship.

The lady tells me, helpfully and gently patting me on the hand, that we'll be in one of the conference rooms and she will take me there shortly. When I finally get the call to go in, I feel a little sick to my stomach and as I enter there she is, sitting on the opposite side of the table with no readable emotions on her face. Michelle at her finest, proud and defiant, determined to have it all go her way.

I swallow hard, taking my seat. Mr. Sykes is our attorney and seems from my previous interactions to be an okay guy. Originally I hadn't wanted a lawyer because I thought we could do it on our own. After I sent that first e-mail I realized I couldn't.

“And so, here I am,” I think as the man begins.

"Well, quite honestly, this is the easiest divorce that I've ever processed."

“You two already had separate banking accounts. There's no mutual debt other than the house and as Sebastian has agreed to take it over. Here's the paperwork to remove you from the mortgage, Michelle, with a

lump sum payment of twenty thousand dollars. All I need from both of you is to sign the following papers and you'll be done."

Signing the document, I'm furious that I don't have any answers to why this happened. As soon as we are finished, she gets up without a word and prepares to leave. It takes everything to hold myself back and not just start yelling.

"So, no comment from you?" I ask. "This certainly counts as the most expensive piece of ass I've ever had."

Stopping and looking back at me, she narrows her eyes, shakes her head "No," and with that she is gone.

And there it is. Her final parting shot and I laugh at the irony that in a few

weeks I will be thirty-eight and my wife has ordered me up a divorce as her early but final gift. At least it won't be a surprise.

I return home, now lone ruler of my castle. My tears are spent, only to be replaced with a visitation of the truly inexplicable: bile. I've never been a weak person but as the days progress I find myself waking and needing to puke every morning. It is a ritual like none other I have ever experienced.

Every day at the same time, five twenty-five am in the morning, I find myself hanging in gut-heaving agony over the sink, often with little result. This loss of identity, order, plan, space, time, it eats at me, gnaws in my belly

like a cancer.

All the time we watch on TV about hurricanes and earthquakes and the devastation they produce: loss of possessions, home and family. And I look upon my life: loss of possessions, the companion of my home, and my extended family in hers as they leave me to support their own. Loss, loss, constantly around me in this hurricane of contracts written and then simply unwritten while I'm not given my chance to say good-bye.

I am still like a man dead and finding myself in a mall as the year warms again, searching for some computer component, I can see them all, those smug couples. Fat and ugly, mismatched

and homely or beautiful and happy, they mock me who once was them.

And I hate them. They make it seem so simple, this 'coupleness,' a thing that everyone seems to be able to do but me. Me, who had planned and ordered and organized. This simple thing they all seem to be able to do, at this I have failed.

For days and weeks I eat my failure: what I did not know, what I did not understand, what I ought to have understood. My limits and narrowness, they eat at me. Every argument I would have handled differently if I had only known what she really had thought and felt. If I had only understood what was at stake.

I eat my fault, daily, mouthful by mouthful. A meal I cannot avoid, a plate I cannot push away, but one I must consume slowly and painfully until every failure, every missed opportunity has been eaten in this crawling review of my life.

And so I retch until I find my new friend, alcohol.

Alcohol, that wonderful panacea. That wonderful drug no doctor will prescribe while they withhold that tranquilizer that will ease your aching spirit in the short term. They are all the same when you stand before them, bereft of sleep, at your wits end, sore of spirit and tormented by regrets.

“You should exercise,” they say, “it

releases natural endorphins.” As if I had not thought about that in the endless push-ups that drive my empty hours. They are worried about addiction, they inform you, missing the fact that you cannot beat the current addiction of constant re-evaluation that leads always to the same hopeless conclusions.

So I walk away and self-medicate for endless weeks in my off hours. Alcohol saves me when time presses upon me on the weekend; when I no longer have work to numb my mind and feelings. I drink until I can make the noise in my head not matter. I drink to suppress the words I need to say to the one person that will not hear them. I drink to avoid my loneliness. I drink to my unlived

plans and toast my false expectations.

I drink until, drowning in ages of self-evaluation and pity, I wake up one morning amid an ocean of beer cans and self loathing to finally say “Damn it, I don’t need to add a drinking problem to this mess, considering that I’m only half recovered from crying and puking.”

And so I shake myself out of the self isolation, force myself out of the orgy of self-pity and hit on a new great plan: women, the first, greatest self-medication that God ever invented.

Adam was lonely and God gave him woman. Never mind that it ended in the fall and original sin and all that. If at first you get knocked from your horse, get the hell right back on and tame that

bitch beast.

I work up to the idea for a couple of days, finally calling the only phone number I have in my possession... Bailey. She of the strong opinion and potentially easy virtue.

Bailey told me that all guys are crazy when they get separated and that it will take time.

“Well,” I think, “It’s been almost nine months and I’m no longer puking or crying and the beer intake meter is back to normal.”

To my surprise, not only does she remember me, the blessed girl agrees to go out with me when I call her.

Maybe I can recapture that first moment, I think as I prepare. I’m

cautious about my clothing as I get ready. “Clothes make the man” I tell myself, but make sure that I smell good at the same time, in case the visual senses fail.

I prepare for everything, condoms in my pocket, all my lines in order. I will be attentive and interesting. I will focus on her and listen to what she has to say. This girl will like me. This girl will let me touch her soft, compliant flesh and make me feel like a man.

But by the appetizer I’m already ten minutes into recounting my marriage woes.

All it took was this poor girl asking: “So how’s it all going?” as she laid her napkin on her lap.

Now, I am pretty sure that she meant “How’s work?” Or maybe, I think in my newly suspicious ‘women can’t be trusted’ brain, maybe it’s a trap to get me to fall into her “How crazy is this guy” evaluator machine. But even then I can’t help it, I’m like a man possessed. This girl knows what has happened to me and I’m sure I have her sympathy. I need her sympathy like a drug, I need her to validate my suffering. Sympathy, the greatest gift that women, apart from their soft, willing bodies have been given. And I am hungry for it.

I watch as her eyes widen first in chagrin and then settle, half-lidded into bemused tolerance. I am in a grace period and sensing my fate if I can’t stop

soon, I head in a different direction, “So tell me about your job at the hotel. It must be very challenging to work every day in that environment.”

In my addled condition I’m confident again now that I’m working my plan. “*I am a man, I am ok. I can do this,*” my mind programs itself over and over again, at the same time that my heart is streaming, “*You aren’t ready to do this yet,*” through every active fiber of my body.

Within moments, I am back at it again, taking something she has said and connecting it to my own misery. I’m discovering, rapidly, that I don’t care what she has to say, or what anyone has to say, for that matter. Only I am

interesting to myself; my story, my one trick pony that fascinates and repels me every day. Like the old man recounting each of his failing body parts in lurid detail, I cannot stay away from my injuries and wounds for more than ten minutes in any of the conversation cycles she keeps gamely introducing.

Bailey is a good sport and tries repeatedly to draw me into conversation about who I am, what I do, where I come from. And I'm trying to do the same. This girl is beautiful and interesting but, just like my parents over these long months, I am wearing out her ears with endless details about the circles I make around the emotional gold fish bowl that I currently inhabit.

We are all like this, we post traumatic divorce victims, swimming around and around our enclosed spaces trying to figure out what the hell went wrong with our lives. Hoping each time that each new person will have that one magic insight or understanding that will break the cycle.

Watching her, wound by both desire and need, I know by two thirds of the way through the date that I've blown it.

Between dinner and dessert she has finally had enough, the frustration all over her face. Suddenly dropping her napkin on the table she politely vacates my proximity with "Thanks for calling me. You could be an interesting guy but, honey, you're not nearly yet ready for

what I want or see. Call me again in six months.”

With that she is gone, and watching her exit from the restaurant, I’m not sure I blame her.

In that one clear moment I realize that I, apparently, have more soul searching to do.

SEVEN – ‘Love Removal Machine’ – The Cult

Time passes slowly for me into the summer months after the disastrous date with Bailey. I work my way carefully through the events that prompted me to try and share dinner with her and even more importantly, to under perform so far below my expectations of myself. I've always been good with women, can charm them, get them to do what I want, mostly by identifying what they want or need in the immediate and then meeting it with at least the appearance of cooperation. With Bailey, my own hidden needs and wants interfered with

my game plan. I wonder if for the first time in my life I'm living and not planning. Maybe my needs are imposing themselves on my agenda, pushing themselves forward to make me pay attention to them.

I begin to recognize that I wanted something more complex than sex from that interaction, much as truly I'm itching for that by now. I wanted connection, to be in that place where my thoughts and feelings were known and recognized.

A wife is all those things already, matter and spirit. The hard work has been done and you've settled into that comfortable knowingness where the game is over and the life begins. I'm realizing that I don't want to be alone

and yet I also don't trust my ability to make connections anymore, to make it actually happen. What I had trusted in myself has misled me. I'm uncertain how to proceed and find the middle distance between alone and attached.

Yet, unexpectedly and suddenly, I do fall in love, hard, with a burning passion.

I am smitten, besotted, a man blind to all other things. I have discovered true magic and delight in... my iPod.

It's my constant companion, this genius piece of technological wizardry. It now provides the soundtrack of my life as I head down the jet way of the yet another airport, as I stand buying groceries by myself, as I move from

destination to destination, always delivering another theme song.

I spend hours perusing the internet in search of music I have long forgotten, I download favorites from CD's I've not listened to in years. I teach myself a game, 'How fast can you name that song?' competing against myself until I'm able to answer in the first three seconds of any of the nine hundred songs I acquire. And I realize how many girls from my past are attached to songs, captured in some passing piece of music.

Some of these are songs are simple, like when playing the side dish to Angela, who already had a boyfriend, 'I'm that type of guy' by LL Cool J always came in handy to ease my

conscience. But most of the songs aren't a literal translation of an event or an experience. Usually its something in the title or the song that connected itself to what was happening in me and around me. With 'It's Tricky,' it's the title that made the connection and to this day every time I hear that song I think back twenty years ago to the lovely curly haired Heather associated with it. And there are others: 'Sex and Candy' is Melissa; 'Wicked Game,' Jan; 'Don't know what you got ('til it's gone)' is a favorite for Lisa; 'One Way Out,' Cindy; and 'A Long December' for Linda. Each song, happy or sad, good memory or bad, evokes an image in my mind of a girl long gone.

Way too many girls.

My iPod adds color and description to what I feel. It plays, loud and insistent through the ear buds as I replay over and over something that highlights today, what tiny emotional piece my brain is working to process. I lavish care on my favorite friend, laying out the money for the docking devices so that I never live without it in my house or my vehicle.

Each day finds another tune to energize my steps and I begin to sing again into the moments it provides for me. Angry, sweet, hard, cold, sublime and sometimes just dirty, I have them all at my disposal and the whim of my mood as I chew through all of my experiences

from long before Michelle.

I'm delighted when I discover another advantage: my iPod is a great means of keeping people off my mental doorstep, keeping them out of my physical space and stopping them from intruding while I think.

Nothing wards off an unwelcome conversation more than a pair of ear buds and the volume at full blast. I admit it sometimes makes me look completely addled as I stand gape mouthed mid-lyric realizing someone has been talking to me for two minutes as I sing some silly song to myself, but I'm okay with that. Nobody talks with the addled for long, I find to my satisfaction.

It almost gets me into trouble once, my singing to this soundtrack of my life. Marching confidently down the moving sidewalk one afternoon in some southern US airport listening to ‘Can a n***** get a table dance?’, unconsciously singing the lyrics as a six foot six, football sized African-American man suddenly looms up from behind me and taps me on the shoulder.

Panic strikes me as I turn my head to size up the reality of the shadow, and he says “You *do* know that you’re singing out loud, don’t you?”

And I don’t, until that very second.

I stare at him, my balls suddenly, seriously, all in a knot, until he laughs and unbelievably just says, “Where’d

you get that from? Can I listen to it for a minute?"

We part only moments later, he with the requested information on a scrap of hastily retrieved paper, and I forewarned not to sing the objectionable songs on my iPod in public. In fact, I create a playlist labeled 'car and shower' just in case I ever forget.

Slowly I realize that I'm no longer so sad, once I rediscover the comfort of music. And I know that I need people again to add happenings and memories to my new life.

I turn to Ty again, adding in Pete, when his wife will spare him. Men seem safer company to my newly cautious mind and we shoot pool or burn

energy on driveway basketball courts. They listen to me bitch and complain, adding in their own issues; Pete with his increasingly embittered wife and Ty, a women pressing for a wedding date he appears less and less to be pursuing. What a trio we make.

I even get to know my neighbors on the cul de sac, a nosey bunch of jackals it turns out, who count cars and know the meaning of a moving van. They approach me cautiously as I mow the lawn or take out the garbage, curiosity overcoming hesitation to engage in vague dialogue until they always get to the same punch line, “So, I haven’t seen Michelle’s car in months; everything okay?”

I tell some of them that she died, just to make them feel bad for their presumption. It's always fun to squeeze out a tear or two to add to the impact. I kill her numerous ways: car accident, cancer, aneurism, even leprosy once, whatever strikes my fancy at the moment. And I'm sure that once they gather together and collect notes, they'll just conclude that I'm an asshole. I'm okay with that.

Our mutual friends are a different story. As a couple we had married friends, some with kids, some without. They all responded much the same way to news of the break up depending on who got there first.

“Yeah I heard, so sorry man, but Leah

was talking to her and I'm not sure that there's anything I can do. You know women." Or, "Sarah thinks she's a bitch, let me know when you need a boys' night out."

But in a crowd of couples you discover quickly as a single that you no longer fit. If you're a woman you become a potential threat as an option out. As a man you become the guy that takes the man away from his home and into dangerous territory.

They called for a while, trying to take sides while they didn't take sides, until they realized that neither of us fit in anymore into the great American domestic experience. Then the calls got less frequent and the offers for contact

passed away.

Through it all I contemplate Michelle.

It slowly comes to me that by leaving me without comment or explanation Michelle has successfully laid the entire failure of the marriage at my feet as if I ought to have known what was happening and the outcome requires no further discussion. It's a neat trick really, and I fell for it, eating only my fault, my endless mea culpa for my imperfections.

It changes my perspective, once I realize it. Actually it allows me to draw some conclusions about myself in this ruin of my life: I had a wife, I did all the things that I think husbands should do and yet, here I am. I'm not a husband

anymore.

I evaluate over and over what a husband should and shouldn't do, and objectively I begin to understand that I did model all the right things my parents taught me. Not only did I model it, I believed it; believed *in* it.

My parents instilled in me the idea that marriage isn't something to take lightly, that it's intended to be a onetime exercise and that careful selection and self-evaluation should land you with the person that you want to spend the rest of your life with. That you should make sure, once the beauty of youth is gone, that there is enough substance to make what is on the inside still matter.

They always said that to make

marriage work you needed to be willing to do things you may not want to at times. My father and mother reminded my brother and I that life together wouldn't always be a bed of roses, that this person, your beloved, was going to have tough moments and you had to be willing to support them, and that the reward for your effort would be having the one person that you could truly count on when your own cards were down.

Above all they set these rules: always respect the other person; be honest and sincere in everything you do as it's the only thing that builds trust and will matter in the end; be the husband to your wife, the father to your kids and man up for the challenges that lie ahead. If you

did these things the end result would be a partnership with give and take and all the rewards of the risk and effort.

But I'm also reminded that the one prejudice my dad always repeated to my brother and I growing up was, "Be cautious of girls with divorced parents. There are lessons that they ought to have learned that they have missed because they have not seen marriage when it works."

Michelle's parents are divorced and she grew up in that odd, backwards privilege of two parents doing everything, and nothing, for a child in order to prove that the other was at fault. I didn't think it mattered at the time but it makes me wonder now.

I look at Michelle, my Michelle, who, besides her beauty, attracted me with the ability to always make me smile. That while she seemed so mature, independent and confident, things I hadn't ever noticed with any other women, at the same time for her, nothing was ever good enough. No matter how much I did for her, people who had never done a thing for her would take precedence over me because it made her look good.

As great as she looked then, now she looks like a dishonest, self-serving bitch that only ever really cared about her Gucci purse. Slowly, I realize that it's not so much the loss of her, as it is the fact that I put in so much trust and effort

and I'm going to have to do it all over again. Good luck to her with 'Bob the Builder' coming home dirty from his construction job every night. At least it will always be by five o'clock.

And I'm mad again, furious that I missed so many of the things that I should have been paying attention to. So many of the things missing that I had seen every day in the house that I was raised in and ignored when I did not see them in her.

One good thing about Michelle's quick exit is that she's left behind all our photos, including wedding pictures. It burned in my belly for a long time, that what had happened in time and history had been left behind so casually. At yet,

like that note on the refrigerator, what do you do with the mementoes and tokens of a life you no longer choose to live?

I grin like a devil when I realize that *I* know what to do with these leftovers of what, will now, never be anything but a hurtful memory to accommodate. It's simple. It's September and I need to sight in my rifles.

I call Ty and in what turns out to be one of the most satisfying moments of my life, head for the shooting range. It's target practice time and it is on.

We line them up, starting with all the couple pictures first; all that happy, smiley time when the present is a wonder and the future so beautifully beckoning. We shoot holes in all of

them, always starting with her face. My rifle, with the six hundred dollar scope that can find a deer in brush three hundred yards away, sees the smiles and 'BOOM', one smile is gone and 'BOOM,' so is the second.

The satisfaction is incredible as we move through history, taking off heads, vanishing backgrounds, eradicating memories. We reach the wedding pictures and I keep only one, where I look really good, on that day when I was so certain of who I was and what I wanted. The rest we leave, riddled with bullet holes, in the trash barrel at the shooting range.

I feel reborn, leaving the past in that trashcan. I march out into the battle that

is the rest of my life with my intentions clear: I will never open my heart again, I will protect myself, I will promise women the world but give them only a temporary slice of heaven. I don't know that I want to spend the time and energy to start over but I will keep my options open and if the right girl comes along, great. If not, then I'll just have to find some hot sex to pass my time.

And if I do find a girl I have new rules: ask way more questions if things don't line up, because all women lie to get what they want. Trust my gut, then my head and leave the little head out of it. Be clear on my expectations and don't let someone get involved if they don't understand that I set the rules. Be

true to who I am *now*.

Ty takes me to bars. Why the hell *he* is still hanging around in them is another story; but there we are and I quickly find that my new universe can be filled with available women if I chose it to.

Single women are everywhere, in couples and bunches, sometimes even in packs, congregating in bars and clubs and restaurants. Every age is available, from the barely legal to ancient crones. All the age lines are blurred now, no one caring if the gap is two years or ten in either gender direction. They're all hungry for contact and adventure to stall that slow death from loneliness.

Sorting the women out is another story. I find that either they're

aggressively self-confident and therefore only potentially fun and challenging, or riddled with the effects of multiple bad relationships, scarred, bitter and undeserving of my time and attention.

As I contemplate moving on to actually dating I recognize that it's what I did in my teens and twenties. By the time I was thirty I was engaged and planning for marriage with future plans for a family. I managed to skip the increasingly desperate thirties when clocks start ticking, and a pet and career are no longer enough. I didn't like dating much then, and now with forty not so far around the corner, I wonder if I can manage this arduous task again.

The meet and greet is hard work. You

have to be agile now, adjusting quickly to downward turns in dialogue and segues into confessions containing too much information because, it turns out, everyone's been burned and any one statement can make it awkward. So I stay away from politics, religion and anything regarding why I'm no longer married, effective, but it makes it hard to follow my own intention of asking good questions to evaluate the prospects in front of me.

A lot of the women I meet in bars are only too willing to go home with me with only the slightest encouragement. I shy away from them; these offers of sex are too easy, no challenge to accomplish. I'm looking for female

company, not a call girl that doesn't have even the self-respect to charge for her services. They appall me with their hungry eyes and grasping hands, so desperate to short-cut to intimacy and such a pale substitute for what I used to have.

Finally, after some trying and sorting, I'm able to tell Ty that I have a date with a girl. It's just some girl: pretty, employed and capable of stringing ten words together in an articulate thought, as much as I have begun to expect from all the fish in my sea.

I pick the girl up at her apartment around six on a work night. She's dressed just past business casual, her top slightly lower than would be acceptable,

her skirt slightly higher. I like the view.

I've chosen the restaurant with care, priced so that she knows my pockets aren't empty but modest enough that she doesn't think I might keep gold in my socks. I perform all the tasks expected of a southern boy, open doors and walk on the outside of the street but wonder, inside myself, whether this extended courtesy doesn't just target me as a sucker, though my mother would tan my hide if I didn't, even at thirty-eight.

I like her well enough and this date finds me less apt to talk about my ex. I'm able to carry on an extended dialogue around safe and mundane subjects, but I know that I'm lacking the confidence that once was a mainstay in

my life. My answers come slower than usual and certainly half as funny as I can be. I constantly catch myself looking hard at her friendly face and wondering what's going on in her head and if it's different from what she's showing me.

She's quite ordinary; in her early thirties with a couple of long term relationships behind her that have left her cautious but resilient. Lively, laughing at my jokes and flashing her eyes at me a few times in a way that makes my stomach flop just a little, I can't shake the sense that I shouldn't trust what I see, that I've missed the life class that should have taught me how to deal with women so I don't buy a lemon.

I continue on, carefully winding

around details and information, never letting too much out or leaving too much open for examination to let her decide who I am. A few times I get the sense that she's puzzled by me, as much as I can tell that my company doesn't repel her. By the end of the date she's subdued with a hesitation that must match my own. When I take her back home, walking her to her door, she leaves me with a small shake of her head, grabbing me at the elbow only, leaning in to press a gentle kiss on my cheek.

It appears that I'm not a player anymore, that my humanity has intruded enough on the game plan that I can't work my objective and, as I explain the

end of the date to Ty he offers to play wingman for a night on the town to show me how it's done. He's going to fix this thing and get me back on the right track.

He picks me up three nights later with a grin on his face, like he has a plan and he knows what I need. I hate it when Ty is like that, 'cause you know it's always going to end up bad.

We pull up into the back parking lot of building that looks like it's in need of repair and when I raise an eyebrow in Ty's direction his only answer is, "Just wait."

"Wait for what Ty?"

"You'll see and it won't be that bad, promise."

It doesn't take more than a few

minutes to make our way around to the front where I'm immediately bombarded by the flashing neon of a woman on a swing.

"Ty, this is a strip club."

"Yup."

"No way. How in the hell is this gonna help?" I think, *"If I can't even get a date enthusiastic enough to tell me she wants to see me again, what's this supposed to do for me?"* Seriously, it's not like strippers care what I have to say or how nice I am, in fact their job description demands that they pretend I'm the greatest guy on the planet. Hardly an objective perspective.

In that split second I'm turning around and heading back to the car, only I can't

because Ty has me by the shirt tail.

“I hate strip clubs Ty.”

“I know you do, but I also think it’s been such a long time since you’ve seen a fresh pair of tits that you can’t even remember what it’s all about.”

“I see them on TV all the time Ty, let go of my shirt.”

“Not the same thing at all my friend and I ain’t lettin’ go of your shirt until your ass is inside this bar. Com’on, women are all the same and you need to see some boobies and whooha to get you back in the mood. You’ve been sittin’ on the sides lines way too long. Don’t argue, you’re going in.”

He suddenly starts singing “A lap dance is so much better when the

stripper is cryin',” just like that guy from the Bloodhound Gang, while holding me ever more firmly by my shirt tail and dragging me forward.

And I can't help but think that my best friend, singing at the top of his lungs as we approach an establishment that has a fourteen foot naked neon woman on a swing over the entrance, may just be an imbecile.

I'm still protesting loudly, continually pulled by the corner of my shirt, as we enter the club heading toward the tables near the stage.

It's dark and smoky here, full of shadowy figures in groups or hunched alone over beers, dissolutely ogling the naked flesh of the table dance.

A raucous group of young guys, about six of them, are pressed up right against the stage, hollering at the wildly proportioned woman massaging a pole not five feet away.

It gets worse when I realize that we're moving straight towards them, that Ty knows them, and it's no accident that they're here. They are actually part of the plan.

"Work buddies. Boys night!" He hollers over the noise while throwing himself into the seat they pull out for him to accompany the loud cheer that goes up when they see him.

"Boys," he shouts, "this is Sebastian, the guy who's never met a woman he can't convince to sleep with him."

And they greet me like a hero, firing questions about the stories that Ty has obviously told them about our past conquests, while I feel my temper rise to be jammed up like this.

I hate strip clubs, and honestly believe that all men should hate them for the following reasons: one, it's a waste of hard earned money. Two, there is no way that you're going to get what you want. Three, there is no way that this experience helps you with real women. Four, did I mention...it's a waste of money? And adding a pile of guys ready to behave like jackasses only works to make this experience that much more awful.

The faces are all friendly as I take my

seat, welcoming me to the gathering. It takes a while but slowly my ego kicks in; I can't make Ty look like he exaggerates. I have a reputation that I need to uphold, if only for his sake. So in short order I'm the one who ends up drinking shooters off the nipples of the hottest stripper available.

Think about it, I'm no longer married, so really, what reason is there to be good?

I surrender and it is a bad night.

EIGHT – ‘Bang, Bang, Bang’ – John Lee Hooker

Heading towards the first anniversary of my separation I have less time for bars with Ty as the demands of my job begin to pile on me. But I hunt with abandon, using the available weekends to kill my full bag limit in the company of my dad and his buddies. They're good companions, old and crusty, never asking invasive questions. The only requisite to be part of this gang is to talk when supposed to, shut up when not, and shoot straight.

And I work.

Many months earlier I had the dreaded

conversation with my boss about my newly single status and experience one of the most disappointing conversations of my career. My senior vice-president, apart from being a co-worker and boss for the past four years, has also become a man I consider a friend.

Our conversation went something like this:

“Can I have a few minutes of your time?”

“Sure, what’s up?”

“Well evidently my wife has found someone else and she left me. We’re getting divorced.”

“Holy shit, did you have any idea?”

“Nope.”

“Do you think it has anything to do

with all the travel for work?”

“Yes, it has lots to do with it. She’s mad that I wasn’t home enough.”

“Well, as sorry as I am to hear that, you know that your ability to travel is an integral part of your job here. Did your wife not understand that part when you took the job within my division?”

And without missing a beat, moving straight back into his business need he concludes, “And now that you’re single and you don’t have commitments at the house anymore, can you take on this thing for me in Kansas City?”

Once he realized that I no longer had a wife to come home to and no impending children to take to doctor’s appointments, I become his go-to guy in

earnest and he generates a punishing travel schedule for me. Travelling to our call centers in the American mid-west, Central America, Caribbean and everyone's favorite, the Philippines, I'm out three of four weeks every month. Day trips or week long adventures, it's all the same to me and only my mother really complains.

Traveling can be great. You get to eat at fancy restaurants with business partners or vendors, either trying to impress or be impressed. I expand my palate on everyone else's dime, learning with increasing relish to love the finer food and drink of the upper classes. Sometimes I stay in nice hotels, sometimes we're saving money; but on

each I earn points and wait for when I can use them for my own adventures. I have a couple of wildly extravagant and demanding business partners and I'm glad that with all my travels, meetings and dinners I manage not to generate a 'Wall of Shame' expense report. The Wall is for travel expenses that grossly exceed the recommended limits and I come close one awful night that includes cigars and unnecessary after dinner drinks, *for twelve*. But I do get to participate in a dinner with a colleague and his vendors that ended in a bill that was over two thousand dollars, pushed far beyond the limit by two bottles of wine over six hundred dollars each. He caught holy hell for it. Not the kind of

attention I like to get.

But traveling can also seriously suck with its endless hotel rooms, all smelling funny, totally impersonal and never belonging to me. Airports are a bore with the same harried families dragging screaming kids and businessmen drinking in bars, checking emails on handheld tracking devices to waste the long hours on layover and still earn their pay. I can't even begin to count the endless lost luggage exercises or the cancelled and late flights that put me hours off my agenda and miles away from my intended destination. Even good food, to say nothing of the bad, can get boring and you can hardly wait for mac and cheese cooked in a pot you

actually own.

And most of all, being nice to strangers is the hardest part and they are everywhere. Airport personnel, call center agents, vendors, business partners. I have to build instant relationships with all of them and get their buy-in so that they work my agenda.

Some trips are fun and others are just crazy. Caribbean trips that come in on a weekend and last a week are great, but once I have a grueling thirty-six hour round trip for a two hour meeting in California. Up in the air and back down again eight times with hours of lay-over, only to discover once I get there that I could just have called in on conference.

I think about how I ended up in call

centers in the first place, arranging my long body on a hopelessly uncomfortable seat while waiting for another delayed flight. Nobody, *yet*, plans on a career in call center operations. Everybody falls into it by accident. I am no exception.

Graduating with a degree in Business Administration and with a decent financial offer on the table, I got hired by my first call center. And found a truly fascinating job. Constantly moving and changing, it's a job of numbers and the people that generate them. It's chaos in its truest form, every day presenting a slight tilt to previously known answers and only the bravest and toughest survive. My kind of business ultimately

A call center is a natural extension of

most modern companies' operational strategy and depending on what your business does, that dictates how much of an integral part the call center is. In fact, the call centers may be the only direct interface that the company has with its customers, so it's a vital piece of the operation. It's a new type of business, but it's an important one and it's not going away anytime soon.

Over my career, which is now getting close to two decades, I've seen just about everything. Call centers are collecting basins for the great unwashed. We hire anybody and at the same time it's one of the last businesses where, if you have talent and work hard, you can move through the ranks to good

income and significant decision making power. But when I started my first job as a manager in a call center, I was wide-eyed and naïve. My peers were a bunch of gossip hawks that were always wondering why some people got additional responsibilities, and they couldn't ever seem to figure out that attitude and behavior had something to do with it. I was constantly amazed at their cut-throat mentality, acting like sharks after seals when they smelled blood in the water. So often it was not about doing a better job themselves, but taking out the guy that had.

My first close experience with this group of Neanderthals was a rumor circulating about one of our bosses

sleeping with her peer. Sex with colleagues or rumors of it is a constant reality in a contact center. I don't suppose it's actually really different anyplace else. I'd been a manager about four months with twenty-eight staff under my direction when I started to hear these particular whispers. As luck would have it, I knew both of the alleged cheaters personally from relationships outside of work, so I knew that eventually someone would come to me with the rumor.

I really hate people who spread gossip and when it finally came around to me I wasn't about to let it go. I'd been at work about an hour one day when one of my peers came to tell me

this tall tale. I smiled with delight as I heard the details of the supposed tryst, not for the reason that the tale teller wanted, but because I had a plan to nip this gossip in the bud. I listened carefully until the end of the lengthy, gory tale and immediately asked, "So, where did you hear that? I don't believe it!"

"Oh, so and so," she replied, eagerly providing the name.

"No way, you're kidding, her? They gotta know something more," I answered to my unsuspecting victim and off we headed towards the previous carrier of the tale.

I continued to do this, person by person, each leading me to the next until

I got to the ringleader.

Finally I was at the epicenter of the social earthquake and if ogres were real, this woman would be their queen. I wasn't too surprised in the end. I'd already figured that this was where it had started, but its way more fun to let them all happily lead you to their source.

And she too tells me the tale, laying out all the alleged crimes in lurid detail.

So, there we were, all of us, staring alternately at each other, her especially waiting for my response.

“Wow, that's horrible. That's just not right. You know what, let's go talk to them and see what they say.”

You'd have thought I'd yelled 'Fire' at how quickly every one of them ran

away.

The woman, now suddenly alone with me, turned purple and started to sputter.

“I uh...well...I saw her with him and it was a weird time of day and...you know how it is.”

“So you saw them and they were doing something they shouldn’t and you went and told HR or your boss, right?”

“Uh no, I was going to but it’s not like they were...uh...doing anything right then, but I kinda figured...”

“So, what did you do?”

The purple is not receding as she now lays out the rest of what really happened.

“I uh...I guess I went and told Susie that I figured they were having an affair. I mean, you know, I was disgusted by it

and so I told her. But I told her not to tell anyone so...”

“And she’s the only one you told?”

“No...uh...I think I might have mentioned it to some other people. I mean, I guess I must have,” she finishes lamely.

“But you never actually saw them doing anything wrong?”

“No.”

“So I tell you what *I’m* going to do now. I’m going to let the impacted parties know about what you’ve been saying and what you think is going on. And I’ll let *you* figure out what you should do next.”

The ogre was forced to make a public apology in the end. She resigned about

six weeks later citing medical issues, and I thought to myself, “Yeah, mental issues.”

It takes all kinds.

You meet interesting people in call centers. Sometimes the agents are the most disconnected folks in our society and their work ethic is often not great, but they need jobs and we have lots of them. I remember one woman that I interviewed who, with shirt generously unbuttoned, leaned over the table and asked, “What do I got to do *to you* to get this job?” I didn’t hire her. Others showed their character after we hired them, mostly in their excuses for lateness or non-compliance of some sort. One guy, when asked on the sign-in form as

to why he was late, simply wrote ‘bowel movement.’ I admired his honesty.

One of my all-time favorite stories dates back to my early days and the first guy that I had to let go. Firing somebody is tough, even when you know that you have no other option. But if you care at all as a manager you realize that, while it’s a necessary business decision, it’s also deeply impacting to the person involved. I had to let this man go because one: he was completely incoherent on the phone and two: he smelled like alcohol.

I prepared myself for the dialogue, expecting it to be tough, but the man actually owned up.

“Of course I’m drunk,” he said. “I

hate you, I hate this (expletive) job and I hate my (expletive, expletive) life.”

“And I tell you what,” his words now clearly slurring, “I don’t even want this job. I just come here to get away from my wife. And if you’re gonna get up my ass too, I quit.”

We called his wife to come pick him up because he was in no shape to drive and she responded to the request with, “Oh damn him, he’s drunk again, ain’t he?”

And there ended the story, or so I thought...until about a week later as the employees that sat near him started to complain about a noxious smell coming from his station cubicle. I called the cleaning crew and we set in to

investigate. It didn't take long.

This man, ingenious in his decrepit ways, had devised a short cut around our rules on breaks; in the right drawer he had empty bottles that had obviously once contained alcohol, and in the left side drawer he had a gallon jar filled with...his urine. I had to give him credit, he had figured out how to drink and meet his metrics.

As bad as some call center employees can be, plenty are good folk who benefit from our hiring policies and they work hard. A lot of them are single moms and previously successful people who got downsized and are too old to learn another skill. They care about their customers and diligently try to resolve

their concerns; they are the bread and butter of every organization and truly earn their keep.

But if agents can be bad, so can the customers on the other end. They call us drunk, annoyed and sometimes just plain crazy. What do you do with the woman who calls in hysterically crying that Santa is stuck in her chimney and the elves can't get him out? The fact that she claims to know the President and insists that you call him to get him to help her only adds to the hilarity, but at the same time she's truly insanely distressed.

The dirty minded callers are much harder to deal with. The guys that call in saying "You have a sexy voice, talk dirty

to me,” and then continue on with disgusting requests can seriously unbend the female high school grad who fields the call. And the older woman who’s just been asked to change a dirty diaper by some creepy guy needs more than a few minutes to get back into the game.

Other people are just weird and I have opportunity to meet plenty of them. There’s even lots of crazy shit that happens on airplanes. I once had a woman try to get off a plane that was traveling from Detroit to Chicago. As we sit, ready for takeoff the woman suddenly says, “I’ve got to get off this time traveling plane.”

I have no idea what she’s talking about and respond intelligently with,

“What?”

“This plane is gonna travel through time because it’s ten o’clock now and it says on my ticket that we’re gonna arrive in Chicago at 9:50 am! I ain’t prepared for no time travel.”

It doesn’t take me a minute to explain that Chicago is an hour behind us in Central Standard Time and Detroit is in Eastern Standard Time.

“Oh,” she says, taking a deep breath, “so there’s no time travel. It’s just the time difference?”

I tell her, “Yes” and smile, as I wonder what other things are confusing for this woman.

But other flights exceed my wildest expectations. Take the time I’m heading

back to Kansas City for a meeting with our vendor. It's the trip I've made twenty times since my boss so generously handed it to me and it's always boring. Standing in line at the check-in I catch a glimpse of one of the most striking women I've ever seen. She looks like a model or an actress; long dark hair flowing over her shoulders, a body to kill for and dressed like a superstar, she's a woman that turns heads. I look at the reader board and know that my gate is next to a flight to Los Angeles, so the chances of her being on my flight are slim to none. I'm stuck just watching her move through the crowds, mindlessly acknowledging to myself that she's hot.

Lady luck however, decided to give me a smile and twenty minutes later as the call for First Class comes up at the boarding gate, I take my place in line (the only privilege to constant air travel is that I get first class if it's available). As I stand there, the hottest chick on the planet walks up and asks for a first class seat.

It's my hot girl from check-in. She's told it's a seventy-five dollar upgrade but seats are available. I see my opportunity and take it. One of my frequent flyer privileges is that I can take one person traveling with me and move them up to first class. So I step out of line, balls in hand, broad smile, and say, "You're late. I thought you were going

to miss the flight.”

She widens her eyes slightly at me and blinks only once, a sly smile covering her astonishment, as I hand my frequent flier card to the attendant and ask to have her upgraded, instructing them to put her wherever there's a seat available.

Within moments, as we descend the jet way to the plane she looks back at me and says “Thanks.”

“No problem. I do this all the time.”

It's the truth. I've done it every time I could for anyone that wanted it. Most of the time it's just some woman from Phoenix heading to see her grandchild for the first time.

And my luck continues, that, or an

astute ticket-taker, as I watch her beautifulness take the seat next to the spot that will be mine. I can't believe my luck, but instead of heading straight towards my destiny, I help an older woman place her luggage into the overhead bin. She thanks me graciously and finally I head to my seat. As I sit down, palms slightly sweating, my new, unbelievably beautiful traveling partner says, "You have to be southern!"

I laugh, knowing that my accent is fairly thick and that it must have been apparent.

"Sure, why? Does my accent make it that obvious? I thought I had it pretty well hidden today."

"No, not that. The way you helped the

older woman with her bags even without her asking, it's something I see southern men do."

"Yes ma'm, my mother would put a beating on me if I wasn't a gentleman in those scenarios."

And with that, it is on. I have landed in the best seat in the house and we talk first about my accent, how it can come or go depending on audience or emotion, and then move quickly on to who we are and what we're doing here. She tells me about herself, that she's a dancer travelling to see her sister in Kansas City and lives within ninety minutes of me. Its quite clear she's well educated, wellborn and extremely intelligent. I can't believe my good fortune,

continuing on the idle chit-chat for an hour, adding drinks and connectedness until one stray comment suddenly connects and I realize that her ‘dancing’ is really stripping. Now, much as I hate strip clubs, I have no problems with the occupation.

But I do have a lot of questions.

“How’d ya start?” Do you like it? Do you have a steady boyfriend...how does he deal with it? Do you have plans for when you want to quit?”

She answers them all, transparently and generously. Her roommate in college had stripped since her sophomore year and within ten months of starting had had plenty of money, a new car and all the trendiest clothes. So, she

too had decided to do it during senior year, and made more money in the first month than she had during her entire previous summer's internship.

“Do I like it? Sure, sometimes. It's always funny when guys see you dance a bunch of times and they think they know you. A lot of them end up wanting to take care of you, and it makes me laugh every time I find out that I make more than they do doing the very thing they want to rescue me from.”

“But other days it's hard when you carry a few extra pounds and you don't feel as attractive as you think you should. It's tough too because you don't actually get to choose who's looking at you. For every bored, attractive

business man and his buddies there's ten ugly creepy guys whose money is exactly the same color."

She shakes her head a little bit, takes a sip of her drink and continues.

"I won't do it forever 'cause things do eventually get old and start to sag," she says pointing to what right now is an almost perfect specimen of womanly beauty.

"I'm going to open an art studio with the money I'm saving. The question is when. The money is hard to give up, you know," she says with a tug on her lip.

The boyfriend question is the last she answers, and in the negative.

"No, I don't have a boyfriend. I tried a couple of times but it just gets weird

after a while. You get close, you know? And after that it starts to feel a bit like cheating. Besides, it's way more important to me to be my own person right now, I really don't need anybody getting in my way and telling how I should be doing things. Possessiveness just isn't my thing."

Twenty minutes before we land I realize, when she asks me what my plans are and suggests exchanging numbers, that I may have a date with one of the hottest women I have ever talked to. Who just also happens to be a stripper.

I'm just over a year since my separation. I feel tired and old and the needs of my body are pressing hard upon me. Yes, I meet her again, yes it works

just as well at dinner two nights later; and yes, I climb that mountain.

God, what a woman.

I manage to stay in touch with her briefly, seeming to satisfy with some magnificent sex, but soon find that unlike me, she really doesn't want a relationship of any kind and certainly not one an hour and a half away. I like her but am slightly relieved, discovering, somewhat shamefaced, that as broad minded as I think I am, I'm not sure I can stretch far enough to take a stripper home to my mother.

But I'm back on my horse and belatedly, Ty has taught me the lesson he intended me to learn. I have found my confidence again to score whatever I

want. It may not have been that night in the club, but a beautiful stripper still taught me the lesson anyway.

The experience teaches me another vital lesson as the memory of being part of a couple slowly recedes from my brain. There are beautiful, willing women everywhere that I may find myself, and I figure that as long as they don't work for me or with me in any capacity, that they are fair game.

I've rediscovered my long retired bag of tricks and begin to use them all with a vengeance. I don't have to marry them, they don't need to be my girlfriend but I can still get to know them, build some sense of friendship with them...as long as they don't ask for more. And like the

boy who has sex for the first time while away on vacation and knows it can't follow him home, I learn to date again on the road while I travel. It becomes quite easy to lay on the charm and make myself appealing; it's a thrill to have things go again as planned.

I can be anybody I want to be and they, they're all *the* perfect woman, these conquests, for one great unifying factor - they are non-permanent. While retaining all the truly wonderful things about their gender, these women fill exactly what I need: time, attention and sex. With no strings, uncertainty, or the life-building exercises that I lack the confidence to try.

I love the company of women but I

don't need relationships is my new position as I disappear to the next destination with no returning address.

Another perfect flight greets me months later on a connector to our site in Central America, seated beside a beautiful young lady from Ecuador named Elena. Again luck and charm are with me and by the time the plane heads for touchdown I know that I'll have company during my stay. Landing improves the exercise as Keith, one of my operations directors, waits for me at the exit. I catch him eyeing Elena as I walk out, not more than thirty seconds behind her.

"See anything interesting?" I ask, walking casually up to him.

“Hell yeah. Did you see that hot chick just in front of you?”

“The brunette with the great body? Yeah...I have a date with her tomorrow night.” I answer, smugly pulling out her business card, watching with delight as his face slightly purples with envy. It’s a sad male truth that a hot woman gets all that much hotter if it makes the other guy envious, and I am not immune.

“Sometimes it’s better to be lucky than good,” I think to myself as we head out into the mid-day sun towards his car.

NINE – ‘Bad Luck’ – Social Distortion

As I head towards the April of my thirty-ninth birthday I find that a new kind of life has taken shape. Which, while not entirely satisfying, leaves me content enough with my lot. The lack of the family, hearth and home that I had planned for myself by this time, empty of the children intended to fill my forties, stings to contemplate, but I press ahead as a sense of equilibrium establishes itself within me.

I'm almost forty. I have a job that interests me and plenty of money to compensate for the long hours that I

contribute to my career. I no longer resent the cost of the money in my pocket but I've certainly learned its value. Mid-level executive compensation is often the envy of the rank and file in call centers as they watch the 'men in suits' spend their days in meetings or jetting off to unknown destinations, no longer appearing to work those task heavy days of the front lines. That magic mark of the hundred thousand a year income seems a financial freedom point for so many people. It does in fact allow opportunities for some of those acquisitions that you dreamed of as a young man reading car magazines and watching television shows about the pleasures of available cash. But I've

learned the hard way that it is also very expensive money; it cost me a marriage and all of my planned future.

Financial compensation works almost as a direct ratio of dollars to hours. At fifty-thousand dollars and forty hours a man can make good plans for himself and still call most of his life his own. At one hundred thousand dollars and eighty hours of effort you essentially net out the same hourly compensation, but you give up that healthy work/life balance. I watch some of my peers -- those with children -- and see the sacrifices their families are making in missed soccer games and birthday greetings over phones from board meetings and distant travel destinations. My peer's wives

may be driving BMWs and carrying expensive purses, but they also tuck their children in by themselves a lot of nights.

Once you reach that yearned for plateau you discover quickly that the more they pay you, the less you can say no.

So, I drive a Jag and a pick-up, live in a half-million dollar house that I bought when I was thirty-two and I can buy just about anything I set my mind on. But I also spend my thirty-ninth birthday by myself on a bar stool at eight o'clock, eating dinner in a strange city because three days before my boss insisted that I head there to put out some fire.

At least my mom calls and tells me she misses me.

I feel almost ready for a relationship again, sitting there chewing my food, stinging with temporary loneliness and watching the ball game on the monitor in the corner. But who wants a boyfriend who works most nights until seven, is sometimes away twenty days a month and sleeps like the dead on weekends to compensate for the jet lag?

Even *my* pocket book couldn't support all the flowers and dinners it would take to make up for my absences, arguing, of course, that I could even find the time to build a relationship that could stand it in the first place. So I content myself with the temporary friendships I build in the places where I routinely travel, sometimes seeing the same women each

time I visit, until once again one of us discovers that it has become untenable.

By July, after traveling for endless months, I finally feel confident that we have operations working appropriately. My job has changed so much during all this travel. Where I used to manage a couple of operations, I'm now focused on solving problems across the enterprise, my subordinates taking over the daily tasks associated with my previous operational concerns. I assume that my boss figured it would keep me distracted from my divorce and engaged in the chaos. It worked in its way. Handling all those problems never leaves you time to think beyond the issues at hand.

I'm ready for a new challenge as I head back to corporate for a major meeting near the end of the month. We've all been called together to discuss how to reduce costs based on the predicted economic downturn. I figure there will be a lot of talk about how we're going to put forth our best efforts early to weather the storm. I'm pretty sure that there are a lot of cost cutting measures we've identified over the past six months which, once implemented, will put us in a favorable position and I'm excited to go. I've worked hard for this company and been at the forefront of identifying most of our operational strengths and weaknesses. If there's a storm coming, I'm confident that I've

built a boat strong enough to ride out even the roughest weather.

The only part about being at headquarters that I really hate is the fact that everyone who knows about my predicament is going to ask me how I'm doing. I don't see them in person very often and most of our dialogue is during conference calls where it's never appropriate to ask. I move through the office towards the board room for the big announcement shaking hands and making idle chit-chat, avoiding prying questions with vague answers and promises to catch up over dinner.

I head into the board room five minutes before the two o'clock start time and take my place with my peers,

stopping to look around the room, with its long, polished table and size up the company I'm in. It's an august assembly of vice-presidents and senior vice presidents, fifteen of us in all, called to order by the Chief Financial Officer and Chief Operating Officer. Somewhat ominously, our three senior vice-presidents spend the last few minutes before we begin huddled together at the far end of the table, not glancing up from their discussion as the last of us takes his place.

“Gentlemen, thank you for joining us today,” says the CFO to begin the meeting. “And I am sure you all understand why we've called you in. The economic forecast for the coming

year is far from positive and nobody knows yet, with this recession, where the bottom will be. So in order to be well situated for the crisis we need to begin the discussion on whatever cost cutting measures are most appropriate to make.”

He runs through a laundry list of identified targets that makes everyone nod as he itemizes each element. None of this is a surprise, but then unexpectedly comes a twist...

“And gentlemen, difficult as it is to say...we have also identified that we need to eliminate people, processes and jobs that aren't revenue producing or cost effective. I won't lie to any of you, these cuts are going to come across the

board from the lowest entry level jobs all the way up to the higher management levels.”

The implications of his statement roll through the room like a wave, replacing concentration with antsy anticipation as to who’s going and who’s staying.

But no one, including me, raises their hand and asks for the particulars.

We leave in silence about forty minutes later, acutely conscious of our coming duties and deeply apprehensive as to what will happen next. I head off to one of the empty visitor offices contemplating the news and almost immediately have my team of peers follow me into the room.

“Wow Sebastian, did you see that

coming? I knew I was going to have to cut money from my operating budget, but I thought it'd be in a hiring freeze, not a bunch of lay-offs!"

Conversation starts loud and excited as the last guy through the door pulls it shut behind him.

"Ok 'Bas, you always have a good idea how these things will play out, any idea who Rex is thinking of eliminating?"

"Not a clue, Jim. For once he didn't give me any intel before hand. I have no idea, but based on what the CFO said, should be by department size, seniority, things like that. The way I figure it... we've all been with the company forever, we have major pieces within

the division, nobody is hemorrhaging money, our processes are tight. I mean, I have a few folks I could cut loose without hurting myself too much, but other than that? Don't worry too much, it should be okay for all of us."

It calms us all down slightly to think that, even if change is happening, we are directly insulated from it by virtue of our longevity. We move on to a spirited discussion of who on our teams we will fight to save and what dead weight we can cut in this exercise. We roll back and forth on the relative merits of our employees, arguing for or against each other's statements and assertions.

I take a mental step back, watching the dialogue unfold. I can't help but admire

the power and energy that comes from a group of intelligent business minds focused on analyzing a problem. Truly, it is a sight to behold. This collection of colleagues has overcome their initial fright and resiliently moved on to meet reality as it is, searching for the best way along a rocky path. It's an amazing combination of integrity and practicality and I'm proud to be a part of their company.

My boss interrupts us suddenly about forty minutes later, sticking his head in the door to find us amid a growing mountain of paper and drawings on white boards as we plan our strategies. He smiles towards our efforts and then draws me aside.

“Hey Sebastian, you think you can spare a few minutes for me?”

“Looks good guys,” gesturing with his head towards the white board, “some great ideas up there.”

I excuse myself and head with him towards his office, “They’re doing a great job figuring out where the fat is. I think we’ll have a pretty good plan pulled together in the next few days.”

“Yeah, looks like.” For Rex this is a surprisingly muted response and he doesn’t say another word during the fifty foot journey down the hallway.

I get the second nasty twist in my gut as I seat myself in the chair across from his desk and look at his face. It’s grave but composed as he pulls a stack of

papers towards him, beginning to speak.

“Sebastian, this is one of the hardest conversations of my career.”

“Oh God, you have got to be kidding me,” I groan inwardly, wishing that I was at home and could open a beer to accompany this. Any conversation that starts off this way never ends well. Goddamn, it irritates me that I’m going to have to listen politely to all of it. But I find the courage, tighten my face, and prepare for what is inevitably going to happen next.

“You’ve done great work for us. Some of the best that I’ve seen. And I’ve tried every way I could think of to avoid what, turns out, can’t be avoided.”

“Sebastian,” a slight cough

accompanying the next statement, “it’s been decided that as part of the cost cutting measures, you are one of the executive level staff that we will have to let go.”

And there it is. The inevitable has arrived and what I had not thought possible forty minutes ago is suddenly my reality.

“I don’t understand, I’ve done everything that you asked. I’ve been everywhere doing everything you said couldn’t be done as well by anyone else. How is it that I’m the expendable one?”

“Well yes...you’ve been everywhere for us and performed admirably. You’ve streamlined operations, reduced

costs and improved performance in every place we've sent you to. But in freeing you up to do so, we needed to place others in your previous responsibilities and ultimately, they cost less."

"Additionally, your efforts were so successful that we're now in a good position to run without the oversight and correction that you were providing."

"So you're telling me that I did my job so well that I worked my way out of it?"

"Essentially, yes. And we truly appreciate everything you have done for us in your time here and will be happy to provide a great reference."

"Rex, we're heading into what's predicted to be the greatest economic

downturn since the Great Depression and you're telling me that my reward for personally saving this company millions is the offer of a great reference?"

"Sebastian, we're trying to do our best by you. Com'on, we're offering severance of one month's earnings per year worked and then a lump sum payment of vacation and personal time owed that pays you out until mid-December. You have to admit that's not a bad package."

"What else do you want me to do? The decision was made above my pay grade," Rex concludes, throwing up his hands in a gesture of surrender.

"What happened to the seniority rules you all said you were going to play by?"

“Well, it’s a tricky thing, seniority. Each of the senior VP’s needs to cut one head. Within my division Mike and Jim easily beat you and, unfortunately, for you, Steve has you too by one month. Like I said, my hands are tied. I’m sorry Sebastian.”

“How long have I got?” I finally manage to get out of my mouth.

“Two weeks from today. I’ll tell the others next and you can expect that they’ll reach out to you with any questions they have about taking over some of the new processes that you’ve set up.”

And I know that I’m beat. That there is no way around the crushing logic of a business decision and so I stand, my face

the mask of the perfect corporate citizen while my mind hurls the curses of the unemployed.

I conclude the interview with complete external politeness while screaming invectives at him in my head. “Thanks, Rex, for the opportunity ‘*fuckin’ blood suckers*’ and if you don’t mind, ‘*you self-serving asshole*,’ I think I’m going to head out early today ‘*and drink myself into a coma*’. I’ll be back in early tomorrow ‘*like the fuckin’ company man that I am*’ to walk the guys through my ‘*Goddamn hard work with no reward*,’ business pieces.”

And I even shake his hand before taking my leave.

Mercifully, I’m spared immediate

contact with my peers because some efficient secretary has hustled them out of the office and into the board room where they will hear the official statement of my demise. They've left behind the papers and information that we were working on, obviously expecting to return. I make no effort to clean it up, packing only the things I brought with me and make my escape with a twenty minute head start on the nine-to-fivers.

As reality and the outside air hit me, I realize that I have no place to go, no hole to crawl into to lick my wounds. I'm a forty-five minute flight from home, I have no close connections in this city and the effort of phone calls seems

suddenly beyond me. Feeling alone and slightly shell-shocked, I do the only thing I can think of and head for the bar in my hotel to start the extended process of complete inebriation.

It doesn't take to the bottom of drink one to realize that getting let go sucks. To have waited until thirty-nine to experience it for the first time feels a little like showing up for kindergarten still wearing diapers. Until now, I've always made the choice for the next career move, deciding for myself when an organization is tapped out for me and I need a new challenge. And to be let go for working myself *out* of a job is something I'd truly never thought possible. Usually that effort is rewarded

with a move into a different setting or even a promotion.

“Who’s so efficient at cost effectiveness that your own ass becomes the next great saving? I thought it was my job to save them money,” I conclude, grimacing as the ice of drink two hits my teeth.

My peers, for better or worse, find me in the bar within the hour and attempt to commiserate with me. And really, they aren’t bad guys. It’s not their fault and truly they’re shocked at my departure.

But I can’t help but wonder, as the alcohol mercifully begins to dull my brain, which I hate more: the fact that I have no job, or the fact that I have to listen to the guys who still have theirs

tell me how sorry they are about it.

“Man, Sebastian, that really sucks. I can’t believe that they let you go,” says Steve working his first drink. His face, try as he might, can’t hide the mingled look of sympathy and relief over the fact that it’s not him that has to phone his wife and tell her he’s now unemployed.

Drink three finds me a new level of irritation, contemplating that the other three all have families and wondering if the fact that I have no wife and more importantly, no kids, made it easier to pick me to let go. It’s a thought that propels me like a rocket engine straight on to drink four.

I force myself to make idle chatter with the guys for another half-hour, but

they're realizing quickly that the shop talk that normally forms our dialogue is now desperately misplaced. They make their excuses one by one, offer any help that they can and take their leave.

Mike, the most senior of our group, leaves last and, as he finishes his drink, does his best to reassure me.

“Hey Sebastian, it won't be that bad. The economy hasn't totally tanked yet, you're young, have a great resume and are very good at your job. You'll see, it'll all work out; and whatever you need, you can count on me for a personal reference or to reach out to my business contacts that can maybe help you. I'll do what I can.”

With that he is gone too, and I settle

into my misery.

By the end of drink six the next great thought hits me: “Divorced *and* unemployed, nice. Feels a lot like strike two. Wonder what the hell is gonna happen to me next?

TEN – ‘Let’s Go’ – Trick Daddy

I head back to work the next day, having drunk enough, soon enough, to sleep off the effects before the new work day. I signed all the papers they put in front of me and hand off my remaining workload to the guys left standing. It aches like failure but I put on a brave face and fake its impact, smiling to make the others not feel so bad about their good luck and my bad.

I finish out my tenure in endless conference calls, comforting my teams, reassuring our business partners about ‘continuity’ and prepping my colleagues as best I can for their new tasks.

And I re-work my resume on my boss's dime as a final, impotent, act of defiance.

Looking at it, with its impressive collection of responsibilities and successes, I feel better than I have in days. Maybe it won't be so bad after all. Maybe I can get a job without all that travel and make a solid effort to get a real girlfriend and a more reasonably ordered life.

With that, my work life ends.

Suddenly I have choices again. My cell phone is not constantly ringing at all hours with complaints and concerns from people who should be able to solve them on their own, and my calendar is not lined up with conference calls and

project deadlines. I sleep in, I stay up late, I go for a run when I want to and I realize that for the first time in eighteen months I'm the master of my own agenda.

Maybe it won't be so bad after all.

And I realize with irony that Michelle will miss it, this unexpected time-off with money in my pocket, air miles and hotel points to burn. We could have used them for an extended holiday in some place nice, doing nothing but being together. Not eighteen months after she has left me, if she had but stayed, all my time would now have been hers and we could have maybe started our family.

"Man plans but God laughs," is my conclusion.

But I have no wife and no time to make up. After two weeks of complete loafing about (which I take to calling ‘my de-compression period’ to cover up the fact that I am blessedly, finally, doing nothing,) my work ethic kicks back in and I begin my job search in earnest.

All the misgivings start again. There’s not a lot out there to apply for, and it seems that everyone is thinking the same way as my company. The message is clear in the available postings – trim the sails, throw over as much ballast as possible and hang on for a wild ride.

It makes me uneasy and slightly sick to my stomach but I figure that with my resume I should go to the top of any application pile. I begin the arduous

daily process of evaluating the available positions, composing endless cover letters and submitting on-line applications.

It's tedious work of the dullest sort, filling my desktop with cover letter variations on the theme: 'Hire me for X because I am the most super fantastic at Y ever and you can't lose.' Self-promotion always makes me deeply uncomfortable. But I plug away at it assuming that in short order I'll be getting calls for interviews.

And then Pete happens.

Interrupted mid-application one afternoon by the doorbell, I yank open the door, rather annoyed, only to find Pete standing on the doorstep in the

August sunshine.

It's a Pete transformed: one eye almost swollen shut, purple and grotesque, his lower lip split and slightly bloody and the most sad, lost expression in the eye still capable of normal function.

“My God, Pete, what the hell happened to you?” I blurt, grabbing him by the elbow and pulling him into the hallway. Up close he looks even worse. Abrasions on his right cheek and what will be a nasty goose egg in forty minutes rising on his left temple.

But he can't answer me. His last reserve crumbles as the door closes behind him and he stands mute in my hallway, shoulders shaking with silent

sobs, tears streaming unchecked down his face.

Momentarily stupefied I just stare, resisting the urge to hug him and hang onto him until his tears subside. He's a grown man and I stop myself, fearing to further injure his obviously battered dignity. Instead, propelling him by the elbow, steering him into the kitchen, I seat him on the first available stool and with one swift motion retrieve, open, and silently hand him a beer.

He sits looking at it uncomprehendingly as I find my voice again.

"Pete, drink it...all of it... Right now."

Robotically he complies, swallowing

each mouthful in deep, hungry gulps, eye vacantly staring out somewhere over my left shoulder, waves of still silent misery slowly filling the room.

“They hit me,” he says looking suddenly square at me, pulling in the last mouthful and handing me the empty can.

“I came home to surprise her and....and...and they were in there with her,” his tears slowly leaking again from the corners of his eyes as the memory reforms in his mind.

“And I got mad, but they got madder and they hit me.” He quietly concludes as I hand him the next beer.

He drinks this one more slowly, looking mostly at his shoes, shoulders occasionally seizing in silent shudders

of sorrow. I busy myself, turning my back on his grief to offer him privacy, seeking out pain killers, preparing an ice pack for his battered face.

“Pete, take these pills and this ice pack, and head for my couch.”

“And I’ll bring you another beer,” I add as he hands me the second empty.

He complies, heaving himself off the stool and shuffling toward the family room. He lands like dead weight on my couch, shifting to throw his legs up along the cushions, leaning back and then crossing his arms across his chest like he’s preparing for burial. He lies silently like that for a few minutes, then begins to talk.

“Ok, where’s that beer you

promised?”

Heaving an inward sigh of relief, I hand him beer number three.

“Today is my anniversary Sebastian, and I came home early to surprise Meaghan.”

“But she wasn’t home alone. In fact, she had so much company in bed with her that it was almost a party. A skinny, mean lookin’ white guy and a beast of a Spanish guy...”

My eyes almost bug out of my head while he tells me and I can’t help the look of absolute astonishment that comes over my face.

“You’re kidding,” I spit out to cover the stupid look.

“Seriously Sebastian?” rising up on

one elbow to remove the ice bag and point at his black eye, “Do I look like I’m kidding?”

“No, of course not, whatever. What did you do next?”

“I did what any red blooded American man would do. I called her a whore and told them all to get the fuck out of my house or I was gonna call the cops.”

“And then...?”

“And then they get out of bed and it turns into a sausage fest, all cocks and assholes. I’m yelling, they’re all yelling louder, then the little skinny one decides to throw the first punch, only he’s not that skinny after all. It just got bad after that...” his voice trailing off.

“Oh God, what will the neighbors think? Me being tossed off the front porch by two naked guys and my wife standing wrapped in a sheet behind them screaming like the world is coming to an end. What a nightmare.”

“You know what, Sebastian,” rolling to turn his face into the back of the couch and now muffled by the cushions, “leave me alone for a few hours, can ya? And then I’ll get out of your hair and find a hotel for the night. I hate to do this to you but you were the first one I thought of.”

“Pete, stay as long as you need to. I have plenty of room and I’d be glad of the company. Don’t think about it. You’re right, sleep will probably help,”

I finish, tossing a blanket over his hunched up form.

I leave him there, hoping that a few hours of exhausted sleep will restore some measure of peace, but I have my doubts. Pete is not the most resilient of men and this would be a tough one for even the strongest guy.

I head into the kitchen to call Ty at work. I realize already that I'll have to be the rational one and can provide the best help for Pete, having gone through it myself. But I'm going to need another voice for him. Ty is that guy because he'll find the irony in everything and in doing so, bring back laughter.

He whistles and swears softly under his breath as I give him the bare bones of

the story.

“Poor bastard, sure I’ll meet you right after work. We’ll grab some pizza and walk him through it until he gets used to the idea. Told you we should have told him she was loose. But what a way to find out.”

“Ty,” I answer, with a note of warning in my voice, “that is one thing we are definitely not going to do. Got it?”

He’s annoyed with me but agrees and we arrange to meet at seven at a small restaurant half way between Ty’s work and my house.

Pete sleeps like the dead for several hours until I shake him awake and attempt to convince him to head out.

He's reluctant with his battered face, but the swelling has begun to subside, and he doesn't look nearly as bad as when he first arrived. He's much calmer now at least. I realize, with some shock, that it was as much his emotional horror as the physical injuries that made him appear so beat up when he first arrived.

I convince him to wash his face, comb his hair and straighten himself up and he finally agrees with me that he can handle going out in public to meet up with Ty.

We take the Jag and I let him drive. With three kids, a wife and a mortgage, Pete's had to settle his sights at a more modest level and I know that it always gives him a vicarious thrill to ride in a high end vehicle. The twenty minute car

ride is quiet. Pete says almost nothing and I make very little attempt to break through his silence. Much better to let him spend this time in his own mind arranging his thoughts before we begin to talk through his options.

Ty's already there talking up the bartender when we walk in the restaurant. He waits until we approach to glance back and place an order for a round of tequila shots. As Pete nears the bar Ty reaches out to fold him in a brotherly hug, and releasing him looks directly at his face, "You don't look that bad and now you have reason to get a paternity test for those kids of yours."

I could kill him. Even for Ty this is an insensitive opening line. Astonished

I spit out “Are you kidding me, you moron. He just found out his wife is cheating on him. Give him at least a second to adjust before you suggest the rest of his reality is off too.”

Pete turns to me with the look of a whipped puppy, mutely signaling his thanks for my swift response.

Thankfully, just then the shots arrive and grabbing them, we drink them down without a toast.

But Ty’s comment hangs in the air as we head to a table. Its significance is not lost on me, and I’m dead sure that it’s not lost on Pete either. Leaning back in my chair to look at Ty I ask, “What in the world does a paternity test have to do with any of this? Are you suggesting

that you know this isn't the first time she's cheated?"

"No, I'm not suggesting anything like that. It's just me thinking out loud that he might as well be sure. I'm sorry I even mentioned it, forget it."

I can tell that Pete's relieved that Ty was just taking a shot in the dark and to restore peace I change direction, suggesting we order our pizza. Ty takes my cue and as the waitress takes the order he adds another round of shots to the bill, announcing that he's going to take care of it tonight. That Pete should feel free to drink like the glass has no bottom.

"You know, I had this happen to me once with a girl I was dating. But it was

a little different ‘cause it wasn’t two guys she was in bed with, it was two girls. If it had been only one girl I might’ve tried to join in, but I figured two girls kinda explained why there were certain things we just never seemed to get around to in bed.”

“You’ve never told me that story, Ty”

“Now why, Sebastian, would I ever tell you a story about accidentally hooking myself up with a bona-fide lesbian?” he says, leaning on the table and dragging out an imaginary long ‘e’ in bona-fide to full effect. “Who tells a story like that? Not me. I only tell stories that make me look good, you know that!”

“I hate chicks that cheat,” he continues on, veering close to the subject at hand,

“it’s just not the same as when I cheat. If the girl cheats too, how are we supposed to know who wears the pants in the relationship? It’s just not natural for a girl to cheat. It upsets the order of things and it always causes problems.”

“If a girl cheats it means I gotta go beat the piss out of some guy ‘cause she’s easy and he should know better; and that ain’t fair, not to me or him. But if I cheat on a girl, she never has to go beat anybody up because everybody knows that men cheat ‘cuz most girls are easy!”

Pete and I just laugh at Ty as he reaches this conclusion with his own version of incredibly twisted logic. That has always been his basic premise

– girls are easy – and if they don't take themselves seriously, why should he be required too?

I wonder quietly to myself in that moment what would happen if Ty ever met a girl he really liked but couldn't charm into bed? Would he just walk away and tell himself that he never wanted it in the first place?

“Well, I didn't beat them up, they beat me up,” says Pete quietly. “Do you have any idea how hard it is to fight a naked guy? You don't even have a shirt collar to grab onto. The only thing swinging around that I could have grabbed was a dick and I sure as hell wasn't about to do that.”

“And only girls pull hair.”

I laugh so hard at that I almost spit out my beer. The mental image of Pete trying to hold his own against two men, both of them alarmingly naked, is one for the ages. But it's also not funny at the heart of it, and that reality quickly sobers me up.

“The Spanish guy will remember me for a couple of days though,” Pete continues shyly, proudly holding up the right hand to display his second knuckle. There, under a newly forming scab, is the deep imprint of a front incisor. “I know that, at least, slowed him down a little.”

“Pete, dude, I don't think anyone is going to forget this one, ever,” says Ty reaching over and gently punching him in

the shoulder. “And I’m glad that you’re ok.”

“But what’re you going to do next? You can’t take her back, that’s impossible.”

“*I can’t*, Ty? I have ten years and three children invested in this marriage. I grew up with divorced parents and I hated it and I don’t want it for my kids. Most days she cooks for me, she keeps the house reasonably tidy, she lets me play basketball with you dumbasses, she never seems to mind too much where I go as long as I pay the bills...” his voice trailing off.

And then he sighs. “We have three kids and you have no idea, Ty, what a man might be prepared to do when three

little people hang in the balance. ‘*Can’t*’ is just not a word that applies here.”

In that moment I thank God for my parents and roll out the sage advice that my father gave me not eighteen months ago, including the infamous three questions: *can you forgive her; would you agree to seek help to fix things; can you trust her again.* I add a fourth of my own: If you can’t work it out will you fight for custody of your kids?

He bristles against the last question, insisting volubly that, whatever Meaghan’s shortcomings towards him, she’s a devoted and dedicated mother to his children. I drop the subject without further comment realizing it’s all too

new and fresh to think that far ahead. Personally though, I sincerely doubt the maternal integrity of a woman who has no problem lining up two men for a nooner in the matrimonial bed.

We finish the night talking sports. Even in serious crisis there is only so much that can be discussed among friends. In the end a man needs to reach his final conclusions on his own.

I stop with Pete on our ride home at an all-night super-store, the kind that sells one of everything, and help pick out the essentials he's going to need in the next few days. I reassure him that he's welcome to stay with me until his situation becomes clearer, that I'll be happy for the company.

The rest of the trip home is in absolute silence. I can tell, by the way that Pete has turned his head to the side window, that he's crying again. Large, silent tears over the loss of his reality, and I remember sharply how that feels.

He calls his wife the next day immediately after calling his boss and booking off the rest of the week. She's aggressive and stridently unapologetic, suggesting his supposed inadequacies are the cause of her behavior. Her attitude steals whatever strength he has left as she berates him with the litany of her complaints. Leaning against the wall in my kitchen he sags at the knees, eyes blank, staring at the ground just past his shoes.

For the first time I'm grateful to Michelle. Awful as her silence was, she spared me this heaping on of artificial blame to cover sins far more unpardonable than anything I or Pete ever committed.

The call closes without resolution to anything. Not staying, not going, not even access to clean underwear.

"Maybe she'll calm down a little bit by tomorrow," Pete says, momentarily turning his face to me as he leaves the kitchen, obviously heading upstairs to the bedroom I've provided for him. "I'll try again then."

With that he's gone and I don't see or hear from him again that day, not even in response to my knock at his door at

supper time to see that he, at least, eats. I put his share of the food in the refrigerator and settle in to wait. I know from experience that this will take time.

I find his empty plate in the morning neatly rinsed and laid in the sink, understanding that he got up in the night to obey the commands of his body.

Looking at the plate lying there, his pain hits me in a body memory of my own, recalling those early dark days after Michelle left me. It makes me glad that he is here and that he's not totally alone.

It takes a couple of blank, dark days, him wandering around my house like a shade, before he recovers his spirit enough to tackle Meaghan again. He's

more successful this time, arranging an opportunity to go home to talk with her and see his children.

But he returns from the visit with a suitcase full of his clothes, his face worn with the pain of explaining to the children that ‘Daddy’s going to be away for a while, but don’t ever forget that I love you very much.’ And he disappears again for another twenty-four hours, buried in his room with the television incessantly on.

Pete returns to work on Monday marching manfully through long days as a corporate accountant and by Thursday calls me from the office with, what for him, is the first good news in over a week.

“She wants me to come home tonight. The kids are driving her nuts and she needs a break.”

The elation in his voice argues against even suggesting caution.

“Hey, that’s great. Maybe see if you can’t get her to talk a little about what you want to do long term, while you’re there. Maybe she’s had enough time too, to think about what she wants.”

“I know that you and Ty can’t understand why I want to try and fix this; but I have to for my kids. I’ve been with her for over ten years, she’s not that bad.”

Wanting children myself, I can understand his sad logic.

“Good luck, Pete. But don’t settle.”

He returns the next night like a beaten dog. What he is prepared to accept is no longer an option. Meaghan wants a divorce. But she also wants the house and the kids and exorbitant amounts of child support.

“Time to be practical,” I think heading to my office for the information of the reliable and sensible Mr. Sykes, my capable divorce attorney.

Pete takes the slip of paper, looking at it with loathing that his life’s effort is coming to this, tucking it into his pocket without comment.

“You stay here as long as you need to. I have plenty of room and it makes no sense for you to add the cost of an apartment while you figure out whether

you can afford to keep the house or where you want to live when all this is done.”

“What about the kids?”

“Bring them here if you have to. I don’t care. I have the space.”

We watch television for the rest of the night, silently drinking beer together. I try to keep pace with him, figuring from experience that it’s better not to drink alone, but he makes it hard for me.

And I watch and I understand.

Ty joins us on Saturday, self-invited for the barbeque he knows I have planned, bringing steaks to accommodate for his intrusion. We’re both wary of him and his capacity for unconsidered comment, but he fills the early hour with

idle chatter and amusing stories.

Then sure enough, as we sit down to dinner, he starts in.

“So Pete, how’s it going?”

“Just fantastic. She’s done with me and wants a divorce. And the kids, and lots of child support. Sebastian’s given me the number for his attorney and I’m going to call him on Monday. I don’t have any choice really.”

“So, you’re getting a paternity test now, right?”

“Goddamn Ty, again with the paternity test? What gives?” Pete responds, throwing down his fork and grinding his mouthful of steak hard against his teeth.

“For shit’s sake Ty, what is up with

that question? Why will you just not let it go?" I add.

"Well look at his kids. They look like a UNICEF poster. I don't think any of them are his."

We both sit there gape mouthed, staring at him for the audacity of the comment, but inwardly the visualization of a UNICEF poster materializes in my mind: all those slightly different colored faces. Horrifyingly, he's right. Much as I don't like the conclusion, it starts to make appalling sense.

"Look, before you both climb over the table to start beating the piss out of me, hear me out," he responds to our outraged expressions.

"She's already begun to be difficult.

If there's any chance that it's true, it's a sure fire way to shut her up. Meaghan knows that you make good money and she might also know that she has no better options, if that's the case, from the real baby daddies."

"You're already getting screwed, Pete. Don't volunteer for extra because you want to make the best out of an impossible situation. Defend yourself, ask some questions. That's all I'm saying."

Ty may be insensitive, but he's not stupid. The awful logic his argument ruins our conversation and we finish the meal in silence.

ELEVEN – ‘Simple Kind of Life’ – No Doubt

It sits like a cold hard lump in Pete's belly, Ty's challenge. It reads on his face and in his walk, even as he avoids my attempts to talk about it, so I let him be.

A defeated man is easy enough to settle into a routine with. We ask for almost nothing – food, a comfortable place to sit, plenty of beer, a quiet place to shit and lots of mindless television.

He, like I before him, trudges through work each day and I try to make it as comfortable as possible by making sure there's plenty of food and beer when he

hits my doorstep.

A couple of times he wordlessly throws some money on the kitchen island, providing for his keep. I take the money, not because I need it but because he needs to pay it, to keep his own place in his head.

I watch and I wait, waiting for what happens next because there will be a 'next'. Although every man decides for himself what shape it will take.

And so we continue on, he with his work and me seeking work, as the weather begins to cool slightly heading towards fall.

I'm developing a new routine, starting everyday by looking at the available postings and sending out more

applications with every morning coffee. I approach each potential job the same way: I look at the offer, evaluate the location, research the company, and ask myself what I could bring to the organization. Some I pass on without a second thought, others fill me with optimism that I would be a great fit. But a sense of foreboding has started to invade me as responses to my applications are slow and tepid. Daily the news information becomes grimmer while the talking heads begin to argue the reality of a recession worse than anyone had anticipated. It makes me uneasy but I take comfort in my compensation package and my savings. My boat is sturdy enough to ride out this

storm.

My afternoons are different; they are the moments I truly begin to enjoy as I tackle all the mundane household tasks that I was forced to neglect during the months of travel. I love this house of mine; a testament to my accomplishments. I search out everything that needs repair, everything that could be improved. And I find pleasure again in planning meals for two, meals for me and Pete.

Cooking is a blast when two essential components align themselves – time and someone to cook for – and Pete eats. We eat with abandon, finishing every meal with the same conversation, “What are we going to eat tomorrow?” Talking

long after the plates have been cleared about the merits of meat and the necessary, unavoidable, accompaniment of vegetables.

Ty joins us a couple of times every week. He makes the forty minute commute to my place knowing that he'll find a great meal and an aggressive game of twenty-one on my driveway basketball court. It's like the old times we had, before permanent women and pressing jobs separated us from each other.

And I laugh one morning, standing at the sink in the guest bath on the first floor, discovering a new toothbrush in residence beside the soap. Ty is making himself at home.

One night, about three weeks into these new living arrangements, Pete comes home and blurts out “Make yourself pretty, we’re going to dinner.”

“Well if that’s how you asked your wife on a date then I fully understand why you’re getting a divorce.”

“Fuck you, my treat,” he grins as we head out to a place known for terrible food but plenty of women. Pete’s ‘next’ has begun to take shape.

It is terrible. The food, notorious for being awful, is just that and the women on offer are worse. It’s a great night to break out an alias, and twenty minutes into bad pizza, Pete and I resurrect a game we all used to play.

We called it ‘Doin’ the Golden Girls’

after the TV show with the four old ladies that live together. We used to play on nights when routine and boredom had set in, to provide ourselves with amusement and challenge in the skirt chasing game every single man plays, without fail, every time he's out in public.

The object of the game was simple: collect as many phone numbers or body contacts as you could around the character types of the women on the show. It had nothing to do with the women being old, it was about the fact that the four were organized into such simple categories – the ditzy one, the easy one, the mean one and the old one.

It takes different skills and

contribution of effort to hit on each type of woman, and the points were assigned according to the level of difficulty. You can't get a lot of points for getting the phone number of a 'Blanche' because she's '*the easy one.*' Any guy should pretty much be able to pull it off.

The rules and ranking system went like this:

Blanche – 'the easy one': five points and you have to get them to tell you one thing they're really good at in bed.

Rose – "the ditzy one": ten points and you have to get her to believe one implausible thing about yourself.

Sophia – 'the old one': fifteen points and she has to be visibly out of your natural age range.

Dorothy – ‘the mean one’: twenty points, for all the obvious reasons.

The game had flexible layers of complexity depending on where we were or how much time we had. Sometimes it was just collecting as many phone numbers as possible. Other times, on weekends away, it was how many you could actually score with.

The final rule was that the game was a secret. You couldn’t use it as information provided to the women to get the points you needed to beat your buddies. That didn’t always work though. Some guy will always cheat and sometimes it got out that we were playing.

I remember one weekend at the beach

in my mid-twenties being confronted by a complete set of 'Girls' on the Sunday afternoon. Finding out about the game and talking amongst themselves, it was fairly easy to conclude that they each had my name in common. They descended in a pack to ruin my afternoon beer, all four – 'Blanche'. 'Rose'. 'Sophia' and 'Dorothy' - bearing down on me as a unit, all mad as hell. The funny part for me was, furious as they were that I had made time with each of them; they still wanted to know which category they were in, and none of my answers made me look any better. Needless to say, we didn't go back to that spot for the rest of the summer.

Pete and I decide it's only phone

numbers tonight, as many as we can in two hours, loser mows the lawn; and honestly, even a great player can maybe only manage four in that time frame.

Women may be just as eager as men to find some fun, or maybe even a new relationship, but they are not stupid, nor can they be rushed. It means that you have to put in time to secure your objective and, if you actually like the girl and are interested in her that can be a very pleasant twenty minutes, even if you are just playing a game. But on nights like this one, when nothing you're really interested in is available to make playing worthwhile, it can just be a long two hours.

But I intend to win. And to win you

need to strategize, and to strategize you need to evaluate the playing field. I know from experience what Pete's strategy will be – find the Blanches and Roses, smile and hope for the best. On a good night, it can actually work.

I start by scanning the room, evaluating a potential strategy. Do I pick ditzy and easy like Pete, maybe getting twenty points in at least four rather dull conversations? Or do I take on two conversations, one mean and the other older to walk away with thirty-five points in only two conversations that at least have the potential to be a challenge?

I have to be honest, ditzy and easy are usually boring even if the women are

hot; because having been born especially beautiful, most of these women have never bothered to become anything else. Older is another category entirely. They can still be ditzy or easy, or even incredibly hot, but they also have an inbuilt suspicion of an obviously younger man's desire for their company. Much as being a 'cougar' has gained some social acceptance, I find that very few women intentionally try to be one. I figure there are still too many mothers' voices in heads shouting that the man has to be older for anything to really work.

Now 'mean' is the truly interesting category, carrying a different meaning for each man. To some it's just a woman outside of their natural selection

range, or it might be a woman who holds herself with a certain aloofness. For me it's how the woman treats the others around her, and for the purpose of the game, particularly men.

In the corner to my left are two smoking woman eating ham sandwiches. Not 'smokin' hot,' just smoking – a mouthful of ham and a drag on a cigarette – jammed in repeated succession into their already fat faces. They belong in another category altogether and I pass. Let someone else play some kind of game with them.

To my right is Pete at the corner bar talking with two eager blonds and a short, chatty brunette. The ratio is right but I want Pete to have a fighting chance,

so again, I pass.

But over my shoulder, behind me at the main bar is exactly what I'm looking for – a mean girl – and not just any mean girl; a girl I know from high school, who as well as being definitely mean, has one added attraction – she hates me.

“*Perfect.*” I’m already composing my opening line as I set into motion.

“Amanda,” approaching and extending my hand, “it’s been fifteen years since I saw you last. You look great!”

“Sebastian Behr. How nice.” Her hand barely making contact with my fingertips.

Yep, she still hates me.

“Yes, I don’t think I’ve seen you since you dumped Janet in the parking lot and

took off with that red head.”

“Lisa, this is Sebastian,” introducing her friend, “the one who made Janet cry for six months until she found a nice guy to go out with.”

“And Sebastian, this is Lisa.”

Lisa looks narrow eyed in my direction, also extending a limp hand in greeting.

Even better. Two women who hate me and one by reputation only. Now *that* is a challenge.

“I know, I know, not one of my better moments,” I say putting on my best hangdog face.

It's not actually that hard. I am, in fact, deeply ashamed of that moment. Janet was a nice girl. I was twenty-four,

a complete ass and tired of her at the time. I could make it sound better, but it's the truth and their contempt is deserved.

“I didn't treat her very well, did I?” Looking up from under my eye-brows, “In fact, there're probably a number of women I didn't treat all that well in those years.”

Smiling now at Amanda, “I think that you might have been one of the only ones who just never bought my lines, you always seemed immune.”

“And now?”

“And now I'm a reformed man. You'll be happy to know that I got what I deserved in the end. I was married for five years and she left me eighteen

months ago for another guy.”

I can see that she likes this piece of information. It makes her happy to know that I got what she figured was coming to me.

“Why? Did you cheat on her?”

“No, *not once*. I just worked all the time and she got tired of waiting for me to come home.”

“I thought of Janet, when I was sitting there in the aftermath and understood, with tremendous clarity, what I must have made her feel when I did that to her. If you ever talk to her again, tell her how sorry I am.”

My contrition is real in that moment, and as I turn to take my leave she stops me with a hand on my arm, “I guess you

were young and we all did some nasty things learning how to be grown-ups. Stay and have a drink with us.”

“Here comes twenty points,” I think with some satisfaction.

To keep it straight, Amanda is not suggesting a drink because she has forgiven me. I know this girl from experience and continued reputation. She’s doing it because I will pay and she and Lisa can laugh at me later for what a sucker I am. The only reason that she’s still mad about Janet is that Janet was, and apparently still is, her friend. Its loyalty, not morality, which makes her aggressive with me. If it was any other girl she wouldn’t give a damn.

And sure enough, on my dime they

switch to cocktails, big ones, and she peppers me with questions about mutual past acquaintances. I don't gossip, treading carefully in my responses while she fills in my evasiveness with facts of her own.

“Did you hear about Mark? He invested heavily in the stock market and lost everything. He's living with his parents now, can you believe it? I heard it was insider trading.”

It wasn't and he isn't, but I can tell she doesn't like my assertions to the contrary. It wrecks her fun.

“And remember Stacy, how she used to show off those boobs of hers all over the place? Well I saw her three weeks ago, she's over two hundred pounds and

dragging around twins. Still with her boobs hanging out everywhere.”

“Like that’s attractive,” she says giving Lisa a little wave of her fingers as her friend wanders off to speak to someone else.

“Speaking of boobs,” she leans in conspiratorially, “Lisa’s aren’t real, you know.”

On and on it goes, until I maneuver her around to talking about her own circumstances. She’s perfect of course, everything going according to plan — school, then career, fat bank account, but no man; not sure she needs a man, etc, etc. After twenty minutes I’ve had about as much as I can take, and this last information gives me exactly the

opportunity I've been waiting for.

“Wow, that's really great. I meet so few strong women who think as independently as you. It's one of the things that I really missed in my wife.”

“But I have to get back to my friends,” making a vague sweep of my arm that encompasses the room “and I'm wondering if maybe I can call you sometime and take you out to dinner?”

Mean girl – twenty points.

I head back to Pete, who has moved on to a different combination of women, same numbers but two eager looking brunettes and a chatty, tall blond this time.

I slide into the group with a big smile on my face greeting them all with “Hello

I'm Hamish, Pete's cousin from Scotland (yes with an accent). What are you lovely lasses all doing out on such a beautiful night?" The great part is that Pete is Italian and his last name is Deluca, but they seem to buy it.

Pete sends me daggers with his eyes, which I cheerfully ignore. Three is enough for us both to succeed and if he's smart he'll ride coattails and suggest a double date to show his visiting cousin the sights. I am trying to help the man out.

"Oh, I love Scottish accents," giggles the tall blond, "they're so sexy. And is it true what they say about your kilts?"

I control my face so that my eyes don't roll into the back of my head.

“Aye, lass and more. Did you know that it’s a little known fact that Scottish men have an average willy size of six inches?”

I lean in with a wink for added effect.

“Limp.”

“Ooooo,” says the one brunette as she edges away from Pete and begins an assault on my personal space, “I did know that, but I can’t remember who told me,” she finishes with a giggle, sliding her hand up my arm.

I’m spared further egregious falsehoods by the sudden buzzing of my cell phone and I back gratefully away from the brunette all up in my grill, to take the call.

It’s Ty. Bonus fun. The best way,

ever, to wind Ty up is to make him think that you're having fun that he's missing out on.

“Dude, where are you? Pete and I are playing ‘Golden Girls’.”

“Yeah, ‘No shit.’ Remember Amanda? Yeah, that one. She's here and I put in twenty of the longest minutes of my life to get her phone number.”

“No, she hasn't changed categories, she's still really mean.”

“And you should see Pete, he's hanging all over some short brunette with big boobs trying to score his ‘easy five’.”

“No, don't bother. It's really not all that fun. We're heading home in fifteen minutes after I figure out which of the

three women standing with him is the dumbest one. I want the ten points.”

As I hang up with Ty, on what is actually one of the duller nights I have spent in ages, I can hear his envy and regret and I can't understand why.

Ty's two steps from a great opportunity. He's been with Jill forever (in Ty time) for the rest of us, almost three years. She's a great girl – beautiful, funny, smart, capable, and just enough play in her to take a reasonable shot at a bad boy. He did the sensible thing and got engaged just before my separation but only because she finally cried. Since then he's done nothing, apart from trading in a bachelor pad for an upscale condo, to move it forward.

I don't get it. If I was him I wouldn't envy me, I have to pretend that I'm having fun. Him – he truly could be having it, by the bucket load.

Pete and I head out of the bar a short time later. I've got thirty points and he's mowing the lawn, but he still feels like the winner. His 'easy five' turns out to be a woman he's actually glad took an interest in him and that makes him happy. Me, I couldn't really care less.

"I don't know Pete, maybe I should just call Bailey again."

"Who's Bailey?"

"She's a girl I met with Ty right after I found out about Michelle."

"And?"

"And the first time I met her she told

me I would be nuts for nine months because of it and offered me a blowjob to make me feel better. And the second time she walked out on our date because, for the life of me, I couldn't stop talking about Michelle.”

“So why would you want to date her again?”

“Because she seems to know what she wants and won't settle for less if she's not getting it.”

That girl has gotten under my skin. Much as she shocked me with her proposal on the first night she did not, on second glance, turn out to be as easy of virtue as I thought. In fact, she showed her mettle by walking out on me, leaving me high and dry for not meeting her

simple expectation to have the date be actually about her.

I hate losing.

I call her the next night, apologizing right at the start for my behavior on our last meeting. She's gracious about it and we talk about all the things we should have on that first date: where we came from, what we want from life, about the things that are important to us. I'm impressed again by how articulate she is, how self-knowing and conclude by asking her out for dinner again.

"Are you gonna talk about your ex again the whole time?"

"No, I think that I might be safely past that."

"Really? Why?"

“Because time keeps rolling and you just know that you’ve moved on. I’m not a bad guy but I got thrown into a bad situation. It’s just chance that you showed up at the beginning of the process, and by choice, I asked you into the middle of it before I was actually ready.”

Big breath, “Think you might like to give me a second chance?”

Silence.

“Why me?”

“You’re the one woman I’ve met this whole time who spoke some truth to me, who pushed me to understand where I was and did not let me make excuses for *where* that was.”

“And now?”

“And now I only know two more things: that I’m going to have to try again if I’m ever going to get what I want for my life, and that all the things I knew before, I have to re-think them.”

“Ok, we can meet for dinner. But I’m not going to put up with any bullshit.”

“Fine, I will try not to deliver any.”

We set a date for Saturday.

Friday is rough. Pete is miserable, another weekend without his kids and damn nothing on TV.

So we drink and I wake late on Saturday with a heavy head to find Ty and Pete in my kitchen, and they both have beer.

It’s awfully early for Ty to be here and his next words are totally

unexpected.

“Dude, I moved my stuff into that empty second floor bedroom.”

“You’re kidding? Why?”

“Good question. I can’t let the two of you have all the fun being single.”

“What about Jill? She must be screamin’.”

“Probably. But I can’t do it, I can’t do marriage. Better she finds out now. I know I should do it, and part of me wants to. But you’re both here having fun and I can’t be tied down... I don’t want to be tied down. The world is big and I don’t want to leave any of it unexplored,” waving the beer can in his hand in a generous arc to encompass my kitchen.

And I look at Pete wide eyed to meet his equally startled look.

Ty continues on, “I told her that she could stay in the condo until she could find a solution. Hell, if she can find the money, she can keep it. I don’t care.”

“Goddamn Ty, do you have any idea what you’re doing?”

“No. Neither do I care. I’m not done yet. I can’t give up and become one of you, waiting every day for it all not to be the truth. If I can’t be anything but a shit, and I don’t know yet that I can be anything but...better she find out now.”

“Pull another beer from the ‘fridge, Pete ‘cause now we’ve all messed it up. Time to start over and see if there might not be a better way to run this race.”

“You,” he points with the new can at Pete, “you settled.”

“You,” he points at me, “you played everything the right way and got screwed.”

“Me,” pointing at himself, “I’m the only asshole and I’ll be damned if I repeat the same mistakes by trying to keep up with you both. If that’s grown-up and mature, I don’t want it.”

“Girls are easy, and they fake it to make up for the fact. No way I’m gonna to be caught on the back end, better to join you now.”

“Welcome to our new private club, gentlemen, where we do things the way *we* want to do them. All gonna be the same in the end so let’s play to get in

front of it now. After you fuck them they all cry. May as well fuck more of them and get out of town before the crying starts.”

“I have no intention on being caught in ‘have to’s’ and ‘should have’s’ when there is a world of available and less demanding women out there.”

“Ty, Pete and I aren’t having that much fun.”

“Sure you are. And well...if you aren’t yet...you’re about to ‘cuz I’m here now.” And he downs the last of that beer, banging the empty down on the counter with a resounding crash to emphasize his point.

“Next.”

“Whatever, Ty. Sometimes you’re

just an idiot.”

I leave them there. I have chores and plans and don't have time to figure out which parts of his reasoning are wrong and which parts totally fit into my own seesawing headspace.

But I am pretty sure, as I start to scrub the toilets, that we might all have just have landed at the beginning of a very bad place.

TWELVE – ‘I Just Wanna Live’ - Good Charlotte

Ty moving in doesn't bother me. I saw it coming and if that's how he feels, Jill is better off without him.

It's hard not feel bad for her, terrible in fact, but he was going to do this anyway and at least it's before any babies came their way.

Contemplating that I'll call in a couple of days and see how she's doing, I keep on with my tasks. I ignore Ty and Pete drinking toasts downstairs to the way that women are never what they say they are.

I could join them in their stupidity but

decide to prepare for my date anyway while Ty's voice echoes loud in my head. I don't want to believe in what he says and I don't want to be him. I'm still hoping for a decent future and the opportunity to realize my life's plans.

They're still both hard at it around six when I make my departure, Pete with a belly full of revenge and Ty, a belly full of excuses. I pursue my own agenda, hoping to find some place in the middle by attempting at least a reasonable date.

Pete may be beaten and Ty a fool, but there has to be somewhere in the middle. No way did I get all of it wrong.

I've picked out a Brazilian restaurant for dinner, planning to play like I *do*

have gold in my pockets. It's a place that I know from previous conversation with Bailey that she'll be impressed with, and unlike that nameless girl before her, I actually hope to impress.

From the moment she gets into my car conversation is simple, casual and most importantly, easy. We talk about her work, my lack of work and the challenges I'm having trying to find a position. We talk about favorite vacation spots and what we'd do if we won the lottery. It takes a while to casually mention that I now have two short-term roommates, briefly explaining the circumstance of each man.

“How does that feel?”

“Bit like I'm regressing. But they're

my friends and you never leave a friend out in the cold.”

Looking at her open face and sensing an un-judgmental attitude I tell her a story long buried in my past.

“I once didn’t listen to a friend who told me about how they could not cope, how they needed to escape. I didn’t understand the seriousness of what they said to me. I missed it and told them they should tell whomever they needed to and to suck it up. Turns out they were telling me.”

“And?”

“And because I didn’t listen carefully enough they ended up in a really bad place. Not only did I not help, I made it worse.”

I watch as Bailey takes a long sip of her wine.

“Do you think that’s the case now?”

“No, but I never intend to put myself back in that spot. No one ever really tells until it’s too late, until they’re deep in the weeds and I already know, for a fact, that I’m not good at interpreting.”

Her face is grave momentarily until she smiles again, settled into some hidden understanding. I know that I’ve passed some test and she moves on without further questions.

My sudden confession startles me, so I press forward in the conversation to tell her a cute story that happened days earlier.

“I was standing in line at the

convenience store the other day waiting to pay for gas, and this sweet little voice from behind me says ‘Hi!’”

“Pretty little blonde girl about five years old swinging on her daddy’s hand and smiling up at me without a care in the world.”

“‘I’m Leah,’” she says, “‘how was your day?’”

“‘My day was fine, how was yours?’ I say, at the same time that I’m trying not to laugh because she’s already missing a tooth and is sticking her tongue in the gap while she thinks about her answer.”

“‘Terrible,’” she says finally, “‘I was playing with Lily and she hit me in the head and it hurts; and so do my legs from running and playing.’”

“‘You’re adorable.’ I said to her.”

“‘I know,’ she says, ‘my Daddy tells me that all the time.’ I laughed and told the dad he was gonna have his hands full in a couple of years. He just smiled and said ‘I’m just beginning to see what that’s going to be like’.”

Bailey smiles at the story, its intended effect working perfectly.

“Do you want kids, Sebastian?”

“Absolutely.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s the best chance a man has to give back, to confirm what his parents taught him or make up for their mistakes and do it better.”

“And which are you?”

“Me? I want to honor what my

parents taught me, to pass on the good lessons and make another collection of ‘good people.’ You?”

“I want children, but even more, I want a good dad for them. I’ve discovered that a good lay does not a good guy make.”

“Duly noted,” I answer with a cocked eyebrow and a big grin.

The rest of the date passes smoothly and I find that I really like this girl: the way she sweeps her hair off her shoulders, the way she looks directly at me when she answers questions and especially the way she doesn’t evade any of the questions that I ask her.

By the time we leave the restaurant, entering into the cool night air, neither of

us wants the night to end quite so soon and she agrees to head back to my house to watch a movie.

We argue the merits of ‘chick flicks’ as we drive to my place, about how often a ‘good guy’ to be one, has to watch them and why men just hate them. She agrees, with a laugh, that it’s way too soon to make me watch one with her tonight. We finally agree on something with blood and guts and car crashes as I open the door from the garage into the kitchen.

And I lead her by the hand into pandemonium.

Beer cans and liquor bottles litter my kitchen island, the blender is spilling a dribbling mess near the sink and the

stereo is thumping.

And it gets worse, gripping Bailey's hand tighter and half-dragging her around the corner to view my family room, we encounter an image definitely not worthy of the name.

It's Ty and Pete and the two brunettes from the other night, mostly undressed, one with the most fantastic set of naked tits swinging, playing something firmly on its way to being 'Naked Twister'.

"Where the hell they got a game of Twister is beyond me," I think, turning to look over my shoulder at Bailey as she pulls her hand from mine.

We stand there together, stunned, as my 'houseguests' lift their heads to see us, only just momentarily embarrassed,

before they collapse in a heap of giggles while Bailey turns sharply on her heel heading back toward my kitchen.

My night is over.

And why I hadn't contemplated this possibility earlier currently escapes me.

It takes only a split second to choose what I'm going to tackle first, but already ten steps ahead of me Bailey beats me to the car, climbing into the passenger seat and folding her arms tightly across her chest.

"I'm sorry?" I offer as I climb in and start the engine.

"You said that you were giving refuge to friends who had caught a bad break. You didn't tell me that they were frat boys on a tear."

“I am thirty-four years old and I thought that I was playing with a man, not a boy living in a zoo.”

“Take me home.”

I apologize profusely for the visual that she’s just experienced during the drive home, insisting I can’t believe that my buddies are that crazy.

“I promise you, I’m not like that.”

“Really? But you just happen to have two close friends that are? And it says nothing about you? Seriously?”

Not another word escapes her mouth until I pull up to her apartment complex.

“You’re a good guy. I really like you, honest. I almost had a totally great time. But it looks like you’ve gone from being a guy who can’t get over his wife to a

guy who's willing to live like he's twenty-five again."

"Don't call me until you've hit at least thirty-five on your growth curve. Before that, if I decide that I'd like to talk with you, I will call you."

"Ok," I say quietly to her back as she slams the door and heads towards the entrance of her building.

I am beyond pissed driving back home and as I hit my kitchen again, heading straight for the stairs to my room, I holler over my shoulder at the continuing chaos, "The least you could have done was hang a sock on the door knob to warn me, you assholes!"

The remark is only met by more laughter.

But I spend the night dreaming about
the brunette's tits.

THIRTEEN – ‘Given’ Up the Nappy Dug Out’ – Ice Cube

I’m still entirely furious when I wake in the morning, but I comfort myself with the fact that at least Bailey told me that she actually likes me.

Somehow that makes me feel a little bit better. I rub my head as I start down the stairs to assess how badly the delinquents have torn up my house. Ty hasn’t even been here twenty-four hours and he’s already giving me a headache.

The closer I get to the bottom of the stairs, the more noise I hear coming from the kitchen. But there is nothing raucous in these morning noises, no giggles or

energetic movement now. Instead I hear low voices, the shuffle of dishes and the occasional groan.

Turning the final corner into the kitchen, there they are: Ty and Pete in shirtsleeves methodically trying to clean up the disaster, shoving empties back into cartons, rinsing glasses and wiping splotches off counter tops. I have to admit I'm impressed with their ability to rebound after such a prodigious day of heavy drinking, although a collection of empty sports drinks stands testament to efforts to quell the effects of serious hangover.

I enter. They stand meekly at attention mid-action, hands with contents hanging limply at their sides.

“Sebastian, buddy, look...”

My hand goes up, “Save it Ty, I don’t even want to hear it.”

“This is me getting a bowl of cereal and a glass of OJ and when I’m done with that, I’m going to read the paper and get ready to watch football and the race.”

“Notice that nowhere in that plan is any intention of talking, or even momentarily listening, to either of you,” I conclude, pointing at first one, and then the other.

“And you missed a spot,” I conclude as I leave the room, deliberately and ever so casually emptying some of the contents of my cereal bowl onto the floor.

I leave them there in the silence.

Time passes 'til lunch as I let my anger cool and I decide that I've left them moping long enough.

They're sitting with their laptops at the kitchen island, order restored, a pot of coffee on the counter when I return to lift the quarantine.

“You guys have got to be kidding me that you decided to do something that stupid in the middle of my family room. You could easily have gone upstairs to the third floor. There's a bar up there and everything that you need, including a door that closes. Nobody should ever be forced to accidentally see either of your ugly, naked asses.”

“So we've gotta have some house

rules. Ty, we were roommates before and you already should know that you hang a sock on the door or something to let me know what I'm walking into. Going forward, rule number one: No wild parties unless we're all involved. Rule number two: If you plan on bringing a girl back then it's in your room or the third floor, and you need to let the others know. I'm sure that I have a bunch of others, but that's all I can think of right now."

Ty answers for them both: "No problem."

"And Pete, seriously, with God as my witness, help me understand why you haven't had enough cocks and assholes in your face recently to not play anything

that included the possibility of the words ‘naked’ and ‘man’ in it?

“It’s Twister. While you might’ve got your head jammed up nice and tight between that brunette’s great set of tits, it was just as likely that you were gonna get your face pressed up right next to Ty’s hot and sweaty balls instead. Did you really feel the need to see all that again? Especially Ty’s, for that matter?”

Into the laughter that follows, apologies are offered and our peace returns.

“So how pissed was Bailey?” asks Pete.

“Completely pissed. She called you guys a bunch of frat boys and it wasn’t a

compliment.”

“She gonna see you again?”

“Doubt it. She said not to bother calling her until I’m able to at least graduate toward a thirty-five year olds’ life style instead of a twenty-five year old’s one. And somehow I think that’s not promising, since I now know that I live with two colossal dumbasses.”

“Who cares? You don’t want to settle down yet anyway. You need to live it up, this is your time to shine.”

This is where life with Ty is going to be a challenge.

“Right...sure....Ty, you have no idea what the fuck you’re talking about. Look, I’m not trying to rush out and get married, but I’d like to find someone to

do fun things with. Not that you'd understand that 'cause...like a fool, you just gave up that type of relationship.”

Ty is incorrigible, “Ah, quit it Sebastian, forget all this crap about a ‘relationship,’ you sound like a girl. Concentrate on what you can do, on what you’re actually good at doing and bring out ‘The MP’ again instead. That’s the key to your long term happiness, trust me.”

“No! I’m not doing that. ‘The MP’ is deservedly dead, has been for a number of years and needs to stay that way.”

“No way man, he’s not. He isn’t dead, he’s hiding within you and you know it. Dude, come on. You’ll feel so much better if you let him out. You are,

and always have been, ‘The MP’.”

“Ty, I’d know if he still existed and I’m telling you, that part of me is long gone.”

Pete, looking quizzically up from his computer says, “The ‘MP,’ what is that? I’ve always thought it was a thing like Multiple Personalities...you know, with the accents and the fake names you used to use all the time. Who wants to let me know what we’re actually talking about?”

“Oh Pete, my little friend,” Ty says smiling, bringing him in on the joke, “‘The MP’ stands for ‘The Midnight Plumber’...because the bastard lays pipe all night long.”

Asshole.

“Well, even if I was going to do it now, Ty, you realize I’m so out of practice that it’d have to come with a warning? How’s it gonna sound if I have to start off an escapade with ‘Baby, I’m the Midnight Plumber, but I’ve been in retirement, so if the stuff comes out brown, don’t be worryin’, it’s only ‘cause the pipe is rusty?’ You’re an idiot, Ty.”

Grinning real big, Pete chimes in, “Alright then, if you’re gonna bring the Midnight Plumber out of retirement, it sounds like you’re going to need to practice. And that’s easier than it sounds. Did y’all know that there are bijilliions of websites where you can meet random women for hook-ups? You

don't even need to buy them a drink anymore to get laid. Look..."

Ty and I collect around his computer screen, and Pete is perfectly correct. There on the screen in front of us is a website dedicated to people just looking for random sex: married, not married, bi, straight, curious, all kinds and all with just one intention – fucking.

"Can you believe it? It looks so easy I've decided to respond to one of the ads. Told some chick that I'd be interested in the hook-up, but I've asked to see her picture first."

"And?"

"And she hasn't responded yet. I'm waiting on my next move until she does. I'm not that stupid to end up with an ugly

chick by accident. That would just suck, random sex or no random sex.”

“Right...” I respond, thinking in my head that Pete hardly sounds completely stupid at all.

“Wait a minute, didn’t you get lucky last night? Wasn’t that the whole point of the debacle?”

“Nah...I almost did, but she left.”

“Ahh...no, she didn’t,” answers Ty, stepping sideways out of Pete’s reach, “cause the girl I hooked up with was the one with the car. Your girl slept in the other room. They did the ‘walk of shame’ together this morning around six am. And did you know that girls in their thirties look like hell the morning after a hard night?”

“They just don’t bounce back as fast as the young ones. Hey, that’s gotta be a rule too...add it to the list, Number Three: no chicks over thirty, my eyes just can’t take it.”

“Sure Ty, and thanks for clearing up the fact that you got laid and poor Pete here still got nothin’. You know what, Pete, I’m also thinking that posting for a hook-up on a website isn’t one of your best ideas.”

“But I’m totally horny and its not like I’m not using my real name,” his voice tinged with just the hint of a whine.

I can only shake my head. “You just let me know how that turns out for you.”

“Whatever. You’re the one with the nick name ‘The Midnight Plumber.’

How'd Ty end up giving you that one?"

Without hesitation, Ty launches into a horrible story about the two of us in our college dorm room with girls and playing tag-team orgasms.

"Sebastian played it like it was a race – only he didn't tell me it was an endurance race and I played it like a sprint. I finished and he just kept going and going. I had to do it again just to keep from totally embarrassing myself before he even finished once. Man, was my chick bitter about it."

"Whiskey dick?" Pete asks.

"Nope," Ty replies, "The guy's just a machine. Trust me, I never played in the same room with him ever again."

Ty's story embarrasses me but I laugh

because it's true and turn on my heel to head for the TV in the family room. I did figure out how to fuck like a champion, way back when. Marathon sex is easy enough to do when the girl is a thing and the object an exercise. It's very hard to get truly aroused and the lack of it makes it last forever. You just don't care and just don't connect. Living like that, the only thing you accomplish is a reputation that lines you up lots of pretty girls waiting to be taken advantage of and a bad conscience. It's ultimately a poor trade off from the companionship, affection and closeness a real relationship brings but it does have some compensations in that it's never boring and nobody ever has 'a

head ache.’ I’m just not sure yet that I want to settle for it, although if I’m honest it still holds some temptation for me.

Contemplating my options, I don’t get more than twenty feet out of the kitchen before I hear an enormous bellow from Pete, “You fucking bitch!”

I sprint back, half expecting he and Ty to be wrestling on the ground over some stunt Ty has pulled, but they are both just standing there, staring open mouthed at the computer: Pete the shade of a ripe tomato and Ty with lips already curling into a grin.

“What the hell is wrong now?”

“What’s wrong? What’s *wrong*? Take a look at this!”

There on the screen, in all its hideous glory, is the requested photo that the random hook-up has provided of herself.

Meaghan. Pete's wife. In lingerie.

And into a stunned silence which neither Ty nor I have any idea what to do with, breaks Pete, loud and clear.

"Well, I guess that settles it. I'm getting a paternity test," slamming shut the laptop.

Recovering as quickly as I can, I still respond lamely, "Might not be a bad idea."

Pete just looks up at me, all narrow-eyed, "Thanks for that. Very helpful."

What else can I say? And then I realize there's lots else I need to say.

"Call Sykes on Monday, take a screen

shot of the posting and get him to send a letter. Twist her arm and then march them all to the doctor to get the swabs done. Don't take 'no' for an answer."

"And, my God, Pete, I am sorry."

"I suppose," says Ty, with a shrug and wicked grin in place, "that it's insensitive to suggest starting a betting pool? 'Cause I'd bet a hundred that only Re-Pete is yours."

What a guy. Pete has three kids – Pete Jr., Christy and Stephen, in that order and it's true when you think on it, that really only Pete Jr. looks, talks or acts anything like Pete.

"Fuck you Ty, but I'll raise you fifty that at least Christy is mine too, you prick."

Pete pushes back his tears and continues on, "So what now? My wife is a slut, I didn't get laid last night, and half my kids may not be mine. What, genius, are you gonna recommend now to make me feel better?"

"You know Pete," answers Ty, "there's nothing really left to do. There is no way to feel better. Tonight the answer is simple: get piss drunk, 'cause...it seems like forever since we've done that. And next weekend we'll begin our new life, one where we know that women are whores and we'll treat them accordingly."

"Bas, grab the whiskey we didn't drink last night. Pete, grab the basketball in the garage and just this

once in your whole miserable life we're gonna let you beat us.”

“Fuck it Pete, the facts are what they are. The rest of the unknown facts will come out soon enough and the only thing you can really do is fight back. If you find yourself drowning in a pile of shit, learn how to swim.”

FOURTEEN – ‘Voodoo Child’ – Jimi Hendrix

And we did just what he said.

But Pete is not really okay and I'm caught between two opposing feelings. It pulls strongly inside me to reach out to Bailey and fix it. I want to move toward an attempt at an organized future and yet external warnings keep piling up in front of me: Michelle, the stripper, the women willing to let me leave them in distant places, Meaghan and her tremendous duplicity and then Bailey herself, so intractable, so unbending.

If women learn from talk shows and movies and what their friends tell them

about how rotten men are, so do we. And I don't see anything I should trust, don't feel anything about myself that doesn't have something to do with being a cock or a wallet. Whatever I'm attempting just seems not to be working for me.

Only Ty seems sure of what to do.

"We are going out on Friday night. What're you losers wearing?" Ty announces on Wednesday, starting the lamest fashion show in history.

Ty in my kitchen, point central, it appears lately, for everything major thing that happens in my life, sends us off to respective bedrooms to collect and present ourselves.

I can't even believe that I'm co-

operating.

First comes Pete, descending the stairs in his best jeans and a simple t-shirt.

“God, seriously? Fail.”

Then I re-appear, better dressed by far, in best khakis and a button down.

I too, fail.

“Com’on, ‘Bas? Are you both trying out for the geek squad? Do you want to be taken advantage of?”

“Pete, you present like you don’t even know that girls exist; and even if they magically did, you still look like you haven’t a dime in your pocket to do anything about it. Sebastian, you show up like an earnest guy that wouldn’t hurt a fly, all buttoned up and proper. How

are you ever gonna look dangerous in that? You're gonna get taken home and kept in a pen like a pet dressed that way."

And he disappears for a moment, returning slick, groomed, and definitely dangerous in a pair of relaxed pants, designer shirt open at the neck and a pair of great shoes.

Damn, I forgot about the shoes.

"Here," he says, "this is what it looks like."

"Gold in my pockets, money to burn and an appearance like I just don't 'give a fuck.' It's catnip for women, they just can't help themselves. Everybody wants a bad boy they think they can tame."

"And always concentrate on the

shoes. Trust me, everybody looks at the shoes and everybody can tell where you spent your money.”

I hate taking lessons from an asshole but I have to admit that he makes us look like we belong to the suckers club.

“Do either of you have anything else to wear?”

“Nope,” is the collective reply.

“Then we have to go shopping. We are not dressing for a job interview, we are not dressing to help little old ladies cross the street, we are intending to get laid and nothing else. Dress like it matters. Prepare to open your wallets, gentlemen.”

A shopping expedition, like none other, ensues. High end purchases -

pants, shirts and shoes. Even when our drawers finally drop, no ‘tightey, whiteys’ will make an appearance, not even the plain jockey-legged kind. He has it all in hand.

Pete and I both end up looking as if we had walked out of a men’s fashion magazine and didn’t have a care in the world.

Ty even heads me into the drug store for hair product to control the growing locks that I’ve been ignoring since I was rendered unemployed.

But he’s not finished with us yet.

“Gentlemen, we need to have a conversation about manscaping. Now it’s not something I’m going to do *with you*, we ain’t that tight. But I’m tellin’

you, you both need to pay some mind to those hair collections you've got goin' on," waving his hands in magic circles over us like a hairdresser describing his vision.

"You need to listen to me, Sebastian," as I let out a holler and attempt to leave the room. "See these pits?" pulling open the shirt sleeve, "Tidy." Then further proceeding to pull up his shirt and exposing a neatly trimmed expanse of chest hair. "See these pecs? Also tidy."

"It's a simple rule, if you can wrap your chest hair around your finger, it's too long and if you've got a big collection of fuzz around 'Jack and the boys' you need to get it under control. None of the women we intend to hook-

up with are gonna fight through a jungle to get to the treasure chest. They'll just pack-up and go home."

"None of them are your wives, they will not put up with it."

"But for God's sake, don't go hog wild and trim yourself bald like a monkey's ass, you'll make them think you're gay or doin' porn, and either way that won't help you out. And besides it itches like a son of a bitch when it grows back," he finishes, unconsciously rubbing his groin as if in sudden memory of a previous manscaping accident.

And with that he orders us up to get our gear clean before sundown on Friday which, unbelievably we do, presenting ourselves for inspection from

the waist up like school boys before the headmaster.

He approves. “*Now we can go out.*”

It’s not hard to admit when I look in the mirror that I’ve been transformed from an ordinary guy into a player. I now look the part and almost feel the part, although it means finding things inside myself that I’d long buried. It means more Janets, more wasted time and effort, and many more bad moments that I have to live down afterwards in my mind. But the sex’ll be easy, there’s always that.

I *can* do it, but I’m still not sure that I want to do it.

Eight weeks into unemployment, Friday has closed for me without the

appearance of a single job offer. And the slow, sickening realization that there aren't that many positions anymore to post for locally, or even nationally, hits me even harder.

Everything is drying up, jobs at my level are becoming few and far between and below me less and less appear with each passing day. In contemplating my future I had, ideally, wanted to stay in town, but my options are declining rapidly as I watch our local industries take hit after economic hit. With no good choices I've started to post for things in a wider and wider radius from home.

I know I can move, pick up stakes and start over in a new town if I have to, but

it makes me groan inside to contemplate putting a house on the market at such a bad time. I worked hard to afford where I live; selling my house at a loss has less than no appeal, in fact even the thought of it irritates the piss out of me.

But now at least I look good. And I have a friend deeply concerned about improving my sex life. Who cares that I'm potentially about to morph into a shallow, unemployed sex hog; what really matters is that I'm still young and can have all the fun I want, argues Ty.

"I certainly have time to get laid," I think to myself preparing for Ty's 'big night out' "What with no one actually needing me to do anything of significance or importance except feed

my face and wipe my own ass.” Contemplating in the mirror if my new steel blue shirt compliments my bitterness as well as it does my eyes, I button it up over my newly manscaped chest.

I sure do look good.

We assemble ourselves around nine thirty in my kitchen, shiny and polished like the Three Musketeers waiting to go on a tear. Pete has cleaned up real nice, all the way down to his soft gently buffed loafers. He’s excited about his newly acquired image, suggesting a round of shots in acknowledgement of Ty’s competent tutelage before heading out.

“A toast to all of us, especially you

Ty, ‘Here’s to chicks we love, here’s to chicks we hate, here’s to chicks we’ll fuck but probably never date,’ bottoms up!”

Ty laughs but he’s excited too, having done careful research in choosing our Friday night locale by sourcing, from the young guys of our strip club visit, where we should best go to sow our oats. He informs us that we’re headed to a high-end club that is ‘the’ current hotspot frequented by the nominally young and affluent, and certain to meet our every expectation.

“So it’s set...Pete, you’re driving, right?”

“Whoa, how come I have to drive?”

“Cuz honestly Pete, you’re the least

likely to get laid and therefore the most likely to need a ride home.” I answer for both of us. “If you’re independently mobile, so much the better for all of us.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence.”

“Look, you know how you roll, you see a nine and a six standing together and you hit on the six and it almost never works. And to add to it, half the time you totally miss the fact that the nine is totally digging your act because a) she recognizes you’re a nice guy and b) she can’t figure out for the life of her why you’d hit on the six when there’s a nine standing right in front of you.”

“I tell you what Pete, if you end up in a scenario like that tonight, I will personally pay you five hundred dollars

if you can seal the deal with the nine. Aim up for once in your life. You're good looking, you're actually employed, you are now officially 'scaped and dressed and you're not an asshole like Ty. To my way of thinking, in this trio you're the only catch."

"Ty, you wanna up the ante?"

"Sure, I'll throw in another two fifty. If that doesn't buy some courage, boy, you're never going to find any."

And with that we head out into the night, wallets stuffed with cash, condoms in pocket and attitude to spare.

"I watched this movie once," says Pete on the twenty minute ride downtown, "where the girl lifted her leg when the guy kissed her. I've always

wanted to know if I've ever made that happen. You can't ever tell, you know, 'cause your eyes are always closed. I think that'd be kinda neat."

"I don't know about the leg, but I sure know that I've made panties drop."

"Man, Ty, nobody's ever gonna accuse you of being a romantic, are they?"

"Nope, way better to be practical. You've less chance of disappointing anyone that way. It's not easy to be an asshole, you know. It takes practice to remember never to be too nice. But this way you can't ever really fail either," he concludes quietly reaching over to turn the stereo up loud to fill the car with the pure bliss of Jimi.

We reach the club just as things really start to hop, but before needing to wait in line for thirty minutes – optimum time.

It's been years since I've spent time in a nightclub; once you get older and settled, a nice restaurant or comfortable sports bar usually meets all your entertainment needs. But when you're single, on the prowl and itching for new company, a club is the obvious place to play.

And play we will.

It's clear the minute we pass the front door that the place is packed with girls, lots of them, hot girls dressed to kill and looking hungry. Plenty of guys too, some looking like they've a good idea how to work this opportunity and just as many looking as if they might've come one

county too far from their comfort zone.

Sizing up the room, surveying both the fodder and the competition I have to hand it to Ty. He's prepared us extremely well and as we stride from the entrance I can feel our collective confidence rising. As a trio we're ranking well above the average competition. Heads are already starting to turn and a natural corridor magically opens before us as we walk three abreast and people move out of the way to let us head straight for the bar.

Fuck, I have not felt this way in a very, very long time. I'd forgotten how good it actually feels. Glancing over at Pete with his eyes slightly widened in surprise, I know that he can feel it too.

A slight shiver moves its way up my spine. Confidence and sex appeal — what a sweet aphrodisiac.

We settle in at the bar, ordering up a round of premium liquor, getting a handle on the vibe and evaluating to either go it alone or as a team. The memory of Hendrix in my head slowly evaporates, replaced by the relentless thump of a heavy house beat that starts in my knees and rises up into my hips to finally match the corresponding pound of my pulse. I make the call for all of us in the end, spying three equally beautiful girls, not one a six, at a table with room for company. The blonde has already caught my eye twice and I know that we'll be welcome.

They size us up fairly quickly as we trade introductions and order another round for the table. Shortly, I can see by the discreet nods and subtle glances amongst them that, not only have we passed first muster, but that they've begun to divvy us up amongst themselves in a way that entirely agrees with Ty, Pete and I. It appears that I get the blond, Ty the slightly racier redhead, and Pete the pretty curly-haired brunette. Suits me fine.

Quickly starting a meaningless banter back and forth, entertaining with anecdotes and quips intended to amuse, we manage to pass the time. This is not the evaluation exercise of a potential partner, this is a club and the only test

we needed to pass, the fuck test, we passed the moment we ordered the first round. Now it's only a matter of passing the right amount of time until serious negations can take place as to where and when. The only thing still really up for consideration is whether any of us will find something else we like better.

Hitting the dance floor about thirty minutes later we bump and grind, trading partners as the mood hits and the beat changes. Even Pete is into it, slightly liquored up and exhilarated by the potential of success, exuberantly throwing his shoulders and hips into the game with a surprising show of rhythm.

We're on a roll slowly expanding our circle of contacts, adding bodies and

potential conquests in an ever-wider net. I can see Ty edging away from the redhead, floating into ever closer proximity of a tightly constructed blond with enormous tits and a round ass packed into the tightest pants I have ever been witness to. The redhead pays no mind as she busies herself instead by falling into the orbit of a flashily dressed Latino with great hair, grabbing him by the hips and pulling hard.

Me, I like my blonde with her great breasts displayed in a simple red dress and a kick-ass pair of black boots. I can't help but wonder if I can convince her to keep them on when I actually get down to taking her clothes off. That would be hot, I'd like that. But I keep on

looking just in case.

Pete, he slowly moves away from his eight back into his comfort zone of an aggressive, slightly messy six and spends some time there, shouting over the noise in a pretense of conversation while the eight keeps sending confused glances back in his direction. I meet him in the bathroom about twenty minutes later and tell him to give his head a shake. The next time I check back, sure enough, there he is throwing a pelvic thrust into the eight as she tosses her hair back in response.

And on it goes in the mating ritual of the hook-up, a slow moving dance of circles around the bar, each of us lighting like bees from plant to plant. A

taste here, a look there, evaluating and pressing at the edges to test for the best grab and potential poke, empowered by liquor and the incessant groin shaking beat of the music.

It's always like this until the final evaluation comes in and everybody settles into the best deal they can negotiate. Ultimately, we end up with our original three because, the blond Ty prefers is the only eight in her group, and the red head's Latino has a big bunch of nasty looking friends in tow that her posse are not even slightly interested in.

A quick huddle with my boys leads us to conclude that an offer of after-hour drinks is in order at my house. It's easily and immediately accepted.

Everybody understands the game we are playing and tonight it'll be a team sport.

First step accomplished: arrive, locate and acquire.

Second step: close the deal. Currently still to be seen, but looking far more likely than less.

Heading back to the house, Pete driving just because we said so, he can't help but ask, "That seven hundred and fifty...she's an eight. It's mine, right?"

"Yep, but one fifty off for that pep talk in the bathroom, what the hell were you thinking?"

Back at the house we keep the mood going with free pour liquor, a nice beat from the stereo and plenty of lascivious glances to keep everyone's loins hot.

We break up slowly into couples as the hour progresses, Ty and his companion heading off first, Pete a short while later and me and the blond, whose name is actually Bridget, heading off last to complete the final act of the transaction.

As we hit the bed in a heap, my blond, Bridget, gets bullish with me, suddenly playing the role of the sexual dominant by announcing that her last partner knew five different positions and demands to know what I am bringing to the table. Ty is right. Looking at her slightly flushed face, the Midnight Plumber is not long dead and buried; he is, in fact, alive and well, and at this very moment, he's irritated.

“Well Bridget, I had an ambitious girlfriend in college and we extensively studied the Kama Sutra. Where would you like to start?”

Without even providing the warning about the rusty pipe I toss her into position number fourteen and fuck the piss out of her. And, at least the first time, she keeps on those boots.

FIFTEEN – ‘Here I Come’ – The Roots

Mornings after a one-night stand are always the hardest, even if you've had the practice. In the harsh light of day often with only the assistance of a hangover, you have to examine the hard reality that the person lying beside you is a complete stranger. And if you're at all self-aware, before you pack it down nice and tight in the secret box we all keep in the back of our heads, you know for one, sharp moment that you too have the capacity for complete shallowness.

I lean briefly up on one elbow, looking in the soft dawn light at

Bridget's still sleeping form, and examine closely what I, the cat, dragged into my marital bed. She is, even in the watery light coming through the blinds, a fine looking woman but I can see hard lines around the corners of her mouth, and even in sleep a stiffness in her body that belies the artificial intimacy of the night's activities.

Slipping quietly from the bed, not wishing to wake her and already start the awkward dialogue that accompanies the exercise called 'the graceful exit,' I get ready to head downstairs to make coffee for all of us.

Graceful exit times six and 'walk of shame' times three is what awaits. I can't help but hope that somehow

steaming cups of coffee will help cover the cautious chatter and faked nonchalance that will happen while we pretend that we're all just the best of friends gathering together for breakfast.

And glancing back over my shoulder as I leave my room, I wonder if it mightn't just be easier to do the walk of shame than have a collection of strangers invade the private spaces of my castle.

What do we even know about these women who now know where I live and what I own? Bank robbers, bulimics, bullshit artists; they could be anyone or anything. Last night it didn't seem important and at this second, privacy gone, it feels like the one thing I really ought to have considered. In reality, this

is my first one night stand as a grown up with a home and assets to protect, and it's entirely different than hooking up in a hotel room or as a young man in rented space with a roommate. I'm coming quickly to the conclusion that I don't like it.

Pete joins me in the kitchen not fifteen minutes later to find the coffee pot on and me cleaning up dirty glasses and empty bottles.

“Coffee...good.”

“So....?”

“Yup. I feel much better but it's weird to suddenly open your eyes half-way through and not be looking at your wife. That's gonna take some gettin' used to after ten years of marriage. But I

figure with a dedicated approach and a little more practice I'll get the hang of it," he finishes with a grin.

"And now what?" He continues.

"What 'what'? Oh, the girls. Well, we wait 'til they all show up in the kitchen, make an artificial offer of breakfast and then wait for them to politely decline. And when they're gone, we strip the beds and do a serious load of laundry."

"What if they accept?"

"Trust me, they won't," says Ty rounding the corner heading straight for the coffee pot," and even if they do, Sebastian, you will suddenly discover that you only have toast, got it? I'm taking bets they'll be out of here within

fifteen minutes of them all being awake and well before the clock hits eight thirty.”

“So....?” Says Pete, with a sly look in Ty’s direction.

“Meh, six out of ten. Decent destination brochure but not really any reason for a return visit. Bottled reds never have as much fire in them as the exterior packaging suggests.”

Footsteps echo in my upstairs hall and sure enough, within Ty’s predicted fifteen all three women are assembled in my kitchen, grinning with shy smiles to cover the awkwardness of the collection of dress shoes and evening clothes in which circumstance forces them to present themselves.

Women, of the two genders, really have the worst of 'the walk of shame' the morning after. You don't know your companion well enough to request a shower, especially in this case, times three. Your clothing, so perfectly appropriate for a night out is now completely impractical and disastrously out of place. Worst of all, all that careful arrangement of hair and make-up is totally messed up by too many hours and too many energetic activities. Our three ladies are definitely the worse for wear and appear deeply aware of it.

Ty breaks the awkwardness by silently handing around three gratefully accepted cups of coffee and re-filling ours.

“Cheers...who wants breakfast?”
With a slow blink in Pete’s direction.

“Oh no, thanks anyway,” responds Bridget as spokeswoman, “we promised some friends we’d meet them for breakfast. We really have to head out of here or we’re going to be late. But we had a great time and maybe we can hang out again sometime.”

The other girls nod in socially appropriate agreement, hastily gulping the last of their coffee.

“Really it was great,” says Candace with a slightly earnest glance in Pete’s direction, “but Bridge’ is right, we really gotta go. It was uh...nice to meet you all,” moving to extend her hand and then thinking the better of it.

The red head says nothing, only nods. She seems the most practiced and way past any pretense of relationship building.

And so, as only three southern gentlemen can, we graciously walk them out to the driveway, opening and closing car doors, offering additional idle chatter to fill these last socially-required moments.

We stand at attention with faked chivalry until the car disappears from view and head back into the sanctuary of my kitchen to congratulate ourselves with eggs and bacon.

“And that’s how it’s done.” Says Ty with a mouthful of breakfast. “You get used to the uncomfortable parts after a

while. That Bridget girl looked the best of them all this morning -- how'd it work out last night?"

Now I wish it wasn't true that men don't discuss the relative merits of a hook-up, but if I said that I'd be lying. And, somehow, I'm just as sure that I'd be a rich man if I had a dollar for every time a woman has done the same thing. It doesn't seem beyond possible that a similar conversation about us started the moment the women closed the car doors and drove off.

"I tell you what, Bridget may have looked good, but damn she was pushy in bed. 'Touch me here. No, not there. Why're you doing that?' It was endless, I hardly had time to concentrate. Even a

great set of tits is sometimes not enough.”

“Candace just giggled a lot, almost like she’d never seen a penis before. I was almost afraid to put it in, but I got over it,” Pete finishes with a grin looking over at Ty. “So what’s on the menu for tonight?”

“Same as last night – blondes, brunettes and redheads. Not every lottery ticket can be a winner. Sometimes you get nothin’, sometimes you hit pay dirt, sometimes you just gotta roll over the two dollars that you won and play the next ticket, ‘cuz trust me, there are plenty of jackpots in this game.”

Later in the afternoon, out on the deck

with a beer, Ty continues on.

“I figure it’s a little like buying real-estate, you gotta look at a whole lot of property before you decide where you’re gonna plant your first tree. Hell, I had a prime piece of ground for, what, three years? Even then my friends, you always gotta be willing to trade up if you want to be a millionaire in the end.”

“You know, I sometimes wonder if girls are just completely stupid. I once had this girl in bed and it suddenly comes to her, ‘Hey, don’t you have a girlfriend?’ Like she just, that moment, remembered that she saw me out with her three days before. All I said to her was ‘Sure I do baby, but you gotta know that’s its only emotional cheating I feel

bad about and we both know we're doing this just 'cause you're hot'. And she fucked me anyway."

"Boy, you're deep," Pete chimes in sarcastically.

Quick as lightening Ty answers, "I'm as shallow as that puddle on the driveway. And it took me a long time to get that way. Don't start pressing me now to change. I don't hear anybody bitching that I got all of us laid last night. You found a woman yet, Pete, truly worth your time and effort?"

We roll out of the house hours later, heading for a live music venue I've heard about. Not as expensively dressed this time, but running the same vibe. Within the hour, I've got some random

chick all set up and wanting me to take her back to her place for a romp in the hay.

I can't quite believe that I'm considering it and it aches slightly in my head that I am. But it's so easy to come by and Bridget's bossiness the night before totally ruined my fun, even if I did ultimately perform up to my own standard. I didn't get anything out of it and wasn't that the whole point? Work, work, work, where do my needs come into play?

She's hot and willing and as we leave I can't help but wonder, "*If it's this easy can I, or more importantly will I, be able to stop once I get on this train?*" as I do my due diligence by telling the

guys that I'm leaving.

I let them know I'm intending to return, because my plan is a well-executed hook-up that misses the walk of shame by skipping the morning entirely. I can't see why you can't manage to do the deed and still get back in time for last call. If a random hook-up is about sex, why the hell does anyone have to fake it with a kiss in the morning? Why should a utilitarian act, that everyone acknowledges as such, have to come with so much make-believe and pretend? I feel a kindred spirit with Ty and the redhead. At least they call it what it is.

So I get practical and let Ty know that if they leave before I get back, they

should drop me a text. I'll have to find my own way home, but I have condoms and money in my pocket and know how to use both.

Heading over I can't help wonder, with a girl like this, so easy, so manageable, already pulling at the buttons on my shirt in the taxi, if there might not be something bad that I'm blindly walking into, some 'why' to explain the ease. Does she have a boyfriend? Does she have some weird fetish that makes it hard for her to connect? What makes them all so willing to do this and why am *I* so easily cooperating?

Hitting the house and walking into the front hall, she's reaching back and

undoing my pants three steps into the door way. Ten steps further they're already at my ankles as I kick off my shoes. Maybe this is what Ty means when he talks about the lottery jackpot, I think while grabbing for my shoes as she pulls me down the hall to her room.

I'm a guy, wanton need and sexual abandon is exciting. It blots out all conscious, rational thought and replaces it with hunger and power and adventure as the blood runs from your head, and all clear thought with it.

Nice girls don't know how strong the pull is, they never use it, this insatiable demand of the body. Bad girls know it all too well. And I know for damn sure, the bad girls, they like it. They like its

power and animal need. You can feel their pleasure in their control, working on each string, each taut nerve to drive the demand higher and higher.

She lays me down on the bed, this random, wanton creature and puts the condom on with her mouth. I've heard of this being done, but watching it for the first time really gets me excited. I'm ready to bring out 'the midnight plumber,' to work to meet expectation, and with a little bit of luck, I won't disappoint.

I do my duty and I don't know how long we've been at it, but I'm totally focused and she's making all kinds of noise. Damn it, she's noisy. Her hands are all over me, pulling on my balls, on

my shoulder, my ass. You name it, she's touching it, when all of a sudden something is not on my ass, but *in* my ass, planted firmly between my cheeks and seeking to go further.

And I holler. Actually, I squeal like a girl at the sudden intrusion, instantly eradiating my mojo and shriveling me to nothing as a low, smoky voice fills the room to ask, "Do you like that?"

I can't think straight looking down at the girl in front of me, now lying startled with both hands on her breasts, my eyes wide while time slows down and five actual seconds expand like minutes.

"No, I don't like it!" I leap off the bed as the lights cut on to reveal a younger, beautiful, naked chick with a

kick-ass body sitting just off to the right of where I used to be.

My relief is indescribable, standing stupidly at the side of the bed with my balls firmly tucked inside my body for safety and my hands covering my tail in reflexive self-protection. As I recover myself, trying to find my ‘cool,’ I shout, much louder than I intend to, “Where in the hell did you come from? And why the fuck did you not introduce yourself properly?”

The younger, hotter chick just lets out a throaty laugh, curled up on the far side of the bed, leaning on an elbow as she looks at us.

“It was so loud and I was so alone. It didn’t seem right.”

“Well, I’m pretty much done. You can have him,” says my hook-up rising from the bed. “He’s worth it. Anybody need something to eat? I’m going to make an omelet,” and she heads out of the room.

“Well?” From the throaty roommate, echoing the other and stretching herself slowly out like a cat, displaying the sum of her magnificent goods.

What do I do now? She’s hot and it’s not like I can find in my mind any viable moral objection. I have no girlfriend, the hook-up is not my girlfriend, in fact I hardly know her. I fucked a chick the night before that I didn’t know either, and this one is way hotter than both combined.

What language have I got, what moral reasoning to demand that this is one county too far? What argument can I use to defend what is left of what I used to be? How far, truly, is this from what I imagined would happen when I let ‘The Midnight Plumber’ back out in the first place?

I look at her lying prone and beautiful on the bed for one more split second and decide to follow my, as yet unexpired, need. I can’t for the life of me find one cogent reason not to. What did I come here for in the first place? And what the hell does it matter who it happens with?

“Sure, why not. But here are the rules: no ass, no toys, no combination of asses and toys. Just business, no matter

what your other ‘friends’ may have told you they liked.”

She just laughed her deep smoky laugh, pulling me on top of her as I climbed back onto the bed.

So ‘The Midnight Plumber’ lived while part of me died.

And the omelet was epic.

Then it was my turn to make the ‘walk of shame’ in the wee hours of the morning.

Waiting in the lobby for the taxi to take me home, thinking on what I’m going to tell the guys, I relearn one previously lost but very essential truth – that the ‘walk of shame’ can be turned into the ‘walk of fame’ if you just tell the story the right way. It’s only a matter of

how you tell it, I think, already working
to make it all sound amazing.

It sucks being pretty.

But it's still a long cab ride home.

SIXTEEN – ‘How You Like Me Now?’ – The Heavy

My new social life begins in earnest: dissolute weeks of happy hours and bouncing around to different bars during the week and on weekends. Efforts made getting to know bartenders, waitresses and some regular patrons at the collection of haunts we choose for ourselves. Back to the club, regular visits to some live venues and then sports bars where the patron selection is poor but the staff are hot and available.

Sometimes I just hook-up, but the walk of shame irritates my psyche and I choose quickly to create several ‘friends

with benefits', regular visits with girls who're good enough to satisfy the demands of my body but no one that can meet the demands of my spirit.

The craving for satisfaction doesn't diminish in these encounters. It's just space and time and function. An endless repetition of physical release that leaves me hungrier for the next opportunity and always walking away with nothing. It's an insatiable itch that can't be scratched, driving Ty and I to create a scorecard on the 'fridge, body for body, to keep count of the conquests.

Some days it disgusts me. Other days, when no potential employers call back, it gives me at least some small measure in which I still control my environment.

I love and hate myself. I love that I can convince all women of almost anything, I hate myself that I'm so far from what I ever intended. But they keep lining up for the event, they keep buying the soap. Some try to stay in bad attempts to turn a hook-up into something meaningful, others treat me like the meat that I am and those do not try. I hate the clingers, but I hate just as much the ones who walk away without a word, who know that the transaction was paid for in the cost of the drinks at the bar.

And I watch myself as the days click away, divorced and unemployed and counting down to forty, waiting for the final proof to arrive that all of my careful planning for a perfect life is

coming to nothing.

Pete's DNA tests come back on a Thursday in mid-November. A plain, brown envelope in the mail that he opens with Ty and I in attendance.

We watch his face as he tears the seal, so wishing we could be someplace else and I can tell that even Ty, for once, is waiting to be wrong.

But he is not.

"Well...Pete's mine. And that's it," the envelope and contents falling to the floor at his feet, looking up at us hollow-eyed.

What's to be said? What can anyone do?

"Hey, it's not the first time in history that a woman lied. What do you want to

do?" Says Ty, quietly.

"I want my son."

"And the others?"

"I want them too; it's not their fault she lied to me."

"But you can't keep paying for them," Ty continues.

"No, I suppose not...but they don't know anything else and neither do I. And until those men know and get a chance to step up, how can I break their hearts?"

Pete retreats slowly, shaking his head. We let him go, watching as he moves up the back stairs to his room while Ty retrieves the whiskey bottle to pore a silent drink for us both.

Ty may be an idiot in his life choices,

but Pete's outcome confirms something for me.

Condoms, condoms, condoms. Tie a knot in the sock, wrap the prince, keep the seed in my own possession. My fertility, once so precious to me as means to repeat myself becomes repellant, a thing to manage, a thing to avoid, a thing to not be captured by the unchosen. And I add a greater vigilance to my sexuality that further interferes with my ability to connect with anyone, becoming ever more a eunuch although all my working parts are still in order.

Learn, learn, lessons learned. Once bitten, twice shy.

But we continue our routine: Pete full of vengeance, Ty with home willfully

destroyed and I, evermore a cock, so far from where I ever intended to be.

It's like a disease, bad microbes multiplying, invading your healthy tissues until it's all dark and cancerous. And you don't know it's even happening to you until you start spitting blood.

That's how she finds me one night in a bar surrounded by three twenty-somethings crawling all over me and me laughing, hand cupped for the moment around the firm ass of one, like I haven't a care in the world.

I see a form from the corner of my eye, moving across known space that stirs in me past knowledge, barely registering in my mind that it looks like Michelle until the image stands before

me.

Michelle. In flesh, in time, in space. In front of me smiling like the day she first met me.

“My God, Sebastian, I thought that was you!” Moving through the women that surround me without a glance in their direction, “Hey babe, how are you? You look great!” As she leans in and kisses me on the cheek like she just hasn’t seen me in days.

“Wow, I really like the hair and the shirt,” she says, ruffling my curls and pulling on my collar, “it’s a great color for your eyes.”

And the woman who broke my heart stands before me, all innocence and light, like it was just a bad high school

breakup, and continues, “Sorry I didn’t call you, but there just didn’t seem like a right time.”

“What are you doing here?”

“Oh, friends... celebrating,” waving vaguely around the room in a lesson learned from me.

“Damn, you really look good,” moistening her lips as her eyes travel down my body. “I always told you that you should invest more in your clothes,” pulling again on my shirt, this time on the button seam just above my belt.

“Really? Michelle, these are some of my new friends,” motioning in direction of the girls surrounding me, now quietly watching the interaction and obviously resenting the intrusion. “And girls, this

is Michelle...my ex-wife.”

“Nice to meet you,” says the one of whose ass I had possession of seconds before. “Trying to steal him back from us?” She finishes with a sly look in my direction.

Michelle colors slightly, looking at the attractive, well-dressed trio, registering the age gap between them and me and, most importantly, her.

“Oh, no...sorry to interrupt, but it’s been a while since I’ve seen him and I just wanted to say ‘hi’.”

“I guess you can have him for a few minutes. We don’t mind, do we ladies?” tossing her long blond hair and turning to leave, “As long as he doesn’t mind and we get him back in the end. Right,

Sebastian?" she says from over her shoulder with a big grin as they move down the bar a ways.

I finally look closely at Michelle. She's still well put together and a slight attraction to her pulls inside my loins, but I can see fine wear lines around her eyes and slackness in her body that never existed before. It repels me as unsteady memory floods through me.

I finally offer, "Well, I suppose I should ask you how you've been. But honestly, I'm not sure that I care."

"Oh, don't be like that...look, you always, always told me that all you ever wanted was for me to be happy. And I wasn't happy."

"And now you're happy... with that

Bob guy.... and I should be happy for you since that's all I ever wanted for you, is that it?" looking directly into her eyes with my own narrowed ones contemplating how exactly I'm going to absorb that magnificent piece of sophistry.

"Uh... no...he's gone, it didn't work out," dropping her head and looking at the tips of my shoes. "He had a fiancé all along," her eyes now coming back up to meet my own, accompanied with a defiant toss of her hair. "I was the girl he was keeping in reserve in case it didn't work out. I dumped him when I found out."

I laugh, out loud, right in her face. I can't help myself.

“You dumped him when you found out....very nice. Bob, the wife stealer, couldn’t make you happy either because it turns out that Bob was a cheater all the way around. Yeah, no wonder it never seemed like the right time to call me.

“So you traded me in for a wife stealing, lying, cheating, piece of crap... it must be nice to be that happy. Way to go, Michelle.”

“That’s not really fair...it was a difficult decision to leave and then to find out he was a liar was really tough on me. You were never home, I was always alone and even when you were home it wasn’t like you took me to places like this, dressed like that,” her hand moving to encompass my landscape

from head to toe. “He took me places, he paid attention to me, we went out to clubs. Turns out his fiancé was a nurse, she worked nights...” her voice trailing off into silence.

I just stand and stare. After almost two years, here and now with this woman in front of me, there are crazy answers to ten thousand questions pouring out of her that I suddenly no longer even care to know. My mind answers her accusations while I press my lips hard together to prevent any words from escaping: “*You’re right...I wasn’t interested in playing in bars, I was planning for playing in sandboxes, saving so that you could stay home with the children I thought we both wanted.*”

And I didn't need goddamn sexy clothes to attract women, I'd found my woman, I was done with all of it."

"You were getting so old and boring, I wasn't ready to be old yet," she continues setting her head at a saucy tilt and adding a sudden lift in her voice. "I really like the 'you' standing in front of me right now, with your sexy five o'clock shadow and those hot curls," again running her hands through my hair, allowing the ends of her fingers to drift down the outline of my jaw.

Her touch makes me shudder and involuntarily pull slightly away but she continues on, oblivious it seems, to my revolt.

"You look ten years younger and way

hotter, totally the kind of guy I always hoped for. It's almost maybe like I did you a favor taking a time out with Bob."

"I mean, don't get me wrong...I learned a lot of lessons being with him. You know, there's a huge difference between spending money and having money. He spent money but never really had any. You, you always actually had money but you just never spent it the same way; seems kinda like I can't ever get what I actually want all in the same package."

And damn it, the bitch actually looks sad for the moment as she contemplates her apparent bad luck, but she shakes it off with another quick toss of her head to finish brightly, "You were a good guy all

‘round, ‘Bas. Your numbers all still the same?’”

I only nod in reply.

“Maybe we can go for a drink sometime and I can tell you the rest of the story. I’ll see you around, ‘kay?” She moves back out of my proximity hollering to the girls, “You can have him back now, ladies, treat him well,” with a backward look over her shoulder at me as the girls move rapidly to re-enter my airspace.

The girls are sudden tedium to me as I contemplate the encounter and they look for reaction from me with giggles, eye-rolls and not so subtle digs, “God, she was pretty but she was kinda old.”

I manage about ten more minutes

before I excuse myself to find Ty. He's busy chatting up one of the 'friends with benefits' bartenders he's acquired when I get over to him.

"Hey 'Bas, that little Jessica chick you've been hooking up with lately was just here. You know, the excitable one with the big tits. She's looking for you but I think that she just went off to pee."

"Oh really? Well I have bigger news...Michelle is here."

"No shit," all attention instantly shifting from the girl to me. "Risen from the dead is she? What did she want? What'd she look like?" his head twisting around for a glimpse of her.

"Dunno exactly, but she was hangin' all off me like she was totally digging

my act and she just hadn't seen me in a couple of weeks."

"Think she'd let you fuck her?"

"Definitely...actually I think she'd let me do anything I wanted to her. Date her again even... she likes the new me she says," I add with a lopsided grin.

"And?"

"And if she was the last woman on the planet, the human race would die out." I realize it the same moment the words come out of my mouth, my heart growing hard and cold at her unexpected re-entry into my already messed up life.

"That Bob guy turned out to be a shit just like you, fiancé and everything. She was his piece on the side, his back-up plan.

Ty whistles at that and laughs but before we can proceed any further we're interrupted by the returning Jessica, bladder all back in order.

"Sebastian, there you are!" With a jolly giggle and an open, happy face. "Oh good, I was hoping I'd run into you. Come meet my friends. I told them all about you the other day."

"What're you doing here?"

"Celebrating my birthday with the girls from work."

"Your birthday? I'm sorry, I'd no idea it was coming up." And smiling I continue "See you're still young enough to want to tell people....me...not so much anymore."

"I didn't think to tell you about it," she

replies laughing at my comment on the age gap, “but never mind about that, we’re here celebrating all my youngness and now you can join in and help.”

Jessica is the newest member of my collection of repeat hook-ups, a lively, fun girl with sexuality to spare and no need of the ties that bind. She’s a recent arrival in town, having secured a job as a clerk in a law firm about three months prior. I like her because of her cheerful, easy attitude and the fact that she’s always just looking to have fun. Jolly, no pretense, and as yet, no serious demands.

“Come on,” grabbing me by the hand and pulling me in the direction she wants me to go. “Come and meet them. I’ve

been bragging and they're starting to think that you don't actually exist."

I'm pulled along by the sheer force of her enthusiasm and the fact that my head feels so jumbled that I'm no longer sure what I want to do. With a backward glance at Ty and a shrug, I follow her across the bar to the back room where the booths are set-up.

She arrives joyfully, bouncing to a stop at a large table of women, me dutifully in tow to play my part.

"I found him...he's here, like I told you he would be."

Sebastian, meet Pam and Jody, Laurie, Stacey, Amber," pointing at each in turn, me starting eye-contact all down the line and nodding in polite co-operation just

as a sudden, searing, recognition begins and I realize that I can already provide the names for her as she circles the table. “Jennifer, Allison, Phillipa, Sue,” and pointing finally to the end “and Michelle,” grinning with delight and rolling straight into her next statement.

Michelle.

“Hey, Michelle, remember when I told you about the guy who just kept doin’ it all night long like he just didn’t know how to quit and you said that you once had a husband like that? Well, this is the guy I was talking about!”

Awkward silence descends into the crowd of women that Michelle has worked with for years. All eyes move in unison with mine toward the last spot

at the table occupied by my ex-wife.

Everyone watches as she briefly makes eye contact with me; tight smile, deep blush, and eyes shiny with instant tears, before she drops her gaze back to the glass in front of her with a slightly perceptible nod.

Only the silence remains as Jessica looks from her to me, and back again, eyes widening with sudden understanding while I realize in the same sickening moment that I've never once asked her where she worked, kicking myself to think how easy and essential it would've been to do so. And while my diseased ego nevertheless gains a sick satisfaction from the public discussion of my sexual prowess, the better part of

me is mortified for us all.

“Oh my God...no way...really?” An unself-conscious giggle escapes, “really? Oh, this is awkward. But girl,” looking directly at Michelle, “what were you thinking? You must have been out of your mind to let this one go.” She grabs my arm in momentary possession, as of a prize now potentially in jeopardy.

And Michelle, mustering up all courage, makes direct eye contact briefly with me again, and manages to say, with the hint of a quaver in her voice that only I can hear, “Yes, I’m starting to think exactly that.”

Allison, long-time friend and colleague to Michelle, is first to the rescue as the fiasco unfolds, quickly

rising from the table to exchange smiles with me and give me a sympathetic hug and kiss on the cheek before turning to the comfort of Michelle.

I turn too, my back to the table, facing toward Jessica and pull her gently away to a safe speaking distance.

“Hey...happy birthday...I’d love to hang out, but I think my being here’ll be uncomfortable for everyone.”

A little giggle escapes her lips as she smiles, kisses me on the cheek and says, “Pretty sure you’re right about that. Sorry ‘bout all this, I had no idea. I’ll call you in a couple days and maybe you can give me the present I’d prefer then,” and with a big grin she turns back to the table.

I smile and nod, amazed that she doesn't appear the least bit concerned that all the people she knows in this town are now going to have a very different view of her. Perhaps life is sometimes lived best when we choose ignorance.

I seek out Ty to tell him my sordid tale and instead of sympathy, he laughs.

“That’s fucking classic, dude. Wish I’d followed after you to have seen it for myself.”

“You know what Ty, this is why I never wanted to do any of this in the first place. I’m way too old to be playing these kinds of reindeer games anymore.”

“So what, you think you’d be better off dating that Bailey chick you had the

hots for a while ago?”

I just look at him, pondering blankly for a moment. “Yeah I do, couldn’t be harder than this. We need to go, I’ve had enough ‘fun’ for one night. I’m just gonna go over and say ‘night to those other girls I was talking to earlier. No point adding bad manners as well.”

He heads across the bar with me, moving ahead of me by three steps to close the distance to the girls before I can.

“Ladies, I’ve got to steal your boy here from you. I’ve got a serious pain in my head and he’s my ride. I know I’m wrecking your fun,” he says to their disappointed faces, “but tell you what, next time, drinks are on me,” instantly

replacing their frowns with grins.

These girls are deep, I tell you: take their candy, they sulk. Promise to replace it, they smile. But Ty's surprised me by taking one for the team and I'm grateful for the cover he's providing. I tell the blonde that I'll call her in a couple days and that we'll plan to do something soon.

Michelle and Allison are talking near the exit as we walk by, Michelle looking up and making eye contact once more as I pass.

“Can we talk sometime?”

I smile, say “sure, sometime,” and head out into the night without looking back.

What started out as a good time has

turned into a nightmare.

SEVENTEEN – ‘So Much to Say’
– Dave Matthews Band

On Friday Michelle calls me and I let it go to voice mail. She calls me on again Sunday and I let it go to voice mail, watching the phone vibrate with the demand for contact. She calls me again, again, and I let it go to voice mail. Then I delete all the messages, unheard, like they haven't happened.

I don't want to hear what she has to say, listen to her chat me up because she thinks she likes what she saw. I'm not ready to hear more complaints and excuses about the past. I only want one thing – to know what I missed, what she

hid from me that allowed me to make such a bad choice in a spouse.

It galls that I have to live with my shitty life because she wasn't happy. Not being 'happy' is an emotion, a feeling, not a course of action; but it's certainly an attitude and a demand.

My cell rings again two days later and I answer this time, my sense of fair play and my manners finally getting the best of me. It has to have been deeply humiliating to have Jessica bounce up to the table and make her pronouncement, even if Michelle did make the choice to leave. I wonder if it doesn't mean some sort of apology might not be in order, if only for the embarrassment it caused her.

“Okay, talk.”

“Bas, my God, could you not have asked some questions before sleeping with that girl? Did you care so little that it didn't even matter where she worked or what she did for a living? Are you that big a piece of crap?”

Not a good place for her to start and it makes me instantly angry that I need to defend myself.

“Yes I am and no I didn't care. I don't want to date her, I don't want to marry her, I just want to sleep with her. And what could it possibly matter to you? You made your decision. What do you care now how I live my life?”

“Is this how you are now?”

“Yes, this is the new me. The me with cool clothes and a bad attitude,

hanging out in bars arranging to get laid like you found so hot the other night. What headspace did you think would be accompanying the image?"

"I don't know...I guess I never thought about it."

"Well, start thinking about it. You left me. You took all my plans, you took all my dreams and left me standing at thirty-eight with *nothing* but a ticking clock. It took me years to find a woman that was everything I thought I needed. That woman was you, and look what you turned out to be - a self-centered bitch so needy for attention and fun that you found a piece on the side without EVER letting me even know that you were unhappy. You tell me how I missed that, you tell

me what part you faked.”

I can hear a small, choked sound on the other end of the phone but I continue on regardless, hard-hearted and seeking my pound of flesh.

“I’ll tell you what, when you can tell me what you hid from me while I was busy falling in love with you, then we can talk. It’s the only thing I really want to hear and until you know the answer, we have nothing to say to each other.”

And I hang up, shut my mind to her contact and keep mentally moving. I have bigger things to worry about. I can’t find work and December, with the last of my payout coming, looms hard in front of me. Nobody gets the chance to mess with me twice.

I do not care what shit she has to sell, that mendacious, mercurial bitch. She never even actually asked me once how I was, how I've managed since she left me and whether I'm even okay. That question seems to have escaped her.

All she saw was what she wanted now. The realization that she's still just looking for a good time after I worked hard to be a good husband grows my developing cancer tenfold.

Yet as days pass and my spirit calms again, the new idea that maybe she never wanted the same things from marriage that I did comforts me in a strange way. It makes me wonder if I can't make it work with someone else if I ask the right questions this time.

But employment is what's really pressing on me. Girls are a sideline. What are girls when you begin to worry about the quantity and quality of the money coming into your pocket?

I apply for unemployment and look at the information provided. It doesn't take long to realize that while I've generously contributed to the gross domestic product at a significant level for ten years, my payout will be an insignificant drop into the puddle of cash that I need to maintain the lifestyle I acquired during those years.

I guess the government's assuming that I've built my own safety net, saved enough of my own money in the fat years to make it through the lean ones. And as

I begin to calculate how robust my savings truly are, I start to worry whether my nest egg will carry me through.

I'm suddenly glad of the monies forked over at intervals from Ty and Pete, and further glad that I had the foresight to save some from the bi-weekly payouts still coming from my former employer

While I worry about my safety net, Pete's begun to set a different pace centered around his responsibilities as a parent. Meaghan's tired of her single mom status and begs for relief every other weekend so that she can visit her cousin Suzie and have some of the 'good life'. Without hesitation, he complies

and moves into their household on those weekends to look after the motley collection of children circumstance has acquired for him.

I admire his diligent application of principle and wonder if I could do the same in a similar situation.

One weekend at the end of November he has Re-Pete all to himself and brings him to the house instead. Ty disappears from view when he first arrives, but Pete and I organize a hunting trip for the boy to keep him busy.

I catch the boy looking wistfully at Pete when he thinks no one else's watching. Re-Pete is ten, a seven-month baby that made us all question the timing of the marriage. He touches nothing in

my house that he ought not to. He asks no questions and makes no demands, spending hours playing video games in my back guest room, sadness hanging on him like a shadow. He eats almost nothing, seeming to have no appetite and Pete has to constantly remind him to stop chewing his nails.

“He’s never done that before, you know. It’s a new thing, just sits and picks and picks. I have to keep yelling at him to get his fingers out of his mouth and then he just looks at me like I beat him. And he cries whenever I have to leave. It just kills me.”

They say that kids are resilient but I wonder at a society that’s become so cavalier in testing out the theory. You’d

never throw a child in front of a moving object to check the sturdiness of his body and yet so many parents are throwing their children in front of the moving buses that are their headlong pursuit of personal happiness. Watching him, I doubt in his resilience, though I'm sure he'll adapt, he has no choice. But what he's lost - security, surety, a sense of place and order - will probably never come back.

When they wrote the new divorce laws in the sixties, arguing that it had to be done to rescue women from bad marriages they could not escape without help, I'm sure that no one, save a few wise voices, foresaw the devastation to come. In all the divorces I know of, the

argument is always over the demand for 'happiness' rather than to escape true harm. Our children, these 'resilient' children are the ones force-fed the lesson of resilience that their own parents refused to learn.

It makes me sick to watch him quietly suffer.

We take him hunting with us on the Saturday morning, meeting up with a fairly large contingent that includes my father and his long time hunting buddies.

Getting Re-Pete up in the early hours to take him along is a dream come true for both Pete and I. Pete as an exercise in tradition, and me in a vicarious fatherhood that I'm coming to doubt I'll ever have of my own. All hunters want

to ensure the continued traditions that go along with deer camp, telling stories and exaggerating the feats of our hunting, how many yards or how difficult the shot in a vibrantly, joyfully masculine experience.

Pete hasn't ever hunted as much as I, never managing more than a couple days with us during the season. Much as he may have wanted to hunt more, his desire to go was always hampered by the demands of family and an unsympathetic wife. So this season offers a freedom he lacked for many years and he happily embraces his opportunity.

We start Re-Pete out in the morning with his dad. He's finally in a sunny

mood, smiling and excited like the boy I remember. We set them up at the best stand on the property trying to ensure he sees deer. They've no luck and see nothing but squirrels and birds. Even that doesn't dampen his spirits.

"Why don't you move him over to 'Bas?" says Ty over lunch, "Re-Pete, buddy, he's lucky, he always sees deer."

"Can I, Dad?" Asks Pete squirming anxiously in his seat, looking from face to face as we discuss it over the top of his head.

"Sure you can if you can promise me to do exactly as he says."

"I can do that, Dad. I promise."

It's almost two o'clock when we return from lunch and slide into a blind

made of hay bales cut for the dairy cows on the farm behind us. Re-Pete and I whisper together as I tell him where the deer will probably come from and what I want him to do. My instructions are simple: try to move as little as possible. I'll point any deer out to him, but when I do he can't move to get a better look. If the rifle is on my shoulder, he needs to make sure that he doesn't move until I put the rifle back on my lap. He grins, excited about the fact we may finally see something.

Hours pass for the poor kid with nothing happening and he's quite desperately bored. The sadness slowly comes back too and he begins to chew his nails.

“Stop chewing your nails, Pete. Here, take this. Do you know what it is?”

“Yup, it’s a deer call.”

“Sure is, do you know how to use it?”

“I think so...”

His spirits brighten as he tries it out. He smiles with eyes shining up at me as the funny artificial noises emit from the end of the call.

“Will they come now? And if we see deer can you shoot one? I want to see one get shot. Will it be gross when you pull its guts out? Sebastian, do you really think we’ll get to shoot one?”

“Sure,” I chuckle, “but you understand that if we do, then that deer will never walk again and instead will end-up on the dinner table, right? The guts totally

stink like crazy, and yes, it'll be pretty gross.

“I get it...it'll be okay if it's gross, I've killed Nazi zombies on my video game before,” he answers as he pats my arm to assure me that he understands. While he's still whispering I catch movement in the lower field about a hundred and fifty yards away and know that finally something exciting will happen.

I lean over slowly, “Pete, look straight ahead just to the end of the field. What do you see?”

“DEER! Sebastian, its deer, just like you said...they came! Will you shoot'em?”

“I'm going to start shooting in just a

second. You stay still.” Out of the corner of my eye I can see him raising his hands to cover his ears.

It’s a buck and a yearling. I’ve two tags, can legally kill both and quickly decide that I’ll see if I can pull off the double. I’ve done it many times before but never with a witness.

I draw in my breath, let half out, focus through the scope, gently squeezing the trigger until the gun explodes in the quiet afternoon. Instantly as I chamber another round, I can see that the yearling is down. Swinging the rifle to the left it passes right in front of the buck, now startled and starting to run. I pick a point some feet ahead where I’m confident this one is heading, and as it

enters the scope squeeze the trigger again. “BOOM.” I bolt the action, place the safety on and drop the rifle to my lap.

I haven’t even had time to look to the result before I hear, “that was AWESOME...you got both of them! You did it, they’re both so dead.”

Smiling, “Yeah...but now the real work begins. You ready? We gotta gut them and get ‘em onto the truck. Let’s go buddy.”

Walking together across the clearing, Re-Pete and I, my rifle over one shoulder and my other hand on his shoulder, he asks me excited questions about what we’ll find when we get there.

Pete and Ty round the edge of the brush from the other side of the clearing,

summoned by the gun-fire and text messages. Pete's form comes into sight and Re-Pete takes off at a dead run, heading straight to his dad, excited words carried back to me on the wind.

"Dad, Dad...he killed them both and it was awesome," are the words tumbling out of Re-Pete's mouth when he finally reaches Pete, launching himself into his father's waiting embrace.

"I called them with the deer call and they came and then, boom...boom," his arms up in imitation of my actions. "And then they were dead, Dad," hands dropping to his side and looking in triumph at his father.

"Dad, it was so cool."

Gutting the deer doesn't inspire quite

the same enthusiasm in him, but he soldiers bravely on, holding our rifles as we eviscerate the poor, dead beasts. He gags a bit but nothing dampens his happiness, or ours, as he repeats over and over the sequence of events even still on our ride home, joyfully telling us about the deer calls that started it all in the first place, until he falls asleep in the back seat of my truck.

Crawling into bed in the evening I too review the day, deeply privileged to have been part of the adventure. That kid deserves some good memories. Maybe they'll help push out a few of the bad he'll inevitably have to carry with him the rest of his life. And I worry to myself whether I will ever have a son of

my own to hunt with.

EIGHTEEN – ‘Lost Art of Keeping a Secret’ – Queens of the Stone Age

December's a horrible time to try and get a job. In fact it's the worst of all the twelve months. Jobs are still posted on occasion after Thanksgiving, but no company really pushes until the new year arrives. They'd rather protect fourth quarter revenues, and aren't willing to add new staff right when holidays disrupt the natural work flow.

It depresses me, sinking me into a mild, daily coma staring mindlessly at my computer screen, clicking past postings in Timbuktu and other forgotten wastelands. That's what it appears to be

coming down to as the year closes, crazy ass off-shore postings in second world countries that I definitely know I don't want to live in, even if I would agree to visit.

I finally have one call in December with a recruiter, having set up the interview by email the previous day.

“Steve, it's Don from X Agency. Nice to talk with you finally about the VP position in tele-sales. Let's start by having you explain your work history. Start me at the beginning.”

We proceed through my resume, me talking about my strengths and weaknesses for almost twenty minutes; referring to previous employers, him calling me Steve a couple more times,

confusing me. But I'm on a roll and choose to ignore it until he stops me dead in my tracks by asking me to review my work history at such and such a company.

"Pardon me? Don't you mean 'X'? I've never worked for 'Y' company."

"Uh...no, it says right here that you spent five years with them in the early nineties."

"Noooo...I've never worked for them." Sudden concern enters my voice.

"Oh...ummm...let me see, Steve Bernard, right?"

"No, Sebastian Behr."

"Oh damn, I'm sorry...I have Steve's resume in front of me. He's actually my one thirty call just before yours." A

sudden shuffle of paper audible through the phone. “Right, here it is...your résumé’s just under his in the pile in front of me. Sorry about that,” he ends with an embarrassed laugh.

I laugh too, trying to set him at ease, and feeling immensely relieved. “Oh that’s okay, can we just finish up with mine and then you can call Steve?”

“Well, no, I’m gonna call him right now since he’s expecting my call and then I’ll call you back.”

But he doesn’t. In fact, I never hear from him again.

Recruiters are a colossal pain in my ass. I understand why companies use them but slowly start to wonder who screens the recruiters before they screen

your potential hires?

It can be a lucrative business, this recruiting for companies. A company can receive a fee of up to thirty percent of your agreed wage if they are the ones that place you, but it's also a competitive business when the recruiting companies get pitted against one another. Then it's 'dog eat dog' because only the company who places the hire gets any money.

They're often all the same, very excited on the first contact, treating you like you're the great hope that will put their company first in the sweepstakes to fill the position. They're all your new best friend on call number one and it's only on call two or three that you really

begin to be able to see what they are worth. By call two and three you can start to tell whether they're organized, whether they can read a resume accurately and understand the needs of the position they're working to fill, whether they actually call you back in the time frames they set for you or follow through on the requests for information that you make.

The worst part is that they get you all excited about a position, how good a fit you are. Recruiters always sell the job to you, make you feel like you're the only guy with a chance and then they drop you without a word, return calls for clarification unanswered, the second you are no longer in the running. I

understand their time pressures and business need to focus only on good potential hires, but often they seem to forget the people on the other end of the equation — the great, anxious unemployed masses they treat so carelessly.

Every time they get me excited about a position I begin to think I might be able to plan again. I put mental effort into preparing for the next stages of the hire, I research, I study. So you wait and wait, anxious for the phone to ring, hesitant to leave the house lest you get a call standing in line at the check out, or worse, missing it entirely. And after two weeks, your anxiety subsides when you realize, once again, that the silence

is the answer. You are out of the running.

It's an emotional roller coaster way worse than dating.

And not only are they inconsiderate some of them are also incompetent, stupid and under prepared. I have a conversation with one guy, finally succumbing to what I think is an offshore posting, who talks about the work being located "somewhere on the north side of the island" and it comes out slowly that the 'island' is Australia.

Facing a lack of postings on job boards, I decide to begin privately networking the professional contacts I've acquired over the years. It's a nightmare of a different sort calling

people you left behind and haven't spoken to in ages.

The conversations are always the same, light banter that nobody really buys into, catch-up that horribly, inevitably, involves me listening politely about their perfect lives until we get around to questions about mine. Then I have to cough up the details of my private life I so wish not to discuss and, worse, move right on to the begging part where I talk about unemployment and whether they know of anything in their company or field. It's like repeatedly pimping yourself out, and I start to wonder whether or not doing porn might not just be less painful. At least I'd be getting paid for having to be so

embarrassingly naked.

The only bright spot in the weeks leading up to Christmas is a call out of the blue from Bailey. Her voice on the other end of the line cheers me up. More than that, honestly, of all the women I've taken to dinner or to bed in all these months, she's the only one that really intrigues me.

“Ok, I've forgiven you, you can't help that your buddies behaved stupidly. Want to go Christmas shopping with me on Saturday?”

I don't particularly like her opening line, but I do know I like the girl.

“Ok, sure,” I say, wisely choosing not to defend the two people who have actually been by my side this whole,

horrible time. And we agree, after a few more minutes' conversation, that I'll pick her up on Saturday and she can help me pick appropriate gifts for my nieces and family.

The cooling December air that is the start of winter in the south tugs at my hair as I get out to open the car door for her. She looks wonderful in a clinging rosy colored sweater and jeans. Her hair is pulled up in a ponytail, face with only the slightest make-up, fresh and bright in the afternoon sun.

We hit the nearby mall, looking at clothes, toys and other random things as I ponder what to get. She buys her own presents, while I, more or less get ideas, thinking mostly about what the nieces

will want and trying to make sure that I don't step on any of my families' toes by buying something that isn't right.

She argues, standing in a jewelry store, for diamond earrings for the girls.

"They're only little, what do they need diamonds for?"

"Every girl needs diamonds 'Bas. And they aren't that little. You said the oldest is already seven. That's not too early to start learning to take care of things."

I'll admit I'm intrigued by the idea. I don't want to be inappropriate, but it might just cement my position as the awesome uncle who always gets the best presents. Just the same, a Barbie car might have the same effect.

“I don’t know...it seems extravagant...I’m going to call my mom and see what she thinks before I buy them.”

We wander for another couple of hours and then head out to eat at one of the restaurants that surround the mall.

I’m sincerely enjoying myself. This is the sort of interaction and relationship that I want and this is just perfect: ordinary tasks with someone fun to be with. For the first time in a long time, I’m content and almost happy.

Dinner draws to a close and she invites me back to her house. I’m delighted to accept.

Her neat, tidy apartment smells like her.

“Com’on in. Go sit on the couch and I’ll get you a drink. Ignore the cat if she tries to climb on you.”

We drink some beer and watch a movie. Mid-way through, casually sitting on opposite ends of the couch, Bailey reaches over and takes off my shoes, grabbing my ankles and turning me long ways on the couch. Without a word she slides lengthwise along my body to lay her head on my chest, like this is something we’ve always just done.

I hold my breath for a moment, stomach in a sudden ungoverned flip-flop, before I relax and let it all happen to me. I let myself enjoy it, thinking this possibly might the best night ever: hot

girl, fun date, and now a venture into my personal space that I don't mind at all.

I'm beginning to think that I *really* like this girl.

We watch the movie to the end, not saying much except to laugh together when it's funny. I slowly move my hand into her hair, just holding her close in a comfort I've not felt in a long, long time.

As the credits roll she silently takes my hand, leading me to the bedroom. I start from the top, undressing her carefully, hardly believing my luck. But I'm nervous too, anxious to do well, worrying at each point about timing, rhythm, performance. I do not want to under perform for this girl. I look at that spot on the wall, think of Roseanne Barr

naked, anything to delay my climax. I work the different positions and I leave nothing behind. In the end I'm satisfied that it's possibly my best sexual performance in a long, long time.

Exhausted, I lie there and think about what could come of this...momentarily allowing daydreams of the possibilities. "Babe, Bailey, do you want me stay or should I head out?"

I know that not everyone likes to share a bed; the intimacy of sex is not the same intimacy of a shared bed. I'm comfortable either way. She smiles a sweet wistful smile at me and says she's got a very busy day tomorrow, that it may be best if I go home. I smile too, a little lopsided, slightly chagrined as I

pull my clothes on and kiss her on the forehead before heading out of the room.

I stop in the doorway turning back to say, "I'll call you tomorrow. I had a great time."

"Me too," she responds.

Everyday for the next three days I call her, joyfully, hopefully, waiting to hear her voice on the other end of the phone, but I never seem to be able to catch her. Misgivings wash over me. I know she told me she'd be busy, but this is starting to be crazy.

On the fourth day, I get a call from her and she says, "We need to talk about the other night..."

My heart sinks inside of me as I review in fast forward, looking for

anything I might have done wrong, preparing for the body blow that I can feel is coming.

“Look,” a sudden catch in her voice, “umm...the other night...you were great but...it kinda felt like I wasn’t even there, wasn’t a part of the exercise. I mean, don’t get me wrong, the mechanics were great...you did all the right things technically...but honestly, you kinda made me feel like I should be paying you rather than you actually wanting me. I felt like you weren’t so much having sex with me, but more like putting on a performance.”

I’m sick to my stomach as I listen to the rest of the dialogue, which concludes with her declaration that she just feels

there wasn't a connection between us.

I hang up the phone and just sit. I don't even drink beer. I just sit.

When I don't try, I fuck up my own headspace. When I do try I get fucked up in my headspace. It's like I'm a teenager again, women a mysterious landscape I can't comprehend even if my body can take all the right steps and walk all the known pathways.

A beaming Ty comes into the house just after six, bragging only minutes through the door that he's having a huge month.

"It's awesome 'Bas, there are so many great deals out there, my returns look fantastic."

I don't even respond except to look at

him shitty-eyed, but he doesn't even notice, just rolls right on. "And you know what, if it keeps up like this I probably will only have to head into the office a couple times a week next year. How great would that be?"

I'm pissed. It's insensitive since I have no job and it sets me off.

"That's just great, that's just fucking great. Glad to hear you're having a banner year picking up undervalued stocks off the backs of the destitute while I have to have conversations with guys that refer to Australia as an 'island'."

"I tell you what," now totally losing my temper and ranting like a fool. "The government ought'a tax every company

that puts more than fifty percent of their workforce offshore every time some stranger takes a job from an American. You know what, forget that, they ought'a ban it entirely until every American who wants a job, has one. And even then they ought to fucking tax the hell out of them, like they've taxed the hell out of me. Better still, why don't they just send them all back home, all those indigents that land on our shores 'yearning to be free' who suck on the tit of the mother government that takes them in?"

“Do you know, you smug dumbass, that I've paid into Social Security and unemployment and every goddamn thing for twenty plus years? I've done my part, and do you understand, do you

comprehend for even a minute, that I'm going to get less on unemployment than I would by retiring and drawing on Social Security? Do you realize that *they* all made the mess and now I'm not even going to get enough each month to cover my bills? Do you get that I have fuckin' paid into the safety net over and over at higher rates than most people earn in a year, and they're gonna give it back to me like I worked at McDonald's all this time?"

"Have you stopped and thought for even half a second, what that must feel like, you pompous ass, with your fucking 'great returns'?"

And Ty, for once in his life, just stands speechless with open mouth,

stuttering finally to say “Hey, I’m sorry...”

“Fuck your ‘sorry’, what’s your ‘sorry’ gonna do for me? And you know what makes it worse? What makes it way worse? That now ‘cause of you and your ‘Midnight Plumber’ bullshit, I fuck some chick that I really like and I can’t even connect. She dumps me because I fuck like a champion but can’t even make her feel like a woman, can’t convince her I actually care!”

Finally, he bristles. “What does fucking have to do with caring? Caring is taking out the garbage, caring is being there everyday. Fucking is a job, an exercise, a payout. You fuck women because that’s what they all want in the

end no matter what they say at first. They don't want caring. They want your body, your soul, your will, until its bent into a shape they can control and then they can own you, can make you pay-out on command."

I look at him, stupefied for the moment that I have *ever* listened to him. "Oh yeah, you fucked up genius? When did you learn that completely messed up fucking idea?"

"When I was thirteen and a half and four Goddamn days, you asshole. From that lady down the street that I mowed the lawn for."

And by the time I can blink and re-open my eyes, slow comprehension filtering through me, he's gone, headed

fast for the stairs to his room.

Never mind beer. Tonight the whisky bottle is my friend.

NINETEEN – ‘Times Like These’ – Foo Fighters

I wake feeling terrible that I so completely lost my temper with Ty. I should've been happy for him, it's not his fault I'm unemployed and his own efforts are paying off.

Worse still, I stepped so carelessly on that third rail in Ty's life; the one secret I know that so completely explains Ty, that in my anger I didn't incorporate or consider.

It causes me to ponder in my adult mind, about that secret I've known and have never seriously included in my understanding of him. I've known for a

long time, once told in a moment of drunken confession during our worst hound dog years, and quickly moved it into the back of my head for contemplation later.

I never did go back to it; never thought about it again, never included it in my understanding. He never talked about it again either. Not it happening and not him telling me about it. I left him to his privacy at the time, just as relieved not to have to discuss or imagine it, to work as a young man to understand what it might mean. But how might such a thing, so insidious and pervasive have damaged all his perceptions of the wiles, methods and intentions of the 'fairer sex.' And have I used his

prevailing attitude to excuse my own actions in the trials and tribulations that I created for myself and the others in connection to me?

Even now it confuses and flusters me and I jam it hard into that box in my head, determined only that, in the future, I will be more careful in my more callous and ungenerous judgments of my friend. That the violation occurred and that it injured him, seems suddenly awfully apparent, as I contemplate his lost years leading to forty.

“But I can make French toast for breakfast as a peace offering,” I conclude as I brush my teeth.

“French toast, my fave,” says Ty not thirty minutes later “what the hell did I

do to deserve this?” Grabbing the coffee pot and sitting at the place setting laid on the kitchen island while I ladle the first serving onto the waiting plate.

“Nothin’ ‘cept that I was a jerk last night. I was just mad and shooting off my mouth, it wasn’t fair. I’m proud of you, man...it’s quite an accomplishment and you deserve the rewards. Good for you.”

“Nah, it’s nothin’,” mouthful of breakfast impeding his syllables. “Sorry you’d a bad day, should’a thought about it first.”

I realize, looking at him, slightly hunched up over his breakfast that the best thing I can do right now is restore our order, ignoring the hanging thread of

his comment from last night. And I understand that *again* it must go unrecognized, unacknowledged and unresolved. Some troubles, however pernicious, between men must sometimes always stay hidden.

However Ty determines for himself how best to deal with the demons that chase; I am equally determined to follow-up on Bailey's accusation that I fuck like a three dollar hooker and set up dinner with my notorious Jessica in search of additional feedback. I need to know from an impartial source what it's like, what I am like, in my mad pursuit for a connection that's somehow gone off the rails.

We meet at a place of her choosing, a

funny little Mexican restaurant with candle holders made from gourds and strings of dried chilies over the bar. She bounces in ten minutes after me, smiling and depositing a kiss on my cheek as she moves to seat herself.

“Well, I didn’t expect dinner after the last time I saw you!”

“Yeah...how’d that go?”

“Little like high school, surprisingly enough,” ending with her perpetual giggle. “But I managed it.”

“And after?”

“Well, it’s a little cooler at the office...” slight frown at the menu and smiling up at the waiter to place her drink order. “Fuck’em if they can’t take a joke. Nothing I can do...I didn’t

know.”

It's a nice dinner with lots of laughs and casual comments about the randomness of existence and I wait for a moment where I can ask my burning question without looking like an insecure asshole.

She helps me out finally at the close of a mouthful, “Our arrangement is a hook-up when required. Why you treating me suddenly like a girl, Sebastian?”

Damn, she may giggle, but it appears she ain't unconscious to changes in behavior.

“Well...uhmm...I mean...” Totally flat-footed in the face of her open question I fumble, desperately uncertain

how to ask my question.

“We...ahh...hook-up...but I’ve never asked to date you. How come you haven’t asked why?”

“Oh Sebastian, don’t you know the answer to that? Besides, who wants the answer to a question like that anyway? But I guess ‘cause it never seems you want me that way. Not sure you want anyone that way...can’t you tell inside yourself?”

“I guess...but how did *you* know?”

“Oh...” Easy laugh, “it’s simple really.”

“How?”

“You never touch any of the parts that really matter.”

“I mean you have the mechanics down

pat, trust me,” laughing again, “you know how to touch all the right parts that *technically* matter: grab one breast then the other, lick something. And then when you move your hand at the right time to the right places, you know,” moving her own hand, with a giggle, into her lap.

“But you never touch the parts of me that *are* me. You never touch anything that’s about me: my hair, the back of my neck, slide your hand slowly down my waist before you move on to touch the good parts. Anything that would actually make me shiver. You do all the right things, but you don’t do anything that makes me feel like its really happening because you want it to be me.”

“You never touch me in a way that makes feel that it’s about a connection, and not just this thing we happen to be doing together.”

“Oh God, Sebastian...” looking at my crestfallen face, “didn’t you know?”

“I don’t know...I suppose...I think I did. But why do you let me?”

“Well...that’s a bigger question and makes me want a cigarette. Because sometimes good enough is better than nothing. I suppose because at least somebody cared enough to attempt to get the obvious parts right. And once you know that they can’t get the rest right, you just make do with what you’ve got. It can still be great sex if you choose to forget it’s missing the parts that make it

worth something.”

“I guess ‘cause it’s still kinda fun, right?” she says, fiddling suddenly with the spoon to the left of her napkin.

“I’m sorry.”

“Why be sorry? You’re doing what you agreed to and I’ve accepted it... that’s the deal, right?” she looks me directly in the eye as she moves to collect her things.

We stand moments later outside the door of the restaurant, bill paid and the rest of the evening opening to us.

“You coming over?”

“No,” leaning over to kiss her on the cheek in goodbye, “I don’t think so. Not sure I’d like to be ‘good enough’ just right now.”

““Bas, I think that might just be the sweetest thing you’ve ever said to me.” And she leaves me with a hard kiss directly on my mouth, turning from me as I watch her leave and enter her car.

But I don’t call her again. Know that I never will; she comprehends my Achilles heel. And my cell doesn’t ring again with her number and I know that she understands.

Jessica.

So then Christmas falls upon me, with all its attendant family circumstances.

I choose all my gifts with purpose, hoping to leave a mark: Ty, monogrammed flask; Re-Pete, BB-gun; Pete, microwave; brother, certificate to Crate and Barrel; nieces, Wii with girly

games. No earrings.

I save the earrings for my gift to Bailey, the earrings she thought would be so perfect for my nieces, in a mad attempt to make up for the fact that I messed it up once again. I mail them with the nicest note I can compose: "I am sorry. I think they'd look nice in your ears. Regards, 'Bas."

I get an odd, impersonal delivery in the mail in return two days before Christmas, a subscription for the 'Beer of the Month' club. I can only think, *"Great, twelve months to remember with each flip of the calendar that I fucked it up. Bonus. The gift that keeps ever on giving."*

Ty, Pete and I spend a dissolute

Christmas Eve with each other watching TV specials, trying not to catch each other's eye. Trying not to allow the question, 'What the hell are we doing here?' to enter the conversation. I'm spending Christmas Eve with the boys I love best but when I look at our lives, I can't help but wonder, what lottery did we *not* win?

We open our respective gifts at midnight and they've been generous to me, choosing a large hunting portrait of a Brittany spaniel to finally fill the spot created when Michelle left. That, and my own personal game of Twister.

Christmas morning starts early, shaken from sleep to summon Pete to the phone. It's Meaghan crying 'uncle'. Her plans

are all in place and she's leaving for greater support, forty minutes away with her cousin Susie.

Thirty days from now.

She's done, finished already with carrying the demands of family without support. No longer willing to be a wife, but desperate to reduce some of the burdens acquired by the decision to go it alone. Re-Pete is the child she's decided to shake off in pursuit of a life more to her liking, leaving him, and the house, to Pete.

His face is indescribable on this Christmas morning, as if all the angels in heaven had shone their faces upon him and granted him the gift closest to his heart. He accepts without protest, only

working diligently to ask for access to the other two on her off weekends until she knows what else she chooses to do.

“Mother fucker, I’m not even going to have to fight. He’s mine, and I am gonna make damn sure that nothing bad ever happens to that boy again. Or the others either, if she lets me.”

“Goddamn, she’s a piece of crap,” as he slides a piece of bread into the toaster, grabbing a beer. “Merry Christmas, man....cheers,” grinning real big in my direction.

He’s still there at my counter, shaking his head at his unbelievable good fortune about an hour later as I head off to the loving arms of my family. Now that’s a Christmas present.

My family welcomes me with the smell of pity all over them, all trying at each turn to have it not actually show.

“Sebastian, the girls love the games. Thanks for the gift certificate...we’ve been holding off buying that Cusinart and now we can.”

We set in on Christmas dinner, laying waste to my mother’s efforts for seven in quick time. I watch them all eat and banter back and forth while I decide that I hate turkey and everything it stands for.

They are all so nice to me I could spit.

At thirty-nine I’m suddenly the one to manage, the one whose feelings need to be taken into consideration, the one everyone wants to make sure feels included.

My brother, over drinks after dinner, touches *my* third rail, “Hey Sebastian, it’s been a while... given any thought to finding a girl and trying to get married again? It’s not that bad you know.”

“Shawn...are you kidding me? I never gave up on marriage, it gave up on me. Do you know that right now I could find twenty women on any given night that might volunteer to be the next Mrs. Behr?”

“And...”

“And they’re all lying. They need a baby daddy or a meal ticket, they have daddy issues or they say they don’t need a man ‘at all’ while they grab your cock. Or no matter how hard you may be trying you still just don’t make their

grade. That's what I'm dealing with. I found my girl and even bitch as she turned out, I'm thinking slowly that she just might be hard to replace."

"Sure you aren't just getting jaded?"

"Jaded? Ever had a chick get out of bed to make an omelet because she's had her fill and lets her roommate tag team her like it's a relay? You want me to pick a future Mrs. Behr out of that scenario? It's a wild, wild world out there. The good ones are already taken or back on the market because 'Mr. Right' turned out to be an asshole with a gig on the side, and they're bitter. You have no idea, and my advice...no matter how bad it gets...stay where you are and make it work."

“Two chicks and an omelet?”

“Yeah, two chicks and an omelet... you really wanna make me tell that story like it has a happy ending for me?”

“Did you do it?”

“Course I did it...wouldn't you? But the best part was the omelet, it was epic. Anything else you want to know... you wanna know cup sizes?” As I rise to vacate what was, until moments ago, a comfortable spot. “B plus and a solid C. The B plus gave it up way better...go figure.”

I know that my brother doesn't mean harm, but this constant tension from the successfully hooked is so irritating. It's like they can't decide which line they want to follow -- the strong virtuous

support of the institution of permanent selection, or the thrill of listening to how dirty it still can really get.

“Jaded? Fuck yes, I’m jaded.” I think as I head to my room to hide from the vicarious inquiry; so glad that my parents installed televisions in each bedroom as the ultimate anesthetic for every ill.

So I hide out in my old room, heading to watch TV for the three days every time any one of them tries to climb into my head and find out what’s actually brewing in there.

Success is a great time to let people in, to let them wander about in your joys. Everybody likes it. Sorrows and failure, on the other hand, don’t work

that way. Right when everybody then wants to fix it all, that's about the same time when you're just as sure that letting anybody in is a very bad idea. I let no one in.

I get through it and focus on the next big deal – New Year's. New Year's Eve, that big, Goddamn fuckin' deal. No matter what they say, on New Year's Eve everyone says good-bye to a good year or welcomes, in blind hope, a coming year that will end differently than the last one.

And everyone wants a kiss, even from a stranger, to secure for themselves some talisman that we are not alone in this vast universe; that someone, if they don't care yet, might still... one distant

day. Tell yourself whatever you want. We all want some guard against the fact that we're not walking into an unknown future alone. New Year's Eve is the epitome of hope. It's not about media hype, it's a nodded acknowledgement to the inexorable passage of time.

The decision, on returning home to my compadres, to go stag to a big and fancy New Year's Eve party is simple. We have nothing else that calls for our attention and we've lots to prove, if only to ourselves, that we don't really care.

I have a terrible conversation with Bailey in the space in between Christmas and New Years where she politely thanks me for a gift she clearly thinks beyond our current affinity.

“I like them, don’t get me wrong, but it’s too much. We aren’t even really dating. I’m not sure what you were thinking...but Sebastian...it’s just not like that right now. Maybe it can be one day, I don’t know...” clearing her throat. “But right now maybe you just need to focus on who you want to be; and I’m going to do all the things that I need to do. It’s okay, right?”

What can I say?

“Right, sure...I’m sorry...again.”

“I know that, but it doesn’t change anything does it?”

“Not if you don’t let me.”

“No...not if I don’t let you, it’s true. But what can you still possibly change in that messed up head of yours? When you

want to really try to be the person you tell me that you are, I'll listen. Until then it's probably best you work through it all in your own time."

Two unimportant, polite, closing comments later, I'm listening to a dial tone and I don't even know what to do with myself. I could have provided endless exculpations, protestations to the contrary, but she has it right. Only part of me, the part that does not want to be alone is working. The part that trusts what I see and feel and understand about myself, or anyone else, is still busted. Maybe best to let the girl go.

So I move on to what is right in front of me and manscape my chest because the hair there suddenly looks wild

again. And I pick my clothes, choosing my shirt and pants for the next big night out.

Ty secures us tickets to the hottest celebration in town and off we go, damn the consequences. Pete is happy, Ty...I don't know what. I'm bitter, hooked on the girl I can't have and facing an ocean of girls I don't want.

We hit the club and women are aplenty. All of us agree that the goal for the evening is to talk someone into being there at midnight for the 'kiss'. It's a pretty simple plan as we cruise at high-altitude, talking and mingling with many different women, some known and, thankfully, some not yet known. At least it might not be boring, that would really

suck.

It takes until around eleven for a hot girl to walk up to me from out of nowhere, and as I flash a smile she says, “Who’re you?”

I like this. No effort required on my part. “No one,” I reply.

“Well you can’t be nobody ‘cause, for a nobody, I’ve never seen so many people come up and talk to somebody at such a large event.”

Before I can even answer, she points to a table with two other beautiful women and says with a proffered handshake, “Well, ‘No One’, I’m Rebecca and I had to meet what appears to be the proverbial life of the party. If you care...we’re over there.”

“Well Rebecca, my name’s Sebastian and let me introduce you to my friends Ty and Pete,” looking instantly to locate my support network.

They aren’t far away, my urgent beckoning drawing them quickly into my orbit. They join me, eagerly shaking hands and follow my descent in Rebecca’s wake, pointing in unison towards the waving girls at the table, smiling instant ‘hello’s, heading like drones into the hive.

Ty almost knocks me over to get to the table first. I can’t even tell yet, in the short space of time, what’s drawing him in like a kamikaze in pursuit of glory.

But I find out damn fast. They’re all beautiful, but one, in spite of the waving,

looks at us all as we arrive with bemused tolerance, like she's just stolen candy from a baby and we're to be pitied for it. Sweet, sweet honey for Ty is what she is; a woman who thinks she recognizes him at the outset and has no intention to buy what he's selling. And he moves in to drop himself right down beside her.

Pete and I are content with the other two, seeing immediately that Ty has designs on the one. What does it matter to us? Pete's so happy he doesn't actually care tonight what happens; he has plans, moving as soon as his ex is out of the house. And I look at him, Happy New Years not mattering, proud of how he's bounced back. At least he

knows what he's got.

We sit at the table, ordering drinks that take forever to arrive in the New Year's bedlam and begin the chatter to fill the hour until midnight.

What a game. Can I get this total stranger, this Rebecca, to kiss me in sixty minutes? To kiss me as an eraser of the immediate past and a bulwark against the future; to ensure that I can make something happen that means mostly nothing but will make time stand still and fill it with potential?

I like this challenge. Soft lips are soft lips. They exist as a fact in the face of a thousand nothingness'. Truly, do I care?

I watch Ty too from the corner of my eye as he pursues the beautiful,

comparatively modestly dressed, Sophie to the right of him. I can see from her graceful movements and flashing eyes that she likes him, but she continually keeps herself out of too close proximity. And at the stroke of midnight, when we all lean in for our prizes, she kisses him on the cheek. I see and notice, even as the lovely Rebecca cooperates with me, totally sliding in a little tongue.

Yeah, I kept my eyes open. Hot is always available, Ty getting blocked, isn't.

Ty's face is priceless, totally thwarted and waiting for Sophie to get up and leave; having apparently passed on him, she must be ready to move on to her real conquest of the night. But she

goes nowhere. Continuing to sit and listen to him, continuing to flash those eyes, continuing with those graceful movements inclined in his direction.

It makes me take a hard look at her in an attempt to assess what game she's playing. I'm a wingman always. Sophie is beautiful: soft, round face, dark eyes, black hair spilling gently down over her back. A pale blue velvet dress covering her shoulders, but quietly displaying a modest expanse of great cleavage. It would make you weep if you thought about it.

This girl has it going on. She definitely appears to know it and just as resolutely appears not to intend to use it. She keeps on listening to him though,

intent on what he says, never letting the conversation die.

I'm mesmerized by the tableau as I watch them both head for the dance floor. I incline my head constantly toward Rebecca while I watch, but only momentarily turn my face to take in what she has to say until she finally responds in disgust, "Oh not another one!"

"Damn that girl. I told Ashley that we'd be stupid to go out with her, 'specially on New Years. You do know...look at me," grabbing my chin to swivel my head to look directly at her, "that no matter what...that girl, she ain't gonna give it up to your friend? She never does...ever."

"Honestly?"

“Yeah, may my mother strike me dead. She’s a great girl, but man what a buzz kill. Some guy is always falling for her and she just makes the rest of us look bad...’cause under the same circumstances we give it up and she never does. Don’t get me wrong, she’s a sweetheart, best friend you could ever have. But when it comes to guys...never makes a mistake.”

“Well Rebecca, tonight might just be your night ‘cause Ty is pretty much the king at getting women to make mistakes. Just watch.”

She laughs, sliding her hand into my lap right before she leans in and I feel just a little bit more of her tongue.

But who knew...at last call, Rebecca

turns out to be right as Sophie, who's driving, calls everyone to order in the sweetest way, herding all three women out of the night club to leave our unholy trio all 'dick in hand'. And Ty, to look at his face on this New Year's Eve, the high holy feast day of the random hook-up, you would think that a bomb had just gone up in his face.

TWENTY – ‘What It’s Like’ - Everlast

Ty can't stop talking about Sophie in the days after meeting her. Not from the time we hit the car and he proclaims success in securing her phone number to his first follow-up call three days later and onto securing an actual date.

“Bas, you would not believe how great this girl is. We had a forty minute conversation about that stupid stimulus bill with her telling *me* what was good, bad and ugly about it. And she was right on all points. She's incredibly smart, she's hot as hell and just as sweet. What a package.”

Sophie is thirty-two, an investment banker with a highly reputable firm, financially secure, the daughter of a stable marriage and sibling to four. She's totally a package from any viewing point.

“Hey Ty, I did tell you what her friend Rebecca said about her the night we met them all...”

“Yeah sure, you said that she's famous for not giving it up. But come on 'Bas, how seriously am I supposed to take that? It's what they all say on the front end and none of them mean it. Those types of girls just protest a little louder until they think they've convinced you they aren't easy; and then it *is* as easy as with the rest, just costs a bit

more in dinners. I can wait...she's not boring in the meantime. In fact so far, she's fantastic. It's two thousand and ten and even if you have to wait a while, everybody has sex eventually."

"Any sign she's gonna cave?"

"No...nothing. But that doesn't mean it ain't gonna happen. I figure maybe five, six weeks of dating and then, you'll see. She'll be all shy about it, but she'll let it happen." He looks up suddenly at me, just the hint of wistfulness around his eyes, "They're kinda nice when they're shy about it, you know? You don't find that a lot anymore."

"No Ty, you don't, especially not in our sand-box. 'Shy' is not a word that comes to mind. Speaking of which, you

gonna lay-off that ‘bartender with benefits’ in the meantime, while you explore your ‘Sophie’ option?”

“Not a chance,” and he laughs as he heads for the stairs.

I start back on the job hunt in earnest daily checking on-line postings and reaching out to old co-workers. I succeed only, in the first week, to manage to deeply disappoint myself in one case and socially embarrass myself on the other.

Business networking is great when you have a job. We all rely on connections, whether by looking to place business with a secure partner or by assuming that the guy you did a favor for ten years ago might just give you a break

on pricing 'cause he knows you're steady in the long run. We all rely on relationships. Just like nobody hires a babysitter for their kids they can't vouch for in some way or other, nobody either likes to do business with complete unknowns if they can help it. But I'm finding that without a job or title to encourage whoever you're calling to help you out, you tend to run into their social limitations even before their business ones. Cold calling an old business acquaintance for help finding work is when you find out what kind of person they really are in private.

Case in point: many years before, coming new into a project, I had saved a subordinate from a well-deserved

firing. He was only barely competent in the position, very rough on his staff and floundering in his client relationships – but I saved him, because when I looked at the situation I could see that he'd never been properly taught, mentored or supported. So instead of firing him, I took him on as my own project and spent the greater part of two years coaching him to success. I had to fight hard with my bosses to keep him and protected him more than once, all of which he was well aware of. In the end, he rewarded my faith in him and he succeeded far beyond his own expectations.

When I left the organization he was in great shape and in position to be promoted. We kept in fairly regular

touch over the years. So when I found a posting close to home for a company with which he still had peripheral business contacts, I was ecstatic. Finally, maybe, I would have an ‘in,’ and could get somebody to make a call to somebody else and try, just even try, to see if they couldn’t get my resume in front of the right person.

That’s all I was asking for and that’s when the fun started.

“Look...ahmmm...”

I knew instantly that I was pissing down a blind alley. The quicker the ‘and’ ‘umm’ ‘ah’s’ start the less likely that person is going to do anything to help you. It’s a universal stalling tactic, the ‘and’ ‘umm’ ‘ah’s.’ They fill the air

while the person does a mad scramble in the back of their head to find a way out that they think will not make them look like an asshole.

Too late. I speak asshole...fluently.

“Ahhh...you know...ahhh...I haven’t talked to that guy in six months and we weren’t ever really that tight...and umm... you know that business relationship went sour at the top and I’m really not sure how my boss’d feel about me reaching out to him. I mean, I’d love to help you any other way but...you know, I mean, you were a great boss, don’t get me wrong...I’d work for you again in a heartbeat but I just don’t think that there’s much I can do for you on this one. Sorry, really I am.”

I get an email from him two days later offering the guy's contact information, and suggesting I call him myself but by then, when I check back, the posting's already closed. So much for the rewards of sticking your neck out for someone else.

If business is about relationship it's also about 'quid pro quo'. I do you a good turn and you do me one next time. Sometimes you need to call in the favor fast and other times you might let a return favor run for a number of years before you call it in, maybe even adding on new ones to the strength of your claim. And again, when you have a job and therefore plenty of 'quo' to offer back on the 'quid' you can sometimes set

up a broad barter system that allows life to run much smoother than it would without it.

But when you have no job, no 'quo' to barter with, calling in favors is something you begin to leverage very carefully, contemplating if this favor is the right one to call in because after that, your leverage is gone.

I decide to cash in a favor a couple of days after getting turned down by my former subordinate, looking at a posting sixty miles away for a company with a fairly generic name. As with every posting, I think of who knows who, who's networked with who, what companies have inter-divisional relationships and is there any way I can

think of anyone even remotely connected with any element, and therefore potentially able to help me. Something about this company name in the posting rings a bell and reminds me of an old business relationship that I had; great guy, one of my vendors with whom I had a tremendous rapport, and that he had a close friend that worked for the named company.

Reaching out to Ted is easy. He's called me a couple of times since I lost my job to check on my progress and to commiserate with me on the terrible, terrible timing of it all. He laughs when he hears my voice on the other end reminding me again of the story when he had too much to drink on a site visit and

I got him safely home.

“Sure, I’d be happy to reach out to Paul and put in a good word for you. Anything for the guy who covered with my boss about why I was late for work owing to an enormous hangover. I’ll never forget, there’s you on the call with Mike: ‘Sorry I got Ted to work late but I had a morning call before I wanted him to join me for a breakfast meeting’. Classic...he never knew the difference.”

Within twenty minutes of our conversation he’s copied me on an email to Paul, linking us up and putting in a good word all at the same time. Finally, maybe I just caught a break, until Paul’s answer comes back a couple hours later.

“Ted, glad to hear from you...

Sebastian, happy to make your acquaintance. Ted's told me a lot about what a good guy you are, but sorry to say I can't help you. I don't work for that company. I work for 'Y' Inc., and the company you're asking about is 'Y' Co. We aren't even remotely connected to each other. Sorry. Ted, call me when you're in town next and we'll get a drink."

And there goes that chance down the shitter, and to complete the adventure I feel like an idiot for not having done my homework. It's great, just really really great.

On it goes, everyday me calling people. Some who don't even call back, others who start the 'and um ahh's' the

second I get around to my request and the worst, those who promise piles of help and great leads, only to disappear or cross to the other side of the room the next time I see them in public. It's wearing me out.

Near the end of January, someone at last is paying attention when I get hooked up with a professional recruiter named Sonja who's pulled my resume off one of the job boards and thinks that we may have a match. She asks good questions and really seems to care about what my goals are, about my mobility and expected compensation. Everything that she should be considering.

She walks me through the posting that prompted her to call and in the end, even

though this position is out of my search area, way below compensation level and we both agree it's not a good fit, she closes the call by telling me she'll keep me posted about anything that might work. For once, I believe this lady. When you're out of work and have shit to sell that nobody seems to want to buy, anybody who believes in you seems like a godsend. Slowly I'm becoming a man that grasps at straws.

A couple of days later after another fruitless day of job searching that ends with four first-stage email rejections, Ty finds me in the kitchen, draining my five o'clock 'Close of Business' beer.

"Shouldn't that beer go with loud music and a hot girl?"

“Spare me the raised eyebrow Ty, there’s a big enough party goin’ on in my head. Trust me...a big ol’ bunch of people, dressed in black and dancing on my grave.”

I empty the first beer only to grab the second.

“Dude, it’s only Tuesday. Tell you what, Pete moves out on Sunday. Let’s have a good-bye party on Friday and send him off in style. You can invite anyone you like ‘cept those guys dressed in black hanging out in your head... they’re gonna have to stay at home.”

"Fine, I don't care."

He grabs his own beer, steers me to a stool and parks himself in front of me, “Forget about it man. Something will

turn up. You got time. You don't need money, do you? If you do..."

His pity irritates me and I jump up, "No, I don't need your money Ty...at least not yet."

"Well sit down then; fuck it and let's plan a good send-off for Pete. Focus on what you can get done and poor Pete deserves it...he's about to have no fun at all...permanent dad that he's going to have to be going forward."

"Think he's going to hate it?"

"No, I think he's gonna love it. I'm almost jealous of him for the first time in my life."

And it's Ty's turn to grab that second beer.

"Ever wonder what we're doing,

‘Bas? Ever wonder if Pete, even if he always settles, did the smart thing and made himself a kid? Pete’s never planned or demanded a thing in his life and yet somehow he’s the guy with a focus, with something to live for. Sophie’s got me all fucked up you know.’”

“Not giving it up?”

“Nope, not even close. Made out with her once, tried to unbutton her shirt and she just laughed each time and buttoned it back up. But that’s not why. She likes me and all but she just keeps on talking about the right order of things, that life is about more than just blindly following what we want. Some of it makes sense. She’s not a virgin, you

know...she was married once when she was young; guy who took off with a waitress when life started to get hard. She keeps on telling me to take myself seriously, to not waste myself.”

“So what’s her angle? She trying to redeem you from your wicked ways? Does she even know that you have wicked ways?”

“Yeah, she knows. She says I can be wicked if I want, just not with her; and then she hugs me and tells me maybe I should try and be the person I could be. I told her about the bartender and she just lifted an eyebrow and said ‘Really Ty, is that the best you could do?’ So I think that maybe I’m gonna give up the bartender.”

“Improving your chances of getting into her pants?”

“No, that won’t make any difference to her. I keep telling her she’s full of crap, that nobody thinks like she does anymore and she just smiles that slow smile of hers and says ‘That’s okay, I do, and that’s enough.’ I think I need to pay attention to this one...that’s why I’m giving up the bartender. That and so that Sophie doesn’t think I’m a complete piece of crap.”

I can see his gears turning, then his face suddenly snaps shut and I know the topic of conversation is spent.

“So a party, huh?”

“Yeah a party...a good one that will keep Pete warm at night for years to

come.”

“You’re right, it is a great idea...but for now grab me another beer.”

The Thursday before Pete’s party I receive another call from Sonja and she has a job I might be interested in and the company wants to talk to me; but it’s in Tampa.

The company is looking for a senior vice-president to oversee their customer service and survey call centers that are dotted throughout the United States. This is too good to be true apart from the part in Tampa. The phone interview is scheduled for Friday and if all goes well

I should be flying to corporate in a week or so. Best news I have. Now comes the work I need to do to fully understand the organization and prepare for the interview. At least it gives me focus.

Tampa. That's the only wrinkle, but after five months without employment and a terrible economic forecast, I figure I just better jump on the chance coming my way.

Sophie helps us prepare for the party. Ty's right, she's a great catch, helping by picking up food trays and suggesting other items that we'll need. I can't believe how smitten he is with her, and for once he listens to what a girl has to say, wants her to go with him to pick up the kegs and everything. I've known Ty

forever and I would've never believed it if I wasn't watching it happen. He listens to this girl and not as a way to get her into bed, but because he takes her seriously. Never seen anything like it.

My interview goes off without a hitch, better than that even because when Sonja calls to set up the conversation and throws out the name I'll be talking to, I realize that it's an old colleague from about ten years ago. A guy named Larry that was a great employee: sharp, capable and easy to work with. This is fantastic and really not all that surprising when I think about it. Call centers are still a relatively new business and those of us that made it to executive level are a fairly small population. It was bound to

happen sooner or later.

Sooner is now, and I'm pretty happy heading into the call with how the fates are finally treating me.

And so it rolls, "Damn, Sebastian, how many years has it been? And why the hell did you not call to tell me you were looking for work?"

"Hate to tell you Larry, but after you left X Corp. I lost your contact info. Trust me, I've been looking for you... LinkedIn, FaceBook, I called Melanie... nobody knew where you'd landed."

"I'm here in Tampa, sun, chicks and Spanish speaking surveys to conduct coming out my ass. Let me tell you about the job..."

It's a great fit and my excitement

grows walking with Larry through the position and the process.

“So tell me....think you’d have trouble having me as a boss?”

“Nope, not a chance. You know the business and by the end of your tenure with me you could’ve done my job, and well. I can’t see us having a problem.”

“Okay, then here’s what happens next. You have a conversation with my boss, the president of the operation, he’ll be pretty happy with you and then we’ll move on to introducing you to the guy that runs the site in Tampa. Here’s the only tough part, he’s our sales/client acquisitions guy there and he’s pinch hitting in operations.”

“Frankly, he needs help, not being an

ops guy, and we need him to focus on sales; but since he's bringing in the business to the site my boss has given him final say on the hire in the location. You have to get past him, and of all the people I've talked to, you have the best shot. We'll set up the interview with Sam for next week, I'm sure you'll do fine and then we'll bring you in to Tampa to meet Dan. You'll see, I have a good feeling about this."

As we hang up I'm out of my mind with hope and excitement. This has turned out to be a great night for a party and just like Ty demanded, I intend to make sure that not a single one of those guys dressed in black will be invited. Today is a good day.

TWENTY-ONE – ‘I Don’t Care’ – Darius Rucker

The party is in full swing by ten o'clock with old friends from the past and a motley collection of new acquaintances, mostly girls. Pete's a really likable guy and we haven't had any trouble finding folks to come and wish him well in his new endeavor as a single dad. For his sake I'm tremendously gratified. Motley as this crew is, it's sort of a community and Pete's going to need support and companionship in this version of his new life.

Good food, plenty of booze, some

loud music and a willing bunch of people are all you really need for a good party. Invite a bunch of stick in the mud's, people who need to be entertained and you get nothing; invite people looking for fun and something good will always transpire.

Pete meets Ty and I by chance in the hallway to the garage around eleven, each of us heading to the beer fridge for the good stuff we've stashed, "Great party, thanks."

"Hey man, you deserve it, lots of change coming your way. Least we could do was send you off in style," says Ty reaching the beer 'fridge first and handing out a round.

"Think it's gonna be okay?" as I pull

the tab and the sound of the pressure release fills the garage.

“Yeah, you know what,” the comforting ‘phhffsst’ filling the air as Pete pulls tab number two, “I think it’s going to be fine. I never needed a life like you guys did. I don’t need to get laid like a champion, I’ve got my son.”

“Cheers to that, Pete,” and Ty pulls his own tab and the third ‘phhffsst’ fills the room to complete the set.

We settle in on the tail gate of my pick-up, still down from the last run for beer just before the start of the shindig, and Pete continues, “It was really tough when Meaghan left. I had no place to go and no idea what to do...and you guys helped me. Yeah even you Ty, with your

fuckin' Unicef poster. I hate that part, that they all ain't mine, don't think I'll ever get over it, but I'd rather live with reality than a bunch of lies. And now, I have a new life, a different one ahead of me; but the part that always mattered, my kids, it's still the same."

"And thanks for getting me laid," as he heads to back to the 'fridge and pulls out three more, "a bunch of times. Thanks for leaving me be when I needed it. Thanks for helping me face reality and never calling me a pussy when it turned out as bad as it did. Thanks for always being there."

"To us..." raising his can in toast, "getting fucked, being fucked, fucking up and whatever other way you can use

‘fuck’ as a noun or a verb.”

We toast silently for a moment, years of memory slowly filling us.

Ty starts talking, suddenly way in the past, “Man we’ve done some terrible things to each other; remember “Bas, that double date in college?”

“The one where you promised me a hot date if I’d only play wingman, yet again?”

“Yeah, that one...” And Pete is already laughing into his beer.

“Hard to forget Ty, hard to forget.”

“I pick him up and we head to the chicks’ townhouse. I’ve promised him it’ll be a good night. I have this hot chick all lined up and she’s promised me a companion date for whoever. So we

get there and two smoking hot co-eds answer the door, and the blonde one bounces up and kisses me on the cheek...”

“And I’m actually happy, ecstatic even, that for once Ty has come through,” I continue on with the story. “Until I hear an ‘Excuse me,’ as this guy comes from behind us, up between me and Ty and grabs the other hot, not blond, girl and kisses her ‘hello’.”

“So obviously not your date,” says Pete with a grin and a pull on his beer.

“Nope, not my date. But I keep my cool and think ‘How bad can it be?’ as hot girl number two leaves with her guy.”

“But...”

“So we head into the apartment and I catch the corner of a housecoat crossing the hall to what must be the bathroom...”

“And...”

“And, as we’re pulled in door I’m able to get a better look at a very unattractive woman whom, I’m telling you, I think may be a grandma or housemother. At that moment I’m not really sure, but definitely what appears to be one of the ugliest women I’ve ever seen. Completing the picture I can see a cigarette in hand, what looks like hairy legs even from the door, and a cat.”

“Then Ty’s date, the hot, kissy one, hollers, ‘Elizabeth, I told you to get ready,’ and holy hell as the house mother turns her head, I realize in that instant

that I'm staring at my future."

"He gave me the look from hell, telling me under his breath that if that's his date he's gonna kill me," finishes Ty.

"Then without hesitation Ty delivers a smooth 'So is that 'Bas's date back there?' Fucker. To which we hear a firm 'Yes'. Now this would pretty much be the automatic turn around and leave factor, but its Ty so I hesitate and ask myself if I can do it."

"We keep sitting there, now on the couch, and I can hear Elizabeth bitching about nothing to wear and needing to get into the shower and new razors. Ty, I love you but I just couldn't do it."

Ty again picks up the story, "So I'm watchin' him, just sitting there, sour look

and fidgeting until he suddenly jumps up and asks for a bathroom. One not occupied. My date tells him where it's at and off he goes. Watching his shoes disappear up the steps I get a sinking feeling that I'm about to get screwed, but not by my date."

I take over again from Ty, "So I head up stairs, walk-in, shut the door, look around, and see a window in the shower just large enough for my body. 'Perfect'. I pry the bathroom window open, and hope like hell that, although it's on the second floor and it's dark and I can't really make out what's below, that I won't kill myself, 'cause one thing's for sure...I am gonna jump."

"I'll admit that I was shallow," as I

take a deep draw on my beer, “but I decided that a broken ankle was still better than being seen in public with a troll. I jump and luckily don’t get hurt except to scrape up a knee; fair trade as far as I’m concerned. Dusting myself off I hurry along and start the walk back to our house. By now I am cussing, cussing real bad.”

Ty and Pete are now both laughing into their beer, giggling with sidelong glances as I pause to drag on my can again and continue with my story. We lived off campus and it’s not all it’s cracked up to be because the quickest way home from the girl’s place isn’t through one of the best parts of town.

“So I’m walking and cussin’ and I

hear a couple guys yelling stuff in my direction, most of it indiscernible, but I'm damn sure from the tone that I'm not wanted. I keep going and hope that if I keep walking, maybe they'll all go away. But...I'm wrong."

"Before I know it, I catch a glimpse out of the corner of my eye of some guy coming up to me, talking and mouthing off. I figure I'm fucked and I start planning, fast. Up close he looks like the kind of guy that would just as soon kill 'ya as talk to you and I just stop, think for another minute, then stare at him as he cuts in front of me all malevolent. Here's my plan: I look at him all kinda goofy."

Ty and Pete are still looking,

watching, laughing and I adopt the same posture I assumed that night: head tilted to the left, jaw slightly slack and right shoulder drooping, as I continue my story.

“He keeps yelling shit, loud, hot and in my face. For a few seconds I just stare gaped mouthed and then finally, I respond. Very loudly, with my words all mangled, ‘I’m deaf and it’s too dark for me to read your lips’, in what I believe would be a deaf guy’s voice.

His face squinshes up looking at me stupid, yelling even louder now, ‘Fucker, what you doin’ in my neighborhood’?”

“Oh, I’m so fucked now if he don’t believe me, but I keep going and really,

really slowly say ‘WHAT? I’m deaf, move your lips slower so I can understand what you are saying!’ and the guy, thank God, just looks at me, shoves me once in disgust and walks away. So I turned the corner and made up for the lost time.” I finish to applause and drain my beer.

“And he refused to be my wingman for another four months after that. Even though my date kicked me out of her house and never talked to me again once it was clear he’d bailed out the upstairs window,” says Ty. “And I’m thinkin’ still, he was just a bad sport,” as he laughs and grabs the third round.

“You and bein’ a good sport, Ty,” starts in Pete as another tab gets pulled,

‘Phhffsst.’ ”Let’s talk about that for a second...”

“So, we’re all livin’ together,” as he settles his ass back down on my tail gate, “and I bring home a date because I needed to change clothes. I come downstairs ten minutes later and no date. So Ty...what happened?”

“Well...” And Ty has at least the sense to look sheepish. “I came downstairs and this hot chick was there. I thought she was yours ‘Bas, and I’m in my underwear around midnight. All I asked was ‘So, you’re left down here while he’s taking care of things upstairs’?”

“She simply said ‘Yes’ and looked at me like I might be a meal, so I took her

by the hand and led her to my love shack. Next morning is classic when I'm walking downstairs with her into the kitchen and Pete's sitting there eating toast. From the way his eyes bug out when he sees her, I figure fast that I'm with *his* date from last night. And then she caps it off by smiling at Pete and telling him 'I had a really good time last night.' I thought I was gonna die, right there."

"Sorry Pete, but man, I thought she was yours, 'Bas."

"And the worst part, do 'ya know, was that the change of clothes was a ruse to take a shit. Thanks Ty, for thinking I couldn't possibly score a hot chick, you asshole. If it hadn't been for my bodily

functions and you not playin' fair, I could have had that one," concludes Pete.

"Alright, I'll give you that, but remember when you cocked blocked me hard that one time? That's when I knew we'd be friends forever. So anyway, I'm making out with this girl on a couch, hadn't the sense yet to move to someplace private..."

"You were beer goggling!" Exclaims Pete.

"Yeah, beer goggling...again." And Ty continues, "So Pete leans in and taps me on the shoulder and asks me to look at her real good, and I do. I realize that she's not that pretty and I actually say out loud, 'You're kinda ugly'. She slaps

me and gets up off the couch, bitchin' loudly to anyone that will listen about what an asshole I am. And Pete here, does just that, he listens to her complain. 'Cause I'll bet it wasn't twenty minutes later and there's Pete walking out the door with her, hand in hand."

Pete waits a moment to reply, "Well somebody needed to save you and I knew the moment you looked at her you'd say something like 'you're ugly' and I was right. It paid off for me that night and she had a huge set of ta ta's."

"What do you say...one more?" says Pete suddenly as he collects the latest round of empties. "And then we have to go back to my party."

“Alright, one more...”

And as he hands off the next round Pete starts in with his favorite Sebastian story about a Denny’s bathroom, a married drunk chick, and an idiot husband.

“Oh God.”

Pete replies, “Yeah, that one...but you tell it way better ‘Bas.’”

So I start from the top with the horrible story about my first public date with Michelle. It’s an ugly story; truly untellable except for the fact that I lived to survive it.

“So...we have an employee that’s having a retirement party that night and another employee that’s leaving. Since both Pete and I worked downtown and I

have to leave right away after work, I ask him to go pick up Michelle and suggest we all meet up and hang out at the party. He agrees and while I'm waiting for them to show up there's a lot of drinking going on, shots galore and I'm trying to play along, but not get too messed up before he gets back with Michelle. Maybe Michelle and I'd been dating about three weeks at this point and having her meet me out and me, being plastered, wouldn't be a good thing, so I'm thinking ahead. And I'm hanging out with Tina and her husband -- she's the lady that's leaving, taking another job and moving with her family."

"I'm being nice, talking with everyone

and this Tina chick is drunk, as is her husband, and they seem borderline on doing something stupid. Stop me Ty, if you've heard this one."

And he doesn't; only grinning at Pete, and I realize that he hasn't actually heard it before and is waiting for something new. This is a terrible story, part of why I think that the whole world is on a crash course to perdition. But it's Ty and Pete and we're tight, so I continue. "But hey, they have three kids at home being watched by a babysitter, so I figure, 'How bad can it get'?"

"I get there with Michelle," continues Pete, "this is when she's still in call centers and she's had hints that 'Bas has a reputation and the Tina chick is all

over him on the dance floor. As soon as she gets there, Sebastian extricates himself and joins us for drinks, no problem, and we hang out until the bar closes. Then the shit starts. Michelle hasn't had but a couple of drinks and is the designated driver, and a group of us decide we want to hit a Denny's for food. 'Bas...?'

"As we're leaving, I'm noticing that Tina and her husband have decided to tag along. Good enough, but as we get into my car, to my surprise, Tina hops in behind me, into the backseat. God, Pete, really, do I have to?

"Yep."

"Fuck, okay. So we're sitting there and the Tina chick reaches forward,

throws both arms over the seat, starts unbuttoning my shirt and proceeds to start rubbing her hands all over my chest. I can see Michelle's eyebrows rising so high up on her face that I think they're going to disappear into her hair. But she doesn't say a word, just keeps driving."

"Now Tina knows Michelle from an internship at the office a year or so earlier but she doesn't know we're dating. Michelle says nothing but also has no clue that Tina is leaving and this is her last night. Pete's just sitting there looking out the window, trying not laugh. And me, since I don't really want everyone at work to know my business, I choose to pretend it's not happening

either.”

“We’re all ignoring it and she’s rubbin’ away and yammering about trying to get my nipples hard or something until we stop at the light and her husband pulls up beside us. He takes one look through the window at his wife pawing at my chest, rolls down his window and starts losing his mind. They exchange some very loud words, the light changes and we head anyway to Denny’s ‘cause even if we don’t eat we’ve gotta get rid of this drunk chick somehow.”

Pete chimes in with, “It was one of the most uncomfortable ten minute rides of my life.”

”Fuck me,” says Ty laughing, “that’s a

mess...and then?"

"Ugh you don't know the half of it yet," and I continue.

"We get to Denny's and Pete and I head straight to the bathroom to hit the urinals. Before I'm even sure what's happening Tina follows right in after us, goes to the stall directly behind me and squats without even shutting the door. Pete just looks at me, chuckles, goes to wash his hands and heads out the door leaving me with a woman I'm trying hard to ignore. I finish, zip up and go to the sink where, once again, before I can even duck or dodge or anything, I'm pinned by this damn woman who decides that now would be a great time and place to hook-up. And she means

right now...”

“In the meantime,” Pete breaks in, “I’m back in the dining room trying to tell Michelle what’s going on but Tina’s husband keeps asking everyone where his wife is and everybody keeps saying ‘the bathroom’ and he’s hollering that he looked there and couldn’t find her. So I grab him by the elbow, hissing through my teeth that he should check again, and this time maybe try the men’s room as well. And off he goes again...”

I take over the story, “So I’m standing there pinned up against the wall between the sink and the mirror and Tina is groping me and trying to unbutton my pants and talking all this crazy shit at me. And I’m thinking that maybe, just

this once, I might be okay to manhandle a woman, when I hear the door open thinking, *'Awesome, here's my chance to leave'* but no, no such luck. On the other side of the door is Tina's husband. He looks at me, I look at him, we look at her and she hollers at him to 'Get the fuck out'; and the idiot does, he closes the door and leaves!"

"Now I'm really fucked, I figure. But thankfully it only takes him a second to recover himself and he opens the door again with a bang, she stumbles back a step in surprise, leaving me just enough room to slide past...and out the door I go."

"You should've heard them scrap... what a racket," says Pete finishing his

beer, “management finally got involved and threw them both out.”

“Thankfully, I never saw that crazy broad again...good times, good times.”

“You know,” Ty says as he grabs a last round out of the ‘fridge and we head back into the house, “I know we’re still young but when I listen to these stories we should be pretty happy none of us has ended up yet on the Maury show to discuss our infidelities or to find out that we’ve sired a child out of wedlock.”

“That, or ending up on Springer instead finding out that some transvestite gave us a blowjob and we didn’t know. Although Pete you came pretty close.”

Pete hollers and belts him in the arm, “What the fuck, Ty?”

Ty just laughs, “Not the transvestite, you idiot, that would’ve been me...I meant the paternity,” and we re-enter the kitchen to re-join our guests.

Later that night after I roll off my guest for the evening and spend some uninterrupted time in my own head, I wonder at our collection of stories. All our stories are battles. Maybe as men we’ve lost all our markers for manhood except business and sex.

I remember my first kill. It was just a squirrel and I didn’t eat it. But I’d set a task for myself, an objective, and met it.

The modern Western man has no wars to fight. The urban man has no physical obstacles to overcome in either drought or pestilence or marketing boards. The

only modern obstacle is enough cash to get what you want. And the only physical obstacle left is the will of the other: in business, in sex, in all things. Move the other guy out, move the woman the right way and you can get what you want. You can still set an objective and meet it.

Maybe it's still a battle.

I look at my partner for the night, now sleeping peacefully, 'Vini, vidi, vici', I say quietly to myself.

'I came, I saw, I conquered.' And I roll to the far side of the bed.

TWENTY-TWO – ‘You Make Me Feel Like a Whore’ – Everclear

We help Pete move his meager collection of things from my house on Sunday. It's not a hard move, only the necessary items that have composed a truncated life for the past five months. No heavy furniture, no appliances. Just the bits and pieces you need to keep your immediate life going while you wait to see what happens next.

Pete's face as we hit his matrimonial house is a study in feeling. He's happy to be home even if half his possessions are now gone. He seems okay with it, satisfied that the four walls around him

can make up for the loss of the contents within. I realize that the space itself is what he calls home. This space in which he intended to raise his family and live as a good man. And I understand myself, and why I've not yet given up my own house, no longer a home, even if filled with company. But he also looks slightly sick as he moves through the rooms and sees the change. This house is no longer the home he had, but the home he must now make.

We leave him there, 'fridge full of groceries, beds made, rooms appointed as best we can leaving him to his new life as proud father and independent householder. And we wish him well.

Back at my house Ty and I again

silently toast to the change but before we can even drain the whiskey in our glasses, Ty's cell phone rings and he takes this apparently expected call from Sophie, big grin creasing his face when the assigned ring tone fills the air.

“Oops, sorry ‘Bas, but I gotta take this. I just can’t blow her off, you know how it is...”

Glancing backwards with a shrug, he heads for the stairs. I’m left looking at the bottom of my glass through a collection of ice cubes as I raise it once again to my mouth in toast to us all. Pete has Re-Pete. Ty, ever increasingly, has Sophie. I, I have my house. Which I might just have to give up to move to Tampa.

Monday after the party, I get a call from Sonja regarding the results of the interviews: Larry is hugely interested and so is his boss. They're deciding to skip the second phone interview and fly me out to corporate headquarters instead. I'm thrilled, excited by the prospect that once I get in front of them they'll see what I'm bringing to the table. Maybe I finally have a shot at something.

I don't really want to move to Tampa but I do really want a job. I can't stand this idle time on my hands anymore. I want, I need, to work. This blank time makes me feel half schizoid.

Work is a thing, a part of identity in which you can socially define yourself

as ‘such and such’ or ‘so and so.’ We do it in every socio-economic stratum we find ourselves. Each time we tell someone what we do, we want to be as good as the guy next to us, and maybe even just marginally better. That’s the first piece, but bigger than that, I think we also need to indentify that we are *d o i n g something* to justify our existence. “Look at me, I’m a so and so, and I make shit happen.”

I want to use my brain again for something other than ‘What’m I gonna eat now?’, ‘Anybody mad at me?’ and ‘Is it garbage night?’ I feel like an animal meeting basic physical and communal needs, but never really experiencing anything that actually

makes my brain steam up with the excitement of mental effort. I'm a man without complex problems to solve and I feel lost without them.

But this news is finally good and I convince Ty to go celebrate after meeting at the gym. It's my choice where we go and I pick a sports bar where the food's okay but the girls are hot and we can watch the college basketball game. We watch the game over beer and wings, discussing that the job might be a great opportunity with an organization that shouldn't suffer as much through the bad economy.

"So what about the Tampa part?" Ty finally asks after I've rounded out all the relative merits of the gig.

“The Tampa part sucks and apart from Larry, I won’t know a soul there. So I’d have to start totally over from scratch. No tangible assets, maybe some cash in my pocket from selling off an undervalued house in a hurry, no friends in the area, no girl, nothing really to keep me from losing my mind except burying myself in work.”

“You can always find a girl...”

“Okay, back up a second...I can always find a female body, you’re right on that one. In fact I can probably find a lot of girl bodies to waste some time with...but it sure as shit isn’t what I had planned for myself this close to forty. Remember that guy my dad knew for a while when we were in our early

twenties?”

“The one with the muscle car and the tan, and always with some young hottie on his arm?”

“Yeah, that one...remember how we used to laugh at him? How he always seemed to be such a pompous ass and the girls so hugely stupid?”

“Well...I kinda recall being totally jealous of him...those were girls we should’a had a chance of banging. He pissed me off because he was trolling in our pond.”

“I know, I haven’t forgotten that either. But I think about him sometimes now and wonder if that’s how I’m gonna look in a couple of years. Not sure I’m ready for that yet.”

“Look ‘Bas, you can always skip the tan and the muscle car and pick girls not quite as simple as the ones he liked. He was a tool. You aren’t...but I get where you’re going with it. What about the house?”

“I paid almost half a mil for it...and I’m not going to see back what I paid, that’s for sure. I might get back ten percent on my investment, after the balance on the mortgage is paid. You know, there are eleven properties up for sale in my neck of the woods alone, and some of them are going real cheap because of foreclosure efforts. I can’t see how I’m going to come out a winner on this one.”

“Then why go? Why not wait it out?”

I take a deep draught of my beer and wave to the waitress for another round before answering.

“Wait it out how long? And for what? The economy is completely in the shitter, I don’t have kids that need to be close to my family. I don’t have a wife with a job that ties her down here. I have you guys...but honestly I don’t think I can wait it out six, eight, ten months.”

“Unemployment only covers half what I need to pay out in monthly expenses and making up the shortfall is cutting deep *and fast* into my savings. Don’t forget that I shoved twenty thousand dollars Michelle’s way less than two years ago to get her off the house...even

with my salary, that was a big chunk of change. And I'm not getting that twenty back in the asking price I'd be able to set right now."

"I still want something left of my nest egg when this catastrophe is over... Tampa can make that happen even if it means living in a shitass plastic town where I don't know a goddamn soul."

"Bas, anybody told you lately that you're starting to be depressing? This's like a bloody wake, not a celebration. Look on the bright side: it's the first call where they haven't immediately passed because you're overqualified for the job or been paid too much in the past. And second, there isn't an internal front-runner that can muscle you out. So what

if it's Tampa? You're young, you ain't stupid and you're almost hot."

"Tell you what," says Ty as he swivels in his chair to take a quick look around the room, "I don't think that we've ever picked up any of the staff in this place and it's time we did. Think about it like needing to go to the health club for a massage. You need to relax, stress case, and focus on the positive realities of your situation...right now you still got money, your brain functions and you don't yet have a perma-tan and a muscle car. It's all still good...so let's do this."

I just look at him and shrug.

As a guy sometimes you hit on girls 'cause you can feel your cock, you can

feel its burn in your belly and its pressure to quell a need. You know its power, and you know that you're made out of 'metal and brawn.'

And sometimes you're just a tired, defeated loser, and convincing some chick to touch your dick helps you remember the guy you sometimes are, and always want to be. That's who I am tonight.

For the record, the way a wife validates the cock in us, after a long hard day, is not nearly the same as when some random chick does it for you. I prefer a wife, but I ain't got one...so random will have to do.

We've been pretty reserved here in this bar up until this moment, playing a

long-term game of getting to know the staff but not asking them out. Now Ty rolls through a quick run-down on the opportunities in front of us.

“See the blond at the corner table serving the shooters to those jocks? She’s out, big boyfriend, decent sized ring and she likes the bastard. The brunette at the far left of the bar... serious lesbian, does not switch teams... the other brunette on the far right, that’s Hope and she’s mine...so you know that leaves you Penny.” He points over to the far end of the room at the waitress in the tight top and short skirt serving up a ridiculous round of umbrella spiked drinks to a table of just post-legal tots.

“Hope, huh? As in ‘Hope’ you get

lucky and ‘Hope’ she don’t have a boyfriend.”

He fails to see the humor in it and just sends me a withering look, “Listen you buzz kill, I’m doin’ this for you, the least you can be is polite while I evaluate the selection.”

“Oh yeah Casanova, what about Sophie while you’re here planning your next kill?”

“What about her?”

“Dude, you’re goony over her... everybody can see it.”

“No I’m not...and how can you be ‘goony’ over a girl that won’t even agree to date you until you clean up your act? She’ll see me, but she won’t play, man. She just won’t play by any of the rules

and since she isn't, then I need to feed 'the man-child.' You know how it is."

"No Ty, I don't...but hey, it's your life."

I look hard at Penny who is now heading back to the bar, tray empty. She has a decent body heading towards thirty, shoulders with a bit of a droop that tells how much she'd really rather be someplace else. And in the slope of her back I figure I recognize a kindred spirit – life sucks and she appears to know it.

"What the fuck, Ty...okay."

We head fast for the bar as Hope and Penny hit the waiters' station at the same time. They know us and we settle in for a chat, discussing the ball game as they

ignore the hails of the patrons at their assigned tables.

“Ladies, you look tired and bored... when do you finish your shift? ‘Cause ‘Bas here, and me...we’d like to take you out somewhere quieter and nicer to a place where you get served a drink for once. Whadda ya say?”

Slick bastard...he ought to have been in sales. Actually, hang on...he is, hawking stocks to the sharks with teeth still left in their snouts. Waitresses are much easier to manage then men of means protecting their net worth. And on he sails, sealing the deal for drinks while I tag gamely along in the background, smiling like an idiot and providing extra idle dialogue when

required.

Somehow it works for us and they come along to park their cars outside my house before heading to a piano bar a couple of miles away.

Everything goes as planned. The girls like where we take them, they like that we treat them like ladies and they head back with us to the 'love shack' to pay us back for the honor.

Once back at my place, Hope's very interested in seeing the house. Watching her face with its wide eyes it seems to me that she's probably never been in a space this big before that wasn't a funeral parlor or a hotel. Ty chatters along as we proceed from the kitchen, explaining that he has a condo

downtown but's staying here, as it's getting renovated.

As he smoothly suggests to Hope that he'll take her there at some point and show her his own kingdom, I can't help but smile a lumpy inverted smile. He has an answer and motive for everything.

It's a strategy, you see...if you're not sure that a girl is strictly the type to fuck for the fun of it, you offer or suggest further contact. It makes them think, rightly or wrongly, that you like them... that the reason you're so hot for their bod' *right now* is 'cause you *really* like what's on the inside and you just can't possibly bear getting through all the 'get to know you's' before having a taste. The implication that you actually like

them assuages their shame for contemplating being 'bad girls' right off.

But much as girls all, inexorably, want in the end for you to know the 'inside' of them, they're fuckin' happy on the front end to know that you want a big ole' bite of the outside of them just as much. Your sexual desire for them makes them feel good about themselves just as long as you appear to promise a look under their skin the next time. I think that's why so many of them get so busted up these days. They think they're playing like big girls but somehow they always revert back to thinking that sleeping with us first is a great way to start the conversation.

But it's the inverse that's true. If I

want to date you...I will. I'll be a gentleman, take you out, ask you questions, pay attention to something other than getting to that spot between your legs.

If I take you anyplace without asking even your last name or about anything that you might care about...I just want to sleep with you. And ninety percent of the time it'll never be anything but that, even if I do it twice and no matter how much fun you are while it's happening.

If I wanted to get to know you, *I would*. I know how to do it and if I don't it's because I don't care about that part of you at all. But trust me, we can still have a great time if you just let go of your constant need to take some guy

home to your momma and your friends.

So we give them a tour and each end up back in our separate bedrooms.

Score one for Ty, I think as I start in, telling myself it's just like lining up a massage at the health club. But Penny, beautiful enough Penny, is determined to make it hard for me.

"I've seen you at the bar a bunch of times, how come you asked us out tonight?"

I mumble something about "Takin' my time," as I unbutton her blouse and unhook her bra, heading for the first erogenous zone that I care to hit.

"Wait a second," pulling up my head from her breasts to look at my face, "Do you do this a lot?"

“No. Why? Have you heard that I have a reputation?”

“No.”

“Good. But I don't really care if I do have one...as long as it's a good one.” And I smile a long slow smile at her.

“Oh...”

“Do you think I'm as hot as Hope 'cuz most of the guys at the bar seem to hit on her,” her breath now coming a bit faster as I get back to my business with her tits.

“Sure, Penny,” leaving my mouthful, “I think that you're equally as hot as Hope and how many times have you seen me leave with a chick from your place? You want to do this or not? ‘Cause baby, I can take you home right now if you'd just rather not,” moving to roll out

of the bed.

“No...wait.”

It's like fuckin' catnip.

Seem to reject a girl once she's got her top off and she'll think it's because you don't like what you see and it hurts her, which makes her more willing for you to make up for it. Quickly acknowledge her temporary rejection of your advances and she'll just as fast start to wonder if you just think she's an ugly prude.

She doesn't want you to think that she's a prude, or worse a cock-tease, because she's knows she's already here with her top off. But she also doesn't want to seem like she gives it up that easily, and she's stuck. She's already

one county too far. So if you're smart, you wait and work, because once that first, strong twitch of desire hits, the will, will definitely be out.

So Penny says, half way between where she is and where her body wants to go, "No, I'll stay..."

Because of course I'm back to working on every part of her that matters in this exercise...

"But..."

"Hey Penny, you're hot, seriously you're hot. Right now I'm about to fuck you because I want to...really, *really* want to..." And I look up and deep into her eyes and I am telling the whole truth.

She sighs a deep soft sigh and says quietly, "Okay...but I've been watchin'

and talking to you for a while and I just want you to know that I kinda like you and I don't do this sort of thing often."

"Hey Penny, let's start here...okay?"

And she nods.

The conversation almost makes my dick shrivel and go permanently home, but in that same moment, I hit that sweet spot and she's suddenly all in. And Penny forgets her reservations, Penny forgets everything she meant to hold on to, and then Penny lets this little moment in her life happen.

Her body says 'like me' and my body says 'fuck her' and neither meet in the middle.

When it's all over, me in my head and her in hers I go to sleep thinking not once

to whatever ideas may be dancing in her head.

TWENTY-THREE – ‘One Way or Another’ – Blondie

Two days after our mutual hook-up, girls but not bodies forgotten Sonja informs me that tickets have been purchased and I'll be flying out the following Thursday for a full day of interviews in Tampa. And I feel hope.

I'm deciding that I hate hope. Hope is a terrible feeling, all transient and thin, lifting your feet from terra firma and creating an impossibly impractical headspace that all will be well. But you can't hang on to it, can't catch and bottle it for the days where there seems none. It exists only in the now, ephemeral and

fleeting, attached to one good piece of news.

Despair is a more reasonable, grounded feeling. Cold and smothering, but you can't confuse it with anything else and it can't fool you. Hope sees as it wishes to, despair sees as it is. Hope can let you down, despair never can.

But I proceed on course, tempering my rising hope with great helpings of despair. I've gotta stay grounded.

Ty and I finally discuss our hook-up twenty-four hours later and everything he tells me surprises me.

"I didn't fuck her you know."

"What?"

"Hope...I didn't do it. I couldn't."

"Why the hell not, and so why didn't

she just leave?”

“It was weird...she didn’t leave because we could hear enough to know that you and Penny were getting some, but...”

“But what?”

“I dunno, I kinda of looked at the chick once her top was off and remembered how her face was as she looked around your house and I just kinda wondered. And what I wondered seemed all’a sudden to matter more than fucking her. So I asked her what she was thinking and then it *really* seemed not to matter.”

“What seemed not to matter?”

“Getting laid, ‘cause she started to talk. And what she talked about made

me think some more. That girl's had a shitty life; seeing the house made her wonder how some people do and some people don't, and I just let her talk."

"So you talked..." I can hardly believe my ears.

"Yeah, we talked. Actually I listened and she talked. And after she was done talking it just didn't seem right to fuck her. She'd a done it if I'd asked, but I couldn't anymore."

He grabs a beer from my 'fridge and continues, "Sophie says that you never know what rocky paths lead to anyone's castle; that we all lie about how wide the moat is and how many crocodiles are living in it. And Hope, she has lots of crocodiles already and I didn't want to

be one of them. You know, some people get the worst names..." And he just sits and looks at my kitchen clock ticking off the seconds as he drinks his beer.

"I think I'm gonna tell her what happened to me when I was thirteen."

"Who? Hope?"

"No, you dumbass, Sophie." And he looks again at the clock counting off seconds.

It makes me take a deep breath, "You haven't even told me."

"And I ain't never gonna tell you. You know. That's more than enough."

"Bas?"

"Yeah?"

"Ever think there might just be one girl in the universe worth tryin' for,

worth bein' honest with?"

"Yeah I do."

"What do you do when you meet her?"

"Your best, Ty. Corral the crocodiles and let her swim across the moat. And if she can get across the moat, don't ever trade her in for anybody else, *ever*."

"I think I'm goin' to bed 'Bas. Thanks for the beer."

On Friday, Ty breaches my defenses, informing me that we'll be going on a double date with Sophie and one of her friends.

"I know it's an ambush, but be my wingman. I want to see her again and

she's got this cousin in town."

"Fine...but if there's bathroom window that I need to climb out of... trust me, I'm gonna do it."

He agrees to my terms and off we go.

Dinner is a dreary affair. The cousin is hot enough...I can stand to look at her, but she's snooty and pretentious as all get out.

I hate snotty chicks. How they vet you with what book you've read and what thoughts you think, marking on their mental checklist every wicket you do or don't pass. In this age of two incomes and no barriers in class, snotty chicks still seem to think it's their job to marry up.

Cock and a wallet, *charm*, cock and a

wallet, it makes me gag – and I am a cock *and a wallet*.

I will give this to Sophie though, she's mortified as she watches her cousin put me through my paces, doing her best all through dinner to make it better. Sophie's great in fact, constantly referring to her family's humble roots every time the cousin brags about a connection. She tells us how hard they worked to make it as immigrants in a new country, how affluence has finally found them after much toil. How most of all, that the children of that effort should take no ownership of the fact because they didn't work to make it happen.

The cousin takes no heed and carries on in a weird combination of 'come

here, go away'. She alternates between bragging in apparent attempt to impress me or dismissing my comments as if I don't meet her standards.

But Ty's girl is great; and there we sit, Ty looking with adoration and worship, and the cousin, an ever growing giant pain in my ass. Slowly I know that no matter what I say, I ain't never gonna pass with this chick and I soon give up even the pretense of trying. Oddly enough that seems to suit her best.

We move on to a club. At least the noise and thump of it distracts me as Sophie's infernal cousin grinds against my hips in show that I've passed one wicket – the temporary 'I would fuck you if you asked me to, but don't call me

tomorrow, because tonight I'm slumming' wicket. And I hate her.

Then slowly I feel eyes upon me, aware in growing degrees that I'm being sharply scrutinized. They're ownership eyes and they bore into my back. I turn and there Penny stands before me.

And stupid girl, she's hating me. I can feel it. Actually, it's pretty easy to see in the crossed arms, jutting hip and hot daggers of annoyance shooting from her dark eyes.

Now, unlike Ty in his new persona, I didn't ever stop to ask Penny what crocodiles lived in her moat. I never checked to see if the castle was haunted or if the drawbridge was covered in spikes. I understand suddenly, as I see

her angry, maladjusted face, that even if no cops are ever involved, a ‘yes’ can turn into ‘*NO*’ many, many hours after the deed is actually done.

Penny suddenly has regrets. Penny is angry.

“What’re you doing?”

“Penny, how the hell are you? Wow, it’s been a couple of days.”

“What are you doing?”

“Dancing with the cousin of Ty’s date. You remember him, right?”

“Sure, I remember him,” lifting her fingers in a surly wave in his direction before re-crossing her arms tight across her chest.

“Well...” And my hips are moving in time to the beat while Sophie’s cousin is

frowning at me like talking with Penny breaks some serious rule. “I’m here with Ty.”

“But you said...”

“I said what, Penny?”

“That we’d start here...”

“Yes I did...and what did you think that meant?”

“Well...that’d you’d call me...or something...” her voice trailing off, and then she looks back at the dancing, frowning cousin getting up a new head of steam. “And you haven’t called me and now I find you out here with some chick!”

“Okay, Penny, and I’m not messing with you...I’m on a blind date, I can’t stand the chick. I didn’t pick to go out

with her and I don't want to sleep with her; but what you and I had was just a hook-up. You know how it goes."

"I tell you what, as soon as I can shake her off, I'll dance with you, but honey," grabbing her by the waist in effort to avoid disaster, "you already know that I'm not looking for anything serious. Now, if I had the choice," looking again deep into her eyes, "I'd rather have you, than her."

And I'm telling the truth.

As the words escape my mouth her crumpled face turns sunny again and I know that I'm probably the worst cock on the planet. Still, it strikes me as funny that I just can't give a damn. Far as I'm concerned, liquor in me, nasty

girl behind me, a half-crazy one in front of me, it's disaster averted. This way I won't have spit in my food when we next go back to the bar that Penny works at.

That to me, in my current headspace, is a win.

Penny heads off, apparently at least temporarily satisfied that she hasn't been passed over in the grand scheme of things, and that I have a reasonable accounting for my actions. I don't even see her again during the rest of the evening.

I don't think much more about it after that.

I'm kind of bitter as Ty and I head home from the club by ourselves. "Ty,

Sophie's a great girl but I'm telling you right now that if you marry her and line me up with that cousin as a bridesmaid I'm not showing up for the wedding!"

"Marry her? What the hell are you talking about? I ain't marrying her...at least not until she actually let's me date her for a bit...then I might...I guess." He looks at me with a sideways grin from under his eyebrows before glancing up into the rear-view mirror.

"Hey, 'Bas, can you look over your shoulder and check the car that's behind us? Does it look like a cop?"

Hoisting myself sideways in the seat and checking behind me I see headlights but no sign of a rack of cherries on top of the vehicle.

“Doesn’t look like a cop, no lights... why? You worried?”

“Nah...I wouldn’t blow over, this wasn’t one of our ‘cab it’ nights...but it’s just kinda weird, like the car’s following us and I can’t think why, unless it’s a cop.”

I watch again, still turned sideways in my seat for a few moments longer, satisfying myself that it’s not a cop.

“I really don’t think so Ty...you’re just paranoid after all those times driving home when we shouldn’t have. It’s just a coincidence, don’t worry about it.” I turn back in my seat and busy myself with the iPod.

“I’m telling you though, that cousin... how can such a nice girl like Sophie be

related to such a snooty, impossible cow like that one?" I bitch the rest of the way home and right up into the garage about every damn thing that annoyed me. From the way she cut her food into tiny pieces and chewed each bite like she only had teeth in the front of her head, to the lavish way she spent my money on drinks at the bar.

"Next double date Sophie suggests I'm sending a questionnaire to her first before I agree to go anywhere, but Ty, Sophie's a great girl, one in a million. You'd be the world's biggest idiot to screw this one up."

"Bas, you know what...get off my ass."

"Just sayn' Ty..." And he waves me

off as I head for the stairs.

We meet over the coffee pot the next morning, me half-naked in boxers and Ty's hair still plastered in places to his skull.

"You're beautiful Ty...like you got rolled in the hay by a three dollar hooker."

"Oh yeah, really...look at yourself, skinny legs hangin' out of your boxers; not even Penny'd fuck you right now. Tell you what, I'm gonna go out and steal the paper from the neighbors that are movin', and just for that...*you* can start breakfast."

He's gone about ten minutes before he returns with the paper and a wicked glint in his eye, "Hey 'Bas I just saw one of

your neighbors...”

“Did he ask you why you were stealing someone’s paper?”

“Nope...he asked me if I knew who was fast asleep in the car parked across from the house. First I told him ‘No, we take care of our drunken friends.’ Then I looked and dude...I’m thinking you should maybe go out and take a look too,” he just laughs, grabbing the orange juice from the ‘fridge.

“Oh shit...no.”

“Oh shit...yes.”

Without even stopping for pants I sprint out my front door and halfway across the street until I can see the interior of the car...Penny. Disheveled, passed out, Penny.

I turn on my heel to make a bee-line back to my front door only to find it fully blocked by Ty, who solemnly hands me my cell phone. “Thought maybe you should check this out too...just for fun.” He breaks into a big, big grin as he moves to let me pass through.

My phone is totally blown-up: twenty-two calls, seven voicemails and fourteen text messages, all from Penny.

We stand in my kitchen together processing through the barrage.

“Hey it’s me, Penny...I’m outside your house...come on out and play.”

And it’s obvious from the first message on, with the slurring words and increasingly garbled syntax, that Penny is drunk off her ass.

“Hey it’s me...I’m still here...your lights on, I know you’re there...com’on out.”

“Why you not comin’ out...puuleeze play, com’on out with me.”

“An’ you know what...that blond girl you’re dancing with ‘night she was mean looking at me. I didn’ app...appreciate that. She’s a...a...bitch.” (this one ends with a hiccup).

Ty’s killing himself, “Man, sometimes can you pick ‘em.”

And we move on to the text messages:

“Hey, I’m here...outside...ur not in bed, I see lites. Thnk we shld play like the othr nite.”

“Wanna have fun...come play.”

“Hey why you’nt answering yr

phone.”

“Answr yr phone”

And on and on it goes until the last one: “I’m pissd now. Goin home.”

But of course...she never actually made it.

Ty’s laughing and I’m pulling blinds as fast as I can so the house looks dark and deserted and maybe, just maybe, Penny won’t think to knock on my door when she wakes from her stupor.

“Stop laughin’ Ty,” I holler as he watches me peer through the blinds to see if the car is still there in front of the house.

“What’re you gonna do?”

“DO? I’m going to wait until she wakes up and goes home. And if she

knocks on the door, I'm gonna go out the back and you're going to tell her I'm not home. That's what I'm gonna do."

About an hour later, me sitting on pins and needles the whole time, checking every ten minutes out the blinds like Boo Radley, she's finally gone and I heave an enormous sigh of relief.

"I tell you what 'Bas," when we finally sit down to eat, "that girl, I'm thinkin' she may have a whoooooole bunch of crocodiles swimmin' in her moat." And Ty just laughs as he shoves a forkful of egg into his mouth.

"You know what Ty? Sometimes I hate you."

I spend the rest of the day preparing for the interview on Thursday, reading

material and mentally practicing answers to the questions I think may come my way, but it's hard to concentrate. I'm not in college anymore and the episode with Penny seems so like a throw-back to times that should have been far gone by.

Pete and Re-Pete show up on Sunday for brats and beer and it's good to see them. The little one bounces into my house happy and with a bright light in his eyes.

"Thanks for the BB-gun. It's awesome. I shoot cans with it every day. I don't miss so much anymore. My dad says that we're gonna go huntin' again and this time maybe I can shoot one too. Are we Sebastian?

“Sure buddy, we are. Glad you’re practicing. I learned how to shoot with a BB-gun. In fact, if you go with us this year to sight in the guns, I’m pretty sure that I have a real one that’ll fit you.”

“Cool, what’re we eating for dinner?”

“Brats, you like them?”

“Yup, I like them, my dad made them the other day. Can I play your video games?”

“Sure, Pete...you know where they are,” and he heads off to the spare bedroom where I keep the gear.

“So Pete...”

“Yeah, it’s good. In fact it’s great. I drop him off every day at school and pick him up every night from the babysitters and it’s always the same.

Every day he looks at me when he climbs in the car and says, ‘Dad, what’re we gonna do tonight? And I always try to do something that makes a good memory.’”

“I miss the other kids, but I still get to see them on the weekends she wants a break. That part’s been hardest for Pete...he misses them something awful sometimes, even though he loves having me to himself. Other than that, the only thing I sometimes still miss is a woman to talk with about it all. Apart from that I’m good.”

“You lookin’ for a woman?”

“Honestly, not really. I really don’t need a chick. A chick would just try and pull me away from what I’m doing. But

it would be nice to have a woman to talk to again.”

TWENTY-FOUR – ‘Back Against the Wall’ – Cage the Elephant

I fly out to meet with the CEO, CFO and COO in Tampa on the Thursday, filled with hope that the drought will end and reluctance that, if it does, I'll have to pull up what few roots I still have left.

The flight is uneventful, taking far longer for check-in, security, the waiting lounge and the boarding procedure than the flight itself. It's the irony of modern air travel that even on a domestic flight the process of air travel will always account for more hours than the flying itself.

Truly, by scheduling, I can get

anywhere at any time, in roughly the equivalent of ten minutes for every hour by car. But even three hours of actual flying time to Tampa and back will take almost eight hours in total to complete. One wonders at the fact that the genius of the invention is so impeded by the bureaucracy that controls it. And then the additional politics that adds layers of difficulty to what is truly the most revolutionary product of our time. Don't even get me started on the fact that fuel costs have made airplanes the new buses – a stop here to pick up and drop off, a stop there to do the same.

Even in early February the heat and humidity hit me like a wall as I drop into Tampa and head down the jet way. I'd

forgotten, much as I'm a southern boy, how I hate excessive heat. Score another point against Tampa. I battle through the crowds of tourists to find my waiting limo that takes me to the call center.

In business, as in life, first impressions are important and often bear out in the long run. Running the gauntlet of the meet and greet that awaits me, all of my impressions are favorable until I meet the little troll who runs sales.

The CEO, early sixties, stocky, firm grip and intelligent face; the CFO, mid-fifties, tall, very fit and an open demeanor; the COO, late forties, mid-height, firm grip and infectious smile, all from head office. The sales guy, Dan,

the man hauling in the bacon for the site, short, bad suit, terrible haircut, and frowning as he shakes my hand. Me, almost forty, tall, firm grip and choosing to ignore the bad attitude that I meet at the end of the line.

My meeting begins first with the men who govern the company, Dan excluded and it goes well. You just know when you're nailing it. Men stop being suits, they loosen their ties, introduce topics that include sports in a sign that you've passed the business wickets and that they're now on to vetting you as potentially one of them and how you'll temperamentally fit into their organization.

It all goes swimmingly. I like their

vision, I understand and can work their business plan. “So, I met Dan earlier, help me understand the role he plays in your business structure.”

“Well, Dan is the guy we brought in from outside to generate business. He works as a broker between us and potential clients.”

“Can you define his role and what he’s looking for from this hire?”

“Sure, we pay Dan a finder’s fee to bring in business, and up until now he’s also managed the operations of the business here. He’s got control of each of the relationships that function in this call center. His role, should you take the job, is to continue to bring in new business and manage the relationships

we already have in place.”

“Right now,” breaks in the COO, “he’s running a dual role and he’s looking for a hands-on guy who can follow the directions of his clients and improve the customer experience that currently happens here. And because he’s responsible for bringing in new revenue we’re looking for a good fit between him and whomever we hire.

“Ultimately we’d like to phase him out of operations and bring him back to a strictly sales role; and that’s where we see that you potentially can bring great value to the organization. But let’s bring him in to join the discussion,” completes the CEO.

Now in business language here’s what

I've just been told: in this whole group of intelligent men, the one guy I *didn't* like, he's the one whose ass I truly have to kiss.

Not so happy with that but another part of the picture also becomes slightly clearer.

It looks like this...they identified an expanding market, opened a call center in it and contracted a guy to pull the business in. He's brought some business in, but not lots, and to make up for the fact he's attempted to make himself indispensable by immersing himself in the operations side by arguing that it's what the clients he has brought in, want.

Despair, my deep, dark friend finds me and then hope pushes him away.

“Okay, great. Seems simple enough, let’s bring him in, I’m sure it won’t be a problem.”

And Dan, the troll, joins us over sandwiches on a foil platter and soda cans. Who says that a business lunch includes martinis, strippers and filet mignon?

He starts in on his sandwich, murdering the bread between grinding molars, arguing how limited his time is and then he lays the boots to me.

“So your resume says that you worked for X Company. I know lot’s of guys there. Do you know...”

I answer politely, acknowledging each and every guy I know far better than the troll; until he gets to a guy I knew

only briefly that got let go under a cloud.

“Well that’s the ‘go-to’ guy...you don’t seem to know him...humph, okay.”

“Tell me about your operations experience.”

And I lay that part out. Each time meeting resistance for time honored theories that worked in my Fortune 500 experience as he counter-argues with theories of his own, ten years out of date and empirically shown not to work. But I manage.

The real bosses of the company smile and nod, eating sandwiches of their own, swallowing mouthfuls of soda, watching the exchange, seeming to feel all is going well.

“So how well do you work under

strong direction?” Asks Dan as he hits the dessert tray, shoving a large square into his mouth and chewing vigorously on its contents. “Because as much as my clients are looking for significant improvements, I know what they want and they are looking to me to deliver them.”

Wham, down comes the proverbial gauntlet and recognizing the challenge I answer as best I can. Stepping carefully around the man’s ego, loathing the little piece of crust that hangs on the corner of his mouth, which he wipes away accompanied with the loud smack of his jaws closing over the last chew.

“Well, Sebastian, you seem to know what you’re talking about, and you know

almost everyone that I know that knows this business appropriately...I'll certainly think about it." He grabs two more of the squares he so likes from the tray before departing.

"Gentleman, I leave you to it. I have a ton of client calls awaiting me and I've got to excuse myself."

With that he exits.

We spend the rest of the afternoon touring the physical operation and looking at the financials.

It's clear pretty quickly to me, in the operational oversight they provide, that there's a lot that I can bring to this organization; and in the growing waves of enthusiasm and smiles, it seems apparent that the executive team thinks

so too. Reality is that this site would greatly benefit from the development experience that I've got, but it won't take me long to fix what ails and I'm definitely over qualified for the job of being Dan's bitch. Seems their enthusiasm is actually because they can see what I bring for the whole operation, not just Tampa, and suddenly it starts to really feel like a great opportunity.

And with that I settle in to enjoy the rest of the afternoon, providing feedback and comment on their general expansion plans.

The final act of this day long business theater is an early dinner at a local high-end steakhouse so that I can still make my eight o'clock flight out of Tampa.

We've all become quite comfortable and open with each other as the day's progressed. Dinner marks the moment that ties are loosened that little bit further and additional information is traded over drinks.

"We're deeply impressed, Sebastian," begins the CEO as he takes a long sip on his whiskey and soda before dinner, "with the skills that you bring to the table. I'm pretty confident that you'd make a great long-term fit within the organization."

"Thanks Hank, I feel just as positive about it myself."

"And it appeared to me that you made a favorable impression on Dan as well..."

“*Favorable?*” Says my startled mind as I try to make sure my eyebrows don’t fly up, “*if that’s favorable, hate to see what it’s like when he just totally hates a guy,*” I think nodding slightly, and allow Hank to proceed as we follow the waiter to our table.

“It must seem a little unusual that we’re allowing Dan so much latitude for the hire, but he’s been integral to the development of the site. I’ll admit that it’s been a bit difficult so far to find the right mix of skills that meets the definition of the support he says he needs and our vision of how the role plays out in our global plan.”

There it is, the piece of information I’ve been looking for all afternoon.

Covered under his careful business language Hank is finally serving up the skinny on the location. Dan is an ass with a deep need to stay in control, and they all know it, but their hands are tied by some contractual bond they aren't yet in a position to break. Bringing *me* in helps break it, simply by my doing a much better job than Dan could ever do himself.

As the full picture becomes clear to me, looking from face to face at our table for four I can see that they, each in turn, are waiting to see if I got the message.

“Gentlemen, I don't foresee having a problem working with Dan. And I'm sure, as he gains confidence in my

ability to follow his direction, as the level of client satisfaction improves and he sees that I can consistently make the correct business decision, that Dan will feel comfortable moving his focus back to generating sales.”

Oh yes, I am that slick. Nodding in turn to each one, I can see that my answer is a home run.

Only one thing mars my happy, happy meal and that’s the buzzing of my cell phone.

“Sorry, gentlemen for checking my messages but it might be the airline with a flight delay.”

“Not a problem, Sebastian.”

But it’s not the airline. It’s a text from Penny, “Heyo, holla back 4 a hook-up”

and as my face goes nineteen shades of scarlet in embarrassment and irritation, I cover with a laugh saying, “Nope, not the airline after all...just my mom wishing me well.”

But that girl, I am definitely going to have to fix that when I get home.

The rest of the meal passes without event and as we stand outside the steakhouse waiting for my airport limo, the three execs, led by Hank, reassure me again how happy they are with the outcome of today.

“Thanks again for flying in to meet us, Sebastian, it was a great pleasure. We’ll meet with Dan tomorrow and get his buy-in on bringing you on board; then Larry will reach out to you Monday with

an offer. I think we can make a good go of this all the way ‘round.”

After a final round of handshakes and even a couple of back slaps, the three guys wave me into my limo for the short ride to the airport.

I feel fantastic wading again through tourists to make my flight and notice the entirely different demeanor of those exiting Tampa than entering it. It makes me laugh to myself to watch the sunburned, bedraggled masses push themselves and their tired, whiny kids wearing Busch Gardens t-shirts and fighting with each other through the security lines.

I feel terrific as the airplane takes off and heads finally back home. I feel great

as I wait out my hour-long layover in Atlanta reviewing every piece of the day just passed.

I feel good as the second flight lands and I head to my car, taking a deep breath and settling back into familiar surroundings. And that's when I stop feeling good and begin an anxious review of the interview with Dan, whose approval I'm so going to need. I'm damn glad that I live close to the airport or I might've been able to beat any remaining euphoria out of myself before even hitting home.

Ty is waiting up for me as I get in and he has as an open beer on the counter for me by the time I hang up my jacket, drop my suspenders and remove my tie.

“So...? How’d it go?”

“Well...” Stopping first to take a long pull on the beer as I kick off my shoes, “Ty, they loved me.”

And without a word he heads to the ‘fridge and grabs himself his own beer in order to raise a bottle together.

“I knew it. Tell me all about it.”

I roll him through each step, reliving again everything from the meet and greet up to dinner. We spend an hour over beer talking about Dan, my impression of him, what we think his impression is of me and whether he’ll have the power to handicap my hire. As the recap progresses and Ty applauds me for every good call and great answer that I recount to him, my spirit rises within me

and I feel great again. And it is good.

“Oh yeah Ty...I almost forgot...so I'm there at dinner and my phone starts to vibrate like mad. You know me, I'm thinking its maybe a delayed flight... yeah, no...it's Penny looking for a hook-up at fucking five-thirty in the afternoon. I'm tellin' you man, I'm starting to think that those aren't crocodiles in her moat, they're big crazy ass sea monsters, is what they are.”

Ty just laughs, punching me in the arm before grabbing another beer, “Bas, I'm glad things went so well. I mean, I knew they would, but it's great to hear. But it got me thinking about what happens if you move to Tampa and so I called Jill again today...”

“I’m gonna move back to the condo. It just starts to make sense if you’re leaving town, and Jill’s happy to get out of her half of the mortgage. I’m moving back there in the next couple of weeks. Maybe Sophie will take me more seriously if I actually have my own place to live in, whadda ya think?”

“I think that I’ll miss you Ty, but you’re right, it makes sense. It makes a lot of sense.”

“Cheers Ty...cheers to movin’ on.”

“Cheers to you too, ‘Bas.”

TWENTY-FIVE – ‘9 Crimes (demo)’ – Damian Rice

Friday passes slower than when I was a kid waiting on Christmas, as I imagine the meeting with Dan. By noon I've succumbed to beer as I pace back and forth from the family room to the kitchen and back again. That guy makes me nervous. It's hard to believe that the one man I really needed to impress was by far the hardest to like and that this one tiny, little egomaniac may be all that stands between me and gainful employment. And worse yet, I have to wait until Monday for the call from Larry. So I drink beer and start planning

the move to Tampa to while away the tension and restless hours until Ty shows up for dinner.

“Man ‘Bas, you started Happy Hour early,” he says surveying the five empties that grace the counter as he enters the kitchen.

“Yup...the waiting’s getting to me. But I did find some cool looking condos in Tampa. A depressed market is maybe gonna come in handy. Check these out...”

Walking through the real estate listings I’ve flagged quickly convinces both of us that I can get myself well-situated in a three bedroom condo for less than two hundred thousand. He whistles when I show him my favorite

for one seventy-five in a complex with a pool near the ocean.

“Wow, that’s a great deal no matter how you look at it. If you’re smart you’ll negotiate something with Hank to bridge the financing of your house for six months, wait for our market to recover a bit and then give me the equity left over from the sale and purchase. See if we can’t make you some money when it’s all said and done. The stock market is just as flooded with undervalued buys. Right now if you’ve got money...you can make money.”

I feel good about the plans and strategies I’m constructing and continue the discussion about the potential compensation package as we head out

for steaks and girls.

Executive level compensation is an interesting animal. If a company wants you bad enough, has a healthy bottom line and understands what kind of revenue good executive management can generate, you end up negotiating for a lot more than just an annual salary.

It's quite commonplace that a car allowance or yearly travel home can be included in a package. Companies might take on a mortgage for six months if the executive relocates for the position, or provide a generous re-location package to smooth the transition. Then comes a discussion around stock options, potential 401K contributions and monthly or yearend performance

bonuses. But you, yourself, have to be on the ball, or have the balls, to make sure each item gets discussed. A company may understand that it needs to provide these things to executives, but most don't volunteer and if you don't have the courage, it's often just your loss.

On Saturday Ty and I head out to a furniture store to replace the things Jill took with her: a bedroom suite, a couch, a television, and a table and chairs for the breakfast nook.

“Hey sweetheart,” I say casually, as we wander the aisles and look at the displays, “we heading to ‘Bed, Bath and Beyond’ after for towels and table linen?”

“No idiot, well...maybe.”

The early afternoon is spent choosing the additional accessories of an accomplished life: towels, bedding, even a new shower curtain.

The afternoon light is filtering through the curtains of Ty's tenth storey condominium by the time get we home. We start wandering around evaluating the purchases, deciding where each item will go.

“Hey ‘Bas, I’m gonna move the couch over here to sit beside the coffee table; and I know you hate that shower curtain, but it’s way better than the polka dot one she had in there.”

“Sure Ty, it’ll match those towels you bought.”

On it goes, debate on the relative merits of each item until we wander into the master bedroom and Ty is silent for a few moments as he examines the almost empty space.

“She wasn’t a bad girl, ‘Bas.”

“Yeah Ty, I know.”

Looking around the room he shakes his head, “I didn’t think anything could change this much in my head in the six weeks since I met Sophie. I left Jill without much explanation, you know. I just kinda said I couldn’t do it and she just stood there and cried.” He hangs his head momentarily.

“It just didn’t feel right; Jill’s a great girl, smart, funny, beautiful. But I was doing it because I had to, because I ought

to. And then you bust up with Michelle, and Meaghan takes off on Pete. It was suddenly like this thing that I was chasing, I didn't need to anymore. I just looked at her one night and I didn't want it to be her. I didn't want it to be the end yet."

"And it really didn't need to be," Ty continues, standing now in the space where the bed used to be, swinging his arms wide. You were free, Pete was free. I couldn't stand the idea that I wasn't. So I decided that I wasn't going to be caught yet either. I looked at her as she slept and realized that I didn't want her to be the mother of my children; that as much as I had fun with her, I didn't want to look after her the rest of my life.

So I left.”

“So you left, and now?”

“And now I’m gonna move in and try to date a woman, that as yet, won’t sleep with me. I’m going to come home at night and try to feed myself without company. I watched Pete you know, screwing girls and getting hammered, it was only a holiday for him, a way to deal with what happened. Me, it’s my life, and for the first time I’m not sure why. I’ll be forty in eight months and I’m wondering if I’m not just starting to make a fool of myself.”

“Why not just go back with Jill?”

“Because she’ll let me cheat; she already has. She’s so open minded that she just figures that’s what guys do, and

as long as they come back to you, it's okay. But I already know that if that's what she accepts, I will. And one day I won't come back. And by then there'll be some kids and a house and a mortgage. For all her open mindedness I'm pretty sure she doesn't deserve that."

Pulling the drawers out now in the master bath to see what's left behind, opening and shutting them methodically, I hear Ty finish his thought, "She's so accepting of me that she'll never ask me to be anything else, until it's way too late to change myself. By then I'd just be some irredeemable asshole and she'd just be cryin'." He returns into the room and looks at me.

"Let's go get a beer, 'Bas. I'm done

here for tonight.”

I tackle Penny finally on Sunday night after the college basketball game, calling the number I’ve almost memorized because of the awful frequency with which it shows up on my cell.

“Hey Penny, it’s Sebastian.”

“Oh baby, there you are. I was startin’ to think you’d died or somethin’.”

“I’m not dead Penny.” And she answers with a slow giggle.

“But look...hey, we had a great time, right?”

“Yeah sugar, we sure did.”

“Well look Penny...here’s the thing... we had a great time and all, but that’s all it was. I’m just not looking right now to be involved with anyone and much as it was a great time, babe, sometimes it’s just sex, you know?”

“Oh,” and it comes out of her throat all kinds of strangled and tight.

“Ahh Penny, don’t be like that, I told you on the front end I wasn’t looking for anything serious.”

“I know...” More strangled sounds on the other end of the phone, “but I thought we had a connection.”

“Sure Penny, we did. Of all the girls I know, you know what, I’d fuck you again.”

“Really?” And as the voice on the

other end brightens considerably, I know I've made an error in the conversation.

“Sure Penny, sure I would, but I don't think I'm the right guy for you right now.”

“I mean I know that you don't want anything serious; and it's okay with me if you sleep with other women, I mean...I get that. But I kinda really like you, can't we just maybe hook up sometimes and see how it goes?”

Oh God, the woman who begs. You feel like ten thousand kinds of asshole but why, oh why can't women ever understand that sometimes you just fuck them because you're horny and they're there at the right time?

“I don't think that'd be a great idea. I

think maybe that you're looking for something that isn't there, you know? I think you're a great girl, trust me, but I'm just not feelin' it the way you are. You know how it is..."

And that's how you get rid of a girl on a Sunday night.

At the end of it I just feel like I need a beer and a bath. I do both, pressing on the remote while I float in the water up to my neck, changing the songs on the iPod. Moving past every song about a man with a soul, I drink the beer I've lined up like soldiers on the edge of the tub. It takes more than a few.

On Monday the phone rings a dozen times. Solicitations, my mom, some of my friends, the credit card company

trying to offer new products, this girl I hooked up with weeks ago looking for a date to a wedding, but not Larry.

On Tuesday the phone rings five times. The local newspaper asking if I got my weekly flyer, two more solicitations, my cable company selling sports package options and my mom. No Larry.

On Wednesday the phone doesn't ring at all but over dinner Ty tells me that the furniture's delivered and he's moving back into the condo on Friday.

On Thursday the phone rings and it's Sonja, the recruiter who originally hooked me up with the position in Tampa.

“Sebastian, it's Sonja.”

My heart sinks into my shoes but I play along, “Sonja! Great to hear from you.”

“Sebastian, I got a call from Larry late yesterday and he asked me to reach out to you.”

“Right, right, Hank said that I might hear from you with an offer.”

“Yeah, uhmm...”

Not good.

“I’m not sure exactly what they said to you when you went for your on-site interview, but they’ve asked me to call and give you an update.”

“Okay.”

“Well, first, the executive team loved you, they thought you were great...”

And here it comes.

“But, it seems that Dan is concerned that you’re slightly over-qualified and wants to interview some other candidates before potentially moving ahead with your hire. They’ve told me that they might be able to get back to you in a couple of months.”

“Oh.”

“I’m sorry, really I am. We’ve been trying to help them fill this position for the past six months, this isn’t the first time that this has come back as the answer. Really, I’m sorry.”

I can tell she feels bad for me and I try to make her feel better.

“Hey, Sonja...I understand... companies in this economic climate have a lot to choose from. I appreciate that

you called to let me know.”

“Sebastian, just so that you understand, I do really feel bad about this. I talked about you and your resume with my boss, and I think that you’re highly qualified for any number of positions. We’ve both decided that we’ll do anything we can to help you get a good job. That’s a personal decision, not a professional one.”

“Thanks Sonja, I appreciate that...” and I take a deep breath, “more than you know.”

But what can she do?

And what can I do besides sit and wait to one day be the prettiest pig in the trough? Wal-Mart and maybe even the Army seem almost like a good idea...

they hire anybody.

On Friday Ty moves out, packing his bags in spite of my bad news. “It’s gonna turn around, you’ll see. I hate to go but it’s still the right time for me, you understand.”

And I do.

“I’m not that far away. And I invited Pete and Re-Pete for pizza tomorrow night. You’re coming too, right?”

And I go.

We eat pizza and drink a few beers. Ty takes Re-Pete to the park to throw the football while Pete and I stay in to watch the basketball game. Ty’s face is all lit up when they get back, like he’s just discovered that kids aren’t just a pain in the ass.

I go home to my empty house. No more driveway basketball, no more arguments about whose turn it is to buy beer, just lots of silence that I fill with TV. I sit or I pace, and once a week I take out the garbage. Sometimes I call a girl. And I drink beer, lots of beer, waiting on a phone that doesn't ring for anything important, watching the clock countdown slowly to forty.

TWENTY-SIX – ‘Happy Birthday to Me’ - Cracker

The morning of my fortieth birthday, this Thursday in the month of April, dawns in sharp and promising light. But I wake to no one but the flickering images coming from the family room television. And as I shake the cobwebs of my dreams from my thoughts, rolling my body to the left to get a more comfortable spot on the couch, the house sits around me silent and empty.

I am forty and there is no one to greet my existence and no tangible marker left to say that I have accomplished anything in the years granted to me. There is no

wife to kiss me, no scribbled crayon cards from the children I begat, and no job or tasks to rise to meet.

There is only silence and the dawning realization that I've reached a milestone with nothing to show for it. Just this house. A thing, a property too large for my needs, which I again now inhabit alone.

My mom calls at ten. "Well, so you're finally forty...I remember the day you were born, it rained like crazy that whole day, water pouring outta the sky like it was never going to stop. But what a day it was for your father and me."

She tells me again, like she has every year since I can remember, what it was like to bring me into the world. "I

worked hard all that morning, I sure can tell you; but I was so ready for it. I had waited so long for you those nine months, to see your face and hold you for the first time. You know that the labor pains started the night before, and your father paced the kitchen floor of our old house while we waited until it was time to go to the hospital...”

My mother loves me and the event of my birth changed the very fabric of her life.

“...And there you were at the end of it all. Pink and hollering and your dad so proud that he had a son. I lost a crown that day from biting down hard against the pain...but it was worth it, Sebastian. No matter what your life brings you son,

that day was a very good day.”

Ty calls next around eleven. “Bas, you old fucker, congrats. Hey, I set up a meeting tonight with Steve, that guy I told you about who has some opportunities in his banking call center. Meet me at ‘The Hell Cat’ around eight and I’ll make the introductions. We’re meeting there on other business any way and I figured you might want to tag along. I’ve told him you’re a great guy to look at, he’s totally interested.”

“Thanks Ty, I appreciate it. Thanks a lot.”

Pete calls around lunch, “Hey Sebastian, congrats man, you’re old now! Sorry I can’t get away tonight to buy you a beer, but you know how it

is...school night 'n all; but just you wait, on Saturday we're going to celebrate your fortieth in style. You realize that next it's Ty's turn and the year after, it's mine? Time's moving fast, man, I hope y'all do the same for me. You can't do forty right without a party, is my opinion."

"Sure Pete, I promise you we'll have a party for you next year. Hell, you can have my party right now if you want, wouldn't bother me none."

"You know what Sebastian, think about it this way...this party, you never, ever, know what life will bring you. Maybe everything turns around in the next couple of months and you'll look back on the party as a great beginning to

the second half of your life. Or maybe everything's going to get really, *really* shitty and you'll get cancer and die. Even then, you can look back on the party as the last really great thing that happened before all hell broke loose. It's always best to celebrate the big events 'cause you just never know man, what's around the next corner and whether the ride you're on is goin' uphill or down."

It makes me laugh to think that my divorced, unemployed, fortieth birthday party might be a highlight 'cause after that I get cancer and die.

"You're right Pete, it can always get worse. I'll see you Saturday."

And then I sit in my clothes from the

night before, aimlessly watching the TV, picking up the phone as my grandma and brother call with their birthday greetings. It's all the same message: "Yes we know it's' bad right now, but it's a milestone, and it'll get better. We're glad that you were born."

Everybody is glad that I was born. And I, I had always intended to be glad of that fact on this birthday, but now that it's finally arrived, I'm no longer sure. I've always seen forty as a significant event, an evaluation point and a mile marker of firmly established adulthood. But here I am with nothing but a semi-autonomous cock and a dwindling bank account.

I watch Jerry Springer and Maury to

assure myself that I haven't yet truly fallen into the pit.

Ty's offer and set-up finally propel me into action. I shower and shave, choosing my clothes carefully to generate the impression of a man still walking towards his destiny. I leave the house an odd mixture of despair and defiance.

I hit the bar around eight-thirty, a big space with a place to dance, several rooms and a patio. A couple of women are already littering the dance floor when I arrive. Despite the size, the atmosphere is familiar and intimate. Christina hails me as I enter, an acquaintance of long standing where, every time she's plastered, she hits on

me, but we never follow through.

“Baby! Oh honey, you’re here, that’s awesome. Hey, isn’t it your birthday?”

I just nod my head in acknowledgement while thinking, “*Fuckin’ Facebook, I hate that thing.*”

“Well find me later, baby, I’ll make it worth your while.”

“Sure honey, catch up with you soon.”

And those are the opening lines of the worst night of my life, only I don’t know it yet.

I do know this place, although I haven’t been here that often. Nodding at familiar people, I keep moving until I find Ty out on the patio in a quiet corner with his client.

“Sebastian, let me introduce you to

Steven. Steve, Sebastian.”

I sit down for drinks with Ty and a guy in his early fifties. He’s well kept, just a hint of grey at the temples and with a serious but generous demeanor. I can tell, fast, that the man knows what he’s about. He’s used to getting his way, but open-minded enough to take as many good guys on for the thrill ride as he can. This is a man that knows his economic power, but has determined that having no one riding the wave with him is just no damn fun at all.

“Ty says that you’re one hell of a call center exec; it’s something I’m going to need in the coming year. I’ve seen your resume, tell me what attracted you to the business in the first place.”

It's the most comfortable job interview that I've had in months. The beer rolls, a couple of shots follow and we are shortly doing business fifties style.

I pass every wicket. Sell, sell, selling myself like a dancing clown until he's got what he was looking for and gets back down to the money business at hand, turning again to Ty. I'm spent, sweating privately from the exertion, and excuse myself to head off to the bathroom, intending to come back to the conversation that I know will inevitably circle back to football.

I feel okay as I head off the patio. I cross the dance floor on my way towards the bathroom, accompanied by

that same deep house beat that always moves the loins. But I'm still unsatisfied, itchy in my spirit as the lowest man on the totem pole. At least I have hopes that I might just have some modest shot at a title this time. I'm getting good at the dancing clown.

Then I see her, a lithe body moving in time to the music as I cross the floor close by her. Head low and raising her face in beat to the music, making eye contact with her companions and then, while flipping back her hair, landing her glance suddenly, by chance, on me. She's beautiful: maybe early thirties, heart-shaped face, brunette and slender. The eye contact is electric and she instantly snakes a sinuous arm out to

grab me by the wrist. Pulling me tight and synching me up, she finishes the movement of her hips that she had already planned ages ago.

I go with it and succeed. Hip to hip, parry, thrust, knees bent to create just the right amount of lift in her thighs in a fluid movement as if our mutual history has always ordained it.

“Where have you been all my life?”

“Here and there and everywhere.”

“Everywhere? Then it won’t matter if you stay longer.”

“Sure, but I was heading off to piss,” our hips synching up again.

She throws her head back and laughs, looking at me through long dark lashes as I press hard against her, then break

the connection to head on about my business.

I look back as I hit the door of the head. She's just standing there looking at me, with a delicious sly grin of interest and welcome in place, should I choose it.

I have a minute plus forty second piss to decide... "It's my fuckin' birthday, yeah I want that."

Heading back I decide to casually pass the dance floor where I can see, with a toss of her hair and a sidelong glance, that she's been waiting for me to return.

It's that simple sometimes.

She grabs me close and we dance that way for a few moments, hip to hip, with

the right grind in the loins. She's damn hot and looks so incredibly like an actress on TV that I've been crushing on these past months with her flexible body, tight fitting white shirt, great ass and ample leg. One of which is so generously sharing a great expanse of flesh with my inner thigh that I can hardly believe my luck.

God, the girl can move

"You dance really well, you as good in bed?"

"I'm better in bed than I am on the dance floor," I answer, flashing my best grin.

Raising an eyebrow and calmly moving in that much closer to my essential parts, "Prove it."

“Not a problem, it’s easy enough. Your place or mine?”

She tells me, constantly rolling with the vibe and seriously working me over, that she’s almost an hour away and can’t leave her friends.

“Then that doesn’t leave us much to work with; but I have a truck over in the parking garage kitty corner from here.”

“We can do that.”

“You sure? You’re good to go?”

“Absolutely.”

I agree ‘cause it’s my birthday and I can cry if I want to. And right now I don’t.

Forty-nine minutes. I counted. From beginning to end I counted the flashing minutes on the dashboard as I took what

was offered to me.

Minute one, assault on the mouth. Minute seven move to the neck and the space just behind the ear, sliding down onto the collar bone and then lifting the encumbrance of shirt out of the way. Minute eleven, the first serious moan as the attack moves on to the right breast and then pressing forward through the awkward moments as adults hastily shed clothes in the back seat of a truck; grabbing my first serious handful at minute sixteen as undergarments are lost and the game of no return is truly on. Minutes twenty-one to forty-two as I just keep telling myself that it's my birthday and I have no wife, but I have a beautiful, open girl beneath me. Minute

forty-three where I rest for thirty seconds upon my conquest before I get my head back into the game at hand, and have all my gear back on by minute forty-eight, when I again open the back door of my truck and pull myself upright to stand on the pavement.

The deed is done. Hotness works exponentially to add excitement. She's hot and I scored on my birthday.

We walk back over to the bar, mostly silent and not holding hands.

"I kinda liked that. Do you wanna to stay in touch?"

"Sure," I answer, "anytime, anyplace," while she casually grabs my cell phone from my pocket, asks my number and calls herself, letting it ring

once. All the while raising a perfectly manicured eyebrow in my direction, not in question, but acknowledgement.

My kind of girl.

As we hit the door, I grab and press her hand. “I have to go and check in with my friend, I’ve been gone a long time. I’ll find you again soon,” with a hard inflection on ‘*soon*.’ “Wait for me here,” leaving her on the dance floor.

Damn, she’s hot. Quite out of my league, and I’m not a bad looking guy.

I rejoin Ty, who squints one eye shut as he looks up at me, and shake hands again with Steve as I sit back down to a Jameson’s and ginger that’s obviously been waiting a while.

“Glad you’re back Sebastian. Ty and

I were just talking about the game between Oklahoma and Boise State, destined to be a classic.”

We talk football for about ten minutes, then move on to Nascar. The two tight into their business relationship and I, more dancing clown, am hard pressed to control the ‘I just got lucky’ grin on my face as we discuss the minutia of sports trivia. Suddenly, unexpectedly, a familiar voice opens up just behind my left shoulder.

“There you finally are. Honey, can you hold my purse?”

It’s her and I turn to reach for the purse with a “Sure I can,” already forming in my mouth.

Before I manage to get the words out

it drops to the left of me, without ceremony, in front of Steve. Who *does* deliver the, “Sure I can.”

Minutes smear in a blur of introductions as Ty rises to kiss her on the cheek and says “Sebastian, this is a good friend of mine, Rachel, Steve’s wife.”

Steve smiles in acknowledgement, while my guts rise into my throat, extending my hand as she just looks at me in hastily covered surprise.

“But you must have seen her on the dance floor when you went to the bathroom. Rachel has a way of getting noticed, eh Steve?”

“Yeah I noticed you, nice to meet you, Rachel,” with an accompanying

handshake.

She takes my hand and just nods like she's never met me -- let alone knowing the size of my cock -- kisses her husband and heads back off to the dance floor.

“She's a great girl. I own the place... don't know if Ty told you, investment thing. She's great on a Thursday night when she brings her friends. It helps make the place come alive. Everybody ready for another round?”

And he hails the bartender to place an order.

I am jammed up so hard that I can hardly breathe, but it all keeps rolling on in front of me like the worst movie that just doesn't ever seem to end.

I can barely breathe but it just keeps

on coming.

The waitress heads over, and fuck me, it's a girl I've flirted with when I've been here before. She grins like a fool as she takes the order and comes back five minutes later with the next round.

"I saw you dancing earlier, you're good," she says quietly, placing my drink in front of me.

Steve raises an eyebrow and looks at Ty, "She likes him, I can tell," after she heads off.

"Sure she does, and if you've seen him dance, you'd have some idea why. And this bastard," Ty says as he grabs my shoulder giving it a friendly shake, "if she thinks he's good vertically, stories say she should experience him

horizontally!”

Ty’s helping again. As usual, it’s wrong time and place, and definitely the wrong words.

“Really? I might be able to help you out with this one. It’s your birthday right? Everyone needs to smile on their birthday. Give me a second.” Without warning Steve leaves his chair and heads off the patio.

“Fuck Ty, what’re you doing?”

“Hey man, for five minutes you looked like the cat and then you just looked sick. That ain’t right on your birthday. Steve’s a good guy, he’ll help hook you up.”

“I don’t need help Ty, you have no idea...”

But like a fool I sit and wait, swallowing a big gulp of my drink, hard and fast. I need the support.

I have no idea what to do. My mind's a mess. I don't fuck married chicks, it's just a rule, *a firm and fast one*. But I just fucked a married chick 'cause she looked like an actress and I didn't ask any essential questions. And her husband is the guy buying me drinks in his own fuckin' bar.

God Damn.

I'm suddenly so sick to my stomach that I'm sure there's not enough alcohol in the world to keep the vomit inside of me or to cure me, but I also know that I intend to try very hard to find out if there might be.

“Ty, all bets are off....I’m gonna get plastered.”

“Seriously ‘Bas, tonight? Are you stupid?”

“Yeah, tonight. Starting *right* now.”

“You’re an idiot then. I’m giving you a fuckin’ chance and you’re gonna get hammered? I don’t get you,” but looking at my face he has some answer. “Fine, just don’t do it in front of this guy.”

“Fine Ty, I won’t.” I slam the now empty glass onto the table.

And before we can really scrap, Steve is back.

“It’s all arranged, and here’s a shot for courage.”

He places a shooter in front of me coupled with a bag of beers, and then

grins real slow and big.

“What’s all arranged?”

“Well I was right, she likes you. So I told her to come and hang out with you for a bit to see if there’s a connection. Don’t worry about the work, I’ll still pay her.”

Before I can even protest, he’s waved her over from where she’s been standing at the door to the patio.

She’s a pretty thing, all soft, uncertain face standing before me.

What am I to do? I just fucked this guy’s wife, and it may or may not come out. The strategic bastard in me can only think that if I lay on a second layer, I might have some cover if it does.

“Me...fuck your wife? Nah, it was

just the waitress. People must be confused. You know how it is,” says my mind in pretend dialogue as I prepare for an eventuality.

“Hey Kate,” says my mouth as I rise from my chair, “wanna dance?”

We head to the dance floor, dumping the beer on a nearby chair and we do our ‘get to know you’s’ for a few minutes, with only one break where I leave to approach Rachel.

She looks at me. Calm and brazen-eyed as I grab her elbow, hard, “Drop my number like a bad habit...don’t call me...don’t reach out to me...nothing...*ever*. Got it?”

I don’t wait for acknowledgement, I don’t wait for a protest, I don’t care to

see the response. I am so done and I am so mad.

What kind of woman does that shit?

Kate greets me again, welcoming the attention, not worrying about the momentary interaction apart from saying “Do you know her? I saw you dancing with her earlier.”

“Sure, that was her. She’s your boss’s wife, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Well she dropped her stuff onto the wrong spot a bit ago and I wanted to warn her.”

“Kay, that was nice.”

“Yeah...really nice. Listen, your boss said you think I’m cute,” I’m leaning in to work her body to the music, her

responding in kind, “and it’s my birthday; any chance you wanna make me really, really happy by foolin’ around some?”

I hate it, but I’ve gotta do it. The guy owns the bar, the guy might give me a job, the guy’s buyin’ me drinks and wants me to have a great time on my birthday.

Her face registers surprise at the directness of my question. Uncertainty enters, but like Penny, she knows in her eagerness, that she’s already come one country too far.

“Sure? I think I might...” Her eyes are on the ground but her hands are still firmly on my hips.

To a man with a need, an uncertainty

is just a moment's effort to a 'yes.' And I have needs, thousands of needs. I need cover, I need deniability, I need to wipe that fuckin' woman away from my mind.

I take her answer, pushing it automatically forward as I grab her hand, grab my beer and lead her to the door.

"Where're we going?"

"To my truck. I'd take you someplace better, honest I would, but you don't have the time."

"This isn't something I do normally, you know..."

"I know, I can tell that you're a good girl, but it's my birthday." Flashing a sudden and big fake grin at her, "You can always change your mind when we

get there and you want me to be happy, don'tcha?"

"Yeah, kinda I do," meeting my grin.

Rolling my arm around her waist into a tight hold I kiss her long and good in the parking lot, "Then just follow my lead and it'll all be okay."

I swallow a beer for courage as we hit the truck and then I take my time with the girl. I go slow and press all the right buttons to make sure she wants it as bad as I need it. I want to make it worth her while in my twisted sense of righting a wrong. Since I picked her second, because I had no idea I'd need a replacement for the first, because her boss pimped her out, and because this isn't something she normally does. I

figure that if at least she has some good fuck to talk about, it won't taste so bad in her mouth when she does.

That's what passes for my morality in this surreal moment. Some fucked up sense of making it all okay.

And me, I just want the first girl to go away from my mind. The hot, quick sex I wanted so bad, so fast, with her. The great, quick, immediate, fuck I got, I want it gone like it never happened. I want to wipe it off my body; I want to wipe the husband from my thoughts. I want this Kate girl to erase the event.

But it doesn't work that way. There's no escape from memory. We roll back through the parking lot after another hour spent, hand-in-hand 'cause that's what

she needs.

“Will you call me?”

“Sure.” Exchanging numbers, I’m lying in every fiber of my body. I’m not even pretending to myself that I’m going to, but I lie to her anyway, ‘cause that’s what she needs.

“I can’t believe I just did that, you must think I’m a whore. I’ve never hooked up with a guy this quick before in my entire lifetime.”

I stop and roll my arm around her waist, pulling her in to kiss her again, hard, in the parking lot just outside the door. And this time I do tell the truth, “Listen to me, this just might be the worst birthday of my life and I think that you might be the most honest, open and

friendly girl I've met all night. You aren't a whore and I'm sure you'll never do this again."

"In fact," grabbing her face in both my hands, looking directly at her, "I'm going to strongly suggest that you don't. But thank you from the bottom of my heart," another kiss on the mouth, "that you cut me a break."

The bouncer just grins at me, winking as we pass back into the bar through a door that is getting all too familiar.

Kate waves an uncertain goodbye in my direction before heading back to her duties, looking momentarily like she's not sure whether she's entitled to another kiss or a pat on the ass, or some other token acknowledgement of what just

passed between us. I don't help her out.

I am moderately and irritatingly sober again and truly don't want to be, regretting leaving the beer in the truck. I head straight to the patio and send a 'thumbs up' from the door at Ty and Steve, who just grin like co-conspirators raising their glasses in my direction. Sophie's there now with them and so is Rachel, and whatever thought I had of potentially re-joining them is gone.

Sophie just frowns at them, in their male exuberance, raising an inquisitive look in my direction. I ignore it all and head back, without looking right or left, to the main bar to order a double Jameson's and ginger and a shot of anything else the chick at the bar thinks

that I need.

I stay attached at the hip to the bar, chatting up chicks and drinking for a hard half-hour to make up for lost time. Girls I know come up to me. More than I care to count are suddenly all here, making idle chatter and ordering refills of my glass. Word seems to have spread that it's my birthday and they come in multiples now, grabbing my ass as I, in turn, grab theirs. Seems I might just be the identified man-whore to everyone here. I think I should call it a night and just go home, but before I can a new nightmare suddenly presents itself.

Bailey.

Oh damn.

She finds me entwined with a loud

blonde close talking about nothing; me playing the bag of shit to a ‘T,’ no longer entirely capable of giving a damn.

“‘Bas?’”

“Oh yeah...Bailey ...right?” Pointing a finger at her and sliding my other hand firmly onto the ass of the fake blonde, who giggles and slides her hand to my inner thigh while she looks Bailey in the eye. “Sure I remember, what’cha doing here?”

She’s taken aback but recovers fast, just like I expect her to.

“Seriously ‘Bas?’”

“Yes...No.” And I drop the blonde, pushing her slightly away from me. She leaves with an irritated face.

“Bailey, it’s my birthday,” I provide,

with a small shrug, as explanation.

“Congrats...And?”

“And it sucked until just this very moment.”

“Really.”

Yeah, really.” And another girl comes up to tell me “Happy Birthday... Christina sent me,” planting a big, fat kiss on my mouth.

“Seems you’re doing alright.”

“I am, kinda. It’s been a long night,” ignoring the girl as I grab the drink suddenly appearing before me and take another big swallow.

“It’s my birthday, did I tell ya?”

“Yeah, you told me already.”

“Well, all these ladies,” waving to encompass the bar in an asshole move,

“want me to be happy. What about you?”

“Well ‘Bas,” meeting the challenge head on as she moves up close into my personal space, hand sliding into the spot on my thigh occupied by the close-talking blonde moments before, suddenly massaging a location just inches from my parts, “if you were actually sober you might have another shot at me.”

“But I thought you said that I fucked like a puppet?”

“Yeah, baby, you do. But if you ever want to give up this freak show,” her turn to wave her hand around the bar, “you might just be able to make it with someone worth your time.”

I am suddenly done, she has no idea. I

grab her hand off my thigh and hold it up high before her face, “Bailey, damn it, do you have any idea when to cut a guy some slack? Do you *ever* ask any questions or have anything to say to me that isn’t just one more criticism?”

“Maybe not...” as her bravado fails, her face sliding into self-doubt for just a moment. Wrestling her hand from me, turning to walk defiantly away, she recovers once more, turning one last time to speak over her shoulder, “But if anyone could have argued for slack, it’d be you. If only you tried to speak the truth, just once. Damn it, just once, figure out what you want.”

Her back slowly fades from my view, melting into the crowd, only to be

replaced by Christina.

“Bas, I’m sooooo loaded”

She truly is, staggering, slurring, falling into my lap. A danger to herself and from anyone who might meet her next.

I look at my watch and it’s reading one-thirty am.

“Honey, you’re a mess.”

“Yeah, ’Bas...take me home.”

“Ok, let’s go...”

I probably shouldn’t be driving. Actually I know I shouldn’t be driving. I drive anyway. It’s not far.

We hit her place, I grab my left over, now lifeline, beer and steer her by one elbow through the door.

“Let’s watch TV and see if we can’t

sober you up before your head hits the pillow.” I dump her on the couch on the way to the kitchen to grab a big glass of water for her and make her drink it.

We sit like that for a while. Me watching sports scores, refilling her water periodically. Her with her head on my shoulder sobering up, regaining her senses. I keep drinking: one, two, three, working hard to quell the riot in my head and the violence in my belly.

I loathe myself; wanna crawl out of my skin. I don't hate cheap sex, I'm damn good at it by now, it feeds my needs. But I DON'T FUCK MARRIED CHICKS, I'm not *THAT* guy. I'm the guy that asks good questions, evaluates everything. This shit doesn't happen to

me.

I'm mad: hot, itchy mad, sick, sweaty in my guts and mercifully I'm finally hitting really plastered. Just like I promised myself.

Christina smiles weakly up at me from my shoulder about an hour later. "Thanks 'Bas, I mighta made a bad mistake if you hadn't been there. Will you take me to my room?"

"Sure, let's go."

She walks on her own into her bedroom.

"Sit on the end of the bed while I get my pj's on."

She's still sort of a drunk chick and I comply. They can be touchy and I hate scenes, much as I'm good at creating

them.

She gets completely naked and turns suddenly, “I have a nice set of titties, don’t I?” Full frontal view and then moves, just as suddenly, to straddle me sitting on the end of her bed.

“Bas?”

“What?” two nipples inches from my face.

“Bas,” she’s grinding now with her naked hips against my thighs, “how come we’ve never hooked up before? You know I’ve always wanted to.”

Oh fuck.

“Because you’re just not hot enough,” says my interior monologue. But you can’t say that to any chick, let alone a semi-drunk one in her apartment

when you're truly loaded at three AM.

"But you're a man-whore, you fuck anything." The thought, of a sudden, appears in my foggy mind. *"You just fucked married because you didn't ask a single question, and then you fucked innocent to cover it up. Who says you can't fuck below standard to complete this trifecta? It's your birthday, live a little, you asshole."*

"Guess it never seemed like the right time?" says my exterior response as she reaches for my buckle and buttons.

And I fucked her. May God forgive me. A woman I wouldn't ever have sex with on a good day.

But on this day, this fourteenth thousand, six hundredth and first day of

my existence I fucked one more woman because she said she wanted it. Because I couldn't figure a way out of it that wouldn't hurt her feelings. Because I lead with my cock and seem to be unable to find a way to stop myself.

It wasn't any good, and hopefully she won't even remember it when she wakes up. Hopefully the only thing she'll remember is that I took her out of a potentially bad situation.

At the first snore I pull on my clothes, snatch my shoes, my beer and my keys from the hall table. Heading out the door for my truck, I realize, as the still cool April night air hits me, that I've forgotten my socks and I don't care.

But I do care about my beer, opening

the first of the last two as the pavement below the front steps meets my feet.

I drive blind. Blind with rage, blind with drink, blind with hate and self-pity. I manage to get the truck two blocks down the street into an empty lot, if truly only not to do a 'Penny' in the morning.

I stagger out to take an urgent, violent piss against the back tire, fighting unsuccessfully at the end to redo the button fly of my pants, giving up, opening the door and throwing myself into the back seat, scene of my crimes, as my head spins and my intestines churn.

Finally, I am alone. But I am alone with myself.

I am forty. I have nothing that I

wanted from this milestone. And I have just magnificently lived past all my previous worst moments, rolled them all up in a big fat ball and written a check that my ass, honestly, probably can't afford to cash.

I have just seriously discovered that where I had always intended to be a 'good guy,' I'm just a colossal bag of shit. The kind your mother warned you about.

Happy Birthday to you, you lived a little.

And the blackness finally claims me.

TWENTY-SEVEN – ‘Little Lion Man’ - Mumford and Sons

My name is Sebastian Behr and I just woke up in the back seat of my pick-up; I have a pounding headache, I can hear the sounds of a jack-hammer in the distance and I'm not entirely sure if it isn't just actually in my head. My pants are at my ankles and my mouth is like a cat's litter box, dry and with a taste that I hope might go away with gum. The words "*I think I may have a problem*" keep coming to mind...

The intruding light hurts my eyes and as the clock on the dashboard comes into focus to read six forty-five, I survey the

disaster that is me. Pants undone, shirt buttoned wrong, no socks. I climb ungracefully out to pee, grabbing at the waist of my pants, following the insistent urge of my body as reality slowly creeps up to me, negotiating the edges of my consciousness until first 'where am I', then 'why', and finally the horrible, 'what' hits full force, propelling me swiftly forward to vomit onto the pavement even before my bladder can finish it's task.

As my stomach empties, dick limp in my hand, my mind fills up, causing me to retch again and again in violent recovered memory of my stupidity, my greed, my baseness.

Physically purged it leaves me weak.

Sitting back down on the edge of the back seat as the rotten air of my mess wafts up towards my nostrils, I drop my head into my hands only to have it replaced by the pungent smell of women, multiples, on my fingers and palms. Women I did not love, women I did not know, women who do not care about me, nor I about them. None of them are mine, and I am none of theirs.

I am such an idiot.

I am so tired of selling myself to get a job.

I am so tired of feeling like I'm in a race to make every bad decision possible; like there's nothing left to live for.

I hate all the women that let me take

advantage of them, and yet I never stop myself from doing it.

I used to be a ‘good guy,’ somebody I was proud of: a good husband, a good man.

But this moment isn’t anything that guy would be proud of.

Maybe I’m not a good man.

Maybe I’m a selfish, punishing man. Maybe I’m feeding this fire in my belly with the lives and needs of others. I don’t build relationships anymore, I negotiate transactions. I don’t live with an ethic of fair play, I take what I can get and let the others manage their own end.

I am forty and this is not who I intended to be.

I am not my father.

My honesty is a device.

My sex drive is a weapon.

All my strengths are used for my own ends.

My God, if I was still a decent man I sure as hell would not be waking up here.

I can stand only so much, deciding suddenly to head for Ty's. Gathering myself, I fight morning traffic in the direction of his apartment, dumping the truck in the first parking spot I can find, stabbing the buttons of the elevator in impatience and pounding on the door in full flight from myself.

The door opens to my volley; Ty is standing on the other side naked from the waist up, preparing for his day, shirt in

hand.

“My God, ‘Bas.”

“I need to eat, got any waffles?” spills out of my mouth as I barge past him into the condo, and drop heavily onto the couch.

“Fuck no, what’re you doing here? You look like shit, where the hell’ve you been?”

“I’ve...it’s...ahhh shit...” throwing my hands up in resignation, “I fucked Steve’s wife last night, that Rachel chick.”

“You’ve got to be fuckin’ kidding me. Are you out of your mind?”

“No...I didn’t know, honest,” I defend myself, shouting up at his irritated face, “I didn’t have the even the first clue until

after!”

“After what?” his voice rising to meet mine.

“Look, she hit on me on the dance floor, I took her to my truck and fucked her. I didn’t know who she was until she dropped her purse off, you remember...and by then it was too late...”

“Holy fuck, you idiot.”

“Thanks Ty, like I didn’t know that.”

“But then you...I thought you...hang on,”

“Yeah...I did that too,” and Ty lets out a low whistle as he just stares at me.

“I ain’t even done yet, it gets worse after that...” But as I prepare to make my full confession, I see Sophie emerge

from the bathroom down the hall, turning to look at us mid-stride, me hunched on the couch and Ty towering over me.

It enrages me further.

“Ahhh fuck Ty,” bristling and rising, “so you finally met a good girl and you just couldn’t let it alone until she was just like the rest of the women you know? Fuck Ty, man...fuck. Is there nothing good in this life that either of us have any respect for?”

Before he can even answer, his mouth already open in response, I’m back out the door, heading into the day and running hard for home.

The kingdom of Sophie has fallen and I realize in my newly emerging conscience that I was relying on her and

Ty as hope that there might be some antidote to my sickness.

All castles and kingdoms fall.

I make it miraculously home in one piece. Mind whirling, guts churning, to thump down on my own couch and allow sleep to take me once again.

I sleep fitfully, working the alcohol out of my system in the semi-consciousness of a wrestling spirit. I'm troubled by images and thoughts, of searching for Michelle and not finding her, of nameless breasts and accusing faces, of husbands with angry words and pointing fingers.

But even sleep can't protect you forever. Eventually you have to wake up again and face yourself.

It's mid-afternoon when I recover my faculties and lurch with a heavy heart toward the bathroom to respond once again to the demands of my damn bladder.

I stop before I leave to take a long look at my face in the mirror. My forty-year-old face stares back at me, haggard and worn from a hard night. Defeat and fear tug at the corners of my eyes, wild hair sticks out everywhere and I feel fuzzy jackets on my teeth that I fix with a handy toothbrush. Mouth foaming with toothpaste, I stare back at the accusing eyes asking me "Now what?" I try to muster a careless "So what?" with a commanding accompanying shrug to the image in the mirror.

I am still ‘The Man’.

But the “So what?” just won’t come this time. I’ve finally come one country too far. The language, the heart to defend careless, indefensible actions has finally deserted me and I turn from my own face, spitting my disgust into the sink with my spent toothpaste.

Heading into the kitchen I do the only sensible thing and grab a beer from the ‘fridge, seeking anesthetic for the lightning rods of pain in the back of my eyes and a depressant for my pounding heart. The beer tastes sour and rotten in my mouth, an ugly reminder of the unfortunate help it provided the night before. I pour it down the sink. Some things you have to face sober.

So face it I must.

I wanted a simple life: sow some wild oats, build a career, pick a girl and marry her, make some babies, live a productive life, retire early and live out my days in the comfort of a strong 401K and a happy family.

But what do I have? I have plenty of wild oats, with deeper roots than I ever thought, a career on hold, a lost wife, more wild oats, a busted 401K, more wild oats and then even more wild oats. And the oats suddenly seem to be the only thing that ever really took root, the ultimate fallback position.

I hate that Rachel married girl in sudden frenzy, hitting the wall in culminating frustration. Lying like she

did, not giving me my option to *not* fuck married.

And I hit again and again at the wall, busting up the dry wall in my fury.

“You tell if you’re already hooked-up, you give a guy an option. You tell! You gotta play by the rules!” I yell at the ceiling, dropping my head into the dent in the wall as the absurdity of my ringing words bounce back into my aching brain.

Let’s face facts - the truth is that instant sex never asks any questions and only ever offers helpful lies and omissions; it can’t afford to do anything but. It’s the nature of the beast. Instant sex that asks questions brings with it spouses and crocodiles in moats, past experience, heartache and personhood.

Cheap sex never works if you ask questions. Those are the *real* rules.

Cheap, instant sex is the ultimate ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’.

I didn’t ask, she didn’t tell. She didn’t have to, ‘cause I forgot to make it part of the contract.

She offered sex, I took it.

“But she should have told me, it’s fair disclosure,” I still argue weakly with myself, spent, as I head back to the comfort of my couch. The revolting reality that I too disclosed nothing to Kate as she made her decision, hammers at my logical demanding brain.

No matter how I work it, test it, try it out in my mind, it’s not really different. Not a chance Kate would have gone to

the truck with me if she'd known I'd been with another woman first, let alone her boss's wife. Not a chance. So I lied too, by omission, to get what I wanted right then and there.

So far nobody to be mad at but me.

Then Christina...oh God...drunk, simple, attracted to me for a long time, never somebody I'd sleep with on a good day. But it was a bad day and so it's just going to be one more thing that I'm going to have to manage. Because I fuck like a guy who's mad.

"I'm mad." I let the thought form in my mind.

Actually, I'm past mad. I'm angry – deeply, violently angry.

And I'm disappointed.

And maybe I'm lonely.

The words come out of my mouth for the first time, "I'm lonely..."

I planned a place for my heart. I placed my heart. And I'm suddenly not sure that I picked it back up again and took care of it for myself after Michelle left. In fact, I'm pretty sure I let it go because it misled me. I let it go because it was the most untrustworthy thing that I possessed. That's the problem; I stopped trusting that my heart had any sense, that it had any ability to lead me safely.

I loved a woman and she left.

I loved a job and it left me.

I trusted that if I did the right things, the right things would happen. And I

was wrong, so I let go of the right things and replaced them with nothings.

And I realize suddenly that I'm at the last steps of loss and sorrow and that I've been taking revenge for not having seen what I ought to have seen. And that, above all, I've lost trust in myself and in the values that I held so dear.

And I finally weep again after all these months. For myself, for the others, for my conscience.

Memory and conscience always accuse us.

My conscience, that terrible burden no man ever escapes.

There comes a time in every man's life when he meets the crossroads of his conscience and his innate capacity for

harm. Then every man has to choose.

And now is my moment. I am heartsick. Unemployed, vacant, shiftless, suddenly old and so off schedule. But who am I to be instead?

Again I need relief. And I rise to circle my main floor, marching, avoiding the dent in the wall, avoiding my thoughts, circling the space. Pacing as fragments fill my mind until I find the distraction of the answering machine. And there, in that flashing, insistent alert I'm about to find something that helps, that sorts me and can lead me forward.

I press the 'Play' button and it starts, "Hey 'Bas, it's me, Michelle. Happy birthday, I didn't forget. 'Bas...umm... what you said, what you asked...I've

thought about it since we talked last.”

Listening to her voice catches me so that I can hardly breathe, like a man at the bottom of a deep pool needing to find the surface, but I don't hit the ‘Stop’ button.

“I don't know if it will help but...I guess I pretended to be what you wanted me to be, I wanted to be that person that you saw...I wanted to be that independent. I pretended that I was, but I'm not. And I knew I wasn't, but I wanted what you had. You could do so many things that I couldn't do for myself, and if I pretended I could too, then you would take me on and then I wouldn't have to do it for myself after all. I played so hard at independent but ‘Bas, I

just wanted to be taken care of, to everyday have somebody that only ever thought, worked and cared about me, *just me*, all the time. And 'Bas, you cared about so many other things. Even when you were available, you were still distracted. I knew it when I married you, but I figured it would be okay that you were the way you are. I just couldn't do it. I've just never been that independent. But I guess I pretended that I was... maybe I even hoped I'd learn... but I just really wanted someone who'd look after me, kinda like the way you see in those old movies. And I guess I'm sorry... oh 'Bas...umm...I don't know what else to say. But baby, I'm staying at my mom's now if you want to call

me...Happy birthday anyway. I hope it's a good one."

"Well it was horrible," I answer to the machine, now gone silent as I shut the ringer off.

So there it is. Finally. I didn't ultimately understand wrong. She never wanted a partner, she wanted her dad. And it's a lame answer, but the truth still holds: she never was capable as a partner, she never did meet me half-way. She was expecting me to look after her the way her father never did.

"My God, what a cliché."

And how damn awful that it's the truth.

But it liberates me from my sense of failure. Lots of people hide

incompetencies and manage well enough until the work gets hard, once it tests the limits of their capacities. You see it all the time in business. They work all right under modest expectations and then when it suddenly gets tough, when the expectations increase, they fold as their weaknesses now render their task impossible. And then you fire them or they quit because you both know they just can't cut it in the role they were hired to play. Her 'tough' was my having to travel so much as a way to work towards our future, and then the lie surfaced.

And I begin slowly to understand that you can't know a lie until it shows itself. Until the opposite, the truth,

appears instead under pressure. You cannot defend yourself on the front end from a willful deception. It's designed in its very nature to rob you of the truth, to rob you of your ability to accurately evaluate. Designed to cover an inadequacy that, if shown, can't get that person what they want.

She wanted my success, my money, my determination and my stability because she needed it and couldn't get it for herself. And she lacked the character to admit it and see if we couldn't move past it. She lacked the character and any true knowledge of me to know that if I had known, I would have helped her find her independence.

Maybe that's what it comes down to.

That not only did she hide her weakness, but she also never looked closely enough at me to understand that I could have overcome it if I had understood it. She never gave me the chance, she just decided in the end that what she ultimately thought she needed she would never get from me. And so she went some other place to look for it.

You cannot defend yourself from a willful deception, and even less from a self-deception that believes it can make up the short fall some other time.

It's not what I didn't perceive that caught me short; it's what she purposefully, actively, kept from me that did me in.

But honesty requires honesty.

So what on my personal resume *am I* lying about?

I am lying that I'm better, recovered from deception and a loss of faith in myself and women. Lying that my contact with them can give them anything of what they have a right to want, or even a modicum of what I really need.

I am not better, I'm not okay; I'm managing.

And I'm lying to myself that this ridiculous lifestyle of contract without covenant, connectedness without a shared life, life without real risk, is anything close to what my heart really wants.

I want a wife and family. I want a job.

The job has to come sometime, eventually. It has to and I can't lose heart. I have to be okay having less money than I think I'm supposed to have. I have to be okay maybe starting poor again with my safety net dissolved. And if I want a wife and family, this way, this path, will never get it for me.

I have to keep trying the right way; honest that I don't trust my heart anymore, honest that I believe people deceive themselves and others.

Honest with myself that instant sex tears at my conscience; but I also find it so hard to do anything else.

And I have to be honest that I do not want to end my days alone without a wife, the security of a real home, and

children who bear my name.

Honest in that I want one thing and am living another.

They call it ‘cognitive dissonance’ when you try to hold simultaneously incongruous beliefs and attitudes. Honest that right now I’m their poster boy.

I realize as I finish my circling to stand again in front of the telephone, that I have a shot left to me, and that if I am smart for just once, I will take it. I stare for a moment at the handset, gathering my courage and take a deep breath and dial, expelling the captured air as the familiar voice meets my ear.

“It’s Bailey and I can’t take your call right now. Leave a message at the sound

of the beep and I'll get back to you."

Even in my newfound clarity it's a relief to get the answering machine. Baby steps.

"Bailey, it's Sebastian. Look, I'm really sorry about last night. I'm hoping we both said some things we wish we hadn't. I know I do. I think it might be a good idea to get together and really talk about it. You're a great girl and I'm ready to make some changes. The ball's in your court."

I wish I could say that I stood up after I left my message to Bailey and took on the world like a newfound man. But I didn't. I went over and sat back down on the couch like the man I actually am: exhausted by an internal tug of war,

unsure of what to do next except *not* do any of *that* ever again.

That's how epiphanies sometimes work. They're just one little ray of understanding that can clear your mind and lead you in the next direction once you regain your strength to move.

If you have the courage to follow.

TWENTY-EIGHT – ‘I’m Moving On’ – Rascal Flatts

Dawn finds me on the couch again on the Saturday of my official fortieth birthday party in the clothes from the day before; actually, the clothes from two days before. And my first resolution as I reach full consciousness and stretch my cramped limbs is that I have to start sleeping in my bed again like a normal person, even if I am by myself in that great expanse of sheets and covers.

Soul work is hard work. It runs in an ebb and flow, from grinding despair to the euphoria of blaming others and the momentary redemption you feel in that it

isn't all your fault. Then back again through self-loathing until you're able to find balance and take responsibility for what is yours and leave what is other's for them to own when they meet it in the storm of their own hearts.

My spirit vacillates wildly still in the morning light, moving about my kitchen, throwing out yesterday's abandoned beer can and generally tidying up. I roll over and over again, in wordless agony, from despair to blame and back again, seeking that balance and understanding.

Only one thing is certain: I don't want to live this way anymore, this accumulation of 'fun and follies,' this lifestyle of biblical proportions that just has to stop.

So, if I want to stop, who am I to be instead?

If not '*this*', then '*what*'?

The question formulates a series of actions for me, articulates a plan, engages a knowing.

First, I have to call Kate even if I don't really want to. I need to apologize for taking advantage of her and leave her with something to hang on to that isn't some idle hope in me. I am not the guy that girl deserves and for once I am going to have to let it sound exactly as bad as it really is and take the full consequence for it. Second, I have to call Michelle, to thank her for her honesty and say good-bye.

I can finally say 'good-bye' to

Michelle. In truth, her confession has liberated me. Liberated me not from the failures that I contributed to the marriage, but also from the sense in myself that I ought to have known better. She has liberated me to trust in myself again. It's time to let the failures of the past go.

Third, I have to take some time to be disappointed in myself and to wonder how it all came to be like this.

For ten months I've lived with no serious responsibility except to pay my mortgage, not let the house fall down around my ears and find a new job. And it hasn't been enough.

The old cliché is that 'Idleness is the devil's playground'.

The thing is, a job really gives a man a sense of purpose and belonging. Your career is one of the components that constructs your manhood, and without it you feel like you lose that all important metaphorical 'man-card'.

There are three major things for a man: his job, his legacy, and his partner; and without them it's hard to feel viable, to self-identify as a man.

I have no job, I have no legacy of children and I have no partner to plan into a future or share any of my life experiences with. I've been cut-off, against my will, from everything that I had as a marker for what it meant to me to be man. Against my will, against my planning, beyond my control.

And so when I look at it all honestly, my sexual adventurism must have been an attempt to re-establish my manhood, to get my 'man-card' back.

It's true that when you get some woman to sleep with you, when you break down her barriers, you still have some sense that you're capable of directing your own future, even if only in the immediate. You feel you've still accomplished something, something you can direct, something you have to work to control.

But it hasn't really worked for me in the end.

Employment, fatherhood, marriage: they're all expressions of responsibility, of the submissions of self to the greater

good. Those things, they grab every limitation you have and press hard against them. They push you to stretch and overcome, to expand your capacities.

I stopped stretching my good capacities because I lost the place to apply them. But I have certainly continued to stretch my bad.

As I stand and examine that newly-formed dent in my kitchen wall, wondering to myself what I'm going to tell anyone at my oncoming party why it is, Ty walks, unannounced by a knock, into my kitchen.

“Your garage door was up, I was able to walk right in. You must’a been some hell of a mess yesterday to let that

happen.”

Only a man who’s given up all hope lies to his best friend. And so I don’t.

“Yup, I was. Not sure I’m better yet either.”

“Well, it’s Saturday. You ain’t got no job. But we’ve got shit to do!”

Fourth: tackle Ty. I remember, as I look at him, that I’m mad. Mad at him and at Sophie for caving.

“You know what, you piece of crap, I’m glad you’re here but seriously...”

“Hold your brimstone, preacher,” throwing up his hands in surrender. “I know what you want to say, but you can save your breath. And if you had waited two point two seconds yesterday, or answered your phone last night, you’d

already know this. It's not even close to what you think."

And Ty, hand over heart in the middle of my kitchen, "May God strike me down, I haven't slept with her yet. But I'd sure as hell still like to."

"But..."

"But nothing, dumb ass, there really are some girls in this world who are exactly what they say they are. And if you hadn't been such a hot-head you would have stayed around long enough for me to tell you that she stayed in the spare bedroom; and I could have given you breakfast, even if it wasn't waffles."

"But..."

"Again, 'But' nothing."

"So you haven't slept with her?"

“Nah...hasn’t happened, won’t happen. She’s rock solid in her opinion on the subject. But com’on, we’ve got stuff to do to make this place ready for everybody. Sophie’s coming in a couple of hours with the food and we have to hit the ABC for booze, look lively, chop, chop. But start with a shower, you deadbeat.”

And he hustles me into action, sending me upstairs while he starts tidying things up in a frenzy that doesn’t allow for dialogue. It’s not until the drive to the liquor store that we have time to discuss anything.

“I called Bailey to invite her to your party, by the way.”

“And...”

“Talked to her on Monday but she sends her regrets, she’s away on business for the next week, leaving yesterday or something and can’t make it.”

“Well I saw her on the night of my birthday.”

His turn, “Oh boy. And...”

“And...just another part of a long and awful evening. It didn’t go well. I wasn’t in the greatest shape at the time and we didn’t have much to say to each other that was pleasant.”

“Seems to be the way with that girl, much as it appears you like her.”

“Uh huh.”

“So if I have it straight, you slept with Steve’s wife, you banged the waitress

and somewhere in there you scrapped with Bailey?”

“Yup – wife, waitress, Bailey, in that order; but you left out the part where I take Christina home and hit that too. And then, grand finale, pass out in my truck in a parking lot two blocks down the road from her place.”

“Oh, so that’s why you were banging on my door looking for waffles. I couldn’t some how figure out why the hell you were still downtown at seven-thirty in the morning. Christina?”

“Uh huh.”

“Wow.” He’s silent for a moment, staring at the traffic ahead, “That’s a bad night.” And he shakes his head waiting on the traffic light to turn green, “That’s

a really bad night.”

“So you accidentally purposely sleep with a married chick, you sleep with the waitress because she’s practically handed to you on a silver platter and it just happens you need cover, you fight with the one girl you actually like, and then top it all off with a woman you would never sleep with ever?”

“Uh huh.”

“In your truck...”

“Uh huh...mostly.”

“That makes you like some homeless drunk guy taking chicks back to your cardboard box in the alley.”

“Now wait a minute...”

“And you do know that some piece of this is going to come back and haunt

you? Actually you'll probably be extremely lucky if it's just one piece."

"Uh huh."

"You got a plan to handle it yet?"

"Thinkin' on it."

"Think fast. You know, six months ago I'da been stupid enough to congratulate you but this thing with Sophie, not getting her to sleep with me, has made me think about a lot of things..."

"And..." My turn again, eager in the hope that the conversation might be turning from me.

"And I think that for the first time, in a long, long, time, that unlike you I'm not homeless anymore."

"What the fuck does that mean?"

“Well, I’ve started to realize that my head got all outta whack after that shit happened.”

“What shit? When you were thirteen?”

“Yeah. Things got kinda fucked up after that. It lasted a while, you know, until I figured out how to get away from her. After that, I looked the same on the outside but underneath, everything was different, *I* was different. Nothing felt safe anymore and it took a lot of effort to pretend everyday that I was still ok. I gotta tell you, it’s fuckin’ hard to build a relationship with a chick when you think all females are evil. It wasn’t until near the end of high school, right about when I met you, that I stopped being scared

and just got mad instead.”

“And then what?”

“Well...I screwed a lot of girls, you know that. Each time I did, I figured at least this time, I was in charge. And I kinda also figured that if my cock was what they all wanted, that’s all they’d ever get. Eventually I made myself homeless. I just did what my body was capable of doing, what she taught me to do, and I kept myself to myself. I didn’t let anybody in.”

“And I think,” big intake of breath, “that’s how betrayal works and that’s how you’ve done things too since Michelle left.”

That’s a big think for Ty, and a big think for me, and I let him continue.

“I haven’t said much until now because I didn’t really have anything useful to say. Actually, I talked a lot of crap. I honestly thought, until a little while ago, that you could just get it all back, your sense of who you were, if you just scored a little. That I’d get some power from it. I tried for years. But we’re actually just homeless, man. Lots of places to stick our dicks, and no place to lay down who we really are.”

“Sophie doesn’t treat me like a wallet or a cock. She wants me but doesn’t do anything about it like I expect. She won’t let me make contact the way I’m used to and I’ve had to find another way if I want to keep her near to me. I’ve had to talk about who I really am and

what makes me that way. She just keeps asking me who I want to be and then tries to help me get there. And the one thing I truly don't trust, my body, she doesn't ask me for, doesn't even want from me without the surety that I'll stay forever. That hasn't ever happened to me before. And it's fuckin' hard. You know, I've hardly touched that girl and yet the connection is there, and I'm discovering that because of it I'm not homeless anymore. And I'm suddenly real tired of being homeless."

"You gonna marry her?"

"Yeah, if she'll have me. Messed up and messy as I am, if she'll have me, yes."

"So then swami, what do *I do*?"

“Funny that you’re askin’ me! I guess it really depends on what you want, ‘Bas. Do you even know what that is?”

“I want what I tried for eight years ago when I married Michelle. I want a wife and I want kids.” I have to turn my face away to the window suddenly, “I really want kids.”

“But not Michelle, right? Tell me you don’t want her.”

“No, not her.” And I laugh.

“Thank God. Then you’re going to have to try and trust somebody again. And I guess, first off, you have to decide that there are women worth trusting. They aren’t that hard to find you know; a lot of them are the girls we didn’t pay any attention to because we knew they

wouldn't sleep with us just because we wanted them to. Then take it slow. And if children are important, I guess ask yourself what kind of babies they'd raise with you, what kind of values they have that you'd want your kids to have too. Find one that isn't impressed that you make a lot of money. Find one that insists on knowing what kind of man you are before she asks what you bring to the table. I don't know...ask your dad how he figured out your mom was the right one. I hardly know shit yet; I've only just discovered that I actually want to be married!"

"I don't have money any more Ty, not like I did."

"Don't worry about that. It'll come

again. And I think a good woman loves you for what you are, not what you got.”

“But your job probably won’t change a lot, once you get a new one. You’re still going to be the guy that works his ass off for the money you make. You’d probably be best to make sure any woman you look at understands what that *really* means.”

“Now,” pulling up into the parking lot of the ABC, “what do you think? Five bottles of red, seven white, two Jameson’s, one vodka, one rum? My dime, by the way. You only turn forty once.”

It’s a lot to think about when you’re preparing for a party and when your head is filled with thunder claps of

failure and you're trying to figure out what to do next; but his words are neither lost nor displaced as I join him in the effort to honor my existence.

Sophie is waiting for us as we arrive home with trays of veggies and sandwiches and tons of good things to eat stacked in all the available space of her vehicle.

“Waiting long?” as I reach over to kiss her cheek in greeting, grabbing one of the trays from the back of the car.

“Nah, not long enough to annoy me. Ty, honey, grab the soda from the trunk, will you?” She says over her shoulder

as I follow her into the garage.

“Bas, he explained about yesterday morning, right?”

“First thing when he got in the door, Soph’, no worries.”

Laying the tray on the counter as she enters the kitchen she turns to look up at me, “Oh, I wasn’t worried about me, I was worried what you thought about him. He’s trying, Sebastian. The way he lived, the way you both live, it’s not learned overnight and it’s certainly not unlearned any faster either. You guys put a lot of pressure on each other to nail the girl -- don’t tell me you don’t – and it’s hard for him not to be that guy this time, to never get to say he convinced me to cave.”

“You think I’m putting that kind of pressure on him? This isn’t high school anymore.”

“No, I don’t actually. But he has years of practice at how this thing’s supposed to go and I keep telling him that it’s not going to go that way this time. He has expectations of himself, of what success with girls looks like. But I have higher expectations. Somebody, sometime, has to demand that something else is possible.”

“Is it possible?”

“To ask for more and get it? Yes, it’s possible but you have to be willing to work really hard and make a lot of short-term sacrifices to get there. You have to be clear eyed and honest with yourself,

but you also have to give people a real chance. You know, in the end, it's only in truly investing in someone that makes them even want to try something different. But hey, can you ask Ty to bring two cases of soda in here and then make sure the rest of it is stacked in the beer 'fridge?"

"Bossy little thing," I think with a grin as I head back out to the garage to do exactly as she says.

Pete finds us with our heads in the beer 'fridge loading sodas, laughing as he marches into the garage, "Now there's a sight. Whaddya need me to do?"

"Beer from Ty's trunk into the garage 'fridge, sandwiches into the kitchen

‘fridge and check that there’s no porn in the bathrooms,” says Sophie with a grin as she checks in from the kitchen. “Glad you’re here Pete, you complete the picture I had in my mind.”

“Ok lady, whatever you say! We drinking beer yet?” Pete says, answering his own question by reaching over our heads, grabbing a can and popping open the pull-tab. Its obvious Pete’s happy, it hangs out all over him. He’s fit, relaxed and extremely cheerful. It’s almost irritating.

“Sorry I didn’t make it out on your birthday, I felt bad but just couldn’t manage it, you know?”

“Yeah, too bad you didn’t...’Bas coulda used a chaperone,” says Ty

heading to Sophie's car for the next load.

“Do I even want to know?”

“No you don't Pete. You really, really don't. In fact I don't even wanna know anymore. Where's Re-Pete?” I ask to change the subject as I haul food out of Sophie's trunk.

“His mom. He has to go there sometime.”

“And...?”

“And, it's good, it's really good. You know,” helping out with the food, “I met a guy a couple of weeks back that's a single dad like me. We share the driving now sometimes. It makes it a little easier. Nice try to change the subject, was it really that bad? How much can

you fuck up in one night?”

“How ‘bout how much can you fuck in one night?”

“Nah way...”

“Yeah way...and all the wrong sorts. It was bad, man, turns out I was feeling pretty sorry for myself and I kinda OD’d on all the wrong kinds of human-shaped tranquilizers. I think I’ve finally hit the bottom and I don’t want to talk about it anymore. Go make sure none of Ty’s old Playboy’s are in any of the bathrooms like Sophie told you and forget we ever talked about it.”

“Alright buddy, I hear ya. Think maybe you’ve had your fill of the stupid games you and Ty play? There’s more to life, you know...”

“Pete.”

“Just sayin’...I know, I know, I’m going,” and I watch him shrug his shoulders with a laugh and shamle off to spot-check the bathrooms.

Pete’s right though, I’ve had my fill.

We work hard together, the four of us, to get the house ready for guests, bossed and directed periodically by the spitfire that is Sophie with a mandate. It feels good.

I find Pete, late in the afternoon, everything almost set to go, staring at the dent in the wall in my kitchen. “I noticed this earlier. Nice hole, wasn’t here the last time I was,” flicking at the crushed dry wall with his finger and turning to look at me with a raised

eyebrow.

“Nope, it’s new. Mind your own business, Pete.”

“Fine, but it’s not like you to bash holes in things. You ok?”

“You only turn forty once? I wasn’t when that happened, but I will be,” raising my head to look at him. “Sometimes life comes up and bites you right in the ass. You know that, Pete. Well it bit me hard, because I stopped paying proper attention, but I don’t intend to let it bite me twice.”

“I’ll be okay Pete. I’ll be okay. Grab me a beer and let’s wait for everyone to arrive. Forget the dent, it’ll get fixed.”

My guests arrive in dribbles just after eight o’clock. Ty has invited a mixed

crew of guests: friends from our teenage years who plan to stay the night, former colleagues from past employment and women and their friends from the tremendous folly of our past months. They're a lively bunch by ten, chatting, drinking and eating as my temptation for the night walks into the kitchen.

It's Abby, dragging her lumpy sister, whom we secretly call 'Abi-Normal', behind her. Abby is a former colleague, someone I've been hooking up with periodically since my divorce. I know, looking at her, that three days ago I'd have had a hard time passing her up. Now, confronting the heart-breaking evaluation of my character in the past forty-eight hours I realize, as she sidles

up to me, that each conclusion you reach for yourself is soon tested. And that, in as much as you can gain knowledge and understanding of yourself, it's only valuable when you face, and choose, the first chance to do something differently.

Habits pull hard, and it takes me a few moments to find the resolve to separate myself from the temptation of her tight skirt and laughing face.

So, if I'm not going to be a player at my own party, what role am I going to play instead?

I take the opportunity to stand back and observe, wandering from room to room, stopping to make conversation with my guests. They all have a lot to say, bringing up anecdotes, clapping me

on the back in congratulation of forty, swirling around me as someone hands me a beer and starts again with a “Remember when?” It’s somehow comforting to meet with this collection of people, all willing to come and acknowledge my birth and I realize how right Pete was when he said that you never know what life will bring you next and that these milestones, no matter how bad you feel, need to be recognized for what they are.

I see Pete, halfway through the night, comfortably seated on the couch talking to group of women. They’re mostly eights and I wink at him as I pass. He winks back. Ty is everywhere, talking with guests, whispering with Sophie and

making sure that none of the trays of food are ever empty. But he's never chatting up another woman.

Maybe things do change.

Time passes swiftly, spending time in memory with friends or fending off the now unwanted advances from the assembled women. I busy myself as the night progresses collecting empty glasses and spent plates, taking solace in the fact that I'm no longer so urgently driven to prove myself in a conquest, that in the face of easy temptation I may be finding some other way.

Walking into my kitchen just before one, pushing past the crowds towards the sink with a new armload of dirty dishes and cutlery, I discover it

occupied by a petite woman. Curly mop of dark hair bouncing slightly, she swings her hips and hums to herself in time to the music filling the room, with the sink full of suds in front of her, rinsing glasses and placing them in the dishwasher open beside her.

“Oh hello,” eyeing my arriving load calmly with dark green eyes, “this must be your party then. Let me help you.”

And she unburdens me, efficiently dumping things in the trash, the soapy water and the dishwasher until my arms are empty again.

She unnerves me with her calmness and self-possession, so expertly managing things, that I can only stammer “Come here often?” as my face turns an

unexpected and uncomfortable shade of red.

“No, of course not,” and she just laughs at my sudden dorkiness.

“Yeah right, of course not,” recovering a little with a small laugh of my own. “Let me back up thirty seconds and try again: *I* live here, do *you* always go to parties and clean up stranger’s houses?”

“Oh this,” waving her arms towards the suds, “no, not really,” a gentle laugh reaching my ears again. “But there are so many people and it just seemed such a shame that you would have to get up from your success in the morning and face such a mountain of dishes and mess. Consider it your birthday

present.”

And she proceeds wiping down counters and tidying things.

I just stand and watch as she neatly brings order into the chaos. She takes no mind of me, pushing me slightly aside to grab an ugly mess of half-eaten sandwich on a long forgotten plate sitting behind me.

“Come on, it can’t be so surprising,” she says, stopping momentarily to look up at me quietly watching her.

“It is, kind of. Who *are* you?”

“Oh right, I came with 'Bella, one of Sophie’s friends.” She wipes a wet hand on her pants and reaches out to shake my hand in introduction at the same time an urgent shout goes up from

the front door that instantly calls me away.

“Wait here, I’ll be right back,” calling over my shoulder, looking at her laughing face as I head toward the noise.

It’s a mess: sizable knot of people in the doorway and several others out on the driveway. Abby and ‘Abi-Normal’ have chosen to depart and in doing so have firmly planted half of their vehicle into the culvert at the end of my driveway.

Women and cars.

Abby is annoyed, tapping her foot on the pavement and flapping her arms in embarrassment; ‘Abi-Normal’ is flustered past the ability to extricate them from the problem.

“I thought I paid attention okay, but now look. I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry... it just happened. What’re we going to do?”

“You...are going to get out of the way,” as I join the scene and move her bodily onto the middle of the driveway. And you,” pointing at Abby, “go get Ty and Pete.”

Abby stomps off in a temper, and as I look at her I wonder what I ever saw in any of the women I consented to sleep with in the past months...until her skirt rises to expose just a flash of thigh as she climbs my front stairs to find Pete and Ty.

And then I remember: flesh. Possession of flesh, conquest of firm

female flesh, and I know that I am far from cured. I still have a long road ahead of me.

“Okay, Mark, Steve,” I point and marshal the forces standing out on the driveway admiring the spectacle. “Get behind the car into the ditch and see what we’re looking at. Ty and Pete will be here in a minute and the five of us should be able to fix this.”

I can tell, as Ty and Pete finally join me and we begin our manoeuvres, that this is the same moment of the night when the party breaks up and people head home. Over my shoulder I see that a stream of people is exiting my front door and heading to their cars with shouts and declarations to call and that

Abby and her lumpy sister, have inadvertently called it ‘a night’ for all of us.

It takes a while and some grunt effort to get the car back onto firm ground.

While she thanks me, Abby makes an attempt to secure an invitation to spend the night, “Thanks ‘Bas. You know, I think it was the most time I spent with you all night...that makes me sad. I can ask Janey to head home on her own, if you like?” And she licks my ear with a throaty laugh, “I’d be properly able to thank you that way.”

“Thanks Abby for the offer, but I’m gonna pass,” and I kiss her on the cheek.

She gets the message though, “Fine,” and climbs into the car with a sour face.

As we head back into the house, waving slightly irritated good-byes at the girls who could not drive straight, the house seems totally empty after the crush and noise of the past hours.

“Beer?” Says Pete heading for the garage.

“Beer,” respond the leftovers in chorus.

I head out with him, using the opportunity to pass the kitchen and check for the little dish girl, but she is gone. The dishwasher is closed; counters clean and a little army of glasses are collected in the sink.

“*Beer.*” I say to myself.

We sit for another couple of hours, Ty, Pete and I, talking and drinking with

a few of our high school companions until we all agree that it's time for bed.

I go to bed alone. And it feels okay that I do, rolling around with a slightly blurry head trying to get a comfortable spot under the covers. I'm forty and if I don't want to end up like that guy with the flashy jewelry and the fast car, I'm going to have to find some gravitas, some sense of myself that doesn't include a perpetual parade of tits and ass. I'm forty and I'm alone. My agenda is all shot to hell; I have no wife, no kids and no job.

But for the first time in a long time, as sleep finds me, I'm in possession of myself again. And for now, that has to be enough.

EPILOGUE

The chickens did come home to roost.

It was a horrible conversation with Kate, lots of tears and self-hate on her part. She hated me pretty much too because enough had leaked out for her to know that she was second. It took a couple of bad conversations to make it sorta okay. When I see her on the street, and I do sometimes, she walks the other way.

Rachel, the married chick, she called me anyway, begging me not to say anything to anyone and then passed my number to a girlfriend who drunk-dialed me one night for a hook-up because she

heard that I was a good time.

Funnily enough, the husband never did call me for a formal interview. But I did run into him once at the bank. We shook hands and he looked at me hard, but I didn't stick around long enough to make conversation.

Michelle, I don't know what happened to her. Some things you have to stop caring about.

Bailey and I met up by accident one morning in a coffee shop a couple of days after my birthday party.

“Bas, my God, been meaning to call you” she said, pushing her hair behind her ear and looking up at me. “Sorry I didn't make it to your party, I was out of town. I would have come...”

“It’s okay, how long’ve you been home?” I’m happy to see her and she looks beautiful, but considering my message, I’m surprised I’m meeting her by accident instead of her calling me.

“A couple of days. I had to think about what you said, you know... consider what I wanted to do.”

“Look,” leading me by the hand to a nearby table, “I’ve been thinking about it. And you’re right. We’ve both been way too hard on each other. I like you and if you want, I’d like to give it a real try. You know, I think maybe that I’ve expected too much from you and that I haven’t always been fair but you have to admit you were a mess the other night.”

“Bailey...what can I say? This whole

time, this whole miserable time, you've been watching and each time you called it like you saw it, and you were never wrong. But the potential you saw in me...you're right there too, more than you can even know. I am a decent guy, honest...it's just been a tough time, you know."

As I listen to myself *once again* trying explain myself to this girl, another realization takes shape and surprises us both as it comes out of my mouth, "But the one thing you never, ever, did was try to walk with me, to help me get where I needed to go. Instead you've always just been standing at the finish line waiting for me to get there."

"Oh... 'Bas...so..."

“So...sometimes Bailey, you gotta have the courage to combine a big heart with that smart head.” I grab my jacket and prepare to leave, “And sometimes you have to work to help make something else possible.”

“So that’s it? You leave a message that you want a relationship *five days ago* and now suddenly you don’t?”

“You know what, Bailey? For over a year you’ve told me that I would be a mess, that I *was* a mess and that it would be because I was hurting. But this whole time I don’t remember you once trying to actually help me *stop* hurting.”

“I didn’t know you needed help.”

“Everybody needs help when they hurt, Bailey. How can you understand

so clearly what messes a person up and understand so little about what to do about it? Besides, I called you almost a week ago and we met today by accident...”

“I had to think about it...the risk you know.”

“Time’s up, Bailey. I guess our timing always did suck, honey,” reaching down to pat her on the shoulder in acknowledgement of the awkward moment. “I gotta go, take care of yourself ok?”

And that was that.

I stopped looking for girls after that, spent more time with my father, looked after my friends, kept my house tidy. I even read a couple of books.

It got pretty lonely spending time in my own company; but eventually I was someone I wanted to hang around with again. I've finally realized what I think it takes to be a good guy: be your word, *earn* the people that are given to you by respecting the needs they come with, accept your losses gracefully and always keep trying to be a better man than you were yesterday.

I met that girl again the other day, the one who was doing the dishes at my party. She was at Sophie's for Sunday Night Football. She was as nice as when I first met her.

I think I might just ask her out on a date.

And today at four o'clock, in the

fortieth year of my existence, I have a third and final interview with a company in my town that I really like.

###

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Writing a book is a long and often solitary process, but like many things in life, cannot be completed without the help of others. It is therefore fitting at this time to acknowledge and make known the many people who helped us along the way.

Clayton, Jacinta, Neil and Barb, our first readers, who quickly let us know that we were in fact writing readable fiction, and that we had some idea what we were doing.

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To all of you: you have our deep thanks and gratitude.

About the Author

Sometimes nature conspires in such a way that she only gives half the needed attributes so that people are forced to work together to make a dream come true. Such is the case with the author of 'Ten Toes Down'; for where you ought to have one, you have two. Asher Conrad is the combination of two people: one with a genius for story construction and the other with the ability to put it all into words. Neither could do it on their own. They met on a sunny day a long time ago in a far, far, away corporate world and knew that together, they had something to say.

Bode is the creative intelligence that took a series of unconnected stories and spun them into a collected tale that allows us to examine our expectations and how they play out in the world around us. In real life he is a call centre executive living in the United States. He continues to allow his life and dreams to carry him wherever his ambition dictates, and is not someone you would ever mess with, even on your best day.

Bettina is the master of the words; taking the essential elements and breathing life and form into the idea. Working from southern Ontario, Canada, with three genius children to grow and feed, she initially agreed to write a book to keep Bode entertained. In doing so

she fulfilled a long and quietly held ambition. It doesn't mean she's the quiet one. Exploring their passion for good story telling, they discovered a happy creative partnership and continue to write together.

Look for "Daddy Date Night" in 2013.

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Table of Contents

Copyright

FORWARD

PROLOGUE

ONE – ‘Redlight’ – David Nail

TWO – ‘Do’ – The White Stripes

THREE – ‘Wild West Show’ – Big and
Rich

FOUR – ‘Resignation Superman’ – Big
Head Todd and the Monsters

FIVE - ‘Driveway’ - Great Northern

SIX – ‘Time Won’t Let Me Go’ – The
Bravery

SEVEN – ‘Love Removal Machine’ –
The Cult

EIGHT – ‘Bang, Bang, Bang’ – John Lee

Hooker

NINE – ‘Bad Luck’ – Social Distortion

TEN – ‘Let’s Go’ – Trick Daddy

ELEVEN – ‘Simple Kind of Life’ – No

Doubt

TWELVE – ‘I Just Wanna Live’ - Good

Charlotte

THIRTEEN – ‘Given’ Up the Nappy

Dug Out’ – Ice Cube

FOURTEEN – ‘Voodoo Child’ – Jimi

Hendrix

FIFTEEN – ‘Here I Come’ – The Roots

SIXTEEN – ‘How You Like Me Now?’

– The Heavy

SEVENTEEN – ‘So Much to Say’ –

Dave Matthews Band

EIGHTEEN – ‘Lost Art of Keeping a

Secret’ – Queens of the Stone Age

NINETEEN – ‘Times Like These’ – Foo
Fighters

TWENTY – ‘What It’s Like’ - Everlast

TWENTY-ONE – ‘I Don’t Care’ –
Darius Rucker

TWENTY-TWO – ‘You Make Me Feel
Like a Whore’ – Everclear

TWENTY-THREE – ‘One Way or
Another’ – Blondie

TWENTY-FOUR – ‘Back Against the
Wall’ – Cage the Elephant

TWENTY-FIVE – ‘9 Crimes (demo)’ –
Damian Rice

TWENTY-SIX – ‘Happy Birthday to
Me’ - Cracker

TWENTY-SEVEN – ‘Little Lion Man’ -
Mumford and Sons

TWENTY-EIGHT – ‘I’m Moving On’ –

Rascal Flatts

EPILOGUE

Acknowledgements

About the Author