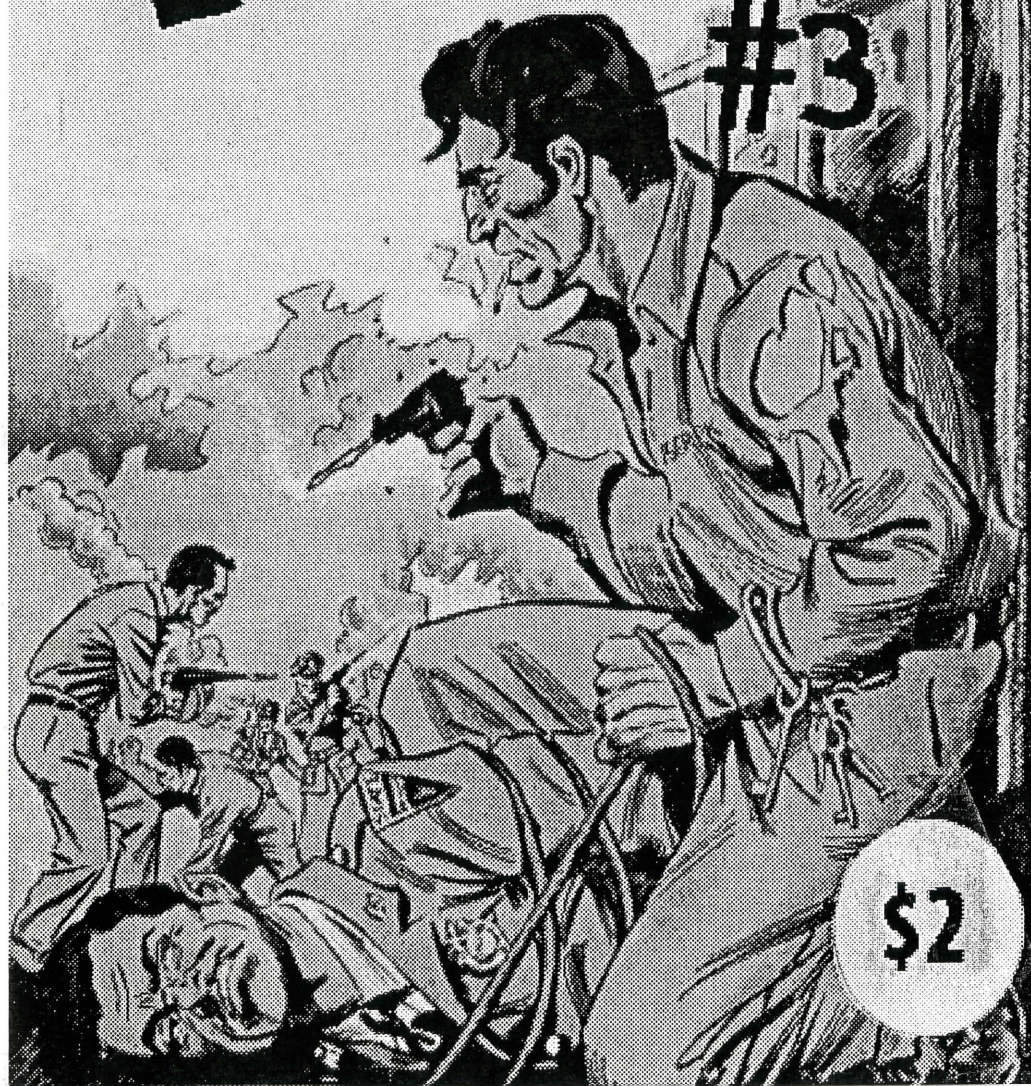


Pick Your Poison

#3



\$2

pick your poison #3

The original idea for this issue was to randomly pick twenty words out of the dictionary and then write something about them. I figured this technique, although reminiscent of a crappy junior high English assignment, would be good at breaking through any lingering writer's block, and let me write about stuff I normally wouldn't.

So I grabbed Webster's and flipped it open. The first three words my finger landed

on were ecumenical, malamute, and basal metabolism. I began writing about "the turnover of energy in a fasting and resting organism using energy solely to maintain vital cellular activity, respiration, and circulation as measured by the rate at which heat is given off" for a paragraph or so before the sheer ridiculousness sank in and I stopped. It felt eerily like I was back in high school, writing a biology report on something I simply did not understand. And what's the point of doing that?

So I cheated a little bit, just browsing through the dictionary, picking out words that caught my eye, and choosing a single word for the title of a few things I had already written. So the only thing that ties them all together is that they're all titled under one word.

Yeah, OK, pretty stupid. But it did get me to write about things I usually wouldn't have thought of. I mean, for instance, one of the words I picked out was Golf. What I ended up writing has nothing to do with golf, but I wouldn't have remembered it if the word hadn't triggered the memories. A few reoccurring themes popped up unintentionally as well,

specifically the feeling of ending up forgotten and trying in frustration to stop it from happening. And it was nice—picking a word like "Week" let me write about random, mundane things that happened to me during the space of one week, which would under normal circumstances be treading dangerously close to full-blown "personal zine" spew, but in this case can be defended by the stupid "theme".

But more than anything, it was really fun to write. I had been bludgeoned by writer's block for weeks, but good ole Webster's broke me out and soon I had a 50 page zine, completed in record time.

I sat back, pleased with the painless process, and surveyed what I had written. Whoa, hold on, this sort of fucking sucks I realized a few pages in. I had chosen words like Exhaustion, Unwise, Theft, Stumbling, and so forth, so a dominant theme had emerged: inane drinking stories. Stuff about being delirious, wandering around in near speed-psychosis, tales of drunkenly robbing kegs of beer from yuppie uptown restaurants, making out in an intoxicated stupor with a girl at a party and then nearly getting clobbered by a guy in a HateBreed t-shirt who turned out to be her fiancé, long retellings of frequenting dive bars in the early afternoon and playing pool games with degenerates that quickly turned ugly and tense, jarring accounts of coming to in the back of a car, realizing you're



THE "EDITOR"

with a bunch of drunk people trying to buy crack, and you're actually giving them directions. And so on, and so forth. Who the FUCK is going to want to read this shit, I thought; the tedious tales that transpire when I get tanked? Not I. So I scrapped most of that shit, 30 pages or so, grabbed the stupid dictionary and sat down again.

Here are the results. I still don't like it and it still seems mundane but I wasted enough time writing it and you already spent your dough so lets just sit down and get this over with.

Ugh. This issue feels like a child you tried to raise well but were unable to do so; it ended up some kind of mutant and part of you wants to chain it up in the basement, shielding it forever from the light of day, but in the end you just toss it out into the world and yell "You're on your own now!"

-Nate

Pps—Originally, this silly dictionary-themed shit was going to comprise issue #4. Issue 3 was set to be all about early stories from the age of ten and earlier, but it didn't really come together and stand by itself very well. I got rid of a few of the stories, and incorporated a few of the other ones into this issue. So, if you notice a number of early childhood stories here, that's why.

Pps- I think future issues will be considerably shorter than they've been so far. Standing next to the Kinkos copier for long stretches at a time made me think "Damn, next time around I should do a shorter issue so this doesn't take so fucking long, and my theft seems less conspicuous." If this thing was, say, 20 pages as opposed to 64 I could: put it out once a month, charge less for it, copy a whole bunch more at a time, and ultimately have more people read them. Then again, I initially planned for this one to be 16 pages, and that didn't work out too well...

Pick Your Poison is distributed by the fine folks at Tower Records, Spy Kids distro, Five Minute Romance, Cafiesme, Sassafra, Independent Thought Brigade, among others. It is also available at fine stores such as Quimbys in Chicago, Atomic Books in Baltimore, Extreme Noise and Dreamhaven in Minneapolis, and various Tower Records stores. If you can't find it through any of those means, you can also get a copy from the address to the right. Also, check out these back issues if you feel so inclined. And write me, I like getting mail.

Pick Your Poison

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Also Available:

Pick Your Poison #1 - \$1.00

The first set of stories about this crazy kid I knew growing up named Rick, plus other general stories about: growing up, drinking, shoplifting, watching people change around you, die around you, cops killing dogs, New Orleans on new years eve, robberies, fake coke and cough syrup, getting fucked up on paint thinner and other bullshit I can't remember. Worth a buck. 48 pages

Pick Your Poison #2 - \$1.00

The continuation of the Rick saga. Read as we get kicked out of school, try to rob a mall, get busted shoplifting. Gasp as Rick runs away across the country. escapes from rehab and continues to do battle with his weary parents. Plus other stuff about cops, smoking dope, stupid jobs, going to jail, and so on and so forth. 48 pages

You Idiot #1 - \$1.00

A zine that explores anti-drug video games, examines insane preachers that burn heavy metal records, gives an in-depth look at the pitiful saga of Nick Carter, and explains the phenomenon of Cat Astrology, plus more. Hard hitting research that will make you think. 28 pages

Cholesterol Junkie Companion- \$1.00

A compilation of my high school zine. Choose Your Own Criminal Adventure, Teacher Reviews, Preacher Reviews, harassing the humorless members of the He-Man Fan Club, plenty of other high school nonsense. 42 pages

Sorry, no trades



rubble



There was an old fire department just down the road from my parent's house that had ironically enough been badly damaged by fire years before and now stood slightly charred, up by the railroad tracks, a nice contrast to the nearby mini-mall.

Me and Justin broke in there one time and found a fire extinguisher, spraying its contents through the whole building, fleeing soon after once the cloud was too thick, coughing and laughing like maniacs. As always, the stupidity of it was fun, but before we blasted everything I was sort of intrigued by all the stuff strewn about, the things that at one point had comprised these people's working lives.

Two days after this reckless invasion I was walking home down the tracks and when I headed towards my street I saw that the building was gone. Torn down by the city, now nothing but scattered rubble. Huh. We had planned to go back in that weekend to steal a few assorted things that had struck our fancy. And now it was gone. I thought it might mean something but decided against it and continued home.

A few months later, I walked over to my friend Rick's house. He lived in a really rich neighborhood, huge mansions shrouded in trees, accessible only by long driveways barely visible from the road. He had recently discovered an abandoned house about a half a mile from his place, not quite mansion level, but still nice.

"I couldn't believe it" he explained as we headed over to check it out. "I mean, check it out, I'm super fucking stoned, right? And I'm biking around trying to find cows, and—"

"Cows?"

"Yeah, cows" he repeated, annoyed at the interruption. I stared at him quizzically. He rolled his eyes "Cuz mushrooms grow on cow shit, dumb fuck! Anyway, so I'm looking for cows and I come across this house, just in the middle of nowhere. It seemed like a sign or something, I dunno. So I'm trying to break in, and it's not even locked, when I get in, I find out that no one even fuckin' lives there! It's perfect, there's only one neighbor, you know it'll be great for drinking and smoking pot and shit."

We cut through some woods and soon enough were there. The house was actually pretty small, especially for that general neighborhood: two levels, narrow, and a small basement that was too far into disarray to venture inside.

The one neighbor lived close enough to easily see the place, I noticed as we pushed our way through the brush. My worry was that they knew the house was supposed to be abandoned and if they saw anyone lurking around, the cops would be summoned.

"Don't worry about it" Rick assured me as we navigated our way through some crap in the yard to get to the front entrance. "As long as we stay out of the windows, they can't see us, and we'll be fine"

Opening the door and carefully stepping around the mound of broken glass at the bottom of the steps, we made our way upstairs. It definitely appeared to be uninhabited, but whoever had lived there before had left behind a few things: a

soiled looking couch, some children's toys, a scattered magazine here and there, dirty dishes piled in the sink sporting some hideous looking fungus. But it wasn't that bad—any filth and grime was well below the level we considered unacceptable, if such a level even existed. It looked like a great drinking hangout for all us local kids.

"Man, I'm totally gonna fucking live here" Rick said with a grin, sitting down on the couch. He pulled out a bag of pot and started loading his pipe. "Do you know how fucking annoying it is to try to get stoned at my house, around my parents? 'Ricky, are you hiiiiigh?!?' or 'Son, I want you to tell me if you're on marijuana right now' Fuck! Here, it's totally cool."

We got stoned and I scoped out the place some more, speculating on who the past residents had been, why they had left, where they had gone. I was stoned, so my mind wandered and I wondered what a typical afternoon had been like in this living room, where we were now doing drugs, sitting on their old chairs and couches, skimming through their discarded magazines. It was a glimpse into a stranger's life, a life left behind. Had it been two parents and one kid? No kid? One parent and five kids? Happy family? Fake happy family? Openly broken and miserable family?

Over time my fascination with these former tenants grew. I searched the whole place for everything they had left behind, hoping to come across a clue as to who they really were. I found their name on the mailbox and considered trying to look them up, maybe send them an anonymous letter asking questions that were plaguing me. I had devised my own intricate theories about them, what they looked like and what their daily routines had been, and part of me wanted to hold on to that, but another part wanted to find out the truth.

But I never got to find out, as, of course, we ended up abusing the place pretty bad. Loud drinking, huge tornadoes of dope smoke constantly billowing out the windows, and the shrieking noise of Rick shooting firecrackers at their house probably caused the neighbors to alert the authorities. We never actually got busted, but one day when me and Jake suggested going there to kill a bottle, Rick exclaimed "Oh, shit yeah I went there yesterday, and its gone! They tore the fuckin' thing down!" Rubble, probably covered over with grass by the next summer.

Even though that family was still around someplace, and those fire fighters were working at a new fire station somewhere, to me it felt like they were dead and gone. The only link I had possessed into who they were existed in those buildings, in their living environment, through what they had left behind, and now it wasn't there anymore. This bothered me, but I didn't let it bother me too much because, after all, it had been my fault both buildings got torn down. Now if I took the time to track those past residents down it wouldn't seem exciting like it once would have, it would just be weird.

Anyway, the demolition of these two buildings got me thinking. For awhile after that, whenever I walked around and looked around, I realized that all the houses and apartments, stores and shops and strip malls, high rises, skyscrapers, stadiums, all of it would come down someday and be nothing but rubble, scattered broken pieces of the past. And I wondered who would be left behind to sift through it all, trying to piece it together and figure out what we were all about. What would they make of it all? What me and the people I knew had to leave behind, to document who we were, was so pitifully inadequate, it would leave an even vaguer picture than what the family had left for me to deal with. This really bothered me for some reason, the idea that once we were gone, we were really gone—no one would know we had ever even existed.

I mentioned this in passing one time to Rick and Jake and they both broke out laughing. "Dude, even if someone could figure out anything like that, they

wouldn't give a shit" That was true, I had to admit, in a crummy way. The average person who would hypothetically come across the wreckage of Rick's room, the bongos and firecrackers and heavy metal CD's, would probably reach a conclusion right then and there and have no desire to dig deeper. It was hard to accept, but until we created something worth leaving behind, a future as anonymous rubble probably awaited us. This was a feeling that could really gnaw at you, but it could be held off for a few years through the power of teenage apathy, coupled with cheap pot and booze. So, of course, that's exactly what we did.

golf

The first time I got kinda drunk, not tanked or anything but just buzzing a bit, was when I was 11, at a golf course.

We walked from hole to hole, fishing out beers from the garbage that still had a few swigs left in them and then downed the remains with a determined grimace. It was probably mostly golfer backwash, which is disgusting to think about, but we got enough beer in us to feel something.

"I think I'm drunk" I announced from atop the fifth hole, thoughtfully examining the PBR in my hand

"Yeah, I think so too" Jim agreed, shaking a can of Miller High Life, then tipping it back and letting the few drips of swill drop into his mouth.

We made our way around the course until we had drank from every garbage can. Now we were drunk on beer, or at least drunk on some sort of delusional placebo effect. Inspired, we started having bike races down the huge hills, which pissed off quite a few golfers. I almost wiped out while attempting a particularly daring stunt, nearly crashing into the swamp.

Biking home at high speeds, everything seemed alright, the world was cast in a new light and the scenery whipping past us, the rows of dreary suburban homes with their perfectly maintained lawns and expensive cars, seemed to finally make sense. I felt like raising my arms and shaking my fists up into the sky to show off my unexplained giddy sense of victory, but decided against it, as my bike riding was already a bit wobbly.

Years later, when we were able to obtain our own beer, the golf course proved to be one of the radder drinking spots around town. The third hole was high up on a hill, surrounded by bushes, and you could be somewhat loud while you drank since there were no houses around. Plus, the road below was perfectly visible so you had plenty of warning time to book it if cops showed up. And best of all, the bike trail was right there so you'd be long gone in a minute or two. A friend of mine lived right next to it and people would get bombed up there and do stupid 14 year old



drunk stuff, like take shits in the golf hole and whatnot. Ah, good times, good times.

My friend Alex also lived right next to the golf course. One time, when we were all 13 or so, he was out of town for a couple weeks so me and Jake and Jim decided to break in his house to raid his fridge and play video games. This was also back in the days when I seriously planned on and looked forward to being a professional thief as my career, so Alex's house seemed like a safe and easy practice. The garage was always unlocked, and I thought I knew where they kept the key for the house door. Wasn't there, though. So instead we rummaged through the garage for awhile, finally trying to force the door open.

"I don't think we're getting in" Jake said eventually.

"Yeah.... fuck" I scratched my head and tried to think of any other possible entrances. I was really hungry and I was sure that fridge had plenty of shit to go around.

"Fuck" Jim said suddenly, hand on his stomach. "I don't know if I got diarrhea or what, but I gotta take a shit really really bad"

"There's a biffy at the golf course, you can use that" I said, heading outside to see if it was possible to sneak in through a window. Jake followed me, Jim stood still for a second, clutching his stomach with a look of panic on his face.

Once outside I heard him yell "FUCK!!" and then slink out a minute later, face red.

"What was that?" Jake asked.

"I couldn't hold it any longer..."

"You shit your fuckin pants man?"

"No, I.... shit all over the floor"

"Aw, man..." I shook my head. I had lingering feelings of guilt about breaking into Alex's house in the first place, but now his family would return home from a most likely dreary vacation to find a pile of human shit in their garage, on top of a toolbox. That was way worse.

Jim looked back at our disgusted stares. "Fuck! Sorry! Like I said, I couldn't hold it in!" He paused "And no, I'm not gonna clean it up"

Our break-in thwarted, we then walked back over to the golf course, Jim slinking a few steps behind, where we'd rummage through the woods and find golf balls. We did that a lot, finding all the really bad shots that the golfers hadn't bothered trying to go after. After scoring a dozen or so we'd bring them up to the entrance and walk up to newly arrived golfers: "Hey, mister, would you like to buy some golf balls?" We'd usually make a few bucks before someone from the clubhouse would head outside and yell at us to leave, pissed we were stealing their business.

uncertainty[★]

I remember as the last few weeks of high school were winding down you were kind of FORCED to think about the future and the fuzzy road ahead as you realized they were letting you loose soon enough. This kind of freaked me out. Of course, leaving high school was going to be great, but it felt like you were truly responsible for yourself and where you were heading from



that point on, and that made me a bit uneasy. I wasn't sure where I was heading, and for the first time that actually seemed to matter, a little bit.

We talked about all this one day in psychology class. "You will all be graduating from here in a few weeks" the teacher said, then stopped pacing around the room and fixed his eyes on our corner. "Well, hopefully all of you" which brought out a few laughs as the kids hovering around that fine line between an F and a D minus blushed or grinned sheepishly.

"And when you graduate" he continued, walking down through the aisles slowly making uncomfortable eye contact with a few of us as he went "You will be entering a very exciting and important period of your life, where the choices you make will affect the direction you head and the way you end up. Many of you will be going off to college, where you'll pick a field to specialize in. Maybe some of you are planning on working first, to save up some money. Perhaps a few of you will do some traveling. Whatever you do now, it will affect where you are heading in life. With this in mind, I want to ask you, where do each of you think you'll be in ten years?"

After a moment of collective silence and desk-staring, one of the pretty, popular girls spoke up. "I think I'll be married, have a kid or two, living in a house. Happy, having fun." She smiled radiantly, confident, excited at the prospect of this golden future she envisioned.

The teacher nodded and continued pacing. I didn't get; I couldn't believe what I had just heard. What a cop out, a bad joke. What kind of fucking goal is that? What sort of scenario is that to aspire to? A duplication of millions and millions of other sheep, playing out a life that's been played before and is now played out, until you're gone and forgotten, nothing new worth remembering or taking note of. A waste; it seemed more like a failure than a goal, more of a sad ending than a happy one. Somewhere you'd end up but not try to get to. To me, at least.

But then I thought about her last line: "Happy, having fun", and realized it was true. She would probably lead a happy existence and end up satisfied, proud of her life. A husband she loved, a couple of cute kids, a nice suburban house with a garden in back and neighbors they'd go out to fancy restaurants to eat with and mammoth SUV's and soccer practices and lots of smiles that would probably be entirely genuine.

So who the fuck was I to come down on that? Was I just jealous that I couldn't relate to it, that I would never be able to get to a point like that even if it was what I was aiming for? Fuck, I thought, I kind of wish I could buy into it all and be satisfied with some stupid job as yet another cog, placated by some doopy loony religion, buying into the lies, surrounding myself with crap I don't need stacking it so high I can't see around it, can't see without it. But I couldn't. What's better, a fake plastic happiness or an honest sadness? The bad lonely parts airbrushed out of the picture or prominently displayed as they really are?

OK, a little overboard and melodramatic, but cut me some slack, alright? I was about to leave high school and I was overanalyzing things and getting worked up because, even though I would never admit it, the fact that I had no idea what I was doing with my life, where I was heading and what I wanted, kind of scared me.

The teacher went around the room, asking the class one-by-one what they envisioned their future to contain. Every answer seemed alien and strange, either something I knew I didn't want, or something I felt I couldn't get. Where did I fit into this? Where would I end up? How was I supposed to know where to go when I didn't even know what I wanted?

My head swamped with these troubling thoughts, I was startled when the teacher came around to me and asked where I would be a decade from that

day. It was kind of a terrifying thing to ponder.

I had been asked this same question before during the high school years by guidance counselors and the like, and usually had responded typically with a sarcastic quip like "Winning the lottery" or "Doing coke and sleeping with lingerie models" but nothing like that popped into my head now. I opted for sincerity "I dunno. Somewhere" which was an even bigger cop-out of an answer than the one the girl had given, but it was all I had to go on.

garage

Doing drugs with my friends' parents could be cool and interesting, but more often that not it was just plain fucking weird, none more so than in the case of Eddy's dad Jerry.

Eddie's pops was an ex-navy biker guy with a huge nest of gray hair and a disheveled beard that gave off the appearance of a lazy, unkempt Santa. We used to sit in the garage of his place and get stoned, surrounded by Harleys and tools and stuff, wasting the day away in a thick cloud of dope smoke.

At first Jerry wouldn't join us, and in fact could usually be found inside the house, staring at the television alone in an unlit room. When I'd walk in to use the bathroom my eyes were red and my mind sluggish, and sometimes our eyes would lock as I went past and it sorta creeped me out cause he just looked at me, never saying "Hi" or "What're you kids up to?". Just a long, indifferent stare. Well, to be fair, I suppose I didn't say Hi either.

Sometimes, though, he'd come out into the garage to hang out whilst we greedily sucked out of a hookah. "I used to smoke weed in the 70's" he'd inform us "Weed that would knock all of you on your goddamn asses!" he'd add with a deep roar of a laugh. "I'll smoke pot with you boys when I retire—but not until then" he'd promise before leaving, as if we had been begging him or something.

He didn't end up waiting that long, though; the sight of us staring at the walls open-mouthed for hours on end must have been too enticing for him to pass up, because soon enough he had joined up.

That was right about the point where pot was shifting for me from an exciting drug I'd do daily to a drug that completely immobilized me and sucked out my last few strands of motivation. I'd barely be able to talk most times I was high, feeling awkward and introverted, so passing the pipe to Jerry seemed doubly weird. He was more than twice our age, getting stoned with his kids—which was fine; other parents I'd smoke pot with would hang out in the circle and talk freely, so you didn't think twice and it felt more or less like they were just another high schooler. But Jerry never said a word, he just sat back with his hands clasped, watching someone play a wrestling video game on TV. Then, every now and then he'd erupt into uproarious laughter at the most minor of a joke, rocking back and forth with his head pointed up at the ceiling. Then, back to silence and staring. Later, he'd look over and say "Eddy, this is some good weed here. This is better than that last stuff we got...." Something about it didn't seem right, like he wasn't enjoying getting high at all but continued to do it for some other reason.

The garage soon grew into a full-fledged pot den or sorts, as word spread that you could get high there and the parents wouldn't just look the other way, they'd actually join in and pitch in a few bucks for a bag sometimes. Close to the full spectrum of high school kids could be found there on any given afternoon after school let out: hippies and preppies and jocks and fuckups and younger kids

who mostly just played video games but would partake in the pot every now and then, giggling at nothingness for hours. Wealthy thuggish-type kids would show up in loud cars, solemnly smoke a blunt and disappear as soon as they had arrived.

Soon all of this traffic got Jerry a little uneasy, probably rightfully so. He imposed a new rule that only kids he knew and was comfortable with would be allowed in the now semi-legendary garage. Two weeks later cops showed up and busted the place, surely tipped off by one of the blunt smokers, angry at getting banned. The cops found not-all-that-much weed, but a whole slew of glass pipes and other smoking paraphernalia. Jerry and Eddy had obtained a sizeable collection, almost comical cause really, how many pipes do you need? I could get plenty ripped off my twelve dollar plastic bong, so I didn't see the reasoning behind blowing entire paychecks on goofy glass pieces that did the exact same thing. But yet they had them, elaborate, intricate dragon-shaped pipes and fancy steamrollers and bubblers and what not, a new one purchased every week for months. Now, all in the hands of the police.

After the bust both Jerry's pot smoking and paranoia shot to new levels. A gigantic safe was bought to house all the pipes bought from that point on. Only on special occasions would the vault be opened to unearth the Hobbit Bong, or whatever the hell it was. They even went to the point of installing security cameras in the driveway. That was a depressing time: staring through smoke in silence at empty unmoving security camera footage, until a car would finally pull up. "Who's that?" "Joe?" "Yeah, it's Joe" And then Joe would walk in to smoke pot with us, and stare at the screen.

Jerry lost his job and had to start taking medication at some point during all of this. Things went downhill. He tried to hang himself in the yard behind their house one time. They found him with rope in his hand, staring at a tree. Later he stopped taking his medication and trashed the whole house, threatening his wife and kid with an axe.

Another weird thing you couldn't really make any sense out of, ending with a scratching of the head and a "Huh". But I heard it all second-hand. I couldn't really deal with the garage, or marathon pot smoking bouts, anymore, and had stopped going awhile back.

wheels

The car I drove was a dangerous, exhaust-wheezing train wreck of a vehicle that was as loud as ten Harleys and as fast and reliable as a shopping cart drunkenly shoved down a hill. Crossing traffic in it was a tense, nerve-wracking affair as it took about a minute to get the groaning car to hit 35 mph; you'd gun it and start creeping across the highway, a honking semi zooming towards you as the passengers howled for their lives from the backseat. But that was all I had, so that was all I drove.

The muffler and exhaust systems were the most obviously broken aspects of the car. You'd hear it blaring from miles away, and see a trail of smoke trailing behind it as it left. Getting my emissions test, the worker stuck the testing tube into my rotting exhaust pipe and returned seconds later with a dazed look on his face. "I can't believe you're still alive!" he remarked in wonderment, almost awe.

Huh, that's nothing, I thought. Exhaust fumes seemed minor, almost unnoticeable. The vehicular problems went well beyond that, to the point where just about every aspect to that car was either broken, or at least shitty and annoying in some

way. Nothing worked on a consistent basis, nothing could be counted on to do its job. The window wipers would break just as the first few drops of rain splashed down. The brakes would cut out until midway down a steep hill. Only one door worked, so all four or five passengers would have to pile in through my side. Then one day that door stopped working, too, leaving me standing in a snow storm staring in disbelief at my now un-enterable traveling tomb. Everything was fucked.

Well, the tape deck worked alright, but it didn't really matter because the tinny speakers were no match for the roar of a ruined muffler. "What's the fucking point?!" a passenger would snort. "Might as well just listen to the muffler"

But I liked it nonetheless. The only cassette tapes I owned were ones purchased during those exciting early teenage years when I was first getting into punk rock. Every time I'd save up four bucks I'd take a bus out to the record store to buy a used punk tape and discover a new band. Hours and hours had been spent listening to and studying those tapes; years later the collection had dwindled down to a handful strewn about in a dirty box in the backseat of my car. But most of the music still sounded good, and I knew the songs so well I could sing along flawlessly even with the annoying accompaniment of the loud car.

Ah, but it didn't last; even the tape player got fucked up. My copy of the Descendents "Milo Goes to College" became stuck. After pounding on the eject button, I resorted to trying to force it out with a screwdriver, but the tape wouldn't budge. I hit the flip sides button and suddenly the tape lurched to chipmunk speed, a 33 rpm played at 78. And the volume wouldn't go down all the way, so you could never fully tune it out.

The tape remained stuck for weeks, slowly getting to me, as I faintly heard Alvin Chipmunk shrieking "I'm a boy and not a toy! I will kill and I will destroy! Paaaarents!!" whenever I drove. Fuck.....

OK, sure, It got you from point A to B, fair enough-- but the unexpected C through Z would usually pop up in the middle, and you'd forget about B, now wishing in terror that you had never left A.

When given lemons, you make lemonades. When you have a lemon of a car, you attempt to get rear-ended so you can collect a load of lovely insurance money. Amazingly enough, that's what actually happened, a great end to that dismal car.

It was the beginning of another Minneapolis winter, snow pounding the ground and steadily piling up, cars sliding around everywhere. People's faces were locked in a grim look of "Fuck, not another five months of this" as they battled the conditions.

I missed the turn to my house and was going up a couple blocks to turn around when suddenly some guy in a pickup skidded in the snow and slammed into me, sending 'ole no-muffler spinning into the middle of the intersection. My reaction shifted quickly in the confused seconds that followed, from "Oh Shit!" to "Am I hurt?" to "No? Fuck yeah! I'm gonna get some fucking money for this shit!" I should have probably faked some sort of an injury, a nasty case of debilitating whiplash or something, but I was too caught up in the moment to think of it. I ended up haggling with the insurance guy to get \$900 dollars, more than twice what I had initially paid.

I also got to keep the car, but its days were truly numbered at that point, it had wheezed through its last mile, scared its last unsuspecting passerby, activated it's last car alarm. Forced into early retirement. Yet when I tried to start it months later, smoke billowed out of the engine, engulfing the block, sending people jogging past into coughing spasms. So actually, even in death, the car succeeded in being annoying.

odyssey

There was a special project for those up to the challenge in fourth grade called Odyssey of the Mind. It was nationwide, I believe, or at least state-wide; sort of a big deal if you were into those extra-curriculum type of things.

We weren't, but Mr. Preblan handed us an info sheet for it anyway during one of the numerous break periods he had in his classes. "You guys might like this"

Skeptical, we glanced over the instructions. Basically, you picked one of five possible competitions, most of them involving the creative construction of a vaguely specified item. After a month or two of work, the finals would be held downtown and all the different groups from all the different schools would compete against one another, the winner in each category receiving a cool five hundred bucks. Whoa. Suddenly it seemed worthwhile. Nowadays, 500 bucks seems like a lot of dough to me, but back then it was a truly mind-boggling sum of money, with which anything could be attained, so we all eagerly signed up.

Typically, we picked the category that was by far the most difficult, almost assuredly impossible to pull off—"Build a battery powered car". The assembled car would have to be large enough to be driven by a human driver. Once completed, the cars would compete on a track at the finals, the vehicle obtaining the fastest lap time getting declared the winner. We were all nine or ten years old so it was ludicrous to imagine us actually designing and then building a car, but we didn't factor that part of the process into our decision—we simply thought "Wow, when we get done, not only will we have five hundred bucks... but also a totally rad car!"

So we signed our names, proudly handed the form back to Preblan and then all met at Jim's house after school later in the week to get cracking.

We were supposed to have two adults help us. Jim's mom and Brian's mom volunteered for duty, perhaps naively thinking that they would guide our group to excellence, to national finals and mild fame, and eventually the creation of a made-for-tv movie centering around them and their inspirational leadership. Ah, but it should have been apparent to them from the start that the five of us were not going to be building any cars, regardless of how much adult support we received. Well, I guess it was apparent, because both of them gave up on us by the fifth meeting, leaving us to fend for ourselves. But the first couple of meetings were legit.

"OK, guys..... battery powered car" Jim's mom began, holding a notebook. "Let's brainstorm"

Blank stares shot across the table.

"I think it should be blue" Brian offered finally.

"No way, it's gonna be black" Nick insisted.

"Green, with red flames!" Jim's mom jotted down these notes at first, but stopped within time, a look of realization spreading across her face.



There was a kid named Paul who joined the group a week or two into it, when things were already falling apart. None of us knew him—he was a friend of Brian's and we were all wary of him. "He's cool" Brian assured us.

One of the bizarre ideas we had floated around was to do a take off on Monopoly, using a huge game board as our track, and having our vehicle be a shoe, or thimble. Paul launched into a semi-coherent approval of this idea. "Yeah! We can make it like a video game! You run around the board getting chased by Koopa-Troopas, and then at one of the spaces is this Gramma with a magic cane and if she touches you it restores your Life. And then another spot will have a guy, and if you beat him, you get a medallion that makes you invisible" Brian, although looking a little bewildered, nodded approvingly from Paul's side. The rest of us smirked. Building a car was one thing—a ridiculous goal that we still thought we could vaguely pull off, but unlocking the secret of invisibility in the next month was a task even we had to admit was a bit far fetched.

That was typically the extent of our sessions, though. The designers of the contest surely envisioned breathtaking displays of creativity springing forth from the vast intellects of the day's youth, the scientists and leaders of the future, who would shape the world to come. But our 'odyssey' was a dim voyage that didn't stray too far from the pathetic ruts our minds were in.

By the fourth meeting Jim's mom realized things were not moving in the direction of car-building, but more in the direction of a group of kids eating all the food in her house, spilling grape juice on the carpet and what-not. "If you guys want to still do this, we're going to have to start taking this seriously"

She looked over all of us gravely, finally focusing her eyes on me.

"What are you writing there? Let's see what Nate's come up with" she said, spinning the piece of paper towards her. I had been doodling, writing out the lyrics to a commercial for Taco Bell that had been stuck in my head all day.

"59, 79, 99.... Oh yeah! Three awesome taco deals for under a buck, only at Taco Bell!" the paper read.

She stared down at the sheet while my companions chuckled. "Ok, so you're not going to take this seriously. I give up." And then walked off.

"My mom was really mad about that" Jim mentioned later. "You totally weren't even listening to her" I suppose that would be a bummer, to find out that people decided it would be more fun to transcribe taco commercials than listen to you deliver a rousing speech.

But Jim's mom decided to give us one more chance. We all met after school and 'brainstormed' yet again, although most of the 'storms' thus far had been pathetic drizzles lasting a mere few minutes before the sun of blissful ignorance was out blasting again.

I looked over the brief rules/instructions again and finally proposed an idea. "We'll make a board with a hole in the middle." I began "I'll stand in the hole, dressed up as a battery. Then I'll run around the track with my feet—you know, Flintstones-style. Get it? A battery-powered car!"

Everyone looked excited at this potential scam, other than Jim's mom, who tossed her notebook on the table and rolled her eyes. It, as far as I could tell, would have been a legitimate solution to the contest, as described in the hazy rules.

We actually made it to a store to look at lumber but other than that the 'odyssey' degenerated to a sad new low as the deadline loomed ever nearer. It was hopeless. Eventually arguments escalated, a fight broke out in our group and three of the members were locked out of Jim's house while the rest of us sat around playing computer games. The ejected trio yelled insults at us from the

driveway. Nick was trying to play Taps on his trumpet when Jim's mom pulled in the driveway. "They kicked us out!!" they yelled excitedly. She made us all go home, and the odyssey was over.

gorilla

One of my old roommates went to a religious college, where he formed a band called Jesus Fucking Christ, who practiced every Sunday morning at the school-funded student center. While the majority of the student body were huddled in church praying, JFC (as they slyly shortened themselves to when setting up shows with school officials) blared out grindcore across campus. I dunno exactly what their songs were about, but I'd wager that the lyrical content was safely on the "unholy" side of things as opposed to general holy feeling that shined off the rest of the campus and students.

Dave, the drummer, called me a couple of times to talk about college life, and it painted a conflicting picture for me. On one hand, it was a religious college, which seemed like a pretty fucking mammoth strike against it. Paying exorbitant tuition costs was probably a dumb idea regardless of the college, but especially idiotic if, like Dave, you weren't even religious and the dough you were doling out went to things like mandatory classes about the bible and church repair and services for creepy Christian kids plotting their surely sinister break into the real world. The worst of it all would be the student body. Don't get me wrong, I have plenty of Christian friends and I don't look down on anybody based solely on their belief system. But it seemed to me that the type of person who would willingly go to a religious college located in the middle of nowhere, most likely to partake in its famed business program, was, well, probably not my kind of person.

But on the other hand, they did have things like JFC and a few people Dave had befriended who pulled all sorts of over-the-top pranks that sounded funny as hell. I mean, overall Dave seemed to be having a good time so it couldn't be that bad. So maybe I was wrong, and was just being too judgmental.

Curious to see the two sides of this college for myself, I drove down for a visit in the late autumn.

I met Dave and one of his friends at a café. After bullshitting for a bit, we headed back to my car to drive over to the dorms. But, of course, it wouldn't start; it wheezed and spat smoke and eventually made a few promising revving noises that briefly lifted my heart, but in the end it would not budge. Stuck. I stared out the grimy window for a minute, trying to soak in the situation. It would be a real pain in the ass to get back to Minneapolis now, or to try to get the car fixed. But, the plan for the evening had been to drink and have a fun time, so I decided to do just that and deal with the problem in the morning.

We headed over to Dave's dorm, where I met his roommate Bill and five or six of his other friends. Good guys. So far, after briefly walking around the bustling campus and now meeting these guys, the student populace was fairly close to what I had envisioned: there seemed to be a small pocket of pretty right-on people fighting against wave of creepy stupidity.

After awhile, someone asked Bill where his twin brother, Jeremy, was at.

"Oh, yeah, I forgot, he got paralyzed today. At wrestling practice, landed wrong, or got hit weird or something"

"Holy shit! Is he Ok now?"

"Oh yeah, yeah. I think"

More people showed up. There wasn't much beer yet, but lots of pot was being smoked, which seemed somewhat risky to me cuz it was a no-smoke, no-drink dorm and not even the slightest precaution was being taken in the way of hiding the smell. One of the newly arrived people confirmed this. "Jeez, you guys, I could smell the pot from your room in the elevator--- when I was on the first floor!"

The guys shrugged and laughed a little. They seemed to know what they were doing, but I was still surprised at the amount they had gotten away with. As we sat around, story after story was related in the ongoing saga of Them vs. The Rest of Campus.

Hearing about all these pranks and robberies and crimes they had committed at the school made me again marvel at both how big of an aberration they were compared to the rest of the student body, and how they could possibly still be enrolled and not expelled.

One time, they found an unlocked dorm room during spring break, stole everything, and then pissed over the kid's bed and left taunting shaving cream graffiti dripping down the walls. Kind of hard to justify but pretty damn funny, so I just laughed a bunch as they told it.

Another time they broke into the school radio station to drunkenly play reggae records and insult the audience. Or, breaking into the library to study. Drinking forties to help the studying. Getting too drunk to study, partying between the book shelves. Leaving the library in high spirits, accidentally setting off the alarm, running through campus avoiding the cops.

It went on like that, a full hour worth of stories of increasingly bold and hilarious hijinks. I'm guessing the school officials knew damn well who the culprits were, but never caught anyone red-handed and thus couldn't do shit about it.

In the middle of a story about some sort of check fraud scam they had run against the school, getting hundreds of dollars ("Man, those were the days. Jesse got so much money from that, we had a huge bowl full of pot on the table for anyone to grab when they needed some. Fucking good pot, too. We started to get bored, almost, cause there was so much pot, that we just started eating it. That got me really fucked up, that one time it didn't hit me until I was at the cafeteria and I just fucking fell over in front of a bunch of people. They were all looking at me weird. Oh, and do you remember that time we made those crazy brownies? And Jeremy drank like three forties so he was so drunk he ate half the fucking pan? And then he thought he was in hell, and then thought he killed Bill, and started



freaking out? Man, that was great"), Jeremy walked in, looking exhausted.

Luckily, his paralysis had been brief, but it still had obviously taken a toll on him. He laid down on the floor "I feel like shit"

"Oh shit, it's almost ten" someone noticed "Hey Jeremy, we're gonna go to the liquor store--- you want anything, or are you still fucked-up?"

"Shit... yeah, I still feel pretty out of it" he said, pausing "Yeah, I should take it easy I guess. Just get me a couple forties"

"Cool, alright, so that makes 18 forties. Lets go"

We headed over to the liquor store. My arrival in town, it turned out, had coincided with the grand opening of a hundred million dollar student center that had been funded partially by a handful of obscenely wealthy former alumni, but also by slashing into the budgets of various departments. We walked by it on our way, and it was quite the ridiculous sight. There was a good flow of traffic for its opening night, but man did it look silly, an unnecessary over-the-top eyesore. Stepping in briefly, we were treated to a gigantic spiral staircase, tons of empty, wasted space, nothing looking that special besides the elaborate architecture. Really, it seemed to house all of the same services and shops and so forth that the old student center where JFC practiced did, only presented in an extravagant 100 million dollar shell. So, especially because educational programs and services had to be deeply cut to make way for it, what was the fucking point?

"I dunno" Bill said "It's stupid, I guess some of the rich fucks here wanted it really bad. It pisses me off, they really fucked with our theater department's budget. We had to cut out a couple of plays". He scoffed and motioned over at it "And really, who's going to get anything out of this that they couldn't get at the old place?"

Back at the dorms, as the forties were steadily emptied, the conversation shifted again and again back to this new student center. It didn't seem like simply a stupid idea, it seemed wrong and hard to justify. It was something worth protesting, even though it had already been built so admittedly it was sort of a moot point. But nonetheless.

"Man, lets go smash our forties down there" someone suggested in between long pulls off the Mickeys. Hmmm. Part of me thought the proposal was a dumb idea that was meaningless when there were probably a lot of other great, creative ways we could register our disapproval with the center. Ways that would perhaps be met with contemplation by the rest of the student body, unlike the disapproving frown and sigh that would most likely come from the sight of broken malt liquor bottles.

But another part of me was kind of fucking drunk, so it seemed like a brilliant, crafty plan that would let the school officials know that people wouldn't stand for this kind of shit. The rest of the room seemed to be adhering to this fuzzy logic, and it was decided. Smashing forties it was.

"Check it out, we'll bring these" Jeremy said as we all stood up unsteadily and drained the rest of our bottles. He started passing out gorilla masks for us to wear. We tried them on before leaving and they admittedly looked pretty damn good, complimenting our leather jackets nicely.

Buzzed from the booze, we hit the streets, swamped with college kids on a Friday night. We headed straight for the center, figuring that if cops saw us walking around with forties we'd get busted before we could even break them. Once we got about fifty yards away, we could see how crowded the place was, even outside, most of it for the opening night dance that was being thrown. "Man, we'll never get away with this" I thought as we approached, making our way through the giddy crowd.

"Alright, put 'em on" Jesse said as we neared the entrance. Donning the gorilla masks, we pushed our way closer, forties in hand.

I think we had been planning on saying "Fuck the student center!" or "Fuck this waste of money, fuckers!" or something, but I don't think we did, in which case the act must have appeared to be kind of meaningless and baffling. (Ok, fine, maybe it WAS meaningless and baffling, whatever). Jesse said "Alright, now" and then we all let 'em smash, a lot of us carrying two of them, so it was an undeniably really cool sounding chorus of crashing glass. Then we calmly entered the student center as one girl chirped "NOT cool, guys" behind us and a whole bunch of other people laughed, probably at the gorilla masks more than anything.

We went straight through the building as kids leaving the dance gawked and pointed at our masks, and then exited out the back. "Alright, the cops are gonna be looking for kids in masks, so take them off" said Jesse "And take off your jackets, too"

Strolling past a few cop cars, we headed back up to the dorm to drink the saved, unsmashed forties and laugh about our hollow, but funny, victory. Later we went snuck back into the student center and got stoned, leaving after one of our companions couldn't find a bathroom and pissed all over a grand piano in some sort of lounge area.

Granted, had we been sober we could have put together some sort of cohesive protest to actually get people thinking about the issues at play. What we did was a funny drunk story, nothing more, but yet it made me feel really good. Not the act itself, but the fact that those guys were doing their own thing in a school like that, expressing alternate viewpoints in what otherwise seemed to be a sea of complacency. It made me realize that even the most seemingly stifling environment can be made an alright place, if there's a good opposition going on. It put me in such a good mood I completely forgot about my broken car until the next morning, and even then it didn't seem all that bad.





prank

One of the things that may seem stupid and immature in retrospect but was pure knee-slapping hilarity at the time was the fine art of the prank call. For many years I knew the home shopping club network's number by heart, along with a whole slew of other 1-800 numbers we learned while watching 3 AM infomercials jacked up like buggy-eyed lunatics on mountain dew.

Some of the unlucky operators would laugh it off and "get it" (if there really was anything to "get"), some people burst into unreasonable rage, but a lot of times they didn't catch on at all and took our queries to be legitimate. Perhaps they had been trained to deal with stupid shit in such a manner, but a lot of times I think it was truly an example of the phenomenon of human-as-robot:

"Does the keyboard have a button for the number one on it?"

"Yes, sir"

".... How about 2?"

"Yes, sir"

"Hmm, and a 7? I use that one a lot"

"Yes, sir" (As the rest of us cackled like goons in the background)

"OK, and FCC regulations mandate that all new computers must have the Omni-Beta dish chip to repel gamma rays.... This one has the chip, right?"

".....Yes, sir"

Yeah, we were stupid assholes, I fully admit it. But it was funny at the time, you know? And fuck it, they were getting paid either way.

But random numbers out of the phone book could be fun too, and I could understand someone not digging the prank in a situation like that. But, you know, oh well. We called a man named Mr. Nut and went into a long spiel about how our peanut company wanted to fly him out to California, dress him up as a peanut, and make him our spokesman. He seemed genuinely excited and bought the whole thing, even though our voices should have betrayed the fact that we were 11 years old, not some advertising exec. "See you at the airport!" we said cheerily. Excited at the "success" of the call, we tried it on some other people. A Mr. Trojan got a call from us, supposedly the condom company, asking him to be our spokesman. At first he seemed a little confused, but interested, until we explained the costume he would have to wear and the various props he would be sticking his head in for the commercial. Then he became enraged and vowed to trace the call. Ha!

"Trace the call" It was a laughable threat that was repeated often, by scores of night shift operators and groggy suburbanites roused from their slumbers at 2 in the morning on a weekday. "Fucking try to trace us!" we'd confidently challenge in our not-quite-intimidating voices. This was back in the day before caller ID or any of that shit, so we definitely held the upper hand. Of course, sometimes the threatened tracing did go through, and I had to sheepishly reply to my parent's "Were you calling a place called Dick's bar last night?" Sorry, mom. Sorry, Dick.

We got on the radio a few times, too, posing as different callers with absurd opinions. Pretty ludicrous for a little kid to try to sound like an enraged hunter, but somehow I pulled it off, arguing that not only was it un-American for

submachine guns to be made illegal, but for ANY gun to be banned was wrong and we should thusly legalize bazookas for our hunters to use. "Either you're stupid, or you're crazy!" the flabbergasted host gasped. "A psycho can do a lot more damage with a bazooka than he can a whiffle bat!" Touché.

We'd prank each other, too, to keep us on our toes, or something. Someone would come home to find a brochure about the pains of bedwetting in their mailbox, and then, walking up the driveway shaking their head, see a grinning marine recruiter sitting on the porch.

A "prank sheet" was actually created that listed all of the good numbers we found so we wouldn't forget them, along with notes: "cranky guy who swears a lot" "goofy magician guy" and so forth. One night, looking it over for potential victims, we noticed a number we didn't recognize that had no description next to it. "Who the fuck is that?" I wondered aloud. "Here, I'll find out" Jim said, giving it a call.

"Hey, who is this? What's your name?" he asked after the mystery guy finally picked up twelve rings in.

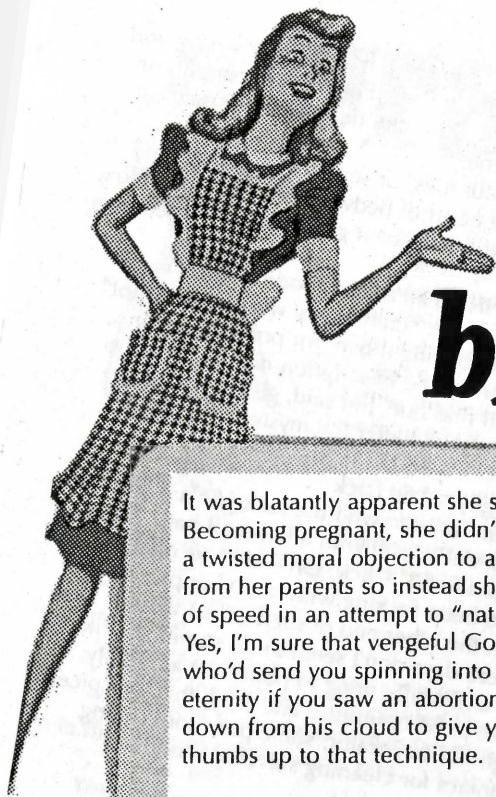
"What? Who the hell are you?" he groggily asked back

It escalated until I was watching Jim yell "Tell me who the fuck you are you little shit or I'm gonna find you and beat the fuck out of you with a baseball bat!! Yeah, sure go ahead, trace the call you stupid fuck!" Click. Oh wait. I recognized the number now--- that psychotic cop who had been fucking with us. Whoops.

Now I must admit that were I to be on the other end of such calls I would probably miss the humor in it, but kids these days don't seem to do stupid shit like that anymore so it's kind of a moot point, and a silly thing to ponder at all, really.

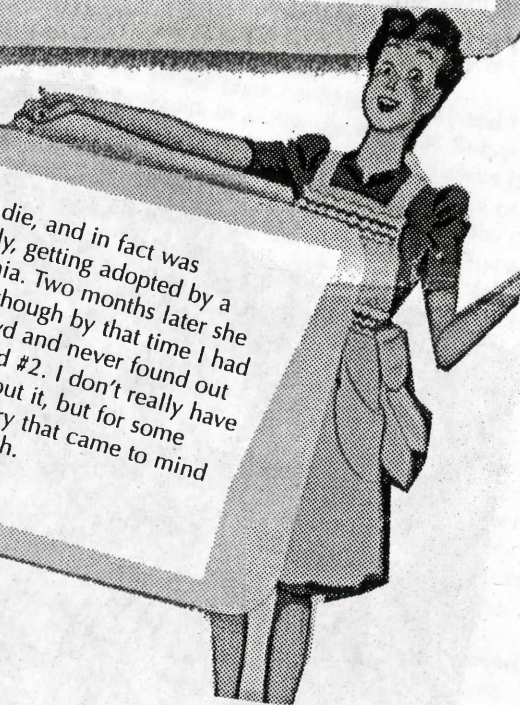
So I'll leave it at that. In the end, I like to be optimistic and think that we spiced up the workday for some bleary-eyed night shift operator; some poor soul rotting away all night fielding orders from insomniacs for cleaning solvents was given something silly to grin about. Ah, yes.





birth

It was blatantly apparent she shouldn't be a parent. Becoming pregnant, she didn't want the kid but had a twisted moral objection to abortion handed down from her parents so instead she did massive amounts of speed in an attempt to "naturally" kill the baby. Yes, I'm sure that vengeful God you're so afraid of, who'd send you spinning into a crater of flames for eternity if you saw an abortion doctor would lean down from his cloud to give you a big ole holy thumbs up to that technique.



The kid didn't die, and in fact was basically fine, luckily, getting adopted by a couple from California. Two months later she was pregnant again, though by that time I had strayed from that crowd and never found out what happened to child #2. I don't really have anything else to say about it, but for some reason that's the first story that came to mind when I saw the word Birth.

blank

Sometimes when you're lying awake at night staring at the ceiling and you've resigned yourself to the fact that you're not going to be able to trick your body into sleeping anytime soon, you begin pondering the various unanswered questions that have plagued humanity throughout the ages. You know you're not going to reach any brilliant conclusions, in fact you'll probably end up even more confused, but you still try to find some kind of easy-to-understand metaphor to life, or at least your life, something that will simplify all of the problems and make it easier to deal with. That's what I've been doing tonight, sleepless with a jacked-up brain running in circles tripping over itself.

Where to start? I guess maybe we can look at it as if we are all given a blank page when we begin our life. Well, no I suppose its not that equal. Some are handed a shredded piece of paper that's on fire; others receive a glossy sheet with prominent lines to trace. Either way, we use what we get and we produce something on that page. Sometimes you can't think of anything to put down and it stays blank, nothing happens. Other times you might scrawl away just for the sake of doing something, resulting in an uneven mess of nonsense. It's easy to add things you later regret; it's hard to erase them. If you're smart, you'll read other people's pages, avoiding the crappy ones, taking something from the good, intelligent, entertaining to read ones.

But even with influences to draw from, it can be hard to not just put down something easy and predictable, to sort of write by default. Clean, straight lines you've seen before that you know look good and won't cause any uproar. It's tricky to think of what you really want to record, and even trickier to tell if its any good or not. I mean, I don't want to be staring at a blank page for year after year, reluctant to put down something I believe in because it might look bad later, until one day the pen runs out and I'm fucked. But I also want to take my time thinking about what I'm replacing that blank space with. (Hmmm, ok, yeah, this is beginning to sound like Chicken Soup for The Idiot's Soul or something)

Then at some point the page is taken from us, or we run out space and its no longer a work in progress. At this end point I think a lot of people, maybe most people, will have the feeling of "Hey, wait, shit I was just kidding, lemme try again. I wasn't done yet" But it's over, the paper is finished. And what are you left with? People will read over the good ones, the truly great ones will perhaps be memorized, copied, remembered forever. But the vast majority will be crumpled up and tossed away without a second thought. That's not to say what the pages contain isn't worth reading, or that it wasn't enjoyable to write. But I think that's my biggest fear, ending up forgotten at the bottom of that wastebasket.





benevolence

One evening, drunk and stoned, I sprawled in a chair and watched with a skeptical eye as late night infomercials shined back at me.

"Good people helping good people" the song sang in that gratingly annoying commercial jingle way, leaving you scowling and humming. Beneath the giddy music, images of american flags burst by on the screen, and grinning businessmen with their hands clasped together walked past rows of cars. How swell. What good people they must be.

As with most of the other infomercials I had watched earlier in the evening, this one really went after what they thought their viewing audience probably was: unemployed, pathetic, debt-ridden slobs laying half-comatose on a couch. Barely tuned into reality, the infomercial would try to snap them up with a promise of free credit and fast cars.

"Denny Heckers Automotive Credit Superstore" the business was called. They drilled into you over and over again that ANYONE would be approved for credit to buy a car-- no matter what your past credit rating was. They didn't get into anything too specific in regards to their methods; apparently you were supposed to simply take the song's recommendation that they were "good people helping good people".

I reached for the phone as I watched the two businessmen continue their walk past the rows of shiny new cars, practically licking their lips as they urged their 4AM viewership to "call right now!"

After a brief recording telling me that the company was full of good people whose primary goal was to help similar-minded good people, I was connected to an operator. I explained that I was a convicted felon, deeply in debt with 14 DWIs, I had just gotten out of jail and I wanted a car RIGHT NOW. I would get money and a license LATER.

The operator paused and gauged my request carefully as it evidently fell well outside of the training provided to him by Denny Hecker. Finally he said

that I was not eligible.

I hung up in disgust, sickened by the blatant lies. They had said ANYONE was able to get credit to buy a new car, yet they had just flatly denied me. Either I was not a good person worthy of help, or they themselves were not good people. I was sure it was the latter as I passed out.

The next day I came home from work. Cody looked up "Hey some guy called Denny Hecker just called for you" A-ha! Good people, indeed.

★ insurance

My first job was doing shitwork at an insurance office when I was 15. The company was owned by my friend's dad, so I got the inside-deal, the hookup if you will. No interview, or application, or anything like that; just show up and go. A sweet deal, but the flipside was, I'd have to think harder about stealing and slacking and all the other things that usually come naturally in a workplace environment. Basically, since I saw the boss's son at school everyday, I'd have to hear about it more if I got caught sleeping in the basement or sneaking out of the office with a computer tucked under my arm.

So I started, a little skeptical about this whole "work" thing I was stepping into, but three of my friends had gotten hired as well so at least any possible bullshit wouldn't be endured alone. But it wasn't all that bad. It was quickly discovered, that in fact we could slack; the job lent itself well to minimal work without eyebrows getting raised.

My schedule was two hours a day, 2:30 to 4:30, a set-up light enough for even the bitchiest of a slacker, but I became restless and managed to whittle it down to an hour and a half, showing up at 2:45 and sneaking out the back at 4:15. Even that was too much sometimes, and I'd be forced to page one of my friends at 3:15.

"Nate, there's a call for you" the secretary would announce moments later, and I'd pick up the line nearest to the boss so he could hear me.

"Hey, did you page me Nate?"

".....What? Your car broke down on the way to the hospital? Wow, I mean, I'm at work and there's a pretty important project we're working on right now... but hey, what are friends for?" Five minutes later, outside, ten minutes later fucked-up at someone's apartment, laughing about it. Still getting paid, too.

The actual work was initially ludicrously easy too, but we still managed to fuck it up.



Our assignment was to put stickers on envelopes. Nothing more. They let us listen to the radio, watch TV, whatever we desired as long as those stickers got on those envelopes. Again, a cool fucking job, hanging out talking to your friends while your now robotic hands plugged away, hardly noticing you were even working. But even that got boring, so we got creative with our duty. We'd write the address backwards on the envelope so the postal worker would have to hold it up to a mirror to deliver it. We'd write "Which Address Do you think It is?" and then have three choices, A, B, or C, with the answer written upside down on the other side. Or cryptograms, where each letter actually meant something else. We even gave him a clue, A=F.

The postal worker was not amused by the fun little games, and returned them the next day with a big "UNDELIVERABLE" stamp. We were thinking it would spice up his workday just as it had ours, but apparently not. The humor zipped well over our boss's head as well.

This, among other things, clued management in to our relative lack of worth as employees. A memo was drafted that divided the workload between the four high schoolers who worked there; in addition to the envelope stuffing, you were given specific duties and had to make sure you completed them each day. I'm pretty sure they knew I was the biggest fuck-up of the bunch, cuz my main job was to stock the refrigerator. The other kids were entrusted with maintaining crucial computer systems, filing important files, calling clients; me? I kept the pop cold. Fine by me—I got damn good at it, at one point spending my entire shift doing nothing but stocking the three fridges in the building; slowly walking in a circle between them one pop at a time, no one noticing.

Once summer hit and we were out of school, our shift expanded to four hours, which initially seemed utterly undoable and ludicrous, but at least it included an hour long lunch, paid. We wouldn't have abused this privilege, but it was hard not to—the job was situated in close proximity to the mighty ridgedale mall, which housed a crappy arcade. So, after wolfing down some taco bell we'd speed over to the arcade and play games for the rest of lunch. Many times the dilemma presented itself "We're supposed to be back at work in five minutes, but fuck—we've never gotten to the dragon before!" And the choice was always clear: the dragon would have to be slain before the envelopes could get stuffed. Once our supply of quarters was drained, we checked the time and realized lunch had stretched to three and a half hours. "Huh. Time to go home, I guess" I calculated it out later and figured that they had paid us about 600 bucks each that summer to eat and play video games.

The job ending up spoiling me a little bit. At my next place of employment, it felt shocking to have to be there for more than 45 minutes, let alone eight hours. "Lunch is only a half an hour long?" I'd ask in horror "And you don't pay me for it?"

"Why, Mr. Gangelhoff" they'd ask "Would we pay you to eat?" Well, shit, why not?



ride

We got on the bus at Hennepin behind a girl and a guy wearing a dress and found a seat a few rows back. The bus was loud, there was a pack of teenagers in the far back yelling and laughing, standing up and walking around.

Apparently there had already been some tension between the front and back of the bus before we arrived, and it was now escalating—insults yelled forwards, angry glances shot backwards. Us in the middle.

A half a block into the ride, one of the kids in back began yelling “Ice cream! Motherfucking ice cream! Let’s get off—stop the bus! Stop the fucking bus!” as we rolled by the ice cream place up to the next stop.

The kids got up and started heading towards the back exit. They began throwing pennies and other change at the people sitting in front as they shuffled off. A curly-haired kid with thick black glasses who appeared to be a meth-head based on his over-the-top twitching threw a few back.

“Stupid faggot!” they yelled as his pennies flew well clear.

“I’m faggot enough for two of you!” he yelled in response, twitching in his seat, eyes wide and angry.

New people were getting on now, eyeing the disturbance in back uneasily. “Please exit the bus” the driver asked calmly, and the kids got off but continued to shout insults at the people in front from the sidewalk.

Curly threw a couple more pennies out the slit in his window at them “Here’s your money back! Enjoy it cuz its ALL YOU HAVE!!” Suddenly he touched his cheek, startled, as if he had been shot.

“They’re spitting into the bus!” a woman next to him yelled in shock, as if that marked the point at which we were all doomed. “They’re SPITTING in the BUS!!!” she repeated, whirling around to look at the driver.

An extremely pissed looking guy in his forties with a faded baseball cap and a bag of groceries by his side stuck his middle finger out the window and mumbled obscenities. The spit continued to be spat.

Finally the bus pulled away from the stop as a dead-ringer for Charles Bukowski boarded, fumbling for change. Parting shots were exchanged as we rolled away and the pack of kids turned their attention to ice cream.

"Not bad for one block" I told Jenna. Bukowski wearily sat himself down next to a stereotypical nerdy looking kid and rested his face in his hands.

"That's a dollar twenty five" the driver called back at him. Bukowski rose, then stumbled forward, nearly losing his footing in the ungraceful process.

"Stand up like a man" angry baseball cap guy sneered, shoving him sorta hard. Bukowski swayed from the push, then regained control and put the extra quarter in the slot. It was sad to watch, as the giggly sorority girls up front shot each other the "Oh, pleeze" look while he wearily returned to his seat.

"Fuck those guys!" Curly snapped suddenly, the angry guy eyeing him angrily. The culprits had departed the bus and yet they were still cursing them, tension was still thick in the air.

This was what I liked best about the bus sometimes, the absurdity, the unlikely interactions, now observing it all as a passerby, sitting in the middle surrounded by the action. Usually I rode the bus in the early morning when it was stuffed with suited corpses, bleary-eyed, the routine lying ahead. But times like this, at night with shady characters fueled by booze and nothing to lose, you usually saw something different, some people with character. Citizens of the city stuck together for the ride, the middle of our different points A's and B's where our paths cross.

Bukowski suddenly broke into a spasm of rough-sounding coughs, snapping my attention back to the colorful crew of characters in front of me and Jenna. The nerdy kid shuddered at the fit of coughs and grabbed a nearby seat. "I think I'll sit *here*" he said loudly with a laughing voice, eyeing the sorority girls the whole time. They didn't look back.

After a few more coughs and a few more blocks, Bukowski trudged off into the night. The nerd tore into him immediately "That guy was gross! I couldn't sit next to him" he complained with a terrible lisp.

"What was so bad about him?" someone asked

"He was coughing like this" he did a poor, over-the-top imitation "And I was like, uh, no thanks" he laughed, still eyeing the unresponsive girls in the front.

"So? He coughed. What, you never coughed before?" It continued on like that. Angry guy let his eyes go back and forth between the two, his rage seemingly equally intent on each of them. His occasional mutterings on the situation were too quiet for me to pick up, but his glare said enough.

The bus rolled on through downtown and we started losing our fellow passengers. I wished I could see how the rest of the night turned out for many of

them. The sorority girls ran out and met a bunch of guys at a corner downtown and then walked towards some awful sports bar. The now dejected-looking nerd got off too, walking the opposite direction away from all the goofy lights and noise into the darkness.

When the lady who had been hysterical earlier came to her stop, she was hysterical once again, after being completely silent and invisible for all the time in



between. She turned around at the foot of the steps.

"My feet are under the wheels of this bus! I'm not going anywhere, and you're not going anywhere until you call the police!!" What? "Those kids were being disruptive and endangering the rest of us, and you didn't do a thing! They were throwing things at us! They were *spitting* in the bus!"

"I'm sorry they disturbed you, but they're off the bus now, and you're off the bus now so I think we can get over it. I'm sorry, but I have a bus to keep on schedule"

"You don't even *care*, do you? I'm not moving until you call the police!"

Angry man went to the front of the bus, rising to the occasion. "Ma'am, I know you're upset at what happened—we all are. But there's people on this bus who have places they need to be, people have homes they need to get back to. And this woman has a job to do, so let's be reasonable about this. No one got hurt. Let's let it go." I was impressed and somewhat surprised by this bit of oration, but the woman stood still and angry man returned to his seat to resume looking angry and muttering under his breath.

After another minute of the ridiculous standstill, the driver called, or pretended to call, the bus security line. "There'll be an officer here in about ten minutes you can talk to. But I need to go now so please move away from the bus" The woman finally stepped back, but still had a look that said "This isn't the end of this". What a crybaby. I felt like spitting on her and then waving as we pulled away, which would have been really funny, but decided to let it go.

The silent people on the bus, those who had been simply watching like us, got off the bus and headed to wherever they were headed. Angry man left and disappeared down the street with his groceries tucked under his arm. I wondered if he would still be mad when he got home, if he was always mad, or if he had just been reacting to the situation on the bus and would soon be smiling and laughing as he put on some music and made himself dinner.

Soon all that was left was me and Jenna, getting off in southeast, leaving the driver to finish her route alone.

dreams

Jason says he dreams about pills. "Man," he says kind of glumly "Most people dream about, you know, girls or whatever. I dream about pills. Robbing pharmacies and shit..."

Amy's dreams are long and strange. The next morning she'll tell me about them, and it's usually a ten minute reenactment, full of arms waving and whatnot. "And then, and then, you passed out in a ditch and I tried to wake you up, and then we were at this castle and there was a television that was playing, and then I turned into this orange blob only it wasn't really a blob, and then----"

At five or six years old I had a strikingly vivid dream that I can still remember to this day, which is odd because for me generally memories that are older than say 15 minutes immediately disappear into a fuzzy cloud, requiring a conscience effort to snatch them out and bring it into focus. In the dream I'm in the living room of the place we lived, with my mom and brother, crouched down beside a couch. Vampires, dozens of them, menacingly roamed through the house looking for us. Cheezy, count chacula type bloodsuckers they were, but yet still wickedly frightening. They would pick up plates on the table and look beneath them for us... dumb shit like that. But I could still tell that if they found us, something really bad was going to happen. I was scared. My mom whispered for us to just stay still; if we were quiet they

wouldn't find us and would leave. We'd be OK.

I responded by letting out the loudest scream I could, which of course alerted all of the vampires to our presence. They turned in unison, fangs ready, and in the dream it zoomed it on one who let out a "Blah!" which caused to wake up in a deep, rattling panic, before he could finish with the inevitable "I Vant to suck your blood!" I can still remember it, as clear as day, 17 years later, and I have no idea why. There's maybe five other dreams from my entire life that I can even remember at all. Generally, my dreams linger for the first few seconds I'm awake, but by the time I'm up and walking around it's gone. I wish they stuck with me, but its rare.

The most recent one I can recall was me and Amy at some hotel, out on a balcony with a bunch of people. Suddenly it was announced that there was a bomb in the building and it was going to blow up any second. People started calmly evacuating.

"Hey, I'm going to take a piss really quick" I said to Amy as we walked down the hall.

"Well, hurry up!! There's a bomb in the building!" she said as I headed towards the bathroom.

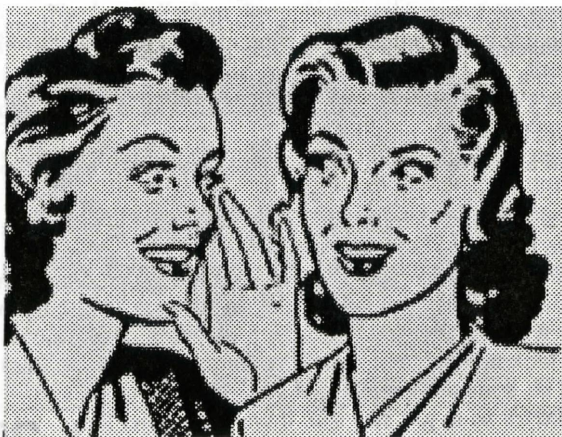
When I entered it suddenly turned into a huge bar, full of people I knew, some of whom I hadn't seen since high school. Well, gotta get a beer, I figured.

"Hey, everybody!" I announced to the bar "It's my birthday!" People started cheering, I drank a beer and mingled. "I got time for one more" I figured, and had another.

I finally walked out, and Amy was furious. "What took so long?!" We left, the bomb detonating as we strolled down the sidewalk away from it.

Dave says he doesn't have dreams "I only have nightmares. Every time I go to sleep, it's just horrible, like I kill someone and have to try to get away with it or something. I always wake up sweating, in a panic" Man, that's awful, I thought. "And if it's not bad, its just tedious. Like I'll have a whole dream where I'm trying to figure out how to get my drums to a show. Or a whole dream where I'm just waiting in line at a gas station. It sucks"

What do these mean? I have a "Dream Dictionary" I bought for a quarter at a dreary garage sale from years back, mostly out of sympathy towards the haggard old couple holding it, who looked on with desperate eyes, hoping you'd buy their microwave cookbooks or Christmas celebration cassette tapes. 'Oh, thank you, dear!' she warbled as I handed over the quarter with a smile.



That was many years ago, it's finally time to get some damn use out of it. What do these strange, elaborate scenarios that our minds create while asleep really mean? Well, according to Lady Steam Robinson, acclaimed author of "The Dreamer's Dictionary", they can be interpreted as follows.

Taking pills signifies new responsibilities that will be rewarding. Castles forecast a comfortable future with interesting travel.

Vampires relate to an ambition that subconsciously is felt to be immoral or unethical, which should be talked over with a competent friend or adviser. Bombs represent a threat to your life which can be averted by judicious action, and a birthday means that good luck is surely on its way. And drums, well, they signify great joy. Thanks for clearing that up, Lady Steam!

superpowers

There were a whole slew of superpowers I wanted to have when I was little. I think everyone held similar notions, or, at least, should have. For me, it wasn't so much distant dreaming: I was actually convinced that at some point a bolt of lightning would strike me and somehow grant the power of invisibility, or a truck carrying strange radioactive liquid would crash in front of me, gushing out telekinetic goo, or maybe I'd meet an eccentric old scientist up on some hill who'd have me test out his time machine.

Time passed, and it seemed like the lightning bolts were cracking down elsewhere and the goo-carrying trucks chose other highways to take. I remained a pitifully mortal, un-superpowered eight year old. But also as time passed my desire for these powers faded, or at least my belief in them did. Reality was rearing its hideous head bit by bit during those years, until finally at some point down the road it would stand in front of you, dwarfing you, roaring with laughter, making you realize that the magnet on your parents refrigerator that had seemed so cryptic for so long is painfully accurate: Life is, indeed, a bitch. You shrug, maybe laugh cynically, and continue on your way, but now always under the shadow of the reality-beast, no longer clinging to childish notions of superpowers.

And that kinda sucks. I mean, you shouldn't be 45 years old and still thinking "Maybe *tomorrow* I'll learn how to fly", but all the compromises people make as they get older just seem so depressing. The kid who wants to be an astronaut strays somewhere along the way and ends up satisfied with a gig on the assembly line cuz it insures his teeth. My outlook on life has always been expect and prepare for the absolute worst, that way even if the outcome sucks pretty bad, it'll still exceed your expectations. But now I'm rethinking that; a lot of times with that outlook you end up thinking "Yeah, this is pretty fucking rotten but at least I didn't get hit by a truck today", which is entirely valid of course, but it doesn't really force you to try too hard. Maybe its better to aim astronomically high. That way you're less likely to compromise, to accept what should be unacceptable.

tenants

I lived in a duplex near the university for awhile, a pretty boring neighborhood full of college students. It was dead and deserted walking around the streets at night—no places to hang out, no stores even, just rows and rows of houses, people inside doing their own thing. Sometimes there'd be a random party we could sneak into, mingle with the crowd, steal booze and creep away. And sometimes a group of frat boys could be found parading drunkenly down the sidewalks. "Hey! What's up man! Hi-five!" they'd say as I approached, delighted at finding a fellow human. I'd give them the requested five, wanting to yell back "College! Who!" or something, but usually I just gave them a bewildered smile and continued on my way. But

other than these occasional exciting social encounters, the neighborhood was empty, and boring, and I tried to avoid being there.

Six ex-sorority girls lived above us, and we never got along too well. I'd sit in my room, playing acoustic guitar at maybe 8:00 at night, when furious pounding on the floor would cause plaster to break off and land on my head. Jeez. A maddening loop of nauseating pop music was almost always sounding out from their apartment, and I never complained. But they couldn't even tolerate me quietly strumming a couple of chords. Shit... I mean, I'm not THAT bad at guitar.

They'd leave bubbly-handwriting notes on our door reminding us that "Hey you guys, you forgot to take the garbage out again" Well, so fucking what?! Sure, we forgot, but it's still in our apartment, not bothering them any. I could see the reasoning behind a note if we had set our bags of trash on fire and lobbed them into their window, but come on! I was tempted to leave them notes saying "Hey you guys, you didn't do your dishes last night" but didn't bother, as it would probably just have escalated tensions to sketchy levels.

I could understand their disgust somewhat, though. One time they came downstairs to ask for something after a particularly bad night at our place. The floor was littered with nitrous cartridges, empty bottles rolled around amidst weeks worth of wrappers and other assorted filth, a tipped over bong still slowly dripped rancid goopy water into the carpet. They cringed. It was a different world from their apartment; the one time I went up there it was immaculate, literally sparkling clean. They probably actually dusted and shit.

When they'd have parties, some of their idiot racist friends would spill downstairs into our place and loudly engage us in some really sad, grating conversations. "Yeah, my sister lives upstairs" one of them slurred. "Oh yeah? Which one?" I asked "Julie" I shrugged. "I guess I don't know her by name" "She's the, uh, the fat one with big tits"

Ahh. So that's how he viewed his sister. What a guy. He started babbling on about how he never came up to the city, and the "race problem" they were experiencing in his hometown. Chris finally told him to get the fuck out, thankfully. And they gave us shit about the people that came over to OUR place!

The next place I lived in had more tolerable people in it. The people directly above us were older ravers, by older I mean like late twenties, which isn't old, but as far as ravers go it kind of is, so they considered themselves to be elders of the scene or something. "Kids these days don't understand raves" they'd snort.

We'd always get invited but then subsequently get way too drunk when they'd throw one of their raver parties. Loaded on cheap vodka, I was ranting to a group of people about how we needed to find cocaine, waving my arms around, when I dropped my glass. It shattered on the floor, soaking it with Karkov. "Whoops"

"Nate!" one of the raver girls yelled "Ever heard of plastic?!"

"Yeah. Hey, great party" I managed, realizing that my presence was probably not all



that welcome anymore. The assemblage of stony late twenties ravers, dj's and players eyed me warily. "Ecstasy." I added "Fuck yeah", everyone turning around with a snort. And the night would continue on like that as I got drunker and drunker and the rave scene seemed funnier and funnier. They actually had a DJ spinning records in the basement, some guy who was so twacked out on some high level hallucinogens that he probably thought he was in a land of clouds, performing a concert for a bunch of flying ponies and dragons. Or something.

I finally tried to pass out at 6 in the morning, but the relentless thumping from DJ Acid Casualty wouldn't permit it. I stumbled downstairs and it was completely empty, just the one guy playing music to himself, trying to nod his head in beat.

I waved my hand in front of him. "Hey man I gotta go to sleep—you think you could call it a night?"

He looked up at me like I was the first human being he had ever seen. His eyes widened. "Hey man—heeeeey. Yeah...."

I nodded. "Well alright then" The music stopped, but the second I laid back in bed it roared to life yet again. Fuck it. I passed out, waking up hours later in the beginning stages of a brutal two day hangover. Stupid ravers.

One of the raver girls told us that if we ever needed speed or pot, ask the guys upstairs. "They totally deal, I can tell" she said, nodding her head. I was a little skeptical; it was possible her conclusion had been reached through some shady detective work, like maybe the guy had a nice car and she heard him sniffing while they passed in the hallway one time. But it was something to keep in mind. I didn't want to ask the dudes unless I knew for sure though.

Dave shrugged. "I'll do it" He walked upstairs at about 2 in the afternoon, drinking a beer. The guy came to the door.

"Hi. I, uh, heard from someone that you deal speed. Could I get some?" He was truly the master of subtlety.

The guy stared back coldly. "You got some wrong information" and slammed the door. Of course, he had knocked on the wrong door; the apartment of the quiet graduate students. Our unintentional quest to alienate and annoy all of our fellow tenants continued on smoothly.

Nick got sick of all the noise and lack of space that came with living in the closet, so he moved down to the basement, on a mattress in the middle of the floor. We didn't bother telling the other tenants in the building about this move, which caused a few people to get freaked out when heading downstairs to do laundry only to come face to face with a stranger smoking a cigarette, sitting calmly on a mattress.

One of the guys, the supposed "speed dealer" in fact, knocked on our door in a panic, asking if we knew who the dude using the basement as a squat was.

"Oh, that's just Nick" Dave said with a laugh "It's cool" The guy remained unconvinced it was cool. Dave used his considerable skill of persuasion and added jokingly "Don't worry, it's not like he's going to rape you or anything" Which caused speed-dealer's eyes to widen even more, rather than calm him down.

After the cops chased us back into our building one time and broke the security door in the process, the mood of the rest of the building towards us definitely went sort of sour. Ah, but it wasn't a big deal. Just when things were getting to the point where hallway encounters were sketchy, everyone else moved out. We stayed, and now all the new people moving in had no reason to hate us, yet.



assignment

Moving out of my apartment this week, sorting through the crap that's stacked up over the past couple years. Found a few pages of shaky gibberish that was evidently written while under the influence of something in the dank basement of my parents house at age 16 or so; folded up and stuck in a book, undiscovered until now. "Blackened like that hardware store, do you remember? The ancient foliage that is delivering a paycheck to the distraught lumberjack, who sits with discontent, swallowing syrup" the page reads. Yeesh. Into the garbage bag you go. In my defense, I didn't write teenage poetry or nothing, and I knew the shit was bad. I just liked writing nonsense while fucked up and then tucking it into my backpack as I passed out, reading it in the next morning in study hall to get a chuckle.

I also found some homework I had saved and never thrown out during any of my previous moves. I'm glad I kept it too, I never actually pulled it out and read it until now and I'm getting a kick out of it.

When we were supposed to write a report about a play, I made up one, an "underground classic" called "The Table" by the playwright Bert Yanger. "In Bert Yanger's play 'The Table', a young table maker named Arnold Tresmith turns to a life of crime in order to support himself, simply because making tables does not offer an adequate salary...." It would have made for a good play, too—Arnold mugs blind folk singers on the street to get money, one day murders someone, stumbling across a bunch of money in the process: "Arnold runs home and breaks down weeping in guilt. 'Perhaps what I did was wrong, perhaps I should not have done that horrible thing. But yet the sharp pains of hunger are driving me to this madness, and I cannot

control my deeds" The regret passes, however, and Arnold uses the cash to expand his business, becoming famous, a revolutionary table-maker adored by millions: "Here the reader must decide: is this a happy ending or a sad ending? Does Arnold deserve to become successful, or should he be punished like anyone else would? Yanger tries to create a bond between Arnold and the reader, making it a difficult decision. The reader is left confused, his basic opinions slightly changed, and that is exactly what Yanger has intended" Hell yeah, I thought, but my grade was: "See me after class"

My offerings for poetry class were particularly wretched: "Roses are red/Violets are blue/and there is a band/ That's named Motley Crue/They Have Guitars/They also have drums/And I'll bet you five bucks/they like eating tums" We're talking senior year of high school here, too, when we were supposed to be writing sappy, shitty musings on love and depression and all that.

My descent into utter, unreasonable apathy towards school is strikingly apparent in my 8th grade English journal. The first few entries actually try to do the assignment given, but a few months in they degenerate into four or five lines of smart-ass bullshit. One assignment was to evaluate to phrase "The Home Stretch" and explore its possible meanings and connotations. We evidently spent an entire class period discussing it when the paper was assigned and I evidently spent this class time sleeping or daydreaming, cuz this is what my stupid ass turned in to the poor teacher: "The home stretch doesn't mean anything to me. It's one of those stupid worthless phrases that makes you want to punch whoever said it. "Home stretch" It even sounds stupid. It's supposed to be when you're running from 3rd to home on a homerun.

Yeah, what a useful phrase. God, who wants some stupid phrase meaning you're almost done? I sure don't. What a joke. Why I oughtta find out whoever said that originally and smack around their descendants. Home stretch is so pointless. There is no point for it to exist. It's something those degenerate TV baseball announcers just love to yell in your ears: "He's on the home stretch!!!" or something. Then they go on and talk about the next batter's number of hits against a left handed pitcher when it's raining in Yugoslavia or whatever. It really makes you want to smash your TV, but you never do because then your parents would send you to some piece of junk juvenile detention center. Well, in conclusion, Home Stretch means NOTHING! It is a POINTLESS PHRASE. Thank you"

Needless to say, my grade was not too stellar. I'm sure at the time I snickered and thought "She just doesn't get it"

A number of the assignments I'm now thumbing through have similar "grades" scrawled on top of them: "You have to make a decision. Treat the assignment seriously or don't bother to turn things in" "We need to talk" "Something is obviously wrong. Talk to me after class" "Once again you have missed the point entirely" Or even more drastic-- one time for a psychology class worksheet we had to think of ways to advise various problems friends might bring up to us, like "The pressure of going to school and doing all the other things in my life is really getting to me. I can't go on like this, but I don't know where I can cut back". The advice I wrote down on the worksheet was "Maybe you should drop out of school and start drinking more so you'll think about it less" which caused the concerned teacher to grab me by the wrist as class let out, sitting me down and delivering a hilarious lecture.

One naïve but depressingly kind-of dead-on thing I wrote in 8th grade was about Career Day, where we were supposed to not go to school for a day and instead follow around an adult on their job, a 'role model' or whatever, to observe their work day and learn from the experience. Getting you ready for the bullshit that laid ahead, basically.... an attempt to sugarcoat the worker ant experience.

I didn't do it—I walked around town and returned to school the next day with the required form filled out and forged to say something stupid, like I had spent Career Day with my aunt, who was a lion tamer. Anyway, in the journal for English class that day, we were supposed to write about what we had learned and gained from the experience. Here's what I wrote:

"Career day was a blast! It's really fun to watch people work! I hope to do it again in the future!

Wowee! Work looks like so much FUN!! I can hardly wait until graduation when I can go and get a real, bonafide 9 to 5 job!! It will be such a delight to process papers for my boss! I will be the best at telling jokes at the watercooler! I will do all the impersonations from the most recent Saturday Night Live and my co-workers will guffaw in side-splitting laughter! I can't wait to put on my suit and tie and catch the bus downtown!! This will be SO FUN!

Get my schedule: I get up at six in the morning everyday. Take a quick shower, then drink the warm....nourishing... coffee. Eat a bagel and catch the bus to my work. Once I get there I must remember to always be kind to my coworkers, especially.... THE BOSS. Perhaps I will get a raise. Then I will do the same thing for three hours until.... LUNCH BREAK!!! Oh yeah! Can life get any better than this? Then I do the same thing for 5 more hours and head home. I'm so tired! After dinner I go to bed. I get up at six in the morning.... (here I drew a large arrow back up to 'Take a quick shower....' Just in case the teacher missed what I was getting at)

Now, doesn't that sound like FUN?!? I'm really glad career day prepared me for this great thing in life."

Like I said, naïve and oversimplified (I got a pretty bad grade on it, another 'you missed the point' kinda thing), but shit—even though I can say it's only brief temp jobs to make me a few quick bucks that I will someday get past, and even though my attitude towards it isn't positive like in the journal, that's still a somewhat startling description of a typical workday for me nowadays. That kinda sucks. I wish I had been right about a different journal, like the one that said I would start my own country by the age of 20, powering it via extension cords into the next nearest nation and so forth. Oh well. (I actually got a good grade on that one, too)

Finding those old papers was basically the only good thing that came out of moving. Moving sucks--- I was only relocating to across the fucking street and it still blew. Cleaning the old apartment was the absolute pits of the whole experience—after sorting through and dealing with all the crap that's accumulated throughout the lease, you're still stuck with piles of debris and garbage, coats of dust and solidified puke puddles, nasty unidentified globs of goo that stubbornly stick everywhere. Ugh...

It sounds like a joke, but at one point in the grueling cleaning process, I actually stared at a wall and said aloud: "Man, that pentagram is not coming off!" Indeed, someone, sometime, had jokingly and drunkenly spray-painted a surprisingly well-rendered Symbol of Satan on the wall. Months later it remained, stubbornly etched on the wall, unresponsive to my furious scrubbing.

The landlord was trying to show the apartment during all of this, which was hilarious. An upside-down American flag was still displayed next to the pentagram, on which we had spray-painted a slogan spoken by one of the villains in an old Captain America cartoon one of our roommates had scored for a buck at a garage sale: "Down with democracy! Down with Freedom!" Said very coolly, with 'freedom' drawn out. A funny slogan that seemed to look even better on an upside down flag. But yes--- that slogan and that flag remained on otherwise white walls as the slumlord tried helplessly to show the place. Comical to envision: rushing the prospective tenants past the pentagram towards a bedroom, wading through ankle-deep garbage. Once in the kitchen, an innocent wave of the hand disturbs the colonies of fruit flies from their slumber, up into the air. The terrified potential renters turn around and flee, tripping on mounds of trash as they leave.

dare

DARE class took place during fifth grade, a time when most of us knew little about drugs and would therefore believe what we were told about them and, more importantly, easily promise to never ever do them. This allowed the fuckers to smugly quote their statistics: "98% of all DARE graduates have made a pledge to never shoot smack into their eyeballs" or whatever. Ah, but had the class been taken two or three years later, the cop-teacher would have been laughed out of the room by a bunch of stoned students.

"Officer Friendly" visited our science



class once a month to hand out goofy booklets we needed to complete, tell and warn us about drugs, and answer any questions we might have. He drilled the mantra into our heads: "Drug Awareness Resistance Education". It was kind of like the national anthem; you didn't think too much about what it meant when you were that young, you were just told to memorize and then did as instructed. Of course a year or two later the acronym evolved into "Drugs Are Radically Excellent" or "Drugs Are Really Expensive".

There was a "Question Box" on the science room counter at all times for students to submit queries related to drugs. At the end of each DARE session Officer Friendly would open the box and read as many questions aloud as he had time for. We had a couple good ones that he never wound up drawing ("I saw Mr. Moynan [our science teacher] doing cocaine, and then he offered me some. What should I do?")

I learned nothing about drugs. Anything anyone gleamed from the class was harshly proven wrong a few years later in real-life experience. Now, with a full decade passed, I'm a little mad about the whole program; how laughingly ineffective and inaccurate it is and how much money it wastes. I honestly doubt it made a lasting impression on a single kid from my class. The students who didn't head down the path of smoking dope and huffing paint wouldn't have been heading that way anyway, and likewise those of us who did would have stumbled in that direction regardless.

Years later, in high school, I would sometimes see Officer Friendly around town, at gas stations, or in his car on the side of the road waiting for drunks to speed by. I was always tempted to go up to him and strike up a conversation, telling him I remembered him as my DARE teacher from way back when. "That class really had an influence on me." "Really? I'm glad to hear that" "Yeah, I was so sickened by the bullshit spoon-fed to us that the only option I saw was to do massive amounts of heroin. I began dealing out of necessity, but it became very lucrative, and now I live comfortably by getting schoolchildren hooked at an early age on my product, telling them DARE is nothing but lies" Never had the nerve to say it, though...

Anyway, after my DARE graduation years passed and when we started doing drugs the efforts by parental and authority figures to deter us from doing so suddenly became comical. There was nothing to worry about; the worst thing that usually happened if you got busted was a crappy class to take and a crappy dime bag to re-obtain.

But after that golden era, when you crossed the line into legal adulthood, the rules became a bit harder and there was more at stake. Now that bag of pot could cost you thousands of dollars in financial aid for college. Now that sheet of acid could land you behind bars.

When Joey got busted at a rest-stop on the way back from California with 80 pounds of pot in his trunk, it was kind of a shock cause he was looking at 20 years. If you really removed yourself from all the politics and bullshit and thought about it logically, it was ludicrous. Twenty years. Twenty years locked up in a cell for having a few pounds of a plant. He took it in stride, confident he could beat it, but he had to drop out of college to deal with it and you could tell the awful possibility was gnawing at him, that he would be put away until his forties.

Months after Joey's bust, I was drunk on red wine in North Carolina, taking a piss in a gas station bathroom, leaning my hand against the wall for balance. My eye caught some writing on the foam "Say no to drugs". Small type, unassuming, but still there, impossible to miss.

It seemed to go full circle back to my days as a wide-eyed DARE student.

Here it was, a urinal, another battleground in the infamous Drug War. I wondered, had any other DARE graduates used this same urinal? Had they laughed, like I did at first? Did they get angry, like I did a minute later after thinking about the insulting pointlessness of it? Surely many drug users had been here. Did any of them ever, while drenching the slogan in piss, get affected by it? Did any single person pause while walking away and think to themselves "Gee, maybe I should say no to drugs?"

These are the solutions presented? Ludicrous programs aimed at naïve ten-year olds, slogans in urinals, the threat of a lengthy imprisonment? I'd be willing to bet none of it has positively affected anyone. I flush the urinal and walk out, Joey ponders his future, determined by draconian laws, little kids obediently listen to bullshit and it goes on and on and on.

bastards

I definitely don't mean to glorify childhood and elementary school *too* much.

Although a huge array of hideous human traits that develop in adulthood aren't there when you're a little kid, you still have a healthy amount of truly mean, rotten people.

There wasn't really much of a "bully" problem at the school in the classic sense of the term (grunting ogre of a child who roughs up smaller kids, demanding lunch money or whatever), it was more vicious shit-talking, horrible, nasty surely untrue rumors that caught on like brush fire and completely decimated the usually already fragile reputation of the unlucky target. I luckily was never a victim of any of the grade-school smear campaigns, but I lived in fear of the possibility—if someone accused you of say, fucking a dog behind the playground equipment, how could you clear your name? How could you conclusively prove them wrong? All the other kids would love to spread such a sick rumor, and pretty soon the words "Hey, dog-rammer!" would burn in your ears constantly.

Well, OK, none of the accusations against kids were quite that graphic, but sometimes they came close. An older kid named Wally was a fairly common target. Once he started working at the local subway, the rumor formed that the mayonnaise from the store was not real, but was in fact "Wally's jizz!!!!" This one caught on really quick, and was viewed as undeniable truth by most people. "I'm gonna go get a sub" I'd mention, when suddenly all faces present would twist into horror "Dude, are you kidding?! Wally fuckin' jacks off in the mayonnaise jars!!" Wally eventually quit the job and the rumors faded, but I'm sure if he had stuck around they would have escalated to "The chocolate chips in subways cookies are actually little drops of Wally's SHIT" and "Turkey?! You think that's TURKEY?! Dude, didn't you know that Wally goes in the bathroom and slices off pieces of his ass? You're fucking sick if you eat that shit"

Other unfortunate kids would endure taunts touching on common adolescent themes: the clothes they wore, how well they did in class, the music they listened to, how much money their parents made... all sorts of stupid shit. It would get bad sometimes, an unlucky soul surrounded in the hallway or the playground as goons yelled idiotic shit and the rest of the crowd laughed in approval. The target would try to stand their ground the best



they could, sometimes even yell back a bit, but usually seemed to be on the verge of tears. And it made me feel like shit, cause oftentimes I'd watch from the edge of the crowd, wishing I could break in and say something to defend the target of the taunts. But I wasn't popular enough to do something that bold, and I didn't have the guts, cause I knew if I tried to point out the idiocy of whatever they were railing on about, their attention would turn to me. And that was something I definitely didn't want to deal with so I'd just watch blankly as they tore their prey apart. Such occasions made me realize the intimidating, unreasoning nature of a crowd. Now, it was some "fucking freak" getting pushed around by a smug basketball playing kid draped in an assortment of corporate logos, encircled by his approving buddies. The holder of the upper-hand was plain to see, and the freak weathered the insults silently, face red. Theoretically, though, if the tables could be turned and it was a pack of 'freaks' hounding on the basketball player for being a "fucking jock", you know it would be he who would feel like a worthless worm. That's why it seemed so stupid to me, only acting tough when you have a pack of obedient goons backing you up, winning arguments by drowning out the other side, and having more fists at your disposal. A lot of times people seemed to become shitty and unreasonable as soon as they slid into a crowd, seeming ok alone beforehand.

Like I said, the school I went to actually wasn't all that bad when it came to stuff like that, but it was one of the worst aspects, and it made me feel shitty and kinda bummed watching it happen.

hound

When the van broke down in Iowa I walked up the road to get transmission fluid, glumly realizing that the problem was probably worse than that. As I headed up the street looking for a gas station, I spotted a large wooden statue of a woman's head, long hair flowing, eyes closed with a strange contemplative look. Stopping to study it for a second, I thought that when I finally got to leave town, I would pass this statue again on my way out towards the highway. Perhaps the van would be fine and I could smile at the statue as we rolled past, in high spirits. Or, perhaps the van was totally fucked and the next time I walked by the statue I would be scowling and tired, looking for a place to sleep. I hoped for the former but I was leaning towards the latter.

The statue marked the entrance to a mall, which contained a 24 hour Hy-Vee. They had transmission fluid, but our fears were correct--- the problem was worse than that. The van would still not budge.

We pushed it up the road to the Goodyear and got a couple uneasy hours of sleep in the parking lot, waking up the next morning to an irate employee telling us he didn't know what the problem was. A different shop did: the transmission was fucked. The van was done.

We split paths. I threw on my unbearably heavy duffel bag, the one I had stared at numerous times and thought 'Boy, I hope I don't get stuck walking around with that thing', and headed up the road towards the Greyhound station, arriving ten minutes too late. The next ride to Minneapolis wasn't until midnight, 12 hours away, which sucked to hear because other than the brief cramped van sleep that morning, I already hadn't slept in a long time.

So, I tried to find a place to sleep. The sidewalk outside the greyhound station didn't work, nor did the deli inside the Hy-vee. Stinging from the

employee's harsh words of refusal, I wandered around and finally found a decent spot behind the K-mart. Laying down I watched as one by one all the flies swarming around the nearby dumpster turned their attention to me. What a downer. I knew I was filthy; I hadn't showered in over two weeks, but I still thought I was above dumpster-level. As I laid there, getting checked out by a pack of seemingly excited flies, I realized that sleep wasn't the best idea right now anyway. If I closed my eyes, they probably wouldn't open back up for many hours, and I couldn't afford to miss that bus, so I got back up and trekked onwards.

The movie theater was nearby, but the only flick I could see myself sitting through didn't start for an hour and a half. So, I went over to the arcade section of the theater and sat down in a racing game, Sega Grand Prix or something, thinking naively that I could lay back and catch a few beautiful moments of sleep. I mean, someone would have to wake me up once the place closed, so maybe slumber was a possibility. "SEGA RACING!!!!" a computerized voice boomed, ruining the notion. I stared at the screen blankly and finally stuck in two quarters. I got 29th place. Game over. "Winners Don't Use Drugs" The game told me.

Next door in K-mart I sat down inside another arcade area. "Now I'm pissed" a man growled, walking past me as I entered, trailed by his two kids. I sat down, watching him return a minute later with two crisp dollar bills and a determined glare. He went up to the crane machine, "Ultimate Bean Bag Shoppe", staring through the plexi-glass with unwavering eyes. "Which one?"

"The tiger!" one of the kids responded immediately, raising himself up a bit to peer at the pile of bean bag animals.

The crane moved to the center, fine tuned left and right a bit, and then dropped, coming up empty-handed after briefly grasping an alligator.

"Motherfucker! Shit!" he muttered "Alright, this is the last one Eric"

"I hope Daddy gets it this time" the daughter said

Again, though, the crane could not grab the elusive tiger. "Alright, that's it. No toy. It's broken" And then out, less spring in their step, into the parking lot.

After the movie, up the road, past the donut shop and the Burger King and the mechanic shop where our van was now housed, past the dollar store that was "closed on Sundays so our employees can worship the lord with their families", over the bridge and past miserable strip malls, going nowhere, nowhere to go. I tried to view the town with optimistic eyes, but those eyes were getting heavy with lack of sleep, and either way it was hard to deny that this was a boring, boring place. Back to the Hy-vee I went, sitting in the deli drinking coffee, watching workers clean and college students shop.

Soon it was midnight, and I headed up the road to the greyhound station. Time passed, and I groaned; I must have missed the bus somehow and now had 12 more hours to go, but then finally it appeared and I got on. I laid back and passed out as we pulled away, forgetting to look at the statue as we left.

★identity★

The room went from being merely ~~turning~~ to fully spinning, so I dashed over the table and stuck my head out the window, letting puke soar into the nighttime sky as college students screamed 15 blocks below. As I let it all out, I heard an ambulance flying by on the streets below, which made me feel even sicker, the siren seemingly saying "Danger!" or "Warning!" or something else shitty.

Once my stomach was thoroughly emptied, I sat back down on the couch,

drained. I was 17, it was my first time in Madison, Wisconsin, and I had delved a little too quickly, a little too much, into the pot and booze. Whoo, college, yeah.

Anyway, I was fine; the room had stopped spinning and my body had been successful in getting across to me the message to 'Slow down there, dummy'.

A few dorm buildings over, some other kid was not as lucky. He too had been celebrating Halloween and college and all that by, you know, getting Fucked Up. His night of debauchery ended with him crawling into and falling down one of the dorm's laundry chutes. I looked at one later—the kid must have been both really small and really drunk. The ambulance I had heard while puking had been on its way to pry him out.

Back in Minnesota, my mom was watching the news. She had just recently busted me with some booze in my basement bedroom, so she had said alright, you can go to Madison but no out-of-control drinking. Thus, she was both pissed and scared when the news shifted from some mundane story about Halloween safety tips to a reporter saying "And tonight in Madison, a 17 year old Minnesota boy, heavily intoxicated, got stuck after falling into a laundry chute. He remains in critical condition at the Madison hospital"

It's probably good I didn't know that at the time, because it surely would have seemed like a free pass I would have abused: "Uh, hey mom, I'm in jail and I need you to pick me up, but don't get mad! I mean, at least I'm not a mangled wreck stuck in the bottom of a small tube draped in dirty laundry!"

I never learned what happened to my counterpart, my mistaken identity, but I like to think he emerged unscathed and laughed about it at some point down the line.



scene

If you want to call a group of people and bands who hang out together outside of the music and in between the shows a 'scene', then I guess what we had going in high school could qualify as a scene. And oh, what a scene it was.

It was usually maybe a half-dozen bands at a time, constantly forming and breaking up, all consisting generally of the same revolving cast of characters other than

the occasional weird, silent younger drummer someone would recruit in a moment of desperation. It was fun and full of energy and ideas, but it was a pretty sorry excuse for music. We were all novices warily picking up our instruments, and it showed in the absence of tuning and bizarre stray notes in the occasional ill-advised solo..... and stuff like that, but so fucking what? It was damn fun and that's what really matters.

Although it was hard to tell, we practiced a lot. Shows, on the other hand, were very rare, and without exception only occurred in two types of circumstances. Type A was when someone's parents would vacate their pad for a weekend, all of us swooping and storming in mere minutes after they pulled out of the driveway, off to their lakes and cabins. Pot was soon smoked freely in the living rooms and dens, which felt really fucking weird, cuz usually those rooms were spent in agonizing fear of breaking or spilling something as you stumbled through an

awkward conversation with the dreaded parental figure. "Yes, school is going good Mr. Johnson. Yep." But now? Punk music was blasting from the expensive stereo system, cheap pot blew through the room, beer and booze purchased by creepy older kids was guzzled at ill-advised rates, and crappy amps were pushed through the crowd on their way to the basement, where the show would take place later in the evening.

But no one was in any condition to play by the time we collectively decided it was a great "Fuck yeah" idea. We were all young and relatively inexperienced in the ways of drinkin'. Kids who had sipped a beer once before in their life had now sipped a half a bottle of vodka and were running around the place howling like lunatics. Bottles of wine stashed and saved for some future important event by the absent parents had been found, opened, slugged, and dropped, shattering on the kitchen floor to a round of laughter. But the show must go on!

To an outsider unfamiliar with our scene, the performance would have seemed, well, sad. An hideously out of tune wall of fuzz and stumbling drums, every song falling apart half-way through. Eyes too blurry to see the little dots on the guitar that we were dependent on. Musical critics surely would have scoffed, covered their ears and gone back upstairs. But our friends, our crowd, were yelling and dancing and pumping fists and it was great, usually followed by an encore or two until someone passed out and dropped their instrument.

After the "show", things would truly degenerate into blurry-visioned power-puking idiocy. The kid whose house it was would snap to a little bit as he watched a party-goer puke his dad's beer onto his mom's afghan quilt. "Hey- my parents are back tomorrow morning you guys----" But we couldn't hear him; we were in the hallway cheering on Dave, who we had convinced to put on Cody's moms wedding dress, as he pranced on a table singing 'Dancing Queen'.

The party was then herded out to the patio where someone made the slurring observation that the next door neighbor was none other than our next-door neighbor Mr. Brown, or Mr. B as he asked to be called.

Immediately: "Fuck you, Mr. B!" and with that a beer bottle spiraled into the nighttime sky. Crash! Seconds later, surreality: Mr. B, blurry, on the patio with us, yelling and swearing up a storm. "Who threw the fucking bottle!?! You clean that shit up now!" and so on. All of this to the sound of someone in the basement, trying with no avail to learn a Metallica solo.

Yep, that was a Type A high school band show. Type B was the talent show, less common and very different. For one, we were sober and thus less bold and stupid. Also, the audience now was not our equally loaded friends, but, rather, our entire high school, seated in the bleachers. Unamused looking jocks sullenly downing 20 oz mountain dew bottles. Bored cheerleaders. Stoned stoners. And so on. A tough crowd, unresponsive to poorly played Misfits covers. One band did a version of God Save the Queen that lead one of the jocks to leap onto the gymnasium floor and jokingly dance around, knocking over a mic stand in the process. "Fucking asshole!" the band's singer yelled into the other mic, and then the show got shut down. Successfully sabotaged—that was pretty cool.

The last high school band show took place at an outdoor talent show on a Friday night, a few days before I graduated. Competing were a gothic-tinged band, a folksy singer-songwriter guy, a "jazz combo", a preppie rock cover band that covered ground from Pink Floyd to Pearl Jam, and us, the token punk rockers.

The song we opened with said the word "fuck" about twenty five times in the space of a minute and a half which caused a number of teachers and faculty members present to frown and shake their heads, but overall the crowd

reaction wasn't too hostile this time. Of course, the preppie cover band won, they had tons of friends who voted for them, but it felt good the next day during the morning announcements: "And second place went to.... Supermanure, who won 50 dollars" Hell yeah.

Most of us graduated a couple days after that, and it signified the end of the scene. People moved away, off to college or new towns, and lots of us started new bands and kept playing music. The new bands were better musically, which is saying close to nothing, but there was something energetic and exciting about those high school bands and that scene that was hard to capture later on.

rewards

If you did something "good" in junior high, like say help the teacher clean up, or do some extra credit shit, you'd get Plus Points. If you did something bad, like skip class, or swear at a teacher, you would get Minus Points. A simple system that broke it all down to black and white terms of good and bad, right and wrong, suck-ups and fuck-ups.

The reason to try and get plus points, and try to avoid minus points, was something called CAPS day. A day off where students could go to bowling alleys, arcades, zoos, amusement parks, and other such destinations the school would set up. If you had two minus points or less, you could go to one of the top-tier destinations, if you had between three and five minus points you could go to one of the lower ones, and if you had more than five, well, you got to stay behind and hang out in the gym with the other fuckups and whatever gym teacher was unlucky enough to draw duty. Plus points really meant nothing. The more plus points you had, the sooner you'd get to pick where you were going, but they never filled up anyway so it was pretty meaningless. A trick to get kids to behave, basically.

One time I got four minus points for the whole semester and chose to go to the bowling alley/arcade, the only choice that seemed tolerable. We loaded the bus and headed over, about sixty students and a couple teachers for supervision.

What a reward I thought as I surveyed the bland scene. We got bored and rounded up quarters for the jukebox. Then we put in Achey-Breaky Heart on repeat for twenty four times and strolled off to bowl.

Soon the first one came on and a number of people groaned. "Who the hell played this song?!" Then it ended and the group sigh of relief lasted for only two or three seconds before the song kicked in again.

"What the fuck?!"

By the fourth playing the mob had gotten unruly, searching for whoever had had the nerve to select that wretched song, the song we were currently getting forced to dance to everyday in gym class. The teachers tried to defuse the situation but it was too late for that. We were still supposed to be at the place for another two hours, and we had put in enough Billy Ray Cyrus to fill it up.

"Motherfucker!" one of the jocks snarled "Lets fucking go! I can't take this!" The teachers pleaded with the owner to unplug the jukebox but he refused. People couldn't finish their bowling games, they'd put their hands over their ears and pace back and forth, scowling. Every time the song ended, the brief few seconds of hushed silence and held breaths would hang in the air. The teachers stared at the jukebox with begging eyes and the jocks tensed up with clenched fists. Anything... ANY other tune would have defused the volatile situation; any of the other rotten hits of the day would suddenly have seemed like the greatest tune ever penned. But

the moment of hope ended harshly, every time, as Billy Ray kicked in yet again. "FUCK!!!" the chorus ran out, and the teachers didn't even bother penalizing the swearing, they had bigger things to worry about.

I don't know why it seemed so funny, and so appropriate, to ruin CAPS day for everyone. I mean, we had to hear the song, too, and we hated it as much as anyone else.

★ impressions★

I somehow managed to score a temp job at a fairly big fortune 500-type company, located in a massive skyscraper downtown. Seemingly important, creepy suited individuals strode past me on my first day as I, completely sleep deprived and wrecked, attempted to find my assigned cubicle.

Good lord, what am I doing here? I thought in a panic as yet another suited man glared at me from behind a cup of coffee as we passed each other in the carpeted hallway. I do not belong here, I'm so out of place it's amazing alarms have not yet shrieked out, rabid maniacal dogs have not been unchained and sent after me.

I was told to dress "business casual", even though the individuals passing me in the halls were decked out in a very uncasual way--- "business methodical" perhaps. My take on business casual seemed to stick out like a sore thumb, nay, a crippled thumb, splurting out blood in a four foot radius.

I wore tennis shoes, for that was all I had. If they specifically required dress shoes, I would attempt to borrow a pair for the next day, but for now I trekked onward with the four dollar thrift store sneakers. I wore a plain gray t-shirt, pretty much the only thing in my dresser not of a punk band or offensive slogan. And my pair of khakis, purchased back in my days as a Target employee, would seem normally to embody the quintessential "business casual" look nicely. Ah, but not these khakis. My roommate Nick had had a job interview a few weeks back, and asked to borrow them to look a little better. Drunk, he asked to try them on the night before to see if they fit. Sure.

He emerged from the bathroom a couple minutes later, cackling. "Sorry dude! I just pissed on your pants! I dunno what happened, I guess I lost control or something...." Indeed, the right pantleg was soaked in a fairly good amount of urine. "Don't worry, I'll clean them" he said, sitting



down to watch TV.

Indeed, he had cleaned them and now they looked pretty much OK, I realized as I continued on down the hallway. A slight stain was still visible, but that wouldn't be a big deal. But it was the simple knowledge that I was walking amongst all of these fine groomed working world folks in pants that had at one point been drenched in piss that really shook me up. Even if they couldn't tell by looking, it seemed as if they would be able to somehow sense it...

In addition to the tennis shoes, plain gray shirt, and formerly soiled khakis, I wore a backpack. This seemed perhaps more out of place than everything else, but I had no choice, as I had a night class immediately after my shift ended. A nice, hiker-type backpack would have been fine. However, mine was a ratty and shredded piece of garbage whose prime had been spent months prior, in a K-Mart, directly above a \$6.99 price tag. One of the straps had ripped out, a problem I solved, somewhat, by sewing in a massive amount of dental floss. Then the actual strap had torn open, a situation I remedied with a generous helping of masking tape. The tape and floss had been applied in a seemingly random, excessive way and the excess amount hung strangely from the backpack. Faint tearing noises could be heard anytime I turned slightly.

I endured a few more glares from my new coworkers and then finally arrived at my cubicle. Horrible! I had not yet logged in a single actual minute at my new job and already, just walking down the halls to it, felt completely out-of-place and unwanted. A horrible first impression.

The job was bad, tedious data entry. I was trained in by a cheery woman who apparently was able to derive great joy from the replication of numbers. As she spoke, in an unholy dialect of acronyms and soul-crushing corporate slogans, a sense of dread tore through my body. "To calculate the TLTF, we use the CPRI figure, and then you key in the date from the MS report, upper right corner. Then," an excited smile "Just press enter! It does the calculation for you! Of course, make sure the amount makes sense. Remember, 'Data integrity is the key to our integrity!'"

Aurrgh. Good god, I thought, you people are mad! *This* is how you spend a third of your day?! People shouldn't be spending their lives rotting away in such tedium! It's not supposed to be like this! Evolution has skidded to a stop and taken an ill-advised turn somewhere along the way, leading us to this.... Performing inane, menial tasks that are meaningless to us for hour upon hour until we are glassy-eyed and zombified; this is our reality, but that's far too terrifying to admit so we return home and stare at a screen which provides it for us: Reality Television, a 'reality' of product placement and cutthroat machiavellian maniacs attempting to eliminate their opponents in order to win a pile of the King Cash. Yes, here it is, this is reality, presented to us with convenient commercial breaks, and it should all make sense but somehow we still sleep uneasily, and in the morning it's back to the gray buildings and gray walls, they try to spice them up with colorful banners that tell us "Every journey begins with a single step", but they might as well be saying "This is the chamber of the Doomed, where souls are trampled one keystroke at a time", and you can see it in the dead, hollow eyes of the wraith-like beings who have spent years here, the ones who—

"—which is, like I said, where you get the MBPTG figure from. Make sense?"

"Huh? Oh, right, yeah"

I left for my lunch break a weary and confused man. Gnawing on a bagel and staring blankly at the City Pages I pondered the bleakness of the remaining day stretched out before me and decided to hit up the liquor store before resuming the depressing entry of data. Once there, I scoped out the cheap section and

spotted the dark green tall cans. Ah, Camo. Some high gravity lager should be able to medicate me nicely after the night class, I thought warmly as I grabbed a few cans.

Walking back through the skyway I approached the entrance and noticed with horror that the CEO of the company was striding towards me from another angle, and we would both hit the entrance hallway at the same time. Earlier in the morning, my data entry trainer had pointed him out as he walked by across the floor. I had made a mental note: "Do not piss that guy off. Do everything you can to avoid him even laying eyes on you" And now he was mere feet away!

I did everything in my power to appear business-like and legitimate, a normal, productive, stock owning employee; not a hungover degenerate temp worker. Oh, how it pained me to have to try to make a good impression on this fool, someone I would care nothing about if I encountered him at any spot on earth other than that particular building. But, I needed that money too bad... Our eyes met briefly as we approached and his look was not one of complete loathing, which was a good sign. I attempted to correct my posture a bit to appear like an even more legitimate businessman. As I straightened out the tearing of the backpack sounded a lot louder and more prolonged than usual and suddenly the entire strap was torn from my shoulder, and the whole thing swung forward, accompanied by the sound of the zipper ripping open. It landed with a thud and two cans of Camo rolled out, one of them gliding perfectly forward, stopped finally, gently, by the foot of the CEO. Any lingering hopes for a "good first impression" vanished in the look of pity he flashed at me as he handed the can back. I considered saying something like "How'd that get in there?" but instead just muttered 'thanks' as he scoffed and returned to his office to make deals, make millions, make people's lives miserable, and I knelt down to put cheap malt liquor swill back in my shredded backpack. Then back to the office, now walking down the hallways with a broad smile, no longer caring about the impression I made.

rest

I've been sleeping at work lately. Not just brief seconds of confused dozing off, but actual full-blown curled-up, blacked-out sleep. It's great. A truly exhilarating feeling: fading away into a deep rest, knowing that you'll wake up an hour later, having earned ten bucks. I wish I could extend this to ridiculous lengths and go into hibernation, emerging from a cave a year later with a check waiting for me. It's actually kinda been a goal of mine for awhile, to somehow get paid to simply exist.

So my job sends me up to this storage room to do filing, and I curl up seconds after deadbolting the door, dozing off with a



grin of victory plastered on my face. Recently I was sent up to do a quick task that would take about ten minutes to do, although I could probably pull off a half an hour without too many eyebrows getting raised. But fuck, I was *tired*! I crashed out hard and woke up a full three hours later. Bolting downstairs I informed my coworkers that the filing system had been way off, making the task quite difficult. "I decided to reorganize it while I was up there, so it'd be in order next time" I explained groggily, fighting to urge to yawn and rub my eyes. They nodded blankly; I'm not sure they bought it. It was probably pretty obvious I had just woken up, my eyes looked glazed and my cheek was red from laying down, using my arm as a pillow.

Besides, I've already ruined any sort of "good worker" perception at this job. One time I went to work super zonked and didn't realize until an hour or two into my shift that I had my dress shirt on backwards. I mean, it sort of defeats the purpose of wearing a nice outfit; I might as well have just donned a shirt screaming "I GOT TOO DRUNK LAST NIGHT". I can't believe they didn't call me on that shit. It's the sort of thing that you'd assume would make them think that maybe I didn't belong in the executive top floor. Someplace lower would be more appropriate, perhaps the sewer.

In addition to the financially-sound slumber, I was able to get away with writing large chunks of this at work (including this very sentence! Yes, right now I can faintly hear in the background my coworkers attempting to fix a fax machine or something). Writing and sleeping—two things I like to do, and now I'm getting PAID to do them! It almost makes all the horrible mind-numbing aspects of work seem a little more bearable, but not quite. I sleep for four or five hours a night and then for the entire eight hour shift that follows my unwanted awakening wish I was still blissfully wrapped up in slumber; that makes over half the day that I wish I was unconscious for. Damn.



video

I was the weather boy in high school video production class. I began the weather broadcast with "According to the guy from channel 4, today will..." and usually ended with a report on the conditions in Chad or Indonesia for students who were planning on traveling there that day.

The teacher pulled me aside after the third time of doing this.

"I knew I shouldn't have given you a job on camera. It makes our show sound shoddy when you say you get your weather reports from the local weatherman"

"But that's what we ARE doing!" I protested. "It's not like you gave me a doplar radar to work with! I'm therefore forced to copy whatever the morning paper says, and in the spirit of



complete journalistic honesty, I feel our viewers should be aware of that"

He scoffed angrily. "Look, if you don't want to take the class seriously, that's fine with me. Just remember that its reflected in your grade" and with that he stormed off. Ha! I thought.

Our class was the worst, a group of twenty kids nearing the end of their high school days, needing an easy credit. It was probably the most pitiful high school video news show ever. I don't know what it was, but it seemed like we went out of our way to produce utter garbage. Half of the class had already been accepted into college, and the other half had already accepted they weren't going for the time being, so no one felt the need to put forth much effort into a high school video class.

The majority of the class period was spent playing video games. There was some really bad but kind of fun game where you shot aliens or something that I would play for entire class periods. One time I was really storming through it, blasting pixilated aliens left and right, nearing the high score as I heard the teacher drone on about our next project in the background.

"Nate! Turn that game off now!" he said angrily.

"Hold on dude, hold on" I replied impatiently as I kept firing away. He repeated his request five and ten minutes later.

"I've almost got the high score! Two more minutes!"

A minute later he walked into the back room and cut the power supply, ending my game and turning everyone else's computers off as well.

"You can thank Mr. Gangelhoff for that" he said, strolling back in.

"No problem, guys" I said, waving my hand.

I heard a football player screaming behind me about how he was on the last page of his final paper and hadn't saved it. Victory.

My chance at attaining the coveted high score thwarted, I turned my attention to the teacher. He was giving us suggestions for the next show. They were building a hockey rink next to the football field, and the teacher recommended that as a great story idea. We ended up interviewing one of the bricklayers for a half an hour, asking him hard-hitting questions like what his favorite type of bricks were. ("You didn't even show a shot of the building!" the teacher complained as the footage played back)

He also told us to do an intro for the show, something that would reflect what the class was like, a behind-the-scenes look at the inner-workings of the show. So, again, striving for journalistic honesty, we filmed a three-minute segment of us playing Friday the 13th: The Video Game as our intro. Right as Jason hacks our helpless counselor to death, the screen cuts to the news anchors. Brilliant, we thought, but the teacher buried his head into his hands as it played.

A couple weeks after those apparently pathetic segments aired, the teacher called us together for a pep rally. "You know, I just visited Wayzata and they have an excellent show. But you know what? I bet we can do even better. Lets show them what we got, let's make a great show"

"It's not great right now?" someone asked.

He paused and stared the kid down. "What you guys have been doing so far is garbage. The sports 'coverage' consists of reading the scores from every game in the paper. Yesterday's weather show didn't even mention the weather... *hygrometer buying tips?* What student here at school is going to need *hygrometer buying tips?* I know you can do better. So lets do a good, informative, well rounded show we can be proud of"

We broke huddle and started planning.

It was hard work, but it ended up paying off--- our best show yet. We skipped class with a camera and went to McDonalds, filming a segment called

"What Kids Do When They Skip School" We were supposed to do a fictional movie-type piece as well for the show, so we opted for "Home Alone Three: Lost in the Ghetto" (this was before they stole our idea and actually made a third film). An excellent film. I played Kevin, who pawns off his moms jewelry after they ditch him, but then gets robbed by the Wet Bed Bandits ("We'll steal all their alcohol and urinate on their beds!"). Luckily Kevin drunkenly played with micro machines the night before, leaving them out, causing the thieves to trip. For my weather broadcast, I did a five minute story about some minor thunderstorm in Texas. "An eerie chill descended on the suburbs of Dallas yesterday, the darkened sky coated the mere mortals below with a sinking sense of terror. Darker and darker, the sky grew, panic rising to a pitch, and then, like the crack of Satan's whip down came a bolt of lightning, slamming the fragile earth, a grave reminder of the evil power that lurked among the seemingly innocent, puffy clouds that had been drifting peacefully far above all the fools below mere hours earlier. The rain drenched the land, infants cried, dogs howled, all living beings tensed up and pitifully prayed to their strangely absent deity of choice." And so on, a full half an hour of pure gold programming

We submitted the tape to the principal to see if we could get further funding. He sent back a letter, which the teacher read to us, once again in huddle formation.

"The show was utterly abysmal. It might as well have been a radio broadcast due to the complete lack of anything visual, but even then I still would have been bored out of my mind."

Several students murmured about, asking what 'abysmal' meant.



1.

It's the fourth of July and I'm on a bus from St. Paul back to Minneapolis, having just played a show at a barbecue. Sitting up at the front of the packed bus is a morbidly obese woman with a stern, blubbery face, eyeing her fellow passengers with disgust. She wears huge, ludicrous looking glasses that resemble the shoddy eye-protection gear they'd hand you in 6th grade wood shop. Out of each side of these mammoth goggles sticks a small American flag, so it appears at a quick glance that they are almost an extension of her; she somehow has old glory branching out from within her ears.

She obviously loves her country. It seems unlikely that this love extends to

her son, though, who is pacing back and forth the front of the bus, talking to the sitting strangers. He's 8 or 9, looks like a good kid—curious, level-headed, not bratty or whiny or any of the other things kids can be. His mom doesn't seem to think so, though; she's yelling like a lunatic hyena at him "Siiit down Chad! Sit down! Those people don't want to talk to you! Sit DOWN! Do you want to get hit? Is that what you want?! The bat?!"

The bat?! I'm taken aback. It doesn't seem to faze the kid, though; he stands for a few more seconds and then sort of shrugs and sits down, not even making eye contact with his mom, who's red with anger, glowering at him as he stares out the window. I'm drunk enough where I want to call the lady on her shit if she yells at the kid again, but I don't get the chance; the bus pulls up to its final stop in downtown Minneapolis and we all get off, the lady in front adjusting her flags to make sure they're still on tight. I don't know why, but I would find it terribly amusing if one of the flags were to get dislodged and snake down the street, carried by the wind, forcing her to waddle after it, huffing and wheezing. That would make a great photo: arms clutching outwards, trying to grasp the flag, just out of reach. But they're secure; America is safely tucked behind her ears as she leads Chad by the wrist down the sidewalk in front of me.

It's not too terribly packed out, but there's enough people milling around drunk to make it alright. I want to do something interesting, like ask the people passing by, the people huddled in shadows, and so on, what America and the fourth of July means to them. I think I'd get a nice range of responses, but my voice is starting to get real scratchy and I'm coughing a bunch and coming down off the drunk so I decide to just grab the bus home instead.

I go up to another stop where I'll catch the next bus back home to uptown. The patriotic lady and her kid are waiting at the same stop, her sitting on the bench staring at her fellow citizens with rage; him walking around the sidewalk thoughtfully watching the action go down. Firecrackers sound off everywhere, whizzing and then snapping. You see a few flags floating through the crowd every now and then. The cops got one of the partiers and have him up against the squad car. "Do you think I fucking like doing this?" the cop snarls.

A shorter guy emerges from the strip club across the street and makes a b-line straight into traffic, not even looking. A bus misses him by inches and a chorus of honking sounds out as cars swerve out of his way.

Undaunted, he doesn't even acknowledge them or slow down, arriving safely on our side of the road. He puts down his bags and looks around, grinning at everyone. He's fucked up. "Where's the bus at?" he yells happily.

"It's not coming" someone offers.

"Neither is your mother! Hahahah!" he replies, doubling over with laughter, clutching his stomach. The patriot lady is seething at him. Everywhere around us, here it is: this is America, these are the inhabitants of it, this is an honest scene, and she, the most patriotic looking person of all of us, seems repulsed by all of it. Fair enough; I can understand scowling at the mornic drunk joker in front of us, but for some reason I get the feeling that this hatred extends well beyond this street corner; she is disgusted by all the pieces that make up the country and yet obediently embraces the manufactured concept of the whole.

I can't make sense of it, and I find myself staring at her as the drunk short guy cackles at passing girls. There, on the bus-stop, almost an anthropomorphic flag, a walking symbol enraged by the reality surrounding it. Then her bus pulls up and she snatches Chad by the wrist, off into the night, still frowning.

My bus comes soon after and I head home, falling asleep fully clothed,

sprawled on the bed, coughing harshly until I finally pass out.



2.

The day after independence day I woke up and realized within a few minutes that I had lost my voice. If I strained my vocal chords and tried to growl as deep as possible, I was able to get about 10% of what I was trying to say out, and even that sounded like I was smoking eight packs of Dorals a day while battling puberty.

Rather than deal with the ensuing laughter every time I croaked out an observation, I stuck to being silent as much as possible, frantically gargling salt

water and chugging cough drops in an attempt to recover most of my voice before the evening.

The ability to talk is one of those things you really take for granted; it's absence is painfully noticeable. Conversations with my roommates were just too damn frustrating, and I think they were getting a kick out of it, my pained facial expressions and frantic gesturing, so I left to wander around.

While walking around, I spotted an old drug dealer of mine chatting with a girl in front of a tattoo shop, stopped on his bike. The last time I had seen him, he hadn't been in the best shape. In the depths of an alcoholic binge he had stolen a car and then passed out, mowing through a parking lot, rows of bushes, over a median, finally wrapping the vehicle around a light pole and then passing out, uninjured, snoring when the cops arrived to drag him away.

"I could have easily killed someone" he admitted gravely "I'm a bad drunk. So no more of that shit. I'm quitting cold turkey, no problem. But this probation I'm on, fuck, I can't smoke weed at all, and it's really fucking with me. I can't hardly sleep, and when I do I have nightmares. Bad, fucked-up nightmares"

One of the stoners at my house then interrupted the story to inquire about possibly acquiring some mushrooms. My drug dealing friend shrugged "Sure, be right back" and headed out the door.

That had been about two years ago, and I hadn't seen him again until now, in front of the tattoo parlor. I was excited and interested to hear what the last couple of years had held for him. That, and maybe he had some hash so I could just zone out that evening and not have to worry about talking. Then I remembered--- our reunion conversation would be a slow, one-sided affair. I would be unable to ask or tell him anything, and he'd probably just look at me strange. I decided to wait until the next time I saw him, and walked past with my head down.

I continued up Lake Street back towards my house, passing the gas station, and there she was, the frazzled-haired old woman who more often than not could be found outside on the curb, head-lowered, talking to herself with a 32oz soda by her feet. Once the cup was drained, she'd walk the few steps back into the store to get her refill and confuse the cashiers with some off-the-wall babbling for a few minutes.

Whenever I walked by her, huddled alone, I'd catch a few seconds of her ongoing internal dialogue: "Motherfucker titty-sucker bucket of shit asshole", stuff of that general theme. The first couple of times it sort of startled me, thinking she was calling me a "horse fucking cocksucker", but I soon realized that she truly was talking to herself, probably not even aware of my presence. So I'd always perk

up my ears whenever I'd pass, curious as to what was on her mind, and I'd always wonder where she was and what she was doing when the parking lot curb was without her.

Right now she was there, head down, the soda half-empty. As I walked by she looked up and her eyes met mine for the first time. "Drugs and prostitution will kill you" she said, right at me. I wanted to tell her that I wasn't into prostitution, or drugs either, really, if nothing else to get a dialogue going, but my voice was still gone so all I could do was open my mouth in confusion and then walk off, which probably looked like startled agreement to her. Damnit.

3.

I'm clinging to the fact that people are fuck-ups; that's what's keeping me going right now. Just about any task you can think of, if it's a person that's doing it, there will inevitably be mistakes made. It might take a long time and it might be a minor mistake, but it'll eventually come to be. People aren't perfect.

So I'm hoping that the bank employee who is entering in my deposit is due for a fuck-up, I'm hoping her mind is drifting away into unrelated thoughts and as she thinks fondly of a different life, her finger will press down on the zero key for a few seconds, unnoticed by her, transforming the four dollar check I'm cashing into a 40,000 cha-ching of a jackpot.

My mind starts excitedly going through all of the stuff I could and would do with such a score, and I'm so caught up in the fantasy that I'm actually sad and surprised when she hands me the correctly entered receipt a couple minutes later. "Thanks" I mutter, walking off.

Oh well. My voice has returned so I'm in a pretty good mood. And it's almost nice to be walking around here downtown, now that I don't work there anymore. The skyways and shops and striding businessmen had become so connected and intertwined with the rotten job I was working that it sort of ruined the whole part of town for me; I couldn't separate the two. The sight of the downtown skyline would make me shudder with thoughts of mind-numbing data entry. But now the job was a thing of the past and I was sort of digging walking around the skyways.

It had been a glorious last day of work too. I had shown up drunk—not on purpose, but I was killing a jug of wine with Jenna when the rising sun poking its way through the windows caught both of our eyes and we realized it was eight in the morning. "Shit, at least I don't have to work today" I reasoned, leaning back contently. "Oh shit, wait, I DO have to work today!" I added a second later.

Standing up to evaluate my condition, I instantly realized that an eight hour shift was out of the fucking question. I could just call in sick, but I had to for sure show up to get my time card signed; without that money I'd be in a dire financial situation for the week to come. Hmmm. I decided to show up, tell them something had came up and I would not be able to work, but did need my time card signed really quick. They'd surely be pissed, but it would have to do. "I'll be back in an hour" I told Jenna, and stumbled out the door.

Downtown, walking down the skyways, I realized I was smiling and kind of goofing on everyone which in turn made me realize that I was still drunk. This realization made everything sort of spin out of control until it all seemed downright hilarious.

I entered the office unsteadily, an hour late. "Hey, guys" I greeted my typing coworkers with a wave. They looked up and nodded, eyeing me strangely. Later, Jenna told me that I still stank of wine, and if she noticed it then my

coworkers could surely smell the Carlo Rossi rolling off me in waves. I stood in the center of the office for a second.

"Uh, oh yeah, is Barb here?" I asked. She's in her office, I was told.

I walked over and opened the door, instantly realizing, shit, I probably should have knocked. My boss looked up and sniffed, but didn't really look mad or anything. "Hello Nate"

"Hi. Um, I just found out this morning that I can't come in today, cause of some shit" I began, then froze, instantly realizing that I wasn't talking in employee-speak; I had just said Shit in front of my boss!

"Ok—" she looked back at me

"But, can you time my sign-card?" I handed it forward. She let a slight smile escape, nodded in the affirmative, and signed the card. Back out the door, a free man. Later that day I got offered a different job and never went back.

4.

Cool summer night, walking around down Hennepin a little drunk underneath a full moon. I know a girl who is always going off about how the moon is a source of energy and the full moon makes everyone wild and crazy and full of life. She always knows when the full moon is coming up and when it arrives she says "Something's going to happen tonight, I can feel it--- it's a full moon." And, she tells me, the full moon affects me especially because my ascendent sign is ruled by the moon or something. I don't buy into that stuff, though, and I never feel particularly more energetic when the moon is full. Tonight is no exception.

But the full moon does cast some light on everything, the night time sky gets a bit brighter—I'll give it that. My surroundings are fairly lit-up and clear for midnight as I pause at a bus stop. It's the same one I was at a few days earlier. Now the celebration has ended, the firecrackers aren't going off and there are no patriots waiting for a bus to return them to the suburbs. I find myself wondering where the flag lady is and what's she's up to. My first guess would be at home watching TV with Chad, yelling at him like clockwork as commercials blare instructions at them. How accurate could that guess be, though, I wonder; I only saw her for a couple minutes and I didn't even say a word to her.

It's strange to speculate on someone you encountered so briefly, someone you probably will never see again. I think of the random characters I briefly crossed paths with over the last few days, how I will likely never run into them again, as they live out a complete life I will be unaware of, forced to speculate on their nature from a miniscule moment in their existence. I wonder how the lady on the curb will spend the rest of her days, how my drug-dealing friend will end up if we don't meet again, how long the bank teller and my former coworkers will stay at their jobs. Where's the short drunk guy from the strip club going to end up? What sort of stories will he have in him for the years to come? How about Chad? Will he bust out of his mom's grip and do what he wants or will it stifle him?

I find myself on one hand chuckling that I'm even contemplating any of this, but on the other hand kind of intrigued by it all.

A man next to me shakes his head violently. "Wow!!!" he pulls his flask away from his mouth and extends it towards me. I shake my head, no thanks.

"I was born in New York" he says, straightening himself up with his cane. "Grew up there, until I was fifteen. Back then, there weren't liquor laws like we have now. If you had your parent's permission, you could drink with them. Twelve years old! You could drink. Now, my father, he drank bourbon. He was a bourbon man, he had boxes and boxes of it in the basement, and I would go down into the

basement and I'd fill up my flask. Then I would get on the subway to manhattan, and I would just walk around all day, drinking from my flask and looking around at everything.... Taking that shot just now reminded me of all that"

He got on the bus then, and disappeared down the road under the full moon.

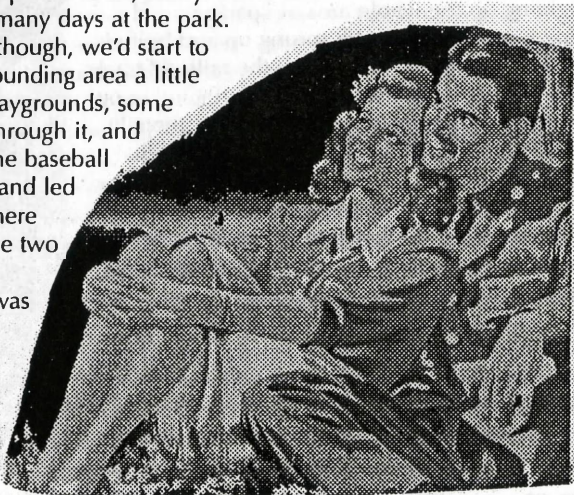
park

Living in a suburban town on the freeway, your range of places to go is pretty dismally limited in the days before you have a car. Biking helps a little bit, but generally you end up hanging around and lurking about at the places in close vicinity to your pad, regardless of what they are and how lame they may be. One such place was the local baseball field, which was a quick five minute bike ride from my house.

When I was seven or eight, I'd go there with a few friends to watch other friends of ours play a school-affiliated baseball game (I of course was never on a baseball team or nothing; in fact throughout my entire schooling I never once joined a sport. Well, I almost joined the basketball team in 8th grade because A. I was abnormally tall at the time and could leisurely block shots, B. A few of the delinquents I hung out with at the time were on the team and C. The coach of the team hated my guts—he was the guy who threw me to the gymnasium floor one time, causing my back to bleed and ALMOST leading to what would have been a hilarious lawsuit. So, I thought it would be funny to have him as a coach. It cost ten bucks to join the team. I came home one day "Hey mom can I have ten bucks to join the basketball team?" She gave me an incredulous look "No, really, I'm serious" Finally she warily handed over the bill. Once it had passed hands and I was walking away I suddenly realized "Damn, I could buy a WHOLE pizza with this", so that's what I did. It was damn good, and the team was forced to carry on without me)

Watching baseball games was pretty damn tedious and boring, much like it is today, but at the time the ballpark didn't appear to have much else to offer so we just stared at the pitifully-played game blankly, when it was done unsure whether to congratulate or console our friends, because we honestly had no idea which team had won, or what had just happened at all, really. But it was something to do, and I spent many days at the park.

When I was nine or ten, though, we'd start to explore the park and the surrounding area a little bit closer. You had two tiny playgrounds, some woods with a creek running through it, and a long hill on the far side of the baseball field that dropped off sharply and led down to the railroad tracks. There was one huge tree between the two dinky playgrounds that had a small hole at the base of it. I was killing some random summer day once when I checked the hole out, and amazingly enough pulled out a badass switchblade, which I still have to this day. Every time I went to the ballpark from then on,



I'd always check that hole out, but there was never anything else in it. One time, though, I was pointing it out to one of my friends, telling the tale of the knife, when suddenly two older kids walked over. "Did you say you found a knife in there?"

"Uh, yeah"

"Fuck!" one of them yelled "That's my dad's fucking knife! I hid it there... he'll fucking kill me. Fuck" he turned to his sidekick, who shook his head grimly and added "Fuck"

"I can go get it" I offered sheepishly

"Fuck, don't fucking worry about it kid. But FUCK"

"Yeah. Fuck" the sidekick agreed and they trudged off.

Wow! I thought! The F-word, used in excess! I started following their example, swearing at all times, even when completely unnecessary. Like the pocket knife, this has stuck with me throughout the fucking years.

When I was 12 or 13 we would start to do silly vandalism to the ballpark, as that seemed like the logical progression once exploration had ended. We'd change the signs to read, rather than 200 feet, 800 feet. Har har har. Actually, I'm pretty sure that even back then it didn't seem funny, but it was like "Well, we scored some spray paint, we gotta do SOMETHING stupid" Anyway, two weekends later they'd reapply some white paint and fix the signs. Then we'd sneak out of our parent's houses and return some night, changing it back and adding remarks like "The City Hall Fucking Sucks" "How Much Paint Can You Dish Out, Fuckers?". They kept up with us for awhile, but by the fifth round we started to get pretty obscene with our comments and the signs came down. I found them behind the city hall dumpster months later.

What else... well, of course, we beat the shit out of the portable toilet, that goes without saying, but one time while doing so we noticed the vending stand next to it could possibly be broken into as well. Mounds of candy slept within, for sure, but also perhaps money? We never found out as a bunch of kids got caught crowbar-handed in the process of busting it open and were forced to do community service.

One time during a baseball game we laid down between some of the playground equipment and set up a few fireworks to launch. These were some fancy ones that made a shit load of noise and crazy sparkler effects and what not. We set them off and realized in a panic that they were considerably stronger than we had anticipated, lighting up the whole area as sparks rained down on the game. We sprung up and bolted down the hill and then down the railroad tracks, the sound of confused screaming ringing in our ears, the pounding sound of what we thought was someone, probably the enraged coach, chasing us.

When I was 15 we'd go to the park to get stoned and.... Well, just to get stoned. That was back when smoking pot was fun and exciting, making anything seem fascinating. It was a rush in a cheesy kind of way, wondering if a cop would pull into the parking lot and give chase, knowing that you'd get busted with curfew and pot if he caught you.

When I was 16, I had a car, and I didn't really ever go to the park after that.



pills

Amy and I were sitting around a little drunk but bored and outta booze. I remembered my stash of mystery pills, unidentified ones I had nabbed over the past few months from strangers medicine cabinets while drunk at parties, or found on the streets while walking around.

We each took a couple and didn't get fucked up, at least not in the "Whoo! I'm fucked up!" silly sort of way. But on the way to a restaurant I began to get a funny fuzzy feeling around my mind and things began to take on a mild dream-like quality. Again, not necessarily in a good way though.

Amy leaned across the table after we ordered. "Nate, I'm fucked-up! These people are freaking me out!" And then went into a spiel about UFO's and cosmic energy and so forth as I nodded eagerly and the fellow 3 AM eaters eyed us uneasily out of the corners of their eyes.

When we got home I sat down and tried to capture on paper what my sluggish brain was wading through. "Mind like a cloud....hard... you know what I mean" I read the next morning, and then chucked the rest of the mystery pills into the garbage.



mall

What had been a construction yard when I was nine became a cheesy strip mall when I was ten. At the time, well no, even at the time, even being 10 years old, it was still not exciting. It basically amounted to walking up over the hill by my house towards the freeway and thinking "Oh. A mall."

On one far end of the new mall you had the restaurant Panekooken. The only notable thing was their degrading practice where the waitress would have to run down the aisles yelling "Panekooken! Panekooken! Panekooken!" whenever someone would order a Panekooken. Am I missing something? Is this some old Dutch custom that's been passed down through the ages? I kind of hope so, because that's lame if it was thought up by some idiot businessmen in a board room. It really looked degrading, and I felt bad for the waitresses. Especially the one who sped past me, balancing a massive Panekooken on each hand, tiredly yelling "Panekooken! Panekooken! Panekoo-" and then tripping, spiraling over onto the floor, getting drenched by Panekooken while idiot customers snickered quietly. (I bet you a million dollars no one in history has ever used the word Panekooken more times in a single paragraph)

Next to that, for awhile, was the pretty rad Highway Man's store, full of a whole bunch of cheap crap that seemed cool to us kids. The old guy who

worked there was awesome, and talked to us in a level way, not condescending like every other worker in that mall, and most adults in general, did.

We bought a Nintendo game from him for five bucks (which was insanely cheap back then) that was called Chiller, I think. It appeared to some sort of illegal bootleg game, as I never saw it anywhere else. It was creepy... the game consisted of shooting people on torture racks, gaining points as they scream in pain, bits of their flesh tearing off. That's the sort of thing that would be for sale at Highway Mans.

The name Highway Man's finally made sense when it was discovered that the old guy didn't pay rent for four months and then bundled up everything in the store and left town in the middle of the night, never to be heard from again. Awesome. I liked to think he just moved down five minutes to the next suburb, to the next strip mall, to pull the same scam again, but our paths never crossed after that.

Next to that was the Subway, and next to that was Hallmark, which was owned by Brian's mom. She let us go in the backroom to eat our Subway sandwiches when she was working, and while we ate and spilled shit all over the floor we noticed big boxes full of lottery tickets.

"Holy crap" Jim exclaimed through a mouthful of sub, picking up one of the boxes. "Feel how heavy this is!" The box contained hundreds of tickets, and since about one in five was a winner, it also basically contained hundreds of dollars.

"This is ours now" I said, grabbing another box.

"Dude! This is my mom's store!" Brian said uneasily, also standing up, putting his sandwich down.

"She'll never know" reasoned Jim.

"What?! Look, there's only three boxes back here, of course she's going to notice! And she'll totally know who did it you guys"

We paused and finished our meals. I ate slowly, hoping Brian would finish first and then leave the back room, but he kept a watchful eye on us. It suppose it didn't make sense to do, anyway—we still had eight years before we could even legally cash in a lottery ticket, and we didn't know anyone who'd do it for us without asking annoying questions about their source.

Even though we spared Brian's mom her lottery tickets, Hallmarks soon went out of business as well, replaced by the annoyingly giddy Smiles and Sunshine, which, despite its rosy outlook on things, didn't last very long either. Down a little further was the arcade that only bothered to buy five machines, all of them obscure games from the mid-eighties. That fizzled out quickly, and in came the hardware store that had the nerve to ask for ID when I tried to buy some piping to build a bong with. I insisted I was in the process of fixing my sink, but they must have seen me check the various pipe sizes by putting them up to my mouth and making lighter motions at the base, cuz they stared me down and refused. The joke was on them, out of business weeks later.

Basically, the whole thing was shit, a long strip of stores that kept going out of business for very good reasons. I always preferred the older, smaller mini-mall a mile or two up the highway. Unlike the new one, which was clean and sophisticated, full of lawyers' offices and stuff, this one was all fucked up, falling apart and shady.

The guy who owned it and sometimes worked in the gas station part of it had a bunch of collectable antique guns that he sold to a couple of my friends who were into that sort of thing—when they were 13. That's what made it a cooler place. Would the owners of the other malls hang out and talk to you and fucking sell you guns? Hell no, they were surely humorless suit and tie fuckers who'd get pissed and have you removed if you even tried to talk to them.

I remember one time when I was stealing stuff from that gas station, which

was so easy it was like a reflex, the worker suddenly tuned me back to reality by yelling "Give me a fucking break! You've got some nerve trying to pull that shit!" Caught with my guard down! I shoved the beer deep into my pocket and tried to play it cool, walking up and asking "I'm sorry, what was that?"

"Oh, not you—this asshole is trying to sell his bike for a shitload more than it's worth" he held up a copy of some biker's magazine. I agreed the guy was an asshole as I paid for my gum and fled the store. That was another great thing about the run-down mall: surly employees who probably wouldn't give a shit if you stole anyway. Compare that to the bubbly Smiles and Sunshine, where they'd accuse us of stealing and make us empty our pockets even when we weren't doing anything.

We spent many an afternoon wandering and exploring that mall, doing stupid shit. There were maybe four or five stores within the mall, all decaying and probably plummeting into debt, manned by weary, defeated-looking employees. You could do whatever you wanted, and no one would care or notice. When we were broke, we'd grab the candy dispensers from the hallway and bring them out back, kicking the shit out of them until out would pour mounds of quarters and mints. Many a movie was rented across the street, paid for always with a pile of quarters which eventually caused the employees to raise their eyebrows, us shrugging back with a mouthful of mints.

The sign outside the place didn't even tell you the name of the main gas station, instead it simply said in a plain boring font: Milk Meats Pop. Fair enough, I suppose it was accurate. Letters fell off over time and it eventually read "ilk eats P p" It stayed that way for years, no one bothered to fix it until it got bought out by a corporate gas station company, after I graduated from high school and moved away. Any character the place once had disappeared in the looming shadow of the Texaco sign (ha! Sorry, that was a little cheesy)

But anyway, as much as I liked the Ilk Eats mall, we still hung out at the clean nice one more often, mainly because it was so close to my house. Also, behind it were the railroad tracks, and those were always fun to hang around at. One day a group of kids showed up at my house "Nate, come check out what we found behind the mall"

Up the road and down the tracks I was led. "There" they pointed. It was a big bag, with an unidentified video tape laying next to it. "I kind of looked in, and it looks nasty... I don't want to touch anything in there" someone said

I shrugged, ran up and booted the bag with all my might. Up into the air it spiraled, spewing forth a whole array of colorful dildos and other sex toys, along with a formidable collection of She Male videos. The group screamed a collective yelp that sounded something like "Whoaaaaargghhhhgrooooooss" as graceful spinning quickly gave way to grim discovery. We were all pretty young, and the objects, especially the teaser photos from the She-male videos, were pretty jarring.

What to do? After a few seconds of contemplation, Jake grabbed the biggest dildo out of the bunch and ran around the mall, into Subway. He strolled up to a family quietly eating and placed in on the table "Enjoy your meal!" and then dashed out before they realized what had just happened, leaving them staring in shock at the bright pink object encircled with mysterious goo.

We left the other shit behind the mall for someone else to find, and ran away down the tracks, laughing the whole way.

tracks

That's what seemed to tie that whole town together—the railroad tracks that went right by my house and then ran parallel to the freeway off into the distance. Inevitably, at many points during suburban confinement, you'd watch with envy as the cars on the road and the trains on the tracks sped away.

If you stood on the tracks and looked to the east you could see, just barely, a blinking light. None of us could explain what it was for, and it was a constant source of speculation. For some reason things got twisted around and it seemed like in some kind of vague unspoken way, something better was done there with that light (which was what? A whole two miles away?)

Every time I crossed the tracks I'd see the light out of the corner of my eye, and in the back of my head wonder about it. Finally, one boring day we set out to check it out.

Down the tracks we went, through tall grass, past broken bottles, the steady noise of the freeway below us. On and on we went, and finally, there it was; we had made it. The light stood blankly, meaningless, some kind of monotonous railroad signal. I looked down the hill at the freeway, and around me at the tidy rows of suburban houses and well-manicured lawns and realized glumly that it was exactly the same as where we had just escaped from. It didn't make sense; this was where our naïve childhoods were supposed to end, where we'd become men! I scoped the hill for a dead body or something, but it was futile. Just another suburb. What a deflating feeling.

We bitterly threw rocks at the light for awhile, and then headed home down the tracks, taking our time.

graveyards

We were hanging out someplace in the middle of the vast fields of Iowa, crashing at a kid's farm, acres of land stretching in all directions, cows wandering around look bored. Our host had to be up at 4:30 in the morning to milk the cows, and we were planning on drinking up until roughly that time, so he offered us the option of camping out further into the property, down a dirt trail. We happily took up the offer. I'm not a big fan of full-blown camping, but this would be more of the "briefly drinking cheap wine at a spot that could be described as 'nature'" variety, which I was a-ok with.

He lead us down the trail, and there it was, a nice open spot under the clear warm sky, all of the stars spotted easily, clear of city smog. A few trees, and a graveyard.

The graveyard dated back to the civil war, he explained before taking off. A few weeks earlier someone had dug up one of the graves and stolen a sword which apparently was worth a good chunk of money. "Anyway, make yourself at home" And with that, he disappeared back up the trail into blackness.

Graveyards tend to be either creepy or interesting, and this one was mostly the former, at least at first due to the image of some grinning creep with a lantern digging up a 150 year old corpse. But it was also fascinating—I mean, the Civil war! Mind-boggling. Battles fought where we now sat, wounded soldiers slugging away at whiskey while their legs are amputated where we now slugged away at bottles

Night Train purchased from the nicely air-conditioned nearby grocery store, limbs intact. The hidden history of every spot across the land, all of the events that had occurred where you now stood, now forgotten and something you never really thought about. This spot marked its past, but it was still hard to picture or comprehend.

We just glanced at the graves every now and then while we talked, but eventually the wine escalated our courage and we pushed our way past the creaky, rusted gate. It wasn't huge, probably a coupled dozen of graves, lots of them crumbled and unreadable or partly covered by grass. No one, obviously, was visiting these people anymore other than some dude with a twisted agenda and a shovel.

I knelt down by one of the better-preserved ones and read the name and dates under the moonlight. Dead for 135 years, gone and forgotten. No one had any connection to him other than an unfamiliar name high up on a family tree. Even his direct descendents wouldn't know a thing about him; it was possible that the only thing remaining of him at all was this tiny marker, hidden on a farm in the deep backwoods of Iowa.

I thought about it a little more. Beneath my feet lied dozens of life stories, ideas and hopes and dreams, successes and disappointments, beginnings and brutal endings. Now, all gone, no one aware of it. What did it mean? What was the point? A hundred and fifty years from now would the same thing be repeated?

I read somewhere about an African society that viewed the dead as being in one of two stages, the sasha and the zamani. The sasha were those who had died but were remembered directly by people still living. They thus could live on in a way through the memories of others who had been around them, through anecdotes and recollections.

Once the last person who had directly known them also died, the person passed from sasha into zamani, the truly dead. No longer was there a direct connection into the world of the living. Stories could be passed down, but there was no longer anyone around who had actually known them or what they were about.

These Civil War veterans were definitely far into the zamani, which made speculating on the day-to-day of their lives a bit harder. What was their mindset, what aspirations did they hold, what belief systems did they adhere to? It was hard to comprehend what life would have been like back then. You ever wonder that, what you'd be like if you had happened to be born in another era? 1680 or 1480 or 1080 as opposed to 1980? Who would you be; how would you be different? How much of what you are now is just a product of your environment and surrounding, and how much is actually you? And how about this civil war soldier? How much of him was defined by the day? You couldn't really know, because all that was left of him was a tombstone. The feeling plagued me yet again of being gone and forgotten, disappearing as time passed... What can you do?

Nowadays people can last longer in the collective memory, with more methods of record-keeping and so forth. But eventually it still crosses over to that point where even the memories are gone, and you're left with some stranger standing over your marker, trying to figure out what you were about, coming up empty and moving on.

connections

My roommate Cody was working a shit temp job as a telemarketing company along with dozens of other kids his age. He was taking a smoke break one day when a fellow telemarketer noticed he was wearing a Ween t-shirt and walked up,

introducing himself by asking "Do you smoke pot?"

He did, and pretty soon the kid, who was named Nate, was hanging out at our house a lot.

One of Nate's friends who also started hanging out was Gabe, who went to the University and listened to a lot of noise music. We'd all drive around downtown in his car, blasting the sounds of static and electronic beeping noise through his nice stereo, receiving confused, pained looks at stoplights from other cars who were more used to hearing top-40 drivel and what not at those volumes, not screeching random noise.

CAAAAAWWWWW the static would be roaring, when suddenly Gabe would get really excited and motion for us to be quiet. "Hold on! This parts tight! This parts tight!" and we'd wait, when suddenly the static would change pitch and a brand new beeping noise would enter the mix. "I think that's pretty tight" he'd say again, smiling broadly.

Gabe lived in the dorms, next to a lot of dealers there, so my roommates usually went through him when purchasing drugs. One of Gabe's friends who they bought from was also named Nate, but that was too many Nates to keep track of at that point so he was just referred to as "drug-dealer Nate".

I started going to parties at Drug Dealer Nate's house, where I met Jenna. By 5:00 in the morning everyone was slouched over in one of the numerous couches, barely able to move or string together sentences as the booze and pot flowing through their bodies tried to steer things towards unconsciousness. I groggily realized the dreaded 5:30 AM busride home was rapidly approaching.

"Am I the only one here who wants to get rowdy, or what?" Jenna asked the room of near-corpses in disappointment, from behind a brimming mug of rum and coke. Impressive.

I went to a party with Jenna a few weeks later, where I met Amy. It was a pretty crappy party, but sitting up on the roof talking to her suddenly made it one of the best parties I had been to in a long time. Two months later, she was my roommate.

That's just one brief example out of dozens, and I'm sure everyone has similar stories. Dumb luck and weird coincidences. It's strange to trace it all back to Cody's random decision to wear his Ween t-shirt that day. I can't help but wonder if I'd be someplace different today if he had put on, say, his Cure shirt instead..... probably a candle-lit den with a bunch of creepy gothic kids, or something.

touring

We had booked tours before, tours hastily thrown together in a frantic mess days before leaving town, relying on torn, old issues of *Book Your Own Fuckin' Life* to fill in the chasm-like gaps on the itinerary, planning to use a burnt-out wagon with one functioning door as our vehicle.

"Well, we've got Chicago on the 10th of June and then Miami on the 17th. And I'm pretty sure Detroit will work on the 30th" someone would report.

"That seems a little silly" I'd admit.

"We can totally just play Laundromats in between." Zack pointed out.



Hmm. Yes, I liked a good Laundromat show as much as the next guy, but I had my doubts. It was a matter of simple economics: cars require gas, which in turn requires money, and it was difficult to rake in any dough playing a Laundromat unless you busted open a washer and paid for a few miles worth of gas with a heap of quarters.

I was, however, willing to try this... it had a nice appeal, playing vigilante Laundromat shows across the nation, then robbing the place once we were done as either the assembled crowd cheered or confused people trying to wash their clothes headed off to alert the authorities. And then, leaving the small town in a cloud of dust as the sun came down, like a scene out an old Western: "Who were those smelly men?" "I don't know, but they sure sucked". Yes, a great scenario, maybe even feasible.... Once. But not for a month straight.

Besides, we were admittedly amateurs when it came to actually playing a Laundromat show, having only done two of them around town. One went fine, but the other one was stopped abruptly halfway through the second song when the owner unexpectedly arrived, roaring "What is this bullshit?!" He calmed down eventually, and didn't call the cops or anything, remarking "Yeah, I was a kid once too". He told us to just at least call next time, and then added as we left "You guys weren't half-bad, either" Sweet. But he had surely been the exception, not the rule, when it came to Laundromat owners, and odds were we'd probably fuck up and get in trouble at some point.

So, we hadn't ended up embarking on any of these "tours" yet. Always at the last minute we would realize the utter stupidity of trekking across half the country in a ticking time bomb of a vehicle with nothing to sell, no one knowing our name, just to play one show in Florida and then turn around. Sure, it would have been fun, really fun, in a ridiculous sort of way, but the fun factor would have most likely drifted away in a cloud of exhaust once the wagon broke down in Kentucky or something, leaving us penniless, stranded, at each others throats. So, we didn't go, and in a typical flaky matter we usually neglected to inform the handful of venues and basements when we had actually gotten "booked" of this decision. Calling people later was always nerve-wracking, as you had to wonder "Did we flake on this guy last time around?"

But this time it looked like we were actually going to leave town on a legitimate tour. We had setup more than three shows this time, and they formed a more or less rational, straight line around the country, not the shaky confusing paths from before, with backtracking and weeklong breaks galore. It appeared that the Rivethead: Whiskey For Breakfast tour was going to be a reality.

We played a kickoff show in Minneapolis with a lot of good bands. We went on first and although I wasn't as drunk as I would have liked and we probably weren't as in tune as the crowd would have liked, I think we played ok. After that I got drunk and watched the rest of the bands put on good sets. Things seemed to be looking up.

I stopped to get a sub on the walk home and I was pretty tanked as I headed up the front steps. BAM! The coordination necessary to lift one leg slightly above the other while moving forward wasn't quite in me and I wiped out, landing on my elbow. The initial jolt of pain was pretty bad and as I lay there, stunned, feeling the pool of blood form beneath me, all I could think was "Well, tours off. I broke my arm." What a moron, I thought. Falling over on my own front steps.

Picking myself up and examining the elbow I realized I had most likely just bruised the bone, so the tour could probably go on. I sat on the steps, drunk and dazed, laughing at the ridiculousness of it kicking off the tour. It seemed like a bad sign, and a good sign, all at once.

Justification

It was a sunny Friday afternoon and we were walking quickly through a parking lot behind a strip mall, glancing over our shoulders now and then as we went. We were making our way towards Best Buy; it seemed like a reasonable idea to leave the general vicinity of the Ridgedale mall, where we had just been shoplifting from a wide range of establishments. Teenage paranoia was now going at full-blast, and we thought some of the security guards might be patrolling the area, looking for us, looking for blood.

So we, Rick, Jim and me, had slipped into the dollar movie theater to watch some action flick and chill out for a little bit. The movie didn't really grab us. Ten minutes into it Rick pulled out one of the cigars he had just stolen and casually lighted it, puffing away, staring up at the screen thoughtfully. Me and Jim shrugged and followed suit. Soon there was a lot of commotion and a very angry and distressed employee was yanking us away.

"Ah, so what!" Rick yelled to the packed theater as we were lead away. People seemed very distracted; they wanted to follow the intricate plot but were unable to turn away from Rick, and the rowdy scene of our removal. I spotted a number of really pissed off looking fathers, who probably felt it was their duty to cave in Rick's skull and protect their family.

"This movie fucking SUCKS anyway!" Rick finished as we exited. Which was true, at least if the first twenty minutes were any indication, but the crowd seemed angry at his critique, his "thumbs down", as it were, and were just happy to see us go. Ah, but they would be reminded of our presence for the duration of the movie by the thick cloud of stale cigar smoke we had left behind.

So now we were heading towards Best Buy, cutting through the employee parking lot of a nearby strip mall.

Rick grinned and pulled out a knife. He walked over towards the employee entrance door for the Audio Store. Five cars were parked around, some of the only ones in the whole lot. I watched Rick walk in circles around each car, slashing all twenty tires

"Ha!" he laughed as we started walking away. "Stupid fuckers!"

Hmmm. I was doing a lot of stupid, illogical shit at the time, but I was 14 so I could kind of be excused for naively justifying my actions with "well, its anarchy" and so on, however even back then I tried my best to not fuck with the "common man", sticking to faceless corporations. So Rick's tire mutilation seemed a little overboard, a bit hard to justify.

I envisioned all five employees of the audio store closing up at 5:00, eager to leave the job behind and enjoy their Friday night: You walk out in high spirits, a shitty day of selling audio parts to idiots now a thing of the past. But as you open your door you notice your front tire is completely deflated, laying limp on the ground. At first, you're a little pissed: a flat tire, that'll require getting out the spare, jacking the car up, putting it on—a slight delay towards Friday night's activities. But wait—a second tire's flat, even worse ALL FOUR are flat, and shredded, irreparable. Maybe your coworker Joe can give you a ride home, or at least to Tires Plus, but wait—he's just a few feet away from you, bitching about his tires.

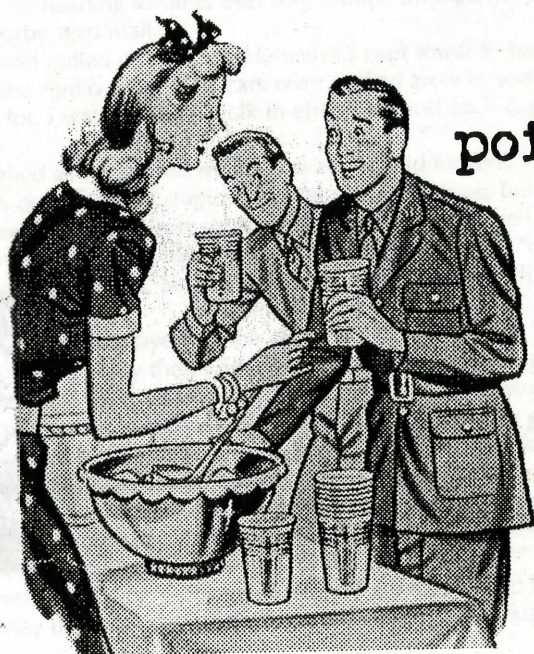
Yeah, if that was me, I'd be fucking pissed. And we didn't even know them! What had they done to us to justify such an annoying (although

admittedly pretty minor) thing? I could see Rick hacking the shit out of the teacher's tires at our school; that made sense in an eye-for-an-eye sort of way. But in the back of my mind I glumly realized that while I would never be some schmuck doling out detentions, I could probably be that audio store employee in a couple years. How could I rationalize such behavior?

I thought back to the scene from the movie theater.... Were we in the right on that one? If, rather than a vapid explosion-laden joke, it had been a film I was digging, would I be annoyed by some fellow movie-goer's smoking, or chatting or whatever?

Oh well. Using the law of averages, they were probably all assholes anyway, I reasoned as we walked on, out of the parking lot.





poison!