



TAKE NOTES

MATT DEL BUSTO

Prose Contest Finalist

5:42 p.m., Hendricks Dormitory, Room 306D

Kai was laughing. Again.

Dammit, dammit, dammit, I thought, rapping my knuckles once for each *dammit* against the decades-old dorm desk of which I have the, ah, incredible fortune of owning for the next eight months. His laughter was not a good sign—it was supposed to be a *story*, not a freaking comedy. Kai, wide shoulders beneath his off-white Stevenson Point tee betraying his ex-football player build, was hunched over on his bed, squinting down at the manuscript I had written for my prose class.

“*Bungle juice?*” he queried, his eyes crinkled in laughter. “You think people at parties drink *bungle juice?*”

Blood rushed to my face. *Didn’t Craig say something about getting smashed off bungle juice?*

“Uh, yeah,” I began. “Like, when you go to a party and there’s a pitcher of, you know, bungle...” My voice trailed off as Kai stifled more laughter.

“Jungle juice, homie. ¿*Como una selva?*”

Like a jungle...yeah, jungle juice made a whole lot more sense than bungle juice. You know, alliteration and whatnot. Damn, and this guy thinks he's hot shit because he spent last May partying—whoops, *studying*—in the D.R. and accidentally picked up some Spanish. I rolled my eyes.

"Yeah, yeah. I get it."

"Look bro," Kai began, handing me back my story, "It's good shit. It is. But you gotta sound like you have some semblance of knowing what you're writing about. And you, good sir, know squat about parties."

I can't say he's wrong. As my illustrious career at Stevenson is heading into its third year, I've only been to two parties. Okay, okay, the first one was in the Union, meaning we got fruit juice instead of jungle crap and played Wii ping-pong instead of beer pong, and the second one was more of a pity invite from a girl in my psych class because I was the only one in our research group *not* going, but you get the point. Parties weren't quite my move.

I inhaled hugely, puffing my cheeks out, then slowly blew air out a thimble-sized hole in my pursed lips. "Yeah, you're right. *Tienes razón.*"

"Alright, here's the shebang, David," he started, proudly emphasizing the second syllable because, yes, spend a month in a Spanish-speaking country and you get so cultured you pronounce your Mexican friend's name just like his *madre* does, "Trent's having a thing. Tonight. You know, back to school kind of get together. Nothing huge, but probably a bit louder than your planned Friday night flipping pages of a book—hey, hey, let's be honest here," he cut in as I opened my mouth to defend myself. "But it'll be good. You know, music. *Bungle* juice. Females. Lemme talk to him and I'm sure you can swing by."

"I mean, I don't wanna crash his thing, like—"

"David, you wanna write this story or you wanna write this story? You come, you see what's it like, you get a little buzzed, or a lot, you go home. Easy as calculus."

"No, I mean, whatever. Fine." At this, Kai pumped his fist in the air like the Packers just scored a touchdown. "And calc's not easy, you asshat. You're just smart."

Unfortunately, even this protest couldn't wipe the smile off his face. He was getting his loser friend to a party, and he was happy as a clam.

8:51 p.m., Hendricks Dormitory, Room 306D

I looked at myself in the mirror. Yep, there I was. Dark hair, light brown skin, eyes, nose, mouth, etc. I started scrubbing my teeth courtesy of Walmart's cheapest toothpaste, trying to rid myself of burrito breath, when I heard Kai's footfalls come out of our double towards the bathroom.

"*Davíd!*" he shrieked with delight, sounding exactly like people do when they pretend to be someone's mom. "*¿Estás listo, m'hijo?*"

I groaned through the foam of my minty saliva. "The Spanish is out of hand. Besides, it's *listo*, not *lista*. I'm a dude, if you didn't know. But yeah, I'm almost ready. Give me a sec." I tried spitting out my mouth full of toothpaste for emphasis. Inexplicably, a strand of teal paste dribbled down my chin, dropping onto my black tee before I could stop it.

Kai, who must've been feeling kind, stifled any kind of laugh. "Shoot, *listo*, not *lista*. You right. That adjective agreement stuff always trips me up. But c'mon, we gotta run over to Anna's before we head over."

After rinsing and sliding my toothbrush back into its holder, I turned to him. "Anna's? I thought this was Trent's thing?"

"Pregaming, *hijo*. Perhaps the most important part of the night!"

Even I knew what pregaming was, so I didn't have to ask. But I did have to put forth a mild protest: "Dude, you said this was a thing with Trent. You didn't tell me we were gonna tour the dorms before going over."

"Chill, man, it's just one stop. And besides, *An-na*." (Read: "Come on man, you know I like her, and what better way to get her to like me back than hanging out and drinking together?")

"Alright, alright, we'll go pregame at *An-na's*," I affirmed, emphasizing her name in the same way he did. (Read: "I don't really want to go, but I guess we can. Besides, you're kind of the reason that I'm going to this in the first place so I can't really leave you.")

"Sweet," Kai grinned. "You know, I *am* kind of the reason you're going in the first place."

Dang, this guy's good. "Yeah, yeah, well. You know," I said, snagging my pocket notebook, lifting it up for him to see before stuffing it into the pocket of my jeans. "For the sake of the story."

Kai eyed me. "You're not actually planning to be writing at this party, are you?"

“I mean, if I’m going to be writing a good—” Kai cut me off.

“Bro. It’s a party, not study tables.”

My face flushed as I fumbled in my backpack for my mini pen, perfectly sized for the notebook. “Look,” I started, finding my pen at the bottom of my bag and snagging it. “This isn’t my thing, it’s your thing. You go for Anna, I go for the story, ok?” I made a show of re-pulling out my notebook, clipping the pen on, and shoving it back in my pocket.

“I don’t know if I’ve heard homework as the reason someone goes to a party, but hey,” Kai shrugged. “If it gets you out of the house. By the way, you planning to head there as toothpaste-shirt guy or you gonna change?”

“Right, right. Uh, forgot about that. Gimme two.” I head into my room, combing through my t-shirt drawer until finding a nondescript blue tee. It’d have to do.

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10:17 p.m., 4422 Westford Pl. (living room, kitchen)

Gingerly pushing open a well-worn door, our crew of five—Kai, Anna and two of her friends, and me—joined what felt like 500 people, though may have been closer to 50. Music pumped through a sound system, generic rap with only expletives and innuendos audible. Something about horse riding, but it sounded like the horse was actually a—never mind. Thankfully, my train of thought was interrupted by flannel-wearing dude looking like he’d been drinking since last night, shouldering me accidentally as he stumbled by and mumbling an apology.

I tried to take it all in. In front of me was a mass of people, their red cups sloshing dark liquid, swaying vaguely in tune to the music. To my right, across from mismatched couches, a 30-some inch TV playing a college football had a few guys huddled around, beers clutched in their hands.

Kai and the girls seemed pulled by some magnetic force towards the kitchen, so I followed dumbly just as I had at Anna’s pregame, edging past too-warm bodies, the scent of the room thick like air before a thunderstorm, the whole place a heavy mix of booze, perfume, and gym locker room.

“You taking notes, m’hijo?” Kai shouted to me over the bass, grinning.

My face burned, but I shouted back. “Absolutely. Number one—Kai is an asshat.”

“What?” he cried.

“I said you’re an asshat!” I bellowed.

Kai flipped me off cheerily and Anna giggled as we scooted around a lively beer pong game and crossed into the kitchen which, while still swarming with people, allowed me to feel like I would at least have the room to lean over and tie my shoe, if need be. On a card table was an enormous salad bowl filled with what I could only guess was jungle juice.

“Kai, what is up, my bro?” I looked up to see a guy from my Brit lit class pulling Kai into a complicated man handshake, lots of hand smacking culminating with a chest bump. “You guys want something to drink?” he asked our group, referencing towards the almost neon-blue liquid in the bowl and beginning to ladle out the stuff as they assented.

I mumbled some sort of yes to his offer as well, pretending he hadn’t ignored me but was actually still planning to greet me in some sort of elaborate fashion. Here I am, this dude sloshing blue liquid into these hallowed red cups, this pinnacle of our very existence, the college Mecca, complete! Jungle juice! Sure, I was still left unacknowledged, but when you’re friends with someone you don’t actually have to say hi, right, it’s just understood?

Realizing I had kind of spaced out, I looked up to see Kai and the others heading back towards the main room and him shouting, “You coming?”

I felt bad for already following them around the last hour at Anna’s, so I pushed my hand slightly forward in the air like I was shooting a basketball with terrible form, as if to say, you kids go on ahead and have your fun without me, now.

“So, uh, how you been, man?” I asked the Brit-lit-classmate-turned-jungle-juice-server guy, sipping from my cup. The stuff was almost sickly sweet, but when I swallowed it, it burned, and I coughed. I quickly tried to stop myself from coughing, which only made me need to hack more.

After the world’s longest twenty seconds I looked up to see him, unimpressed. “So yeah, you’ve been doing ok?” I asked hopefully.

“Yeah. Yeah, not too bad,” he said, not unkindly, but with his eyes already searching for the nearest exit as if I were an encroaching fire. His teeth were blue from the drink. “Listen, I gotta go catch up with a buddy, but I’ll see you around.” He shot out like a rocket, leaving me alone in the midst of blue-toothed, drunken strangers.

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11:32 p.m., 4422 Westford Place (beer pong table)

I checked my phone again. Not even midnight. I felt like I had been here for hours, sipping on blue rocket fuel and incinerating my throat. I was posted up in a corner chair by the beer pong, far enough out of the way that I only occasionally got hit with the sticky, off-white ball.

At parties, I quickly found out, like anywhere in the world, it is very easy to become invisible. If you were relatively stationary, spoke little, and looked down most of the time, bam! No one would speak to you.

I was ready to leave—beyond ready, really. But I didn’t want to be that guy, dipping out before midnight. But I pretty much had what I needed. (Another perk of being invisible, no one minds much if you pull out a pocket-sized notebook and take notes. Mine read: *jungle juice - radioactive?? sweet but super strong. beer pong = necessary evil. making out couples plentiful. drunk people love singing?*)

Nothing too earth-shattering, I realize, but just being here was good. I think I had enough of a handle on the rules of beer pong to write a passable beer pong scene now, too. Looking back, my party scene *had* been a little dopey, come to think of it.

Cheering erupted from the other end of the table, and Kai and Anna were going wild as Anna’s friend, on the side of the table near me, slurped down beer from another cup before setting it aside. Her partner took the ball and tossed it. It clinked ineffectively off the side of one cup before Kai snagged it.

“David!” he shouted, giddy with the combination of alcohol and proximity to Anna. “This one’s for you, buddy!” He chucked the ball hard against the wall to his right. It bounced off, hit the table once, and plopped perfectly in the remaining cup, at which point shrieks of joy erupted.

“HE’S DONE IT! HE’S DONE IT!” some rando shouted, thumping him on the back. The girl next to me, after shrieking in delight, lunged

towards the table in preparation for the next game, bumping a crop-topped girl's back in the process and dropping her solo cup directly onto the right leg of yours truly. Blue exploded in all directions, and I stood up quickly, trying to stop the stuff from pooling, but it was too late. My jeans and, more importantly, my notebook were soaked. I pulled it out of my pocket, ignoring her apologies as someone sober enough to walk in a straight line rushed to the kitchen to find paper towels.

Kai broke himself away from his beer pong jubilation long enough to come over. "Did you see that, *hijo*? Did you see that!" he roared, grinning. Then, seeing me dripping, added, "Man, you were in the splash zone!"

"I'm out. She soaked me."

"No, shoot, you sure? It's jeans, no one will notice."

I looked down at my jeans soaked to a dark blue, soggy notebook in one hand. "Yeah man, I'm—"

"Take these," someone said, stuffing paper towels into my hand. "Lauren, dang it, Lauren, sit here," the voice continued in the same breath, a hand deftly wiping the seat dry before half helping, half pushing the girl who spilled on me into the seat. "She had too much to drink. A-gain. Just like last week." Behind glasses, I saw her rolling her eyes, a movement that looked instinctual.

"Well, uh, thanks for the paper towels," I said, dabbing my pants the best I could.

"No problem," she responded distractedly, using the remaining paper towels to dry the aforementioned Lauren, who was still laughing and apologizing. "Hey, you say you were leaving? I gotta get her home."

Thoughts of being in my extra-long twin bed in 10 minutes, drifting mercifully to sleep after a long, weird night had flooded my mind, but now I saw that dream start to blink out like a weird Power-Point animation.

"Yeah, I was about to head out."

"Help bring her home?" the girl acting as Lauren's caretaker said. My silence spoke for the fact that I didn't want to, but I felt her eyes on me and she quickly filled in the silence. "Last time I tried to bring her myself I couldn't get her to her room fast enough and she peed all over her—"

“I did not!” Lauren interrupted, her voice fogged by jungle juice. “Did not do that, you think I did that?” She turned to me, giggling again.

Ignoring Lauren, who appeared incapable of conversation, I looked to the girl who had asked me to help. “Yeah, sure.”

I look back to Kai to confer with him that I was, in fact, heading out, but he had already been sucked back towards Anna. Soaked notebook in one hand, I stood to head out.

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12:36 a.m., Elmsen Dormitory Room 229A

I adapted quickly to my new role as co-caretaker of Lauren. The girl I was helping, whose name I learned was Mary, asked I at least stay for an hour or so because she was kind of drunk, too, and was worried she’d fall asleep on Lauren. “Can’t have her dying, you know, her parents would kill me,” she’d said.

Mary seemed pretty cool in a refreshing kind of way. On one hand, she was brusque with Lauren, near-pulling her up the stairs when apparently I wasn’t helping her up fast enough. On the other hand, she was looking after Lauren, who was now snoring quietly, and demanded I take some cookies for being nice enough to help.

“These are delicious, by the way,” I told her, reaching into the Tupperware to take out another chocolate chip.

“I know that, David, otherwise I wouldn’t have made them.” She rolled her eyes and laughed, but not unkindly.

I sunk back into their futon, quietly munching on a cookie. My jeans were still wet, but I was getting kind of used to it at this point. Things could be worse, I guess. Mary sat cross-legged beside me, spacing out, then suddenly reached across me, brushing my arm as she snagged my still-wet notebook, which I had set beside me after trying in vain to fan out the pages.

“What’s this for, by the way?”

“Those are just some notes,” I said vaguely, touching my arm, not particularly pleased she just took my stuff without asking. I wasn’t quite in the mood to explain that I took notes on a party for my prose class.

“Ah. Notes. It’s pretty soaked but, let’s see here.” She thumbed gingerly through the wet pages, the ink runny but not altogether illegible. “Jungle juice...Making out couples plentiful.” She pursed her lips, raising her eyes and looked up at me expectantly. “Just some...notes for class?” Her eyes twinkled.

“Okay yeah, that probably looks weird, but it’s for a story.” Here I go, announcing to this poor girl my weird party plans. “Like, for a class. I had written a party scene that was just a mess, so my roommate told me I should go with him so I could figure out how to write a better scene.”

“Did he suggest taking notes?” she asked, a ghost of a smile on her face.

“No,” I laughed despite myself. “No, I can’t say he was a fan of me bringing the notebook.”

Mary seemed content with that, and set the notebook down between us, then slouched down into the futon and put her feet up mini ottoman. “So, did it help?”

“Did what help?”

“Going to the party. With the story, I mean.”

Oh. Right. “Yeah, I mean, I think so. I don’t really go to them very often, so it was good to get experience, I guess?”

She laughed quietly, saw me shrinking away, and spoke. “No, no, sorry. I didn’t mean to be laughing at you. It’s just, people go to parties for the dumbest reasons, you know?”

“Uh, thanks.”

“No, not you. Well, not you specifically.” We laughed, together this time, and Lauren offered a well-timed snore. “Just like, you went to write a book, Lauren went to get drunk, I mean half the people there were probably there just because they thought they had to be there.”

“Yeah, I think you might be onto something.” I thought for a second. “And where do you fit into that whole spectrum?”

She sighed at that. “There was this guy. He told me he was going and that I should come by, so of course Lauren was up for it, and then this douche doesn’t even show up.”

I gave a series of intelligent responses, “Oh, yeah. Huh,” before finishing it off: “Well, I’m sorry about that.”

"Yeah, I dunno. It's probably for the best. I mean, I'd rather babysit Lauren and have some weird guy eat all my cookies anyways."

It was at this point I realized that I had been on autopilot, as I finished chewing the last bite of another gloriously soft chocolate chip cookie. "Shoot, I've eaten like six of these."

"Eight, actually," Mary said, helpfully. I was mortified. "It's fine, really. They're better fresh anyways." She pulled another out of the Tupperware, broke it in half, and handed it over. "Here."

"I really can't say no to these," I said, accepting the cookie half and taking a bite.

"Yeah," she giggled. "I gathered that after the fourth or fifth one." We ate in a silence that wasn't quite uncomfortable. It could have been a worse night. I mean, the party was weird and sweaty, my notebook was ruined, and my sleep cycle (I glanced at my watch—12:47 a.m.) was surely thrown off, but the cookies were good and Mary, honestly, was kind of cute.

At a certain point, I realized I had dozed off, but woke up really needing to pee. I gingerly poked Mary, who had nodded off, too. "Can I use your guys' bathroom?"

She nodded. "Yeah, shoot. I fell asleep. It's right over there." She pointed to the right of their entrance and got up to go to check on Lauren, who was still snoring contentedly by my standards, as I went to pee. As I came back, wiping my hands dry on my damp jeans, I tried and failed to stifle a huge yawn and asked, "Is it cool if I head back? She seems, uh, pretty alive, by my standards."

Mary laughed, her eyes crinkling up in a smile. "Go for it. And hey—thanks for helping out."

"No problem. Anytime you need someone to pull your drunk friend up the stairs, just let me know," I said, heading towards the door, still bleary from sleep. Clever, right?

"You could hardly get her up the first step," she retorted. "Hold it, your notebook."

I turned towards the futon to get it, but she already had it held out for me.

"Thanks."

“Thanks yourself. And sorry about the notebook, anyway.”
It was still pretty damp, but she had clipped the pen back on for me which was nice, I guess. She unlocked the door, pulling it open.

“Okay, well, have a good night.”
I stepped out into the dorm hallway.

“You too David, seeya.”

Wet notebook in hand and the remnants of chocolate chip cookies in my molars, I left Elmsen and crossed the quad to get to back to Hendricks. The night had an early fall crispness to it, chilly but not unpleasantly so. Across the way, I saw three girls laughing, shoes clacking in rhythm on the sidewalk, dressed like they were going to a party. Wait...I checked my watch—1:22 a.m. They weren’t going, they were leaving. Maybe their bloodstream was tinged blue with jungle juice, too, which reminds me I’ve got to tweak my party scene. Damn. I couldn’t sleep yet, I still had work to do.

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9:47 a.m., Hendricks Dormitory, Room 306D

The story was done. Finally.

Feeling surprisingly good for not having got my 8-hour quota of sleep and now having finished my short story, I was feeling pretty happy with myself.

“Ka-i! Breakfast is ready!” I shouted gleefully, in a horrendous and vaguely motherly soprano. Dutifully, Kai appeared, shirtless and with uncombed hair, but there all the same. I’ll admit, the man came pretty fast considering, *A)* it was Saturday, *B)* he was slightly hungover, and *C)* breakfast was Pop-Tarts.

“So, how’d things end up last night?” I asked, sliding a pack of Pop-Tarts over to him.

He grinned. “Good man, it was a fun time.”

“So, you and Anna...” I asked, letting my voice trail off.

“I mean, she seemed to have a pretty good time,” Kai said through Pop-Tart crumbs. “But you know, I don’t really like to rush these things.”

“Claro que si, I gotcha man.” I smiled.

“By the way, why am I up right now? It’s like 10 a.m. on a weekend.”

“I thought you’d never ask,” I said jubilantly, reaching into my backpack. “This.” I handed over my finished short story, triumphant.

“Hey, m’hijo, there we go!” Kai raised his knuckles for a fist bump. “Well, grab some Pop-Tarts, stay a while, lemme read this sucker.”

“Can’t do that, my man. Not today,” I said, standing up from the table, grin on my face.

Kai looked up, mid-bite. “And why’s that?”

“Because of this.” I pulled out my now only damp notebook from my pocket, flipping to the back of the notebook, where on the cardboard backing, a hasty scrawl in blue pen read, “Because you forgot to ask for it —Mary,” with a phone number and smiley next to her name. A smiley!

“Who’s Mary?” Kai asked, blinking with sleepy eyes.

I grinned. “I’ll tell you after breakfast, man! Enjoy your Pop-Tarts!” Before he could respond, I winked at him, snagging the remaining a copy of my story before heading out of our room and the front doors of Hendricks into the squinting morning sun.

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9:58 a.m., Reggae Cafe

I was sitting maybe halfway to the back wall of the cafe, facing the entrance so I could see Mary when she came in. Feeling like I needed something to do with my hands, I thumbed through my short story. Mary would think it was lame, maybe, that I was bringing the story to show her. But, if her figuring out I went to a party just to take notes on parties didn’t make her realize I was at least 50% lame, that was kind of her bad.

Looking up from my story, I saw her open the door and waved her over. Last night’s jungle juice and chocolate chip cookie-tinged assessment was confirmed—she was cute. I smiled, but then tried not to. This resulted in my face looking like I was either constipated or suffering from appendicitis, or both, as she sat down across from me. Thankfully, she seemed not to mind, and immediately dove into her mental dilemma regarding the merits of an omelet versus chocolate chip pancakes. After I assured her there was perhaps no order more noble than chocolate chip pancakes, we both ordered and she nodded at my papers on the table.

“Wait! Is that your short story?” she asked, sounding excited.

I grinned.

“Yeah, I thought I’d bring it if you wanted to check it out.”

“Of course! My sister writes stuff all the time and I love reading it.” I slid the paper across to her, and she picked it up, read for a second, and set it back down. “Wait a second. We should read it together, I wanna be able to point out the parts I like.”

She stood up, scooted next to me in the booth, and, our shoulders touching, we began to read together:

The gas station dude was giving me a weird look, like he was in on a secret he couldn’t wait to tell me. Frankly, I was just hoping to buy my Coke in peace, but he chats me up like he’s been waiting for this conversation for years.

“How ya doin’ this afternoon?”

“Good, thanks. Just enjoying the weekend.”

“Any big plans for the night?” he asked, ask I handed over my credit card.

“I may go out with some buddies tonight, but I’m not sure yet.”

His eyes twinkled a little bit as he handed my card back. I was itching for the receipt to print.

“Going out, huh? That sounds like a fun time to me.”

“Well, it’s not really my thing.” I shrugged. “We’ll see.”

The receipt came out, mind-bogglingly slowly. He tore it off but, still holding it in his hand, leveled his gaze and spoke. “Hey, you go on and have a good time, alright? Nights like that are great.” He handed over the receipt, and I smiled at him. He continued, so earnestly I half-believed him, “Really! Trust me, you never know who you might meet.”

