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Catch Hell Blues

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Bard

The night began with the four of us sitting in the Murdermobile, getting drunk while the party raged on across the street. This was something we usually did with our clothes on. But the party was underwear and lingerie themed, and Vince had suggested pregaming in our skivvies so we wouldn't feel self-conscious when we walked in. Vince generally seemed to enjoy being naked, and I knew he wasn't self-conscious about anything, really; but he had given us a ride and was sharing his Jagermeister, and we probably felt it would be polite to oblige him.

The car was called the Murdermobile because it was a Navy Blue 1996 BMW 7 series, the same make and model as the vehicle in which Tupac Shakur had been shot and killed. This, of course, was why Vince had bought the car, using a portion of his weed hustle to finance the down payment. Miles, who had swallowed three perc-10's when the bottle came his way, was now digging ferociously at his crotch, saying the come-up had gotten his crabs all hot and bothered.

"Sorry guys," Miles said, wincing as he raked his nails over the affected areas. "It's the gift that keeps on giving."

Nobody laughed. There was a time when we might have envied Miles for his venereal misadventures, or at the very least found some humor in their consequences. But the birth of his little son, Javier, then not even a few months old, had changed this for us, even if it hadn't seemed to have changed Miles. Taco leaned to the side, as though he was worried that Miles's vigorous itching might dislodge a mating pair. Vince swallowed Jagermeister and looked on murderously through the darkness.

"Sometimes Miles," Vince said, "You remind me of Oedipus. If Oedipus had been a teenage father with scabies."

"Mind your cruelty, shithead. Lest it fuck with my high." Miles's itching resumed with escalating vigor. Vince unlocked his car doors and pointed towards the sidewalk.

"Sorry," Miles said, opening the door with his free hand.

"I pray to God you wear a glove with Gabriella, you nasty bitch." Taco called out after him. Thin and gravel-voiced and mean-looking, Taco's claim to fame was that he made experimental Soundcloud Rap that was actually good enough to get him signed, which he eventually did. Taco

wasn't actually a mean dude; but he was still struggling to come out at the end of high school, and this and Miles's proclivities had a way of putting him in a vile humor.

"If you ain't shit wrap your dick," Taco yelled down the street.

"Afraid she's one step ahead of you." Miles said, "I've been sleeping on the couch since her third trimester."

The party was at Jada's house in Harvard Heights, on a block consisting of hulking, Craftsman bungalows. Jada lived in one of a few houses in the neighborhood that hadn't been subdivided. Her house was a three-story Craftsman and had a gigantic front-yard full of hydrangea, honeysuckle, and bougainvillea. She was the reason I was there; we'd started to have sex last weekend until her mom had shown up and started banging on the door, causing me to ejaculate in a paroxysm of animal terror. Now I wanted a redux. I was ready; not too drunk and tastefully attired in my polka-a-dot fruit of the looms, Vince and I both ripped from our thrice a week after school Rendez-Vous in the Oceanside High weight room.

We watched as Miles walked in front of the car and stopped, his face quizzical and ill-at-ease in the headlights. He bent over quickly, both hands plunging into his too-small pair of briefs, his shameful, lice-ridden genitals briefly but unmistakably revealed. Vince's fist mashed the horn, sending Miles into a scurry. Taco shook his head

"Banana smugglers were a poor choice," he announced dryly, as Miles straddled the trunk of an enormous date palm and began to grind his crotch against its plaited bark.

"Now he's molesting some innocent palm tree," Vince said. "What did that palm tree ever do to him?"

I'd been friends with Miles the longest, and a part of me felt as though I should have said something. And yet a larger, more vocal part of me that night felt that Miles was a fuck who deserved to die. It was the first time we'd seen Miles since Javier's birth, and somehow he had already managed to cause grave offense with his penis. Though Vince, Taco and I had sworn dire, drunken oaths of obligation to Javi on the night of his birth, I already knew that we'd never forgive Miles for what he had done.

The way he treated Gabriella was bad enough, especially when I remembered how their courtship had been - back in the days of our vehicleless loserdom, when still drank at the Loz Feliz

Rec Center picnic benches. She had fawned over Miles as though tending to him in sickness, the ideals of healer and concubine melding with Freudian poignance; Freudian because Miles's Mother had been a patissier, Gabriella a patissiers apprentice. He'd even met in one of his mother's own bakeries. Miles, for his part, had betrayed her repeatedly as soon and as often as he could, though it should be said that he told her he would do this ahead of time, as he did with all the girls who loved him. There had been, in spite of this tendency, quite a few girls all told. "Like flies to their wanton God" as Vince had once put it, not that we were any less accommodating of our friend's fetid ways.

The sad thing was that Miles had been more or less like this since his mother died of cancer, back when we'd gone to elementary school together. Miles's father, who was rich and famous and big on sex, had never shown much interest in him. An architect from the school of Neo-Phallic design, he taught classes at Cal-Arts when he wasn't designing buildings that looked like humongous plate-glass cocks. Their estrangement notwithstanding, Miles's father was paying for the apartment that Miles and Gabriella had shared since Javi's conception, which I suppose Miles's dad found easier than going to therapy with his son. Miles may have been a fuck, but you never doubted the authenticity of his hurt. Once, a few months after his mom died, I'd seen him take a bite out of a dog turd on a common dare. There was a great deal of shared history between the two of us, if nothing else.

Vince took a long draught of Jager and turned the car off, our signal to exit. We filed out of the Mudermobile, our nipples hardening as our bare skin came into contact with the damp night air. Miles was now swooning face-first against the palm tree in the limp posture a pool noodle. I watched as Taco picked up a small rock and with a snap of his wrist sent it flying in the direction of Mile's buttocks, colliding between them with savage precision. Miles squealed and slowly knelt into a patch of tall grass, clutching his ass with both hands as though proffering it to some unseen suitor.

"Aw fuck!" Miles moaned. "Aw fucking, fucking FUCK!"

"What's wrong, boy?" Taco yelled, "Trying to catch a dick?"

"Some friend you are," Miles wailed, "I think a wasp just stung my asshole!"

Vince and Taco began to chortle, and I shook my head at both of them.

“Guys,” Miles whimpered, “Guys, this really isn’t funny. Does anyone have an epi-pen?”

Vince grinned, smug behind his aviator shades and lit cigarillo, looking from the neck up like the world’s handsomest dirty cop.

“Hurry up Miles, I’m trying to boogie,” Vince said. “Maybe you can find some nice freshman to suck out the poison.”

Back then I felt I could at least count on Vince, who’d been my best friend since Middle School. Like Miles, Vince was preposterously good looking, though his beauty lacked the formers androgynous flavor. When he cut his hair he reminded people of a young Sean Penn, with an errant, half-hazard confidence to boot. He was two years older than us on account of all the school he’d missed when his parents were both on meth. Vince ran cross country, starred in our school plays, and maintained a 3.8 unweighted grade point average. He also sold drugs, weed mainly and sometimes pills. He could flip quads for a hundred dollars to kids from Bel-Air all day and pretty much did; he had the Murdermobile paid off in full by the end of the same summer he bought it.

Miles and I met Vince when we were in the sixth grade. Miles had lost his virginity to Vince’s cousin - a strange but intoxicatingly nubile goth girl named Marcy - around the same time that Vince was living in her family’s apartment, during the last of his parent’s many attempts to get clean. Vince and I would drink Red Bull and play Super Smash Bro’s Melee while Miles and Marcy went at it upstairs. We liked the same kind of music (Gangster Rap and 90’s Seattle bands), and Vince had been a font of the kind of information that budding delinquents relished. Like how to roll a joint, or how to know when a girl was ready to go to third base. Once, when our conversation about the simple pleasures of huffing nitrous oxide from whipped cream cans was interrupted by one of Marcy’s exuberant moans, Vince put down his Red Bull, shrugged, and sighed.

“Been there done that.” Vince said. His Captain Falcon walloped my Kirby with his firey fist, sending him cartwheeling and caterwauling into the lava pit below.

Game!

I realized Vince was looking at me, his eyes belligerent and searching.

“Damn.” I said, somewhere between fascination and hyperventilating discomfort. “Aren’t you two blood relatives?”

“What of it?”

The question sat before us, a demand nailed to the church door. Somehow I rose to the occasion. I shrugged. From then on, I had his utmost confidence.

Vince’s apartment was a half mile down the hill from mine, in Frogtown. The complex - named the Venetian Villa, or simply La Ville to Frogtown locals- was notorious even by the standards of the area. A decrepit and blatantly landlocked structure, Venetian Villa looked less like a villa than some kind of highly dubious, subtropical Khrushchyovka. Vince’s apartment was on the top floor of the complex. The elevator was broken, so getting their entailed ascending a dimly lit stairwell in which people, according to Vince, sometimes fucked. I never saw any fucking, but the people who scored drugs there certainly liked to litter the stairwell with their burnt and bloodied paraphernalia, lest they be mistaken for folk unaccustomed to squalor.

Upon entering their home, one’s nostrils were immediately accosted by the commingling scents of cat piss, tobacco, and glade cinnamon. For some reason, I liked it there. It struck me as atmospheric. If you’d drunk enough beer, you could piss off right off the terrace onto the concrete embankment of the L.A River. We thought this was great sport. Vince usually seemed to be living there with a couple of other people, blood relations mostly, but so long as we didn’t puke anywhere untoward we could usually count on being left alone.

His older twin brothers stopped by sometimes, musclebound repo men who dabbled in low-level narcotics trafficking. I don’t think I ever knew their names. They were handsome and arrogant and looked with their SS bolt neck tattoos like no-bullshit white power gangsters. I did my best to avoid them, despite Vince’s attempts to reassure me by saying they were too stupid to be feared, as though such people existed.

His grandmother lived on the couch in the main room, greeting us in Spanish whenever we crossed paths. She lived on the couch because she was missing an eye, a foot, and a good number of her teeth, which probably would have made living anywhere else quite difficult. It seemed to suit her somehow, which isn’t to say I think she enjoyed missing all those body parts. She just sat there and sowed and said nice things to us in Spanish, as though the long lost fourth

fate had decamped to some Frogtown hovel. Vince said she'd once been the Madame of a Jaurez brothel, and we both thought this was pretty cool, that his toothless little Abuela had once been a lady-pimp.

Vince's dad, Steve, looked a great deal like Vince, but drunker and older. Jailhouse tattoos depicting scenes of damnation and eternal torment snaked up the length of his enormous arms. He collected handguns and read lot's of old paperbacks by Stephen King and Dean Koontz. He struck me as gentle and kind, at least for a man who used to cook meth for bikers. Sometimes we'd all get drunk together and he'd give Vince and I buzzcuts.

The trouble with Steve was that he drank more than any other person I'd ever met, even more than my mom; he plowed through at least a fifth of whiskey a day, a chemical deluge which he supplemented with handfuls of Vicodin and countless bong rips. Vince was circumspect about this; he minded but saw it as an alternative to the meth, under the influence of which his mother and father had sold the families household appliances, even Vince's cherished Nike High-Tops. They shared between them the anguish of his mother's absence. Vince had shown me the postcards and letters she sometimes sent, their return addresses made out to budget motels in various rundown exurbs in the Inland Empire. He kept in the same drawer as his safe and scale. He would cry for her sometimes, but only when he was black-out, stumble-down drunk, and when he did so Miles, Taco and I would hold him as he shuddered and heaved and howled to wake the dead.

The party was already in full swing when we walked in together, Kendrick Lamar blaring from the speakers, the air ripe with drunken, underage lechery. I entered the living room and turned my head to see Stacey Yu with her back turned toward me, nude but for a g-string. Everywhere I looked, my peers cavorted in similar states of undress, lining the hallways, perched on the countertops, sprawled over furniture, french kissing in twos and threes on the rug. My throat tightened. Miles wobbled in after us and immediately took to the couch, whereupon the Hernandez twins nestled against his lolling form and began to play with his hair. I thought of the last time I'd seen Gabriella at his apartment, pale and still exhausted from her labor, and of little Javi himself; seven and a half pounds of hot-pink, cantankerous, vulnerability, so exquisite in his newborn ways that the sight of him had brought Vince to unshy, manful weeping.

I drank deeply from the first red solo cup that came my way, a witches brew of red wine, Mexican coke, and grain alcohol. Vince and Taco had sequestered themselves in a corner with Benny Hadid and LaQuia Duval, the latter of whom was attempting to light a blunt the approximate size of a hot dog. Taco had fought as a flyweight at Golden Gloves on a lark last year, yet he awaited his turn in the rotation like a deer in headlights. He liked most substances, but seemed to come within a hair's breadth of a psychotic break every time he smoked pot. Taco had come into the fold during our sophomore year of high school, when Miles was away at some Utah boarding school for the well-to-do and chemically incorrigible, leaving Vince and I bereft of a third core-constituent. His real name was Taqwa, an Arabic word for piety and cognizance of God. But there were certainly more devotees of Mexican cuisine than the Islamic faith on the gritty block of Venice beach where he'd grown-up; thus, Taco stuck.

At the time, Vince and I had been beefing with Marcus Howard and his posse of teenage defectives, all of them violent and slow-witted Tongans from Hawthorne. Marcus and his friends knew they'd be rock-bottom fucking losers forever, and they dealt with it by going around and kicking the dogshit out of the defenseless and earnest; like our friend Noble Trash, who dared to confront them about the drugs they hadn't paid him for and received 16 staples in the side of his head for his trouble. It was a beating from which Noble Trash hadn't seemed to have recovered; he left the school shortly after he got out of the hospital, and when Vince and I ran into him near the boardwalk a few days later, he told us he'd been living in a tent he'd pitched under the Venice pier.

It was on account of this that Vince had sworn to destroy them. He taunted them insanely, issuing obscene threats of torture and sodomy as he pantomimed semen throwing. Sometimes he just barked like a rottweiler, Frogtown style.

“WOO-WOO-WOO!”

Marcus would purse his lips and light a cigarette like it didn't bother him, as though he and his little posse of obese child molesters had more important things to do. Vince even insisted that we ate lunch a mere fifteen feet from where they usually gathered, just to further antagonize them. After the third lunch period we'd spent staring at one another with barely-suppressed homicidal intent, my resolve had begun to crack.

“Vince,” I said, “I wish we could get back at them for Noble Trash just as badly as you do, but this is downright retarded.”

“Fuck you, Ricky, my Uncle’s retarded.”

“Be that as it may, I don’t think this makes any sense. They’re chunky monkeys for sure, but there’s five of us and two of them. And we aren’t exactly Chuck Liddell and Randy Couture.”

“This is a matter of honor.”

“Of whose motherfucker? Of Noble Trashes? Since when did we become his guardian fucking avengers? Look, Vince, I like Noble Trash too, but Noble Trash is a fucking dope boy. And not one I esteem as highly as you, or myself for that matter.”

“If I am not for Noble Trash,” Vince said, his voice taking on a theatrical intonation, “then who will be for me?”

“Noble Trash would not have been for you under these circumstances.”

“Nor could he have been Ricky, so how about you stop being so goddamn callous and bitchlike!”

“Fuck you Vince, they’re not worth it and you know it.” And yet, in the most private corner of my heart, I knew I did not know this, and that in truth I burned with holy hatred, a teenaged jihad. Underneath that covered pavilion, I recoiled at my own meagerness.

It could not have been a few seconds later that we saw Taco run-up on Marcus Howard, call him “a sniveling bitch”, then grab him by the cuffs of his dickies and yank him off the brick embankment where he’d been sitting with his cronies. The embankment was nearly chest-high, and Taco had done this with such unanticipated swiftness and agility that Marcus’s pants were pulled down around his ankles. Then, Taco got on top of him and began to punch him in the face.

We’d learn later that Marcus had called Taco a faggot, and that Taco had subsequently challenged him to a fight behind the gym. After Marcus had blown him off for the second day in a row, Taco had come to him, or rather for him. The Tongans had converged around Taco and were beginning to windmill on him when Vince set down his chicken nuggets, stood up, and let out a throaty, bawling “Allahu Akbar!”. Then he tossed his chocolate Milk in Marcus’s brother’s

face and hurled himself into the melee, only to get wrangled into a headlock by a pair of corpulent homunculi who'd been suspended for downloading snuff films on school computers.

I leaped forward and hooked my arm around the leg of the smaller one, then drove him into the ground with me, the wind coming out of him with a wretched croak. I leaped to my feet and looked about wildly, only to get clocked by Marcus and his friend at the same time, the blows landing on the left and right sides of my jaw. My head bounced as it hit the grass. Someone was trying to kick me. Then they were down, and Vince was lifting me to my feet and launching me forward like a human tomahawk into Marcus, who by then had simply discarded his dickies and was fighting in his sky-blue gap boxer briefs. Marcus got me in a half-nelson while his friend grabbed me by the hips and rammed his huge beefy knee into my ass. I screamed wildly. Not only were they going to rape me, but I knew I was going to shit my pants. Then Taco punched my would-be sodomizer in the throat, and I dropped to the ground again. It was nice there. There was grass and some soft dirt, discarded paper sheaths of straws floating about like the ghosts of earthworms. I knew we were all about to get arrested.

Then we did.

A whistle blew; I saw the black boots galloping sideways towards me, Vince and Taco dropping to the ground with their hands spread out. The zip ties did not hurt as much as people told me they would. I was lifted to my feet and frogmarched forward in front of hundreds of my screaming peers, some of whom were taking videos with their cellphones. Vince was screaming the words, "Tee off like Tiger Woods" over and over again, lost in a rapture of violence, until one of the cops who had zip-tied us yelled at him to shut the fuck up.

They deposited us in the office of the school police, who made us sit in folding chairs while we answered their questions. Taco's nose was gushing blood, and Vince had purple lump swelling up on the side of his head, as well as a bloody spot on his eye where someone had gouged it. My mouth tasted like pennies, and I could wiggle my back molar with my tongue. I felt like I was going to vomit. Tears trickled soundlessly from my eyes, stinging the abraded skin on my cheeks.

The cops asked us each who started it, and seemed to believe us when we said it was the Tongans. In addition to hating the likes of Marcus more than anything, they were also almost

certainly prejudiced against the Tongan people, and therefore seemed to implicitly approve of what we'd done. They even brought me an icepack for my jaw. Eventually, the Dean, who for whatever reason had an unrequited hard-on for Vince despite his sexy, drug-dealing, theater kid ways, came in and screamed at us, then winked and gave us pink-slips saying we'd been suspended for the next three days.

We exited the office together and began to limp down Lincoln Boulevard, our swollen and bloodied faces contorting against the midday sun. Vince nodded in the direction of the Yum-Yum doughnuts by the check-cashing place on seventh, where Vince bought Taco a bubble tea and we made his acquaintance.

"That was lucky for me the way y'all came through," Taco said. "On my mama though, they were about to put a stop to my ass forever."

"You could have taken them," Vince said, and I didn't argue, though if my aching asshole could speak it might have begged to differ. Taco stirred his bubble tea pensively.

"Not sure about that, but thanks."

We spent the rest of the afternoon talking, about our school and our lives, the things we liked to do and the drugs we'd done and the music we were into. A speedoclad, musclebound man on rollerblades passed by, eliciting a wolf-whistle from Taco in response. It was a Wednesday, which meant at some point I'd have to go home, and when I did my mom would be as loaded and foul-tempered as a Mission-Street bum. But Vince was holding, so I could at least get high before then. The twilight was cool and purple, and we decided to go to Hotchkiss park to lay in the grass.

Vince put an instrumental on his portable speaker and Taco freestyled for a little, his rhymes loose and associative as he felt out the beat, Vince alternating between bird calls and gunshot noises as Taco's flow built momentum. He broke out with tremendous force, his rhymes becoming more than, a history of the anguish howling up from within himself. We were quiet when the track ended. Vince looked as though he might cry. Then the weed kicked in. Taco made a joke about me getting kneed in the ass and we all laughed until Vince hocked a blood clot the size of a jawbreaker. Then Taco poked it with a stick and curled up in a ball and rocked

back and forth, and Vince and I could only laugh harder and harder. Everything hurt. I was pretty sure I was concussed. We were all so happy to have met.

People forgot about the fight quickly, though Taco was accorded a significant measure of respect for having dealt so handily with Marcus. Marcus did not take his defeat nearly as gracefully; he threatened to have us shot on Facebook, and Vince reposted a gif someone had made of Taco punching him in the face with his dickies around his ankles. Marcus got so much shit for it he deleted his account the next day.

We started hanging out with Taco at his mother's apartment on Westminster Avenue in Venice Beach. Vince and I were working nearby at Marina Del Ray Sportfishing, and we'd take the bus over to his place after work with our day clothes in trashbags, reeking of bleach and cut bait. We had to be careful doing anything fun at the apartment - Taco's mom, Carla, was six years sober- but at night the beach cleared out and became a wasteland of junkies and fornicators, and as long as we didn't trip over any of the vaguely shifting lumps we could drink and smoke and scream ourselves hoarse.

Taco hadn't seen his father since he was six and didn't know a great deal about him in general, other than he was a Doctor of British-Ghanaian extraction, and that he'd worked at the same hospital where Taco's mother had before ditching them for a girlfriend in London. My own father had pulled a similar stunt with a live-in nurse in Palmdale after my parents separated; but he still called sometimes, so I fancied myself lucky by comparison. Carla worked long hours as an ICU nurse; she was -in the opinion of Vince and I - extremely beautiful, a petite woman with amber eyes, kinky, reddish hair parted down the middle of her head, and - when flirted with - a delightfully girlish demeanor. She was also obsessed with Vince.

I don't remember when I first realized there was something going on between them. The way she spoke and interacted with him always seemed a little odd. There was a lot of eye contact at first, a slight nervousness in them both. Vince would be usually reticent and distracted after they interacted, as though he was planning something. At some point he managed to get her cell-phone number from her, at which point their interactions became markedly different.

"Good evening scrumptious," she might say, pouting and intent as she stroked Vince's silky chestnut bangs, or squeezing his craggy face into a fishlike pucker. "Pretty specimen of

man you are. Smooth and pretty and strong, like a stallion. But pretty. You eating enough, baby boy?” Fawning and fawning, and Vince pouting back, his hands lingering at her waist, a caress away from bursting into priapic flames, Taco looking on like a man who’d seen things.

And then there was the foot-rub.

It a Santa Ana afternoon, the kind during which the unairconditioned entirety of West Los Angeles withers and bleeds. Vince and I had stopped by to pick up Taco, who had walked to Abbot Kinney for a bag of ice. Carla had been on the couch with a damp rag over her forehead, incapacitated by period cramps, and when Vince had asked her if she needed anything, she said,

“I think I’d just about die and go to Heaven if you could give me a foot rub right now.”

“Why of course Ms. Smith.”

And he’d sat on the couch, put her feet in his lap, and started kneading her arches. Carla began to breathe heavily. “Ooh.” She said. “Ooh.” She giggled. After a little while, Vince asked me to prepare a glass of cranberry juice, so I did. I lingered in the kitchen, thinking of Pulp Fiction. Taco came back soaked in sweat, the 10 pound of ice slung over his shoulder semi-melted; he took one look at what was unfolding and rolled his eyes. Vince excused himself tenderly, and we departed. Taco didn’t seem any worse for the wear as we cruised down Venice Boulevard, though he automatically skipped any romantically themed songs that came up in his spotify.

Then Miles came back from reform school unreformed, and since he was my friend and Vince’s friend we were all more or less friends for a brief, idyllic epoch. Except not really; Taco never took to Miles on the grounds that he was lecherous and bitchlike. But Vince and I could manage that, until he knocked up Gabriella and everything was ruined.

And then there was me. My mother and I were living in a rented duplex in Elysian Heights, up the hill from the Silver Lake Reservoir. Our unit looked somewhat like a Zendo, a Zendo littered with my mother’s empties. My mother left for work before I woke up and didn’t come back until 8 or 9. When she came home she was usually drunk. Sometimes she’d fall asleep somewhere inopportune, draped over a couch or facedown at the dining room table. I’d help her into bed, pull off her shoes and roll her on her side with a trashcan nearby.

It was a wretched and saddening thing to come home to, though in some ways I wasn’t dissatisfied with the overall arrangement. I basically got to do whatever I wanted, so long as I

didn't inconvenience anyone other than myself. Plus she was liable to forget things like whether or not she'd given me my allowance, or whether or not she thought the front porch had smelled like weed the night before. Almost everyone at Oceanside took at least one online class, on account of it's hellacious overcrowding, and we were allowed to take as many as we wanted that way. So my day's from when she left for work to when she came back, were pretty much free. I'd pretty much completed a years and half worth of high school that way. I only had to show up to school for my A.P classes, or if I wanted to see Vince or Taco. I'd go to one class, lift weights with Vince and Taco at lunch, go to another, and take off. All the answers to our online classes were on wikianswers. I had a lot of time to read, and I read all kinds of stuff - the modernists, the beats, whatever had won lots of awards that year. I also wrote lots of poetry, histrionic imitations of Philip Larkin in which the subjects lamented having done things like stealing their grandparents oxycodone. Taco had been a particularly early and enthusiastic supporter of my writings, some of which I even managed to publish in tiny literary magazines.

In any case the situation was infinitely better then when my Dad had been around. In the last few years of their marriage, my parents had seemed locked into a slow-motion suicide pact of intractable marital unhappiness, a pact which they maintained through their mutual inability to quit ingesting prodigious amounts of alcohol and sleeping pills, have affairs, or refrain from the kind of maudlin, porcelain-smashing arguments which brought the entire neighborhood out to their lawns. I had an older sister, but she hadn't been home since my parents had divorced.

There was something wrong with my father, who seemed to think that if he lived in his mind, he could gain everything by venturing nothing. He was a thin, muscular man with an air homicidal cunning, a former contributing broadcaster for CNN Money before his breakdown. He never worked after that, but rather stayed at home, where his day seemed to consist largely of P-90x workouts, smoking pot, and writing cyborg-erotica which he never published. He wasn't ever one for household chores, but he did give me rides places, during which he liked to muse about what his life would have been like if he'd never had a family. I still loved him though. When he called my cell I hung on his every word. He'd left behind some old DVD's with all his old segments from CNN Money, and sometimes I'd get stoned and watch them and cry.

But it wasn't all drunken, bourgeois, single-parent household misery; once or twice a week, my Mom and I would go to the beach. I'd help her make a picnic and drive us there in the mini, steering with one hand so she could sip her Tito's on ice from a dixie cup. I looked forward to those outings more than house parties. Just me and my long-suffering, crapulent mom at the beach, watching the sun dip beneath the mountains on Catalina Island, the planes taking off over Shitpipe beach. She got pulled over once, and when the cop asked her if she'd been drinking she looked at him as though he'd called her a whore. He let us go. I had gotten my learner's permit the week before, and after that, I got in the habit of driving us home. Later she would say it was because Officer McNally thought our surname sounded Irish (it was scottish); but my mother was sweet and funny and still quite beautiful, despite the gin blossoms, men were sweet to her, my father notwithstanding.

So that was us. We weren't a bad lot, just feral, a bit mushy in the prefrontal cortex. The drugs may not have helped with that, but life didn't help with the drugs. We felt that we were closer to the truth of things than most, as if we had made up for what we lacked in judgment and maturity with our taste for mindless pleasure-seeking.

Everywhere I looked I saw destruction of property, teenage malaise. I took a deep breath and sallied forth through the teeming, undressed masses. I found her in the back, sprawled on top of Dante Freeman on a white chaise lounge, drinking wine from the bottle while he plaited her hair. Not that this was cause for concern; if Dante had eyes on anyone at this underage flesh-fest it was most likely Taco. Jada was attired in black lingerie, her face flushed and bemused at the proceedings around her. Dante saw me first, his lips pursing as he appraised my semi-nakedness.

"Polka dots," He said to Jada as I approached. "Your boy's got that lean look to him. Like a Somali pirate." He paused for a moment, searching for the appropriate qualification to this remark.

"A white one."

"What's good Dante." I said.

"Shouldn't keep your girl waiting on you so long. I was starting to get bicurious."

"Lucky for me you didn't." I turned to Jada as her face broke into a lascivious pout.

"Mhm, give me a nickel," Jada said, biting her lip. "I want to bounce them off his abs."

“I think you mean you want to bounce your pussy off his dick.” Dante murmured, unshly eyeballing my organ.

“Rude.” Jada said, her gaze narrowing. “Better let us get to it then.”

“I’d have you both if you let me.” I muttered.

“Is that so?”

“Think I just saw Taco with Vince.” Jada said.

Dante rose, wiggled a pierced eyebrow at me.

“We’ll be in touch.”

And then we were alone. Jada extended one of her legs out and circled my kneecap with her big toe. Every molecule of my being warmed in concert.

“I like your braids,” I said. “Dante did a good job.”

“What else do you like?” Jada said. I thought she had very pretty eyes. They were light brown with green flecks in them, and they seemed mischievous and kind and also a little afraid. She watched me. I slid down alongside her in the chaise lounge and she placed her thigh over my lap. We moved slowly closer to one another, and she moved away at the last second, giggling. I kissed her hard then, biting her lip. She whimpered, her body becoming pliable against mine. I picked her up and proceeded to carry her up the stairs. When we got to her room I set her down on the bed and caressed her sides while I kissed her neck and collar bones. She touched my cock. Suddenly she sat up and slapped me.

“Fucking hit me Ricky Campbell!” Jada wailed. This gave me pause, as I had been conditioned to think of such an act as a cardinal sin. I felt conflicted, slightly irritated; but the point, I realized, was to take charge. I grabbed her by the throat and pushed her down on the bed, hard, and began to maneuver my way through the various veils of her lingerie, Jada blissfully gasping for breath as my hand slipped under her waistband. I felt violent, monstrously inept, but Jada seemed to be enjoying herself. I turned her over and yanked down her underwear, then began to spank her viciously. She wailed in a delirium of sensual panic. The flesh of her ass was now marred by a bright red handprint. I pinned her arms to the bed while one of her hands felt feebly for my cock.

I entered her savagely, condomless, feeling like Tarzan or God. She shrieked inconsolably, and I spanked her some more and stuck it in to the hilt. I grabbed her hips and drove myself into her, spanking her harder and harder. She was ecstatic. “Harder, you villain!” She shrieked. I grabbed her neck and pulled it closer to me, then shoved her back down on the bed. Her ass was a mess of red welts. I was insane. I licked a finger and inserted it in her rectum. She threw back her head and screamed,

“OH IM GOD I’M GOING TO CUM I’M GOING TO CUM WITH YOUR FINGER IN ASS OH MY GOD I’M GOING TO CUM...”

For modesty’s sake, I covered her mouth once more, and she made sounds into my palm that sounded as though she were sobbing or dying. I tried to hold off, but felt myself falter, as though I had driven a sleek, sexy car over a patch of black ice and off of a bridge. I was cumming so hard it almost didn’t feel good, like I was on the verge of losing consciousness and getting a hernia.

I collapsed on top of her, my limbs enveloping hers in the manner of a copulating starfish. She breathed contentedly as I kissed the sides of her face and neck. I was worried about my right hand though. It was the first time I’d ever inserted a finger into someone else’s ass, and I didn’t know what the etiquette was. Plus, I was experiencing a modicum of hygienic anxiety.

“I’m on the pill, just so you know.” Jada said after a while, turning around so she could face me. With some reluctance, I put my hand down on the comforter, though I tried not to touch it with my befouled forefinger.

“I’m sleepy.” Jada said. “I had a dream about you the other night.”

“A sex dream?” I said, feeling smug.

“No.” She said. “And it’s pretty weird, fair warning,” She took my hand and kissed the fleshy part of my hand, seeming nonplussed by the proximity of her lips to my index finger. “It happened at school. On the quad. There was someone kneeling under a guillotine at the center of the quad, except I didn’t know who it was at first, because they had a hood over their head. Vince and Taco were there too, they were the executioners, and they were wearing breeches and powdered wigs. And Vince was reading from a scroll, something about ‘the manifest will of the bumrush.’ But right as Taco was about to drop the blade down, you showed up riding a donkey,

dressed like the Man With No Name. And Vince drew down on you with an old timey pistol and you fell to your knees and wept and began to speak. I don't remember what you were saying, except you were reciting poetry and it was very moving, and at some point you got up and started walking around and looking into people's eyes as you spoke. And when you finished Vince and Taco were crying, and they took off the hood and it was Miles, except he had little horns and small wolly legs and cloven hooves, and he was crying too. Then you sat cross legged and a circle formed around you, a giant circle with everyone in the school sitting cross legged around you, and you pulled out a giant jug of Carlo Rossi from under your poncho and passed it around the circle while you read your poems from a journal."

"And then?"

"I woke up."

"I feel so very complimented by your dream."

I was looking at her eyes, at her pupils, thinking about their strange blackness. Watching them grow and shrink, I thought about the intricacy of the human eye and brain. I stroked Jada's hair and thought about her brain. I found myself wishing I could kiss her brain Then Jada looked upset.

"If you tell anyone I let you put your finger in my butt I'll never fuck you again."

"What?" I said. "Goodness me Jada, I do consider that to have occurred in confidence."

I kissed her, and then I was hard again. Jada touched me and giggled.

"Might you like to go for a second round?"

"If you wash your hands."

After we were done, I held her until she fell asleep. Then I put my clothes on and returned downstairs.

The party was thinning out, and those who remained were reeling, sloppy. The floor was littered with cigarette butts and burned-up roaches. Unga Bunga by Flava-Flav was playing loudly enough to make the floor rumble, a stupid, racous tune which Vince loved dearly. Sure enough I found him manning some turntables in the living room. Taco and Dante were there too. They were wrapped in a blanket and spooning one another on the couch, Taco grinning sheepishly as Dante whispered sweet-nothings in his ear. Miles was standing in the corner with a

red solo cup in his hand, alone. He had put his pants back on, a smear of ointment descending conspicuously from his navel to underneath his waistband. Vince saw me and walked over.

“You kill the pootenannany?” he said, all shades and shiny square teeth, the unlit, half-smoked blunt dangling from his lips like a mobsters cigar.

“Excuse you.” I said. “We made love.”

“Is that so?” Vince flicked my penis. “Ricky, ricky big-dicky, banana hammock, all sticky.” He handed me a Marlboro 100, which I tucked behind my ear.

“I love you.” I said. “You bloodthirsty, cum-filled savage.”

“Have you received communion my child? Or are you as of yet bereft of the eucharistic species?”

“I am bereft, Father Vince.”

Vince handed me his cup, which I finished in several rapid swallows, Gin, and Cough Syrup curdling in my gut. I doubled over, trying not to vomit.

“Do not blaspheme on the rug,” Vince said sternly, then reached into his briefs and pulled out a sandwich bag filled with pills, a few tiny slivers of blotter paper.

“Traded some Frankincense and Myrrh for this.” Vince said. “Some Adderall, some Xans, Benny said those are quarter tabs of Lysergic sacrament, but it’s probably 2-C-I. You’re welcome.”

“He has risen!” I spluttered. The spasms abated, gave way to a liquid calm.

“Stick out your tounge.” Vince said. “The Saviors body.” He placed an Adderall and the tab on my outstretched tongue, which I swallowed dry. Vince and I decided we’d stay for the time it took us to finish one more beer each, then sally forth. We didn’t know where, but it never really mattered. We beckoned to Miles and told Taco we were leaving, and he got up abruptly before Dante could ask him to stay.

“See you homie.” Taco said, as he tried to shake his hand. Dante, to his credit, refused to sour, but shot Taco his most eager, simpering look. Taco flushed, stared at the ground. As we made our way outside into the courtyard, Vince cleared his throat.

“I think Dante thinks you’re a hot ticket, if you catch my drift.”

“Nah fool,” Taco said, “Dantes a friend.”

“I have lots of friends like that.” Miles said.

“Do you speak of the viruses living under your foreskin?” Vince said.

“I am at peace with the notion that some might find my choices objectionable.” Miles said, looking like a small, beautiful ghost.

“Is that why you took three percocets before you even walked in the door?” Taco said.

“Sounds like the pot is calling the kettle black.” Miles frowned contemplatively. “Or, rather, sounds like the guy on drugs is telling a guy on drugs that he’s on drugs.” He stopped in front of the Murdermobile’s rear view window to fix his hair. Vince’s mouth curled into a sneer.

“Mirror mirror on the wall, who has the itchiest dick of all?”

“Oh lay off him!” I howled. “Let’s just all be happy we aren’t Miles.” The drugs were taking hold at odds with one another, and I was tiring of all this rough, macho talk about Miles’s rotten appendage. At this, everyone looked satisfied, especially Miles. We opened the trunk and got our clothes back on, then took off. Vince played old Ice-Cube on the stereo, and what remained of the Jager was passed around the car.

Los Angeles. The city at night was cacophonous and lonely, the sirens and horns and the whirring blades of police helicopters blurring together, like some discordant symphony of incipient violence. The traffic on Alvarado was bad, even late at night. People from Central America walked between lanes of stopped cars, bundled up from head to toe in winter clothing, selling water bottles and chili candy for a dollar. The tent encampments had been cloistered earlier in the winter with gigantic industrial tarps to keep in the warmth, creating gigantic tunnels which spanned entire blocks. The hookers were out in their stilettos and jean shorts, despite the cold, and waving at passing cars, their pimps lurking nearby in the shadows. Of all the kinds of people you saw out and about in Los Angeles late at night, I liked cops the least and hookers the best. The hookers were flirty and professional, and therefore the parallel opposites of the police.

“L.A man,” Vince said, after finishing the Jager in several angry, pulsing swallows, “Like Czarist Russia, but warmer.”

“I pray that someday I leave this town.” Miles said. “Perhaps for the Bay Area.”

“Or Portland.” Vince said.

“My grandma lives in Seattle.” Taco said. “Seattle seems cool as fuck.”

They all nodded, wistful for those rainier, cloudier climes, as though the weather here was mocking us with its perpetual, vapid mildness. As the only one among them who'd ever lived anywhere else, I rolled my eyes.

"Everywhere there will be Los Angeles some day." I said. "There will be nothing left but Reality Television and real estate that no one can afford. We will spend all of our money to sleep on soiled mattresses in mop closets, and starve."

"Amen." Vince said, relighting the blunt. "With naught but medical marijuana to console us."

"Meanwhile I will own everything having done nothing, and it will make me about as happy for having done it." Miles said.

"Eat the rich." Taco said, smacking his lips at Miles. "I bet he tastes like Grey Poupon."

"You have my full consent, if you can make it past my mercenary army."

I toked the blunt, which Vince had spiked with an atrocious amount of Keef. It was like breathing in clouds of burning sawdust. Three hits later and I felt like I was hopping through the vast, empty halls of my own consciousness on a pogo stick. All around me I saw dazzling patterns, riots of color. I saw myself as an amoeba, Los Angeles as a spot of grime under god's thumb nail. I considered texting my mother that I loved her. Taco took two hits and immediately began to scream-cough and dry heave. He rolled down the window, smoke billowing ludicrously out of the car.

"Blarrrrggggh." Taco said. "Blarrrrggggggggghhhhhhhhhhh." It was then that I saw it, a black and white Dodge Charger lurking three car lengths behind us.

"Winslows on my six!" I whispered. "Fuck guys be cool."

"Roll up the window!" Vince said. "Taco, gather yourself!"

"They're looking at us." Miles said.

I saw the lights before I heard the sirens, an awful portentous whooping. I thought of fireworks displays, air raid sirens, death. Someone shrieked with terror and dismay, I think it was Vince. He floored the gas, and the Murdermobile rocketed into the alley with a screech of rubber as the squad car bombed passed us, the cop in the passenger seat shooting us a look of quizzical disdain. We were silent. Then Vince began to howl with laughter.

“Fuck Vince, my bad.” Taco said. “I have asthma.”

“Hey Taco, all’s well that ends well.

“Goddamn Vince,” I said. “You’re the motherfucking gingerbread man.”

“That was the closest I’ve come in a long time to soiling myself.” Miles said himself, as though talking to oneself was somehow quaint.

We drove on through Rampart Village into Echo Park, looking for somewhere to park, all of us giddy except for Taco, who had been utterly laid waste too by the evenings entertainment. At a certain point, we got around to the subject of God and Free Will, a favorite topic of conversation for us. Though Miles could hardly be counted as one of the devout he spoke of God often, were an ex-girlfriend he simultaneously hated and couldn’t get over.

“God is real, make no mistake.” Miles said. “Though he is not, to speak generally the touchy-feely God of the Gospels, but the blood-dimmed totalitarian of Deuteronomy. He is, in summary, an irascible artist in the sky, painting all things into being with his omnipotent, merciless brush.”

“How do you know God is a being?” Vince said, “And not, lets say, something bigger... a sort of omnipotent, but ultimately inscrutable force?”

Vince had read both the King James Bible and the Tao Te Ching last summer, and since I had only read the latter in full and very little of the former, I regarded him as an authority.

“Consider the world on it’s own terms.” Miles said. “The only thing as brutal and petty as the swirling cosmos are the storms of feeling and caprice in private hearts of men and women. The Greeks had it right. God is just like us, but a God.”

“I liked what Carl Sagan said.” I said. “That we are the universe experiencing itself. Makes God seem kind of beyond the point, at least as most people have been thinking of him.

“Tomato-Tahmato.” Miles said. “It is a tortured something, this God or Universe, a lover of impermanence, a cruel trickster and taker-awayer of things, his cruelest trick being the idea that we are any more significant than any other amalgamation of matter, or that we have any more control over our fates.”

“Do you deny free will?” I asked

“Ask not what your existence can mean to you,” Vince said, “but what your existence can mean for your country!”

“I don’t deny free-will,” Miles said, “so much as I assert the existence of it’s opposite, destiny! We all know the universe behaves only according to natural laws, that the matter in our bodies has followed the same fixed trajectory since the beginning of time and will continue to do so until it’s end.”

For this I could think of no parry. I turned to Taco, hoping he might help, but he was nodding off. Vince looked stumped, in the throes of existential malaise. Vince cracked the seal on another bottle, and for a few moments we drank in silence, considering ourselves.

“Who or what do you believe in Ricky?” Vince said.

“I believe in Beauty.” I said. “Beauty is my God. Beauty is truth, truth beauty.”

“But what about the ugliest truths?” Vince said. “What of Oedipus, and the truth of his parricide and motherfucking?”

“The truth of Oedipal motherfucking is the truth of many things.” I said. “It is the truth of the inevitability of pain without reason, of refusing to accept what you cannot control. To heed them is to live more bravely, more lovingly, more beautifully, and they are therefore a species of beauty themselves, even if they contain ugliness as well. And they have to. Because there would be no point to love, to be brave, if the world hadn’t long ago been overrun with their opposites.”

“Let me try to wrap my head around this. Is that beautiful?” Taco pointed at a billboard featuring a victoria secret advertisement, a buxom blonde model with suspiciously blemishless skin and a skeletal waist.

“No,” I said, “That billboard is not beautiful because it is untrue.”

“What about the ending of the Titanic?” Vince asked.

“Yes.” I said, “Grief is always beautiful because it is also so horribly true.”

“No,” Miles said with sudden vehemence “There is no truth, no beauty, only what God allows us to think we feel, to keep us playing his sadistic games. Ergo, beauty is a manifestation of God’s hatred for us all.”

“We had moved on, Miles.” Vince said.

“There is no moving from God’s hatred!” Miles cried out. “Believe me if you believe no one else! God hates us all, and me most of all. ”

“God doesn’t hate you Miles,” Taco growled, lurching forth from his stupor. “Matter of fact he loves you, because there’s nothing God loves more than a weak, bitchlike motherfucker like you. When them hoes are sucking your nasty little pecker, God be shaking his head and loving you anyway. When you pop them pills and pass out, and your baby boy be crying in the next room over, hungry, his little drawers filled with doo-doo, God be crying, too. All your sins, all the sins of everyone in the world don’t amount to a grain of salt in one of his tears, so immense is His love and pity for us.”

Taco drifted off, and a quiet fell upon the car which none of us dared to profane. Then Taco burped and farted simultaneously and was thus brought back into being, rudely roused by the sound and force of his own emissions.

“Holy shit, Taco” Vince said. “That was deep as fuck.”

“Praise Jesus I’m crunk.” Taco’s cheeks swelled; he seemed to be swallowing back a deluge of vomit. “What did you say Vince?”

“I said that I was excited by what you just said. It was fucking deep.”

“What was?”

But Vince was somewhere else already, his eyes glazed over as though he might weep, his lips pursed and trembling. “Taco,” Vince said, momentarily, as though addressing his parishioners, “There’s something I’d like to tell you. Something that might surprise you, which will very likely upset you, but which I ultimately think will make us closer.”

“Vince,” I said, “whatever it is, I do not think now is the time.”

Vince gave me a look of disbelieving, wounded astonishment, then closed his eyes and shook his head

“He doesn’t think now is the time.” Vince said, smiling sadly, bemusedly, at my timidity. “If not now, when?”

“Some time that isn’t now.” But Vince was charging full steam ahead.

“Taco” Vince said solemnly, “ I love your mom.”

“N----a I’ll fucking kill you.” Taco snarled.

“No Taco, not now,” Vince said. “It’s an adult thing we share, a mature thing. For me at least... I’m afraid she thinks it’s just a puppy crush on my part. Which is why I raise the issue, you feel? I wanted your advice on how to convey the... meaningfulness of my intentions.”

“Purity?” Taco squawked, “How about I fuck your momma?”

“Hey,” I said, “I don’t think Vince said anything about fucking anyone, right Vince?”

But Vince merely sighed, shook his head dejectedly.

“Look Taco, if a mature conversation is an impossibility at the moment, we can put a tack in this.

But I like to think that, if the tables were turned, I would put those sorts of feelings aside...”

“Vince,” Taco said, “I need you to listen to me. You’re my good friend. I don’t care what my mom does, the bitch is fucking crazy...”

“Hey now...” Vince tut-tuted.

“But I need you to fucking listen!” Taco screamed, “If you ever bring this shit up ever again THEN WE’RE NOT GOING TO BE FRIENDS ANYMORE, SO SHUT THE FUCK UP MOTHERFUCKER!”

The last word left him like a kidney stone passing, and Taco buried his face in his hands. I shook my head at Vince and I tried to rub Taco’s back, but he reacted to my hand as though it were a tarantula so I stopped.

“I’m sorry Taco.” Vince said.

“Let’s just talk about something else.” Taco said meekly.

“Vince was saying that we liked what you were saying,” I said.

“Yeah!” Vince said. “All that stuff about how God actually loves Miles, even though he’s a crusty little lech.”

Taco thought for a moment.

“I didn’t say that.”

“Yes you did.”

“No I didn’t. Miles is an abomination. God hates that fool.”

“He’s right.” Miles said with a shrug. “I am, undoubtedly, an abomination. It’s not even like I don’t have a conscience. I do. I just routinely ignore it. I feel nauseous with guilt and transgress anyway and savor both the feelings of boldness that accompany transgression and the

remorse that allows me believe that I remain on, some level, a decent person, though other times I understand that I am truly beyond forgiveness and redemption, that no just god would allow me anywhere near his celestial kingdom ...”

“Pussy boy.” Taco hissed. “Sin of despair.”

“Let alone reside in it for an eternity, for my soul, though it masquerades as nothing more than a fart, one of those near-silent and yet cataclysmically malodorous ones, is really a pestilence, a pestilence borne by the wind of the original sin to be unleashed upon the more pretty and weak-willed female inhabitants of Los Angeles...”

First his mom, then his God. It was not his night. Taco got out of the car, walked to the back, and opened the passenger-side door.

“Get out of the car.” Taco said. Miles looked up at him with sheepish terror.

Taco grabbed Miles by the feet, his signature move. Miles began to squawk, began to resist his extrication by grabbing for me.

“HELP ME,” Miles wailed “FOR THE LOVE OF GOD HE’S GOING TO BEAT MY ASS!”

“Taco,” I yelled, “put him down man, go for a walk!”

My hands slipped out of Miles’s grasp and he grabbed the seatbelt, then was pulled thuddingly out of the car and into the dirt and swiftly dragged to the center of the dirt lot, where he lay, writhing and moaning.

“Taco!” I yelled, “get back in the fucking car!”

“Get up boy!” Taco said, menacing as he stood overhead. “Stop rolling around, I ain’t stimulating your G-Spot!”

But Miles didn’t answer, persistent in his sensual woundedness. Taco walked back to the car, slammed the door. Vince told him to be more careful with his car, and I could perceive his ire through the darkness of the car like some smoldering emanation. I turned off the car. I honked the horn, then got out to go examine him.

I turned on my cell phone's flashlight light application and shone it upon him.

“Miles.” I said. “Get back in the car man, we’ll take you home. We’ll make sure Taco isn’t going to do anything.”

He didn't answer. He was lying on his back, staring straight up. With dirt in his cold sore and tears streaming down his face, crab-ridden and drug-addled, ever at the whimsy of his cruel, control-freak god. Then he spoke.

"I wasn't the one who had sex with Carla!" Miles said. "You and Vince were going to let him hurt me."

"I'm sorry Miles." I said. "I didn't think he was going to stomp you, I think he just wanted to make a point."

"That's not how it felt." Miles said. "All of you! All of you have been so... so unkind to me tonight! What did I ever do to you?"

"Miles..." I began

"Gabriella is going to leave me soon." Miles said. "And she's going to take Javi with her."

"What?" I said, "What do you mean, leave you soon?"

"She fucking told me Ricky. Said she's working up the nerve."

"Oh." I said. I was shocked, despite myself. "Jesus Miles, I'm fucking sorry to here that."

"Are you really?"

"Yeah Miles. I think for whatever reason I actually am. I wanted you guys to work it out."

"You can think I'm insane for saying this," Miles said, "But I really thought I'd figure out how."

"Well what the fuck stopped you then?"

I looked at him and remembered Valentine's Day in fourth grade, how the teacher let everyone pick and we'd both made heart-shaped cards for one another. I wondered when he had changed for good.

"I don't know how to make plans anymore." Miles said. "I'd make an appointment for couples, for a detox, and the next thing I know I'm having a full blown fucking panic attack, thinking about how everything I've ever touched turns to dust in my hands."

He picked up a handful of dirt and let it fall through his fingertips.

"Oh Miles," I said, "Why the fuck did it have to be Gabriella?"

“I don’t know.” Miles said, “True love? Freudian displacement.”

He was only 11, when his mom died. My Aunt Martha, though she was actually my godmother. I remembered her reading in the beneath a cascade of bougainvillea in their backyard, how every room had an open window and smelled variously of fresh-baked bread or flowers. She’d worked in restaurants her whole life, though she’d taken time off to get her Master’s in French Literature. Aunt Martha was the only adult I ever met who ever stopped and talked to panhandlers, and she would always listen very intently as they explained how their lives had fallen apart, even if they were drunk or hysterically bitter, and ask them if they wanted food or money or the number for a shelter.

One day she found a lump. Breast cancer, Stage 4, inoperable. Prescription bottles everywhere, popping up throughout their house like clusters of toadstools. The flowers dying, the bread smell gone. When I stayed for dinner she wouldn’t eat anything, just smile and watch everyone else eat, except sometimes when she was in pain and had to excuse herself, and Miles would too, and when I went to say goodbye they’d be lying in bed together, reading or watching a movie on a laptop. I was very scared of the way she looked she lost her hair. Miles would get very upset when she took her hat, even yell and cry, and if he kept after her like that for long enough she would start to cry, cry as though she was never going to stop.

I started seeing Miles’s Dad even less then usual. One time, at sleep over, I got up in the middle of the night, and when passed by his study on my way to the kitchen I heard him crying. He was never there after that, and Miles refused to go anywhere without his mother, so I only ever saw the two of them together, at their house or the hospital. Then her breasts, gone, one after the other. Stunned by their absence, I could only imagine a sort of bloodless chopping block. She was at least still Martha in her eyes, her eyes which were now so sad and scared, but the eyes look like they were trapped inside a skeleton. But what was much worse then the way she looked was the way she looked at me. There was so much fear in her eyes, and sadness, and seemed to contain all she wanted to say but couldn’t; *“I know I’m a grown-up and that you don’t want me to be looking at you this way. But no one ever tells you how to act when you know you’re going to die young. I know Miles is your best friend, but he’s my son, and that’s something you don’t know about. He cries every night like you wouldn’t believe, that so much*

pain could be contained in such a tiny body. I'm sorry to be looking at you like this but every hour my son tells me he wants to go to Heaven with me, and my husband is never here, and I'm dying almost alone while my 11 year old son watches and there's nothing I can do about any of it. I look at his little face and feel so much guilt. There are things I hope you never understand.

Towards the end, I had the dream. I dreamt that I was in her room with her, alone, and that she'd begun to scream for help, that was trapped inside her own corpse. My parents wouldn't allow me see her after that and since Miles never left her side I never saw him either and I cried and cried and said that I hated them. I didn't know until they divorced that she'd told them she didn't want me coming over anymore that she didn't want me to see how bad she was going to look, how deranged with grief my best friend had become. They had said when they caught it that with Chemo she might get another five years, but in the end she was buried after two. The first time we played outside together after the funeral we found a dead rabbit by the side of the road, and we buried it in a shoebox and prayed that it go to heaven so his mom would have a pet.

There didn't seem to be much else to say, but I also sensed that Miles didn't want me to leave. So I stood there, trying not think about Gabriella or Aunt Martha or especially Javi, but I couldn't. I looked at Miles and he looked at me and he looked so much like his mother that I started to feel like I wasn't really there anymore. Not having anywhere else to look I looked up at the night sky, or rather what you see of the night sky in Los Angeles, a veil of pollution with a sickly reddish tint. I thought of a phrase in a poem I'd just read, "a vermillioned nothingness." I wondered if that maybe was what I'd been looking at.

"Did you say Vermillion?" Miles said.

"What?"

"Pretty sure you just something about Vermillion and Nothingness. Don't know if you knew I was listening."

"Oh." I said. My cheeks flushed "A Vermillioned Nothingness. It's from a poem."

"What is it?" He asked.

"I was just thinking about that, I'm not really sure. You'd like the poem though. It'sn about wanting a religion, even when you don't believe."

“I see.”

“The poet thinks human beings are the real aliens because everything else just is and we’re the only things in the universe to whom everything seems so weird.”

I opened the notes section in my iPhone where I’d copy-pasted the verse in question and read it to Miles.

“Oh,” Miles said. Then, “Oh! I get it. He’s saying the idea of an alien is us like the idea of a monster is us, the alien represents the part of us we find too weird to know the way a monster represents the things we can’t face are true about people.” He rolled onto his back. “I wish I could smoke that poem. Or rail it maybe.”

“You could memorize it.”

“Yeah,” Miles said. “But I don’t think it’s the same.”

He rolled over on his belly then. Face in the dirt, return of Oedipus. I walked back to the car.

As I approached the car I could hear Vince speaking rapidly to one another in low voices, lowering them further as I approached.

“What’s up?” I said when I got in the car. Vince and Taco looked at each other and grinned.

“Our boy was holding out on us.” Vince said. “Guess what fell out of this pocket?”

Vince placed it between the three of us. My eyes widened. Sitting between the three of us on the central console was a golf-ball sized plastic bag of off-white powder.

“Holy fucking shit. Is that what I think it is?”

“If you’re thinking to yourself, that’s a big old bag of cocaine that Vince just showed me, then yes Ricky, it is probably what you think it is.”

“Holy shit.” I said. “Holy shit.”

There was something different about cocaine to us, or at least the way we imagined it, compared to how we felt about other hard drugs. We were starting to see the people we knew who liked Oxys and Hydro’s make the switch to black-tar, and though we’d all dabbled with the pills in the past we’d since decided that opiates were opiates. It was our parents’ vice, and we probably associated it with them more than Punk Rock. Even Miles tried to be discrete taking

them around us. Vince and I had swallowed Crystal Meth a couple times and even smoked it once, but Vince had been overcome with regret after on account of his father and sworn that we would never do it again. It didn't feel that much different from Adderall unless you smoked it anyway, and since Taco and I and roughly half the people we knew had prescriptions for the stuff we didn't have to feel like we were missing out. We liked to smoke weed and certainly didn't mind the odd amphetamine or benzo now and again. But hard drugs, for the most part, was something we liked to think we were above.

Maybe it was Wolf of Wall Street, or the Gangster Rap we listened to, or the stories we'd heard from our rich friends' parents when they drank too much at Benihana. Maybe it was that I'd never tried it before, and that I only knew a handful of people who ever had, we didn't know anyone who did it, Oceanside not being the kind of high school where most students had any kind of pocket money to speak of. In any case, we did not look at the bag of cocaine with any sense of foreboding, or even caution, really, but instead felt rarefied and bad, rude tellers of teenage truths.

"Will it not be as good because of everything else we've taken tonight?" I asked Vince.

"No." Vince said. "That's the thing about Cocaine. It's never not good."

"We should ask Miles first." I said. "Just in case. So we don't accidentally Pulp Fiction ourselves."

"Fuck Miles." Vince said. "He's been rude as shit." He honked the horn again, and Miles didn't even look up.

"Leave me alone, I'm recovering my strength." He yelled. Vince honked again, more forcefully this time, and Miles reacted by slowly raising his middle finger in all of our directions.

"Good enough for me," Vince said. He opened the bag and fished out a decent-sized rock with his car key, then deposited it underneath his lip. We awaited his verdict with fluttering stomachs.

"Well." Vince said, "The bad news is that, in some ways, nothing will ever quite compare."

“Let me get some.” Taco said. Vince handed him the key, and Taco began to rapidly spoon the cocaine into his nostrils. After his fifth key bump Vince waved his hands in Tacos face.

“Go easy Taco, that’s the Pure you’re fucking with.”

Then it was my turn. I didn’t bother with the key, just held the bag up to one nostril, plugged the other, and breathed in deeply. Then for good measure, I put a rock in my gums, as I’d seen Vince do. Numbness spread across the back of my throat and mouth, expanding into my chest. I couldn’t feel myself swallow. I slumped back in my seat, feeling dizzy, faintly nauseous. Something wild and insatiable was coming into being inside of me, tottering to its feet with each of my heart. Then it stood up and roared.

“Whoa.” I said.

“Oh yeah.” Vince said. “Big fucking whoa.”

“I think too much.” Taco said. “Or maybe I took too little.”

Vince started to growl, a growl which quickly metamorphosed into a hideous, balls-out shriek. He screamed and screamed and began to bang his head into the horn, and Taco began to shake his head over and over again, saying “No, No, No”. I understood both sentiments perfectly, and I was so thrilled by this, by my own perceptive acuity, that I began to beat my chest in the style of King Kong. Our noise-making syncopated; I thought of a three-piece outfit, Vince on vocals, me on percussion, and Taco on sound effects.

“I got blisters on my fingers!” Vince shrieked.

“Kill, kill kill!” I howled. “Rage, rage against the dying of the ruckus. Do not go gently into that kicked in door, waving the .44.” Taco several deep swallows from the bottle, then passed it to me, which I finished. He put an instrumental on the stereo and began to freestyle.

“Taco the defiler, tell me who be wilder, coked-up in the beemer got my white friends going wild yuh, Cali weather mild yuh, one he got a child yuh, pass the yay aint got all day my soundcloud it be fire cuz, you ain't been you never was, rich in barz but broke as fuck, got no cash I eat that ass my homie Vince be on the track.” Vince

“My name is Vince she licked my big dick so slick and quick it made her sick...” there was a sharp rapping on the window. Thrust simultaneously into a state of paralyzing, buttock clenching paranoia, we turned to see Miles' reddened face mashed up against the glass.

“You dickless assholes! That was supposed to be a surprise!”

“Surprise bitch!” Taco said, “We found your surprise!”

“You... you abusers of my good will! Relentless, sadistic hecklers of my reduced state!” Miles's face welled up with tears.

“Aw Miles come on,” Vince said. “Come do this yay with us!”

“It was my coke!” Miles whined. “Mine! I bought it, with my own allowance!” He began to sob unabashedly. “I just want to feel loved!” He fell to his knees and began to crawl, sobbing, back into the dirt.

“He never stops does he,” Taco said. “Strumming away on our heartstrings.”

“Like a spastic banjoist of pity,” Vince said. “I guess if you strum along for long enough, you'll strike a chord at some point.”

“Let's do another bump.” I said. “Then group hug.”

We exited the car and marched toward him, laid down on top of him one by one, enveloped him in our arms. Taco rubbed his belly, Vince licked the tears from his face like a dog. I kissed his brow and stroked his hair. Then we gently lifted him in the air and over our heads, our petite, beautiful champion. Miles sobbed and sobbed. We placed him in the back seat, Taco and I still caressing him as he gargled and wailed. With a pediatrician's tenderness, Vince plugged his nose so he would open his mouth and poured some of the cocaine into his gasping mouth. Miles went rigid, sobbed once or twice more. Then he grabbed the bag and took a long snort, the sighed contentedly.

“Thank you.” Miles said. “I was in need of a little tenderness just then.”

Taco played Paranoid by Black Sabbath and we did some more coke. It was still more than plentiful at that point, but by then we'd worked up a thirst. Vince suggested we go to gas station in Sylmar, which was owned by a friend of Vince's family, Abe. Abe had been a friend of Steve's in jail, a strange, rumped, Georgian emigre who also happened to employ Vince's brothers. Sometimes they drove U-hauls filled with handles of Liquor from L.A to Seattle, to

dodge the 30\$ tax per gallon Washington State levied on hard alcohol. It was on the strength of this family connection that he was willing to if he was in the building, he would be willing to sell us beer. The consensus among us was that this was a splendid idea. We jetted off once again into the night.

The 405 was chock full of cars even at 2:30 in the morning, all of them going at least 20 miles over the speed limit, if not more, and Vince going a great deal faster than the rest. The needle would top out just shy of one hundred and Vince would bring it back down to 90, then bring her back up. He seemed to be switching lanes every five seconds. We passed the bag around, snorting bumps off of the fleshy parts of our thumbs and licking what remained. We were giddy, borderline hysterical, except for Miles, who was quiet but not ill at ease.

“I feel rather queer,” Vince said.

“I am queer,” Taco said. “I want to fuck men.”

The car once again felt charged with revelation, albeit a sweeter one than that of Vince’s literal mother-love; we’d always known, of course, but to hear him say it felt momentous in it’s own right. As the murdermobile hurtled down the freeway, I felt an ecstatic blossoming of brotherly love.”

“I am honored that you should that with us,” Vince said, growing emotional. “Love is love, as they say.”

“No,” Taco said. “I only want the love of a woman. From men I seek only complete submission”

“I do believe that is your American prerogative.” I offered.

“Huh.” Vince nodded. “I’ve always felt they’re kind of the same thing.”

“Love and submission?” I said.

“Haha, maybe, but no, I meant love and sex.”

“All of the above, but it depends on the person,” Miles said, emerging from his sorrow like a ferret from it’s den.

“No,” Taco said. “No, no, no. You do not understand me.” He shook his head emphatically. “I want a man to suck my dick. A beautiful, delicate man with high cheekbones and sandy hair. I will not love him, I will not even kiss him. I want his girlfriend to watch, and for us to fall in love.”

“You and the man?” Vince said, cocaine quizzical.

“I feel persecuted,” Miles whispered.

“No,” Taco said, his face contorting into a sneer. “Do you mock me? Do you mock my pleasure?”

“Excuse me?” Vince said. “A man’s pleasure is his sacred right. I would die for the right of a man to his pleasure. Here Ricky, keep her steady.”

I tried to keep us in our lane as he placed the baggie against his nose, inhaling raggedly. Then baggie was mine once again, an erotic thrill. I took communion, restored myself to bliss. The valley spread out before us underneath the red night sky, a sprawling grid of flickering, horizontally arranged lights. It was enormous, and beautiful. In my head, I began to compose grandiose odes to the city.

“L.A, City of Angels, No, City of Seraphim, Ciudad de serefines, of Taco trucks and hour and a half commutes, of marijuana shops outnumbering libraries, of chlorine-smelling, particulate choked air which bequeatheth birth defects and spectacular sunsets...”

I felt I could use some of it, so I jotted down what I could in the notes section of iphone as Vince bombed down the exit to Van Nuys boulevard.

“Who is it who can tell me who I am?” Vince growled, his widened eyes flashing briefly from the neon sign of a Gentleman’s Club.

“If I am not for myself, who will be for me?” I replied.

“Who dat boy, who dis be!” Taco yelled.

It occurred to me we were devolving fast. A few red lights notwithstanding, Vince had been driving at roughly the same speed that he had been on the freeway. When we got to the gas station, we would only be a mile and a half from Miles’s place. I decided that once we reached the gas station, I would raise the possibility that we walk to Miles’s and crash there. We hadn’t talked about it, but it was probably our best option. I didn’t think, ‘there’s a newborn baby and his mother in that apartment.’ I didn’t think, “we’re going to drive drunk, and high on drugs, to an apartment where a newborn baby and his mother are sleeping.” I didn’t think. And after we pulled into the gas station, we all did more cocaine, and I didn’t want to ask about going to Miles’s place, I wanted to drink and then maybe do some more.

Vince and I decided we would go in. Upon walking in to the gas station, the first word that popped into my mind was “wan.” The second was “dinge.” A Los Angeles gas station, but as imagined by Conservative America. A clerk with a pompadour and a craggy, pitted face scowled at us from over his copy of “420 Entrepreneur”, which he’d just been underlining with a highlighter. He had an odd, unkind seeming vitality about him, which made me nervous. Vince took no notice, and seemed to be making a point of touching as much of the merchandise as he humanly could. He was even examining the label’s on the ’40s, as though a great deal depended on whether or not we drank King Cobra or Olde English. As 420 Entrepreneur seemed to be weighing the merits of calling the police or shooting us outright, Vince was holding a bottle of King Cobra up to the light to check for impurities. Plus our tongues; for some reason, we couldn’t stop licking our lips. We were both wearing black denim knee-length shorts; I had earrings and a shaved head, and Vince was wearing a shirt emblazoned with Robocop’s face and the words “Say No To Drugs On It” written in huge red block letters. We looked like a pair of high as shit gigolos, or worse.

Vince selected three bottles of Olde English and walked to counter. He and the clerk sized each other up for at least fifteen seconds.

“I.D?” The clerk said.

“Is Abe in?”

“No.” The clerk said. “He isn’t.”

With an important, almost sacerdotal air, Vince opened his wallet and selected the most expensive of his three fake I.D’s. The clerk held it over the scanner, and it beeped. But then he started to look more closely at it. He retrieved a small magnifying glass and began to look at it intently. Vince’s eyes narrowed with scorn. His fists clenched. I nudged him, but he kept looking at the clerk.

“This I.D is fake.” The clerk said. “I believe you are attempting to purchase alcohol with fraudulent identification.”

“The irony,” Vince said, “is that you are sorely mistaken.”

The clerk said; “We can let the authorities make that determination.” Vince planted both hands on the counter, staring at the clerk with a disgusted, warlike petulance. I was aghast.

“You have confiscated my property under false pretenses.” Vince said. “And are discriminating against my companion and I based on some preconceived notion about our relationship to one another and respective identities. If you do not return my property to me and complete the sale, you can expect a complaint with the Van Nuys chamber of commerce.” He pushed a 20\$ bill forward on the counter. “Now ring us up, punk.”

The clerk looked on unblinkingly, as his mouth became increasingly scrunched and turtled. Vince was leaning closer and closer to him. My father had covered the riots in ‘92, and had often spoke of the L.A Liquor Store Clerk with the same kind of conflicted admiration he reserved for mobsters and Navy Seals. I thought of the bat, the collapsible baton, the snub-nose .44 underneath the register. Vince had picked a fight with a latent homicidal.

“Punk?” The clerk asked. He surmised I was the weak link, turned his fearsome gaze on me. “What do you think of your punk friend calling me a punk, punk?”

“Uh...” I said. “We can go somewhere else, if it’s too much of a hassle. Right Vince?”

“I’m the one talking to you.” Vince said. “Ring us up.”

“Or what?”

Then Vince did something insane. He picked up one of the bottles, cracked it open, tossed back his head, and poured it down his gullet in a tremendous, frothing cascade, then set it back down on the counter. The clerk took out his bat, tapped it against his palm. Vince didn’t move. Then he and Vince broke out into a grin.

“What’s good Nariman,” Vince said.

“Same old shit. Work, school, school work. Northridge is a fucking blast, I got bitches on deck like I’m Mick Jagger or something. Whose this fool?” he said, jutting his chin in my direction. “I thought he was going to snitch you out.”

I shrugged. “Maybe I just know who I should and shouldn’t fuck with.”

“A guy who knows things. No wonder you two are friends.”

“Thats Ricky.” Vince said. “He had my back when I fought Marcus Howard.”

“What are you about, Ricky?”

“Books,” I said.

“Ah. A book guy. I’m a book guy too. The more you learn the more you learn.”

Nariman rang us up, and we parted ways. Vince said he needed gas, so we all gave him ten bucks. We guzzled the forties and did more coke while we pumped the gas. I was starting to feel a little rough around the edges. I thought longingly of Jada, Jada in a thong curled up blissfully on her queen sized bed in her room full of books. She'd sent me a picture about an hour ago, a cheesecake shot of her in a bikini. I looked at it for a long time, agonizing over how to respond. Eventually, I texted back, "Ur rilly cute ;)".

It was then that the El Camnio arrived, rusted orange and beat to shit, scotch-taped everything and two flags on the back; a Make America Great Again and the Stars and Bars. We stopped talking as it pulled it up and the pot-bellied, trucker-hatted driver got out to pump his gas. We made eye contact, regarded each other with mutual disgust. He looked contemptible and witless, the sort of man who harrasses dancers at strip clubs.

"Would you look at that." I said, exultant with scorn. "Only in the fucking valley."

"That really grinds my gears." Vince said, squinting preposterously as he licked his lips. "A slap in the face to the Union dead."

"Among others," I added, casting an apologetic glance to Taco, who seemed to be thinking about something else."

"That," Miles said, "Should even be legal."

"Eh." Taco said. "First amendment though."

"Huh." Miles said. "I'm a little surprised that that would be your perspective."

"Excuse me?" Taco said, cocking his head to the side and bearing down on Miles like owl,

"And why the fuck is that Miles?"

Miles did not reply.

"What the fuck do you know about it?" Taco said. "What do any of you know about it?"

"Not much, if I'm being honest." Miles said.

"I've always wished I knew more." Vince intoned, brow knitted in solemnity.

"And there's always more one *can* learn." I added.

"Then find out." Taco said, "it's not that fucking hard, it's not like you don't have fucking library cards."

"I wonder what he thinks," Vince said, "that my abuela, is, a RAPIST?"

“He definitely thinks that.” I said, my mind aflame with visions of glorious, bloody carnage.

“Fool definitely doesn’t think about shit.” Taco said.

“What’s he doing?” Vince said. We craned our necks, saw the hapless redneck perusing the porno.

“Let’s steal his flags.” I said.

“No,” Vince said, “ that wouldn’t be going far enough.” His eyes locked on a portable jerry can nearby.

“For the love of fuck,” Taco said. “It’s four in the morning. Can’t you guys just sign a fucking petition or something? I mean, fucking look at yourselves.”

He pointed at us, at our tongues gyrating sloppily over our lips. “Do a little coke and all of sudden you think you’re John Brown. Get over your fucking selves, you just want to burn something”.

“You’re right Taco.” Vince said. He adjusted the stereo, and Battle Hymn of The Republic began to thunder out the speakers. “On three Ricky.” We got out the car. Vince yanked the nozzle from his tank and let out a jet of gasoline over the flags, then tossed me his zippo.

“Finish them Ricky!” I held the zippo in my cupped palms, chortling, and the flag went up in flames with a tremendous whoosh. The zippo exploded. I staggered back, smelled burning hair, as the other flag went up. I felt Taco's hands pulling me inside the murdermobile, which leaped forward with such speed that I was nearly flung from the car, my legs dangling out of the open passengers side door. I sat up, saw Nariman and the victimized bigot running out of the shop, the latter tearing at his hair and shrieking like a banshee, the flames reaching, high, high into the night sky, so very much higher than I imagined would.

“Kansas Bleeds!” Vince shrieked, launching the murdermobile off a curb, and swinging a hard left across two lanes off traffic bringing us within a yard or less of being jackknifed by a semi, the driver of which began to beat his horn in a fury. It was madness. I looked out the window. The El Camino was fast approaching. Vince dipped into an alley, started zig-zagging madly through a subdivision

“You stupid motherfuckers.” Taco yelled, “That was the dumbest thing I’ve ever seen.”
“Did we lose him?” Miles said.

“You probably set his whole fucking car on fire.” Taco said, shaking his head.

“No greater feeling then being shot at missed.” I said.

“Holy Shit!” Taco squawked. The El Camino pulled up alongside us with both it’s flags still alight. The driver was screaming, insane. “Scum!” The man wailed, his face huge with terror and murderous bereavement, “SCUM!”

“Eat a dick white trash!”

A racial slur, the Jager bottle exploding into shards against the El Camino, the truck veering toward us like a missile. Taco clambering into the front seat, an empty forty following the Jager.

“Pull over bitch!” Taco screamed, “Just you and me motherfucker, just you and me.” The El Camino veered into us again, severing the rearview mirror, and I knew then that it was over, that someone was going to jail and someone else was going bleed

“You will be disembowled, skullfucked, and cannabialized!” Vince was quite literally frothing at the mouth. One of the forties had keeled over and emptied itself into his lap. He appeared at once bloodthirsty and soaked in his own urine. Miles was plastered to his seat, moaning in terror. A red light appeared at the boulevard up ahead, and the El Camino and the Murdermobile screeched to a halt along side one another. Vince got out of the car and started toward the El Camino. The driver reached into the glove compartment, and Taco said the word before I saw it Vince stopping in his tracks.

Taco clambered to the back, fastening himself to Miles and I. Miles was making an odd sound, a sort of high pitched moan Vince stood in the center of the road. His face was nearly blank, almost confused, like a tiger in a cage. I heard the metallic click of the hammer being cocked; the driver was clutching at his throat as though he were choking, the barrell trembling in his hand. I couldn’t move or breathe. And then,

“Biiiiikkkkkkawwwwwww!”

Vince stood with both arms tucked in at his sides, adopted a strange, spread legged crouch. He flung his head down as though pecking at feed.

“Vince!” I squealed, the three of us whimpering and shaking, clinging to one another with trouser-wetting feeble-minded terror. “Aggghhhh...” went Taco, a strange reedy sound. “Agggh.” Vince hopped from one foot to the other, squawking, thrusting his head this way and that, followed by his strange, avian shadow. Under the glow of the streetlight he looked floating and ethereal. He would be shot to pieces and killed before us all; but would you believe me if I told you that then, just then, that he was beautiful?

The light changed to green; the El Camino sputtered to life and drove away. And then it was just us on the empty street. Vince kept dancing, hopping from foot to foot. I heard frogs, and I realized there must have been a stream or pond nearby. Maybe when we died we became frogs. Maybe we lived in a pond with our loved ones and childhood pets, who were all also frogs. Maybe we sunned ourselves and ate flies by day, and regarded each other with huge, wet beautiful eyes, eyes that showed nothing but love and understanding; and maybe we gathered at night and sang gentle songs to comfort the living whom we’d left behind.

I looked at Vince; he was still dancing. I knew then that his mother would be dead before she could come back for him, and that my father would live but that he simply never would. I knew that Vince knew about his mom too, and that this was in part the reason why he couldn’t stop dancing. I knew that Jada would break my heart into a million pieces, and of the loneliness ahead, how I would drink and drug my way into it’s yawning, pitiless mouth. I knew that Taco would live to see his dreams come true, and that Miles would be dead before his son could walk. Vince danced, and the frogs sang of things ending, of the passage of life and love like color from the leaf. And I sat there, knowing.

I got out of the car and walked over to Vince, moths fluttering in spirals up toward the streetlamp above. Vince squawked at me, then stood up and smiled.

“Miles’s?” He said.

“Yes.”

He drove carefully. The coke was gone, the beer was drunk, and nothing was said. Vince was humming to himself, and I rested my head against his shoulder as he drove. I didn’t feel very well. Miles wretched violently in the grass when we pulled up in front of his apartment, and I

followed suit, more from nerves than the chemical slurry which was then going back the way it came.

The door opened before Miles could finish fumbling with the keys, Gabriella standing in the doorway with disbelief, Javi feeding from her bare breast. She stood back wordlessly so we could enter. “There’s Guisados in the fridge, if you need something to eat.” Gabriella said. She had coal black circles under her eyes. I asked her how she was doing, and she asked me what was the longest I’d ever gone without sleeping. I told her two, maybe two and a half days, and she threw back her head and laughed, except I hadn’t actually said anything funny, and she wasn’t actually laughing. I wished she didn’t hate us. I looked at Miles and looked right through him, to that mouldering apple core where a heart had been when we were kids. I knew what he was thinking then and hoped I knew; “I didn’t ever know I could do this Ricky, that I alone could destroy a person as thoroughly as I have been.”

Gabriella swaddled Javi, set him down in an electric rocker, and told us she was going to sleep. When she left we took a full bar of Xanax each, as per Miles’s recommendation and sat together on the couch, watching taped over episodes of the Murray Show while we waited for the drugs to put us to sleep. The Murray Show had been a beloved, louche staple of our adolescence. We liked the episodes with paternity tests best of all, especially when the father was not a match; Murray bellowing his most infamous refrain, the adulterous wife clasping her hands together in prayer as the cuckolded father fell to his knees, destroyed entirely before the baying multitudes. But this time, when the awful moment came, no one spoke. Maybe it was because Vince, Taco and I had done a group project on the Roman Coliseum for Honor’s History, and considering the two spectacles in light of one another seemed to imply a rather dark view of human progress. Or maybe we had gotten old enough for utter ruination to stop seeming like an abstraction. Or maybe we were just getting older.

There was a bic and an ashtray with good-sized, barely smoked joint on the coffee table, and Vince selected the largest of the bunch and got it lit and toked it. I had blisters on the palm of my right hand from the exploding lighter, and a cursory examination of my face using the camera app on my phone revealed that I was bereft of an eyebrow. We smoked the joint and watched as a beautiful woman kiss a frog who became a Prince, the message being that

Coca-Cola was really making it work for some people. Then we watched as soldiers rappelling from helicopters and charged out across the empty desert, carrying boxes labeled aid. And at this I thought of my first cousin, who had gone to both wars as an officer, and came back with medals and incurable psychoses. I thought advertisements and wars, and how Coca-Cola couldn't make you a prince anymore then killing someone could make you a man. And as the sky started to go from navy blue to yellow and the joint burned down to it's smoldering conclusion and the last of the drugs we'd taken began to percolate their way through our beleaguered systems, little Javi begin to cough.

I don't know what it was about the sound of his coughing. It was a tiny sound, barely recognizable for what it was, and yet it agitated some subconscious, primordial instinct before I could articulate what we had just done; that we had just hot-boxed the room in which Miles's infant had been sleeping, and that Javier McNaldo Reyes Erickson had likely just gotten high for the first time in his brand new life. We sprang to our feet and began to rush madly about the smoky room. Miles opened windows while Vince flailed our hands over his gasping little mouth, trying madly to scoop the smoke away from his face. Miles grabbed a handheld vacuum and held it over his face, which woke up him and made him cry, which didn't seem to have much of an impact, except that seeing him awake and crying was somehow better than seeing him coughing in his sleep. Taco charged back into the living room brandishing a floor fan set to the highest setting and aimed it at Javi's face, and his tiny cheeks and eyelids fluttered in the wind like those of a falling skydiver.

After a little while Taco turned the fan away from Javi and Javi stopped crying, and we sat in a circle around him, breathless in our self-loathing, in our utter relief that we had not killed him. I pictured our teary-eyed mugshots on the evening news, having been arraigned on charges of negligent infanticide. And as we crowded around him, looking down at his little self, something beautiful happened. Javier opened his eyes, wide, like I'd never seen a baby that small do before; and they were clear and tiny and blue like little sapphires. Javi looked up at us and the ceiling, and his eyes turned to the left and he looked at the sky. And the sky was so big and our faces were so odd and Javi felt such wonder at all this, such piercing, amazing wonder, that he did something that Miles would later tell us he'd never see his son do before; he smiled. He was

so humbly, and openly, and lovingly amazed. We all blacked out on the floor for a good ten hours right after that, and pretty much right where we were sitting, because that's what happens when you take a full bar of Xanax and don't go lie down in a bed. But I do remember what happened just before then; that little Javi looked at us, at his father, at the apartment and the sky; that Javier looked at the world, and what he saw amazed him.

I used to think I would return to that night because it was the very last time we had all been beautiful together, but I not very long ago I realized this wasn't the case. Why I return to this night, again and again, is because it was the last time the four of us were ever in one another's presence. So I return to this memory covetously, polishing it, fondling it, studying it, hoping to find some essence of what's been lost. So maybe I'm more like someone starved, falling upon a crust of bread.

There was awkwardness when it was all over. Miles was right; Gabriella moved out a week later, to the back house of his own father's Sherman Oaks manor. Miles sent me a the only voicemail his father had left him after it happened, a cold, smug, and yet unmistakably rehearsed little monologue in which he referred several times to Miles's "dereliction". He made millions of dollars designing penis-shaped skyscrapers and imagined it gave his monstrosity some artistic varnish; and he really, really liked the word dereliction.

Miles of course saw the irony in this too, but said the whole thing felt like castration not only because it was, at that point, self-evidently true; but because in losing Gabriella and his son he also felt in some way like his father had won. I reached out to him once or twice before the summer, but Miles didn't really seem to want to see people then, and it was honestly a relief to leave it at that. I thought being alone would be good for him. Instead, he started shooting heroin.

I looked at Vince a little differently, after that night, and he knew it too. I tried not to think about it, but I was warier of his moods, his flights of fancy. But for the most part things seemed the same.

Life, after we'd gotten into school, seemed inordinately good for a few months. I'd applied to two schools and been accepted to them both, Sonoma State and a small, prestigious, private liberal arts college in Upstate New York. I applied to the latter on a lark; I didn't think I would get in, but they allowed you to apply with a couple essays on some famous paintings, a geopolitical hypothetical, and some books you liked in lieu of grades and test scores, so I went for it. Sonoma State was cheap, plus if I went I could major in wine. But the college in Upstate New York had a dozen famous writers on their faculty, not including the ones who came to read. They were usually on the High Times annual list of best American colleges, the only ranking system that I had any respect for, and they even had their own art museum. It was a good school. It was the kind of school where good kids went, kids with good grades and good parents and ambitions, kids who I imagined would be different from the ones I knew. I imagined if I went there that I would become different too.

On the night I found I got in, my mother phoned my grandfather to ask him for money. She sat me down and told me I wouldn't have to take out loans, that he'd cover what was outstanding after financial aid. I was astonished that she had done this for me. I didn't like him very much. If I'd had to be to ask, I almost certainly wouldn't have. But she did for me, so I could move three thousand miles away from her and go to school in New York. I thought about her differently after that.

Vince had gotten into the acting program at UCLA, but it would have been 5,000 a year, and Cal-Poly SLO had offered him a full ride. So he was going to go there. And Taco was going to Merced. Vince and I were working extra shifts on the King Richard so we'd have money when we went to college, and the Twilight shift became a regular party. We drank Dos Equis between spots, snuck joints in the head. The crew didn't mind; the harder we partied, the harder we worked. We'd swallow pills with our beer and cut a hundred pounds of bait in an hour, douse the boat in bleach and industrial detergent and hose it down until it sparkled. In the previous year there'd been nothing but Rockfish, which were tasty but not exactly a thrill to fish; but an El

Nino spring had brought Yellowtail and Barracuda to the bay, and business was good. We were making over 300\$ some weekends, which seemed like a lot of money for a job where we got to party and fish.

Taco and Dante started seeing a lot of each other, and Taco's soundcloud started really blowing up. He also had other friends, people from the neighborhood, mostly and I imagined he wanted to see them as well before he went away. I didn't want to think it had anything to do with Miles or Vince and his mom, or the fact that we'd nearly gotten ourselves shot to death by a redneck while high on cocaine. In any case, he seemed happy, and I wanted that for him. And it wasn't like we never saw him. Carla and Vince were more reserved towards one another when they crossed paths at the apartment, but sometimes I'd see her name pop up in Vinces phone. Vince told me about it sometimes; he was really losing his mind over her, even though I didn't possibly think it could be more to her than an ill-conceived escape from the yoke of 60 hour work week, the decades spent languishing in single-motherhood. It seemed less the Graduate then some tragic saga of Freudian weirdness. But everything was changing, we were letting each other make our own mistakes.

I saw Jada a lot. She was going to Sarah Lawrence, and we talked about visiting one another on weekends. We were falling in love. She told me about her life. Jada's family was rich, Hollywood rich, but it hadn't always been that way. She told me about the apartment they lived in when her dad had just started his record label; how one of her first memories was of watching Zooboomafoo when some men broke into their apartment, except they told her they were the movers, and she watched T.V while they packed everything up, and how they did the T.V last. She told me about her Dad, the time he went to jail for throwing her mother through a sliding glass door. How his music industry friends were always coming over to do drugs, famous people, and how one of them had molested her when she was only 7 or 8. She cried when she told me this and I held her, and after a while, I started to cry too. That she had survived so much made her all the more precious to me, made the way we felt seem all the more like destiny.

We talked about the future, as a hypothetical, of course, but a hypothetical that made us maddeningly happy. I was going to be a writer, and she was going to be a human rights lawyer. We'd live in New York, in a brownstone. We'd never get married, but there would be kids once we were established enough in our careers and our nanny would speak to them in a foreign language so they would grow up to be beautiful little cosmopolitans. We weren't ever going to hit them or scream at them or get wasted in front of them. We wouldn't fight, but if we ever argued it wouldn't be in front of them, and we'd make up quickly. We'd raise them to be better than us. That seemed like the most important thing

We graduated in June, three names in a class of a thousand. We were stoned out of our minds as we took the stage to shake hands with the Oceanside High School's principal, red-eyed and grinning in robes, underneath which we wore colorful rented suits; mine had a purple dress shirt with a matching color pocket square, which I folded to resemble the Sydney Opera House. Tacos was cream suede, underneath which he wore a cashmere turtleneck, and powder blonde wig to top it all off. Vince wore a Zoot-Suit, for his Abuela. Steve was brown-bagging, and he and my mother and Carla laughed about it like old friends. They took pictures of us afterward, the three of us in our funny hats and nice cigars, and Jada showed up with her mom, and Dante showed up with his dads and they took pictures of all of us. We felt like we were growing up, and that day it seemed like the best thing that had ever happened, almost like a miracle.

That summer was mainly spent on the boat or at Jada's, though I spent the night as his apartment three times in the weeks before I moved to New York. I didn't think about it at the time, but I was the first visitor he'd had in months. He didn't strike me as being that bad off; he seemed depressed for sure, but not nearly as emotional or self-flagellating or despairing as he'd been in the past. Just kind of tired and preoccupied, like his thoughts were working harder to assert themselves.

We didn't go anywhere or talk much about anything that had happened, though he was curious about Vince and Taco. Basically, we drank and got stoned and took pills and talked. He told me about Noble Trash's backwoods squat out in Topanga Canyon, how they'd jury-rigged the well and got a stolen generator up there and how for a couple weeks Noble Trash and his friends had been having the time of their lives up there, parties every night, backyard shows,

group-sex. “It was Eden,” Miles said, a veritable teenage eden, until the Sheriff’s department got wind of it and shut it down. So Eden was briefly lost, and Eden-kind relocated to Miles’s apartment, until one of Noble Trashes’s friends, Lady Smurf, stole one of his paintings and traded it for drugs. I told Miles I was sorry about the loss of his Eden, and that I wished I could have seen him in his element while it was still intact. Miles said that it was ok, that a person only ever had one Eden, and Eden, by design, was always lost in some way or another. Besides, not having people around gave him more time for his art.

His most recent work was dark even for him, epic, tableaux of violence and lust and debauchery, allusions to consumer culture, global warming, Middle East Conflict, and outright blasphemy, or at least it’s depiction. He used cutouts from magazines as well, gluing them directly on to the canvas sometimes. He was also doing sketches, highly impressionistic little projects which he told me he tended to start and finish in one go, and had titles “Portrait of Myself in the Throes of a Duster Blackout”. I believed deeply in his talent as an Artist. I thought if only he could see it for himself that he might come out of this, whatever it could be called at this point.

He told me about the Heroin on the second visit. He told me he was going to go to the bathroom to inject Heroin, and that he’d injected it twice the last time I saw him and that he didn’t want to lie to me. I don’t think I expressed concern. I did ask him if I could watch him shoot up, and he thought about it and decided I could. I sat on the edge of the bathtub while he cooked up the shot, which he’d learned how to do when he was crashing with Noble Trash. I asked him what it was like and he told me it was just like the pills, that when he injected them he couldn’t tell the difference between the two. When he was done I rolled a joint, and he showed me the paintings and sketches he was starting to sell on Etsy.

We crashed in his bed together when I came over. I slept on Gabriella’s side of the bed. Javi’s crib was still in his bedroom, but the crucifix that had been hung above the bed at Gabriella’s insistence was gone. In its place was a large print of Salvador Dali’s *Voluptas Mors*. It was a substitution which almost seemed in the spirit of Miles to be poignant; and yet, like the man itself, it somehow sort of was.

The last time I ever came over, we spent the evening injecting cocaine. I remember Miles's dabbing my inner forearm with an alcohol wipe, Miles saying something about my veins. He made me promise I wouldn't hate him if anything happened after, and I said I wouldn't. He stuck the needle in the vein. I watched as the barrel flushed a sacramental red, the plunger inching toward the barrel as Miles sent her home. A few seconds later and philosophy was dead, had been reborn as the first true joy. I fell back on the couch, moaning with an abandon unknown to mere lechery. Having achieved immortality, I sublimated into a perfect, roaring, oblivion.

Miles was up before me. We'd taken Valium to fall asleep, but I still felt spent, like someone had gone into the part of my brain where happiness was made and power washed everything. Miles was in the kitchen with a bowl of cereal he'd just made, pouring Smirnoff into his orange juice. He toasted me. He said he was happy for me, and I believe he was, that any happiness he could still feel at that point was probably felt on his friends behalf. But he didn't look it. He was smiling, but he looked like he knew we were saying goodbye, and I was probably smiling back beneficently, like I loved him but I knew it was for the best. And he'd see that too and he'd start to get better, and things would be different because we weren't kids anymore, but a time would come when he would see it wasn't such a bad thing.

I was hungover on the bus ride back. The sky was clear, and the air was unseasonably cool and breezy, a melancholy Sunday afternoon. I thought of all the Sunday afternoons that had been like that one, with me hungover and alone on the bus back home, wondering how such a beautiful day could feel so lonely and sad.

I'd been in college for almost a year when Vince texted me saying Miles had OD'd and that he was in the hospital. I was confused; I hadn't seen Miles since that summer, but the most recent thing I'd heard was that he'd gone to rehab. I asked Vince if it was bad, and Vince said he wasn't sure but that based on what Gabriella had told him he didn't think so. I tried to put it out of my mind.

It had already been a hard year, especially for Taco, who had to drop out of college almost as soon as he'd gotten there. He came home for a few days at the end of his quarter, and Carla and some people from the neighborhood threw a raucous, boozy barbeque in his honor. I

was still in New York so I didn't go, but Vince did. He said the whole block turned up, entire extended families, and that there'd been music and dancing and copious amounts of good sticky weed being smoked until those two cops had shown up on their segways.

The cops had made them turn the music off and wouldn't let anybody leave, even though Carla offered to tell everyone to go home. They asked everyone for their I.D so they could run their names for warrants on a small, blocky laptop one of the segway cops had in their backpack, and the people who didn't have I.D were told to stand away from everyone else, including some people who were very old and had trouble standing up for a long time. People got upset, started to yell. Someone threw a hot dog at one of the cops and it hit him in the face and got condiments all over his uniform, and that was when everything went to shit. The cops lost their fucking minds, and they drew their tasers and started screaming at people to get back when two middle schoolers jumped on their segways. And the cops were about to tase the kids when someone hit one of the cops from behind with something, someone who hadn't been at the party, and seconds later it was five on two, cops at one point getting beaten with their own segways.

Not that Vince saw this; at that point, everyone who could was running away. They did everything but call in the National Guard; helicopters, Swat Teams, cops in riot gear stopping at intersections. Very, very early in the morning, two Detectives stopped by Carla's to take Vince and Taco in for questioning, and they let Vince go but kept Taco for three days. They finally let him out on bond with a court date, and Taco's lawyer said the good news was that the charges would almost certainly be thrown out. The bad news was that Taco couldn't leave the county until then, so he wasn't going to go back to school. Taco didn't even know the guys who hit the cops; they hadn't even been invited to the party. While his peers were enjoying their first months of college, Taco was at home, taking orders at the In N' Out on Washington Boulevard.

When I found out what happened I wanted to be with him, but I couldn't fly home until Winter Break. Taco was going to be in school for all of January so he could make up the class he had missed, so I only got to see him once when I was home. I had wanted Vince to be there too, but Carla had ended things with him a few hours after Taco had gotten out of jail. She'd told Vince - who himself had once told me that he'd been in love with her since the first time they met- that she would never forgive herself for what she'd done, that the thought of it made her

wish she was dead. So Vince said he thought he was getting the Flu, and I ended up going alone. We smoked a little weed, and Taco told me about jail, and working at In N' Out, and how the guys who hit the Cops with their own Segways had all been charged with attempted murder. Then played some of his newer music for me, which was better then it had ever been. If he asked me about Miles, I don't remember it.

I didn't see Miles that break. I had to go home early for a three week long science program my college inflicted upon all the freshmen. He texted me a few times, and sent me an email that he had put himself "in a program for people who can't stop getting high," and I'd finally gotten back to him, though I'd kept it brief. I told myself I was busy, that there would be time to catch up when he was really better. Plus I felt like I had my hands full with Jada.

Things had gone south between Jada and I about a week after I started school. I had been trying as hard as I possibly could to keep her in my life, and right until it ended I was sure we would pull through. But Jada was losing her mind. She'd stopped sleeping when she first got to school, and instead of recognizing that this was a problem, she'd ditched her medication outright. Our arguments were constant, brutal, and stupid. I'd be close to catatonic by the time they ended. But still I persisted. Until the fight we had a week after winter break, when she'd slapped me in the face in a jealous rage and I'd simply known, and I'd grabbed her phone and ran to the bathroom and locked the door while she banged and screamed bloody murder. And then I saw the text. She'd admitted what had happened to a friend.

I put her phone down. I didn't want to know anything else. Jada stopped banging on the door. When I came out of the bathroom she was ashen-faced. I asked her why she had done it, and she said she had convinced herself I didn't love her anymore. At this I broke down. I looked at her, at the small, pretty face that was now so pinched with torment, that I had loved so much and could love no longer. I started to cry.

"Didn't you love me?" I said.

"Yes." Jada said. "I still do, so very, very much."

"Then why did you fuck someone else?" I said. "Was that how you thought love works? Was it opposite day?"

Jada begged me to stay, and I said I wasn't going to. And she cried too. She wouldn't let me go. She grabbed on to me, and I told her that nothing she had done was hurting me more than that. So she let me go, and I don't think I've ever seen a person look the way she did. I'd never seen someone who wanted to be a good person so badly before, and yet somehow couldn't. She said, "I hope we can be together in the afterlife, and that when we're there you won't remember all the things I did to hurt you, and I can love you the way I was meant to." And I said I was going and she said she understood. Then she walked over to the window open window and swung both legs out and started to lower herself out the window, which was on the seventh floor.

By the time the cops made it up to her apartment she was back inside. They stood me up against a wall and frisked me and asked me what had happened, and I told them Jada had tried to jump out a window, which is why I had called. Then they asked Jada if I had hurt her, and she shook her head no.

I thought about what she said to me that night, on the train ride back to school. It seemed, at the time, like the saddest thing one person had ever said to another. I still think about it sometimes. I don't love Jada anymore. I hope she's ok, but I don't want to know if she isn't. But on the night we broke up, when, somehow, I was finally able to fall asleep I dreamed about her. I don't remember where we were in my dream, except I know that wherever I wasn't here. But we were happy there, wherever it was. And I remember the way she looked; that she had a pretty white gown on, and that she glowed. I saw Jada in my dream that night, and she looked like an Angel.

And then, three months later, Vince texted me that Miles had overdosed. It was early May in Upstate New York, and never, in all my life, had I ever seen so many shades of green. I had more or less survived the break up, except that I was drinking too much, sometimes two thirty packs of beer in a week, and sleeping with lots of random people. For while anyone could have had me, and a surprising number did. Including a man, for thirty sublime seconds and a disappointing minute and a half, and I had been so lonely then that I almost asked him to stay. I hadn't been thinking about Miles; a month before then, he sent me a second email, a long one talking about the Rehab and what he did there and all the realizations he'd had since coming there, how he'd started to feel authentic, spontaneous, unmanufactured happiness for the first

time he could remember in a very long while. And I remember reading it and feeling happy, feeling like I was having a good day too, so I decided to go on a walk and while I was out a girl texted me asking to hang out and I forgot to write him back. That had been around a month before Vince's text. I used the email to tell myself it was ok. Miles's was probably fine, and if he wasn't, his Dad could get the best Doctors.

By the time Vince called me back it was several hours later, and in the interim I had gone from having been doubled over with guilt, and because I convinced myself that Miles's overdose was, in a lot of ways, actually pretty funny. It was funny, I had decided, because he would need it to be, he would need to see the humor in it, and it was funny because overall things had gotten so completely out of hand. I was terrified and desperate but it was ok because things were also pretty funny, because Miles had probably almost died right in the middle of his getting better and better, and we'd laugh about that some day, how he'd let himself get so ineffectual and depressed that he almost died. I was still thinking of ways in which it was funny when Vince called me and told me what had happened; and I still did after it even when he started crying and told me he had to go. I decided I would text him something sympathetic and cheeky, for when he felt better, and it was only after I'd found him in my contacts that I realized he would never see it, that he was never going to have the chance to laugh at his own mistake.

We buried Miles's body on a Friday, in a cemetery in hidden away in the Santa Monica Mountains. That was how I tried to think of the funeral. Not that we were burying Miles, not that he was inside the coffin, but that the funeral was about burying his body. This was because I was having trouble thinking of him as dead. I had trouble even thinking of him as a junkie. The sum total of the facts I had seemed to amount to an accident, a chance cleaving of him from his life, yet no less irrevocable for it's randomness, for his sheer absence of intent.

What I heard was that Miles had been living in an outpatient facility in Orange County, and that prior to that he'd been injecting a hundred dollars worth of heroin a day. His dad had threatened to cut him off if he didn't go, and I guess Miles had called his bluff at first. But when he didn't come to visit Javi for a couple of weeks, Gabriella went looking for him and somehow tracked him down to his father's A-Frame cabin in Idyllwild. He'd broken a window to get

inside, and when Gabriella found him he'd been lying on the couch next to a pile of syringes and empty bottles of Vodka. He was passed out, and he'd thrown up on himself. He didn't even weigh a hundred pounds.

Gabriella had thought he was dead when she found him, so Miles was woken up by the sound of screaming and crying. And I guess he decided then that he didn't want to die, so he went to the outpatient facility a few days later. They got him on Suboxone and Librium so the withdrawals wouldn't be too bad, and from what I understood he'd been doing well there. He'd been there almost two months when there was another fight with his Dad and left the facility and bought some pills and some coke and some Xanax downtown. He was on the train head to Long Beach when the police got to him, and he didn't have any drugs actually on him, they found them in a waste receptacle on the train. We interpreted these facts to mean that he was going back to the facility, that he was going to turn himself in. That was one of the hardest things to hear, that as low as he probably felt in his final hours he was still trying to make things right. Yet it still seemed like a thing worth remembering.

Basically Miles passed out on the train, and fell on the floor, and his lips turned blue and he didn't seem to be breathing. They gave him four narcans on his way to the hospital, and he kept sliding back into it. He was in a coma for three days. A day before he died the test results came back and it turned out there was Fentanayl in all of the drugs he purchased, even the coke. His organs failed on the third day. The doctors told Gabriella and his Dad that even if he did wake up that he wouldn't be Miles anymore, that his brain was damaged from the lack of Oxygen. And then they said he wasn't going to wake up at all.

I couldn't think of loneliness when he left the rehab, of him dying on the floor of the train car, alone. To think of him living with that kind of loneliness was by far the hardest thing. I wondered why he hadn't told us what was happening to him, or at least why he hadn't told me; it seemed for a while, like he'd done something monstrously unfair, by not telling us how sick he was. It was hard to accept that it probably wouldn't have made a difference. He had relapsed and there had been Fentanayl in the drugs he bought and that was why he had died, why kids our age all over the country were dying. Yet I kept reading the email he sent me, trying to hear his voice

in my head when I read the words, the cadences of the way he'd talked. I kept reading the email, and thinking about how things might have gone if I had only responded.

The Cemetery was up the coast in Malibu, and small. We'd driven up that morning in my mother's minivan, Vince, Taco, Gabriella, Javi, my mom and I. Gabriella had asked my mom if she could ride up with us the night before the Funeral, and my mom had said of course, so we'd picked her and Javi up in front of Miles's dad house at 9:00 that morning, both of them dressed in black. I was surprised Gabriella wanted to come with us, but I guess we knew Miles better her own family probably did, or anyone else, for that matter. I was glad she was with us, in any case. We saw Miles's father's Rolls Royce in the parking lot, but Gabriella stayed with my mother while we walked over to pay our respects. He wasn't crying, but I could feel him tremble when I embraced him, as though he could intuit our recriminations through our touch.

The sky was cloudless but slightly hazy when we got there. The mountains were parched looking, yellowed by years of late-stage drought, and, in some places, fire-scarred. But it was springs, and Chaparral still echoed with grasshoppers and bird song, and rising up hugely against the churning Pacific. I'd been there before, when we'd buried Aunt Martha. The initial shock of seeing his coffin, of knowing that the body that once contained him was inside of it, that it still probably looked like him, diminished under the weight of my *déjà vu*. But it was beautiful there, at least there was that. The place had the kind of beauty against which the whole mystery of human sorrow seems even more abstract. *'Are you there, Miles?'* I wanted to ask of it all, of the mountains and the sea and the sky. It seemed possible, then, that he might be hiding out there somewhere.

It was a Jewish funeral, and the fact that this was so struck me as pretty unbelievable. I remembered Miles had told me in the past that he wanted a Jewish funeral, but not without a modicum of drunken irony. Apparently I wasn't the only person he'd told. Taco, Vince and I hadn't been sure if we were supposed to wear the Kippah that had been in a basket outside the Cemetery before the service and had decided it would be safer to do so. I for one felt better to see that Gabriella had put one on little Javi.

The Rabbi spoke of the world to come and how it is not like this one, a place without eating or drinking or procreation or business or jealousy or hatred or even competition. The next

world, the Rabbi said, belonged only to the righteous, and that all they did there was sit with their crowns on their heads and rejoice in the brightness of the divine presence. I thought this sounded pretty boring. I wondered if Miles got to be counted as among the righteous. It seemed like an unrealistic expectation. I liked the idea that he might be a part of nature better, and while the Rabbi I thought for a while about where he might be, if he was out there at all. He never liked the beach due to his abiding hatred of sand, but he liked woods. He liked woods because his mother used to take him camping, just the two of them, since his Dad considered camping “peasant recreation.” I decided he’d probably be in the canopy of a tree, above one of those miniature jungles that flourish alongside the creeks and in the bottoms of ravines. The Rabbi spoke of how, when an especially tender-hearted soul finds itself ill at ease here on Earth, that the will of Angels sometimes overpowers that of the people; and I thought that, wherever Miles was, if he still was, that he would want to be with his mom.

I thought ‘Are you hearing all of this Miles? How are you making out up there, among the righteous? Three dozen gentiles in Kippahs at your funeral, I doff my hat towards the great beyond, you wry bastard. Are the angels partial to posthumous jokers? In any case keep it coming, truth is just about anything helps at this point, because every time I remember you’re dead I feel like I’m slowly being ripped in half. Got to hate how the world goes on, right? And maybe you’re out there and maybe you aren’t, but in truth that’s not the hardest thing. The worst of it Miles, the reason I am talking to the sky as though it might be you, is that I worry you didn’t know how much I loved you.’

The service ended without the Rabbi managing to avoid the specifics of how Miles had died, though he mentioned an addiction medicine program Miles’s father had just made an enormous donation too. Vince sobbed as the coffin was lowered into the grave, and tears streamed down Taco’s face. The three of us and my mother filed in around Gabriella, who had endured the proceedings with lock-jawed, tearful stoicism, for the filling of the grave. Miles’ father had been supposed to go first. He hadn’t cried at any point during the service and looked determined not to; but, as he reached for the shovel, he pitched forward, falling to his knees. He tried to stand but couldn’t, so he sat in the dirt with his legs spread open, wide-eyed, delirious. Vince, the Rabbi and I helped him to his feet, and waited with him as Gabriella poured the first

shovelfuls of dirt over the coffin. Javi, who'd slept through his father's intuition, began to wail and wail. We held Miles's father as the mourners poured dirt back into his son's grave, his red, sleepless eyes seeing nothing, his lips moving in desperate silence as if he was reciting some desperate, secret incantation. He was alone in this world and probably knew he would leave it that way, and I could hold him because I knew that for all of his monstrousness that the grief which was to come would not be commensurate with whatever pain he had inflicted upon his wife and son.

Then it was Vince and my turn, and we asked Miles's father if he thought he could stand and he waved us off. Vince went. I put the shovel in the dirt and raised it over the grave. I hesitated. I looked to the mountains and see for strength. I thought, "Ok Miles, here it is." I said, out loud, "Goodbye my dear friend, I am so happy to have loved you." I let the dirt fall from the shovel over his coffin, and with that the service was complete.

Miles's father needed sedation and so the wake was postponed, indefinitely. Instead we went back to his house to be with Gabriella, Vince, Taco my mom and I, and a couple of her relatives. My mother ordered take-out, and we sat in the living room and told stories about Miles. Some of Gabriella's family didn't speak English very well, but seemed delighted and amused at light-eyed, fair-skinned Vince's native level of competency. My story was about burying the rabbit for his mother, which Vince translated for her family members through a deluge of tears, and despite the disdain I was sure they had felt for Miles during his lifetime they found some tears to spare for him as well.

Gabriella's extended family had come from as far away as Bakersfield and Barstow, and eventually they started to file out. My mother gave Taco a ride back to Venice, and then it was just Vince and I. We asked Gabriella if she wanted us to sleep on the couch, for our own benefit as much as hers, no doubt, and she said that as long as she was with Javi she'd be ok. We said goodbye and promised that once a year we'd all go to his grave together. And as the wrought iron gate to their driveway closed shut I turned around, and Gabriella was clutching herself, sobbing or hyperventilating into her own hand. Vince started the Murdermobile, and we left.

The next evening I was on a Redeye, floating back to New York through a starlit night, and I looked out the window and saw meteorites falling over the Kansas plains.

A lot of time has passed since then, not all of it bad. I think we all wanted to believe that going through Miles's death together would create some kind of unbreakable camaraderie between us, and we did go back together the year after that one, like we had planned to do; but that summer my mom told me she was moving in with her boyfriend in Denver, and I didn't go back to Los Angeles that entire year.

Taco's done well, and I hope the best is yet to come. He left school to make music full time, and now his watched youtube video has almost 3 million views. He performed with a famous rap collective on Degeneres show, and she even said his stage name, "Taco the Defiler." He gave himself over to his music like nothing I'd ever seen before, and now you might even have heard his name. Last time we spoke, he told me he was making five digits a show, and had no idea what to do with the half a million dollars in his checking account. I told him he should buy real-estate, and he said he was going to pay off his mom's student loans, then take her to Rome.

That was the last time we texted, and I've made my peace with that. He's famous now, and, if the videos he posts on instagram are at all like his day to day, seems to spend his downtime nightclubbing or trying new kinds of extreme sports with his harem of slender, androgynous, skateboarding groupies. We only knew him for two years. The important thing, I tell myself, is that he is doing what he loves and is moving through the world as himself, and he needed to find the people who would allow him to do that.

I had a bad spell, in the months after the funeral. I told myself in the following weeks that I would take care of myself, that Miles would have wanted me too, and a couple months later I was ordering bottles of Dexedrine from an online Indian Pharmacy, smoking an eighth of weed a night to come down from it. I took so much speed I became anorexic. I barely slept, I hid from my new friends. I had a high grade point average and an ulcer, and when I went out to party I blacked out and threw up blood. I walked around campus looking raggy and high, about 9/10ths of the way there to a breakdown, and people were generally polite and unnoticing.

I didn't know how to write about the things that were making me sad, so I wrote about my insatiable partying instead. "Does the world really need another beer poem?" said one of my professors to the class, during a workshop, and I replied that "Every poem is a beer poem". The class laughed and the professor smiled at me, as if to say "you have your moments, Ricky, even if you're not much of a poet." And that seemed like that was better than nothing. But that day, I got high and thought about Jada and her dream all that time ago, about all the people whose faith in me had been misplaced.

It went on for the better part of a year, this feeling like I was raping myself. My own reflection made me cry. I hadn't written anything in months, and after a case of ischemic colitis that left me shitting literal blood I flushed the pills, and for the rest of that month I went through withdrawals that felt like every unhappy feeling I'd ever had was now roosting on my heart like a flock of vultures. But a week later I was feeling spontaneous joy again, too, and the week after that I was going on long, lazy runs. By the end of the month I was writing again. Pot took a while longer, and in some ways it was harder motivationally. Whereas speed made you feel like an unmitigated disaster, on pot you believed yourself to be largely functional; when you ran out, however, you felt as though you'd been drop-kicked into the seventh circle of insomniac hell. But when I quit the pills, I felt once that in the end it was largely up to me, whether I died a failure or not.

The worst thing that happened, in the years following Miles's death, was when they found Vince's mom on the side of an interstate in Arkansas. She'd been hitchhiking. I couldn't bring myself to read the articles; all I knew was that it was the third such case that year. He sounded like an animal, when he called me. I didn't fly home for that one. We never talked about it, and he didn't respond to texts, which a part of me knew were perfunctory anyways. He was three thousand miles away; I had all the books and freedom I would ever have dared to hope for, friends whom I valued just as highly as him; as excruciating as it was to recognize this, my life was no longer in Los Angeles. So I told myself I couldn't help Vince anymore than I could have helped Miles, knowing full well this was a false comparison, that in truth I simply lacked the courage.

I did see him last summer, and I don't imagine I will again. We went to a bar, a dive near his house. He seemed to have changed. He was heavier than I'd seen him the past, with skinned knuckles and a couple of tattoos, the terrible haircut like a cop. I could tell that he was badly hungover, or perhaps coming off of some harsh drug, maybe even both. He asked me how the writing was going and I told him it was going well, which wasn't true. I told him I was sorry about his mom, and in the span of a few seconds he made several facial expressions, all of which resembled greek masks in their grotesqueness and intensity. It was terrifying to see. Then it passed. He told me he'd been expelled from SLO the first week he was able to come back, for fighting, and that he was working as a bouncer while he trained to become a prison guard.

"I'll make 90 grand a year starting, goes up five grand a year every year after that. The C.O's Union is run by a bunch of straight gangsters, get this, I can retire on half pay when I'm 50, if they don't catch me moving weight for La Eme." Vince said. I almost asked if he was joking, then thought better of it. "If I make it five years and finish my undergrad, the state will pay for law school." He peeled back the label on his bottle of beer. "Better to reign in hell, I guess."

Vince went in for a hug before I had time to make things brutally awkward, which I appreciated. I hugged him back, and after he stood back and put his hands on my shoulders.

"I don't regret any of it." Vince said. "I wish Miles were still alive, of course. And uh, you know." The faces returned once again, abated. "I don't know about you, but it really threw me for a loop, the guilt did. But I thought about it for a long time. And I really don't think any of us has anything we should feel badly about."

I felt them then, the old feelings, and they rocked through my body before I could stop them, hardened in my throat, streamed out of my eyes.

"No Ricky, really." Vince said. "It would be pretty brutal to think anything else." We embraced. I cried into his t-shirt like a little kid.

"I'm so sorry Vince," I muttered. "I'm just so sorry, you have no idea..."

"I do know Ricky. Do us both a favor and let it go."

I want to believe that Vince is ok. I've come to understand that there are things we simply need to believe, and that, for me, is one of them. I need to believe that Vince is ok, that a part of him remains beautiful and undestroyed. I think one should always hope for just a little more than what is reasonable.

Gabriella is the only one I still talk to regularly, or rather correspond with, over email. Like a couple of old people, I think to myself, like the old people I hope we get to become. She seems to be doing ok. She's finished her apprenticeship, goes on dates. She has, in the last couple of years, found a surprising amount of clemency in her heart for Miles. The following is from an email she sent me a few weeks ago, around the third anniversary of Miles's death.

"I don't think he really meant all the things that he did. He thought he couldn't stop because he was a weak person, but I don't believe that anymore. The only thing he couldn't stop doing was believing he was too weak to stop. I have to believe that he hated himself as much as he said he did, to have put me through the things that he did. Sometimes I think that I hate him just as much as I miss him, so recently I am focusing on trying to let go. I forgive him but not the things he did to me, if that makes sense. I am angry he left Javi, even though I know it was an accident and that he was sick and that he didn't mean too.

I still want Javi to know about his Dad. I want him to have the best parts of both of us, so I'm teaching him Spanish and he goes over to Miles's dad's house on Sunday and he tell him about the Torah. One last thing before I go, I want Javi to be a Jew. I never had a communion, so I want that for him. I want him to have things that he can know about himself and feel grounded by, and being a Jew seems like it's better for that than being a Catholic is. He is starting to look like his dad, which makes me happy and sad at the same time."

When I wrote back I asked her for her most recent picture of Javi, and she sent me one of the two of them on a seesaw. In his pictures he looks the way I remember Miles looking when the two of us were little kids, cuddly with a hint of the joker about him, a dollop of his father's own intractable insouciance. I have a suspicion that when he is grown he will be even better looking than his father was, though I hope their similarities start and end with the positives.

In our most recent correspondence, we talked about what we would be willing to tell Javi about his dad, one of those big topics that makes me feel much older while simultaneously reminding me of my own age; older because Javi is the child of a friend who would have been my own age, if he were still alive; and yet, in the hugeness of the question as it appears to me, I am humbly reminded that I am only 22, and that there is a great deal I don't yet know, and plenty I'll never learn. Gabriella told me she feels it as well, this feeling of being aged and young, though I imagine a feeling she gets far more often -and intensely- than I do. But we discussed this question, and Gabriella told me that her tentative conclusion was that when he was old enough he would be entitled to know whatever he could discover, but also that there were things that she didn't need to tell him herself. The way Miles died would be something he'd know early on, so he wouldn't start doing the things we did as young as we were. But the other stuff. She wasn't sure about the other stuff, the ways in which Miles had been a fuck to end all fucks.

I told Gabriella about what I had been writing about him, and told her that if she was ok with it and Javi wanted to, he could read it when he was old enough. Gabriella wrote back asking me how much of what I wrote actually happened, and what parts of it I remembered. And in response I wrote back "all of it" and, "the worst." And Gabriella she'd have to think about it, that she'd have to read it first and determine that "even in the ugliest moments there is a prevailing spirit of love." And I wrote back that this was completely fair, and that if she was ready she could read it soon. And I also said that, while I could not in good faith claim to be aware of the prevailing spirit of what I had written, I believed that spirit to be the spirit of love. I wrote I did know one thing about what I had written, and it was that if Javi ever read any of what I'd written about his dad he could at least know it was true.

So if you're reading this Javi, you can at least know that, though I doubt it will be much of a comfort to you. And I feel inclined to say that what you've read is not the truth that you would find under an electron microscope, but rather the truth as I remember it, evoked and rendered for my own selfish reasons. It is the truth of my relationship with your father and his friends, but that in the end it is just one of many. And while I hope there was no one in this account you find truly irredeemable, I know you will have to draw your own conclusions about what was said and done in what I've written, and that I am only in a position to insist upon the

following; that what I have written is true; and that whoever your father was, you are someone different.

An excerpt from Gabriella's most recent email:

He asked me a few weeks ago where his Papi was. It was a warm beautiful night and we were at Will Rodgers, putting fireflies in jars. He said, "where did my papi go?". And I didn't know what to say. I wasn't sure if he knew he had a Papi, maybe he think a stork brought him to me or something, IDK, he's only four. But anyways, he asked me this, and I'm freaking out, I never went over what to do if he asked. I'm freaking out, and it's just the two of us at Will Rodgers, and the fireflies, and the moon which is so pale and nice. And I started thinking about Miles just then, because he was so white he pretty much glowed, but also he was always so beautiful, like the moon that night. So I just told him your papi is the moon now, I said "your daddy had a hard time here down on Earth, it was making him really sick. So he asked the sun what he should do, and the sun told him he needed a new moon, so his dad became the moon. And Javi asked me if he'd ever come back and visit, and I told him he wants to but he can't, if he does he'll get sick.

I don't know if it's wrong to tell Javi things like that, but I didn't know what else to say, I guess it made me sad and I got a little carried away. But anyways, I told Javi if he said something to the moon that his dad would hear it, and that if he waved he would see it. And this made Javi so happy. He started jumping up and down and saying "Hi Daddy, I love you!". So I take him home, we go to sleep. And the next night, Javi asks me if we can go talk to his Dad. So that's a thing we do now. If the moon is there, we go outside and say hello. Javi even says if his dad is making a face or not, depending on how much of it you can see, if he's making a happy face or a frowny face or a silly face. Sometimes I worry about when he's older, that he'll figure it out and he'll hate me for making something up, but I think for now it seems ok. It doesn't seem that much different from telling a kid about heaven, in a way. And the thing is Ricky, sometimes I do it too, I catch myself talking to the moon like it's Miles, and I'm starting to think he's the moon now too. But maybe that's ok too. Maybe it's ok to be a little crazy as long as you know you are. But anyways, thats what we say every night, so Javi and I can feel less alone. 'Goodnight moon, goodnight Miles.'

