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The Catcher in the
Rye in this humorous
novel following a
neurotic economics
major weeks from
graduation.*

DORK

By Will Winkle

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DORK



WILL WINKLE

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1.

Nailing the First Line

and

I'm Not Going to Read Your

College Poetry

It was a lovely spring day in the Pacific Northwest, which only meant it wasn't raining. It was in the mid-fifties and either mostly sunny or partly cloudy depending on your worldview. This was the exact same kind of weather that had sent everyone diving into their closets for sweatshirts and long pants months before but now compelled people to find objects to throw back and forth on grassy areas and caused sweat to stick the shirt to my back. The large top-floor window that took up most of the back wall let in unobstructed sunlight, turning the third-floor classroom into a sort of convection oven. This created a level of exhaustion in the sedentary audience, who each took turns shifting our gazes down at their phones and up again to our classmate giving his presentation. He had taken the senior economics presentation as an occasion that

required a sport coat, tie, and a button-down shirt that had the unusual characteristic of turning a darker shade of blue whenever you looked back up from your phone.

I felt bad being on my phone, but I would have preferred if more people had been on theirs during my presentation. This wasn't from any fear of public speaking, but more because I would rather that they had been looking at something they actually found interesting. The only student who seemed to truly pay attention was named Zack or something like that, though I may have only assigned him that name because I disliked everyone named Zack that I knew. I mean, the lack of common decency required to not only read the presentation slides but then to also ask questions about them is astounding to me.¹

I cycled from Facebook to my email - both student and personal - and to a picture sharing site, each of which I had combed through less than five minutes before. I would occasionally look up at the presentation, both to see what new shade the shirt had reached as well as to relieve the presenter from having to continually stare at the baseball-sized circle of thinning hair on the top of my head. I missed some hairs at the corner of my mouth when shaving and I absentmindedly picked at them throughout class,

¹ During my presentation on whether or not college football stadiums affect enrollment, he not only asked me a question, but even had a follow up question to go after. Sounds like a Zack if I've ever heard one.

intending to just rip them out of my face like a psychopath.

I thought the guy speaking was about to either wrap up or collapse, but he lasted another pint of sweat before getting to questions. The suspected Zack raised his hand which almost gave the girl next to him whiplash when she had to turn away from his unobstructed armpit. The presenter gave an answer that made it seem like he had been paying as little attention to his own presentation as the rest of us had been. There were no more questions from any of the students, which meant that Professor Baker would have to ask in everyone's stead. Baker looked like an economics professor from a movie which meant a lot of tweed and argyle. He would ask tenured professor questions, which meant he would ramble about his opinion on the topic before saying, "So what do you think about that?" and no matter how you answered you were not quite right.

Maddison had abandoned the melting man in front and shifted her attention to my barbaric method of tweezing. She had blonde hair, blue eyes – all that stuff – but even more than that she seemed like she would be attractive for a very long time. Her face wasn't going to soften in her thirties or forties, and when her hair silvered it would do so gracefully. All of this would make it hit someone a lot harder if she said that they should just remain friends when that someone asked her out nine months before. I never felt that of course, because Maddison and I were just friends.

The guy finished his not quite right answer and received half-assed applause to show that nobody else was going to ask any questions – even if they wanted to. Baker looked at the clock and said, “We might as well stop here,” which we all knew meant the class wouldn’t end for another ten or twelve minutes. He used this time to ramble in much the same way he did when asking questions, but at least we didn’t have to give a not quite right answer this time. Maddison and I were among the last ones out of the classroom, which was on the top floor and coincidentally down the hall from Baker’s office.

“Raymond,” Maddison started as we followed the rest of the class down the stairs. She always began conversations with the other person's full first name, even when it was obvious who she was speaking to.² This made her one of the few who used my first name at all instead of calling me Cooper or Coop. “How was trivia?” she asked.

“We got second.” We had actually tied for third, but we were pretty sure that the new bartender they had keeping score missed giving us points for one of our answers. Either way, we weren’t that close to the team that won almost every Tuesday. “Are you going to Ladies’ Night?”

“Oh! There’s a DB twenty-one run tonight so I should be out.”

² This helped to provide an unintended level of intimacy for some idiot to misread before asking her out nine months before.

“Who’s turning twenty-one?” By this time, we had reached the bottom of the stairs and were turning toward the doors outside.

“Do you know Nikki Martin? She’s a junior.”

“Yeah, I know who she is.” I knew the name, but I couldn’t put a face to it right then.

“You should come. We’re pregaming at Claire and Heather’s apartment.”

Claire? That was a thought, but accepting an invitation to the birthday party of someone you hardly knew would be the move of a truly socially starved individual.

“What time?”

“Pre-game is at nine, then we’re going downtown at ten.” She said.

“Sounds good.” We were heading down the walkway toward Greek Row, flanked on both sides by tall elms attempting to grow a new year’s worth of leaves. It was a very pretty walk that likely inspired a lot of bad poetry. “Are you doing anything this weekend?”

“I’m driving home tomorrow.” She did this once or twice a month.³ “What about you?”

³ She’s from a small town two hours away, and to get there you had pass by a town of a hundred people called Compost, Idaho. There have been several attempts to change the name – for obvious reasons – but they were all shot down. I’m guessing that’s because if you live in a town of a hundred people called Compost, Idaho, you are likely the type of person that will oppose anything that somebody else says purely because you don’t like being told what to do.

“The D-Psi’s are selling wristbands that give you discounts downtown on Saturday.”

“That sounds fun, what are the wristbands for?”

“At The Ivy you get -”

“Sorry, what cause?” she clarified.

“Oh. Child illiteracy.” That was a half guess.

I still can’t wrap my head around people that went home during weekends without cause. It seemed like they had resigned to have less happen in their lives – a timespan I had equated to before one turns thirty. They were arresting their own development, unlike someone like me, who went to the same two or three bars every weekend. At least there was a hope that something would happen on Saturday, I just wasn’t certain what that something might be.

“What are you guys having for lunch?” She asked after a lapse in the conversation.

“I think breakfast food.”

She made a soft guttural sound, “Uhh, that sounds so good.” She drew out the “so”.

“What’s at DB?”

“Grilled cheeses, and I’m probably going to eat a whole tray I’m so hungry.” She drew out the “so”, again. “I didn’t eat breakfast.”

“Huh, well I’ll actually be eating breakfast pretty soon.” She laughed at that even though it wasn’t very funny, another cause for attraction. We each told the other one that we would see them at Heather and Claire’s that night. The path dumped us out onto a street corner, and I cut across the road to the walkway up to the IO house.

After getting up to my room, I closed the door to get to the mirror on the back. The missed hairs at the corner of my mouth had to go, so I grabbed my razor and locked the door to prevent someone from flinging it open and slicing my ear off. I'm not sure who would have been so eager to speak to me but can't a guy dream about losing an ear in the name of comradery?⁴ When I finished I took a multivitamin and fiber supplement. I put both pills in the same bottle so that it would be less of a task to take them. This is just one of the things one can achieve after four years at a state school.

I opened the curtain and window opposite the door. The room had a solid view of Greek row, which was one of the reasons I had picked it. Two of our sophomores were throwing a frisbee in the front yard. They weren't throwing it to each other so much as to the sidewalk and street next to and behind their partner. I kept hearing the disc skittering on asphalt as I changed into running clothes. By the time I had finished tying my running shoes they had given up the effort and had committed to smoking cigarettes on the bench out front.

It was a little before eleven, so if I left right then I would be done running and back right before lunch was served. I ran my earbuds under my shirt and plugged them into my phone before putting my phone into my pocket. I sat down at my desk and opened my laptop, on which I repeated the cycle of Facebook, my email –

⁴ If you think that's extreme then you can just ask Vincent van Gogh, but he won't be able to hear you. He's dead.

both personal and student – and the picture sharing site before I ended up looking through YouTube videos. After ten minutes I wrapped my earbuds around my phone and took off my running shoes.

After another ten minutes, I opened my econ term paper, looking over the most-of-a-page that made up the entirety of my completed writing. It was due in a little over two weeks. The tepid results of my research made it as interesting to write about as it did to present.⁵ This wasn't helped by the fact that graduation was on the horizon, which not only put the brakes on productivity but also flipped a U-turn over a double yellow and started in the opposite direction. I came up with a solid opening line, the wake of which I had hoped to ride throughout the rest of the paper. "Everybody loves a winner, but sometimes it's good enough to just try to look like one."

I shut my laptop, slid on my slippers, and went to the opposite end of the hall from my room. I could hear music on in Trevor's room next to the fire escape, so I pushed the door the rest of the way open. Trevor peaked around his closet to see who had entered.

"Hey Cooper," he said returning to the mirror on the inside of the closet door. It looked like he had recently showered and was now messing with his bleached hair.

"What's up," I replied.

"Not much, did you just go running?"

⁵ If you're looking for me to discuss my research any further prepare to be disappointed, and even if you didn't want that I still wouldn't get my hopes up.

“No, I’m going to go after lunch. Are you going to the DB twenty-one run tonight?” He was good friends with Claire, so I figured he might have been invited.

“I’m going to the pregame,” he said. “I don’t think I’ll stick with the group downtown though.”

“That’s what I was thinking, I just wanted to make sure that there would be more than two people that I actually knew there.”

“When does it start?”

“I think at nine. Have you gotten your wristband yet?”

“Not yet, are they selling them tomorrow too?”

“Yep,” I said.

“Cool, cool, cool,” he said while checking his phone. “Oh, but guess who’s going to be in town on Saturday.”

I guessed Noah, which was the name of Trevor’s ex-boyfriend.

“Yep.”

“Oh shit, really?” Things hadn’t ended well between them, so naturally his returning to town may cause emotional distress to my close friend, and worse than that, might affect my Saturday night.

“Yeah, he sent me an email saying he was. Said we could get coffee if I wanted to talk to him.”

“An email?” I asked, twisting up my face.

“I have him blocked on pretty much everything else.”

“Didn’t he say he got engaged like two months ago?”

“Yeah,” Trevor sighed. “I don’t know what his fucking deal is.”

“Can’t trust those gays,” I said, taking a step back from the doorway. “What you need to do is date a straight gay guy.”

“They’re more trouble than they’re worth,” he said, following me towards the stairs. “Do you know what’s for lunch?”

“Breakfast.”

His reply was a drawn-out, “Yes.”

We walked into the formal room, which for the literally and figuratively uninitiated is similar to a parlor. We would just call it a parlor, but that would sound even more pretentious than formal room. It contained a pair of brown leather couches separated by a coffee table as well as a fireplace that set off the smoke detector whenever we used it. At the end we had entered from, there was a small library with a collection of old yearbooks and out of date legal codes. The dining room was through an archway opposite the fireplace. The tables were placed end-to-end except for the head table at the far end, which was set perpendicular to the rest.

Trevor and I plopped down opposite one another on the leather couches, and each put a foot up on the coffee table. Trevor took out his phone and I did the same, intent on spending the twelve minutes until noon cycling between Facebook, email – both student and personal – and the picture sharing site. Eventually, the freshmen hashers showed up, some still rubbing the sleep from their eyes, and began setting up the buffet-

style lunch. They wiped off the tables and laid down cardboard where the hot pans would be set. The last member came in from the kitchen carrying a ten-gallon jug full of the pink lemonade flavor that I didn't like. They then made half a dozen to go boxes for people still in class. Each got a shoveling of eggs, hash browns, a few pieces of bacon or sausage, and maybe a biscuit depending on how nice the guy making it was.

Everyone lined up behind the hashers, and when I was handed the tongs I gave them several test clicks to make sure that they hadn't stopped functioning in the two seconds since they were last used. I loaded my plate with eggs, bacon, a biscuit, and filled a cup with the dumb pink lemonade.⁶

Trevor and I sat halfway down the row of tables. Cameron, a fellow senior, moved down the rows in the sure-footed way that made people surprised to learn that he is legally blind.⁷ He looked eager to get something solid in his stomach, feeling the effects that come with being on the eighth day of what would turn out to be a ten-day bender. I suspected that was related to his having been dumped by his girlfriend of three years.

"What's up, guys?" Cam said in the way where it was more of a greeting than an actual question.

"sup" I returned, salting my eggs.

"Oh, living the dream."

⁶ The food here was why I had re-found half of the weight I lost the past summer. The blame definitely goes to the food, and not any personal shortcomings on my part.

⁷ His cornea has been slowly deteriorating, which so far had left him with tunnel vision and night blindness.

“Are you going to the DB twenty-one run?” I asked.

“Nikki’s? Yeah. Are you?”

“Nope, just asking.”

“Well, okay then.” He laughed.

I had been unsure if he planned on going out of the chance that his ex would be there. She cheated on him during one of those service-learning trips where they build shoddy housing for people in Costa Rica. This made it worse in my mind because unless they’re in the wake of natural disasters or wars, the free labor ends up causing long-term detriments to developing economies by undercutting local workers. I decided not to tell Cam about that though. He was already going through a lot.

“Champ’s⁸ is going to have two-dollar Jager bombs with a wristband on Saturday,” Cam said.

“So, you’re going to be there all day is what you’re saying?”

“No, just most of it.” He cracked a grin. “Hey, do you think Jada will be at the twenty-one run?”

“I was trying not to think of it so I could enjoy my lunch.” I played this as a joke, but I had mulled over the possibility.

“Are you going to choke her again?” Trevor said. By then I knew it was pointless to argue that her mention of liking to be choked having come after we had slept together a few times didn’t mean the two were

⁸ Champ’s is a sports bar that is only kept open so the owner can write it off as a failing business. In order to keep this a reality, they sell liquor close to cost, the draw of which is countered by them encouraging the untrained bartenders to drink on the job and offer terrible service to keep customers away.

related, so I instead joined in on the laughter. Some mistakes become penicillin, but most just become things for your friends to make fun of you for.

I grabbed another biscuit after I finished my food and was bringing my plate to the kitchen. After adding it to the stack I stepped aside to check dinner on the schedule. It was spaghetti and meatballs. I returned to my room to put my running shoes back on and ran my headphones back down my shirt and reattach them to my phone. After a few stretches to loosen my hamstrings I walked right past the stairs and into Brad Bannon's⁹ room.

Unsurprisingly he was playing FIFA, Brad being the only person I knew who went to the women's soccer games because he wanted to see them play and not because he thought that the players were attractive. I didn't recognize either team playing, which was no surprise either. Soccer questions are rarely asked in bar trivia. Brad sat on the only part of the folded-up futon not being occupied by his girlfriend, Megan, who was lounging outstretched, chewing on one of her fingernails while looking at her laptop.

"How's it going, Coop?" He said taking a quick glance away from the screen.

⁹ Although his parents gave him a WASP-y name, Brad was actually Irish Catholic. His great or great-great grandfather was born O'Bannon in County Cork, Ireland. The "O" was confiscated when his family came through Ellis Island over a hundred years ago. You can do with that information what you want.

Megan gave a, “Hey,” while looking up from her laptop.

“Pretty good,” which was my muscle memory answer no matter how things were in going.

“Did you just go running?” Brad peeled his green eyes – which had been called “pretty” by numerous girls on numerous occasions – away from the elevated TV and saw my outfit.

“No, I’m about to go.”

“Oh, well good for you buddy.” Which like everything Brad said, was completely sincere. “I need to start running again.”

“Yeah, you’re starting to get a little fat,” I said, which was untrue to the point that it was an obvious joke.

“He’s right,” Megan said. Brad’s laugh seemed more forced for this remark.

“Are you going to Ladies’ Night?” I asked.

“Oh, maybe,” Brad said, which meant that chances were slim to none, and slim had left town.

“I might go,” Megan announced. This was done less to entice Brad into going as it was to point out that she would be going out without him.

“You both are coming on Saturday, right?” I asked.

“Yep,” Brad said. “Should be fun.”

Megan shut her laptop and began putting it into her backpack. “I’m going to go back to my place.” She said broadly but was still directed at her boyfriend. He paused his game and put his shoes on to walk her home, compelling me to accompany them down the stairs and finally out the door.

2.

Running Through My Mind and Quitting the Sauce

We passed the Gammas lounging on blankets in their front yard, most were reading books or listening to music through headphones. I was the only one to pay the girls any mind, but I didn't stare at them or anything weird like that. Instead, I just took six or seven rapid-fire glances, which was definitely less obvious. Megan kept her eyes on Brad's eyes, which were set dead ahead and angled down toward the sidewalk. I was reminded when I saw the two D-Psi's sitting at the table in front of their house that I still needed to buy my wristband and made a mental note to pick it up after my run.

"Have you gotten your wristbands yet?" I asked the two holding hands next to me.

"Not yet," Brad said. "Maybe on my way back."

Megan eyed the pair of coeds. "Let's pick them up now."

"Okay," Brad said as if that mattered, and the two veered off across the street.

I continued alone, eventually passing the rec center, which was guaranteed to be packed with everyone who figured that three weeks would be plenty of time to get that summer body they promised themselves back at New Year's. There was a running track on the second floor that circled the basketball courts and racks of free weights, but I preferred to run outside. Really I preferred to run wherever I was least likely to encounter other people running. My resolve was rickety as is, and it didn't help to be passed by an old professor who probably used to run in the Boston Marathon or something. The last of my energy draining as I see his full head of white hair bounding down the track ahead of me, only to reemerge behind me a minute later. Also, running outside meant I would have to continue running to get home, which I've found to be a solid motivator.

I put in my earbuds when I reached where I started my runs next to the liquor store just off-campus. I listened to audiobooks when I ran, which sounds like some sort of Socratic training-the-body-and-mind-at-the-same-time deal but was actually because otherwise I'd be constantly taking my phone out to change the song. Being the very deep and insightful person that I am, I often get lost in thought anyway and never ended up following along to the story. I only needed it for background noise to drown out the panting that begins after I run twenty feet and only ends when I stop for the day. I tapped play and started jogging, immediately feeling tightness in my hamstrings that had plenty of time to become unstretched.

DORK

Seven blocks in I was almost hit by a car. This happened fairly often, but of course, it was never my fault. They were turning off of a side street while I was crossing and slammed on the brakes a couple of feet from me. I just gave a little wave and flat-lipped smile that said, "Thanks for not making me that one person on crutches during graduation." The driver initially returned the wave but internally was trying to figure out how this interaction had been my fault for when they tell it to people later.

You're supposed to run going with traffic, but the other side of the street lacked a sidewalk for that particular section of my route. Instead, there was a dirt trail lined on both sides by patches of tall grass. Whenever I ran on that side a clutch of small rocks would magically appear inside of my shoes, and it was the time of year when snakes and lizards were starting to be out and about. I'm not afraid of snakes, I've been startled more times by sticks that looked like snakes than actual snakes. As long as I see one soon enough I'm fine with it, but I'm markedly less fine with unexpectedly colliding with a living creature that has so much in common with a rope. It's not like they can deftly avoid an impending running shoe, so if I spot it too late there's nothing either of us can do.

Snakes can become tangled around your legs, their only choice of action being to writhe around, which wouldn't make matters better for either of us. I don't like octopi for the same reason, them being the small net to the snakes' rope. My world changed the first time I saw a bird carrying a snake while flying. Implying

that at any moment my day can be ruined in a way that I hadn't even considered possible. I'm happy that I don't live by the sea or a large open-air aquarium, because if I ever saw a bird flying with an octopus, I doubt I would ever go outside again.

Anyway, I crossed back over to the right side of the street when the sidewalk started before the intersection with Main street. Ahead and to my left was The Corner, where we had tied for third at trivia on Tuesday, and where I would inevitably be going for at least two out of the next three nights. From the outside, it looked like nothing more than a brick box, with a small gravel parking lot separating it from the Elks Lodge next door. Looks can be deceiving, but more often than that, looks can be extremely accurate and telling. It used to be much bigger, but in the Nineties they put in a throughway to allow the highway to bypass Main street. This through street banked in at a slight left turn before merging with the end of Main to form the highway north out of town. This resulted in The Corner – which was named because it originally sat on the corner of First and Main – no longer sat on a corner at all. To add to the irony, even though its address was technically on Main street, there was no way to get to The Corner from Main and vice versa.

City planning facts aside – although extremely interesting in their own way – The Corner was the most popular bar amongst students. Its yellow neon sign beckoned you from down the length of Main street like a green light at the end of a dock, or some other heavy-handed literary device. I continued onto the

throughway, and almost crossed the street when I thought I saw Jada walking ahead of me. It turned out to be an older Korean woman, which was odd because Jada is my age and not Korean, but they had similar hair and her back was turned.

This got me thinking about our relationship – if you could call it that – and all the shit that came after. I guess you would have to call it a relationship, you can't sleep with someone half a dozen times and say that you don't have a relationship with them. We might have been considered “friends with benefits” but without the “friends” part, and even the “benefits” hadn't been that great either. A glance at our text history was a repeated cycle of the same conversation.

Want to hang out?

Sure, come over

Be there soon

These being sent exclusively between one and three in the morning at monthly intervals. She wasn't unattractive by any means, but it's not like I was a stud myself. There was just never anything between us. I enjoyed trivia and Fleetwood Mac, and she wasn't a fan of either of those things. At least, I assumed she wasn't, we never really spoke about it.

None of the shit that came after had been ours though, it belonged exclusively to the other DB-IO couples that had spent a good portion of our junior year

trying to set us up. Couples – so I’ve been told – are on a constant lookout for other couples to be friends with. This process becomes easier when people from the same fraternity and sorority begin dating one another. Once it became public knowledge that Jada enjoyed the layout of my face, the existing couples saw a new pairing to bring into the fold. More people to go with to date functions or birthday parties or downtown. It’s a strange feeling, having other people exercising such control over your romantic life. The closest comparison would be riding in your mom’s car and she starts digging around for some Kleenex in her purse in the backseat while on the highway. The benefit from what they’re doing doesn’t seem worth the possible outcomes from their actions, but you know that it would be problematic to forcibly try to grab the wheel.

Their conspiracy involved asking me to help move furniture at Delta Beta that inevitably turned out to be Jada’s or “randomly” assigning her to coach the team I was on for their charity softball tournament. Jada was uninvolved with these machinations. It was actually what we laughed about when we wound up sitting next to each other at The Corner in the spring of our junior year. That was the first night we had sex – and I definitely didn’t choke her.

We had the last laugh as one-by-one the DB-IO couples began to crumble around us, of which Cam’s was the last. The only exception was an older couple who had abstained from attempting to Frankenstein a love connection. At the time Brad had been dating a DB named Ruth, though their form of dating was closer to

what junior high school kids consider dating. This amounted to not much more than them watching TV while sitting on his futon. It wasn't going anywhere, but neither wanted to be the one to break things off. The problem with dating one of the nicest guys on campus was that not only would he be too kind to end things himself, but he also wouldn't decline when another girl began kissing him on the smoking porch at The Corner – that would have been rude.

This all became ammo for Megan when they started dating the next fall. It wasn't necessary though, because the person who had been far and away the toughest on Brad after the incident was Brad himself. He had this bad habit of having standards for himself to uphold, so the whole affair had him really put out. I had been interested in Megan before the two of them had started dating, but after seeing how she was in a relationship I felt that I had dodged a bullet.¹⁰ She had already been a friend of ours before the two of them got together – their being two friends that just started dating being the reason why none of us thought that it would last very long – but she seemed like an entirely different person now.

¹⁰ This was inaccurate however, because in order to dodge a bullet it at least has to be fired in your general direction. A better saying would be that a bullet struck my friend, originating from a point somewhere between the two of us, which indicates that I was never considered a target in the first place. Obviously, this analogy wouldn't work because it's too long and involves events that are not centered around me.

Ruth ended up dating an IO named Harry who was in the class below ours, and both got on well with Brad and Megan. All four of them would be coming with on Saturday, along with Claire and Trevor. Claire, that certainly was a thought.

By the time I made it back to the liquor store my shirtfront was soaked and stretched from repeatedly being used to wipe my brow. I stopped my audiobook, its plot a mystery to me, and put away my earbuds. I took my phone back out to check the time, then Facebook. A few seconds later I took it out again because I hadn't paid attention to the time when I first took it out. A breeze had started up, which was nice. I had to wipe my brow a few more times, but now that I was on campus I felt compelled to suck in my stomach each time I lifted my shirt.

I wasn't really that fat or anything before, which is usually what formerly chubby people say, but for me that was true. My concern was that like the rest of the men in my family I'm barrel-chested, so I had to lose weight to not look boxy. This act of basic bodily upkeep earned me several compliments, but I would rather that people hadn't noticed, and instead preferred that the thinner me was what they already pictured in their heads when they thought of me, which I'm certain was all the time.

I never noticed how many people don't walk in a straight line until I started running. Unless someone is coming the other way, many moved the same way a bowling ball does when you have the bumpers up. They never can tell that someone's behind them either

because most are plugged in with headphones or earbuds, unable to go the five minutes it takes you to reach anywhere on campus without listening to something.¹¹

As I got closer to the house I had to pee more and more. I think everyone has experienced this, where your need to go skyrockets as you get closer to home. I wanted to just run the rest of the way, but by then I had reached the bottom of Greek row. If I started now everyone would assume that I was only running the last part to look good or would know I had to go to the bathroom. Either way, I would look like a total dork. So instead I deployed a brisk, stiff kneed, flat-footed walk that couldn't have passed for natural in a parade for people born without hip joints.

Back in the house, I took the stairs two at a time first past the split level with the formal room, then to the second-floor bathroom. I shouldered open the door and likely let out some audible sigh of relief. There was a divot at eye level on the wall above the urinal created by people leaning their foreheads against the wall after coming back from the bars. After a while, we stopped trying to fill it in since we knew it would be back a week later.

I stripped down to my underwear in my room. I closed the door even though I was about to walk

¹¹ I thought for a moment that people closed themselves off and would only have human contact if they physically ran into somebody. I then realized how much this resembled the theme from the movie *Crash*, so I knew it must have been wrong. *Crash* sucks.

through the hall in my skivvies anyway, had to leave something to the imagination I guess. Towel, fresh boxer-briefs, shower caddy, rubber flip-flops, then a brisk walk to the shower. There was a small hallway with the bench past the urinals where you could set your toiletries. I hung up my towel, put my caddy and both pairs of underwear on the bench before grabbing my shampoo that prevented my baseball-sized patch from going on to softball-sized.

The main mistake that guys make when they find out they're losing their hair is going through a period of denial. They expect that it will just stop or go away on its own, suffering more unnecessary deforestation in the process.¹² After I toweled off I combed my hair the opposite way that I normally kept it because I discovered that by letting it dry one way, it looked thicker when I combed it back the other way.

I pulled on the jeans I had worn earlier along with a clean t-shirt and sat down at my desk. I opened my econ project and was able to efficiently turn an hour of work into half a page of writing, all of which just worked to build up the tepid results that I would be reporting on later in the paper. The last chunk of time was scrolling up and down over the almost one and one-third pages I had thus far. I knew that the first line would be the high point but hadn't thought it would go downhill this

¹² "All the time you spend trying to get back what's been took from you, more is going out the back door." That's from *No Country for Old Men* which is considerably better than *Crash*.

quick. “Everybody loves a winner, but sometimes it’s good enough to just try to look like one.”

The most productive moment came when I decided it would be a good idea to tell Chip, another senior in the house who only lived a few blocks from Claire, that we could swing by his place on the way downtown. He responded a few minutes later.

Cool, sounds good

I saved the document and went down to the basement to see what Dillon was up to down. When I entered his room, he looked up at me from his near supine position reclining in his high-backed office chair in front of his computer. I took a seat on his folded down futon, and from this angle, he bore a resemblance to Ayers Rock in Australia. Perfectly flat leading up to his mound of a stomach, then returning to flat. His only movement was occasionally swiveling his chair to bring his hand closer to the magnum-sized energy drink on his desk. Something has to be said for that energy drink, because if this was how active he was while drinking it then otherwise he might have been borderline catatonic.

Usually being lazy is seen as synonymous with being a slob, but this wasn’t the case with Dillon. He kept things tidy – though he would greatly prefer if somebody else did it for him – because then he would have everything exactly how he wanted it, which is important for a creature of comfort like him. Dillon put

on clean underwear every day, which he bought in bulk so that he could go without doing laundry until he went home for a school break and his mom would do it instead. He wore a goatee because that's the minimum amount of shaving he has to do to sleep – which is done almost exclusively in the nude – with his hand under his cheek without having a handful of beard hair.

Dillon was pursuing a degree in physics which, like most others in the College of Science & Engineering, meant that he had a minor in disparaging social sciences such as economics as “not a real science.” Scientific methodology and linear algebra be damned would never be good enough for the antisocial scientists. After all, science is about continuing to believe the same thing in the face of whatever evidence there is to the contrary.¹³

We watched videos on YouTube, many of them I had watched before lunch, but Dillon had probably been out of bed for the same amount of time as I had been when I watched them the first time around.

“Do you know what's for dinner?” He asked, swiveling away from the screen to where I was sitting on his unfolded futon.

“Spaghetti.”

¹³ Dillon did show a selective understanding for certain concepts though. Such as when he convinced Brad that because the marginal cost would be zero if he drove Dillon home for spring break – after all, Brad was already making the drive and the additional weight of Dillon and his dirty laundry wouldn't affect the gas mileage – he, meaning Dillon, shouldn't have to pay full price for his share of the gas money.

“Oh, okay. Are you going?”

“Yeah, might as well.” I didn’t ask him back. I already knew the answer. It’s easy to be friends with people when you already know what they will most likely do in a situation. You can’t really be disappointed that way. You could have been friends with Charles Manson as long as you weren’t surprised that every once in a while he might ask you to go on late-night drives in the Hollywood Hills.

“Would you be down for a campus tour?”¹⁴ He said.

“Tonight?”

“No, tomorrow.”

“Yeah, probably,” I said, suggesting there was some off chance that I would have anything better to do.

“Cool, Cam’s already down,” Dillon said, which was unsurprising.¹⁵ I thought about bringing up his recent drinking but didn’t think that would go anywhere.

“Have you bought your wristband yet?” I said, after remembering that I hadn’t. Like my class notes, my mental ones were less than helpful.

¹⁴ **Campus Tour**

noun

The act of secretly drinking at several locations on campus. Done out of a sense of rebelliousness and not having anything better to do on a weekend evening.

¹⁵ The Cam already being down to drink part, not the Dillon speaking part. Although I supposed both had hit me with equal amounts of non-surprise.

“Not yet. They’re selling them tomorrow too, right?” The drink deals were enough to charm him out of his den, as long as the bars weren’t too crowded.

“Yeah.”

We hung out the way the many good friends do, sitting in complete silence watching dumb videos on the internet. Soon we heard a commotion from the room across the short hallway, which was soon followed by Harry’s appearance in the doorway.

Dillon swiveled towards him. “Campus tour tomorrow?”

“Nah, I’ve got Azure Ball.” He said the name of the dance in a mockingly fancy tone.

“Ruth can come too, the more the merrier.” Dillon returned.

“That would be a tough sell. I need to see if I have anything clean to wear,” Harry said before flopping back onto the mattress next to me with his legs hanging off the edge.

The soccer jersey that Harry had on was tighter around the midsection than it used to be. His potbelly still paled in comparison to the boiler Dillon had been working since freshman year, but it was a start. Dillon and I had swapped ends of the scale and then some. Fortunately for him, he has a tall frame to drape the extra weight over. Harry is on the shorter side, around five-six, so I guess that accentuated how much he had expanded.

Harry’s answer about going to dinner would be the same as Dillon’s and every former inhabitant of the basement rooms – inertia was more powerful down

there. He remained active socially, do in no small part to girlfriend, so I still asked him about the twenty-one run.

“I won’t make it to the pregame but might catch up with it downtown,” he said.

I then asked if he and Ruth were going to be going downtown after the dance the next night. He said they might, but probably not until later in the evening. Unfortunately, bringing up the DB dance left me open to jabs about Jada.

“I wonder if Jada needs a date,” was how Harry started it.

“Probably couldn’t find anyone that could compare to me,” I said.

“You could wear matching colors.” Dillon was in on it now. “You just need to find a tie that matches her choker.” He emphasized the last word, placing his hand around his throat when saying it.

“The theme is ‘Enchantment Under My Tightening Grip,’” I said. Like with my hair and figure and pretty much everything else about me I had learned that if you get in the best joke about yourself it will bring the ribbing to an end because guys could only continue if they could top it. This brought about a level of self-deprecation that in no way could lead to serious mental problems later in life.

For better or worse neither of them could insult me better than I had, so our conversation shifted to TV and movies. We spoke about what to expect in the upcoming blockbusters. Our sources always being the most reliable possible, some dude on the internet.

Building up our expectations to a level that would be impossible to live up to on-screen. The two of them talked about when they would watch the next episode of a TV show they were watching together with Ruth. I don't remember which one it was. I do know that a woman who rollerblades loses her leg and her wife builds her a new one, and once I knew that the rest of the plot was easy to piece together to the point that I never needed to actually watch it. This opened up to a broader discussion of the shows we had watched. Someone would suggest a series to someone else and they would say, "I hear that's really good." Which always came with the silent addendum of, "But I'm most likely never going to watch it."

Dillon's jaw tightened when the banging started overhead. It was from the hashers moving around chairs in the dining room before dinner, which he should have been more used to since it happened at the same time Sunday through Thursday. Between the day-to-day commotion coming from overhead and the rumble from the washers and dryers in the laundry room at the end of the hall, there was little respite for those who deliberately selected these rooms based on their seclusion. This was my signal to head upstairs, but I assured Dillon that I would ask Brad about the campus tour in the likelihood that I saw him at dinner.

I sat in the same spot as earlier in the formal room. The seating order was determined by class, so the five seats at the head table would go to Cam, Brad, myself, and the two juniors present who were named Armen and Luis. Cam had arrived first, which meant he got to

hit a small bell at the beginning and end of the dinner. He also got served first, but the bell was the more important thing. There were around fifteen people in the formal when one of the hashers hit the bell so we could enter the dining room. We passed an optimistic amount of place settings for how many usually showed up for Thursday dinners. This expectation was then lessened while moving later into the semester when guys start getting sick of each other.

Cam took the middle seat at the perpendicular end table, with Brad & I on either side of him, and Armen & Luis beyond us. The sophomores matched my class with three, so counting the hashers there were more freshmen than the rest of us combined. I didn't sit down with everyone else after the bell was hit, but I went back into the kitchen to prepare a plate myself, as I often did. I grabbed a clean plate from the stack at the end of the assembly line set up the hashers used to fill plates. When I walked in I saw Dillon's back exiting the kitchen before turning to go downstairs with a full paper plate, and a few other members were in the kitchen spooning noodles and sauce onto their own plates before following his example.

I loaded up on spaghetti but didn't get any sauce, preferring it in a style a waitress once described as "sad" to me and a group of my friends during my sophomore year. When I tell people that I prefer my spaghetti without sauce they usually assume that I want them buttered. It's the overly slippery texture that is rejected by my childlike pallet, so butter isn't much different than sauce in that way. I fished a few

meatballs from the pot with the sauce before passing over the cooked vegetables. I also returned with a few pieces of bread. I hadn't told the hashers not to put anything in my spot when they were coming out, so I just had that meal handed down to whoever hadn't been brought one yet.

"Did you go to make sure it's extra sad?" Cameron asked.

"I like my spaghetti on suicide watch."

The hashers moved the water pitchers from further down the tables to our end. I heard the whir of the sanitizer. Secretly all hashers wish for a dinner where almost nobody shows up, I certainly did my freshman year. From pans to dishes to mopping you could knock out clean up for this size in half an hour with four hashers, and that would mostly be waiting on the sanitizer to run each load. That didn't stop it from being disheartening for the guys who showed though, especially for those of us with only a few weeks left. Cam was graduating with me, Brad couldn't decide on his emphasis until the previous fall, so he still had a handful of classes to take the next year. Megan also had another semester, but they weren't planning on moving in together.

Armen was sitting at my end, and his head looked like it had been freshly shaved that morning. Seeing his bare scalp always made me pet my baseball-sized patch of thinning hair with the tips of my fingers, a habit that became dangerous when holding a fork. I asked if he was going to Ladies' Night.

“Maybe later, some of us are going to Post Night.” He answered between bites. This was at The Post¹⁶ – an outlandish revelation to be sure – the bar favored by all the Ag. Students and rural locals.

The draw of Plant Night was dollar tubs – quarter gallons of beer – until the keg blew, then two-dollar tubs until the second keg emptied. That was the only reason why anyone I knew went there, and it was enough of a bargain to get you to push beyond the modern country music they piped in. Of course, I would be unable to go that night because my presence was expected at the twenty-one run of a girl that I might know, maybe. Also, they didn’t invite me.

“Oh, Cooper.” This was Cam. I turned toward him. “Dill and I were thinking about a campus tour tomorrow if you’re interested.”

“Yeah, he asked me before I came up,” I said. “Maybe we could even get that wet blanket on your left to join us.”

“You talking crap, Cooper?” Brad chirped back, smiling.

“Yeah, as much of a load as I’m gonna leave in your pillowcase if you don’t go on the tour.” The guys in earshot laughed

“Oh, you hooker.” He said, still chuckling. This was his way cursing without really cursing. He only ever curses when he drinks.

¹⁶ It was originally named The Whipping Post, but the name was changed for obvious reasons. This didn’t affect much however, it’s one thing to change the sign out front, but changing the people inside is something else entirely.

When everyone was close to done eating, Cam hit the bell again. The hashers came out and stood along the wall shared with the kitchen. Cameron asked if anyone had any announcements, and when nobody did he asked if anyone had a joke. Armen knew the most hacky jokes, so he took the floor.

“What’s the difference between a chickpea and a garbanzo bean?”

Somebody down the table supplied the “What?”

“I don’t like having a garbanzo bean on my face.”

There was a short pause before the groans and laughs, then Cam hit the bell to signal the end of dinner. We all grabbed our plates, scraped off any unwanted remnants into the garbage and stacked them in the dish pit next to the sanitizer. Utensils went into the soapy water bucket in the adjacent sink.

Luis – our resident member of the student government – followed me up the stairs. He had long held the assumption that I was in some way associated with the Econ Club, and even if I wasn’t a member I would at least be able to name names. Telling Luis that you were not as dedicated a social climber as he was only earned an expression like your head was upside down and you were speaking in tongues. At best he might just suspect you of holding out on him, and that you want to use the contact information to the entire Econ Club – which you must have memorized – for your own ends. The fact was that I didn’t know a soul in the Econ Club, my reasoning that it would mean associating with people who thought that being in the Econ Club was a good use of their free time. In fact, I

cared so little about being involved in the Econ Club that I had never actually checked if one existed on campus in the first place.¹⁷

“So obviously the Econ Club would play a big role in decision making if I get elected,” Luis droned on as we crested the second-floor landing.¹⁸

“Obviously.” It was obvious because otherwise Luis would have to play a big role in decision making, and nobody wanted that, most of all Luis. The key to being a good politician is to have a balance of ideas which is easiest if both sides of the scale are empty.

“So, you think I can get their endorsement?” He asked from the doorway as I sat in my office chair and opened my laptop.

“I’ll make sure to tell everyone in the club that I know.” That seemed to satisfy Luis, but not enough for him to leave my doorway. “You’re going to grad school, right?”

“Maybe, depends if I get any job offers.” I pulled up my econ paper.

“Would you go here if you do?”

¹⁷ I hadn’t heard the question about the existence of such an organization when it was first brought up and out of instinct replied, “oh, yeah?” in the way one does if when you don’t know what the person said, but don’t care enough to ask them to repeat it. This was interpreted as “oh, yeah,” due to it being said in a loud bar while the speaker was several tubs deep.

¹⁸ He was running for All Student Body president, a position whose responsibilities were a mystery to all of the student body. That was except for being mocked behind their back, which was more of a ceremonial role.

“Most likely.” I started randomly flipping through my research notes.

“Would it be in economics?”

“Most likely.” I opened a drawer in my desk and removed two textbooks that were entirely unrelated to my research project.

These questions, of course, were not out of any personal interest in my life, but because Luis subscribed to the ideology that it’s not what you know, but who you know. So, he had to know what he could be getting back from the time he invested in talking to people.

“Are you working on something?”

“Yeah, just my term paper,” I said, looking up from the mound of school material on my desk.

“Then I won’t keep you,” Luis said, before heading off toward his room.

My high school buddies always disparaged fraternities for phoniness like this, even though it was a minority of people. This was especially the case with those that didn’t go to college, because to them anyone that doesn’t work at a Guitar Center or talk about making an indie film wasn’t living a genuine life. These were also the guys that liked to go to the German tap-house back home because it makes them feel cultured, even though the only foreign country they’ve been to is Canada. I thought all of just over three weeks from graduation and the only semblance of a plan was to go to grad school, which really would just be postponing making a real decision for another two years. Also, I hadn’t even been to Canada.

Once Luis disappeared around a corner I headed down to Brad's room. Our desks could be used for one of those spot-the-differences pictures, with the most obvious one being that he was actually working. Of course, this didn't stop him from looking over when I knocked on his doorframe.

"Hey Coop," he said.

"So, do you want to go on the campus tour tomorrow?"

"Yeah," he said, sincerely. "I'll just have to finish up my homework when I get back."

"Wow, drinking two nights in a row?" I said.

"My Irish is showing."

"Am I distracting you?"

"No, you're fine," he said.

"Then what's the point." We both laughed as I stepped into the hall.

He called after me. "You hooker."

"You can't afford me."

3.
**Losing at a Game
of Dress Up
and
She Might as Well Have
Been Named Zack**

I ran into Cameron, almost literally, on my way back from the bathroom.

“Maddison asked me to help set up for the pregame, you wanna come with?” he asked.

The two of them grew up together near Compost, Idaho. The offer was enticing because it would mean more time around Claire, but I was forced to decline because it would draw attention to the fact that neither the residents of the apartment nor the person whose party it was had invited me over to their apartment and/or party themselves.

“I still need to change and comb what’s left of my hair.”

“Okay, I’ll see you there,” he said, the last words coming from halfway down the stairs. I went to Trevor’s room before my own to see when he’d be ready.

“Hurry up or else we’ll miss last call,” I said in a rushed tone. He checked the time on his laptop, which was around eight ten.

“It starts at nine, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you have anything to drink? I was going to stop by The Nest on the way.”

“That’s fine, I need to get some cash.”

I went back to my room and shut the door. I had on the pair of blue jeans I’d been wearing all day but wanted to change into my tan ones. They fit better because I had bought them after losing weight. I’m never sure what to wear to something like this, and by “something like this” I mean “anywhere that someone might see me.” Does not knowing the birthday girl that well mean I should be more dressed up, or less? Cam had on shorts, but that wasn’t saying much. I’ve seen him wear shorts to class in ankle-high snow. Plus, he always under dresses. Trevor is just the opposite, so I had to aim somewhere between the two.

At first, I thought about my golf sweatshirt, which had a sort of collar on it. It was a similar tan as my pants though, which made it look like I was wearing a jumpsuit. That would be too much of a fashion statement for somebody who is used to making fashion mumbles under his breath. I settled on a baseball shirt with long sleeves that I could slide up when we went

inside. It was my uncle's from his time at the university when he was who everyone called "Coop." It had a glaucous torso, puce sleeves, and said "Kingfisher Baseball" around a cartoon of a bird stabbing its long beak through a baseball, all of which was also in puce.¹⁹ I reopened my door and sat at my desk while I put my shoes on. I wore red Vans because I have the same taste in shoes as a junior high student from 2007 that listened to alternative rock.

I reopened my econ paper. "Everybody loves a winner, but sometimes it's good enough to just try to look like one." I thought of a better way to write something halfway down the page, but after the rewrite, the whole thing was noticeably shorter. To compensate for the shortening, I tacked on a few filler sentences that would need to be taken out later. I closed Word and opened my browser – Facebook, student email, personal email, and the picture sharing site. After that, I watched YouTube videos until it was almost time to go.

Open windows to empty rooms have long been targets for the occasional firecracker or dog turd from a passing vandal, so I closed mine before putting cream in my hair that let me push the front up so it would look

¹⁹ These are the school's colors. Glaucous is a pale grayish blue, while puce is a brown red. The best marketing for any sports team are colors that you have to explain what they look like, as well as a logo that makes people think your mascot is a woodpecker unless the word "Kingfisher" is directly beside it. With this knowledge it is a surprise that the university hadn't had a baseball team in over twenty years by the time I started going there.

thicker. This, I hoped, would give my hair the appearance of being a solid plateau from front to back, but of course, this plateau was just a bluff.²⁰

When I returned to his room Trevor was putting on his watch. He took a multivitamin, which he claimed prevents hangovers. He had on a casual button-up and jeans like mine. We left through the door closest to The Nest, which was a small convenience store that you can see from my room. The term “convenience store” was a stretch, but I doubt that there’s a zoning designation for “beer store with one shelf of chips and candy bars.”

The ATM was on the left when you entered, next to the cursory offerings of chips and candy. The Nest had my favorite ATM because aside from giving out tens instead of twenties, it was the only machine nearby that didn’t emit a screeching tone to guarantee that you retrieve your card before the cash is dispensed. Naturally, I’m fairly averse to standing next to machines spewing unpleasant beeps, especially when they’re refilled by people in an armored truck. This results in the opposite of the intended effect, where I’m put into such a rush to get the hell out of there that on more than one occasion I left without taking the cash I was there to withdraw in the first place.²¹

Anyway, I stopped at the ATM while Trevor continued to the walk-in cooler that took up the lion’s

²⁰ I’m pretty sure that is the best joke in the whole book, so I wouldn’t blame you if you stopped reading now.

²¹ My bank doesn’t have its own ATM’s, so instead they cover the fees from using other banks’ machines. These footnotes can’t all be winners.

share of the establishment. I always preferred dealing in cash to using a card. Whenever I used a card I was worried that it would be declined, which would then be announced by whoever I gave it to over a PA system that had not been present at the business when I first walked in. I had plenty of money, you'd be surprised how much you can stretch a dollar when your only expenditures are fast food and alcohol. What made me anxious was that there would be a system error or some other excuse that you would expect someone to make if they truly had insufficient funds. I took out thirty dollars before going back to the cooler, which took up almost two-thirds of the business.

"What are you getting?" I asked Trevor. There was one other guy in the cooler with us. I didn't know him, but age-wise he looked one a step above two middle schoolers under a trench coat.

"I was thinking some wine, but I usually can't do bars after wine."

"There's always these." I pointed at the forty-ounce bottles of malt liquor on a bottom shelf.

"Do you think they sell duct tape here?" Trevor laughed. "Get some Edward Forty-hands going."

"Who needs the bars? We can just pass out on their couch."

"Do you want to split something?" he asked.

"Sure, we could get a six-pack."

"What were you thinking?"

"I'm fine with Coors Light," I said, which is the proper amount of enthusiasm that someone should have for Coors Light. Given that the first two spots on my

list of favorite beers belonged to “free” and “cold” respectively, I stick Coors Light at number three. Some may be reviled by this, but they can suck their local microbrew out of Samuel Adams’ ass for all I care. With Coors Light, you know exactly what you’re getting, and it’s served at almost every bar in the country, which meant you wouldn’t be scrambling for an answer when asked by a bartender.²²

He grabbed a six-pack of bottles and we left the cooler. The younger guy ended up ahead of us in line behind a gaggle of red-eyed girls who had cleared out half of the lone shelf of snacks. When the young guy got to the register he had two tallboys of Twisted Tea, which is kind of like Mike’s Hard Lemonade if you don’t know what that is. He took his “license” out, but not from a wallet, instead just from his front pocket along with some loose bills. The cashier glanced at the card in the same way you do when someone shows you a picture from their vacation that you hadn’t asked them about. He quickly handed the card back in exchange for the cash it had shared the pocket with. Trevor bought the six-pack with his debit card, and I said I would buy him a root beer kamikaze at Sharky’s. We then cut across the parking lot next to the Tri Phi house, which was Megan’s sorority that she spent no time at.

“Tri Phi,” Trevor set up as we walked by.

²² Now the same could be said for Bud Light, but my dad drinks Bud Light and if I drank the same light beer as my dad then it wouldn’t be very alternative rock of me, and I might have to turn in my shoes.

“Everyone else has,” I said.

Claire and Heather’s apartment was only two blocks away from Chip’s, who was then a little over a dozen blocks from downtown. Both the apartment complexes were run by College City, called College Shitty by the renters, which only added to my paranoia about having to get an apartment if I stayed for grad school. I assumed that I would get bored while reading the lease, and end up skimming over something super important like I’ll come back from class one day and they’ll tell me that I have to now have to be roommates with a sizeable refugee family. Then when I complain about this scenario they’ll say, “Well you signed a legally binding contract saying that we could move in as many people to your apartment as we wanted, so what’s the problem? It’s because they’re refugees, isn’t it? You’re a racist.”

Then I’ll say, “What? I’m not a racist.”

But they’ll say, “Oh yes, you are, that was in the lease too.”

Anyway, Trevor asked if I had ever been to Claire and Heather’s apartment before, and I said, “Yeah, I did homework there with Heather and Maddison.”

I had been there with Trevor before, but he wouldn’t remember it. We were at trivia the night that Trevor officially ended things with Noah. He ended up blacking out and Claire offered to let us leave him on her couch instead of walking him the entire way back to the house. We got second in trivia that night.

We climbed the external staircase to the second floor. The apartment was at the end of the walkway and we could hear music when we reached the door. Upon entering and pushing up my sleeves, it was easy to see why you needed an hour for the decorations. The immediate eye-grabber was the yellow and blue “HAPPY 21st BIRTHDAY!” sign made from individual paper letters hung on a string across the ceiling. The left end was tied to the light over the living room and ended with tape holding the right end to the corner of the entrance to the kitchen. On closer inspection, which meant looking at it for more than two seconds, I could see the “2” in “21” had been scribbled in Sharpie next to the “1”. Other decorations included streamers in DB’s colors, orange and black, dangling over the window by the door, which gave an unintentional Halloween theme to the occasion. There was also a “Live, Laugh, Love” sign²³ on one wall, but that was likely a permanent installment.

We proceeded further inside until we could see into the kitchen. Balloons that matched the streamers and two stacks of plastic cups were on a card table with a sheet over it. This dining room table also held a few boxes of wine and some two-liter soda bottles for mixing drinks. I identified the birthday girl by her glittery sash that announced her as such and realized that I knew her from a class I had the previous semester. Jada had also been in that class, so I had to

²³ This is just the female equivalent of the Scarface or Bob Marley poster that adorn the walls of guys’ apartments.

make sure to sit away from the birthday girl in case Jada showed up late. Fortunately, as I glanced around the party she appeared to be absent.

The birthday girl was standing near the stove with her hands on the lower backs of the girls to either side. They were hit with a flash of light that made me expect to see three perfect outlines of the subjects on otherwise charred cabinets and backsplash. The girl on the right missed her cup on the first try, but after blinking hard a few times was able to get it the second time around. Claire extracted the photo from her Polaroid-style camera before performing the mandatory amount of shaking. She handed the photo over for viewing, but I couldn't be certain how much of it any of them could make out.

Maddison broke off from her group to greet us. She addressed us both by name and said we could put the beer wherever we wanted before heading off into the kitchen. Trevor continued past her before she was fully done talking, and we settled on the coffee table that had been pushed closer to the TV to make more standing room. We each took a bottle before posting up at the end of the couch facing the kitchen from across the living room. I always cover my front teeth with my top lip when drinking from glass bottles out of worry that the bottle will get bumped in just the wrong way and knock out my front teeth. Of all my irrational fears, this was the only physical one. That's unless you count the snakes carried by birds thing, but I bet people in Hiroshima said the same thing about the guy that was

concerned by a single plane flying over on a clear August morning.

After a few minutes, Cameron emerged from the kitchen carrying two beers in his left hand. He was drinking from the top can with the backup stacked beneath. I complimented him on the decorations when he reached our end of the couch.

“Thanks, I made them from scratch. You didn’t happen to bring your dokha with you, there Trev’?”

“I did, I did,” Trevor said, taking out the small plastic bottle of Afghani tobacco and a pen-shaped wooden pipe. He took a deep breath in through his nose and exaggeratingly adjusted his belt, “Well, I think it’s about time for a smoke break.”

I don’t smoke so if I were to join them then I would look like a dork tagging along because I didn’t know anybody at a party for a girl that hadn’t invited me, in an apartment rented by people who also hadn’t invited me. I instead preferred to stay put and stand alone in the corner like any other socially adjusted person. Some folks are like a force of nature at a social event, they enter like a storm and everybody knows that they are there. I’m more comparable to a pile of snow that survived into spring by being in a shadowy spot off to the side of the road. As long as I keep out of the way I’ll be allowed to stick around. I did know a few of the girls at the party pretty well, but they were all talking to other guests in the kitchen. So that meant I would have had to cross the room and join in on the conversation. You know, like a psychopath.

I needed action. Something I could do to take up time until the guys came back. One pipe full of dokha is only a few hits worth but has the same amount of nicotine as a cigarette, so they wouldn't be gone long. Going to the bathroom was my first choice, you can burn a lot of time on your phone in there. I made my way to the back of the apartment to a stunted hallway, at the end of which was the bathroom door. The sink and mirror were outside of the bathroom like in hotel rooms and were surrounded by half a dozen DB's touching up makeup and running hands through their hair. The bathroom was in use, which made me down the last half of my beer. Between disposing of the bottle, getting a fresh one, and returning to my post I could burn a whole minute if I stretched it out. Luckily after getting another beer, I found Ruth.

I had missed her when I first looked around the apartment, likely due to her diminutive stature. When Harry started dating her we joked that he had finally found someone shorter than him to date. Personally, I would be fine with dating a woman who was taller than me, but it wasn't like I'd had many opportunities on that front. I did work on a group project with a member of the volleyball team once, and she seemed pretty nice. She had a boyfriend at the time though, but I like to think that if she had been single I would have had a shot at getting turned down after she got to know me better, and not just because she could see the top of my head.

"Thank god, someone I know," I said in a way that was supposed to sound like an imitation of someone anxious at a party.

She laughed, “I thought Trevor and Cam were here.”

“They went out to smoke. That’s such a bad habit.” After saying that I made a show of taking a drink of beer. She laughed at that too.

I had pretty good relationships with most of my friends’ girlfriends, but Ruth was one that I actually considered a friend. At least as much of a friend you can be with the person your friend is in a relationship with. A majority of the time your friend’s significant other only exists to you in relation to your friend. In your mind they’re *your friend’s* girlfriend or *your friend’s* husband, and if the relationship ends they’re *your friend’s* ex. Then aside from the occasional run-in out in public, the contact between the two of you ends.

Ruth had gone from being a friend’s girlfriend to that friend’s ex, to another friend’s girlfriend. I had gotten to know her much better after she started dating Harry than when she was with Brad. Harry did things like bringing Ruth to trivia that brought her more into the fold as one of us. Her indoctrination included desiring to be made fun of like what we did to everyone else in our group.

Her height was the easy target for such jokes, which was why I instead preferred to go after her old lady name. You never think of someone with a name like Ruth or Dolores or Cecil as being a young person, but that’s probably because you’re selfish and only think about yourself. Instead of picturing a young Milton or Bertha, you just assume that they pop into existence saying something offensive at Thanksgiving.

On a few occasions, she went to trivia with us sans Harry, which we were cool with because she was the stronger player of the two. There was even once when she and I were at The Corner without Harry and she offered to wingman for me. This was after the initial Jada stuff. She told me to pick out a stranger that I thought was cute, so I did, then spent the next five minutes laughing to myself as she followed the girl around like a helpless kitten.

“So, have you decided if you’re going to grad school yet?” she asked.

“Not really, I applied, but I’m still going to look for a job. Then if I don’t get any offers I can just do that.”

“Another year of trivia.”

“I think the program’s two years.”

“Even better!” We both laughed at that. I started to say something about how none of my friends would still be there for the second year, but she stopped me. “Oh, wait. The bathroom is open.” She was leaning to look around me.

“What?” I asked. I turned to where she was looking then back.

“No one’s in the bathroom,” she said, pointing.

“Oh, okay,” I said, but that answer didn’t seem to be satisfactory.

“Weren’t you trying to use it earlier?”

“Oh, yeah. Can you hold my beer?” Besides the obvious sanitary reasons for not bringing food or drink into the bathroom, this would assure an easy jump into any group that she might join while I was gone. Another thing you can learn through four years at a

state college. By then I did have to pee a little, so it was as good a time to go as any.

I was grateful to be a guy since I was able to aim away from the water in the bowl, also the whole getting paid more thing, but right then mostly for the aiming thing. Maybe this would make the girls think I didn't even need to take a leak I just needed to make a phone call and had to go into the bathroom for privacy. As for the flush afterward, I was simply ridding the house of stagnant water which is the breeding ground for bacteria. They would think, "Not only is this guy well connected, but he's also preventing cholera. Now, I wonder how he feels about choking?"

Half of them were gone when I got out, and two of the girls left stepped away from the sink for me. The sole remainder was directly between me and the sink. I didn't know her. She had black hair and a glittery pink jacket. The other girls looked at her, then me, then back. I stepped around her, holding my hands up like I was prepped to perform surgery. I looked in the mirror and we made eye contact. I planned to do what you do when you make eye contact on an elevator, fold your lips in and make just a flat line smile and nod your head. Fucking got her good with it, too. Someone told me her name later, and it was something trashy like Roxy or Amethyst or Bobbi spelled with an "i".²⁴

²⁴ Obviously you can tell that it is spelled that way, but if this heap is ever read aloud that's something that would need pointed out.

I wiped my hands on my jeans on the way back – there had been a pink jacket between me and the hand towel. The guys walked back in right when I rounded the corner from the hallway. They came in fast, laughing with closed mouths, and closed the door quickly. Maddison started a conversation with them as they entered, Cameron stopped but Trevor breezed by without acknowledging her. He didn't have his bottle with him, so I guessed that he hucked it into the parking lot the walkway overlooked. Not at any cars, just into the open area to hear it pop and skitter across the asphalt. Trevor grabbed another bottle and sought out Claire in the kitchen. I found Ruth with Nikki the birthday girl at the other end of the couch than before.

“Two drinks at once? At least you're not letting your age get the best of you.” I said when I got to her. They laughed and she gave me back my drink. Nikki was called away to greet someone who had just arrived, someone that she had likely actually invited.

“So, are you coming to the bars with us?” Ruth asked.

“No, some of us were going to skip the first few bars. Probably wait at The Ivy or Sharky's.”

“That's probably the way to do it,” Ruth said. This reminded me that I still needed to get back to Chip on when we would be swinging by his place on the way downtown.

I was looking down at my phone when I heard a woman's voice say, “Ray.” It sounded like Claire and was coming from the direction of the kitchen. I turned, but before my eyes found a face, they were met with

what looked like the business end of one of those coin-operated telescopes. A telescope with shoulder-length light brown hair. I was still trying to comprehend what I was seeing when my vision went white. I closed my eyes and saw green and purple spots. When I reopened them, I saw Trevor laughing lightly and Claire taking the photo out of the slot.

“That should be a good one,” She said before shaking the piece of film. The entire time I’ve known her she’s been interested in photography. This doesn’t sound like much in a time when everyone has a camera in their pocket and has an account on at least one website or app they can post pictures to. I guess what I mean is that Claire regularly posts pictures that are not of herself.

“I usually charge for modeling,” I said. The room looked dimmer than before, so I opened my eyes wide to try to get them to readjust.

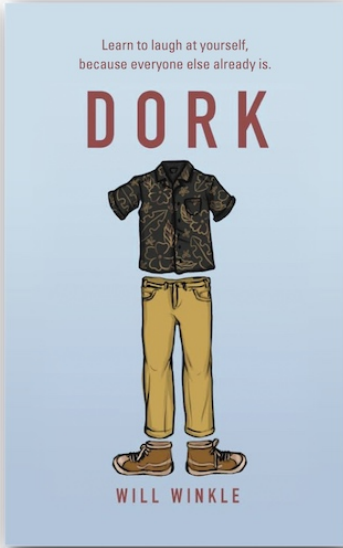
After it developed the two of them leaned in to look at the palm-sized square. They both laughed, her a little, him a lot. Trevor grabbed the white border along the bottom and turned so I could see. They say that if you saw a clone of you on the street, you wouldn’t recognize yourself because you have constructed a false image of what you think you look like. You picture yourself as having a more defined jawline, wider shoulders, thicker hair. I immediately recognized the central subject as me. I was framed by the sheen off the back of Ruth’s head, the orange and black streamers, and the beginning of the “HAPPY 21st BIRTHDAY!” sign. The flash gave an irradiated and supernatural look

to the glaucous and puce clad figure. I was looking at the lens but didn't see it. It was like a concussed ghost that wasn't sure how to talk to people at parties.

"A picture says a thousand words," Trevor said leaning in. "This one just says, 'choke me.'"

Talk about it being time leave spread through the apartment. Maddison came over to Trevor, Claire, Ruth, and I to tell us such. Trevor gave a sharp, "Okay." It wasn't overly curt but properly signaled that the conversation was over, and she might want to move on to the next group. There was a single bottle left in the pack. Neither of us wanted it, so Claire put it in their fridge for us and threw the cardboard into the recycling basket. I invited Cameron and Ruth to skip ahead with us, but both said they were going to stick with the main party but hoped to see us later.

Somebody said that everyone was about to leave, so we knew that it was going to be at least another five minutes before the main group was even close to leaving. This knowledge contributed to Claire joining Trevor and me as we made our way towards the door.



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