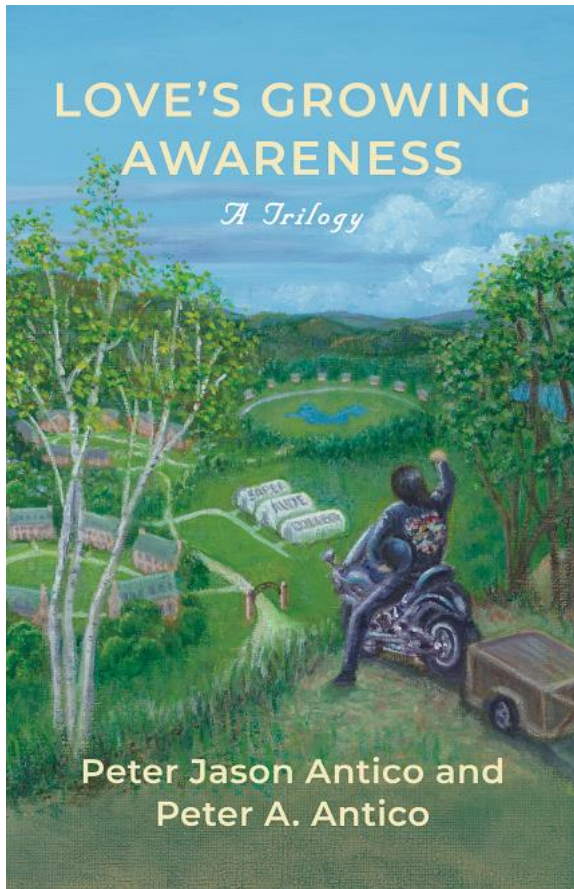




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Love's Growing Awareness

By Peter Jason Antico and Peter A. Antico

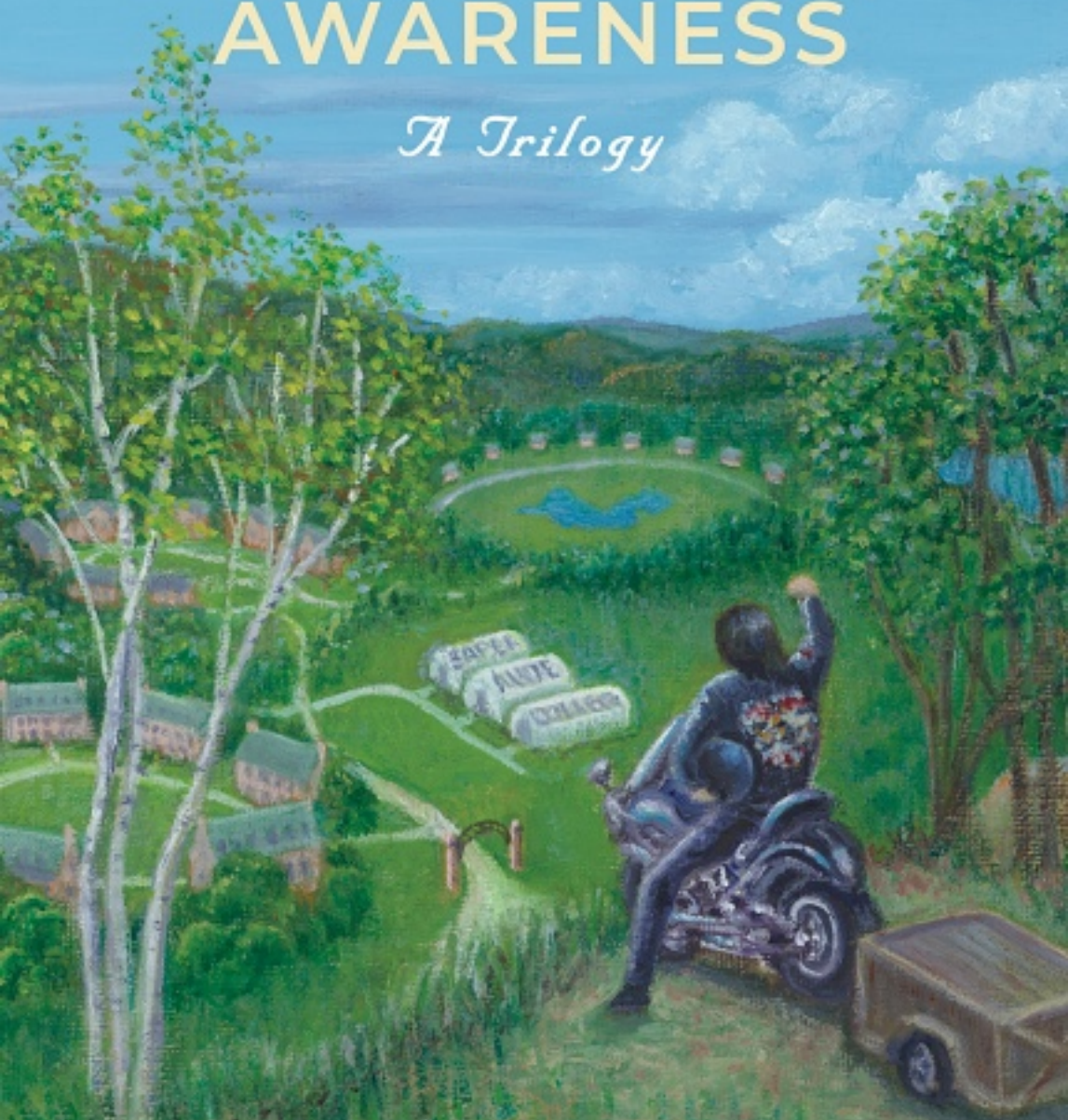
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LOVE'S GROWING AWARENESS

A Trilogy



Peter Jason Antico and
Peter A. Antico

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AUTHOR BIO

Peter A. Antico recently passed away. He was blissfully retired and lived in 'gratitude' at his beloved 'Jersey Shore'. He reveled in his solitary octogenarian bachelor lifestyle.

Peter was disinclined to provide an 'author image' at his age. He was concerned that the expensive camera lens on the current I-Phone could crack.

Peter spent a great deal of time struggling to write the perfect declarative sentence.

CHAPTER I

— 1 —

Jim was locked onto the road. He was just trying to get the miles out of the way. The new-looking green metallic road signs constantly reminded him of how many more he had to go...147...98...27. It wasn't a bad run—only five-and-a-half hours—and there were plenty of juicy views of tree patches, meadows and valleys. The rural four-lane highway had a nice low-key, super-smooth feel to it, which was perfect for riding.

As he drove along, all kinds of random thoughts bounced around his brain. Distance thoughts—like how many more miles he had to go before he needed gas. Thoughts of trucks that could suck him in with their air drag. Pain thoughts—like how his neck and shoulders were getting stiff from his riding position, and how he couldn't stop shivering from the wind. The worst, though, were the worry thoughts—like how much the luggage cart on the back of his bike swayed, and what it would be like to crash and slide across the grass shoulder. From time to time, even the local cops crept into his mind because he wasn't registered, didn't have insurance, and was using some bogus Georgia plate. Risky...yes! However, for Jim, sticking to one's principles was often more important than playing by the rules. Anyway, how much damage could a motorcycle do in a crash? So going legit really wasn't necessary.

Besides, it cost too much damn money!

Except for that cool Bon Jovi song, "Wanted Dead or Alive," filling him with the urge to belt out the words, for most of the trip his mind was blanked out by the wind. Just the sound of the engine and trying to get there. None of those mystical, philosophical thoughts you

sometimes read about. No serious contemplation about how cool, and what kind of change, the “TRANSFER” was going to make in his life.

At long last the exit came up and Jim pulled off, downshifting as he went around the long, gentle curve of the ramp, slowing the whining of the modest 500cc engine. Only after he stopped and stretched his legs at the light did it start hitting him that he had finally arrived. As he made a right and glided along Route 112S, the West Virginia scenery was still the same, but with more barns and stretches of houses, which all had white clapboard and contrasting shutters in black or green.

Then at some point—starting with the billboard of Red Dog Beer—some nasty strip mall schlock began. Unfolding before him like a checklist with a towering 3-D sign was savannah-like parking lots that were the same throughout the country. Then followed Citgo and Getty gas stations, a Saturn car dealership, the Jiffy Lube, the Kmart, an AMC movie theater complex, the omnipresent Burger King and, of course, a Starbucks. Fortunately, this nasty scene faded back into the countryside when he got to the edge of town.

He pulled up in front of a park to get his bearings and walked in circles to stretch his legs. He had a good manly feeling as he took out his smokes. He lit up and decided to hang out on top of a bench that overlooked the town’s main drag. There were all sorts of fancy cafés, restaurants and bookshops with mahogany and brass exteriors and names in gold lettering, like “Beyond Words” and “Essence of the Middle East.”

Besides Saper Aude, the University of West Virginia was located nearby. Students just getting back from vacation were everywhere. This, of course, included lots of young nymphs in their skimpy summer regalia of jean shorts and tank tops.

Jim’s deadly duo was the regimen of study in the college life and being preoccupied by chicks. These two focal points took center stage

in his mind. The vast array of cute girls was not healthy for his dry spell. Thank God fall was coming. *Must control my Neanderthal tendencies*, he thought as they walked by in groups of twos, threes and fours with their unattainable 'hee-hee, you-can't-touch-me' attitude.

Looking around at the students, he felt how different he was from everybody else. He wondered about how he was going to fit in against the 'clean cuts' with his long, black banger hair. His clothes included jean jackets with Iron Maiden and Metallica painted on the back, and \$20 Buck Ames work boots and black Levi's. The crowded student body was totally devoid of any bikers, slackers, trailer trash or teenage townies. He knew immediately that there was going to be a struggle ahead of him.

Watch out, folks, the hick's coming to town!

Jim was a critical-thinking loner who had escaped from small-town life and the small-mindedness that destroys intellectual pursuit. He was not a clinger, like most of his male friends, who always hung out. They constantly did the same things and conformed to a group identity. Good guys to share your Iron City Beer, but forget about holding any kind of conversation that wasn't related to 'tittie' bars, trucks and guns.

With the "TRANSFER" he had the independence to develop his thoughts and the freedom to express them. That which he had longed for was in his grasp. Yet, so much of what he was getting into was problematic. Surely, old markers would not work.

He got back on the bike but didn't put his helmet on, just kept it hanging on the mirror, and headed deeper into the countryside toward the college.

"Yeahh, boy!" Jim shouted into the wind as he saw the sign leading to the turn-off.

A tighter road curved its way from Route 112 and was surrounded on either side by forest. After a mile or so the forest gave way, and

suddenly Saper Aude College came magically into view. The small college consisted of a large open area with a greenhouse/farm center. There were seven low-slung, two-story buildings spaced loosely together in the shape of a U. Then paths that branched off and led to the dorms. After that, alternative-style campus apartments, which were called “pods.” The pods were surrounded by woods. Trees shot up several stories into the air. The campus was a sylvan paradise. It was not just a forest or a park where people could visit and hang out, but a perfect blend between nature and the human community. Here, you could really learn to grow and develop your intellectual potential.

He found a parking lot that was closest to the dorms. Inching backwards—while pushing all of the Yamaha’s weight with just his feet and legs—Jim guided the trailer into a remote space. He turned off the high-revving engine. Even though he felt like he should be winding down from the road trip and should have been excited to be there, he was involuntarily beginning to tense up.

Like some unknown monster, a new roommate was awaiting him. Why couldn’t they have given him a room to himself? The Resident Housing Association gave him some bullshit reason that freshmen and sophomores have priority and that there were only a certain number of single rooms. Jim could be cool about a lot of things, except when you forced him into a situation in which he didn’t want to be. He did not want a roommate. He didn’t want to deal with the student brats whose daddies were flipping \$25K a year for their kids to sit fat and pretty. The types who pretended that they were really working and studying hard. He knew that he was going to have to adjust to a whole new scene, but he wanted solitude to do it. Living with a complete stranger would put him in an uncomfortable pressure cooker!

He got off his motorcycle and left his helmet hanging on the mirror. He didn’t want to give off any “biker” impression. He lit up another Red and thought about what he was going to bring inside on

the first run. He was thinking about bringing in nothing and being loose enough to check things out first unburdened with any stuff. But he wanted to get his unpacking out of the way, so he unlocked the padlock on his trailer and grabbed his green army duffel bag.

There were two sets of dorms, and where he was going to be staying didn't look too bad. The brick building was in a U shape around a courtyard with some picnic tables and was only three stories high. The rooms had some good-sized windows and a few even had balconies.

His mood lightened. He couldn't help but chuckle to himself, thinking how he was hopping down the bunny trail to the secret house in the forest. All sorts of thoughts were growing in his mind about immersing himself in the freedom, in the innocence, and in the good times of a rural, remote place. He moved past several other students up to the second floor and walked down the hall, checking off the numbers on all the doors until he got to his room. He heard voices inside and, sure enough, the kid and his parents were in there. He took a deep breath and stepped inside. *Holy hell, the whole family*, Jim thought as he was thrown into a panic.

"Hi, you must be Jim," his roommate's mother said cheerfully. They all stopped unpacking for the moment. With her neatly coiffed hair and blue calico sundress, she seemed to have that subtle but distinct air of the good life about her.

He greeted her in the affirmative with little more than a grunt.

"This is our son, Doug." He shook the kid's hand firmly but didn't look him in the eye.

"So, did you come with your parents?" she asked perkily.

"No," Jim said, thinking, *I'm a very independent kinda guy and wanted to make the transition on my own.*

“That’s too bad.” The voice became slightly high-toned and more superficial. Jim really wanted to vanquish these bourgeois people for simply polluting reality.

“So...are you a transfer student?” Apparently the mom was all hellbent on breaking the ice.

“Uh-huh.” Jim put his green duffel bag on a bed but didn’t open it.

“Where did you transfer from?” the father asked after pulling a black speaker from a box. With a full head of slightly greying hair neatly parted to the side and his yellow Izod shirt and his meaty forearms showing, he had a nice, fresh, plump look.

Jim, who didn’t have a father, felt a pang of jealousy well up inside him. He hesitated. Now the cover-up begins. *You’ve got questions...I’ve got answers.*

“A small community college outside of Pittsburgh,” he replied, while checking out Doug, who seemed to be passive and quiet. The kid had a hippy nineties, slightly grungy air about him. He looked like he might be struggling along but was probably hiding an ATM card and credit card in his Birkenstocks.

“The tuition here must be a little more expensive...were you able to get any financial aid?” A classic Dad kind of question. No reason to lie about this one.

“I made out pretty good. I’ve got most of it covered, and from what I’ve saved over the summer, I should be able to cruise through the year.” Jim stood there facing him with his hands clasped behind his back. He didn’t play the conversation back and he didn’t ask any questions. That would be way too uncomfortable. With his long hair and his jacket, he felt like he was on display. His awkwardness quickly turned into sheer suffocation, and he told them that he better get the rest of his stuff.

He went back and forth several times to get his stuff. Included was an archaic stereo with a turntable, but no CD player. He also had some

books, two heavy-metal posters, a lamp and a few knickknacks. He piled up his things on his side of the room. By then, the top ten generic questions were asked and answered. After the initial chitchat, everybody fell into that lull where nobody knew what else to say.

The family chatted among themselves as they continued unpacking. Each time they came back, a treasure trove was forming before Jim's eyes as he saw more and more of Doug's stuff.

"Where do you want to put the computer?" Jim heard Doug's father say, returning from his third trip. There was a mountain bike, all sleek and shiny. Jim didn't understand how he even moved on the damn contraption because it didn't have pedals, just these round-slot things. What? The computer had a monitor and the guts didn't lie flat but shot up like a tower. It had that CD thing. What did they call it? CD something?

All these THINGS. These bourgeois goodies! The wealth was subtle, but the newness was really out there. It had such power to sway you to ogle, worship and not condemn. Not that he was guilt-free. He had lots of things, too, but he had bought them himself and they all had a practical purpose. The way he looked at it, if you wanted to be independent, you needed personal belongings to give you freedom. Besides, his things, like his camping equipment and bike, were recent second-hand acquisitions and not free handouts from mommy and daddy.

He didn't put up his posters, take out any of his books or set up his stereo, and decided to leave all of his camping equipment in the trailer. He was trying to figure out what he was going to do next. He really wanted to take a nap since the five-and-a-half hours really wiped him out.

"We're going into town to get a bite to eat, and if you want, you're more than welcome to join us," Doug's father said.

“No, thank you.” Jim felt put off by the invitation and was being more polite than usual for some unknown reason.

Doug’s father asked him if he was sure.

“Thanks for the offer, but I’ve got some loose ends to take care of,” he said, all sophisticated-like and in a way he would never talk back home.

Soon the kid took off to go into town with his parents. Jim thought, *Well, isn’t that just special...parental units at your beck and call.* Jim deeply breathed in the serenity of the room, savored the peace, and lay down on his bed. He felt a little strange because he didn’t know who else had used the springy, thin mattress. He figured it was the same kind they used in sleep-away camp or prison. At least it wasn’t stained! He was so worn out that it really didn’t matter.

He crashed for over an hour, and when he woke up his instinct was screaming to get out of the room before they came back. He decided to hit the bookstore to pick up some course materials. Then it struck him: he had to go further than that. The more he thought about it, the more he was leaning toward not coming back at all for the rest of the weekend.

He got up, put on his jacket, and paced around his new boxed room. He thought it should be called CELL-4B. “The plan...give me a plan, Jimbo,” he said out loud, pounding his fist into an open palm. Something he could do for the weekend. Going camping came to mind. The kind of tactical retreat he realized he needed because if there was one thing that freaked Jim out the most, it was dealing with strangers in his personal space. That was the real reason he had accumulated those new things. They gave him freedom. When he felt trapped, he could flee. Camping was a good idea, and he knew where to go. Not a state park, which would’ve been too overdeveloped. Too many park police cruising around. Too many roads and parking lots. Too many hook-ups for huge, sausage-like RVs. No...a national forest, which

would have a lot fewer people. He had spent time over the summer gathering up maps and info on the cool green patches in West Virginia. If there was one thing to sum up Jim, it was that he was always prepared.

He knew where to go. He would write out directions and slip them into the clear plastic pouch of his small sack. He would then attach the sack to the gas tank. This way, he wouldn't have to keep stopping to see where he was going. The only question now was what he was going to do when he got there. Practicing being a Buddhist monk and meditating all weekend seemed somewhat extreme. Then he figured he could get some books for the classes he was taking and get ahead of the required reading. So he spent the next couple of minutes busy as a bee, getting the directions together and getting the course catalog. He made sure he had his computer-printed schedule and headed off to the bookstore.

The campus bookstore wasn't like the one back home in Winapaupac, which was the size of a 7-Eleven and only had a couple of narrow aisles with mostly used, beat-up textbooks scattered haphazardly about the shelves and resembled a windowless shack. Saper's was a two-story carpeted beauty with big glass windows and views of the campus. Jim got giddy when he realized that there were lots and lots of serious, pristine books with that heavenly aromatic new smell about them.

Trying to avoid the students scrambling around to get their goodies, Jim remembered how nerdy he had gotten back at Winapaupac Community College. He always liked to check out the books from different classes, even if the pickings were slim. He felt that taking a class was a serious endeavor, and that you really needed to have a good feel for which direction the class was headed before you made a commitment. The best way to do that was to review the book before you took the class. For Jim, even though college

bookstores were bland as vanilla, they still meant a lot to him. It was the only place where all the serious books were located. No cheesy romance or crime novels. No self-help oodles-of-noodles-for-your-soul books. No celebrity autobiographies or fancy coffee-table books with nothing but huge photos or any mass-marketed hardcover that was just going to wind up in the dollar bin in a couple of years.

After he got his books, he waited in line for a good 20 minutes to pay for them. Jim absorbed a deeper feel for what the kids on campus were all about from two or three private conversations weaving themselves out into this public space. They looked like your average college joes with that youthful, casually indifferent way of dressing.

A lot of the snippets were pretty surface, but some of it was about school stuff, like DIV II projects and cultural events going on around town. *Maybe, he thought, there was still hope. Could be it wasn't going to be too 'pseudo.'* *More than likely, though, it was going to swing from tolerable to complete bullshit.*

He picked up the books from the basket and figured the cost. The final sum turned out to be expensive as hell. This was to be expected and he wasn't too surprised. Back home, when he had cash flow, these kinds of purchases at the bookstore didn't really faze him, but now, without money coming in, there was more of a sting. He wondered if he was going to have to steal them—like his buddies back home. “The noble crime of stealing books for the sake of knowledge!”

After paying for the books, he went back to his trailer. He put down his book bag (which he had used instead of plastic). He tried to unlock the trailer from his bike.

Dammit, why won't it slide out? Frustration was beginning to bubble up. He had spent a lot of time with his uncle building a custom hitch.

Unlike a lot of folks, with their “banging and shoving” mentality, Jim liked to slow down and look for the right solution. Part of his roots, you could say. He bent over to have a closer look.

Will you look at that. Well, I'll be a sonofabitch. The bolt that held his mini trailer in place was slightly bent. Using a lot of force, he finally got the trailer unhitched after he straightened the bolt with a wrench he had in his tool bag.

He put his stove and pot and pans in one of the horse pouches that hung from the side of the trailer. Then he tied the tent and sleeping bag to the two-foot-long passenger back support bar. Jim was an expert knot builder, and the crisscrossed web he created to hold his stuff in place was extraordinary. Even with 70-mile-an-hour winds, there was no way his cargo would even move an inch.

He felt kinda cool doing all this expedition-preparing in public. He was relaxed and focused as about a dozen students walked through the parking lot, giving him glances as if he was some kind of Green Beret. It wasn't a thing like Pirsig or religious escapism, but it was tying stuff and lashing it down like a sailor or cowboy. Just a guy who had the skills to go out there and survive in the elements while depending on NOBODY!

Of course, being Jim, he didn't have a backpack. They were for yuppies, with all those fancy belts and internalized frames. Well-positioned horse pouches would do the job very nicely, thank you.

With everything together, he wondered what he should do about the trailer. There was a chance that it could be stolen or screwed with if he just left it there. But he didn't want to drive around with it empty. Lord knows how much it would sway. So he left it there in complete abandonment and took off.

The ride to the national forest, which was due east in the middle of West Virginia, took about two hours through rural non-sprawled

countryside. It was the kind of landscape that beckons to just soak your bones.

Jim settled into his campsite a little after 7 p.m. Leaning against a log, he took a closer look at his books and the course catalog he had brought along.

In a desperate way to prove that the world did exist outside of Winapaupac, Jim was probably the only person in his town of 14,000 to read the Sunday *New York Times*. In his first fall semester at Winapaupac Community College, on one of those typical, bitterly cold and snowy wintry days, he came across an article in the magazine section about Saper and the hardcore intellectuals it was breeding. He got so excited as a result of the article that he shot down on a secretive mission to check out the school. The name Saper came from the Latin. It was a phrase the philosopher Immanuel Kant used that translated as, "Dare to use your reason."

Saper was a radical college that was established in the early 1970s. There were no grades and only written evaluations. Students did not have to choose a major but could form their own. It quickly gained the reputation as a Hippie U where all the students did was smoke weed and do acid. The school became famous for a DIV III project comparing the health benefits of frisbee throwing versus hacky sack playing. By the early 1990s, however, it had become a serious academic institution for independent thinkers who felt confined by traditional boundaries.

The college had three divisions. In Division I, a student either completed two courses or did an independent research project in one of the four schools: Humanities and Arts, Social Science, Cognitive Science and Cultural Social Science. The project had to be approved by a faculty member. Together, they worked out the details, content and direction of the project. They met on a regular basis and an oral review took place at the project's completion.

In Division II, a student selected two professors, then drafted a concentration and program of study, which then needed to be worked at and approved in conjunction with the faculty committee. As the student carried out the concentration, faculty provided criticism, advice and evaluation. DIV II culminated by a student portfolio presentation, which consisted of papers, independent projects, course and field work.

In Division III, students undertook a major independent study project; i.e., a piece of scientific research, a scholarly paper or a film, under the guidance of a faculty committee. The project explored a specific aspect of the student's DIV II work. Some previous projects included Public Housing Projects, Design and Crime, Biracial Identity Development, The Place and Virtues of the Spirited in Plato's Republic, and Multimedia Interaction between Music and Technology.

He was so enraptured by the college that he became consumed by an overwhelming desire to get in and become part of the myth. He dreamed about studying and reading...doing his own thing in some warm, cozy niche in the library while overlooking fields of snow...having really deep intellectual conversations with people in some cool, hip coffeehouse. The feeling went deep! How long he spent absorbing this myth and dreaming of this rural, pristine Never-Never Land where he could truly be free to do his own thing. He carried around all the information from the college for months in a special folder that was labeled "Turning Dreams into Reality."

The application process had been difficult. He still had nightmares about the two months he had to spend pounding the bureaucrats at his old high school for his transcript and the required teacher recommendations. Then there was the four months and hundreds of hours he wracked his brain, making sure his essays and mini-proposal for his program of study was perfect.

Saper only had about a thousand students. The acceptance rate was 60%. Jim was a transfer, so he had to cover all the bases. With a 3.0, the grade aspect wasn't a problem, but completing the application made him doubt his self-worth and wore him to the bone. All these questions! What kind of activities? Research or independent study? Sports? Writing for a publication? Volunteer work? The process left him feeling that he hadn't done anything of value with his life. Shit, all he had done in college was study and work. He wondered if he could include getting trashed and laid as activities that really enriched his horizons. Maybe something more existential—like the night he got severely lost on a farm looking around for a clandestine patch of marijuana plants and, after a couple of hours, wound up sleeping beneath an apple tree.

So he took almost a whole year of behind-the-scenes strategic planning to make up for his inactivity, to build a stronger profile. He tutored kids in a local elementary school, wrote some pieces for the Winapaupac Community newspaper and did an independent study project with one of his professors.

Then there was all the writing he had to do. There was a personal statement, where he had to write about a significant academic or private experience and how it affected him, or an individual who had a particular influence on his life. There was an analytic essay where he got a break and just had to hand in one of his papers. Finally, there was a mini-proposal for his "Program of Study," where he had to describe all of his interests, goals and any independent projects he wanted to undertake.

Jim then scanned through the college's reading materials, thinking about this and what he was going to be doing. He came across one student's bio in one of the brochures which read:

Ben Jacob wanted to understand the thoughts and feelings of senators that guide their motivations, and so

he went directly to the source and was able to obtain interviews with Jesse Helms' press secretary and Senator Norton herself. His project resulted in a 95-page Journalistic Report. Now in DIV III, he's drafting a political novel about the struggles of minority Democrat senators, who band together to push through a national urban development program that focuses on the creation of community centers that provide training, job referrals and day care centers funded through federal tax dollars, but are thwarted by the Senate majority. Then Republican mayors and corporate sponsors around the country take up the plan and create their own version of a national workfare program, which helps create a bountiful minimum wage labor pool for private companies. Together, they are able to turn their program into a great success by beautifully orchestrating and effectively spin-doctoring the impacts of their policies in the mass media.

Truth be known, there were so many intellectual endeavors going on at Saper that he no longer had any certainty in what he believed was the most important. Jim was not overly political like this guy Ben. He wondered why all the science, artsy and PC stuff was so dominant on campus. For him, art, science and the further fracturization of the social sciences didn't have much relevancy in modern society. None of these could explain or show any real understanding of the country's current socioeconomic organization. This, Jim strongly believed, was the most pervasive and penetrating structure that framed the reality of our lives.

With some digging, Jim found a few classes that took a critical view of American capitalism. This was Jim's primary focus. To be sure, he was not a radical in the political sense. A lot of his friends

were pro-NRA, anti-government types, who believed that the Unabomber, Ted Kaczynski, was really a hero. Jim, however, was not that anarchical and believed that deeper, more theoretical, systemic critiques were needed more than random acts of violence. Nor did he lean toward the extreme on the other side. His view of communism and socialism were, although viable political/economic alternatives for countries like Cuba, China and the USSR, unpromotable systems in the USA, and seemed silly and a very naive 1930s/1960s idealistic kind of pursuit.

For Jim, before any alternative political system was to be advanced, the current one had to be delegitimized on moral and socio-economic grounds.

In community college, his focus was in ‘Philosophy.’ Rare beyond rarity, a study that makes you least marketable in securing a career, to get to the cash/prestige land of the Red, White and Blue, at the end of the twentieth century.

In justifying what he studied, Jim would simply say, “A lot of folks have Bill Gates as their demagogue—and need Jerry Springer and Oprah to enlighten and entertain themselves. I, on the other hand, have philosophy and think it’s more important to question the false grounds they rely upon in their taken-for-granted assumptions about the nature of morality, reality and life.”

By the end of his community college stint, Jim strongly felt that ‘Philosophy’ should be grounded in providing people with an understanding of their contemporary social reality. Yet, in order to achieve that more practical understanding, he had to first go through a philosophical critique of the social sciences, which were artificially created by academia at the beginning of the twentieth century. They were broken down into these artificial slices of sociology, anthropology, psychology and political science to fit into the structural framework and reproductive mechanisms of higher education.

Therefore, the paper he had done for Saper was a philosophical critique of the neopositivistic tendencies that dominate the social sciences, which attempts to model them based on the natural sciences, and, in the hand of the Red, White and Blue, exist in a capitalistic framework. As such, having strayed from pure philosophy to pure critiquing the philosophical assumptions of the social sciences, he had moved toward wanting to develop a critical theory of capitalism.

In order to pursue those academic interests, he knew that he was going to have to find an 'alternative' college. He was aware of some of these types of schools in Vermont and Massachusetts, but there was no way he was going to attend any of these institutions. They were way too pretentious and full of sophisticated hot air. So he decided on Saper because the college was in West Virginia, which he thought would be more like upstate New York. Realizing the clear contradiction of studying a critique of capitalism while paying \$25K a year, he thought the intellectual seriousness and academic freedom he had seen at Saper would offset that and he would be able to pursue his area of interest.

What got him into all this stuff in the first place? Why did he have this itch to go to Saper so badly? How was he going to fit in? These were just a few of the questions he pondered as he stared into the darkened woods, drinking his beer.

Maybe it came from his mom...or the townies...or the customers at his uncle's hardware store...or the guys he had worked with over the summer.

For Jim, it was all death!

He didn't see humans in his small town, but walking skeletons and zombies. They didn't have any real thirst in their lives to find meaning and deeper purpose. Except for maybe his uncle, all everybody did was work at some 'okay' or 'shitty' job (but, hey you gotta work, right?), go home, eat, watch TV, hang out with the same crowd, talking about

nothing important and hitting the same two or three bars every weekend. If they weren't working or were underemployed, they would merely waste away their lives hoping and waiting for something to come along. So, in the end, this is what drove him. It was 'THE FEAR'! Pure fear of being consumed by absolute nothingness. Pure fear of having a meaningless life.

Marcy, Jimbo. That's why we're really here. That's why we've got to stick it out. Just so we don't fall into that whole trap again! You know what I'm saying, buddy? he asked himself rhetorically in the darkness to no one in particular. He was, of course, thinking about their relationship AND the car AND how it all ended.

They had started going out in the beginning of his second year when he had met her in one of his classes. Marcy was studying to be a medical recorder. That was all she was hoping to shoot for in life—besides getting married and having kids. Jim had run into 'this type' many times at W.C.C. 'Looks' weren't that important to Jim and he really wasn't attracted to her. She was pretty plain-looking and a little on the big side. She used way too much hairspray to style her naturally brown hair, which she sometimes bleached, and that she liked to wear in stretchies. But this was the first time a girl had actually shown romantic interest in him. She liked his long black hair and how he "always had such deep things to say." Also, they both liked that hard-core '90s band, Rage Against the Machine.

Eventually, they got to talking in that young, beautifully innocent and cool class context. They found themselves hanging out at a party where everybody got totally trashed. Ultimately, they escaped to the laundry room, where they hooked up. Jim thought that the cheap, clandestine way he had lost his Big V was kinda cool. Later, his friends would joke about using fabric softeners for cushions and if he turned the dryer on to cover up all the moaning and some real locker-room stuff about the creative use of liquid laundry detergent.

After that, Jim was conflicted about his relationship with Marcy. One option was ‘a dip and a split,’ as he called it. But he also thought about the consequences of going dry again. Jim had never really been a ladies’ man. He had gone through high school and the first year of W.C.C. dry and wandering around like a monk. So, before he knew it, he was going along with the ride—even though it wasn’t the right thing to do. Not getting laid, which Jim felt was turning him into a neurotic repressed mess, was even worse.

Even though Marcy tried to turn their relationship into something more serious, Jim made sure that he didn’t feel suffocated. Throughout that fall and into the winter they did the usual stuff. They drove the hour to get to the nearest mall. They drank beer, watched videos and had sex. Jim was very careful to avoid getting trapped by keeping the old wiener schnitzel nice and protected.

When Jim found out that he had gotten accepted into Saper, he decided to cut it off, not only because his conscience was bothering him about all the pretending he was doing, but just as important was the ‘frustration’ the relationship made him feel. For the whole time they were going out, he tried to have some serious conversations with her and was never able to make a dent.

He wasn’t a male-dominating sexist, but he just couldn’t get her to open up. Like the time they watched *When Harry Met Sally*...Jim thought the movie was contrived and too Hollywoodish. All Marcy thought was that it was “a good romance,” and that was it. Or when they went to the mall (which Jim hated) and he tried to raise the issue of gluttonous consumerism, to which Marcy replied, “People gotta shop and the mall is the best place to do it.” Their sharpest differences were over Winapaupac. Jim saw skeletons working, driving and walking around. Marcy didn’t get the metaphor at all. To her, Winapaupac was a “nice town and sure better than the city with all those wacky people robbing and killing each other.”

It was his first nooky-packed spring, though, and he didn't want any confrontation. His being was relishing the intoxication of that fresh, warm air seeping into every pore of his body after a long, cold winter. He was surrounded by budding greenery that lent motivation to passionate sexual encounter. All he wanted to do was rattle off poetry and sing songs to the muses. So he held off on the breakup and didn't tell her about Saper.

It wasn't until mid-June—when he was working fifty-hour weeks sheetrocking—that he stopped touching base and didn't return her calls. That went on for a month or so until she tracked him down at his house. The breakup didn't go as smoothly as Jim would've liked.

She just went off about why he didn't tell her that he had even applied and got really hung up on why they couldn't stay together. He told her it was better to break up because they were going in separate directions. She just threw it all back in his face. That he was abandoning her. That he really didn't love her. "You think you're so smart. Talkin' about philosophy and all those dead Greeks and 'I think therefore I am,' and that Hobbes guy and this and that. But as a person, you're just a selfish son-of-a-bitch. Don't you think I have any feelings? Or is it really that you think I'm one of those whiny teenage moms that you're always putting down?"

Jim, who really hated it when people talked about philosophy and always made the same two or three references, threw her argument back in her face. Being a typical male, he did not know how to react sensitively in the situation and just made it worse. He told her it was because of her lack of individuality that he hadn't been able to get more deeply involved.

Her insecurities just bubbled to the surface with her claiming that he thought she was a stupid, small-town chick and how he was becoming a snobbish intellectual know-it-all, and on and on and on.

This kind of got to him, and her outpouring showed that she did have a lot more emotional depth than he did.

Suddenly, she became a mirror that reflected all the changes that were going on in his personality. He was losing his rural twang when he spoke. He was talking in clean-cut English. He was using more abstract words and phrases.

Did it really matter if she could not articulate her thoughts and opinions as well as he could? So Jim wavered because he didn't want to make himself seem like such a bad guy. He told her he "would give it another shot" and they went out for another month. During that time, he pretended like a dog that everything was all right, before it all came crashing down. He thought about all the hard-core stuff he was about to experience at Saper. He knew himself and so he told her...even if they stayed together and when he came back, his inability to relate and share with her would just lead to problems and then get progressively worse.

It was at this point she gave up trying to fight for their relationship. She left—storming out of his house—feeling really used and looked down on.

Just as she was peeling out of the driveway in her white Ford Escort, she came to a screeching halt. Jim was standing in his doorway checking out the bumper sticker on the back of her car, which read, 'If you don't like my driving, get off the sidewalk.' He had no clue what was about to happen. He simply watched as she reversed back up the driveway doing a good thirty miles an hour and rammed into his beige '79 Chevy Nova. She rammed into the car at just the right angle and completely demolished the driver's side door. Amazingly, Jim felt quite unemotional about the whole incident. What she had done was so sad because it was her only way of exacting a feeble revenge on him. To him, it really didn't matter because she was forever stuck in Winapaupac. HE WAS NOT!

It was that image of his poor, fucked-up car, this symbol of what he had left behind (and perhaps in some ways still carried with him) that lingered in his mind as he crawled into his pup tent with the last two beers of his six-pack to catch some zzzs.

— 2 —

After getting in a lot of reading and doing some hiking in the woods surrounded by happy families and carefree young singles, Jim got back to campus on Monday morning around 10:30 a.m. He was kind of relieved to be back because he was getting bored as hell and chewed up by his loneliness. Yet, when that day and the rest of the week should've followed the typical 'Going Away to College Experience' of meeting lots of new people and being on your own with no parental rules, Jim hit a wall.

He continued to be nervous about 'fitting in.' It got worse the moment he walked into Cell Block 4B and found his roommate sleeping. His exposed vulnerability immediately reminded him of the brother he never had. He felt his insides gripped by this bony claw of anxiety as he had to tiptoe around the room searching for his shower stuff. He wondered if he was acting so freaky because he had always lived alone with his mom.

The shower was relaxing, and he got the itch out of his unwashed, greasy hair after the weekend in the woods. Since it was only mid-morning, he thought that it would be safe enough to hit the cafeteria before he went to class. He still didn't have his campus I.D. and he had to use his debating skills to get in. Once he did get in, he was astonished at what lay before him. Contrary to W.C.C., there were all these islands and stations with salads and muffins, bagels and croissants. There were six different types of juices, four types of coffee

and eight brands of tea. And here, unlike back home, he could eat whatever he wanted without having to worry about the price. He wondered why, though, for \$25K a year, it wasn't equipped with white embroidered tablecloths and fancy fruitwood chairs.

Having had starved on pasta and peanut butter sandwiches, he loaded up with delicious goodies and found a table next to the huge glass wall overlooking a wooded knoll with squirrels going to and fro. *Not too bad. Not bad at all*, he thought. It was real peaceful, and at that hour in the morning, very few students to be seen. He began to think about how he could meet other students. It shouldn't be all that difficult. There had to be plenty of opportunities. For instance, in Saper's liberal tradition, the showers were co-ed...not that liberal, since everyone had their own private stall. He fantasized about sparking up some small talk and picking up a young, nubile Saper chick in her bathrobe. But 'the claw' would not let him. That was the whole problem. How could he get 'the claw' to loosen its grip?

This psychological cloud hovered over him as he went about the rest of his day. He took two classes that afternoon—'Poverty and Wealth' and 'Contemporary American Capitalism.' Fortunately, both went pretty well, and he became excited with their potential. A good handful of some of the critical thoughts that had been bottled up inside of his head were getting put out there. In the Poverty and Wealth class, for example, the female professor asked if anyone in the class had experienced poverty. She addressed the contradiction of studying the subject in a private higher institutional setting. The students seemed a lot more willing to interact and participate. This was going to be cool.

This was a stark and refreshing change to all of that mono-lecturing and to the passive lemmings he had come to dislike so much back home. Feed me, feed me. More drivel. More bullshit. Feed me!

But Jim still had deep doubts about getting to know any of the students. Perhaps Marcy wasn't the only one who had been instilled with a crippling sense of self-doubt.

So by the end of the day, and with no one to talk to, Jim remained uptight. Except for the three hours of classes, Jim suddenly had a lot of free time, and he found himself in an involuntary void. He was swept up by a homeless feeling and loathed going back to the dorm. He just did not want to deal with his roommate at all. Not even go back to unpack. And so his upbeat, ecstatic mood sank as he sat in one of the study lounges after dinner, burdened with all this negativity. It was all so deeply unnerving, not having a base—some private space that was his own.

Jim's major problem, of which he was aware, was that in cutting himself off from the skeletons of Winapaupac, he had become claustrophobic with strangers and felt a trapped sense of anxiety when he was around them. All he was really conscious of was that he was literally going to have to spend as little time as possible, maybe all the way from 8 in the morning to 11 at night, outside the dorm room. Planning a tight timetable for every hour was going to be tough. Figuring out a schedule...the best time to do things...finding his own niches to dodge the herd. Filling the Vacuum of Time!

It was like some poor bastard staying at a homeless shelter who had to wander the streets all day until they let him back in. He always hated spending too much time in one place in public. It made him feel like a loser, watching everybody else come and go. It felt like some kind of a ghost within the snow globe of the college—being aware of all of the campus social activity. But he was not a part of it and they were not a part of him.

As he sat there staring out the window—with two or three groups of students hanging out and talking in whispers in the background—he thought back to the summer when he was working ten hours a day,

six days a week. At first, he thought it was cool and more healthy than studying all the time. But then the grind of sheetrocking, the taping, the plastering, the cutting, the nailing, AND having to hold entire eight-foot-long pieces against the ceiling wore him down through all his muscles and straight to his brain. Doing the same physically exhausting work day after day turned him into Jell-O. He would come home and wouldn't want to think or read and just grab a beer and veg out in front of the TV. Then, thinking about how the whole day went, he suddenly wanted to be working again. Structure. Just give me structure. Anything but the void!

So...what now? It was only 8 p.m. He considered watching television, but there was no way he could publicly hang out in the lounge on his floor. It would just set him up for gigantic waves of anxiety. He would be trapped in a cage with all those strangers. It occurred to him that he might be getting psychotic! Why was he withdrawing so much? Deep down, he didn't want it to be this way, and he knew the more he withdrew, the harder it was going to be to U-turn out of it and swim back to shore. This was the critical reason he wanted his own space. At least that way, he could withdraw...engage...withdraw and engage again. He knew that he could achieve peace of mind if he could cook...study...sleep...write papers and listen to music by himself.

Then, and only then, could he deal with the world!

He decided reluctantly to go into town and get a 'Forty' and hang out. Yes...his go-to buddy...40 ounces of a big glass bottle of malt liquor. This liquid support system was becoming his escape hatch from his anxiety. For a little while, at least, it provided a way to loosen the claw's grip.

For the next few hours he took small sips of his beer while sitting under a tree at the back of campus. He mellowed around the edges of his buzz and started back to his dorm around midnight. A lot of the

doors to the building were opened. A pack of students was running around and laughing and having a good-old time. Jim was forced to weave his way through the revelers. It struck him that he was going to have to deal with this shit every night and he was grateful that he had gotten stewed.

Luckily, when he got to his room, Doug wasn't there, and Jim just crashed. This time, he slept under a light blanket and totally created a cocoon-type posture. Twenty minutes later, he heard the door open, flooding the room with fluorescent light from the hall.

"Oh, it's my roommate. Looks like he's asleep. Let's go to your room," Doug said to another guy and the door shut quietly. *This sucks...this really sucks*, Jim thought as he curled himself tighter beneath the blankets.

— 3 —

Amazingly, Jim got through the rest of the week adhering to his vow of silence. He patched together several pit stops, including the library, student lounges, and his dorm room when his roommate had classes, where he could hang out by himself and not feel the anxiety so tightly. After his final class that week, Jim felt a spike of weekend euphoria, but it was short-lived. Although the days and evenings were squared away, the weekends were another logistical nightmare.

He had to deal with all that empty time. Luckily, the season cooperated with a mellowing Indian summer sun and sinfully delicious woodsy breezes. So he gathered his textbooks and added a few that he had taken out from the library and decided to take off again and to go camping. When he got to his parking spot, even the sight of his fourth parking ticket did not dampen his good mood.

When he arrived at the camping spot from the previous weekend, he was happy to see that the sites on either side were not occupied. As

he settled in, he felt good about his new base. *Too bad I can't live in the woods*, he mused, *and go to school*. Surrounded by pines and white oaks, he set up his pup tent without the need to clear away any sticks or other earthly debris. He could see his bike through the woods at the end of the little path leading from the site to the park road.

With his tent and motorcycle in the background, he thought, *How cool is this scene*.

It was a whole picture-perfect lifestyle from some hip eco-friendly, pseudo-bohemian twenty-something travel magazine. He got a fire going and pulled out one of the two 40s he had picked up on his way to the site. He started slurping the big bottle down sideways like a newborn calf and savoring the deepening sunset as it slowly seeped through the trees. His mind played back through the week and his classes. Saper had allowed him to transfer enough credits to complete two of the four schools to fulfill his DIV I requirements. He reflected on the classes he was taking that semester:

Contemporary American Capitalism

Modernity and Its Critics

Economic Conceptualizations

Theory of Language Semantics

Poverty and Wealth

Then, hanging out in the peaceful twilight of the forest, Jim considered the social aspects of the past week. Indeed, the only person he had talked to was his Aunt Betty. He called to assure her that everything was moving along smoothly. But, of course, it was not!

He found that his attempt to meet other students and chicks presented the opposite problem from that at W.C.C. Now, instead of being confronted by a scene filled with antiintellectual simpletons, he had to deal with a whole bunch of pseudo-liberals. They had their own sets of opinionated points of view and like to talk just to talk without leaving any space for differing perspectives. In his Modernity class,

for example, several women kept harping on how Rousseau and Mills had a lot of sexist tendencies, which, to them, obliterated the significance of their philosophy. And in his Economic Conceptualizations class, how some kid went on about being from New Jersey and that manufacturing was no longer an important part of its economy. Jim knew this to be false because the kid's argument was based on the fact that he didn't know anybody who worked in manufacturing.

There were some exceptions to the pseudos. There was a cute blonde hippie girl with dreads who didn't shave her legs—which Jim thought was kind of sexy in a French *au naturel* sort of way—in his Theory of Language Semantics class. Then there were the two brunettes in his Modernity and Its Critics class. They both had short, bobbed hair and wore hip-huggers and halter tops. One had a pierced nose and the other, a very enticing-looking belly-button ring. But, being as introverted as he was, he couldn't break the ice with them. He was feeling self-conscious about his background and being too much of a hick. These issues also prevented him from meeting any cool guys. So there he remained on the sidelines, watching students get to know one another in class, in the cafeteria and, especially, in the dorms.

The whole scene became very painful for him.

After the forest descended into total blackness, Jim started focusing on the next part of his dilemma—his roommate. By Wednesday, Jim still hadn't said a word to him. They weren't talking to each other in the room, or even when they ran into each other on campus. Jim had created this profoundly anti-social silence cloud between them—as if they were in a monastery. It dissolved into a weird and rare scenario. How many people could there be who were living under the same ceiling, and literally not exchange a word with each other? In a convoluted way, it did make Jim's circumstances somewhat easier. He had no pressure to have to bullshit with this guy.

But the situation was definitely skewed off the range of social normalcy, and getting comfortable in this weird environment was a bummer. Zen Buddhist monks would have been very proud of him, but the rest of society would've been waiting for him to go postal.

He slithered into his sleeping bag around 10 p.m. He dreamt that he went to the Post Office. Behind the counter were Buddhist monks. They didn't speak, so he left without his stamps!

He awoke the next morning to an overcast sky. Waking up in the woods was scrumptious—especially with that misty dampness in the air—and, for the moment, he was able to put the whole complex mess of his social situation behind him. After making breakfast, though, his sense of tranquility slowly ebbed away. So he went to work on his first paper from his Poverty and Wealth class to keep his loneliness at bay. The topic was about defining factors that contribute to poverty and wealth in the late twentieth century. The assignment included giving some examples and to argue whether or not those factors are recent or can be found in the earlier part of the century.

Jim knew poverty personally. He remembered going without heat because the oil bill hadn't been paid. He watched his mother scramble around for the cash to get the tank primed. He recalled having to eat SpaghettiOs for three or four days at a time because there was nothing else.

With regard to his paper, Jim was vacillating between a linguistic emphasis and a structural critique. From the linguistic perspective, Jim wanted to build on the contradiction of the professor's contention—that the students were studying poverty and wealth in an institution that is used to create the gap in the first place. Then, Jim could further argue that the linguistic context of the class was, in fact, distorting them from getting at a more truthful conceptualization of the two extremes. As the professor correctly pointed out, these social categories are relative and only exist based upon consensus and

statistical definition. As a result, the class itself could not truthfully argue and discuss issues surrounding poverty and wealth because of unacknowledged class biases and prejudices. He certainly could discuss the fact that America is experiencing a shift in the concentration of wealth and where economic capital is located. His example would be that a big portion of low-wage service jobs and minimally skilled blue-collar work tends to be focused in rural areas. That approach would require a lot of historical research.

With his back against a tree and using his knees for support, he wrote out a rough draft until it began to rain. He had to spend a very long night submerged within his solitude in the pup tent, with only the surrounding nature to comfort him. The next morning, the weather remained gray and overcast. He decided to shoot back to campus while the rain stayed at bay. His plan was to feed the rough draft into the computer. When he got back, he neatly packed all his gear in the trailer. He was compelled to consider where he could park it to avoid more tickets. At that point, he realized that he had no choice but to go back to his room. He had to take a shower, unwind from the road and refocus.

When he got there, his roommate was hanging out in front of the computer. He pushed his chair back with his bare toes sticking out of his TEVAs. They exchanged greetings and Doug asked him what he'd been up to that weekend.

The never-ending questions, Jim thought with strained amusement.

"Doing some fishing up at Lake Pasackett. Got hit by a squall and got totally soaked," Jim said, looking down at his boots while enjoying his off-the-cuff fabrication.

"So, me and a coupla friends are going to catch some lunch, if you wanna come," Doug said while turning away from his computer.

Jim's pessimistic voice grumbled, *People...must avoid people!* Then he was told that girls would be present. And his optimistic voice took control...*I get to talk to a pretty girl today.*

Jim took a quick hot shower, put on some dry clothes and went along with Doug to the cafeteria. He realized very quickly that he didn't like the girls. They presented nothing of interest for him. Not even what they looked like. They had no substance that he could feel. The trio acted like sparrows chirping back and forth on superficial subjects and leaving Jim out of the conversation. The girls went on about used clothing stores they had found in town that had 1950s vintage shoes, the best coffeehouses, and what their woodworking class was like. Doug went on about where to buy homemade candles, his mountain bike and the awesome trails around campus. The simple fact was that Jim didn't have anything in common with these folks. All this talk about sophisticated lifestyles and niche consumerism was out of Jim's league. He could never make small talk like that. It was an interpersonal skill that Jim lacked, and he wouldn't know where to begin. So he pretty much just clammed up.

When they eventually got around to include him, they asked the typical generic questions, i.e., what classes he was taking...where he was from...what's this thing about fishing, etc. Although he answered them as best as he could, he could not bounce back with questions or comments of his own to continue to drive the conversation forward.

It wasn't just a problem of insecurity, but because any attempt to 'fit in' when the discussion was so superficial made him feel like a hypocrite. Not being part of the social scene and having to make all this effort to be accepted was humiliating to Jim. This was so totally unlike back home, where it was a lot more casual. Here, it was like you almost had to adopt this persona to have a social life. And there was no way in hell that he was going to do that. What a swing! Back

home, he felt too intellectual and now at Saper, he felt too much like a hick.

After they finished lunch, Jim wasn't going to get foolish and allow himself to feel trapped into staying. So he got up with his tray and swung into that college 'gotta go, lots of things to do' mode. He smiled and even gave one of those European wave gestures for effect and took off. It was a good, clean break.

The warm air felt good when he got outside, and all his pent-up tension started oozing out of him. He headed over to the student center, where the computer labs were located. He followed the signs down a set of stairs leading to the basement and walked down a long corridor lined with pale-blue cinder blocks. As he walked, he continued to 'play back' in his mind the group scene he had just left. Being his own harshest critic, he wondered how he could have 'performed' better for all parties involved.

At the end of the corridor, he could see a double door and what appeared to be a large room. He stood there for a moment, pushing his thoughts aside, because his papers were more important than having a bunch of pseudo-liberal friends.

As he stepped into the computer lab, Jim nearly went into shock! The windowless room had six rows of tables with ten computers each. The walls were made of cinder block, and between randomly scattered water and heating pipes, the low seven-foot ceiling had five rows of fluorescents lined up in vertical military style—the naked tubes forever burning their harsh whiteness through the stale oxygenless air, giving the walls and the linoleum floor a permanent septic glare.

"I'm going to have to write all my papers down here? It's a tunnel," Jim muttered under his breath, feeling like a prairie dog in his native habitat. Feeling like he was a product in an assembly line, he sat down in front of an open computer between two other students. *Screw this.*

he thought. *For \$25K a year, Saper could've at least given each student their own desk.*

Jim was old school. Like a few other dying traditionalists, he saw no problem with handwritten papers as long as they were legible. He had to update his game for his essays for Saper, which he did on an electric typewriter. Now, all of his professors *required* him to do his papers on a computer. He had taken some lessons for WordPerfect 5.1 and decided to stick with that application. Going into a Windows environment seemed too trendy for Jim.

Without any preparation whatsoever, Jim just started pushing through his rough draft. Having to hold his books open for reference was a real juggling act. His hunting and pecking style of typing moved along at the breakneck speed of four words per minute. He was making more mistakes than a George W. Bush speech. With about thirty other students around him clacking away, this situation just confirmed his status as the new kid on the block.

He got in most of his rough draft and figured that he could just type new stuff from there. But between the fluorescents sucking out almost any creative thought AND the one blue-eyed cyclops of the computer screen casting its hypnotic spell AND trying to find all the letters on the keyboard, he was only able to write forty-two words after two hours.

At that point, he noticed that only two other students had been there for the whole time. Rather than getting totally frustrated in his battle with 'the machine,' he decided to take a break, grab a smoke, and get some air. He left the lab without even saving anything he had written—because he had forgotten how to—and then couldn't find any loose templates around with the WordPerfect codes. His macho pride prevented him from asking for any help from any of the students who worked in the lab. Although that wouldn't have mattered anyway

because Jim had committed an even greater blunder. He hadn't even brought a formatted 3.5-inch floppy with him!

The air helped revive him and he went at the paper again feeling a little fresher. But typing every line on the computer screen was still a mental struggle. First, *Oh man, I only got fifteen lines*, then, *Cool, I'm in the thirties*, and finally, *Come on, Jimbo, bring it home. Ten more lines to go*. What a price to pay to escape from dead-end small-town malaise. He might as well have been doing time on the 'chain gang.'

After he finished one page, he projected that it was just going to be easier to handwrite an entire rough draft first. So he decided to shut it down, but couldn't figure out how to exit. What was it? F1? No. F10? No. Control F9? No. He tried several other combinations. Nothing! He decided to screw it and just turned off the computer.

WAIT A MINUTE...WAIT A MINUTE! he thought. A bad sinking feeling came over him as the computer's hard drive became silent. He knew he had forgotten a step. "Come on, Einstein, what is it?" he asked aloud while wracking his brain. "Shit...I forgot to SAVE!" Six pages gone. Shit. Shit. Shit. Gone with the wind. "Dammit to Hell!" he muttered between clenched teeth, wanting to scream out his frustration.

The only consolation in the entire matter, as Jim took it all in, was the likelihood that the same type of problem was happening to thousands of others simultaneously.

— 4 —

"Son of a bitch," Jim said out loud as he saw yet another bright-orange parking ticket from about forty feet away. This time they had tucked it between the crack in the doors on top of the trailer. When he walked over, he just stood there. He was stuck on what he was going to do next.

He was getting cold—even with his gloves, overall suit and leather jacket. Not exactly the young, hip, casual campus appearance of the nineties, nor the black leather rebel ‘Harley’ look, but more like some homeless guy who lives way up in the Arctic and threw on every scrap he could find. Even though November was closing in, he was still going camping just to get through the weekends. This time of year was nature’s way to refresh his soul. He found it very invigorating to be able to sleep next to the trees. Within the framework of the deepening autumn chill, they were transforming into their casual dress with earthen-clay red, sunburned yellow and rust-tinged orange color pigmentation.

To avoid tickets, he was parking the bike off campus in one of the residential neighborhoods at the edge of town. But he continued to leave the trailer on campus. By doing so it became the target for numerous parking violations. The way they had nailed his trailer this time gave him a sinking feeling they were going to confiscate it. So he decided to go down to the Traffic Office. This was located in a beat-up-looking trailer that was all the way down by the Physical Plant, in a separate field away from the main campus.

Jim began politely by asking if there was anything he could do to keep his bike on campus.

“You’re the guy with that box thing!” a very overweight and grouchy woman snapped at him through a plexiglass partition as she was filling out paperwork with a pen that seemed to be choking to death by her big, fleshy hand.

“It’s a trailer.”

“You’re not registered.”

“AND?”

“So, if you want to park on campus, you need to be registered.”

“But it’s just a trailer...it only takes up half the space of a car.”

“There’s nothing I can do. You can either pay and register your vehicle, or else you’re gonna get booted.”

Ahh, Jim loved her logic. No sympathy. No compassion. Just a bureaucratic rule-follower. He left—tearing up the ticket as soon as he got outside. He was about to scatter the fluorescent orange pieces all over the lawn, but thought twice about the poor bastard who would have to pick them up, and threw them in the garbage instead.

As he headed back toward the bike, the sun had vanished, and he started to think about his options. He quickly realized there was no way he was going to be able to get out of this slippery, muddy hole. Of course they were going to want his registration. But that meant he was going to have to get a motorcycle license AND insurance. These items never factored into Jim’s list of necessities. What a mess! Was this his reward for trying to keep things simple and doing the ‘right thing’?

Up to that point he had been successful in keeping the bureaucracy in check. But now he felt like he was being squeezed.

In New York you were ‘required’ to take motorcycle classes (a skill at which he was very proficient) as a prerequisite for obtaining your license. This made no sense to him. Then you had the privilege of paying N.Y.’s exorbitant registration fees on a yearly basis, even though you kept your vehicle for multiple years. The final indignity was having to pay 900 bucks a year for insurance, even though your record was accident free.

Jim’s priority, of course, was paying his school bills. This experience was just another example of how the ‘SYSTEM’ wanted to extract ‘EVERYTHING’ out of the individual—even down to his last penny!

The reality of all of these different issues was making him bitter. It started with the day he tried to socialize with Doug and the ‘Chipettes.’ In the past two months he had not spoken more than a

dozen words with his roommate. In listening and eavesdropping on his fellow students during that time, he came to the conclusion that most were rich, pretentious snobs. He had gone through all that effort to get into Saper Aude and had believed the propaganda in the brochure: the freedom of choice...a liberal attitude in all matters of discussion...the concentration of study that dealt with the important and challenging problems of contemporary society.

It was turning out to be such major bullshit! Superficiality oozed out of most mouths he heard around the campus. Admittedly, his classes were pretty cool, but everything else was petrified in this bourgeois bureaucratic haze. It was like clear molten stuff being poured over everything—freezing you against your own will into the dominant mold—so that you involuntarily became part of the structure.

Now as he paced around the bike, puffing away on a Red, it was slowly dawning on him that he was being hit with one dilemma after another. Standing alone in the darkening and cold parking lot, Jim considered his next move. If he got on the road, the late autumn wind was going to get to him pretty quickly. How long could he last? Forty-five minutes? Maybe. An hour? No way. His hands and feet would probably get hypothermia. So going camping was out of the question. Desperately, he thought about staying in a motel, but that would be just too weird!

What about going to the other side, and being more social and trying to 'fit in'? Jim would rather have a root canal on his brain!! Fit in? For what? To sell out his soul and become some grass between your toes...credit card hidden in the sock...pseudo-intellectual? A guy who likes to talk about their favorite type of bagel, their trip to China, their fifty-billion-RAM computer, their favorite Sundance movie?

A person has to stand by his principles, or else they are just taking up valuable space!

But what was he going to do now? A plan, Jimbo! My kingdom for a plan!! He tried to force himself into thinking that he could bear down and get through the rest of the semester spending the weekends on campus. He had a lot of papers to write, and that would keep him extremely busy. What was he looking at...six weeks, at most, until the break? But even if he got through those weekends...what then? He still wasn't going to be able to go camping until spring.

Clearly, Jim preferred to 'hang' by himself. But what he was discovering was that being alone around other people made his situation impossibly overwhelming. He concluded there was absolutely no way he could hold out that long—without losing a piece of himself.

He reflected on the whole situation—while pacing back and forth—as he gazed at the falling leaves beneath the lights of the park.

The only option he could think of was to get a room off-campus—and he had to do it as soon as possible. He needed to enjoy some peace of mind now because when he got back to Winapaupac, he was going to have to live with his alcoholic mother and whatever guy was the flavor of the month. With the University of West Virginia close by, Jim had seen ads all over town for rooms in group houses. The prices weren't bad, and he had seen some for as low as \$200 a month plus utilities.

Their sanctuary was beckoning him. *Jim, it's okay...it's over...you can come home now!* But could he flip the \$250? With a little under \$1,600 to last him till May, it was going to be tight. There was no way that he could pay rent for six months. He figured he could make it to March and then find work. All he would need was fifteen hours a week, and even if he was only making six bucks an hour, that would still cover the nut.

By then he was half-frozen and was having a difficult time thinking. Having decided to stay, he left the bike and went to one of

the student lounges to basically hang until he could go to the dining hall and eat. There was one more problem he had to address. While he had decided what he was going to do long term, he had no plan for the weekend. The thought of spending Friday or Saturday night in the bowels of the computer lab or in some vacant study spot while everyone else was partying seemed way too loser-ish. He fantasized that his roommate might not be at the 'cell' and uncharacteristically decided that he had to make a stand.

After dinner he made a nice turkey breast sandwich to get him through the rest of the night. He went back to his dorm room. He sat down at his desk and started doing some reading. Twenty minutes later Jim's roll of the dice came up 'snake eyes' when his roommate came sauntering into the room.

They mumbled their hellos and Jim sat there pretending to read, but hoping he would leave. Doug made some phone calls (which made it worse for Jim, since he had no one to call) and asked 'so and so' if they would like to come over. He hung up the phone and started working on his computer.

Now Jim felt trapped. His experiment had failed. He wanted to leave, but he'd have to say something. You know, that social rule of having to tell somebody when you're leaving. But under the circumstances, Jim didn't feel compelled to utter a word. For over an hour they both sat there in a thick, dark fog between them, Jim with his long hair dangling down over his shoulders as he leaned over his book, and Doug, with all his bushy hair, typing away on his computer.

Just as Jim was ready to explode from the tension, he just got up, grabbed his knapsack and, moving quickly, left the room. Upon closing the door, he breathed a deep sigh of relief. He had exited so fast that he had forgotten to take his jacket. Nevertheless, he left the dorm and started a walk in the frigid air along one of the wooded hiking paths leading away from campus.

He stood on top of one of the benches that lined the path. There he remained, doing the ‘hopping in the cold dance’ to stay warm. He was wracking his brain for about twenty minutes, trying to plot his next move. Then, mercifully, the light bulb switched on in his head. A classroom! An empty classroom! Where the idea came from was impossible to determine. Perhaps it was divine intervention, but more probably it was his own sheer desperation in trying to find a little space of his own.

He headed over to Alton Hall. He didn’t have any classes there, but it was one of the more impressive buildings on campus. It had that real collegiate vibe with its brick and ivy, and a basic overall inviting warmth. He walked the halls a bit, listening for any sounds of activity, but at 7 p.m. there weren’t any ongoing classes.

“Well, well, well, check this out,” he whispered as he cracked a door open about three inches. It wasn’t a classroom, but more of a conference room. It contained several long tables, equally spaced, and a decent set of windows overlooking the woods. Even though the room had a corporate feel with the carpeting and the fluorescence, it didn’t feel cramped like a lot of the other classrooms on campus. The silence. The peace. *So delicious*, Jim thought as he sat down and felt the tension retreating from his body. A possible hibernation hole for the winter? He could even use the blackboard to write notes, which would be cool. Maybe he could sleep under a table.

He really got into his hideout, and like a criminal on the run waiting in a motel room, he shut all the blinds and twisted off all the fluorescents except one. Hell, if it was up to him, he’d turn off all the lights and just hang his camping lantern from the ceiling. The difference, of course, was that Jim was merely an intellectual vigilante seeking a safe haven.

He knew the campus police were on constant patrol and might come by and clamp down on his freedom with some cheesy line like,

“Sorry, nobody’s allowed in here after dark.” This, in spite of the fact that there would be no reason to hassle him because he wasn’t doing anything wrong.

As a preemptive strike, he threw his I.D. on a table. This could be a way of challenging ‘The Man.’ Then he took out his books and began reading. He started with *The Great U-Turn* for his class on *Conceptualizing the American Economy*.

Several quiet hours passed until he heard footsteps echoing down the hallway and the crackle of a radio. Jim froze! With nowhere to hide, he could only brace himself. Alone in the quiet room, he anticipated being the ‘suspect’ in a police interrogation.

The cop was a woman in her early forties with kind of a relaxed but slightly haggard look about her face and the way she carried herself. The working stiff did not grill Jim at all, just asked him if he was studying. Then she took a quick look at his I.D., told central security over her radio that everything was okay, and that she had just found a student studying in Alton Hall.

Once she left, Jim felt sorry for her because she could’ve been somebody that he knew. The thought crossed his mind about how he was studying so that he wouldn’t wind up in some dead-end job like she had. Yet did that also mean he had no other choice but to conform and become more like Doug and the ‘Chipettes’?

— 5 —

Another Saturday on campus made its appearance, and he was out of the room by nine. He got some breakfast and went over to the other dorm. He pissed away half the day watching a cheesy double feature from the mid-eighties, *Groundhog Day* and *Meatballs* with Bill Murray.

In the afternoon he strolled over to his room to work on his next paper for his Modernity class. His papers were going well. It took him awhile to get used to not seeing grades but getting critiques instead.

He was relatively satisfied with his effort for the Poverty and Wealth class. He found that one of the factors contributing to the growing dichotomy in the economy was not only a growing pool of low-paying jobs in service industries like temp agencies, fast food and mega stores, but geographical location and how close you are to wealth centers. You could live in Washington State, but if you're two hours from Seattle, then chances are you're not going to be able to work your way into the computer industry. The professor did kind of enlighten him, though, because he did not take inner cities into account, which are often very close to the capitalistic core and totally excluded.

The paper for Modernity had its focus on a debate between Jürgen Habermas and Foucault. The material was very interesting and a lot more fun to write.

Once he completed his rough draft, he descended into the 'torture chamber; to surrender it to the computer. A few weeks before, he had found a precious rare template. It was a thin, two-inch-wide, foot-long plastic strip that you put above the keyboard and had all the W.P. codes. In securing it, he learned that students in the mid-eighties would give their pinky toe to get one, and they are now considered a real collector's item.

After his disastrous first experience with the machines, he cried 'uncle' and had come to a viable truce with them. They had trained him very well. He learned how to spell-check and save, save, save.

Within the framework of the templates, he got into some real addictive habits of playing around with the formatting. Some students like to double space and have wide margins to make the paper seem longer. But Jim thought that was being lazy. He was a 1.5 line space, half-inch right and left/slimmest top and bottom margins possible kind

of guy. He spent hours trying to reach that mystical point of perfection: getting the most text on the page and still being able to see it on the computer screen and then print. Could he get away with 1.4 or 1.3 in line spacing and still have it be readable? How much of a difference is there really between 1.5, 1.6 and 1.7? Was it possible to make the footer just two-tenths of an inch smaller and still be able to print it on line? Or seeing if he could make the left margin a couple tenths smaller without having to move back and forth to see all of the text on the computer screen. But then he ran into problems with non-sequential formatting, like why there were 1.5 lines here and 2 there, and indentation nightmares when he had to do an extended quotation. So he had to go into that secret twilight zone of reveal codes in WordPerfect 5.1. This split the screen and showed the regular text in one half and all the places where you put margins, tabs and spacing in the other half. And all of that was only a small part of the collective experience from 'computer hell'!

After several hours of working in the 'catacombs,' Jim decided to take a break. Except for his talk with his Aunt Betty, it occurred to him that he hadn't spoken with his family in two months, so he decided to give them a call.

He first tried his mom. The answering machine announced that she was tending bar, so he just left a message. In Jim's reality, that was a good way to communicate with her. It was his position, at this time, that the less she knew about his life, the better. He did not talk to her about the community college and never discussed all of the strategic planning in gaining admission to Saper Aude. This was not a situation of conflict or animosity between a mother and son. However, because of some of his mom's behaviors and attitudes, Jim's relationship with her was very guarded.

The problems began when Jim was three years old. At that time his mother was the victim of violent physical abuse from the hand of

his father. As a result his old man was kicked out of the house. Tragically, she never got over it!

She became infertile and, for a long time, was afraid of men. Then she started bartending and drinking after work. This led to her coming home with strange guys. All of this culminated into a perennial pessimism.

So Jim knew in advance that if he ever discussed his plans and dreams with her, she would just respond, “Well...I wooden git yor opes up too mush...ya know how it is wit us Socios...were jist plain fucked-up!”

Fortunately for Jim, his Uncle Rob was a healthy relationship. He was like an older brother to Jim. He owned a hardware store and helped Jim with work projects and solid advice. He was a caring mentor who went out of his way to ensure that Jim didn’t wind up just another ‘fucked-up’ Socio. He was also one of the few people in town who wasn’t so anti-intellectual. They spent some good times together hanging out and discussing Jim’s reading and studying projects. They also did ‘manly’ projects together, like building the trailer and chopping wood. Occasionally they went camping and hunting together—although they never caught anything.

Jim’s uncle was real glad to hear from him—just a little upset that he hadn’t called sooner. Jim apologized and told him that he had been pretty busy settling in and writing his papers.

“Well, I’ll be...so they got you working on computers, do they? Next thing you know, you’ll be on the ‘Information Superhighway’ and wanting to send me those electronic messages like they do in the C.I.A. But until that boy Gates flies to my house in one of his multimillion-dollar jets to hand-deliver me one and sets it all up, you ain’t ever gonna see me use one of those newfangled machines. Everyone tells me they’re always crashin’, and how they ain’t got

enough memory. And you know what I tell them? I've got me enough memory, and you don't ever see me breakin' down."

At that point Jim told him about the whole living situation. "It's gettin' tuff...can ya imagine me livin' with some guy?" Jim said mindlessly while staring at some flashy ad for 'spring break' getaways that was hung over the phone.

"It being a liberal college and all, I jest hope you're keeping your 'you know what' under lock and key where you're sleeping...if you know what I mean."

"That's just a minor part of the problem. I got no one to talk to. They're all a bunch of rich snobs...talkin' about their trips to Central America and where they like to go mountain biking."

"That's a real shame. You worked so hard to get in there, and now you gotta deal with all those rich folks. I always thought they wore fancy clothes and lived in the city. Looks like you found a whole 'nother breed. I guess being a serious student doesn't always help to keep your nose to the ground. Makes ya wonder if you would've fit in better at the Public U.—even if they didn't want to take all your lefty ideas seriously. There has got to be a few hicks like us around. Hell...you're in West Virginia!"

Jim didn't think so but wondered if his uncle was right about going to Public U. They talked about Thanksgiving. Jim declined his uncle's invitation. Even if he did stay at his place, his mom might just show up and make another scene (like she had the previous year when she came over all drunk). They did agree to get together over the holidays and hit one of the local bars to shoot some pool for old times' sake. At that point Jim drew the conversation to a close. Then he headed into town to get some beer before the store closed.

— 6 —

It was a cold Friday morning, and some freezing, slushy rain was coming down. Once again Jim was down in the ‘dungeon,’ surrounded by all of his immovable machine mates. Since it was Thanksgiving weekend, a furlough had been granted to the gentry, and almost all of them had gone home.

Jim made a comparison (between the haves and have-nots) to the early part of the twentieth century. Then it was about a decent wage and an eight-hour day. Now it was about equal opportunity and the right to have your own computer.

His lucky bastard of a roommate had his own computer. He felt an inequality about that—this private hoarding of technology while the poor peons like him had to endure a sort of second-class citizen status by being forced to work in the computer lab.

In a rare moment of whimsy, it made him wish that there was more sharing in the world. This possibility—not being particularly realistic—dissolved into a daydream where the underclass revolted and, in the ensuing chaos, commandeered all of the computers.

This flighty of fancy having ended on a high note, he drew down the curtain on his reverie and parachuted down into his present reality. He was faced with the foreboding task of being in the printing stage of yet another paper!

There were laser printers in the lab, but you had to use an access card that cost a dollar. In addition, each copy cost ten cents. Why they weren’t free was one of Jim’s many pet peeves. Not willing to spend the money, he was forced to use dot matrix printers and deal with all the chaos that they unleashed. Shivers ran up his spine at just the anticipation of having to use these medieval torture devices!

These were some of the horrors that awaited going offline and printing the last two lines on the next page...trying to get online when

you had to refeed the paper while making sure the dotted sidelines fit properly...making sure that it was feeding correctly (or else it would jam, and the printhead would run over the same line again and again and again). Then, because the dpi (dots per inch) quality was so bad, you could not print in draft style and had to choose premium, where the head had to go over each line twice.

Nee chuk chuk chuk—nee chuk chuk chuk

Even when he finally had a hard computer copy, the pain and suffering continued because Jim was weak at editing. *Oops...forgot to capitalize this. Oops...I repeated myself. Oops...I can't start all of these paragraphs with 'On the other hand.'*

With all the obstructions he had to bleed through, he became absolutely convinced that it was easier (and probably faster) to handwrite papers.

But for now, being at the final stage, Jim went a little berserk! He had a brainstorm!! Why use one printer for a ten-page paper when you could utilize all five in the computer lab? So Jim just divvied it up—2, 2, 2, 2, 2. As he was about to send the third slice out, the first printer started... *Nee chuk chuk chuk, nee chuk chuk chuk.*

“Release the hounds!” Jim shouted out like Seinfeld from that American Express commercial. The speed! The power! What a rush to have all five printers going at once. His excitement led him to stand on top of the table, stomp one foot down on the crown of the computer monitor, raise both arms wildly in the air, and scream out, “Don’t you see! Don’t you see! We can tame ‘The Machines’!”

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After his work was done at the computer lab, he headed back to check on his trailer. For the past several weeks he had been playing ‘hide and seek’ with his faithful road companion. He had it hauled off campus

to get it out of harm's way. This strategy backfired, however, when he got in trouble with a local resident for parking in front of their house.

This was not a legitimate gripe, of course, because it was a public street. But campus security told him 'they didn't like the way it looked.' So he brought the damn thing back to campus and the exposure of getting impounded.

Fortunately, when he got to the parking lot, his fears were quickly dissipated. Mother Nature had intervened nicely with a decent storm. As a result—whether by luck or design—the plow guys had hemmed his 'buddy' under a six-foot mountain of slushy snow.

With a sigh of relief, he went back to his dorm room. He placed the final paper (in all of its white pristine crispness) into a folder...put on one of his classic Judas Priest tapes and crashed on his bed.

He was grooving on the feeling of getting out of the computer lab with the nightmare behind him. For this brief moment his whole body was at ease, and his mind was blissfully relaxed. It was as if he was experiencing his surroundings through a lightly veiled fog.

He had gotten lucky for the holiday because his roommate went home. However, it did occur to him that spending 'Turkey Day' alone, and having nothing to eat except for a TV dinner, was a little lame-o. Then his mind turned to more pragmatic matters.

Although he had punched through his escape plan, he still had to make it work monetarily. With 10,000 UWV students for competition, he wondered how he was going to find work. The town only had a couple of businesses, and winter was fast approaching. Good luck.

With the five he was going to have to drop for rent...\$200 for books and another two on smokes, beer and weekend trips, he would be under \$1,000 to last him until May. He pictured himself standing on a street corner begging for money. It might be time to start praying to the great green gods of capitalism for help!

— 8 —

In early December Jim continued to roll under the radar. While everybody else on the floor was hanging out, Jim quickly became the 'outcast,' the 'quiet guy' and 'Casper the ghost.'

He was still sticking to his 8-to-11 schedule with a three-hour window in his room during the afternoon when Doug wasn't there. It seemed like a huge amount of time to not be spending at home base, but since it was 'paper crunch time,' he had plenty to do with his hours. Reading...writing rough drafts...feeding them into the computer...printing and editing to a finished product took up most of his time.

Weekends were more challenging because he didn't know when Doug was going to be in the room. So on Saturdays and Sundays, that 'computed' to being out of his dorm room for fifteen hours each day. Of course, being 'Jim,' he had a plan for this problem as well.

He spent the two days cruising between the cafeteria, the library and his classroom hideout in Alton Hall. He also had access to the TV in the other dorm.

This wasn't particularly helpful, however, because there was usually a steady run of all of the senseless sitcoms of the day. Jim found no merit in shows like *Melrose Place* or *Beverly Hills 90210*. Overhearing his fellow students taking the plots so seriously made him want to give them a free ride into the inner cities in his trailer.

In reality, the weekends were a good time for Jim. He could relax, study, and absorb the beauty of the campus while patiently awaiting the cleansing snow as winter slowly set in.

Just about this time, he was beginning to change his mind about getting a room off campus. Having two pads in which to crash was a luxury he couldn't afford. Besides, he calculated that the chances of getting work were slim to none.

Then, one weekend afternoon, he overheard Doug talking about him in their room with some other guy.

“Jim is psychotic...a low-life hick with a bad attitude problem.”

This really drove Jim crazy and made his blood boil over in pure rage. This was at the top of Jim’s most hated list: people talking about him behind his back.

He was still reluctant to fork over the cash to move out. So—even though he loathed asking people for a favor—he wanted to try one more option. He would go to the RHA office to request a single room for the next semester. His understanding of the rule was that all transfer students had to stay in a two-person dorm for a year. But he was hoping that something could be worked out. If it did, he could save himself a good chunk of cash.

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The office was uncomplicated. Just a small niche on the first floor in the other dorm building. It had some sweet rural views and a nice laid-back vibe without any overtones of bureaucracy.

Jim signed his name on the clipboard to talk with a counselor.

What a cushy job, he thought. While two-thirds of the folks in West Virginia were probably busting their ass in some coal mine, paper factory or dead-end service job, all this person had to do was bullshit with the offspring of the privileged class about their petty rooming problems.

His counselor was a short, chubby 20-something woman who was casually dressed in jeans and a richly textured Irish sweater. She wore no makeup or jewelry. She had that chippy, perky aura about her. Jim probably exaggerated his impression of a smoothly polished, professional veneer of the psychotherapist because there was a couch in the room.

"So, what can I do for you, Jim?" she asked after pulling his file.

Jim recalled filling out some forms about his 'likes' and 'dislikes' in a roommate. He wasn't going to talk about his problems. He didn't see the point. He just wanted a solution. It struck him that the serious pseudo-professional atmosphere seemed so hokey.

"Look, I've got a serious problem. I just transferred. I'm a very 'introverted' [he made the quotation marks with his hands] kinda guy. I need my space, and I need to be alone. So I'm just asking you if I could get my own room next semester."

"I'm sorry, Jim, that's just not possible in the middle of the year. If you like, we could possibly find you another roommate...or maybe," she looked over his file, "since you are a second-year transfer, you could apply for one of the pods, but that's all we can do."

She studied his body language, wondering where he was coming from. Of course she had a history with alternative types at Saper, but Jim didn't register anywhere in her experience.

The pods were a possibility, but you had to go through a screening process by the members who lived there. Chances were that Jim would get along better with the upperclassmen, but fitting into one of their cliques seemed remote, at best.

He had seen ads for different pods around campus. But they each had their own theme, i.e., gay and lesbian...environmentalist...vegetarian...musician...multiculturalist, etc. Jim, being the slightly out-of-date relic that he was, couldn't fit into most of the categories. There may have been a few that could accommodate him, but his alienation prevented him from considering those options.

The counselor asked him what kind of problems he was having. Jim immediately became defensive. He severely doubted if she could relate or even be sympathetic to his situation. He shuddered at the thought of all the superficial 'self-help' books that might have

cluttered her brain. But he was in no mood to repress all the loneliness and isolation that had been chewing up his insides.

And so, in a controlled burst of anger and in an elevated tone of voice, he said, “I’m not going to talk about my problems like I’m some kind of nutcase. But I’m going crazy. I’ve worked my ass off to get in here, and I can’t get a room to myself? Don’t I deserve my own peace of mind?”

“I understand what you’re going through. Sometimes first semester adjustments can be tough, but I find that communicating your problems—while maybe not being able to solve them...” The bureaucratic RHA tape droned on, and Jim blocked it out of his mind. “...If there was a single room available, I’d give it to you. Like I’ve said, maybe you should consider applying to one of the pods.”

She spoke in a quiet and assertive manner while leaning back in her chair with elbows resting on its arms and hands clasped.

“Well...just fuck me. Whatever!” Jim cried out as he got up and started to leave. Frustration was pouring out of every cell of his being as he was coming to the cold realization that his only option was being slammed shut in his face.

“I wish you’d refrain from cursing in this office, Mr....” she peeked at Jim’s file, “...Socio.”

“Just interacting with you for the past few minutes, I know that you’ve never had to sweat a day in your life to earn a paycheck. You can give me a room...you have the power, but you just don’t want to. You’d rather just sit there making your thirty grand a year and go on cruise control. Most people would kill to have a job like yours. But you gotta wonder what all that cushiness does to your soul. And you know what...maybe you should try getting out of your little office with your fancy furniture and your nice little view and getting more in touch with other people’s reality, cause this power-tripping, rule-abiding insensitivity is bullshit.”

"I don't think what you're saying is at all appropriate, Mr. Socio. Obviously you're having some problems, and your taking them out on me is very immature," she responded quickly in a snippy voice.

"Until you've fallen asleep covered in dried-up joint compound with sheetrock dust caked up your nose and in your ears, I don't think you know what is or what is not appropriate!" he shot back as he stormed out of the room.

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Later on that same day—while Jim was enjoying his two-hour window and listening to some old Iron Maiden and Korn—he heard a knock on the door. He had a hunch that this was a formal visit, so he quickly hid his smokes and threw some empty beer cans under the bed.

RULES...RULES...DAMN RULES!

After spraying some air freshener, he opened the door. It was one of those (what do you call 'em?) R.A. persons. This was a student who got their own free room for basically maintaining order on the floor and coordinating activities in an attempt to create camaraderie.

They exchanged tense pleasantries as Jim let him in and turned down the music. He was about 5'9" tall with a stocky build. He had bleached-blond, curly hair and was wearing owl-shaped glasses. Given his sullen mood, Jim did not want to deal with this 'rah-rah' nerd at all. The R.A. guy closed the door behind him—making Jim a little apprehensive about what was going on. He stood in the middle of the room, looking pretty pissed off, and just launched into what he had to say.

"I just heard about what happened down at the counselor's office. I wish you'd come to me about this first. That's why I'm here. Now look at the mess you've made. First your roommate made several complaints to me about how you're acting. Then you go down and

disrespect the counselor's office. Hey...I don't want to have to write you up or anything, but if you're not gonna work with me, then you're not going to leave me any choice. I wanna be cool about this. That's what it's all about. We're all different. We're all into our own thing at Saper. I know you just transferred in and it's gotta be a little tough, but you can't continue like this. You just can't! Telling off the counselor was especially rude," he groaned on while shifting his weight from side to side, as if he was expecting some kind of pushback.

Jim, who had been standing about two feet away with his arms folded, was becoming more and more enraged. He pushed his long hair back, clenched his jaw, and gave the guy a long, hard stare. He paused briefly before he spoke his mind.

"I came here because I thought I could get accepted and be able to do my own thing. And you, and that so-called counselor, and my roommate are all trying to persuade me to rationalize the situation in a positive manner. That just won't cut it! I'm paying enough money to have my own damn room!! But hey...I'm used to not getting what I deserve. So why fight it? I'll just back off. Wouldn't want to get into any trouble...would we? Is there anything else?" Jim asked satirically, flipping his palms upward and cocking his head forward.

The guy, who had lowered his gaze and head slightly down as Jim lashed out, wavered a bit because he had never dealt with somebody quite like Jim. Then it hit him that he was the one in charge and, adjusting his glasses, sought to reestablish control.

"You don't vent your anger and frustration out on me. I didn't create this situation...you did. Your roommate's been telling me that you practically give him the silent treatment, and now that it's all built up, you're taking out all your anger on people around you, and that's not right. So I'd just like to get this out in the open, and since this has been going on for a few months, it needs to be worked out right now."

By then Jim realized that this guy was a lot more effective than the counselor. But Jim also knew that he was trying to sterilize all his thoughts and feelings. He was attempting to negate the legitimacy of his anger, but Jim wasn't having any of that.

"You wanna get a little 'dialogue' going," Jim said—twisting the satire out of the word as if it was something really pansy. "Let me ask you a couple of questions. Are you paying for any of your education with your own money?"

"No."

"Are your parents divorced?"

"No," he replied, giving Jim a perplexed look.

"Did you grow up in a suburb outside a major city?"

"Yes," the guy said, wondering where Jim was going with all this.

"Then there's no point. You have no clue how hard it was for me to crawl out from where I came from to get here. There are three people who can fix my problems, and they are me, myself and I. As for the roommate situation, if he wants to move out, then that's on him, because until I can come up with another option, I have nowhere to go."

"I don't understand why you just don't get along with him. If this is how you want to leave it...fine. But if I hear any more problems, then I'm going to have to write you up." The guy left.

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These recent situations were out of character for Jim. He was rarely this rebellious about 'them' trying to control 'me.' Okay to crack down on his freedom at home, but why now at Saper? More and more, his 'dinghy' was floating out to sea while the majority of the students were happy to stay in 'port.' They were content to just go along with the

rules and apparently didn't see the point in making a fuss about anything.

Jim always believed that holding onto one's principles was a noble endeavor, but he was beginning to wonder if the high price he had to pay was worth it. He just wished that he could get a teaspoon of sympathy—or maybe even a cup of compassion—because he didn't appreciate being processed like a slice of cheese on the production line.

Once that second incident went down, Jim knew that it was time to bail. It was just like the sheetrocking over the summer. He had seen a couple of sketchy guys who did not like getting bossed around. Once they went head-to-head with the foreman, their days were numbered. They got axed the first chance the foreman could find an excuse to fire them.

So he began scoping around town and UWV for a room. After a short search, he found one that was available and made an appointment to see it.

The room was in a seamier part of town. There were lots of dilapidated two-story houses with peeling paint. To Jim, though, they were somewhat extravagant since most of the houses back in Winapaupac were only one story.

The first thing he noticed was an empty keg on the front porch. There were no curtains on the windows. The doorbell was hanging from a wire, and so he knocked on the fruitwood-stained solid oak door.

A tall, thin, early 20-something guy let him in. They walked in and turned left into the living room. It was sparsely furnished with a ratty-looking chocolate-brown couch and a small-screened TV with a cable box perched on top of a milk crate. Scattered about the floor were flat objects that looked like skateboards but had boot-type fasteners similar to those on skis.

Dave, the guy who answered the door, had long, straight, unkempt brown hair that spiked down from his crown to over his ears. It looked like it hadn't been washed in over a week. He was wearing basic and faded blue jeans and a wrongly buttoned and tattered, yellow-stained, collared gray work shirt. He was acting like he had just woken up, even though it was almost two o'clock in the afternoon.

Dave told Jim that there were three other guys living there. As he was giving him 'the grand tour' around the house, he warned Jim that they placed very little emphasis on cleanliness.

"If you're a neat freak, then the room might not be for you," he said mildly.

He then showed him the kitchen. It presented as an obstacle course of pots, pans and utensils scattered about the room, and was highlighted by a mound of dirty dishes piled in and around an unrecognizable sink. Dave was about to show him the stuff in the fridge, but quickly reconsidered and moved on.

As for the bathroom...the tub was so black that when they used it as a charcoal storage area (yes, they did), you could not see the charcoal! As for the commode...it was so rusty and nasty that the statue of *The Thinker* would probably refuse to sit on it.

The room for rent, however, was tolerable. It was the back room on the second floor. Unlike the approaching hallway, there were no holes in the walls. The hardwood floor was made of English oak. The room was somewhat drafty—with a single-pane-glass window and caulking that had long ago coalesced into a state of oblivion. It looked down into the winter-barren backyard.

Jim asked some general questions about how well everybody got along and if they had a lot of parties. Dave told him that they were all friends from UWV. They did have parties, but only on the weekends, and there was no loud music after eleven.

Without any further hesitation, Jim took the room on the spot—just because he wanted to get out of the dorm so badly. Dave said it was okay—even though he seemed a little uneasy about Jim being a Saper student.

A little while later, Jim just lay on his newly acquired dilapidated bed, sipping a warm brew and reflecting on how easy it is to make things happen when you have the cash. As a result of having his own room, he didn't think getting along with the guys was going to be much of a problem.

Fortunately, having access to the school cafeteria, he didn't have to put his intestines in harm's way by having to use the in-house kitchen. Also, he could take advantage of the Saper shuttle to take him back and forth between the school and the town.

He gave himself a 'tap on the back' because now he had worked out the logistics for a double base of operations. He promised himself that he was going to try to enjoy it to the fullest.

Hopefully, he was going to have peace of mind again!

— 12 —

Jim had gotten back from Saper a couple hours ago and was in his room listening to all the *FUN FUN FUN* going on downstairs. The guys—whose names Jim still hadn't been able to figure out—were setting up for a party.

He had really been excited about moving in. With respect to furniture...he solved the mattress problem by 'borrowing' one from a guest cot that was stored in the basement of his dorm. He also secured a sturdy faux-wood card table and a solid cherry-wood sitting chair from a local thrift store. He complemented this 'ensemble' with a retro table lamp resplendent in a scratched-up ruby base that he scooped up off the street on a throwaway day.

His bike was now conveniently parked right outside in the driveway, which gave him a sense of 'studliness' in his new surroundings. Since his trailer was still snowed-in, he had to take the shuttle bus five times into town and then walk ten blocks each time to move in all of his stuff.

But dammit...he was enjoying every minute and had planned the move so that his roommate had no idea as to what he was doing!

As he paced around the room, he recalled when he had finally found the lamp and had completed furnishing his 'little island' of tranquility. He then just stood there for over an hour looking out the window with his arms crossed.

He was absorbing the solitary beauty of the space through every cell in his body!

With this new peace of mind, he could really focus on his papers. For the most part they were doing well. Except for being overly opinionated on occasion, none of his professors were giving him any bad critiques.

For his Poverty and Wealth class, he actually attended some job preparedness 'seminars' for former welfare recipients. He ripped into the instructors because they were so superficial and patronizing. Truly, the bureaucrats were taking a Band-Aid approach to a very complex psychosocial problem.

With regard to his paper in the Semantics class, he was examining the different code words that the students were using to discuss poverty and wealth: below the poverty line...underclass...lower middle class, etc.

In the Contemporary Capitalism class, he was studying Sweden. He was writing a paper as to whether or not the country should be viewed as a very equality-oriented paradise or one that's way too heavily taxed and didn't promote enough economic growth.

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At his new pad the situation was moving along in the right direction. He had only been there two weeks when he heard a party going on downstairs. Even though he would have preferred a quieter place to study (and the proposition of mixing social space and living space just didn't seem right to him), he decided to make the best of it. So, because he got along with the guys—since they weren't so pretentious—he decided to try to socialize.

There were about fifteen people at the party. There was no frat element, and it was just your average college gathering where a lot of drinking goes on, and social reality becomes this wonderful moldable stuff that you feel you can define in any way you want it to be, and everything seems to be possible.

However, after spending three months with very little human interaction, he was having a hard time connecting with people—especially the ladies. Besides his rusty social skills, he was turning into one of those hard-core Saper students who took their course of study very seriously. After the disaster with Marcy (having to be superficial and having to keep his real thoughts out of the conversation), he was very reluctant to revisit that kind of charade.

For several hours the conversations focused on all things 'collegiate.' Talk about college football and old drinking episodes. Discussions regarding snowboards—all the guys in the house were real big fanatics—and some presidential politics. It wasn't that Jim did not want to fit in, it was just that he didn't want to be a participant in that anti-intellectual bubble mentality.

Jim did a little smoking and got to talking to a brunette named Peggy. She was just your average 'jeans and sweatshirt' college kind of gal. Devoid of any body piercings, she wore her hair in a short, full

style that was completed with neatly cut and forward-facing, strategically placed bangs.

They were hanging out and talking on the nasty chocolate-brown couch. They had hit it off pretty well because they both came from the rural northeast and were trying to make their 'mark' in life by going to college.

Once they got to talking about Saper, however, the situation took a slight downturn. She asked *him* what he was studying, and when he told her, Peggy only seemed half interested. He asked *her* what she was studying. She told him that she was majoring in political science but had not been motivated to the point of taking her classes seriously. Peggy then turned the conversation to the subject of roommates and housing. Because he was in a current state of high inebriation, this set off a 'trigger' in Jim.

At that point all his anger and alienation faded into the background. Instead he was overcome by pure emotion and the basic human desire to be wanted and the need for human companionship. Almost as if confessing, he told her about his situation. Everything was on the table. He confided to her in a kind of 'stream of consciousness' way for a good fifteen minutes: his inability to make friends and his difficulty with living with anyone...how camping became his 'go-to' alternative...the fact that he had not talked to his roommate—or anybody else—the whole semester, etc., etc., etc.

By that time the red warning light was beginning to flicker in Peggy's brain. But she decided to hang in with him and debate the importance of positive roommate co-existence.

"It's like with me and my roommate. Like six weeks ago there was this guy that we both really liked, and we were both totally pissed off and mad at each other. We didn't talk for weeks. Then finally I was like, you know, this is so silly. What's more important...a guy, or getting along with the person you're living with? So we made a pact

not to like the same guys, and now we're even better friends...which is great. There's always going to be conflicts, but if you can get through it, you feel better and everything flows along more smoothly, and your life doesn't seem like such a wreck," she lectured from her end of the couch.

"But then doesn't living with somebody, and also being friends with them, create all this social glop? Don't you think that the two should be separated? In other words, don't you think that living together and being friends automatically creates conflict? If you hadn't been friends in the first place, then the conflict would've never occurred," Jim said loftily.

Peggy looked confused. "But everybody needs friends," she added meekly.

"Yeah, I totally agree. But you also need your space to develop your intellect. You need to have principles, or else you're just conforming to everybody around you. And without your own individuality...what's wrong with that picture?" Jim said very seriously while trying to make eye contact with her.

Peggy became offended. "Just because I have friends doesn't mean that I don't have any individuality."

That's when she abandoned their social bubble and Jim just kind of watched her flee. Metaphorically Jim had paddled his way back to shore, and now the natives ran away from him. The whole episode had baffled Jim because he thought he had been a very good 'listener' to what she had to say.

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It was a week before Christmas, and the guys were throwing another party. Jim was boxed in. If he joined in, he might have to deal with Peggy again. Even if she didn't come around, he would still have to

employ the 'odious' guy charade. His anxiety was taking over again. It was like a chronic disease. He kind of wished that these folks were more like his old friends back home, because with them he could at least fake fitting in. He could've gone back to Saper, but it was only 6:30 and was freezing outside. But he knew that if he stayed there, he would have to listen to people having fun all night while he was locked away in his room.

That would've been really crazy!

CHAPTER II

— 1 —

The door was open, and Brice stood in the corridor just outside their room, leaning against the eggshell-white-painted concrete block wall. He was eavesdropping on the feminine cadences in their voices, trying to distinguish between the two. A lot of enthusiastic joy was welling up inside of him. It was going to be great having the gang back together again. In a cool Brice move he was able to slip into their dorm without having to use the intercom, so he was going to surprise them.

“Hey, guys, how’s it going?” Brice sang out as he let all his happiness explode in the form of two outstretched arms while bursting into the room.

Erika and Kim, who were both squatting down on the floor, turned around from their unpacking. The room was a mess with boxes, clothes and stuff everywhere. They were dressed in jean shorts and casual tees. Both had a nice tan going and were cutely barefooted, revealing attractively painted toenails.

Brice, who hadn’t seen them all summer, was beyond pleased to once again have the pleasure of their company. He recalled very quickly—and reveled in—their striking physical beauty: Kim, with her smooth-flowing, jet-black hair, which accented her exotically gorgeous Asian facial features, and Erika, with her daisy-fresh blonde hair bob and ethereally beautiful suburban look.

These were among a small class of women whom guys would enjoy sharing a classroom with and admiring the whole semester. The cool thing, though, was that they downplayed their looks and didn’t let them dominate their personalities. They were both open and easygoing, and not stuck-up and out of reach.

For Brice—who already had a girlfriend—the situation was totally neutral and added an almost perfect balance to his life.

When they saw Brice, their faces lit up, and getting up from what they were doing, they outstretched their arms in the same enthusiastic gesture, and all three meshed into a group hug.

All three were filled with that beginning-of-the-semester college-reunion exuberance. They were smiling and laughing and riding high on their togetherness. It's that feeling when you haven't seen a friend for a while, and then 'BOOM,' this instant connection happens and you're hanging out together again, and the stylus grooves the LP and it's time to throw fate to the winds.

"Oh my god...we've got to play that perfect end-of-the-summer song. Where's my CDs?" Erika giggled as they were exchanging some quick details about their summer adventures. "I can't find anything in this mess," she added while gleefully sifting through some of her unpacked cardboard boxes.

"Wait...I think I can dig it out," Kim said confidently while bending down, knowing exactly which one she wanted as she rummaged through an unmarked box. She corkscrewed her hand through some sneakers and flip-flops, then pulled the CD out from a stack that lay underneath and handed it to Erika.

"What's the title?" Brice asked as he was pushing aside a pile of clothes so that he could sit on a bed.

But in that classical female way, they teasingly told him that he had to wait. Erika cued it up in her stereo with its pumping five-disc changer. It was one of the latest models with all sorts of sleek, colored, funky-shaped buttons and a very rounded post-modern, cutting-edge look that naturally fit into the scene without seeming very materialistic.

“The Boys of Summer,” Brice said with a laugh as the soft, airy-sounding electric guitar intro came on, and the old classic stirred up nostalgic feelings of the past.

The girls, who were now in the middle of the room where there was a little bit of space, just nodded because they were slowly swaying their hips while cocking their heads back and singing along with the words.

They waved their arms to Brice, who, although he hardly ever danced, just let the spontaneous fun of the moment overtake him, and he got up to join them.

Brice was about 5'11". He was good-looking in the “All-American boy,” “Tom Hanks” kinda way. He had laughing eyes, a well-defined jaw and the easy flash of a great smile. He was possessed with a subtle undertone of sexiness that he kept in check without vanity or pretense. He had a good, solid build that could encourage the co-eds to want to cuddle.

As the three sashayed together, they made the perfect dancing trio. For the rest of the song they just smiled and sang along and became totally absorbed in the moment. They were enjoying their nostalgia trip with complete abandon.

“We should get our own group going...set up some gigs. I betcha the whole campus would be scrambling to get tickets to see us,” Brice kidded.

Erika then turned down the volume and put on some Squirrel Nut Zippers, which was one of those groups that was riding the new swing fad.

“So...how did everything go with class registration?” Kim asked Brice.

“Well, I’m only going to be able to take three classes this semester.”

"So does that mean you're not going to be able to graduate with us?" Erika said in a disappointed tone while giving her nod of agreement to Kim, who wanted to know if it was okay to put 'Alvin' the rabbit on the shelf next to the dresser.

"I don't know. Not unless I can take classes over the summer. I guess it looks like I'm going to get left behind like some delinquent high school student," Brice said in a mocking-crying voice as he sat down on the bed again.

"Sorry," they both said together in that sing-songy, comforting female way.

"Don't worry about it. I'm sure everything will probably work out," Kim added in a positive tone of voice.

"Are you still teaching that physics class with those high school students?" Erika asked as she was putting some clothes in her closet.

"Yeah. Maybe with my lighter schedule I can concentrate more on helping the kids!"

"Well, how about that! Like I always say...there's usually a silver lining in most situations," Kim offered.

"It should be a good experience for you and will look great on your resumé. I know I could never do it. Trying to teach all those high school kids and getting them to pay attention? You're gonna have your hands full," Erika observed.

The music continued to play in the background, and the scene turned into one of those pressure-free, innocent college moments in time. Brice sat on a soft, floral-printed comforter with his legs dangling over the bed while silently and amusingly observing the girls. The girls continued setting up their room by hanging up posters and putting the rest of their things away.

They talked about school stuff...all the classes they were going to take and which of the gazillion prerequisites they were going to be able to get out of the way.

They were all Mechanical Engineering students. This would not be one's first impression if you met them at a party.

Brice could come off as a happy-go-lucky business student with some of the inane things he had to say in the flow of conversation. He would talk about wanting to swim in the northeast Atlantic Ocean in the middle of January, or flying to the moon in a bottle rocket, or exploring Antarctica on a yak.

The girls, on the other hand, had a different kind of image problem. They were girls! Although they were part of the new trend to establish equality among the more prestigious professions, the prevailing stereotype was still out there: that only the 'guys' gravitated to engineering.

You wouldn't guess it either—if you met them briefly. While they weren't the 'let's be friends with everybody' type, they were generally very playful and outgoing and did not fit into that introverted, geeky engineer image.

Indeed, their talent in this regard could sometimes rise to the level of raconteur. For instance, the girls could have you laughing out loud with their imitation of a particular ambivalently heterosexual Copenhagen bartender. In telling the story, they would tag-team each other both verbally and in gesture.

Apparently, the gentleman had a penchant for Hawaiian shirts, big gold-buckle belts and short rattlesnake boots in his vain attempt to be 'one of the boys.' He only drank Cosmopolitans and was constantly on a diet of arugula and radicchio. His go-to social activities included visits to the zoo to watch the orangutans swing from the trees, buying candles, and anything Andy Warhol. At work he would talk the male customers out of their original orders and only serve them what he wanted to (never beer...sometimes wine, and usually exotic cocktails). This was to get them drunk so that he could coax them into dancing the Macarena and give them a chance to admire his belt.

While M.E. was a pursuit the girls enjoyed excelling in, they tried to keep their personal lives separate and distinct. It was their way of giving balance to the hardcore seriousness of their soon-to-be ordained profession.

That's what Brice liked about them. He'd run into many M.E. students who either had no social lives and studied 24/7, or others who would only talk about their classes and their labs in a social setting. He, however, preferred the 'study hard/play hard' approach in his life. These days, though, trying to stay focused on the 'study hard' part of that philosophy had hit a detour. The reason why Brice was only taking three classes was because of cash-flow problems in his financial aid package.

His school—the University of Bickford—was about two hours west of Saper and located along the Ohio River. Tuition, room and board was about \$30,000 a year. Truly, this was a 'king's ransom,' even with the assistance of grants and loans.

The issue of tuition was not even on Brice's to-do list for his first two years at school because his father was handling the matter. His limited involvement was occasionally going over to the student aid office to endorse grant and loan checks.

The situation, however, changed dramatically in late July that summer when he finally received his financial aid letter. The first problem was that it was nearly two months late—which was very concerning. The second—much greater—problem was the content in the letter. His aid faucet had been turned off! No Pell Grant...no Perkins Loan...no university grant...no work/study opportunity...none of the scholarships he had applied for—nothing...zero...nada! Translated into an equation, this meant: no liquid green=no flow=no go.

Interestingly, he wasn't thrown into a panic because this was something his father had dealt with previously, and Brice just assumed that he would take care of the problem this time too.

Even when his father was not able to totally correct the matter, Brice still wasn't too worried about the situation. Mr. Harrington had always been a steadfast breadwinner, and Brice believed his father's explanation that the whole episode was just a minor setback.

The reason for Brice's financial aid shutdown was the always odious: CHANGE THE RULES IN THE MIDDLE OF THE GAME WITHOUT ADEQUATE NOTICE fact pattern.

For the first two years Mr. Harrington (who had not been claiming Brice as a dependent on his own tax form) always documented Brice's status as that of being independent on all of the financial aid forms, and the process moved along smoothly.

Thus, when Mr. Harrington completed the latest SAR (the Student Aid Report)—a form so ostentatiously opaque and confoundingly complex that Professor Stephen Hawking dismissed it as being impossible to decipher—he noted Brice to be 'independent.'

Up to that point in time, if a student had an 'independent' status, his parents were not required to provide a copy of their tax return with the filing of the SAR. All of the various never-ending piles of forms (with documentation attached) had to be filed perfectly in order to qualify for the different financial aid programs.

In Mr. Harrington's case, he was not aware that attaching his tax return was no longer just optional but, indeed, mandatory. He did not know this because of his lack of due diligence, but was sabotaged by the fact that the unknown hierarchy in the financial aid office had not implemented this new policy change in their computer-generated letter. Also, he was never notified of the oversight by the financial aid office.

This fact did not surprise Brice, who truly believed that there were no real people in that office. He imagined that the true powers there were, in fact, robotic marionettes whose strings were being manipulated by the big banks.

The knockout blow was, of course, the omnipresent and deadly 'deadline.' Once it passed, there was no going back. No ticket...no shirt...no financial aid. Brice found out the hard way that a private university can be fun, fun, fun only when the very sensitive foundational financial machinery is running smoothly.

So...as they continued to talk about the upcoming semester, Brice let them in on some of the minor details. But he skimmed over most of the whole ugly affair because he felt kind of stupid that he knew so little about the whole financial aid process.

Contrary to Brice's situation, the girls were in good shape. This was because—unlike Brice—they had gone to financial aid seminars, knew what was going on, and kept on top of their respective situations. As a result, their pipelines were still flowing, and they were coasting along.

"Enough of the school talk...are we going out tonight?" Erika said emphatically—changing the topic somewhat abruptly.

Kim responded, "We definitely should," as she folded away the new Peruvian sweater she had purchased on a spur-of-the-moment whim from a street vendor. It was Brice's turn, and he agreed, making it unanimous.

Going out and having a good time at some of the local college hangouts had become a healthy outlet for them as an alternative to the daily grind. It helped them feel hip and more carefree than a lot of their fellow engineering students. They were not in the camp of maintaining a mad party frat pace. However, when they weren't bogged down with homework or labs, they would try to get out at least once every weekend.

They did not have the easier life of the liberal arts students, who could just cram or pump out papers like mad dogs in sporadic spurts. On the contrary, they had to stay on top of their studies or else be quickly and permanently swamped. But at the same time they did not want to study to the point of becoming total nerds. So in this context they began a discussion of nightspot alternatives.

— 2 —

Bickford was located in a moderately sized industrial town of 300,000 people about two hours west of Saper Aude. It had blossomed significantly because it was right on the river that formed the border between Ohio and West Virginia.

Therefore there were many venues to consider. Lucy's was usually filled with too many immature freshmen and other pretentious students who bungled through lots of pseudo-intellectual conversations. Zippo's was decent, but on a Saturday night a heavy-duty frat meat-market. The Vault was another possibility, but Brice only liked doing the whole nightclub scene when he was with his girlfriend, Hannah.

They eventually came around to choosing Gallic's Pub, which was a nifty sing-along place. It featured a piano man and an acoustic guitarist. A crowd of 60 to 70 folks would sit and stand facing the piano—raise a glass—and sing their butts off into the early hours of the next day.

"Sounds cool," Brice said after they agreed on a nine o'clock meet-up time. Then he took off.

He went back to his dorm, and since he had gotten to campus a few days earlier, didn't have any unpacking to do. So he sent out some e-mails and prepped some problems for the high school physics class that he was teaching.

Then his roommate, Dan, arrived and they chatted a bit. Brice had lived with Dan the previous year. They had met in one of the core requirement classes. Dan was studying to be an electrical engineer. They had hit it off pretty well and then hung out a few times. They decided to dorm together because although they got along well, they weren't buddy-buddy. This meant that they could live together and still give each other plenty of space. As a result, they could avoid a lot of conflicts. For instance, if one had any female company, the other would merely hang outside of the room for a couple of hours.

And this was the way Brice preferred to live. Because although hanging with the guys on occasion was acceptable, it was his opinion that most of the time it got boring and blandly predictable. But socializing with the girls was so much more fun and way cooler.

Later on—after talking to Dan about getting MP3s so they could download CDs off of the net and play them right on the computer—Brice called Hannah. He wanted to catch up and let her know that he was going out with the girls and see if they could get together the following night. He would have preferred to be able to invite her to the evening festivities, but in the past, she had made it abundantly clear that she didn't get along with the girls. Something about her being a cultural anthropology major and having nothing in common with the 'Girls of M.E.'

Hannah had a way of taking the traditional liberal arts vs. science clash to a higher level. Brice couldn't quite understand any of this because the girls were conversant in many subjects besides M.E. when they were in a social setting.

— 3 —

On his way back to the girls' place, Brice decided to 'prime the pump' of the evening in style. He had a few more months to go before he hit

that magical milestone of 21, but like so many of his contemporaries, he was in possession of a fake I.D. So he thought he would pay a visit to the local liquor store and scoop up some beer. He wasn't a fancy beer drinker—usually he and the girls drank Busch and Rolling Rock—but this night he decided to splurge.

This was not an easy task because the store had about 40 microbrews from which to choose. He figured he'd play it on the safe side and got some Pete's Wicked. The \$14 tab didn't faze him because he usually treated the cash that his parents gave him as Monopoly money.

The girls were glad that he had gotten Pete's Wicked, but suggested that the next time he get Pete's Wicked Raspberry, which they thought was better tasting. As they hung out and sipped their brews, the girls asked if everything was cool with Hannah and the fact that he was going out without her. Brice's quick answer was that he thought so because she hadn't said anything against the idea.

However, upon reflection, he thought he might have heard a little bit of a letdown in her voice.

At that point the girls started looking through a catalog from IKEA—the megastore chain from Sweden that has a whole line of cheap, fashionable furniture that you can purchase and put together yourself. They were trying to find things that they thought they might use to spice up the room.

Brice was getting kind of bored and reluctantly joined in for a while until he reached the limit of his inner domestic goddess and started acting like some very effeminate interior designer.

“You know what I really think you need? Flowers. Lots and lots of flowers!” he said with an exaggerated Swedish lisp.

“Come on, Brice...this is kind of important, you know. We've got to live here for the next eight months,” Erika said while raising an

eyebrow and pointing to a really neat throw rug with a swirling aqua pattern.

"Yeah...and don't hold it against us because we don't want to live in some stereotypical dorm room with Bruce Springsteen posters on the wall and a pile of moldy underwear on the floor—like some guy we know," Kim said with a little twist of irony.

"I don't have Bruce Springsteen posters on the wall...I have posters of the Grateful Dead. About my underwear—FYI—I own 365 pairs, so I only have to wash once a year...twice in a leap year.

"At least I don't listen to Wham... (Wake me up before you go-go)," he replied while smirking and singing off-key and doing a very bad job at mimicking George Michael's moves.

They went on like that, comparing eighties music to the latest cutting-edge stuff of the nineties. Then they started discussing what group they were looking forward to catching when they came to town. By that time they all had a good 'buzz' going on and were ready to hit the bricks. They gathered up all the empties scattered about the room and hid them under a bed (there was this small technicality about it being illegal to drink alcohol in the dorms).

And so the trio moved out into the warm, late-summer air that was enhanced by just the slightest breeze to tingle their young, nubile bodies.

The streets were jumping with the pulsation of youth. The town was alive with big posses and small groups and the occasional soloist. Students and young adults frolicked to and fro. They came not only from Bickford, but the other schools in the area. Most were migrating to local frat parties and the half-dozen or so watering holes downtown.

The pub was a fifteen-minute trolley ride from the school. All three of the trio were underage. In typical tavern ‘profiling,’ the girls were permitted to pass right in, but the bouncer did check Brice’s I.D. The scene was dotted with fresh white college faces. These were the ‘beautiful’ people, casually perfect and confident in a universal carefree, happy-go-lucky mood.

They were fortunate to find a booth that was decent enough in which to sit. The reality was that almost everything in Gallic’s had a beat-up feel to it. There was peeling wallpaper, torn vinyl benches and chairs, and wooden tables that contained an informal history of the place in the form of countless patrons’ carvings. The only untouched haven was the stage. It stood about four feet above the floor along one side of the room so that everybody could have a good view.

Residing on the stage was a black, gleaming Steinway complemented by a four-foot-wide red velvet bench. The piano’s neighbors were a tuxedo-black bass and a golden-wheat acoustic guitar, both relaxing in the same pedestal. The set-up was tied together with an elaborate sound system. Music did not start until 11:30.

While they were waiting, they played this fun little game of guessing what the musicians would be playing. Then they shared suggestions of which songs they could request.

After that they talked a little bit more about school. Kim had spent a whopping \$500 on books. Erika was glad that she didn’t have to take any more Gen. Ed. classes. They both cringed about having to take Systems Analysis II, which was one of the required M.E. courses. Brice then tried to elicit more details on how each spent their summer.

“So any new romantic flings, guys?” Brice asked mischievously.

"I told you what happened at camp, right?" Erika replied with a wry smile (she had spent the summer working at a camp for mentally disabled inner-city children).

"Oh...the story about the male counselor who didn't believe you were an M.E. student until you showed him how to draw a vertical tree graph?"

"Wait a minute...what's this about a guy and a vertical tree graph?" Kim asked in a somewhat titillating tone while grabbing some popcorn with her right hand and making a stop-sign gesture with her left.

"I'm not going into the sordid details, but you would think that since we are now in the late nineties, most guys would be with the program. The deeper question is...if the guy is really cute but doesn't take you too seriously, is it okay to hook up for maybe just a while?"

"Let's just stick to the heart of the matter...did you break out the vertical tree graph before you had sex, or did you use it as some kind of foreplay device? Sort of like you wanna get turned on...look at this big boy type of thing?" Brice inquired teasingly.

"Like you'll ever know," Erika replied decisively in shutting him down.

Brice then turned to Kim, who basically spent an idle summer while hanging out at her parents' summer house.

"I spent most of my time at the beach, and at least a half-dozen guys tried to pick me up, but they were all such...I don't know. Like there was this one Australian guy who was soooo cute, and we went out a couple of times, and he was a lotta fun (especially with his accent and some of the words he used).

"And then there we were, alone on the beach under a starlit sky. The moon was glistening across the water, and the sound of the ocean waves was creating a lovely hypnotic spell. The hot summer air had been nicely tempered down by the cool breezes coming off the water.

The scent of the lilac bushes just beyond the dunes was intoxicating. It was a perfectly beautiful, romantic setting.

“We started making a little smoochy-smoochy and he started getting kind of frisky, and I’m thinkin’...you know, Kim, you study hard, you’ve got another stressful year ahead of you...so why not have some fun. Go for it! Sex on the beach. The pinnacle of the romantic summer fling (just like that old Hollywood movie *A Summer Place*).

“But then my flight of fancy was cold-cocked by a strong and loud inner voice that posed the question...‘Do you have any feelings for this guy?’ My immediate reply was ‘not really.’

“Truth be told, he was just this ‘roofer guy’ who made me laugh a little bit, but we had nothing in common. I hate to have to say this, but socially and intellectually he just did not rise to my level.”

Erika then spoke her mind. “I’m telling you, Kim...you can’t always find the perfect guy. So you just gotta have fun along the way until you find him. You’re fortunate in that you’re intelligent and good-looking, so that getting what you want is not going to be the issue.

“What *is* really important is the work we do at school. What we study will help us determine who we are and how we view the world.

“We have to separate our personal lives from our professional lives. If we don’t, then we might wind up with some computer techie or some engineering guy. If that happens, it’s going to be much harder to enjoy our lives or ourselves.”

“Oh, Oprah...that was so beautiful,” Brice blurted out (utilizing the classic cringe-inducing male technique of saying a dumb thing at the wrong time). Both girls snapped their heads at him and gave him a long, hard look.

He changed the subject very quickly by asking them if they were still doing their Thursday night 90210 get-together with some of the

other girls in the dorm. Apparently a lot of the girls in the building had made this into a ritual the year before.

"Of course," they responded in an enthusiastically unified answer.

They started talking over each other about how much you could learn about real life from the show (even though it was totally made up) when the musicians started taking the stage.

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The piano guy—whose name just happened to be Joe—was an average-looking joe who looked to be in his late thirties. He was wearing black jeans and a red-plaid button-down shirt, which seemed very casual for a date with a Steinway. He purposely positioned himself on the bench and started warming up his fingers with some arpeggios. He made some obvious moves with regard to the placement of his tip bowl on top of the piano. He then adjusted his microphone—complete with the obligatory "test...test...test."

By this time the room was packed wall to wall with merry-makers. He took a sip of his very dark beer and cradled it down on a glass coaster next to the tip bowl. In a way, that made it seem like he was just a good friend who often stopped by your house to play. He quietly stated into the microphone, "Gimme a song."

Brice immediately shouted out, "Battle Hymn of the Republic" (at which point Erika kicked him under the table). After a modicum of laughter died down in the crowd—and per the request of most of the other patrons—the piano man, unsurprisingly, started off his first set with Billy Joel's "Piano Man."

There was also a very good reason for this. In America—just like you have to start off every sports event with "The Star-Spangled Banner"—you have to start off every piano bar set with "Piano Man."

And so the entire pub was off and running with everybody singing along and plenty of mugs being sloshed to and fro.

For the next three hours, ‘Charlie’ and his two ‘angels’ continued to drink, make merry, and sing along with the tunes.

Between sets they never ran out of subjects to talk about. This tight little trio was very open with each other. There were no constraints, and they all felt free to toss almost anything into the mix—whether it be an anecdote, an opinion or an observation. As a group, they had the capacity to keep the conversation lively and moving along.

At 2:30 a.m.—after the last call—they left the rowdy scene at Gallic’s and exited into the quiet, late-night town streets. They moved past several sleeping bodies in front of a bank and flagged down a cab. The spacious vehicle rolled out slowly, gliding effortlessly through the urban emptiness as it headed back to the dorms.

By then the three pitchers of beer and several shots of Jägermeister took its alcoholic stranglehold on the partygoers. Their conversation bottomed out into silence, and they were on the verge of passing out. Mercifully, the taxi driver dropped the girls off in front of their dorm before this could happen.

Brice continued a short distance back to his dorm. After tipping the driver, he staggered back to his room. He crashed while still fully clothed and fell asleep like a baby engorged with formula.

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The next day Brice slept until noon. After he got up, he was pretty much functioning in the ‘time to pay the piper’ hangover haze, when you just don’t feel like doing anything except drink tomato juice, take aspirin and nap.

After spinning the cobweb out of his head, he called Hannah to firm up plans for the evening.

He then decided to play a little of the new 3D graphics version of *Mortal Kombat II* on Dan's Sony PlayStation. It was one of those 'must-have' video games (until a newer and better game came along that reduced it to a 'who cares' video game).

He was in the middle of blowing up humanity when he got a phone call from Kim. Because of a huge 50%-off sale, the girls were headed over to IKEA, but before that invited him to a late lunch.

"Where are we going for lunch? I don't want any Swedish meatballs from IKEA," Brice offered in a weak attempt at being funny.

After an audible groan Kim said, "We were thinking about that fifties diner. You know, the one on the back highway next to the Great Eastern Superstore."

The plan sounded cool to Brice, and so he agreed to join them. He hung up the phone and rescheduled more explosions for another day. As he was getting ready to go out, Brice reflected on his relationship with the girls. Since they usually initiated most of their activities together, it showed that they really cared for him, and he wasn't merely a third wheel.

Once they met up, they walked across campus to the student garage center. They took an elevator up to the third floor, where Erika parked her car. She had an older Toyota. Because of the \$300 per semester parking fee, her father was against her having a car on campus. But Erika convinced him to let her have it if she paid half.

She drove down the curving ramp and slowly approached the temperamental yellow-painted wood control arm adjacent to the attendant's booth. Flexing its muscle, the arm elevated and permitted her access to the outside world. With a small sigh of relief, Erika rolled into the sunshine.

As she made her way to the diner, Erika weaved the way through the city streets while pressing the radio buttons, searching for good

tunes. Meanwhile, a mellow Kim and Brice sat quietly in the back seat, still recovering from the night before.

The diner was like a trip back in time. The exterior was authentic fifties style, encased in stainless chrome with end corners that turned like a Whitey Ford curveball. Inside, the booths were retrofitted with gleaming red leatherette padded benches and matching Formica tables.

On the back side of each table sat a mini jukebox that, for the small sum of ‘two bits,’ could play a doo-wop song or the original rock and roll. The walls of the eatery were chock-full of fifties memorabilia. There was a picture of a ‘duck-walking’ Chuck Berry. A poster of a young Marlon Brando, all leathered up, sitting on a Harley for his starring role in *The Wild Ones*. A caricature of an ‘I Like Ike’ oversized campaign button.

There were many ‘back in the day’ product placements also on display. Stuff like the old Coca-Cola bottles...Brill ‘a little dab will do ya’ Cream...and a grouping of ice cream sundaes with names like Chocolate Duster, Cherry Bomb Supreme and the infamous Awful Awful!

Everybody ordered the usual fare of a cheeseburger and fries. They all sat quietly while they were eating their meal because of the small residual headaches they were still experiencing as a result of their hangovers. Once they refueled their bodies’ engines with lots of good old American grease, however, the gang’s mood started percolating.

On the road again, they headed to the ‘mother’ of all furniture centers...the always imposing IKEA. Although the parking lot was humongous, Erika could not find an open space.

“I think that we need to pray to the parking gods,” Brice said in exasperation.

On cue, all three started chanting like monks from Tibet, “Auuummmm, Auummmm.”

As they continued trolling for a space (while chanting and snickering), Erika played the 'beep and wave' game. When she observed somebody who appeared to be walking back to their vehicle, she would beep to get their attention. Waves would then be exchanged so that she could follow them to that coveted little piece of real estate.

After finally finding a space utilizing this method, they found themselves in that dangerous position generally referred to as 'pedestrian.' They walked across the lot, crisscrossing the lanes while scrambling to avoid swift-moving vehicles that were looking for a space. Now the 'beep and wave' became the 'wave and beep.' That is...they waved to the cars NOT to beep.

They quickly made their way to the front entrance. They walked past a sliding gate and through a large and heavy glass door. They had arrived. It was like the land of Oz (and so they started skipping down an imaginary yellow brick road).

Their first stop was a large outdoor furniture display the size of a basketball court. Impractical, of course, at this stage of their lives, but they still had fun checking out all the barbecues, water fountains and lounge chairs.

The path continued into a labyrinth of room displays the size of two football fields. Everything and anything that one could want or need in home décor. There were twelve different living rooms...fourteen different bedrooms...sixteen different kitchens, and twenty different bathrooms. There were infant rooms...kid rooms, and teenager rooms. Also on display were ladies' craft rooms and man-caves and even in-law suites. And on, and on, and on.

Most of the furniture was in the form of airy and bright light pine. The pieces were in all sorts of fun, practical shapes, sizes and colors. You could get into a state of sensory overload and just want to move in to these perfect spaces and live happily ever after.

Throughout the store there were many students and their parents browsing and debating about what to buy. All that newness and its sweet seduction. You were overwhelmed by all the stuff that you wanted but never thought that you really needed before. And they made it so easy and convenient. Just purchase the prepackaged box of ‘stuff’...put it on the roof of your car...take it home...put it together AND ‘walla’!

As they ambled about the cavernous store, Erika wondered how cool it would be if they had their own place that they could decorate themselves. Brice, on the other hand, wondered how cool it would be if they had a shop where they could build their own furniture.

“Like you have any carpentry skill,” Erika observed.

“When I was but a child and only this high,” Brice said in a bragging way while holding out his hand about three feet above the ground, “I went down to my father’s workshop and gathered up a hammer, some nails and a hand-saw. I went out to the back of the house and built a log cabin from scratch—complete with a screened-in porch.”

“And who taught you how to build all that?” Erika said, playing along.

“Why, I learned everything I know from watching *Captain Kangaroo* on the TV,” he said with a smirk.

“You can be so hokey sometimes. Come on...let’s go hang out at that living room display over there,” Kim said as she headed off and plopped down on one of the couches. Erika then shared the couch with Kim. Brice took a diving jump onto an adjacent recliner and almost tipped it over.

They sat there for a few minutes with customers just casually walking by in the background. Brice wondered out loud if the store was “over the top.” Kim thought that although it was very tempting to go overboard with all of the decorating choices in the store, it was a

good place to go for the occasional odd or end. In Erika's opinion... "You can never have enough 'tchotchkes.'"

"I'm starting to feel like I live here," Brice said while leaning back in the recliner and feigning a napping position. "I could spend all my time here."

"Yeah, we could be a permanent part of the display," Kim said. "Kind of interactive advertising. I betcha IKEA would love the idea."

Reality set in when security came around the second time and tapped Brice on the foot. So the trio moved on.

The girls did eventually buy the throw rug with the aqua swirling pattern. They also picked up some Chinese paper lamps and a few knickknacks for their bookcase. They were glad that they had gotten a good deal and gotten the errand out of the way.

Erika suggested that Brice get something for Hannah. He selected a wall-hanging scroll written in Chinese. The translation was something along the lines of "health and happiness to all who enter this portal."

It sounded sort of odd in English but looked pretty cool in Cantonese.

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When Brice got back to his room and was in the process of wrapping Hannah's gift, it occurred to him that he had spent the afternoon with the girls and not her. He then recalled what Kim had said about how they were on a different level than other people. He wondered if he was inadvertently applying this kind of bias in his relationship with Hannah.

The thought was immediately repulsive to him, and he quickly dismissed it as not being true. But it still made him feel kind of wrong, and he decided to try and make up for it. The original plan for the date

was catching a flick, but now he figured he would also treat Hannah to a lovely dinner.

Brice had met Hannah earlier that year during the spring semester when they were both sophomores. They met in a required Gen Ed. class and experienced a shared attraction. Their relationship escalated rather rapidly.

Hannah's parents were in the process of getting a divorce at that time. Besides finding Brice to be 'very cute,' she found him to be sympathetic and sensitive to her personal problems.

While it was her view that the study of M.E. was somewhat isolating in a social context, she didn't think it dominated his personality in any negative way. She liked the fact that his studies made him steady, secure and focused.

For Brice—who had been a bit of a recluse in high school—Hannah was his first girlfriend. He liked how their different backgrounds complemented each other. So he was the sensitive engineer guy, and she was the politically engaged multicultural thinker.

Although Bickford was primarily known for its Engineering College, it had an excellent College of Arts and Science as well. It was there that Hannah was pursuing her degree in Anthropology.

Hannah and her roommate, Shiva, were progressive activists. It had been at Hannah's urging that Brice volunteered to be a mentor and to actively pursue the physics tutoring position for the inner-city high school kids.

He always saw himself as a pretty much middle-of-the-road guy. He believed that while he probably could not totally absorb Hannah's progressive perspective, he would at least try to meet her halfway.

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They wound up going to an Ethiopian restaurant that was very popular with the college crowd. Everyone sat on cushions positioned on the floor around three-foot circular tables. There were no utensils. Instead, diners scooped up their meal with thin, hand-sized pancakes. The food included various helpings of yellow rice and chopped-up vegetables and small pieces of lamb sitting in low-slung wooden bowls.

Hannah got into it and was in a good mood. She had been touched by Brice's gift. It bothered her that the restaurant was so expensive, but Brice just brushed it aside as his splurging for a good cause (which, in this case, just happened to be Hannah)!

Although she was having a good time, Hannah expressed her concern about how much time Brice was spending with the girls. All four had hung out several times the previous semester, but it hadn't gone well. Hannah thought that while on the surface they were all nice and friendly, they tended to be condescending and self-centered.

So, because of the tension between them, Brice offered very little detail about the past two days he had spent with the girls.

"So...did you all hang out on the couch together or what?" Hannah asked, looking at him inquisitively.

"Actually we all got naked, drank wine, fed each other M&Ms, and fooled around...are you jealous?" he asked slyly.

"No...I'm just kind of curious as to what sort of 'looney-tune' you act like when you're around them," she said while carefully picking up some food with one of her pancakes.

"What the hell does that mean? I don't act like a looney-tune."

"What about that time over the summer when you were at my mom's house and you stuck those ziti up your nose?"

"You loved it. You said it was very sexy and cute."

"Now did I?" she said, laughing.

“And what about the whole mud incident? Talk about ‘looney-tune,’” Brice said while struggling unsuccessfully to get some food onto his pancake.

Hannah pleasantly recalled those couple of days over the past summer. Brice’s parents had rented a cottage, and they had gotten there several days before his folks had arrived. Brice didn’t want to go swimming in the lake, and so they wound up renting mountain bikes.

During the course of their ride, Brice got stuck in a pretty deep mud patch, and as he slowed down, he tipped over. His right foot got twisted in the toe clip. When Hannah caught up with him, she splattered his face with a big glob of goopy mud. After Brice broke free from the mountain bike, they commenced to getting into a no-holds-barred mud-wrestling match. Hannah managed to wiggle a good handful of mud down the front of his pants. Brice—always the gentleman—settled for maneuvering a packet of ferns down her bra.

“You know what happens when you run out of pancakes?” Brice asked mischievously.

Hannah gave him a wide-eyed blank stare while shaking her head from side to side.

“You have to do this.”

And then he put his hands behind his back and dive-bombed his head into a bowl of the yellow mash and began eating directly with his mouth.

“That is beyond disgusting,” Hannah said, laughing.

“Is there something wrong?” Brice said in a ghoulish way while most of his face and hair were covered in yellow muck.

“Here...give it a try,” he continued while scooping up some of the yellow mass with his fingers.

She tried to turn away, but Brice got some on her freckled cheek and in her curly red hair. While she was wiping off her face, Hannah was already plotting her revenge.

Satiated with their bellies full of exotic food, they took a short walk—hand in hand—to a local art-house theater to see *The Sea's Harvest*.

The film takes place in the early 1950s. The protagonist is a middle-aged, divorced Italian sculptor whose name was Luciano. He is commissioned by the Town of Gloucester, Massachusetts—which has a very strong Italian fishing community—to plan and to build a statue in their honor. He comes to America to get a better feel for the town and to find inspiration for his work.

In the town's general store, he meets Cecilia, a newly married woman who works there. Since she still speaks some Italian and he knows a little English, they get to be acquainted with each other, and then—through the vehicle of the awkward bilingual linguistic mix—close friends.

Over the course of the next year, the catch dries up, and the sculptor—feeling that the downturn has changed his subject's essence—destroys the unfinished work. At that point he looks to Cecilia for inspiration with regard to troubleshooting new ideas. At the same time, she turns to Luciano for sympathy because with the bad times, her husband started drinking too much and had become abusive.

Over the course of the summer, Cecilia's husband, and a handful of other fishermen from the town, take a risk and go looking for work up and down the New England coast.

Under the cover of darkness—and moonlight of varying hues—Cecilia and Luciano have a very passionate love affair.

Shortly after the men finally come back, Luciano completes the statue. It is greatly admired by the town.

Then Cecilia finds out that she is pregnant. Luciano pleads with Cecilia to come back to Italy with him, but she decides to stay with her husband. He leaves but for several years begs her to join him in Italy.

And it is from a series of love letters—including pictures of his small villa, a 40-year-old one-way plane ticket from Boston to Rome, and a life-size sculpture of Cecilia standing in the town square that a young middle-aged daughter—with more than just a slight resemblance to Luciano—comes to find out about the affair while going through her recently deceased mother's papers.

After the movie Brice wanted to extend their evening together by going to a local neighborhood tavern and having a beer. Hannah—whose parents were not nearly as well off as Brice's and actually had to work for her social money—thought that the idea was a bit extravagant but agreed to the plan in deference to Brice.

The bar was located a few blocks from the theater in a quiet neighborhood. It was unassuming and dimly lit with patrons scattered throughout. They found a quiet table in the back so that they could be alone and talk.

A grapefruit-sized faux-electric candle flickered vertical shards of illumination across their faces. The junior bartender brought over their drafts and some free chips and salsa.

Once they got settled in, Brice decided he would try to make some intellectual points with Hannah by engaging her in serious conversation. So he started out by asking her what she thought was the main thesis in the film. She knew immediately what he was trying to do, and not being inclined to enter into a profound academic discussion, slyly replied, "Be careful who you hire to build your statues."

"No...really...what did you think?" he responded—not being particularly amused with her answer.

"It was a good example of 'mass-mediazing,'" she said matter-of-factly while temporarily dropping her guard.

At that point she stopped herself from continuing the conversation. She was reluctant to honestly share her opinions with him. In the

past—in spite of his funny and sensitive nature in their personal lives—he had seemed indifferent to her serious thoughts with respect to her societal point of view. Indeed, he had been somewhat dismissive of a lot of her academic ideas. And even though he listened to what she had to say, she got the impression that he either didn't understand or—worse—didn't care about the connection of her undergraduate studies with regard to addressing current social problems.

With all this in the background, Brice realized her hesitation. However, he would not be deterred and pressed on.

"I would like to get your serious take on all of the various issues in the film, Hannah. This is important to me. It will help me to understand you better."

She was touched by his directness and sincerity, and so she responded honestly without any sugarcoating.

"To me, the statue wasn't a representation of a continuing fishing tradition, but a symbol of a town that was trying to hold onto a way of life that was slipping away from them. Cecilia's outstretched arms to the sea was a plea for a better harvest. From my perspective, the whole love affair was a lot less important than the gradual economic decline of the community. All those scenes of the fishermen coming back empty-handed was sadly beautiful. It vividly illustrates how culture is related to and totally tied in to economics. If there is no source of income, the results are tragic. Without money, subcultures within the U.S. cannot survive.

"There is another subtle issue with respect to the survival of the community as depicted in the dinner scene in the film. The older sons of the fishermen are discussing leaving the town to find work in another place. They are influenced by the 'myth' that we are supposed to have lots of upward mobility in this country.

"So this sets up a scenario—that when the 'good' harvest returns to the sea, there is no one left in the community to do the fishing.

Now—when the fishermen’s sons fall prey to the ‘myth’ and are unsuccessful in finding jobs in other communities—it sets up the potential for a double tragedy.

“So as you can see, Brice, there are many important issues that should be addressed in the film, far and above the obvious story of the love triangle,” she concluded smoothly and sincerely.

Brice—who had given her his full attention and was trying to understand the content of her conversation as much as possible—then asked her what she had meant when she used the term ‘mass-mediating.’

She continued the discussion in her warm, expressively articulate manner. She told him that the phrase was her own creation. She needed a concept to explain the taking of human experiences and turning them into superficially oriented entertainment that lacked any deep meaning and avoided the complexities of real life.

In her view, ‘mass-mediating’ affected almost everybody’s life in American society without their actually realizing the consequences.

Instead of using our own experiences to suffuse our lives with meaning and purpose, we defer the responsibility to ‘talk radio’ or ‘Hollywood movies’ or the ‘TV WASTELAND.’

More times than we should, we no longer carve out meaning from our own experiences, but rely on ‘mass-mediated’ frames of references and formulas as to how it should be defined.

A great deal of the time, everyday personal and ordinary experience is not valued or legitimized on a societal scale as much as ‘THE WASTELAND’ is.

‘POP MUSIC’ is a good example of ‘mass-mediating’ because it can manipulate our feelings; i.e., without rock and roll... we can’t have fun.

We talk about something funny that happened in our lives and compare it to a *Seinfeld* episode.

When we think about drama and adventure, we think in terms of *E.R.* or an Arnold Schwarzenegger movie.

If it's a historical event, we consider it in the context of the History Channel.

And while she thought that we would not go so far as to seek out titillating relationships in our own lives—like those from *Beverly Hills 90210* or *Ally McBeal*—we cannot really imagine what any type of vibrant relationship could be like outside of these references, where politics and intellect intersect.

Hannah then discussed the whole ritualistic experience of going to the movies. It starts before you even go. There is conversation between friends and the reading of the critics' reviews. Then you have to travel to get there by either public or private conveyance. A good deal of the time, the theater is located in a mall, Hannah continued.

In and out of itself the mall creates an entire 'mass-mediating' environment.

There's the pulsating music...enticing displays and cleverly camouflaged deals. Then one is accosted by salespersons who hide behind kiosks and jump out as you're passing by and stick unrecognizable merchandise in your face for purchase. Or the food sample folks, who place tidbits of unwashed morsels under your nose with their dirty hands.

Nutritionally, the choices at the food court go from bad to worse, as evidenced by the many protruding stomachs that obscure the view of the floor as they walk by you.

A thousand and one services are provided (unrestricted Middle-Eastern bazaar, anybody?). Most of these so-called services are useless and senseless, but encourage you to dig into your wallet nevertheless.

"And then you arrive at the multiplex," Hannah said in an exaggerated tone—continuing the analysis of her concept of 'mass-mediating.'

“You walk into the thick-carpeted lobby, where you are immediately and pungently engulfed with food smells that make your senses dance like James Brown.

“And then...and then...and then, ordinarily sane adults pay a 400% mark-up for candy...a 600% mark-up for soft drinks, and a 1000% mark-up for popcorn. With thousands of empty calories in hand, the patrons then enter a darkened, encapsulated auditorium.

“Before the movie begins—while sitting in plush seating that encourages their lower lumbar region to atrophy—they wipe their greasy popcorn hands on the seats in front of them, dribble droplets of their Mount Everest-sized soft drinks on their clothing, and throw their food wrappers on the floor (like the twelfth-century Vikings that they wanted to emulate in a flick they saw recently).

“Conversation is exchanged about the ‘uplifting’ experience they are about to have. Then the movie begins, and the audience is sucked into the Hollywood version of ‘reality.’

“As they walk out of the theater with that visually numbed post-movie feeling, they discuss the film.

“They talk about how great it would be to ‘live where they live’...‘do what they do,’ and ‘be like they are’!”

After Brice kiddingly thanked Hannah for ruining his movie-going experience for the rest of his life, he had a few points of his own that he wanted to make about *The Sea’s Harvest*. He thanked her for her analysis of the movie and praised her for her novel theory of ‘mass-mediizing.’

“It’s interesting, Hannah...a lot of the observations you made about the story would have never occurred to me. On the other hand, you gotta admit that the movie was really ‘old school.’ Let’s face it, being a fisherman is a hard life. Doing the same thing day after day. Getting up at 5 a.m. Smelling all the time.

"You haveta wonder if there's any value in that subculture—as you call it—in a technologically advanced society like the U.S. To me, it makes the whole small-town fishing way of life somewhat antiquated and doomed to fade away," Brice said indifferently.

"You shouldn't put the fishermen down like that. There was something very beautiful about the simplicity of their lives—without all the stresses of technology.

"Imagine the privilege of being that intimate with the sea every time you go to work. Nothing but the eternal sky and the sun glistening across the water. A perfect spiritual embrace between man and nature.

"And you are able to make a living by merely dropping a bunch of nets and dipping into that vast bounty that Mother Nature can provide," Hannah said, making a big circle with her hands.

"Not for me, thank you. Think about how lonely it gets. But let me ask you...do you think Cecilia should've gone with that guy or not?"

"I don't think so. You can't just throw away a life like that, even if it does have a lot of problems. Remember that sculptor guy was a bit of a player, and she could've gone off with him, and he could've dumped her. She might've been left alone in the middle of Italy."

"But didn't she have a right to be happy? She spent all of those years in a suffocating marriage. Didn't she have a right to get out of it? If the harvest continued to be bad, Cecilia's husband probably would've gotten worse and worse."

"Why should she be dependent on *any* guy to give her freedom? Another question is...could she have just left? All of her identity was based in the community. Take her outside of it and who would she be?"

"But everybody has got the power of their own self-will, and the option to make their own decisions. She was a smart woman. Look at all the great advice she gave to Luciano. Every woman should have

the right to her own self-development,” he said in his sometimes pedantic way.

“There you go with that extreme individualism stuff again. Don’t you think that it would be nice to see more ethnic communities sustain themselves without having to assimilate?” she said, posing her own personal opinion.

“The only way to gain economic success is to assimilate!” Brice said, putting an exclamation point on his point of view.

“Why are you so concerned about her, though?” Hannah said, pushing back while purposely ignoring his point.

“I just really felt bad for her entire situation,” Brice said sympathetically.

His response gave Hannah pause. There was something so contradictory about his defense of this fictional character and his real-life relationship with her.

Apparently, he was able to stand back and objectively analyze Cecilia’s life in its entirety. But with her there were areas of misunderstanding and lack of empathy.

His inability to ‘connect the dots’ with respect to how the concept of mass-mediating affected his own life was a good case in point.

She couldn’t understand how he could not relate to some of the deeper aspects of her thinking—or some of her political views—in spite of the fact that he seemed to get along with women so well. There were parts of her lying dormant and undiscovered that she wished she could share with him, but their relationship had not reached that level as yet. And so she continued their discussion.

“You know, Brice...you can’t compare the women you personally know with the whole population. Me and your female M.E. friends are the fortunate ones. It takes the right parenting, and a proper and extensive education, to become independent-minded.”

“I will do my best with the physics class to prove you wrong.”

"We'll see. I just hope these kids aren't in over their heads," she said, wondering if he was teaching the class more for himself or for the kids.

"Well...if the physics part doesn't work out, I can always teach them how to fish," he said facetiously.

Realizing immediately that what he had just said had fallen on Hannah's brain like a SCUD missile, and seeing the scowl on her face, he moved on very quickly.

"So...anyhoo, Hannah, do you think that the movie had any connection to us?"

Hannah laughed. "It was just a movie... How could it relate to us—or, for that matter, any other couple?"

"Well—for the sake of discussion—am I more like the sculptor or the fisherman?" Brice asked naively, without realizing it was a very loaded question.

Again, Hannah laughed. "You're like the guy that we never get to see. For the late fifties these fishermen had some pretty nice boats, and you're the guy who helped design and build them," she said, knowing that despite the professional career he was about to have, nobody—including her—knew exactly what he did.

Then, during a quiet moment and while looking down at the table, Hannah saw her chance. With a large tortilla chip, she picked up a thick gob of salsa and smeared it on Brice's face and into his right ear.

"I guess that makes us even," Brice said while laughing and squinting at Hannah as she was looking at him with a crazy, silly gaze in her hazel-green eyes.

He cleaned out his ear and they left the bar, then started heading back to the campus. They walked back in silence, and Hannah's thoughts once again lingered on how much of a soul connection she had with Brice.

But she wondered if their deep-set differing points of view—and the tension with the girls—was putting a damper on their relationship. Yet those doubts quickly dissolved as they held hands, and Brice asked her if she wanted to go back to his empty room.

She was grooving on that ‘back together with the boyfriend’ feeling—and in that happiness, her body was yearning for intimacy.

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The next morning Brice and the girls were up and running. They were once again immersing themselves in their version of the beautiful college life as the semester began to unfold. A mix of good, carefree times and academic responsibilities. They transformed into their school mode. It was the time to gather up their syllabi and organize their notebooks. Getting the word as to how difficult their classes were going to be and planning accordingly.

Could they just cruise through *Thermodynamics I*? Was *Systems Analysis II* going to be the nightmare that their fellow students suggested it was going to be? Could they avoid having to get any tutors—like they had to do for *Differential Equations*? Was the lab in *Measurement and Instrumentation* going to take up huge chunks of their time? Did *Control Systems Principles* have the potential to be as stressful as *Design and Manufacturing*? When were their first problem sets due, and when were their first exams?

They would huddle on all these matters, and then put their best play in motion. The object was to consume as much technical ‘turf’ as they could. Knowing that the clock was ticking, they would prepare for the obstacles that lay before them.

Sometimes they would have to ‘block.’ Sometimes they would have to ‘lateral.’ Sometimes they would have to ‘run out of bounds.’

Whatever they had to do, they were willing and able to march straight ahead to their ambitious goal line. This is because they did not view *Bickford* as a university campus, but merely a temporary pit stop leading to their careers.

These issues were all a familiar part of their lives in that self-contained universe. There was nothing daunting or even confusing about the situation because they knew the subject matter. They could absorb the science and the math and their application to M.E.

Brice and the girls were the diametric opposite of their liberal arts and business-oriented fellow students. As a result of being 'checked' and 'blocked out' by all of those equations and terminology, these groups could not comprehend the importance or the impact of tech. Indeed, many—in their lack of understanding—would castigate the knowledge's vital significance in the general societal context.

Perhaps these thoughts crossed the minds of the budding M.E. trio, but they were far more focused on getting through their studies than on contemplating the enormous societal significance of their pursuit. They knew their strategies and were secure in the fact that if they worked hard and succeeded in their course of study, they were going to be set for life. They were getting better at absorbing texts and lectures and defining the important technical principles. So their path was well-structured, and their goal was clearly defined.

They were right there, at the spring's source of the economy with the secrets of its technical knowledge in their hands—AND THEY KNEW IT!

No life comes without its challenges, and Brice's existence was no exception. At times the schedule became a pressure cooker. In previous semesters, for example, there had been many days when the problem sets and labs were due from different classes at the same time. Preparing for four and five finals simultaneously could also crack the most studious soul.

So for Brice—at least for the time being—the pressure was off with his lighter load. His life would be a lot less stressful with only having to take three courses. It was going to be like a working vacation. Perhaps, he thought, it was a good thing that he did not get the financial aid. Now he had a lot more time to concentrate on his physics class and the ‘kids.’

Author Biography



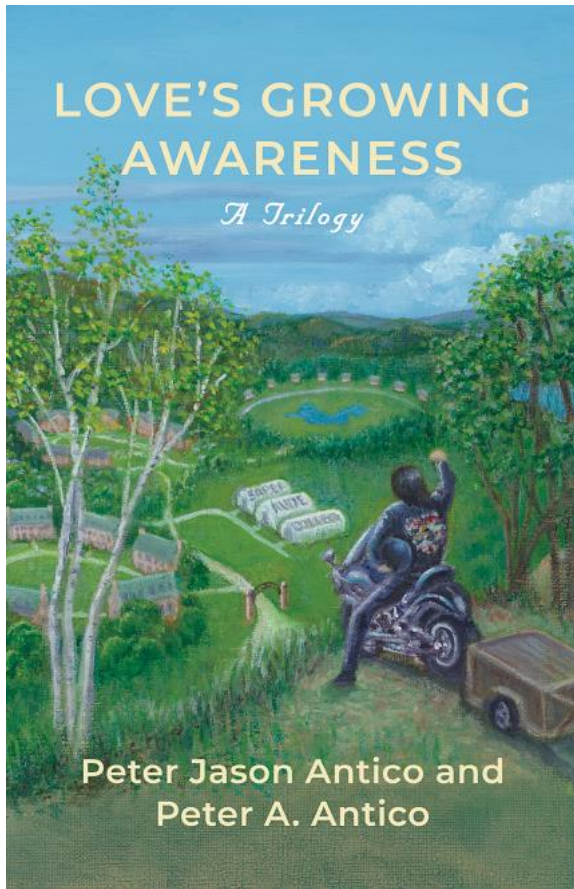
Peter Jason Antico has had a varied and comprehensive academic history. In his formative years he attended American University in Washington D.C. While there, he majored in Cultural Anthropology and minored in Physics.

After 'American' he spent most of the next decade exploring the Length and Breadth of Central and South America. He survived by teaching English and hustling odd jobs. During that time he also learned how to speak fluent Spanish.

In his 30's he secured a degree in Forest Management from Oregon State University.

He has worked in a broad range of settings. These have included the restaurant 'Planet Hollywood' to the forests of Alaska, Wyoming and Arkansas to several manufacturing distribution industries.

He currently resides in Texas, where he owns a small ranch on a few acres in cattle territory. He shares his home and hearth with his wife and rescue dog, Miel.



Love's Growing Awareness is about 3 students in college: an American intellectual, an activist and a mechanical engineer as they seek love, success and knowledge navigating their way through moral dilemmas and financial troubles.

Love's Growing Awareness

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