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Apples & overcoats

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Apples & Overcoats

By

Joshua M. Browning

Accepted in Partial Completion
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Masters of Arts

Moheb A. Ghali, Dean of the Graduate School

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MASTER'S THESIS

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Joshua Michael Browning
April 15, 2011

Apples & Overcoats

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of
Western Washington University

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
Joshua M. Browning
April 2011

ABSTRACT

Apples & Overcoats is a novel in progress, and this is the first third of the work.

As a self-contained and solitary pseudo-workaholic, Will Beckett was able to ignore the growing rift between his professional ethics and personal ideals until his failed tobacco campaign and some angry mothers get him suspended. With time on his hands and nothing to wear but suits, he is finally able to interact with his friends—a con man that lives next door and a transient cat named Bill.

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Table of Contents

Abstract.....	iv
Acknowledgements.....	v
Chapter 1.....	1
Chapter 2.....	18
Chapter 3.....	27
Chapter 4.....	40

Chapter One

Good Lord.

That thing is enormous.

I've never expected anything of mine to look quite so, well, big. Back in college, I could never even write long papers. Nothing I have ever had to say that was worth listening to took more than a few paragraphs.

I stare at the billboard overlooking 2nd Street in downtown Shermer, Pennsylvania, boldly displaying a simple picture.

A cartoon bull towers over me. He is upright and wearing red track pants.

The bull is on the right, not unlike something that can be seen in an old Tex Avery cartoon. He's running away from the left side of the billboard while looking back at it over his shoulder, where a cartoon red brick building with a bold Helvetica text reading "China Shop" (the only text on the billboard) is painted on the top of the building. The

china shop is engulfed in flames. It was all I could do to convince Bullrun not to use Comic Sans.

It's 8:45 and the sun has just started to peak behind the sign while cars play red light, green light behind me in the city street. I look down to my feet as I pull my Armani sunglasses from my black leather messenger bag put them on and glance back to the billboard, now tinted brown.

Shermer has become an asphalt jungle in the last twenty years, springing up and smothering the unprepared local grocery stores, mini-marts and video shops that had lain claim to the land years ago. They've been pushed to the suburbs, if they even made it that far, leaving their own trail of tears only to rot in the new ghettos and neighborhoods of the resulting suburban sprawl. The ones who didn't make it out of the way before consumerism struck had their bloated corpses (prime downtown real estate) converted into overpriced boutiques, boot shops, or brand name merchandisers.

At least, that's what my boss says.

But now, the just off center section of this booming example of capitalism is watched over by a billboard.

My billboard. At least until it gets torn down.

My sneaky pseudo attempt at something between supraliminal and subliminal messaging, all in the name of cigarettes.

Specifically Bullrun cigarettes, my client as of the last three months.

Between the Public Health Cigarette Smoking Act of 1970 and the Comprehensive Smoking Education Act of 1984, any mass advertising of tobacco

products outside of a very limited selection of magazines and storefronts has become all but impossible.

This billboard, along with a few magazine and television placements, *somehow* made it past the FCC and the concerned mothers of Middle America. Watch an episode of the new Matthew Perry sitcom. A magazine is prominently and strategically placed in all of them.

Perry himself is a brand loyalist.

Because the cigarette brand isn't explicitly written, the logos aren't used, and a cigarette doesn't appear in the ad, it doesn't break any of the books upon books of rules. The image relies on the image of a bull running (Bullrun cigarettes), and the colors used were very carefully selected.

It's an overtly obvious image that was only designed to get the name Bullrun in your head. Sure, it doesn't quite make smoking as cool as Joe Camel did, but it isn't supposed to get 11-year-olds to smoke.

Focus groups and samples proved it worked. Bullrun approved it. It's only three weeks into the campaign, and sales for the cancer stick conglomerate have already seen a small spike. Regardless of how long it lasts, I should still go down as the first guy to get a tobacco ad like this up in the last twenty years.

I'm officially an enemy of health classes all over America.

Fuck it. I'm going to get a promotion out of it.

My hand roots around my custom-made Moroccan suit (one of three I own, today it's the grey one), groping for my pocket and the play button on my iPod. Bill Withers suddenly blocks out the street noise.

Turning my head, I see that traffic has stopped, and as I walk the rest of the way to work I look once more over my shoulder at the billboard.

It's a beautiful thing. But in the paper this morning, I saw an editorial. The only reason I saw it is because it was on the page facing Beetle Bailey. Some concerned citizen lashing out, defaming Big Tobacco for their sneakiness, calling for the conglomerate to apologize and rip down the ads. Right.

I cross the street, making sure my black Beatle boots miss the puddle in the dip in the crosswalk while dodging the onslaught of people on their own way to work—overpriced sugar coffee, brief cases, and cell phones in hand.

I really don't know anything about clothes, but I was always told to dress for the job I want, so I figured the more expensive the better. And recently I've found myself with money to burn. The Beatle boots don't quite jive with the ungodly priced suit (my grey one is my favorite), but they remind me of my grandpa and I think they look good.

I have to say, I wear the shit out of this suit.

As I close in on Brone & Smith, my advertising firm, I see why the traffic has stopped and is being backed up for three blocks and counting.

—Holy shit.” They're the only words I can think of, given the scene laid out before me.

There is someone lying in the street, an SUV stopped four feet from the body. There's an ambulance parked a few cars back with lights flashing, I guess as close as it could get, while blue-clad EMTs seem to be examining the person on the asphalt.

The SUV waiting behind the EMTs and the person they are focused on is a silver Mercedes M-class. White, my boss, drives newer one. A guy in a J.C. Penny's suit is

standing behind the vehicle and arguing with a cop standing by. I get closer, and can now see that the person being examined is a skinny woman, wearing filthy looking clothes that are brown and grease stained. Her long hair is a dark grey and her eyes are closed.

A thick pool of blood is gathering around her head, like she is leaking red tinged motor oil.

God.

I hear yelling and look towards the cop and Cheap-suit.

—It sure as shit isn't my fault! I had a green, that bitch walked out in front of me!" Cheap-suit is livid. —I'm running late to work as it is."

—Sir," the officer is being entirely too calm. I don't see a police car, and notice his dark blue bicycle a few feet behind him. His helmet is under his left arm at the elbow and he is holding a pad of paper. A pen is in his right and he's waving it like a magic wand, calmly trying to get Cheap-suit to shut up. —I'm going to need you to wait here for a—"

—Here!" Cheap-suit fishes his wallet out of his jacket pocket, rifles through, offering a card to the cop. —This is my insurance card and business card. Just call me when—"

—Sir!" The cop is young and slowly growing some balls. —This isn't how it works..."

I hold the door for a few people that are coming and going while I watch the spectacle.

Cheap-suit is brushing back his brown but graying hair, every few seconds removing then replacing his black-framed glasses. He turns to watch the cars piling up behind him, to EMTs lifting the woman onto a gurney (she's obviously homeless now that I can see better, as her skinny unconscious frame looks as frail as her worn and battered wardrobe), then to the cop all in turn. From Cheap-suit's pacing and haggling with the cop, you can tell he isn't seeing the same scene everyone else is— a poor woman caught and tossed by a midsized luxury SUV.

All Cheap-suit sees are things in the way of getting where he is going.

People spend time bitching about cigarette ads and alcohol ads and violent video games and sex on television, the whole while clowns like this are walking around. *That's* why kids are fucked up these days. They're taught to get theirs in school, nothing about general decency.

I realize I haven't seen the woman move once, and that the seconds I feel like I've been standing here holding the door have actually been minutes.

I enter the building and nod to John, the token overweight and aging security guy/live directory service, and make my way back to the elevators. Today is the day I get another raise, my second within the year.

How the hell can someone just mow someone down and just worry about getting to an interview.

Cheap-suit's got a killer "I'm late" excuse.

I was never much of a worker in college, let alone high school. Always seemed like I just blended in between the smarter students and the troublemakers. College got easier once I resolved to stop fruitlessly yelling over the crowds and do just enough work

to stay under the radar. Being big enough of a presence in class that the professors were humored by me was simple enough, but being a small enough one that they never really noticed me was even easier. Same chair every day in the middle/back of the room behind someone taller. I could never bring myself to skip though. I mean, I'd paid for all the classes. My work was always done well and on time, but was never handed in early or was excessively impressive. The A's came easily. It was a balancing act that allowed ample amounts of weekend time to learn how to drink (something that seemed important way back when but later actually became embarrassing. Having the tolerance of an Irish dockworker becomes blindingly apparent during cocktail hour meetings with firm partners who drink like 12-year-old girls). The only internships I worked were used to build the resume I was told I should have, while the only asses I kissed were ones I knew could find me a job. Glowing resumes and references come from what I imagine movie extras have to do. Show up early, hit your mark, know your lines, and do what the guy in charge tells you to do.

It all led me to Brone & Smith fresh out of college at twenty-two, where my resume did the talking for me.

Epiphany hit at twenty-three, when I realized that this was it. I'd been waiting my entire life to grow up, for some mental switch to flip.

A sort of light bulb moment, like cartoon characters have when they finally figure out how to kill that pesky anthropomorphic rabbit or bird.

At twelve, it was, —~~When~~ I'm sixteen, I'll be able to drive, and feel older and responsible.”

When I got there, I was still the same twelve-year-old, except I could drive. So, upon recognizing the lack of a light bulb, I decided the magic year was eighteen because, —I'll be able to vote (I didn't) and legally smoke (still never have) and buy lottery tickets (the biggest waste of money next to buying a brand new hybrid car).”

Still no light bulb.

And then nothing at twenty.

Twenty-one, no dice.

Twenty-two, nothing.

At twenty-three, I rolled out of bed and realized—

—This is it.”

The Sunday funnies still appealed to me over the stock of the firm I work for. I still ate Trix every morning. My Felix the Cat clock still made me laugh, as did the Danger Mouse action figure hanging from my rearview mirror. I am who I will be. Forever.

Now ain't that about a bitch.

A year into a job that paid well and I actually liked, the only light that turned on wasn't the one I had hoped for. I would never *feel* older. So, I started working longer days, because I suddenly found myself in a new city where I hadn't bothered to meet new people, and there was nothing at home except Bill. And that was only sometimes.

The forty-hour weeks I was putting in turned to sixty-plus. Eight in the morning to seven-ish. And apparently my boss noticed, gave me a raise, eventually making me the lead on this cigarette conglomerate campaign.

The elevator stops at the fourth floor and I walk across the room, through grey padded cubicles and getting slight nods of hello from coworkers who notice me walking by.

My office is small with a great view of the mirrored windows of the office building next to mine. It isn't unusual for my coworkers to catch me staring out my window, looking across a twelve-foot, four-story high gap looking at myself across a twelve-foot, four-story high gap. Coming off as a workaholic who is caught staring at yourself not working at work must be the equivalent of being caught masturbating in your dorm room by your roommate when you told him you would be studying. My desk sits in the back corner of the bare-bones office with its left side against the window. There is *just* enough room to walk between it and an eye-high bookshelf that holds no books. Just files of past projects, an unsmoked variety of Bullrun packs and a coffee pot that has never been used next to a coffee grinder that has. My boss's broke apparently, so he comes in and talks to me while he uses mine. He won't take it back to his office, and says one day I'll quit buying coffee from Perks across the street or just bringing it in.

He hasn't been right yet. I couldn't get any work done if my office reeked of coffee.

A cop car approaches from outside. Their sirens are different than ambulances. Hopefully arresting Cheap-suit for being a jackass.

My job really isn't that difficult, and is much less so than people seem to think. People other than my mom, at least. People act a certain way, absorb information in a certain way, and they all want to hear the exact same thing.

–You’re special. We made this for you.” Something that will distract them from the shit that’s really going on.

Once you figure out what bandwagon your ever evolving demographic is on for the moment, the hard part of the job is over.

The black phone on my desk rings. It’s the kind with about a billion buttons—call waiting, hold, transfer, and other nameless features— that I have yet to find a reason to use.

I stare at the flashing red light for a few rings before picking it up.

–Beckett.” I answer with my last name now. I saw a cop on television who shares my last name do it and she sounded like a badass.

–Will!” Malcolm White has a great boss voice. Imagine any overweight and overworked mall-Santa’s voice. Big, boisterous and beaming, but somewhere in there is a *hint* of something that lets you know he’d kick your ass for asking about his list and if he really goes through that thing twice.

–My office, now.”

–Sure thing, Mr. White.”

I push myself away from my desk, straighten my business cards and squarely push the chair under the desk.

This is when it happens. Pay raise number two.

I close the brown office door behind me, and begin the trek to Mr. White’s office, down the hall and neatly separated from the cubicles that belong to the peon fact checkers and ad-space salesmen. On the way, I realize that I will now have the highest paying job anyone in my family has ever had, and I’m only twenty-eight. But that’s what happens

when you come from a family of blue-collar workers who simply cannot fathom why anyone in their right mind would rack up five digits worth of school loans so he can eventually try to sell things. Especially when they're successful welders and Avon ladies who somehow live more than comfortably.

His office door is cracked.

Deep breath before I knock.

–“Sir?” Two sharp raps.

–“Don't knock, I told you to come up and left my door open so you wouldn't. Sit down, Will.”

He is sitting at his custom one-piece, oversized cherry stained cedar desk— easily a few grand. He had his doorway widened so it would actually fit. And the days it took to widen the door? He got those off.

I sit down across from him.

His tie is the same color as the blood that woman was leaking onto the asphalt.

He shuffles through some files on his desk, then looks up at me over his reading glasses. –“We need to talk about this campaign.”

–“Thank you, sir, it was a fun project,” I say. I can't stop looking at his tie.

And its knot is sloppy...

–“Fun my ass! Do you even watch the goddamned news? I don't even care how long it took you to figure out you could actually get around the goddamned FCC's rules.” He shakes his head and goes back to rifling through the files on his desk.

I wonder if they would fire me if they knew my neighbor gave me the idea one night over beer and pizza that he had swindled out of a delivery boy for free. Cigarette and tobacco ads, all the rules, yada yada yada.

—“What if you just don’t say what you are advertising when you advertise it?” was the advice he was able to leak through a mouthful of pepperoni and cheese.

I laughed it off, but got to thinking about it later. Turns out he was... News?

—“News? What about the news?”

He pauses on a file, pushes the rest to his left and puts the one he settled on squarely in front of himself.

—“Here’s the thing about getting around the FCC.” He takes his glasses off and rubs the bridge of his large nose with his right thumb and index finger. —“Those pricks are sticklers over there, and finally picked up on your ads.”

—“Finally? They’ve only been up for three weeks...” Where the hell is this going?

—“Honestly, I’m surprised they lasted that long. I’ve been on the phone with some chairman of something or other half the goddamned morning, and with the CEO of Bullrun the other half. Everyone is pissed.”

What the hell? How long has he been in today? I’m usually in hours before he is, but I got distracted today.

I stepped in a puddle of water in my last pair of black socks, so I washed a load. There’s nothing more frustrating than a wet sock. Then there was that wreck out front.

—“Who is everyone? I mean, I saw an editorial this morning...” I’m starting to sweat. There’s no way I can get blamed for this. —“They can’t blame me for this.”

—“They sure as shit can! And they are. And not just some piddley ass editorial.”

—How is this falling on me?”

—It goes like this. Some moms group against tobacco or something or other got pissed at the ads and called the newspapers, who wrote articles about the ‘Sneaky Big Tobacco company’ and ‘What will they try next?’ kind of garbage. You probably saw one of the hundreds of editorials. How in God’s name have you not seen this? This got advertising regulations boards all in a tizzy, who pissed off Bullrun, who is now pissed at you because these ads were supposed be, how did you put it? ‘Untouchable.’”

I can feel the armpits of my shirt growing moist.

—But there is—”

—No way they can nail your ass to a wall?” he interrupts. —They can. They’re a major client, they have leverage over me. And I have leverage over you. And because you apparently didn’t do good enough homework, they want you gone. Shit falls *down*.”

They can’t fire—

—You can’t fire me for this, it wasn’t even me that gave the final go-ahead! This campaign—” I’m so far forward in my chair I might as well not have it under me.

—I know,” he interrupts again, —it’s perfectly legal, etc... But bad press is bad press, and that can be worse than a lawsuit or a fine in their eyes. The point is they are pissed. And I’m not going to fire you.”

I sink to the back of the chair. He’s not.

—You’re not.”

—N.” He puts his reading glasses back on.

Fuck me. My heart is slowing down.

I was supposed to get a raise for this.

—But,” he holds up the file he put in front of himself a few minutes and gallons of sweat earlier.

—What’s that?” The heart is throttling up again.

He puts the file down on his desk and opens it, shuffling through the contents.

—This brings me to another point of friction concerning you. I was talking to H.R. and the personnel office.” Mr. White says, not looking up from the paper he must have been looking for.

—Apparently you haven’t taken more than seven days off of work in your tenure here.” Without lifting his head he looks up at me over his glasses. —That *includes* sick days.”

So?

—Good genes I guess. And I eat lots of apples,” I say. There is fiction because I don’t miss work? Why wouldn’t I come, they give me a paycheck for just showing up.

—That’s six years and some change. What the hell do you do with yourself? You’ve never even taken a vacation.”

—When? When I’m here I work, at home, I guess I read—”

—But,” he cuts me off before I can finish. It’s just as well, I don’t think I’ve actually read a real book in six years. —I’ve decided you are leaving.”

The fuck?

—You said you weren’t firing me.” Heart’s at full throttle again.

—I told you, I’m not. Let’s call this,” he pauses and looks at his phone. The red light is blinking. He must be getting some call. —Let’s call this a trial vacation.”

–“What?” I was supposed to get a raise today.

–“Well I’m telling Bullrun it’s a suspension. You can think of it that way if it helps you sleep better.”

I realize my hands have a death grip on the wooden arms of my chair and fold my arms into my lap.

–“What am I supposed to do? When do I come back? How does this affect my job?”

–“I don’t give a shit what you do. Go to a baseball game. A movie. Build a goddamned boat for all I care, see how many animals you can get on it. You’ve still got your job, but you won’t work on any future Bullrun campaigns. And don’t come back to this office for three or four weeks.” He takes his glasses off. –“Understand?”

–“Tell the truth, not really, no.” I’m supposed to get a raise today.

–“You’ve done a great job on almost all your campaigns. Like with the new college ball team promotion. And the Klein ad magazine proofs before that. Reformatting *PA Today*’s format. And every other job I’ve thrown at you. Even this last one didn’t tank, it actually *worked* for a few weeks before it turned into a pain in the ass. It just *also* pissed a lot of people off. But now? Get out of here. You’re taking a break.”

He locks eyes with me. I’m suddenly aware of the dumbass look I have frozen on my face.

–“Besides,” he continues, –“personnel tells me at this point we might actually save some money with you not being here, earning overtime and all that. I don’t remember exactly how they explained it, but it made sense.”

–‘m supposed to do what though?’ What the hell is this? You can’t make someone not come to work because they are doing a good job.

Right?

–Again, I don’t give a shit. Just vanish. You’ll have everything waiting for you when you get back. And it’s paid leave. Just don’t come back.”

–But Mr. Whi-”

–See you on the 21st. Or later. Don’t even check your voicemail before you leave, Danny’ll deal with all your stuff and make sure it gets to the right people. The little shit’s been getting off way too easy these past days anyway. I’d even pin this Bullrun thing on him if I could, put some fucking hair on his chest.”

Danny is his assistant. He has been with the company for three months now, outliving White’s last assistant by three weeks and counting. As far as I know, no one has kept the job for more than four and a half months. They’ve all either quit or been fired. I can’t help but think that his particular job is secretly some sort of corporate fast-track gauntlet, like to Willy Wonka’s factory tour, but no one has made it past the fizzy flying drink. They all end up getting eaten by those giant-ass fans in the ceiling. Danny won’t last. He waves like a twelve-year-old girl.

I stand up and start to walk out the door, face still frozen. I put my right hand on the door frame and start to turn back around, but my half open mouth is met by wide eyes that say nothing but ‘Don’t. I’ll fire your ass.’

I go back to my office and pick up my bag. I straighten the business cards on my desk and look out my window and see me looking back at me, not working. I walk out my office and shut my door behind me.

I was supposed to get a raise today.

I walk through the office back towards the elevator, not nodding back at the nods from the cubicles and I turn my gaze to the cheap carpet that has no answers.

The elevator opens as I push the button. It was waiting to kick me out of the building as well.

The ride to the first floor is silent other than some muzac-ized version of “California Dreaming,” and the doors open with the same quiet *whoosh* as when they closed.

I get through the lobby without making eye contact with token John and step out on to the street. A girl with monstrous headphones that I can hear horrifying metal music seeping out of knocks me off balance and nails my left shin with a suitcase. My bag falls from my shoulder to the pavement.

Why is she carrying a suitcase?

I pick up my bag and sling it over my other shoulder and lean down to rub my shin, already throbbing and probably going to bruise.

Cheap-suit and half the cops are gone. No more homeless woman in the street, probably in the back of the ambulance. The road has settled from the 6:30-8:30 rush.

Car wreck, bruised shin, no job, failed campaign, no promotion. And I forgot to make coffee this morning.

I look at my watch.

9:24.

I didn't even think people *read* editorials.

Chapter Two

Perks is fairly full and a line stretches seven people deep, snaking away from the aluminum veneered counter. I see there're still a few awkward looking chairs empty as I shuffle to the back of the line.

I'm going to be here forever. And I just want a black coffee.

Through the glass doors I see an ambulance driving down the street, carrying the dead, judging from the amount of blood that was on the pavement, homeless woman that Cheap-suit mowed down. I can't see the actual spot, but there's probably still a ton of lingerers. Rubberneckers. Worst part of any accident, even small ones like twisting your ankle. The last thing I want to do is have people stop to pay attention to how I apparently forgot how stairs work. The screaming sirens are fading into the distance, but slowly. They'd be in a bigger rush if she were still alive.

I'd hope.

God. She died. She's past tense.

I shake my head and dry swallow a loose Advil I'm able to fish out of my bag.

Old chests and furniture posing as coffee tables and chairs are scattered all over the place with what look to be mostly college students in them. The college downtown isn't big, but it isn't far from here, a few blocks. I've never understood the chairs or tables in coffee shops. They're almost always the wrong size regardless of who is sitting in them (too big, small, square, round, hard, soft) and without fail, filthy. I don't see how anyone even pretends to work in here.

But then maybe it's people I don't get. After all, I just got canned for being good at my job.

I was good at my job.

I catch eyes with an early twenty-something-year-old wearing large gold-framed headphones over an olive beanie, sitting in a converted cask a few yards behind where I'm standing. He's holding an old looking book, wearing pants that are too tight and a Ramones shirt that looks like it got into a fight with a lawnmower.

I nod, the obligatory hello for anyone you catch eyes with.

He looks back down to his book.

Asshole.

I look back to the register.

It's shits like him that make advertising so much fucking harder, with their retro this, used that. There are four people ahead of me in line. I glance back at Olive-beanie, now immersed in whatever he's reading.

—Asshole.”

Everyone in this place is wrapped up in whatever they are doing, pretending to be in their own little world with their happy little latte. These places should have two lines, one for sugar coffee and an express line for black coffee.

The man two places ahead of me in the line looks around the guy in the blue blazer between us and removes his glasses as he speaks. —“Excuse me?”

Holy shit.

Cheap-suit.

—“Yeah?” I say. Blue-blazer turns to look at me. He looks as confused as me.

—“You just say _asshole?” Cheap-suit puts his glasses back on, unbuttons his jacket and folds his arms across his chest. He has a pin on his lapel, looks like—wait.

Did I? I don’t, didn’t. Not out loud.

What?

I motion to myself and scan around me, catching Olive-beanie in the corner of my eye. —“You must have heard me wrong, I wasn’t—” Shit.

No, I should say. But had I seen you there...

—“You weren’t what? Calling me an asshole? I’m here, just talking to,” he motions blankly to Blue-blazer.

—“Tom.” He smirks and shakes his head as he looks down to his brown boat shoes. The girl at the register looks to us. It’s Cheap-suit’s turn to order. I can see the pin is a crest of some sort, purple and gold, it matches that ugly tie around his neck.

—Tom. I was talking to Tom about my shitty morning. Picking up a desk for my fucking ex-wife, missing an interview, and to top it off, a fender bender. But you, you don't look like you're talking to anyone.”

I glance behind me, people are starting to take notice of the loudmouth. —Fender bender? No, I'm not... I was—” My hand reaches into my pocket and pushes volume buttons on the side of my phone.

—So you were just throwing it out there that I'm an asshole? To no one?”

I'm stumbling over the pronoun I.

You, I should say, are in a different class of asshole than Olive-beanie. He's just socially retarded concerning coffee shop etiquette. He doesn't wait for me to answer anyway. He turns back to Blue-blazer and continues.

—I just can't get away from bullshit. It's one thing after a-fucking-nother. I miss my interview because of a car wreck, and now some guy here is talking shit.”

A car wreck? Wait, you...no.

The quieting coffee house bustle spreads further and further away from us and now the other barista washing dishes under the chalk menu looks up.

—A car wreck?” I say.

Cheap-suit's posture straightens and his hands move to his hips. —Yeah, a car wreck, on the way to a job interview that I got set up by my good friend, who had to pull big strings to get it, because I got laid off after fifteen fucking years!” He uncrosses and re-crosses his arms. The pin's got some sort of lamp on one side. Next to him, Blue-blazer takes half a step backward.

The hushed ripple caused by loud mouth is still spreading, more and more people staring. He got canned? I wouldn't run down a woman and I just, I was, for no reason, I'm not the asshole, he... I'm not going to be the asshole here.

Rooms seem bigger when they are quiet.

—Yeah,” Cheap-suit snorts. —Whose day is worse?” He starts to turn his back on me.

Screw it.

—You mowed down a fucking person!” I'm not going to be the asshole here. —You weren't in a wreck, you were haggling with a cop! Because you were late to a job interview?”

He stops, turns back around and his face levels to nothing, staring at me like he's trying to tell if I'm bluffing.

—I don't know what you think you saw—” His posture starts to give.

—Right out front, in the street, you were with a cop and trying to get off, get somewhere else, while a woman laid in the street bleeding out her head because you missed a job interview!”

Blue-blazer sharply looks back to Cheap-suit at mention of a bleeding head, starts to talk and is cut off by him.

It's now dead quiet other than pop music playing over the sound system.

—Bitch walked out in front of me.” His back straightens up a bit. —You don't know what was going on.” He's starting to fidget now, and it's still his turn to order coffee. —Who the fuck are you anyway?” His posture returns and he turns his back to me, barking something about a half-caff to the wide-eyed girl behind the register.

He's blowing *me* off? I've had the bad day, I got suspended, and I watched a woman die. He couldn't have even been that good at his job if they could justify letting him go after fifteen fucking years.'

—'Son of a bitch,' I mutter under my breath. Blue-blazer looks back and forth in between me and Cheap-suit a few more times. I glance around and fewer people are staring, the hushed room returning to a rumble. I pat down my pockets, touching my cell phone, wallet, keys, look to my feet, the back of Cheap-suit's head, again around the room, everyone is turning back to their conversations like some dick hadn't just tried to start a fight in a coffee shop in the middle of the morning.

Cheap-suit doesn't turn back, his eyes locked in front like I'm not even here.

How does no one care? He probably killed that woman.

I realize I'm just cursing under my breath to no one. Blue-blazer steps up to order.

Cheap-suit turns back to me after he is handed his coffee.

—'I may have accidentally hit a woman, but I'm not the kind of asshole that starts fights in coffee houses with total strangers.'

You motherless—

—'Next time, think before you start slinging your shit around.'

Piece of shit, I can't, how is he, the hell with it.

I walk to the door, push it open with my forearm and stumble down the half-step that leads outside and turn to walk home. I have coffee at home. I pull out my cell phone and put it back without lighting the screen.

Cops are still in the middle of the street getting in their cars (the one on a bike stays, he looks settled) to leave. Three people are standing across the street, one pointing at the blood on the sidewalk and another stands there with a horrified look on her face, the third shrugging and nodding excitedly.

I pause and look back up the street towards the coffee shop and Cheap-suit is leaving, turns away from me and what's left of his mess and walks up the street. Piece of shit refuses to take some responsibility let alone look at it, even if it wasn't his fault.

I look up at Brone & Smith. The tall building doesn't notice me walking by, the cops and lingerers don't notice as I make eye contact. My slow pace speeds up. I need to get home. Get coffee, more Advil, food, something. I look at my watch.

9:52.

My pace quickens.

But I'm not hungry.

There are so many cracks in the cement.

I look up from the grey ground as I notice a green dumpster coming up in front of me and two-thirds of a vinyl cartoon bull crash into it.

I stop and look up and I realize the black-hoodied girl who smashed my shin with her big black case is tearing down the image, one three-foot section at a time.

My billboard...

It's, but I just left today...what is she...

—What are you doing?" I shout to her. The girl looks down at me.

—Me?" She lowers some long tool from the top of the billboard.

She's older than I thought.

All that's left is a burning china shop and a third of a bull.

—What,” I look from her to the dumpster and back again, —~~What~~ are you doing?”

She's twelve feet up, shouldn't be confused, why is she, —~~Why~~ are you taking that down?”

She looks up to the china shop and shrugs. —~~It's~~ my job? Why does it matter why?”

—~~Because~~ it...why?” Why is she taking it down? I'm shouting. I shouldn't be.

—~~Why~~ were you told to take it down?” I look into the dumpster and see shards and strips of my ad.

—~~It~~ just was! I guess it breaks some laws or something. It's a cigarette ad. Tell the truth, I don't get it anyway. ” She turns back and begins to work on the china shop.

She doesn't get it? —~~But~~, no!”

She turns back from the billboard. —~~No~~?”

—~~Bull~~run! Cigarettes! People get it!”

She looks up to the china shop, pauses and turns back, brushing loose hair behind her ear. A few cars slow and look at me. —~~No~~. I thought it was a cartoon ad or something where they forgot to say which show it was when I first saw it.” She looks back at it but continues, —~~I~~ couldn't figure out why these things were all over the place.” I can barely hear her over the street noise, cars driving by.

She's that dense? —~~It~~ makes sense!” What's confusing?

—~~Look~~,” she doesn't turn back to face me, —~~It~~ doesn't matter, it's down. Must not have worked well. Have a good one.”

—~~But~~ why are you getting rid of it?”

–My boss is. Just go to work or something.”

I can’t go to work. –But it’s mine!”

–Have at it.” She doesn’t turn around.

–For work, it was mine!”

She doesn’t turn back around. She can’t ignore me. I put too much work, months into it.

–It’s not trash, I made it!” The street noise must be drowning me out.

She doesn’t look back down and finishes tearing down part of the china shop, dropping its flaming sign into the dumpster in front of me.

I made it.

–I made it!”

Across the street I see my reflection in a building’s window. I’m standing next to a dumpster, my gray suit almost blending me in with the building behind me.

Another strip falls.

Chapter Three

I check my mailbox even though I know it's too early for anything to be here, open the beaten green door to my stairwell and take the black dirt stained stairs two by two as I fish my keys out of my coat.

My place is above a record store and a sundry shop at the point where downtown begins to dwindle and grass begins to grow. The bigger park in the city is a bit up the street and I can see it from my window. It's Shermer's version of Central Park. Large cities like keeping large areas of grass in the middle of the metro area, it's like they're trying to seem less... cold. They're proudly displayed in every major city's tour guide. If you walk through the park away from my place you'll be dropped off in the middle of Shermer's downtown shopping district. I haven't spent a lot of time in the park, but it's where the out of towners seem to hang out and the ruckus they cause in the summer months during the classic car shows, small music events, summer movie screenings and

countless other events (Shermer's attempt to make the city family friendly) are most likely the reason my rent isn't as pricey as the other ungodly priced lofts near downtown.

While the noise does bother me, it's only during the summer. I'd move but I've got rent control and have lived here since I moved to the city six years ago. I doubt I'd find a cheaper place that's just as close to downtown and just as big. I mean, I could afford it, but why bother. Besides, I lived over a bar during college and I lived through that.

I hike up the stairs two by two, slam my old green door behind me and toss my bag under the kitchen table.

I need coffee.

I grab a porcelain burgundy mug out of the cabinet and set it on the table, reach into the neighboring cabinet for my coffee grinder and my elbow sends the mug crashing to the floor. The porcelain shatters, shooting slivers and shards across the black tile.

I see the woman's head bounce off the hood of a Mercedes and slam, shattering on the asphalt. Porcelain is everywhere.

~~Fuck.~~"

I grab some Excedrin from the cabinet after I return the coffee grinder and I chew.

I look back down to the mess as it crackles under my right foot.

Fuck.

I take out a dustpan from under the sink and get down on my knees.

How the hell can today keep doing this. Suspended for not missing work.

Grandma would just love this. *See, that's how companies work when rich people run them.* Well not everyone can sell makeup to their fellow Lodge members.

The coffee shop even turned on me. My coffee shop. I love that place, they know my order there. Black, sixteen ounces. The girls and gay guys do at least. No one else could have stepped in, said something to Cheap-suit. There's no way no one sitting there saw what happened, it was across the damn street.

I grab a damp paper towel to pick up the tiny splinters, then stand back up.

My shoe sticks to the tile, snapping as the floor releases it.

Damn it.

He got fired. I'm not much better off. I didn't even fuck up. I was supposed to get commended. White lost his shit and dumped it on me.

I fill the sink up with hot water and open the cabinet under the sink again, feel behind the garbage can until I find the soap and rag, squirt soap into the sink and toss the rag into the rising water.

I remove my jacket, drape it over the back of the couch, do the same with my tie, kick my shoes into the open closet and throw my socks in on top of them. I hate wet socks.

I hate Cheap-suit. How the, how do people live like that? Rather have blood on his hands than a good excuse to be late for an interview.

I kill the water and wring out the rag, kneel back onto the floor and rub. My left palm peels off the floor as I readjust my body.

What the hell is sticky, I didn't spill anything. Not recently. The black tile masks the color of the culprit.

Could be orange juice. No, I would have cleaned that but then there is milk, but that would smell, right? I lean down, doesn't smell. Coffee isn't really sticky, it's water, and I don't really drink anything else.

The wine. Ollie spilled wine a few days ago.

I look up and my door is locked, latched when I slammed it.

A Bullrun calendar is fastened to the back of the door. There's a picnic scene for April, people sitting in the middle of the woods. No one smoking.

At least there was a smoking building in my ad.

I drain the water and wring out the rag and toss it in the sink. Mom taught me to clean out the sink first thing, soap leaves rings, *you never clean up after yourself, even when you clean*. She'd throw *something* at me if she found out I got suspended, meanwhile Chas can't even hold down a job for a few months. How hard is putting up drywall anyway?

I'm sure it's harder stoned. But no, older brother can do no wrong, he's just misguided, mistaken, misinformed, misled. I'm the one with a degree, I should have known better than to get fired.

I pull the vacuum out from the closet and run it where the tiles turn to carpet. I'm sure shards spread throughout the apartment. I'll be slicing my feet for weeks.

The roar from the small motor drowns out the people yelling.

My door slams shut, rattling in the frame.

I use the sink to hoist myself to my feet from the bathroom floor and lean down to brush off my knees.

My back hurts from being crouched over so long. And I'm still in my fucking slacks.

And my shin is still throbbing, fucking billboard lady.

I look out the bathroom door and see red boxers connected to pasty legs and mismatched socks in front of my open refrigerator.

Ollie.

I survey the white porcelain toilet, the bathtub and the sink and run my right hand through my hair.

My hands reek of bleach.

This bathroom couldn't get much cleaner. Not even a single soap ring.

I flip the lights off and step out into my apartment and see Ollie, still bent down into my fridge. My vacuumed, dusted, mopped, wiped, shined, polished, buffed, straightened apartment couldn't get much cleaner.

I even dusted under the DVD player.

—There's not much in there.”

Ollie jerks up and spins to look at me. A half moon of Colby is hanging from his mouth.

—Well, hey, you're out of provolone man.”

I look around the apartment. The books I haven't finished on my coffee table are haphazardly stacked purposefully. A Men's Health issue is tossed just off center of the kitchen table next to the ashtray. A stray coat is draped over the back of the couch.

Clean, but with a slightly disorderly lived-in vibe.

—Never had any, you need anything?”

—Nopenope. What are you doing home?”

—I’m cleaning.”

—That’s why the floor’s wet.” He shuffles his socks back and forth on the black tile. —No no no. I just mean you’re supposed to be at work.” He puts the cheese back in his mouth as he bends back down into the fridge. He shuts a drawer and stands back up, holding my orange juice just above the door.

—You want some?”

I groan.

—Yeah, sure. Glasses are up above—”

—Yep, the sink.”

He slams the fridge’s door, puts the juice onto the counter and reaches up into the cabinets.

—Coffee mug ok? Looks like you’ve only got one clean lowball.” He always talks so swiftly. But purposefully. It’s like he’s one step ahead and waiting for his cue.

—Yeah, that’s fine.” I toss my keys on the table into the ashtray in the center the table. Another gift from Bullrun I’ll never use for its intended purpose.

He’s shirtless and has a large black H with concave sides at the middle tattooed on his right shoulder blade. He’s skinny-fit, not quite like the guy we used last year in the ad for the boxers he’s wearing. I snagged some for him at his request.

You can hang pictures of people in underwear, their junk bulging, all over the city and no one bats an eye. But the moment someone realizes there is some meaning behind a bull running away from a burning building, they lose their shit.

–Here you go.” He hands me the porcelain mug. A cartoon bear stares at me from the mug, just smiling away. The mascot of my high school. They wanted me to come back and speak two years ago about success and working hard and achieving goals. Some rally/encouragement/go-get-__em, seize the day thing. Yeah, I’m good at what I do, but I was just one of the few to actually go to college, let alone graduate. I hated those things as a kid anyway.

It’s just the same, they won’t be calling me again this year.

–Picked my lock again?”

He looks up from his lowball of orange juice, almost squinting at me.

–Oh, yeah.” His eyes open when he realizes what I’m really asking. –Oh. Nope, door was shut and locked, nothing to worry about chief.”

–Why don’t you just use my spare you have?” I regretted giving him a spare key for my place when I learned his __profession‘ wasn’t exactly on the up and up. Then I learned he could pick locks and figured it didn’t matter. He might as well have my spare if I lock myself out.

Ollie laughed, his brown eyes looked down to his left hand, still holding a quarter piece of Colby cheese, and lifted it up to me.

–I was making a sandwich and I realized I was out of cheese. And I had a new pick to try out, its parts fold up like a credit card. You can’t make a turkey melt without provolone, and I figured you might have some, which you don’t by the way. Just this yellow stuff.” He looks back down at the cheese before shoving the rest in his mouth.

It’s too early for a sandwich.

–It’s Colby.”

—Yeah? It's great, same stuff I've got, but no good on a turkey melt."

—It's not that bad."

—But it's no provolone. You're usually at work around now, I wouldn't want to disturb you man. I know you have a schedule." He drains half the orange juice and looks at the glass. Then back up to me. —Why *are* you home? You're never late." He finishes his orange juice and turns to the sink with his glass. —You never even skip work. You're a machine." He washes, rinses and dries the lowball, then returns it to the cabinet. —You done with that?"

I finish the orange juice and hand him the mug. He repeats the quick cleaning.

—I, we, were there, it was a half day. At work. Nothing really to do, so I just got some coffee. Came home." The coffee shop scene replays in my mind.

I hope no one I worked with was there.

Ollie doesn't work. He says he is a —freelance opportunistic investor." Everyone else would call him a confidence man. And I've seen paintings in his apartment, he likes to paint. He also plays piano at Toms Tavern every Wednesday for tips. I've never been, but he must be alright if it's a steady gig.

—So you got canned." He shrugs and puts the mug into the cabinet.

—I" How the hell, —No, I just, well there was some sort of misunderstanding, I just," I trail off. He's quick.

I scan apartment. It's good sized, about 950 square feet of loft. The bathroom is a little small and sits over the stairwell, but is big enough for me. Ollie breaks in a few times a week to borrow something, but he's never taken anything from me he hasn't returned. At least after I ask for it back. He even helped me build my bookshelf.

He might have taken the skid pads out from under my table though.

–Bill here?” I ask, looking at the open window over the sink then turning back to Ollie.

–That cat? I haven’t seen him.” Ollie takes a scan of the apartment himself.

I trade places with him above the sink and reach up into the cabinets for another coffee mug, grabbing the one Ollie had just washed and fill it with yesterday’s cold coffee.

–You?”

–Stuff’s no good for you man.”

–Eh.”

–You should switch to tea. Better for the mind and soul, they say.” His head cocks. –Didn’t you say you got coffee after work?”

Dead woman on the pavement. Motor oil. Cheap-suit.

–Well,” I take the coffee mug full of cold liquid and put it in the microwave, enter numbers, turning 10:03 a.m. into 1:30 min.

–So you’re free Thursday? I’ve got this thing, it’ll be fun and Jules bailed on me, something about tills and a guy stealing a Snickers and being a shitty worker anyway.”

Jewels?

–What? Jewels?”

–She’s the manager of the sundry. Not ours, downstairs, one up on Fourth Ave. Good chick. Likes to wear bells for some reason.”

My head hurts.

—So you're free Thursday. I got something for you — free drinks, plenty of interesting people, easy ten-minute walk from here. Through the park and two blocks west.”

I rub the back of my head again and look down to my empty wrist (the watch I took off before I cleaned the sink). —It's been a long day. What are you talking about?”

—Gambling. Quick money. You like poker?”

—Yeah, sure I like poker.” I forgot how nice of an excuse work could be.

Ollie grins. —It'll be good. And what are you going to do otherwise? Dress nice, make some cash, meet new people. It'll be fun.” He raps twice on the bar and turns towards the door.

—I'm out.” He waves what looks like a credit card over his shoulder as he slams my door behind him.

Bah.

I pull a bowl down from the cabinet, grab the box of Trix from another and pour a bowl halfway full before returning the box to its place besides the whole grain rice I've yet to find a use for.

I open the refrigerator and survey its contents with my hand on the half-gallon of 1%. The fridge is pretty empty considering I eat out as little as I do.

I shut the fridge and pour the milk into the bowl, too much for the amount of cereal in it.

I grab the bowl and turn to survey my earth-toned rental kingdom.

There aren't any casinos around here. Right?

The shelf next to my couch has rows of movies, a few books I haven't read, and an assortment of cameras.

There's still cleaner sticking in the air. I turn and open the window over the sink.

The Nikon needs fixed. The shutter was stick-

(Beep)

-ing the last time I used it. I turn around to retrieve my high school mug from microwave, placing the bowl on the right side of the sin-

"Fuck!" The bowl drops the remaining inch to the counter as Bill hops down from the fire escape, through my open window and onto my counter.

"Dude," I survey the Trix and milk, slowly spreading across the counter around the bowl.

The orange tabby shakes his head, stretches, and goes straight for the Trix on the counter.

"Where did you sleep last night, brother?"

Bill starts lapping. He's homeless-ish. I wonder if he ever ran into the woman Cheap-suit hit.

"I got shit-canned today."

He looks up, then turns his attention back to the sugary milk, careful to nudge the colorful chunks of cereal out of the way.

"You don't care."

Bill first showed up about a year and a half ago. I'd torched some eggs on the stove, opened the window, and there he was, sleeping on the fire escape. He didn't even bother to look at me.

He's a medium sized cat, not scrawny, but athletic (if that's the right term for a cat). Orange, cream and white with darker orange stripes throughout his back. Maybe a few years old. I guess. Cats all look the same unless they're inches from dying or just born.

He's actually not dissimilar to Holly Golightly's cat, Cat, the poor nameless slob.

Ollie lent me the movie a few months ago, telling me I should read the book as well. Apparently Capote made it much more obvious in the novel that Audrey Hepburn's character was a 'lady of the night,' and also gave her a sailor's mouth. It was an okay movie, but I can't help but think it would be a bit more entertaining if those additions were made.

There's something about the idea of Hepburn swearing as she paced around Tiffany's. Ollie likes to point out Katherine was the better Hepburn, but Audrey was cuter and always had a great leading man to follow.

When I got home I saw I forgot to shut my window, and Bill was still on the fire escape, sleeping. I poured him a bowl of water and put it up on the sill after frantically searching my apartment for cat shit. After I found nothing, I figured a bowl of water was a nice enough gesture, considering he was polite enough to keep it outside.

He's just kind of hung out here since then, coming and going when the window is open.

When Ollie met him, Bill was sitting on the counter pulling at some turkey.

—When the hell'd you get a cat? Why is he eating your food?"

—I didn't. He just kind of showed up."

—Showed up? Just sitting there?"

–Well not there,” I pointed out past the windowsill to the rusting fire escape,
–there.”

–And you feed the thing?”

–I didn’t at first, but he kept coming back every few days. So I figured, what the hell. If he’s going to be here he might as well have something to eat.”

–Right. So it just kind of hangs out. It have a name?”

I hadn’t thought about it until just then.

–I don’t know. I guess he looks like a Bill.”

Bill looked up from his turkey.

–You’re sure it’s a he?” Ollie picked Bill up to examine his cat junk. Actually, I think Ollie’s socks mismatched that day, too.

–Yup. He’s got balls and claws.” Ollie laughed. –B.C.”

I liked Bill.

I grab the bowl out from under his head, and Bill’s attention goes back to the cereal on the counter.

–Time to clean up.” I pick him up and put him back onto the sill as I continue cleaning up the mess in the counter with the green rag I keep draped over the faucet, pushing everything into the sink with a few swipes.

I rinse everything down the sink, run the disposal and fold the rag back over the faucet. Bill just watches.

Chapter Four

It's Thursday and I fell asleep on the couch again. I sit up and rub my eyes.

The television is looping the menu screen for ~~“Better Off Dead”~~ and I can't remember watching anything past a hamburger patty screaming like David Lee Roth. I grab the remote from the cluttered coffee table and hit play. My Nikon is in pieces scattered across the black table among stray french fries, two emptied wine glasses, crumpled up napkins and a half-full mug of coffee.

My head hurts.

The sun is beating down through the window, and the cat clock above the sink says it's 11:15.

~~“Shit.”~~ I haven't slept this late in—

Shit.

Ever. Mom never let me sleep past nine, and I always took early classes through college. Chas though. He got to sleep in.

—You’re brother isn’t up because he was out late,” she would say. And she never asked what he was doing. Heaven forbid her first born get in trouble for whatever he was out doing. Drugs, booze, seniors. Don’t ask, don’t tell. —He’ll find his path. You just worry about you.”

I look around my apartment. Chas lives at home, still a fucking deadbeat. At least I can hold down a job.

Damn it.

My job.

Coffee shop, Cheap-suit, bastards ignoring what happened.

I grab the cold cup of coffee and take it to the microwave but almost drop it as three bangs rattle my door in its frame.

—Who...?” I ask the door. —Hold on.” I say louder. I grab a white button-down that’s draped over a chair and pull it on as I open the door.

Ollie is standing there, coffee in one hand and a piece of paper in the other.

—Damn. You did get laid off.” Ollie looks from my bare feet to my unshaved face. —Liar.”

—Well no, kind of, I, not really it’s just that I’ve had some vacation I haven’t used and,” I take a step back, look around my (feels like a shrinking) apartment and rub the back of my head.

—So yeah? No big deal, economy sucks, budget cuts. You’re young still, bounce back in no time.”

—No, I just have a leave thing, it's nothing. A few weeks." How did he, —How'd you know?"

—You're wearing scrubs and an unbuttoned dress shirt, man, and it's noon on Thursday. Making sure you remember tonight."

—What?" Tonight?

—Gambling, free drinks, interesting people. Tonight. You said you'd come." He points to the piece of paper with his coffee. —Remember?"

—Fuck." Tuesday. —Right. Gambling. The fun thing."

—It's an easy ten-minute walk from here. Through the park and two blocks west."

I rub the back of my head again and look down to a watch I'm not wearing. —It's noon, I don't know if I can get ready, I just woke up..."

Ollie shrugs. —We have lots of time, it doesn't start until eight and we shouldn't get there before nine anyway." He hands me the piece of paper and takes a long drag of his coffee.

It's an invitation. *St. Peter's High 1998, Come On Home!* is emblazoned across the top in gold Comic Sans.

I fucking hate Comic Sans.

—A high school reunion?" I hand it back to him.

—Yup yup. It's a high school reunion. The big one in the area, uppity Catholic one on Beacon Street." He folds it in half and tucks it into his back pocket. —S how's it sound?"

—You want me to be your date to the reunion? I thought there was poker."

Ollie laughs. —You got it. But not a date. We'll find those there. And there's gambling, it's casino themed, I guess to actually entice people into going. Check out the fine print. And their pockets are deep, buddy, private schools means trust funds and family money.”

—But I don't know, I don't know anyone there, and it's just, I don't know. I didn't go there.”

Ollie grins. —No one knows each other, it's a ten-year reunion. You're the right age, and it's a big school, how old are you?”

—Twenty-eight.”

—They haven't seen each other in a decade, you're the right age and you went to high school so you're fine. Just smile and talk about football if you get uncomfortable. And I'll be there. It'll be good. And what are you going to do otherwise?” He pushes past me and looks around my apartment. —Stiman, Better Off Dead is good, but you can watch that tomorrow night. You've got no reason to say no, Doctor B.”

Doctor...the scrubs.

Fuck.

—Fine. What time?”

—Yes. I'll knock nine-ish, it's a ten-minute walk. Throw on one of those gray suits you like so much and you'll be fine. But you want to look approachable. Don't wear a tie. Or shave.”

No tie?

—Why not?”

After a twenty-minute long ten-minute walk across the dark park and mud, through some dank alley and five blocks north, I see a large white banner draped across two wooden arched doors that face the street.

–Ten-minute walk?” I say.

Ollie stops walking as we approach the stairs leading up to the entrance, unbuckles his belt and begins to tuck in his white button-down. What sounds like thunder is leaking out of the old building, well-dressed people in pairs or groups are laughing, coming and going from the church in a slow trickle. The thud of bass pulses through the ground.

–I said ten-ish. Put your game face on, Will.”

–So you keep in touch with many old friends from high school? Teammates, clubs, classes, anything?” The building is menacing. Giant, gray and brown brick, a Romanesque design to it, arches over the windows and rounded corners. Smooth lines with angular designs, embossed crosses and a singular tower. It reminds me of that Modena Cathedral in Italy.

I saw it on some travel channel yesterday.

–Nope.” Ollie buckles his belt, brushes back his hair and straightens the suit jacket he had me loan him. –When I was done I bailed. Didn’t play any sports or join any clubs. I was in a play though once. *Ordinary People*. I think it was a book or something. Kid tried to off himself, goes to therapy, some drama shit. It was awful. I was just trying to nail the mom character.” He looks up to the banner hanging across the doorway. –Good movie though.”

–Oh. I haven’t seen it. The reunion is at the cathedral?”

The banner reads like the invitation, *St. Peter's High, 1998, Welcome Home!!*

—The school and cathedral are joined. I guess it spreads through both. Let's hit it." Ollie begins to hop up the stairs to the entrance.

—Sounds good, you—"

—wait. You don't know anyone here?

—Hold on." I call out. Ollie stops mid stride and turns to me, still at the bottom of the stairs. —You said you don't know anyone here?"

He nods to a couple who pass him on their way in, saying something about a dress. The female looks back and smiles, the guy pulls her up the stairs without breaking pace. —Yeah. Right." He cocks his head towards the door. —You coming?"

—You said you went to high school here, right?"

—I never said that. What's the problem?"

What's the problem?

—What's the— Ollie, come here." I wave for him to follow me to the bush by the side of the stairs. His shoulders drop, but he hops down and follows me. —Why are we here if you didn't go to school here?"

—I told you man, gambling and free booze." He pats me on the shoulder and motions back to the entrance. —Let's go make some money and drink."

—But why are we here? They'll know we didn't go here, we don't know anyone, how are we, what are we supposed to do?" What the hell is he talking about?

Ollie smiles and waves to a guy looking at us as he begins up the stairs. The thunder surges as he opens the door to walk in. A new bass line starts the new song.

—Look, it's easy. We're the right age, these people couldn't have known everyone, and by now they're already drinking. People are just here to hang out and prove they did something with their life. No cares about you. Come on.” He hits my shoulder again and turns, taking the stairs two at a time up to the entrance, disappearing inside the door.

I just, how—damn.

I knew I should have stayed home.

Walking through the arched doors, I see Ollie waiting just inside in the long foyer. Dark wood accents the curves of the hallway, unlit candles in gold ornate stands follow the wall and busts and paintings of saints are displayed every four feet lining the rich red carpet. They're all staring at me. A check-in table is at the end of the hallway, pieces of paper litter the blue table cloth and a bubbly twenty-something in glasses waves excitedly at Ollie and me.

—Ollie.” He turns and smirks at me.

—Ready for some fun?”

I grab his arm as he begins to walk towards the table. —No, what the hell am I supposed to talk about? I didn't go here, we don't know these people. What are we doing?”

—Hopefully earning a few months of rent.”

I don't smile and his grin drops.

—You're really worried?”

—Hell yes I'm- what am I doing here?”

–Having fun, because you’re too uptight and just got laid off. Just grab a name tag and mingle.”

–Suspended.” The difference really doesn’t matter.

–Six of one, half a dozen of another. Look,” he turns and waves back to the bubbly girl, —if you’re worried... here, wait a second.” He walks to the table, Bubbly-girl giggles, and he walks back up to me with a book. –Here.”

–It’s the yearbook.” I say.

–Right, look.” He flips to the back. –Here’s who you aren’t.” He stops on a page. –Read the names.”

–It’s the varsity football team.” The black leather bound book, symmetrically organized black and white book has to be the most boring yearbook I’ve ever seen. And their uniforms suck. They’re Parrots.

–Right, read the names. Everyone here will know them. You can’t be one of them.”

I scan through the names. I don’t know why I expected one to look familiar. Our football star was Brad Swanson. I just assumed everyone’s quarterback was Brad Swanson.

Brad is an awful name.

–Pay attention. Got it?” He flips further up, –now look at these guys. The valedictorian and his posse. They’re smart, you can’t be them either.”

–I can’t be smart?”

—No. Not this smart. People will recognize them. You need to be bland. You need to be,” he walks back to the table, stares at the pieces of paper, grabs two, and walks back. —You are, here,” he sticks it to my jacket, —Tom Gibson. Formerly bland.”

He pats the red-bordered nametag.

—Who the hell dots i’s with a circle? I wouldn’t write my name like this.”

—That’s good, because you didn’t, Tom. Cindy at the table did. Joke about it inside. As for me,” he sticks one to himself, —I’m Glen Daniels. It’s been too long, Tom.” He flashes his teeth and extends his hand.

—But,” a stream of people file out of the room all the music is coming from, brushing past us. Yelps and laughter and music leak through the doors.

—No buts, Tom. You were in advertising, think about your demographic. Smile, and just ask people what they are doing now. Everyone is good at one thing and they love to talk about that one thing. If they do it for a living, they’ll talk about their job for hours. If they don’t do it for a living, they’ll spend hours talking about what they’d rather be doing than working. Boating or some shit, with this crowd. Mention watches, problems with expensive cars, whatever. Ask questions. Worse comes to worst, ask about football or something. That goes double for women.” His eyebrows bounce like Goucho’s. —Not the football thing. Just ask questions.”

—Because it’s that easy.” I look back towards the exit. My television is a ten-ish minute walk away. —Advertising.”

The cuter Hepburn is at home waiting for me.

—Yep. Now quit moping and looking at me like that. People will think I just broke up with you. Let’s go gamble and get some numbers.”

–Scotch rocks, please.”

The bartender looks up from cleaning a lowball and shoots a sideways look at me. In a burgundy jacket, white shirt and black tie he is easily the best-dressed person here.

My suit cost more though.

–So, having a good time?” Another piss-poor attempt at small talk. I can do better than that.

He shrugs and hands me my drink. –It’s a job.”

–You been doing this long? Not tonight, I mean, you’ve been here just as long as the rest of us. Well you were probably here before setting up and stuff. And I got here late, but—”

–Two years,” he keeps cutting me off, this whole half hour now, even though I keep feeding his tip jar. –It’s a good enough gig.”

He goes back to work, sorting and cleaning behind his black booth/bar that’s backlit with green, blue and yellow lights. It makes the vodka bottles look like Christmas lights.

It never was Christmas in the Beckett household without at least one bottle of booze under the table.

I spin in my stool to look back into the crowd of St. Peter’s alumni, most currently jumping around to a Blackstreet song, the rest mingling, hitting each other on their shoulders, clay chips clinking, sharing stories, throwing dice, exchanging cards, betting cards, shaking hands, hugging, bitching, commiserating, pretending to listen to each other.

And they all have some version of a ~~W~~“wooo!!,” yelling at the top of their lungs at all the people they never really cared to see again. At least they’re all making the effort to look interested, simultaneously one upping each other with their new identities and regressing into their old ones for comfort’s sake. It’s something you learn in advertising. People love to regress. While the successful man’s mantra is Look ahead to the future! he secretly longs for things that remind him of simpler times.

The best way to sell ad space or even a jingle is to find out who the main man is, the big cheese, find out what was popular during his formative years, then imitate it. It’s how I got the Bullrun gig.

Tex Avery cartoons.

Strobes are strobing, bass is thumping, fog is fogging and the only lights are over each individual gaming table while each participant peppers in a colorful blasphemy or curse with an almost startling regularity. I don’t know how these lapsed Catholics are justifying this in a building connected to a cathedral.

Are Catholics even allowed to gamble?

~~H~~“Hey!” Ollie’s sudden grip on my shoulder spins my stool towards him. ~~W~~“What the hell have you been doing?”

~~O~~“Observing Catholics slide into fire, mostly.” My throat freezes over as I choke on a piece of ice.

Ollie’s head drops and shakes. He snaps up, grabs my face with both his hands and pulls my face three inches from his.

~~F~~“Fuck, Ol, wha—”

—Stop talking. Thinking. Getting in your way.” His eyes close and he takes a long deep breath through his nose, but I still can’t move. His disturbingly damp hands are like a vise.

His eyes flash open. —I brought your ass here to have fun and gamble. Take some tail home. Raise some rent. Something other than mope with your shitty DVD collection, seriously, it’s sad and you don’t even own *The Big Sleep*.”

—But that movie blows—”

—You’re thinking of *The Big Chill*. God bless Goldblum, but that movie, good Lord. *Big Sleep* is Bogie. But them,” he turns and points to a group of four gathered and awkwardly bouncing to the music, —I’ve been talking to them. They can’t believe how much I’ve changed!” He lets my face go.

I rub my cheeks and look over to them, a brunette glances my way.

—Ollie, I just—”

—Graham.” He corrects me.

—Glen,” I correct him, he looks down at his nametag and shrugs, —I don’t know about this. I’m not really a Tom.”

—Yes you are. Just remember, ask questions, you weren’t smart or athletic, but be confident because you are now incredibly successful.”

—I just got canned.”

—Will got canned. Tom’s rich as God.” He looks at my drink, points to it and motions towards the threesome, now mingling close to a craps table. —You can bring your friend. If you’re that concerned, pick your favorite actor, model, singer, whatever,

and be him. Or her.” He pauses, looks around and snaps his attention back to me. “You read *How to Win Friends?*”

“The self-help book? Carnegie or whatever?”

“That one.”

“Years ago, yeah, corporate nonsense.”

“Good. Use everything you can remember from that, it’s not so much a self-help book as a thinly veiled social engineering textbook.”

“Social engineering?” What is he talking about?

“Getting people to do what you want them to do. Easy, simple concepts that have worked since the thirties. No different than advertising. Bring it.” He leaves and walks back towards them.

Fuck it. I finish the drink and hand it to the bartender for a refill. It’s just a demographic.

That means I’m just a product. And I don’t remember anything from that book. Something about using a person’s name excessively was in there I think, people loving the sound of their name or some nonsense.

“Who’s Will?” the bartender asks as he hands me the drink. I look down to my nametag.

“My brother.”

Walking over to Ollie/Glen is like walking through a maze filled with elbows and it’s all I can do not to spill my drink onto the black-tiled floor that my feet are already sticking to. Balloons are strewn across the floor like little mines, one exploding every few minutes.

Ollie grabs my shoulder as I approach, ~~“Tom!”~~ He turns to the group, ~~“You guys remember Tom, right? Fucker’s gotten taller, eh?”~~

Immediate and synchronized Oh’s, Hey’s, and Course’s come from each half-confused and half-schwacked member. How the fuck am I going to convince these people I actually went to school here.

For some reason, the first year at Brone & Smith pops into my head.

~~“You remember these guys, right?”~~ Ollie taps my nametag with the arm he has slung around me.

~~“I, well, let’s see, there’s,”~~ what the fuck is he expecting me to do? The guy has a nice Hamilton on, near identical to mine, and the girls are cute enough...

He taps my nametag again.

Oh...nametags.

~~“Right!”~~ ~~“Rob”~~ is stuck to the guy’s pretentious pin-stripe jacket, ~~“Rob I remember, beautiful watch by the way, Rob.”~~ I flash mine at him and shake his hand as he smiles through a confused and forced smile. I look over to the redhead to the right of Rob, and see ~~“Hannah”~~ displayed on the left of what has to be one of the loveliest pairs of breasts I’ve ever seen, supported by one of the lowest V-cuts I’ve ever seen down the middle of her black cocktail dress. ~~“Hannah, of course. Stunning dress.”~~ The brunette in between Ollie and Hannah is missing a nametag.

~~“Shit,”~~ She’s got nothing, no nametag anywhere. Just black slacks below a black t-shirt under a dark gray high waisted jacket. Screw. ~~“I’m sorry, I just can’t place the name, but you look familiar...”~~

She smiles and her friends start laughing.

Rob, Hannah, Rob, Hannah, Rob, Hannah. Ollie grins.

Glen.

Hannah grabs her shoulder, ~~—~~We were telling her she looks just like Sarah McMasters! Rob had English with Sarah and mistook Kate here for her.” Rob shakes his head and looks down to his drink.

~~—~~Sarah!” This is too much work. Kate. ~~—~~That’s who she reminds me of, Hannah. Kate, it’s great to meet you.”

Kate extends her hand, ~~—~~You too—”

I point at my nametag, ~~—~~Fom.”

Kate.

~~—~~Fom.” Kate flips her hair over her shoulder and pulls at the bottom of her t-shirt.

~~—~~So Tom!” Hannah releases Kate who looks like Sarah and folds her arms.

~~—~~What is it you do now?”

~~—~~Fom here invented Silly Putty actually. Been living off it for years.” Ollie/Glen laughs and elbows me.

Rob’s head cocks slightly and the girls’ eyes seem to light up. Uncertain disbelief and being impressed looks the same on everyone’s face.

Shit. Well.

~~—~~Actually,” I unbutton my jacket and put my hands in my pockets, ~~—~~Silly Putty was an accident. A guy was trying to invent a rubber substitute during World War II, but he couldn’t get it quite right and it just sat. Eventually, it made its way to a toy store and the owner threw some dye in it, and it soon outsold everything but crayons.” Discovery Channel.

The Kate and Hannah laugh, Rob roles his eyes and Ollie/Glen looks confused and impressed with me then lurches as someone pushes past him.

–So,” Rob checks his watch, –what *do* you do?” This guy’s temperament is just about as short as Cheap-suit’s.

For some reason Superman pops in my head.

–Rob, I’m a reporter.” Clark Kent. –By day.” I move my hands to my hips. He was never my favorite superhero, but Clark Kent is bland. It’s an innocuous enough profession, there’s billions of them and only a few are actually household names.

–For who?” Kate’s interest is perked. What kind of girl comes to a high school reunion for the hell of it?

–One of the smaller papers in D.C. Mostly community events, fluff stuff, stuff that distracts people from the shit that’s really happening. People like to see certain things, like to be told certain things, and they like to hear in ways that are easy for them to hear. Most newspapers are written at a fourth grade reading level. But it’s fun.” I shrug. –It’s a paycheck.”

Kate’s head jerks back and her brow furrows. –Fourth grade?”

–Yep. The classy *New York Times* reads around seventh grade, I believe.” It’s all shit you have to take into account when designing ad copy. Ollie looks bored and scans the room.

–So, gambling?” Ollie hooks his arm through Kate’s and pulls her and the group towards a Blackjack table.

After a few hands of Blackjack and bullshitting across the green felt table, I learn that Kate is a fashion writer for some online magazine and is here because she is Hannah's roommate, randomly met through some online posting. I could never get onboard with all this online meeting stuff, seems like you are just as likely to have a potential roommate end up at your doorstep as a nut job with an axe who just happens to know that no one else is home. Rob is in merging or acquiring or something for some money farm, and I forgot his title within seconds. Journalist isn't glamorous, but people know what that is at least. He's a dial tone who yawns a lot, making sure his watch shows every time he covers his mouth and making sure that the girls know he is bored by me and Ollie. I don't really care, but my indifference is mirrored by Ollie/Glen's indignation. Every time Rob opens his mouth— whether to yawn, place a bet, or talk about his new BMW— I catch Ollie smile with his teeth clenched. It reminds me of the Joker— I'd never seen him make the face before. Hannah works for some nonprofit that wants sustainable everything and has no place existing in a large Midwestern metropolitan city. It's noble, but I don't think this green fad will last much longer. I excuse myself to use the restroom and grab a drink, Kate asks for a beer I've never heard of.

Pushing through the crowds of increasingly inebriated pseudo-Catholics proves to be a workout, and to my surprise the bathroom is empty other than an old guy all in black at the only urinal. The floor of my stall is sticky, and there is an inverted cross Sharpied above the toilet.

Running through the night, I realize it's going really well, considering I've just been selling a dumbed down version of Superman's history as mine. Adopted, originally

from a small town, favorite color is either red or blue (which Hannah found odd considering the colors say two conflicting things about a person), dad died when I was young, close to my mom, dated another reporter for a while. Emerald is my birthstone.

I laugh to myself in the stall. I'm not sure emerald is even a real birthstone. Ollie caught on when I mentioned red or blue, and winked as he drained his drink. He responded by telling the small group how his parents died in a mugging when he was a kid, adding how he now loathes guns.

Washing my hands, I see the old guy next to me at the sink is a priest, a white box secures the collar of his black short sleeved shirt. Why they hell would a priest be—

Oh.

—So, having a good evening?”

The priest grunts and shrugs, dries his hands and picks up a glass of ice off the top of the paper towel dispenser. —It's alright for what it is. You?” He shakes some ice into his mouth and chews. He hasn't shaved in a few days and light/dark patches of gray litter his face.

—It's okay. Tell the truth, I feel like I'm just faking my way through the night.”

He grunts again and shakes more ice into his mouth as walks out the door. I follow him and he stops, resting against the wall just on the outskirts of the gambling and drinking. The light from the hallway to the bathroom creates a silhouette of his glass of ice on the gambling floor.

I stop next to him. —So, how'd you settle on this gambling theme?” The guy looks lonely.

—Settle?” He shakes his head and looks down to his ice. —There was no settling, the class president decided it was the best way to get people to come,” his voice rises, —the house proceeds even go to the church,‘ she says.” He shakes his plastic cup.

—So this wasn’t something you thought of?”

—Son,” he turns to me and looks over his glasses, —w’re in a church. Do you think I wanted gambling and drinking here? It’s bad enough these hellions even came back, all those stories about drugs and Catholic school girls and the raucous little bastards that end up here, they exist for a reason. Far be it from me to endorse stereotypes,” he touches his collar, —but they exist for a reason.”

I look out into the crowd and imagine everyone here sneaking off to the restroom to do coke that they swiped from their dad, leaning down during lunch to pop valium they lifted from their mom, getting busy in the cafeteria after school. But then that’s how my high school was, and we were the lowly public school kids.

—I’m sure it wasn’t all that bad.” I look to the priest, —I mean, you’re still hanging out here.”

—To make sure the little shits don’t wreck any of the art.” He clears his throat. —The sculptures and paintings need someone to be accountable and it’s my ass if something happens.” He looks to me, squints over his glasses again and says nothing. It creeps me out and I look away. He pushes his glasses up. —You didn’t go here. Why are you here at this, —I’ve peaked‘ party?”

I’m geared up to continue with the Superman story but realize if anyone would, he would call me out. Keep it simple. Meet your audience where they are. And this guy doesn’t seem affected. —I did go here, I’m over there, with Hannah and Rob and Olli-

Glen and their friend Kate. Just catching up, new stuff, old stuff. Hannah's actually become pretty involved in the green scene around here, trying to push for a more sustainable use of power by Cascade Electric. Sounds like she's been doing well for herself, didn't really catch what Glen is doing. Me, I'm a reporter down in D.C., just up for the weekend." I find myself trying to match Ollie's talking speed.

He grunts again. "Journalist. Reporters don't call themselves that."

"Sorry?" What is he talking about?

"If you write things, you are a journalist. Reporters died out with Walter Cronkite. So how do people here like your, reporting?" He shakes his cup again.

"It, well it is what I do. I'm pretty good at it. I just aim for Cronkite status. But in print."

"Right." He shrugs. "It's just I'm a priest. Wouldn't call myself a pastor."

"Well I'd like to think I report things. Journalists have grown lax and tend to spin." Nailed it. "Mind if I ask, I've always wondered, why do you guys wear the," I motion to my neck, "white thing?"

"It's a clerical collar. And I'm a priest." He shakes his ice.

"Well," I look out to Ollie, who makes eye contact with me and jerks his head to bring me over, "I should head back." I point to his drink, "It was good chatting, can I grab you some more water or anything?"

"Water? Scotch. I'll get it. The bartender can remember drink orders just as well as he could remember apostles."

"Apostles?"

—It's a joke. Just remember, stay here too long and you're guaranteed quick drop and a warm stop. I don't care what you believe, God's going to be pissed after this mess."

I'm sorry? —But I thought...are you even allowed to drink, I mean, being a priest?"

—So you've never read the Bible? Noah was a drunk, and the only person on the planet God saw fit to live. Hopped off the ark, grew some grapes and imbibed. Excessively." He scans the crowd. —Say what you will," he says, —but this, this is almost as close to bitch-slapping God as it gets. At least when you were kids you could say you didn't know better."

I don't have anything to do with this though, isn't he supposed to be compassionate?

—But I'm not—" I'm not really doing anything wrong, hurting anyone.

He nods and walks away, circling the room towards the bar instead of fighting through the mess of people.

I follow the priest, breaking through and parting the few people he did on his way to the bar, get a drink for me and a beer I'm sure wasn't what Kate wanted. She doesn't say anything about it when I get back to the table.

Ollie is standing on the edge of the table, and as I saddle up beside him I see him staring at Rob, it looks like he is sizing him up. He notices me and a smirk appears on his face.

—I'm up two-fifteen." He motions to the stack of small chips in front of him.

—Nice, man. How about everyone else?" I nod to the other three at the table.

–Hannah’s just more than broke even,” she’s still attached to his right arm,
–Kate’s up thirty, and Rob,” Rob looks down to his chips and nods at me, unimpressed
but noticeably pleased with himself, –Lucky Rob here is up three-ten.”

Shit. –Three hundred ten?” Rob nods again at this and takes a drink of his
whiskey. –Well damn. I should stand by him.”

–His luck will change.” Ollie almost breathes it, slow, but loud enough for me.
He turns. –House will win.”

–And your two-twenty?”

–Thirty. I’m a smart player.” He pats my back, turns his attention to the Hannah
and his voice is back to full speed. –Keep playing, or want to try a new game?”

–New game!”

–Alright,” Kate smiles and looks to Rob, visibly unhappy about the suggestion.

–Well,” he turns and scans the dark noisy room, –It looks like all the tables are
full, and we seem to be doing pretty good here.”

–Oh, common, Rob!” Ollie holds up his hands and shrugs, –where’s your sense
of adventure?”

–My sense of adventure is coming out on top. It’s why I do what I do, and you
do, what was that again? Copy work?”

–*Copyediting*. I edit copy. I make smart people whose strength isn’t
communicating sound like they actually *are* as smart as they are. That takes a whole lot
of smart. I’m sure even you have us on staff.”

–I say we stay.” Rob returns to his drink. This guy’s a dick.

–Well,” Ollie smiles, –I guess we stay! Besides, this lady has been great enough to let us hang out and bore her with mindless conversation and updates. Heather here at least deserves a tip for her trouble.” He slides her a few chips and the dealer blushes. The girls smile and say nothing. –Kind dealer lady! I’m going in with, well,” Ollie shuffles through his stack, –well, here.” He moves all his chips forward but pulls back a single worth ten. –Fom?”

Rob shakes his head and leans down to whisper something into Kate’s ear, but she’s too busy staring at Ollie’s stack of chips in play.

–That’s, three-nine, four hundred and twenty!” Kate slaps her head and laughs.

–It’s only money, and it’s more fun this way.” Ollie turns back to me. –Fom?”

–Damn. No, I’m good watching for now, I’m already down thirty.”

–Ladies?”

Hannah and Kate chime in twenty. Rob throws in thirty.

–Rob? Come on, big winner. You can do better than that.” Ollie is taunting him.

–My bet’s been made.”

–Come on, I’m sure Heather will let you put in some more if you really want to.”

Rob stammers and shakes his head as Kate playfully scolds him to have some fun, he’s up anyway.

–Pussy,” Hannah laughs and nudges Ollie. Rob shakes his head and slides another thirty in front of himself.

Ollie lights up. –Deal them!”

Heather cycles out the cards and Ollie busts while the girls and Rob beat Heather.

–Shit.” Ollie looks up to Heather, begins to speak, stops, –Shit!” Ollie shakes his head and turns to Rob, –Well, I’m sure you’re happy with yourself.” He empties his near full drink and practically drops it back onto the table.

–Yes. I am.”

Ollie pats down his pockets and pulls out his wallet. –Can you make change?” The dealer smiles and says of course as Ollie opens his apparently empty wallet. –Shit Goddamn.” He stares at the green felt for a few seconds, everyone watching, confused. His head jerks up, looks around the table and Rob, Hannah and Kate exchange confused looks. He holds up his single chip, drops it, and raises it again. –Looks like this is all I have.”

–Well, looks like you should cut your losses, not played quite so flippantly if you couldn’t afford it.” Rob looks smugly to Heather, who I now see looks more concerned about Ollie’s lack of money than he does.

–No. Night’s not over just yet,” Ollie looks around, searching the room for something. He pats down his clothes again and turns back to the table. –This isn’t really my game anyway.” He looks Heather up and down, then breaks into another grin as quickly as he talks. –How do you guys feel about another game?”

Rob is shaking his head before Ollie finishes his sentence, –Glen, I told you, the other tables are full and I don’t want to move. The girls are good here too, you shouldn’t have just been giving all your spare chips over to Heather, betting like a jackass.” Hannah turns sharply to Rob at his last comment.

Ollie just laughs. –You’re right, of course, but how about this? We switch games, but stay here? Heather, would you mind taking a break? I’ll buy you a drink and

give you a chance to play. I've got a fun, easy game." His voice is warbling, higher than normal.

You can tell she loves the attention, but withdraws a bit, "I don't know, I can't really let you play with the money, switching games, it's charity and I'm not really supposed to..."

"No no no," Ollie cuts her off, "I'll be against my money, it's fun, easy, no issues. Come on, I know you could use the break, it's been a long night so far and I've been a bore with all this talk about copy and grammar and all that nonsense."

"I just..."

"I'll be fine! No harm, come on, I bet Rob here will even spot you a ten to play with." Ollie kicks my shin under the table, and I almost yell out when I realize he wants me to play along. I don't know what the hell he's trying to do, but, eh.

"Come on Rob, let's try something new. Heather? Please?" I flash my best Ollie-grin at her.

"Well," she turns to the rest of the table, everyone smiling and pleading but Rob, "okay. Why not?"

"Excellent." He walks behind the table and tells Heather to sit in his seat.

"So," Rob slides her a few chips, I'm sure worth no more than the ten Ollie promised her, "what are we playing?"

"Old street game that just relies on me being faster than you. Heather, dear, would you please draw three cards from the top of the deck?" She smiles and complies, while Ollie flips the three over— a jack, seven and three. "Alright, usually this is done with a queen—"

—Hold on. This is one of those scam games. Card switching, something like that, like that cup game with the ball. I'm not playing this.” Rob shakes his head and looks to the rest of us. —He's going to sucker you all.”

—No no no! It's true, this has been a cheat game, but it's also simple and fun when you are as quick as me and play it honestly.” He grabs his empty glass and drinks the nothing that is in it, bringing it away from his mouth and staring at it, confused. —I need another one.” No he doesn't. Ollie turns to Heather. —Here. Practice round. Follow the jack, and you'll win. Easy.”

He slowly moves the cards, left to right to middle to right to left, like he's braiding something. —Find the jack.”

Heather grins and looks to the other girls who smile at her, Rob just looks away. —The left one.” She's sheepish.

Ollie cocks his eyebrows, —You're sure?”

—Yes,” she's bashful for some reason.

—Come on, I need more convincing! Shout it, Heather!”

—Left!” she yelps, covering her mouth at the word's finish.

—You got it!” He turns over the card, and returns it facedown.

Rob yawns.

—Ready for the real thing?” He holds up his ten-dollar chip. —Money time, but I have to go faster.”

—Sure.”

Ollie begins rearranging the cards, moving faster and faster, every now and then a card catches on another, interrupting his flow, creating a stutter in something that

otherwise would be an almost impressive simple movement, and I lose the card the second that I look up to watch Ollie's face.

He's quick despite the fumbling.

He stops.

–Pick!”

–Umm, ri-right. Right!” Ollie laughs and turns the card over. The jack shows his face and Kate, Hannah and Heather all cheer. Rob shakes his head and yawns. Again?

–Huh.” Ollie scratches his head. And looks around the room, which has grown considerably louder since my conversation with the priest. The alcohol is doing its job. Everyone's leaving with less money tonight. A fundraiser in disguise.

–What's wrong?” Kate seems concerned, which grabs Rob's attention mid-yawn.

–I, well.” He pats down his pockets again. –I just realized Heather here won all my money.”

–I guess that's the end of that,” Rob says as the smile returns to his face.

–Unless, Tom, you mind spotting me? A few bucks, I'll get you back, I can't lose all night. Just to get ahead, come on come on. Just to get the game going, how much do you have on you? I'm good for it, I'll even cut you a check if I lose it. I'd ask Rob there, but he doesn't like bets, which is strange for the guy doing the most winning. And the girls here, well, you just don't borrow money from ladies. It's untoward.” He's talking even faster than normal.

Shit.

–I,” I only brought, –I only have, I don't know,” I rifle through my wallet, –I've got two-twenty, with my chips. But I don't—”

—Come on! You’ve got all that Silly Putty money.” He winks at Rob.

—Well,” shit, Kate and Hannah are staring at me and Heather just looks like a puppy dog on a stool. —You’re right. I’m sure you’re good for it.” I toss him the cash and slide him my chips.

—Yes! Good man. Rob, you see, this is a sportsman. Actually,” Ollie sniffs and wipes his nose with his sleeve, grabs his empty glass and raises it to me, —you mind, since you’re not playing at all?” His drunk ass just wiped his nose on my jacket.

—Yeah, sure I guess.” I grab the glass from him, using just my index and middle finger after the rest of my hand sticks the sides. Whatever sugary shit he was drinking, he apparently sloshed it all over the place. —What is this?”

Ollie rolls his head around his neck, faces front and shakes his head quickly. —Whoop! Umm, scotch with, well, tell you what, just tell the bartender to fill it with the same thing he’s been giving Glen all night long. He’ll know.” Ollie smirks, —We have quite the rapport going, him and me.” He takes a long pause, deep inhale through his nose, then explodes, —Now! Back to the game!”

I fight my way through to the bar again, avoiding elbows, a small amount of balloons that I’m surprised are still intact and puddles of...*something* in the middle of the room. I look down to my watch—10:59. It feels later.

The bar, again, is vacant. I scan the room and see that somehow, everyone has a drink. I catch the priest’s eye, back in the corner by the bathroom. Looks like he’s chewing on more ice, empty glass in hand. The room is just a blur of movement, expensive clothes that may be a little too revealing (and straps that are beginning to slide

down shoulders, not really helping), lights that are still a little too dim, words that are a little too profane, and money being handled just a little too carelessly.

And I gave mine to Ollie. The guy who picks my lock for cheese.

God help us if there's a fire.

–More whiskey?" The bartender practically yells at me over the counter.

I turn around. His tie is gone.

–Yeah, sure. Oh, and here," I give him both glasses, –Glen," I wait for some look of recognition that doesn't come, –Glen says you know what he has been drinking all night."

The bartender nods, pours me my drink and fills Ollie's with something from a fridge under the counter.

–What is this?" I smell it and look through the amber color. It just smells like, apples. Sugar.

–Apple juice." He nods in the direction of our table. –Glen, the designated driver guy, right? Nice jacket?"

My jacket. —Sure I guess? Didn't know he was driving anyone anywhere."

I look across the room, Ollie is tilted back, laughing, hands thrown in the air. The girls are smiling, and the back of Rob's head looks...boring.

I don't know how, but it looks boring somehow. And kind of mean. I think I wouldn't like him, had I only ever seen the back of his head.

Huh.

I grab the drinks and fight my way back across the room, and upon arriving at the table, Ollie yelps.

—You! You found it again! Tom, we're in a bit of trouble, this Rob guy's too quick. He's stolen almost everyone's money."

I look to Rob, now with an even larger stack of chips, a few more hundred by the look of it. How the hell— —Where did you get all that money, weren't you just playing that find the card game?"

—This," Rob motions to the stack of chips, —is actually mostly your money. Some of it is Hannah's and Kate's. But mostly yours. You should thank your friend Glen here."

Gone? I was gone ten fucking minutes, if that! How could he, all of it?

—Oh-Glen! You lost all my money?"

His face shrinks into a grimace, his lips part, teeth clench, and he inhales with the sound of a deflating tire. —Yeah, well, I just, well, Hannah was good, then Heather got good again, and then Kate cleaned up, but then Rob here just sweeps everything, bets and bets and bets and I just, well, it's, he won. Yupyupyup. That's it. He beat me. But not all of it! I still have this!" He proudly raises his ten-dollar chip. —And you! You have that!" He grabs the drink from my hand and empties it into his mouth, coughing after he swallows the half that didn't cascade down his cheeks and onto my jacket.

Rob's smiling smugly, Kate and Heather are just staring at Ollie, and Heather tugs on my jacket and motions at me to lean down.

—I think your friend, Glen? Is drunk. He wasn't a very good card mixer-upper." The rum on her breath stings my eyes. —Cute though, right?" She giggles.

Fuck me.

I look to Ollie and he shrugs. —Bathroom! Heather dear, thanks for being a dear. Here, for your trouble.” He tosses his one remaining chip to her. —Kate, Hannah, do not fear, I will return post haste. Rob,” Ollie hugs an uncomfortable Rob who immediately pushes him away, —you know you’ll worry about me. Tom! I might need you to hold back my hair.”

He trips over the corner of the table, and I follow him towards the bathroom as he taps, greets, and hullo’s everyone on the way. At the priest he stops, snaps his posture upright and salutes. —Fåter. I love your clerical collar. It brings out the seriousness in your eyes. I myself could never pull one off.” He laughs through his nose, smiles back at me and stumbles to the bathroom.

I nod at the priest and he at me, over his glasses again.

—Quick drop, warm stop.”

Shit. —Look, it’s not me, I just, well, I, fuck. Never mind.” Damn it. —Gt it. We’re going to hell.”

I push through the bathroom door, —What the fuck was all that about?” I hear a flush, and Ollie steps out of the stall twirling a set of keys. He flashes a smile at me and leans over the sink, fixing his hair in the mirror. —And who are you the designated driver for?”

He turns on the faucet, pushes his jacket sleeves up and begins washing his hands as he laughs, —I just told that to the bartender.”

—And you’re drinking apple juice? Why?”

—You know, during the Colgate Comedy Hour, Dean Martin never drank whiskey. Always apple juice. Looks the part, none of the liver disease.” He kills the faucet and

grabs some paper towels, ~~–~~And the keys? They're Rob's." He holds them up. ~~–~~Beemer. A 5-series, too."

Rob's? ~~–~~So you're not drunk? No, why do, what the hell are you doing with Rob's keys? He bet his car? Is that why you lost all my money?"

~~–~~Nopenopenope, I lifted them. And been drinking Dino juice all night."

What? ~~–~~When? What?"

~~–~~It's why I hugged him. That guy is a jackass. Actually thinks Kate is going home with him. Come on." He pops half his jacket collar and unrolls one of his jacket sleeves.

~~–~~Take it easy on the jacket, Ol." He doesn't hear me, he's out the door.

I follow him, and he is saluting the priest again, looks to the table, Heather is dealing and everyone is still there. He takes off around the room and I follow. Where the hell is he going?

He looks back to me, motioning for me to hurry up. I follow him through the hallway we came in through, back through the cathedral, and out to the parking lot. He stops, raises Rob's keys in the air, and a gray BMW's lights flash on a half dozen cars in. He jogs over to it.

~~–~~Ol! What are you doing? That's Rob's car?"

~~–~~Get over here and quit yelling. Yes, it's Rob's." He opens the car door and hops in the driver's seat.

Is he stealing it? What, someone is going to know this isn't my car. I mean, my suit looks like I could own one, but I don't, and—

–Are you stealing his car?” I stand by the hood, looking around the parking lot. Other than cars, it’s empty. I’m slightly relieved that no one is in sight.

–No, I’m not stealing his car, Will. Come on. I don’t steal cars.” He is shuffling through the glove compartment and center console, –Perfect!” He triumphantly holds a few CDs and an old iPod out the car door.

–What are you doing?” I can’t be here, what the fuck is he, I look back to the closed church doors, shit. I’m suddenly aware I am patting down my pockets and looking around the parking lot like a dog that’s lost his ball.

–He’s a smoker! It fucking reeks in here. No way in hell he’s going home with Kate. She hates smokers.” He unfolds a piece of paper from the glove box. –Oh, he’s got a great insurance plan too. You really have to with these cars, prime real estate to get ripped off. Like a good neighbor,” he sings. He gets out of the car, looks around, and sidearms the CDs and mp3 player into the bushes. –Alright, let’s get back inside, they’re probably missing us by now, right?” He laughs.

No. What the, no. He, what is he doing with Rob’s, why did he just throw that stuff away? –No!” Ollie stops. –Ollie? What the hell is all that?”

He looks to me, confused, and walks back over. –What was what? And remember, Graham.”

–Glen! You’re Glen! And why did you just toss that stuff?”

–To make it look like he got robbed.” He pauses. –Oh, you’re right, I’m sorry. Those kids couldn’t have just opened his door.” He walks back to the BMW, shuts the door, takes a few paces back, picks up a stray fist sized rock, –Turn around, this might splinter,” and throws the rocks through the window.

—What the fuck!?”

I always thought a car window would be louder.

—Come on.” He reopens the car’s door and claps me on the shoulder as he jogs back towards the church.

I realize I’m just staring at the shattered window as Ollie yells —~~W!~~! Come on.”

I trace his steps, much slower than him, turning back to the car, to the church, to the car, to the—

—You alright? Insurance will cover it, no worries.”

No.

No!

—That’s not what I’m worried about!”

—What’s the problem? I told you not to worry about your money.”

You don’t see what’s wrong here? I shouldn’t have to explain why—

—There’s nothing wrong,” Ollie grins that grin he has dialed, —hook, insurance will cover it, you just have to pretend you didn’t see this. Which won’t be hard, no one will ask us. We’ll go back in, everything will work out, don’t worry about it. He’s a dick, you know, talking shit about your shitty reporting and how you’re a know-it-all with your Silly Putty nonsense. I’m just, well, speeding up karma.”

What was wrong with my Silly Putty story? —My shitty reporting?”

—I know! You’re not even a writer!” He holds his stomach as he laughs.

Ollie opens the door for me, motioning inside. Fuck.

I walk up the stairs and through the door, and turn back to Ollie, who is holding the keys into the night air and pushes a button on the remote. A car alarm starts beeping and blaring and screaming.

–Come!” He walks ahead of me, readjusts his collar into a contorted position and nods to the nametag lady. He begins to slightly limp as he reenters the gambling room.

We walk a long way around the room, back towards the bathroom, and then join the group at the table.

Ollie hugs everybody, and again is shoved off by Rob. He hugs me last. It’s all I can do to laugh.

I notice I’ve started to sweat through my jacket and cross my arms.

–So, what’s the game? How’s it been?” Like he didn’t just break into a car. And then break its window.

–Well,” Heather pushes some more chips towards Rob, –your friend here is just cleaning up.”

–Congrats, buddy,” Ollie smiles at Rob’s haughty nod.

–This is where I depart and take my, and your, money with me. Excuse me.” Rob nods, squeezes Kate’s arm, and walks towards the cashier next to the bar.

Ollie coughs and shrugs, nudges me, –Well, that guy’s just a barrel of fun, eh?”

–Yeah, well,” we did just destroy his car.

–So what’s next? Are you guys done? Going home soon?” Hannah grabs Ollie’s arm, her resting place most of the evening, blue eyes darting back and forth between the two of us.

–Well,” Ollie looks towards me, –your thoughts?”

–Shit, I don't know, I'm broke, and need to get up early-ish, catch my flight home, so I guess I'll just grab a cab to my place." I look from Kate to Hannah, both indifferent, to Heather, still smiling. Why doesn't she stop smiling?

She stops smiling.

–You mean your hotel?" Heather says. Her voice almost squeaks. God.

–Yeah, Tom, hotel?" Ollie repeats, the first seriously inflected thing he's said all night.

Oh. Right.

–Hotel, yeah. That's what I meant, I don't live here after all." I'm Clark Kent from D.C.

Hannah turns to Ollie, –I know a great little diner, or if you want some coffee or something, I make a great cup and can give you a ride after to where you need to go since he's leaving."

–Well," Ollie turns back to me, his straight face turned back to that grin.

–I think I dropped my keys around here," Rob pushes Ollie aside, looking over and around the table. Son of a bitch, Ollie's got the— –Got em." Rob pops up from under the table. –Kate, you like a ride?"

She blushes, grabs her purse and her remaining chips, –Sure, right after we cash these."

–Fellas. It was pleasant. Thanks for the cash." He pats his right jacket pocket and hesitates. –Actually..."

What does this asshole want now. Yes. I helped destroy your car.

–“I’m going to the girl’s room,” Hannah announces and brushes Ollie on the way to the bathroom.

–“Here,” Rob pulls a ten dollar bill out of his pocket and hands it to me. –“Cab fare home. I’d feel bad for you if you hadn’t freely given your money to, well, him.” He nods at Ollie.

–“Thanks, I guess, I’ll see you around.” You have a hole through your window. It should have been louder. I reach to pull out—

Shit.

My wallet.

I pat down all my pockets. Cell phone, keys.

–“My wallet is gone.”

Rob looks up and laughs. –“At least there was nothing in it. You should learn to be more careful with your possessions.”

Rob and Kate turn and walk towards the cashier and I turn towards Ollie.

–“My fucking wallet is missing. There’s your fucking karma. You’re going to get a safe dropped on your head walking down the street.”

–“Naw, you’ll find it.” Ollie shrugs it off. –“Remember.” He points to himself. –“Karmic agent.”

I continue checking every pocket and come up with nothing, again and again.

I know I didn’t take it out to do anything but give money to Ollie, and I put it right back. Right?

—“I’ll be right back.” Ollie pats me on the shoulder. —“Meet me by the talky nametag ladies table in two with Hannah. You can get home, right? It’s an easy enough walk.”

Shit. —“Yeah. Sure.”

I watch Ollie walk towards the cashier, and Hannah walks up behind me and tugs on my sleeve.

—“Where’d Glen go?”

—“Who?” Glen? Ollie. —“Right, he said to, well that we should meet him by the door.”

She looks almost hurt by this. Must have been the ‘we’ are meeting him part.

—“I’m just going to walk home I think. To the hotel. It’s short enough, nice enough outside.”

She smiles at this. Looks like Ollie at least got his tail. Rent, no. Fuck I even lost a half-month’s rent. But he got his tail. —“After you, Hannah.” I turn back to the table, —“Have a good evening, Heather dear.”

She blushes and squeaks something about ‘you too.’ Awful voice. Just awful.

And I lost my fucking wallet.

The makeshift casino is still bustling, but a few people have begun to filter out. K.C. & Jojo are crooning. Bartender is packing up. He’s lost his vest. The priest is still staring. Still chewing. God should judge him for this mess, for letting it go on. Especially if He is going to be as pissed as the priest says He is.

I take Hannah to the front, and Ollie approaches within seconds, talking to Kate while Rob sneers, all but pulling her out the door. Hannah hasn’t said a word, but it’s

just as well, I've got nothing to say to Hannah and she's obviously not interested in anything that I have to say. _Glen's' reporter friend who is a sucker with money.

Kate waves good bye, yelling she'll be late home, grabbing a drink with Rob, as he continues pulling her out the door and away from Glen and Tom.

–No worries, me too!” Hannah looks to Ollie, who nods, –See you!”

–Shall we?” Ollie motions to the door.

We leave, me trailing in Ollie and Hannah's wake.

At the door, Ollie says how great it was to see me, going about some other bullshit about getting together the next time we are in the same city, but all I can think of is my missing wallet and my lost money and how the only successful part of the evening was getting Ollie laid, committing who knows how many crimes, and lying to a priest with an ice fetish.

Or a drinking problem.

Ollie walks with Hannah out to her car and I turn to walk home when I hear Rob start to scream.

I smile. I'm ashamed of myself, but it feels, I feel...justified for some reason.

Karmic agent. He read that somewh—

–Will!”

I turn and Ollie is jogging after me.

–Yeah? More larceny on your mind?” I still can't believe he smashed the window.

–You hear that scream? Stick around, I’m sure there’ll be an encore if you want to hear it.” Ollie hasn’t stopped smiling. –This, I believe, is yours.” He holds his hand out, a brown leather wallet.

My wallet.

–Where did you find this?”

–I lifted it. It looks better if one of us got hit as well as Rob. You’ll find your investment as well as a cut in there.”

–Cut?” Lifted? –You took my wallet?”

–Borrowed. Hey, have a good night man. I’m sure I’ll see you tomorrow-ish, scrubs, unshaven and the shirt you’re wearing now, right? I told you this evening would be worth it.” He flashes that grin and jogs away.

I open the wallet and find it lined with cash.

There’s six hundred dollars in here.