

# blurt!

number one

#2



other stories



# blur

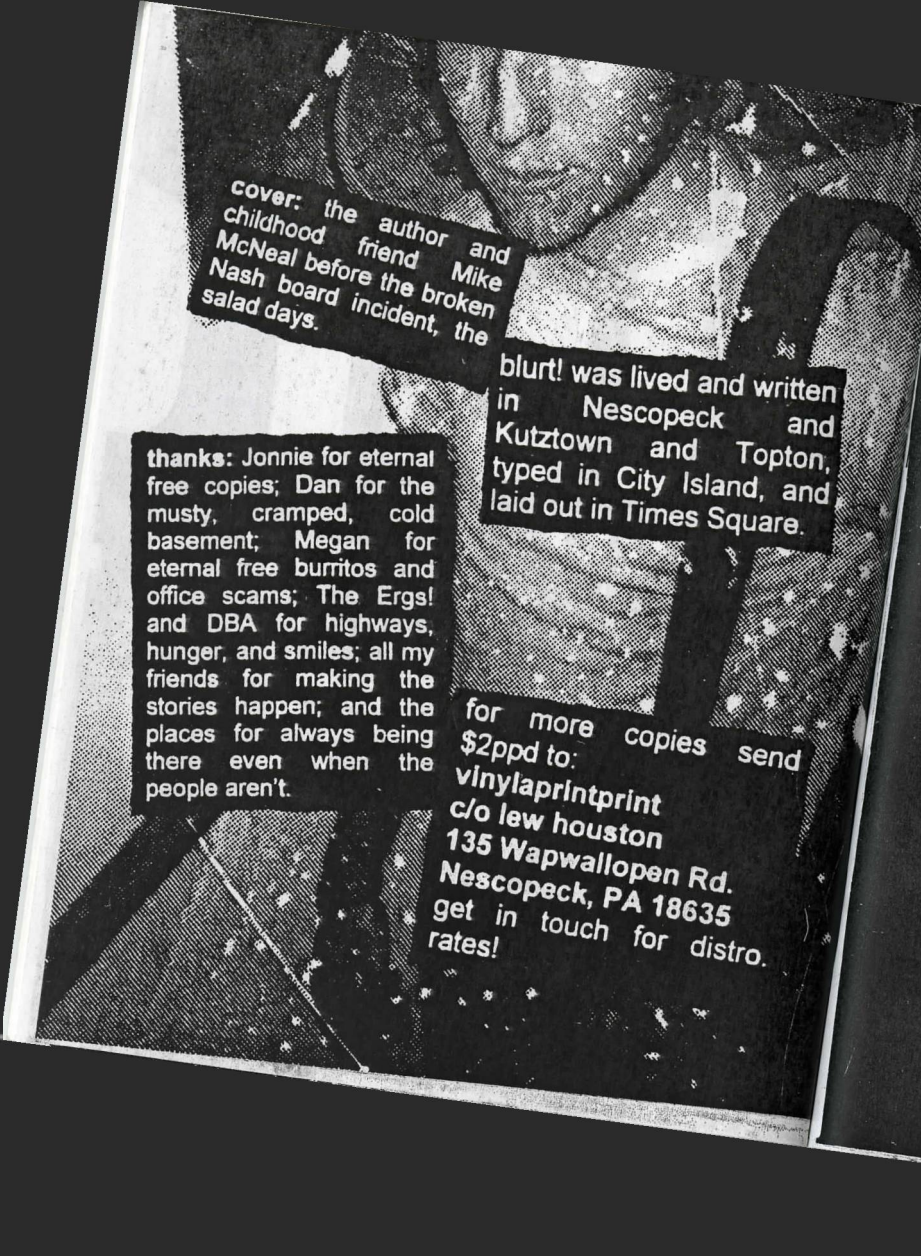
number one

other stories

**summer**

**2004!**





cover: the author and  
childhood friend Mike  
McNeal before the broken  
Nash board incident, the  
salad days.

thanks: Jonnie for eternal  
free copies; Dan for the  
musty, cramped, cold  
basement; Megan for  
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hunger, and smiles; all my  
friends for making the  
stories happen; and the  
places for always being  
there even when the  
people aren't.

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# intro

**p**eople keep asking what I'm doing with my "shove-this-job" time.  
"Working on a new zine. Stories from my life."

"Why don't you write another tour journal like *Tales of a Travelling Panty Salesman*? That one was great."

"But I don't want to keep writing tour stories!" I stammer.

"But you've been on three tours since that one, you must have some great stories to tell."

I do have great stories to tell. Other stories: stories about growing up in Nescopeck and battling trees; getting bored in college Kutztown and battling booze beratement; moving four cow-stacked miles to Topton and walking back; then sailing to City Island, in the Bronx, to shake the woods out. And yeah, there are a few tour stories too. These are them, the

**other  
stories.**


♥ | ew

# NESCOPE

Start 1 1/2 inches to the side







Nescopeck (NES-ko-pek), borough  
(1990 pop. 1,651), Luzerne co., North  
Eastern PA., 23 mi/37 km SW of  
Wilkes-Barre, on Susquehanna R.  
(bridged; opposite Berwick to NW), at  
mouth of Nescopeck Creek;  
Mfg. (transportation equip., ordinance,  
burial vaults). Agr. area (apples,  
potatoes, corn; livestock; dairying)  
Settled 1786, inc. 1896.

# ~~sleighriding~~ sledding

**A**ndy laughed when I called it sleighriding.  
*"Dude it's sledding. There's no horses involved."*

But he calls soda - pop and sprinkles - jimmies. We're even, I laugh at him too. His eyes grow big and he spits a lot, sometimes standing out of his seat, telling stories of kid sledding. Arms fly around and he jerks back and forth relating crazy tales of breaking his dad's favorite thirty-year-old sled and nearly himself too. Or the time they built a jump so high his friends nearly landed on the roof of a shed. Or the downhill battles where kids would get run over. But for all the danger none of his stories ever ended in the hospital.

Andy made his winters sound like the greatest adventures our country ever had. Suddenly I felt I hadn't lived. His neighborhood had twenty kids. Mine had three. Most winter mornings it was me and my dog Prince on the big hill out back. I'd head down the hill and Prince would chase after me, biting my head, pulling off my winter hat. But as different as our experiences

were and separated by three hundred miles, we both remember the greatest sledding year ever. The year a foot of snow fell, then melted slightly, then froze. The entire earth's surface was our giant frozen pond. Sledding was never more treacherous, or more fun.

*"We didn't even need to build jumps or runs that year," Andy stood.*

*"We could sled anywhere."*

## seeley's acres

**J**onnie grew up in New York City. He said he and his friends walked the city streets at night looking for adventure.

*"What the hell did you do lew?"*

*"I fought trees," I replied too proudly.*

Sadly this is true, for nothing makes a better opponent in a game of good vs. evil than a stalwart sapling. They put up a good fight, but several whacks with a big stick and they couldn't help but crack and crumble.

Most teenage adventures happen in cars or on sidewalks and back streets or in malls, clubs,



highways, and cities. But most of my biggest adventures happened in none of these places. They happened in the woods. I grew up in Nescopeck a small agricultural/railroad town at the edge of the coal-mining region of Pennsylvania. The town was named after the Indians who settled the land. A sad, small concession for kicking them out. My house is on three acres and includes a long driveway, a pond, and a house bordered on three sides by trees that extend into woods for miles of no homes. There's a three foot wide shallow creek running through it all, as well as various paths worn down by the Indians before they were forced to use them to flee.

On warm, limitless Saturday mornings my dad's old army bag would be loaded with peanut butter and jelly and Cokes and me and a friend would set off for glory. Mark Fisher was one of those friends. His claim to fame was being really good at wrestling and living right across the alley from the only comic shop in town. After he'd kicked my ass on the mats we'd blow our allowances on the latest comics. The best friendships are tested by drama; Mark and I were no different. One sunny afternoon he called me a pussy, which was true. I was anything but tough those days. As if to

prove his point I slapped him open handed. He immediately pounded me in the forehead with his fist, the first and last time I was ever punched.

We were good friends after that. Such good friends we decided we could conquer the woods. On this day merely smashing trees wouldn't do. We needed glory and adventure. We were going to reach depths of the woods never breached by mankind, or at least two wet-eared thirteen-year-olds.

My parents loved me and so there were boundaries not to be passed. There was a prominent bend in the creek with a fallen tree lying across it. For general purposes this was as far as we could adventure. That day when Mark and I reached the bend we blew past it, knowing true adventure lies past the lines of safety. Soon the creek was widening to a full ten feet and we were discovering breathtaking glens and swampy areas and fallen trees and giant rocks and deep swimming holes and lots of rotten trees to knock over and all sorts of other cool shit. We'd been moving fast so we took a break and ate our sandwiches then started out at a slower pace, heads nearly always pointing straight up eyes bouncing side to side, scanning the tall trees and

mesmerizing views. We barely talked but when we did it was fart jokes, or military talk, or preteen insults, or exclamations of "holy shit!" and "look at this!". We were stupefied by the fun, discovery and adventure. So stupefied that we went really, really far; further than we ever meant to.

A city boy might be wondering why we weren't scared. Was it because we were raised in the woods and therefore able to fight off bears with cinnamon sticks and boy scout badges? Did we know how to find our way by relying on tree moss and shadows and animal prints? Hell no. We didn't know any of that shit. We both dropped out of boy scouts after getting the book that told you how to start fires and we spent all our spare time breaking trees and playing Techno Super Bowl. We weren't scared because there weren't many animals and there was that creek running through the woods and right past my house. Try as you might you couldn't really escape the creek. On one side the woods was only fifty yards deep, giving way to fields and back roads. On the other side it was a little deeper, but we avoided that side. As long as we remembered that the creek ran away from my house there was no way to get lost. And so our brave teenage hearts blurted out a huge



*"what the fuck?"* when my parents and a neighbor came bounding through the cornfield at the edge of the woods, livid and huffing and worried, as we sat on some logs and planned our next move.

*"Where the hell have you been?"* my father exclaimed.

*"In the woods."* Duh.

*"For three hours?"*

*"Oh."*

In all our awe and adventure-lust we hadn't bothered to bring a watch. We didn't get in trouble but neither did we ever venture much further past that bend in the creek. Still we swore there were parts of those woods that no one but us had seen since the Indians left. Every summer after we would yearn for that same sense of adventure, awe, and wonderment. Indeed, I've been trying to find it every day since.

# Eggies

**I** grew up fifteen miles from town. Mike McNeal lived just five walking minutes away from it. He even had cable, a Nintendo, and a backyard swimming pool. Later he'd have a big screen TV and a subscription to Playboy. In short, hanging out with Mike was a lot of fun. A typical weekend would be spent exploring the woods around his house, or lighting things on fire, smashing bottles, and throwing eggs at the houses on the edge of town—easily accessible by climbing down the big wooded hill out back.

Other times we'd search behind the targets at the shooting range during off-hours, looking for missed clay pigeons. Then we'd smash those too. If empty handed we'd grab those bottles easily found on his alcoholic fathers back porch. Rainy days were spent soaking up all the music videos and '80s movies local TV had deprived me of. TV off and bored again we'd come up with crazy schemes for world domination or just to make a few bucks. Mike was the king of scheming and a

bit of a pathological liar and kleptomaniac. I mysteriously lost a lot of possessions at his house, but I gained a sense of urgency and a feeling that there was fun and loot in the world that was ours for the taking. One bright spring day we picked rotten raspberries for twenty cents a pint. They were so diseased we spent more time flinging them at each other than actually finding good ones to put in our baskets...or mouths. We spent over an hour and walked downtown with about 78 cents each. We'd always end up at Eggies, the corner store and deli. We bought a twenty five cent bottle of the local soda which when returned made us ten cents that got us a giant sweet tart. We'd run and chew, saliva running down our chins, until we were back at his house where we'd peek through the bathroom blinds at his teenage neighbor sunning herself in the pool.

Once the comic store moved into the alley downtown we needed more than pocket change. So we raked leaves and mowed grass, making enough money to buy a few comics then head over to the basketball court. Now worried about clothes and CDs Mike looked for ways to make more money with less work. This led to one of his less labor-intensive schemes that failed miserably when



the scrap metal guy noticed something funny about the weight of the aluminum cans we had hauled in. Upon investigation he discovered the lead cylinders hidden inside smashed cans.

Sometimes our projects were aimed more at killing boredom and having adventures than making money. Like the time we decided we would start a local paper: The Nescopeck Times. The neighboring town had the monopoly on local papers and all those reporters in the cartoons and movies seemed pretty fucking cool. We bought notebooks just like real reporters and started snooping out stories. When we were on our way to his house and my mom drove us by a fire downtown we knew we had our first. My mom never put restrictions on me as a kid, I was too dumb and scared to do anything wrong, but that day she made it painfully clear that she wanted me nowhere near that fire. We watched from the living room as she pulled away, then we ran straight out the back door, down the hill, and into town. We stood across the street taking notes and preparing a headline that was never typed up.

Like most of our schemes the paper failed. Years later we ended up in the same freshman year journalism class, a romanticized

movie journalist spark still lingering in our hearts. We learned all about bylines and captions and headlines and story structures. Most importantly we learned that journalism can be a lot of research, creatively restricting, boring and without any glory.

In the meantime, with help from Saturday morning teen shows it was decided that Mike would clear the lead and smashed cans out of his garage and we'd start a band. A keyboard was a must, even if neither of us could name a band that used one. I bought a guitar and a skateboard and started listening to punk rock. Mike started drinking, something we'd both sworn off since my parents were recovering alcoholics and his father should have been, but mainly because I didn't like it and he was a good friend so he pretended he didn't either. He stopped pretending when he met the older kids. I didn't like the older kids and desperately wanted Mike to become a punk. But the older kids had cars and beer and knew girls. I couldn't compete. When he used a sledgehammer to break the Nash board I'd lent him I knew he'd never be a punk. I met a punk girl from another town, Mike's parties raged on, and we stopped hanging out so much.

Mike and I had an obsession for girls and so it was fitting that he was the first one I told about losing my virginity to that punk girl. He lost his two weeks later and stopped coming to classes. His seat at the end of the lunch table remained empty for more than half our junior year. It wasn't surprising when he didn't show up at all for our last one. For awhile he lived in the house between the car wash and the bridge at the end of town: the last house in Nescopeck. I would run into him at the amusement park or outside the video store. He'd tell me he was a security guard for some bank, but that he couldn't really stand the job. I'd tell him I was going to college for art education, but that I didn't really want to teach. We'd walk in different directions knowing our schemes were over, the loot gone, Eggies closed, and our sunbathing teenage neighbors moved away.



## berwick punks .

**H**er friend Marty walked onto the porch on all fours. Bill held the leash that was attached to Marty's dog collar. It accented his two foot green mohawk and other punk fashions. Perfect attire for a graduation party. My poor grandmother's heart stopped. She was still mad at my uncle for growing his hair out in the '60s.

"These are Maisy's friends?  
These...these...punks?"

Yes, my sister's friends were punks. I was fifteen and just finally got cut from the basketball team. She was eighteen and listened to Smashing Pumpkins and Tori Amos, but also The Misfits and The Ramones. And Marty, he wasn't really her friend just a friend of her friends. A troublemaker. A born punk. He started out a metalhead jerk off/class cutting pain in the ass back at Nescopeck Elementary. I can still taste the chocolate milk soaked puke from the day he pushed me and Mike on the tire swing and wouldn't stop when I screamed. He grew out of his faded Metallica shirts and became one of two kids at Berwick High with a Mohawk. Most of the other

punks were fastidious followers of The Misfits. They had devilocks. Most were members of Berwick's only punk band. A bunch were drug using, mixed up, trouble causing rebels.

I was a clean-cut, straight-A dork, a real nice guy. But I envied the punks. I peered out the graduation party window in awe and excitement as they formed a circle pit around their Escort.

*"Sex and violence,"* they chanted.

It took me three years to figure out it was The Exploited.

My relatives all poked fun: crazy punk rockers, stupid punk rockers. I laughed while secretly making a vow to become one.

When not holding Marty's leash Bill walked around Berwick all day and raved about Converse and how he could cliff jump in them one day and wear them to school the next. He also pined for my sister for years, but she liked Brian who constantly walked the streets of Nescopeck with his hands shoved deep in his pockets. Those three; Brian, Bill, and Mae; would hang out all summer. While I made envious eyes they'd jump in the local swimming hole, go to thrift stores, and hang out for hours at the diner.

Eight years later my sister lives up the driveway with her two-year-old daughter, no longer a punk or even a music fan really. I took it all to heart, even if I never walked on all fours or ran around Escorts chanting Exploited lyrics. And I still think of those three when I sit at the diner or wander the streets; hands deep in pockets, Converse soggy from the creek; on the lookout for a good thrift store.

**it's still like this.**

**A**s much as I wanted to I couldn't do all the normal young punk things. The nearest coffee shop was twenty highway miles; people kept their garbage in big plastic cans with lids to keep the raccoons out, not in dumpsters; and the only bridge ran over the two-foot wide creek that wound around our property. Hanging out under it was creepy. There weren't any forties or ripped-dress punk girls, just frogs and fish and raccoons and other unpunk stuff. I didn't even have a town to wander in. No back alleys or avenues or side streets, or abandoned buildings.



Just trees, fast highways, and old Indian paths. There aren't a lot of punk songs about wandering around in those.

I'd love to tell you that I met other punks in the hills and that we carved forties out of logs, ran extension cords from our back porch, spiked our hair with pinesap and wrote our own songs about living in the woods. But that never happened. Instead I strained my bent and borrowed wire antennae to pick up the college station where educated punks sat some forty miles away. And, just as bored as I but with less trees, broadcast local anthemic punks across the air. I sat in awe at the riveting raw sounds of one of the local bands. They didn't sing about trees, but they did sing about jock-infested high schools and interstate highways. I hated jocks and was really familiar with interstate highways having grown up at the intersection of two of the biggest in the country. After the songs came an announcement of a show. My begged sister gave in and drove me to the belly of the first punk scene I ever elbowed into.

Like kisses, first punk shows cannot be tainted. The band is always the greatest band you've ever seen, the kids the coolest, widest smiling you'll ever meet, the pit the most

mesmerizing and adrenaline thrusting you'll ever circle in. And so it was with that show. There were no trees or frogs, just punks. Everywhere. Standing on countertops, diving off countertops, hunched up on windowsills, packed behind me and in front and spilling all across the cement floor of the back room of the pizza shop. My whole self was shaking finally witnessing live what I'd heard in solitude from that radio. But still I had no idea what the band looked like. They were on the floor swarmed by those kids. I never once laid eyes on them as they stammered out their scrappy punk anthems about shitty high schools and love and youth and those highways.

My jaw was dragging around the floor in realization that this was what my life had lacked so far. It snapped back hard when the punk girl standing on the windowsill decided to change her shirt. Then it got whacked into my head by a passing sweat drenched shoulder as I made my first wiggle into the pit and the band crashed into the first Ramones song I'd ever hear played live. I was never so happy to be in pain, never so happy to be surrounded by a group of people, never so happy to be out of the woods.

# throw shit out!

**M**y mom's been hinting at it for years:  
"What's in those boxes in your closet?"  
"You could make some extra money  
selling some of that stuff on Ebay"  
"Why don't you throw some of that shit out?"

For all of her love and support I don't think she believed I'd ever get rid of any of my collected possessions from the last twenty-two years of existence. She was right. But I'm finally sort of moved out of my house for the first time in those many years. I've taken everything still currently useful to me (Which means collections of books, zines, LPs, 7"s, CDs, and a skateboard helmet) out of my room. For some records it's the first trip out since they first arrived through the post. This momentous occurrence made one thing clear: my mom was right, I have too much shit. Three carloads is not acceptable. How can I live a punk rock hobo lifestyle if I have to make three trips to move my shit somewhere? How can I hop trains with six boxes of records and a big one of zines? I must downsize. I must throw my crap out.



A year ago I made a resolution to never loan out my most cherished zines for they tend to never make it home. Now I'm thinking about donating them to a zine library. The rest would do well stuffed in the fire barrel out back. But I can't bring myself to do it. Each faded page is nostalgically viable like the rest of this aging crap. If it isn't useful its audible or visual or memory inducing or historical. If it isn't any of those I remind myself that it may come in handy for research some day.

And the records, the physical embodiment of my seven years trying to become a bigger and better punk, I can't possibly get rid of those. No, that would be suicide. But keeping them only invites more. Surely a record collection stopped dead in its tracks, unable to grow, is worse than none at all. But letting it grow is not an option. I've been to those houses and seen the shelves full of records buckling under the pressure. The owners ruled because they were genuine, honest, inviting, interesting people; not because of their gigantic record collections. I want to be like them, but I want to be mobile. I don't want a million records.

Property is weighing me down. I told my mom I was going to come home and pack up those comics and sports cards and try to sell them off.

*"Don't worry, we'll store them for awhile."*  
My face lit up. Would she take some records too?

**T**hey're everywhere. Spilling out of boxes, leaning against doors, holding up the end table, stuffed in boxes:

## **crap records**

The kind you buy on a whim at the thrift store. What's 60 cents anyway? Multiplied by ten it's 6 dollars, and at least five lousy '80s LPs you skip through once only to discover there's not a single danceable tune in the whole bunch. Then there's the sentimental records. Some were your parents, actually your uncle's before your mom stole them from him and you stole them from her. Now they're rotting in your room.

Some were gifts from ex-girlfriends—the novelty record with the funny kid on the cover that reminded her of you. It was christmas and you had

a pact to make one gift and get the other cheap. What's 60 cents when it means making your boy happy? You never even bothered listening to that one. You just filed it near the back of the box so you don't get too sad until the very end of your flipping. Its right next to the Elton John "Best of" that some jerk accidentally sent you instead of the Buddy Holly LP you won on Ebay. The other bidder, the sap that actually wanted Elton John, was happy with the Buddy Holly he was sent by accident so you got a refund and a free Elton John record. But who wants that? At least you can feel good for improving someone else's record collection.

So what do you do with these crap records? You obviously can't throw them away or the Elton John would have been gone years ago. You can't sell them. You were doing the store a favor by emptying out the dollar bin in the first place. Besides you can't sell nostalgic presents from girls. And certainly not your mom's LPs. You should probably return those since you only took them thinking they wouldn't want them. Three years later you don't want them either. But putting them back is too risky seeing as she doesn't even know they're gone. You could trade them at the

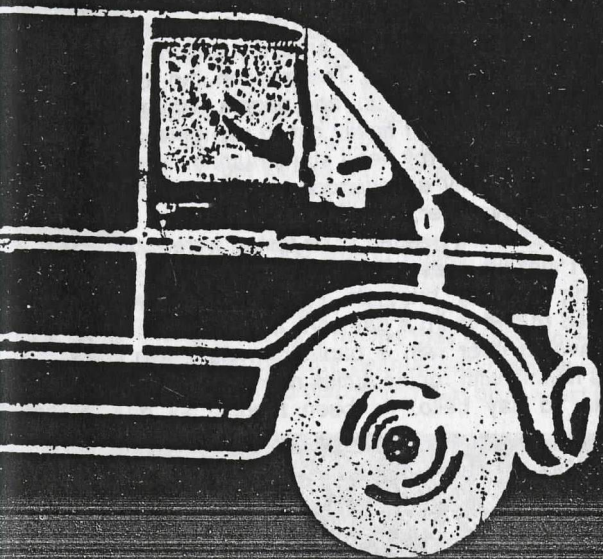


swap meet next Sunday. But that defeats the purpose. You're trying to get rid of things, not replace things. You just want to be able to move freely, pack up a few tapes, maybe keep just a few LPs, and head for the west coast and a whole new town. A new town with a new thrift store to poke around, new New Wave records to buy, and new girls to buy you kindhearted novelty records you can never throw away.



Our young  
tree smashing  
adventurer  
age 7, after  
appendicitis  
but before  
Eggies, punk  
rock, LPs,  
and sex.

# tour stories



# floriday

**W**e froze our asses off in West Virginia. I reached in the bottom of my bag and snagged my winter hat. Didn't think I'd need it so soon. We took our jackets off in Alabama. I started wondering why I'd never ventured south during the winter before, why it took a punk tour of the south, Florida and Texas to drag me out of the oppressive cold. Florida felt like spring, my favorite season. The season when annoying, too long dragged around, cumbersome jackets are finally shed. The season the snow melts, the flowers poke up, and people remember smiling. The season I finally get to see girls' skin again. The season my heart starts hurting. Was it possible this newly experienced simulated spring, placed in November, not April, could have the same effect? All it needed to be tested were a pair of heart sinking eyes. I'd find those where I left them on summer tour: St. Petersburg. I was surprised to find them a day early in Orlando. She had traveled over with a band from St. Pete. I busied myself with roadie duties making sure to be the last to say hello. I'd been moping all day,



avoiding people. I had reached the four-day mark when I start to get sick of having constant people around.

Finally I talked to her. She's flirty and flirts with everyone, or is just nice and likes to touch arms. This I can't take from a girl I think I could fall madly for and may have already. She smiles a lot too and has bangs and bedroom eyes. An old guy at the cheese factory said that about a secretly beautiful older woman we worked with. I knew what he meant right away. Eyes that send your heart into your lungs, then past them into your knees. Last tour I noticed right away how she flirted with everyone: a tragic accident about to smash into me. I flirted back, even though she seemed to be with a one of the guys in her band. It turned out she wasn't then, but was now. But they'd just kicked her out and went on tour. He wasn't around this time.

She was drunk, everyone was drunk. And, for the first time in weeks, I wasn't. I avoided the mass of kids in the bar and sat in the van listening to Dylan rattle *"the times they are a changin,"* thinking maybe they finally would. I ate a bagel with crunchy peanut butter and snuck off to the lake. I had discovered that on the last tour too.

It was thirty feet behind the club and the perfect spot for moping and avoiding. It started raining, even better.

Inside, the show went on. I made sure I was there to sell merch and load out. But in between and after, when everyone stayed to drink or crash at the motel next door, I snuck off to that lake. Hours later I went to the motel and talked to drunk slim-jim eaters. Then she came in. She showed me a photo. I know girls' secrets. I know they only show you photos so they can sit close and lean across. I know that means they want to kiss you, even when they have boyfriends; especially when he's on tour. I cheered up a bit after that and walked with her to the bar. I tried to get a photo booth picture with her but two of my companions jumped in and I only ended up with one-third of my head in one-fourth of the photos.

"A bad average," I thought as I swore off photo booths forever. They're hard to find in Kutztown or Nescopeck and never did me any good. I was always getting squeezed out of the frame or ambushed or losing them.

Everyone went to bed or got wrapped up in late night jam bands or wandered off drunk. She was drunk too but I didn't know until the next day

when she said *"I was drunk last night...the whole time. You didn't notice,"* I didn't. I blamed the stumbling on her shoes and the smiling on her mood.

For the past months I'd been lost in reality and in figurative. Lost in my head, lost on country roads, lost in the library, lost on the interstate. Lost. I'd wandered along train tracks, explored back alleys, and tromped over wooded paths. Always alone. So I smiled for the first time that day when she said yes to walking even though it was still raining, really late, and we lacked a destination. When I hesitated at the train tracks leading to an abandoned factory but she pressed on despite high heeled, nearly un-walkable shoes I grinned wider. She ruled much more than I already knew she did.

I'd never explored with someone before. It was less introspective, but better because I had someone to push my limits. Someone to hop the "no trespassing" fences I never would. Without her I'd still think Orlando was a club, hotel, and lake. Travel to see the world, trespass to see the rest. The night ended back in the club, me holding a pillow, her in the bathroom puking.

We shared a bed, but not in the way everyone thought the next day. I moved a little



further away when she confirmed her boyfriend's existence. But not before I admitted I wanted to kiss her. She puked again. For the first time in a year I was close to a girl and not drunk and still I was saying too much too soon.

The next day she drove a few of us to Tampa's record shops. I didn't yell shotgun. Better to feign disinterest in the backseat. Not that I could at that point, I'd blown my cover last night. Not riding up front left my longlong legs splayed in the middle backseat. My head obscured the mirror's rear view. The mirror contained her eyes. Her eyes met mine every five minutes. I didn't know if she could see past, over, through, or around my head at the traffic or if she was looking for eyes too. I sat up front next time. Her eyes had caused me enough trouble already.

At that night's show I disappeared again. But this time I didn't help sell merch. I never even set it up and barely tore it down. And this time I wasn't alone, I was with her. St. Petersburg was made for wandering. We ended up at the Gulf of Mexico, the first time I'd ever seen it. I rejoiced. Now I'd seen the Redwood Forests AND the Gulf Stream waters. Woody would be proud. We sat on a pier, me being amazed at the salt water, me

being a dumb hick from Pennsylvania Dutch country where we don't have oceans or gulfs or salt water. The gulf winds drove us up, we followed the water to a bridge. It was surrounded by manmade, sandbag-shaped rocks. She suggested we hop over the rail and sit on them. They ended with big, jagged rocks and the gulf waters.

*"That's a crazy idea,"* I thought. Which meant she would do it, I wouldn't, and she'd be better off for it. So I did it. She followed. We sat and talked like we'd done it for years.

The cold chased us up again. We hugged each other to keep warm. Her touch jolted me. Jolted my memory. It had been hours. We missed the entire show! I'd slacked on my duties. I'd never done that before. The band would be pissed.

We ran back and one block away heard closing band strains. We *had* missed the show! Mike, the drummer for the band I was traveling with, was outside glued to his cell phone girlfriend. He confirmed our suspicions, the show was over. We dispersed to find our respective friends. My band kept giving me sly looks still thinking something had happened that hadn't. They confirmed Mike was a big fat cell phone loving liar. The sets had been switched, they hadn't played

yet. I searched front and back for the merch set up. A terrible roadie it is who doesn't even know where the merch is.

Neither she nor I had wanted to go back: wandering was far better than another lousy punk show. But I was certain the band would hate me if I hadn't. When Dan said he didn't care I nearly waved her down and walked out. But we waited until the show was over, left the band with scattered equipment, and drove off.

*"To where?"*

*"The beach?"*

I really wanted to swim on this tour. I'd never swum in the ocean in November. It was too cold that night, but seeing an actual beach was the next best thing. We parked in a motel lot and hopped over curbs and fences. It had been years since I'd seen a deserted late night beach and the first time ever at 3AM. We scared all the birds, then they scared us. Then we walked to the seemingly-magnetic wooden beach chairs, the kind you rent cushions for. We didn't have cushions, or much room. They were designed for two with a space in the middle for a cooler and to prevent making out. Making out on the beach: clichéd all over again. But I'd never made out on the beach



ever, let alone had a first kiss there. It was a whole big night of firsts; most amazingly it was my first sober kiss in nearly two years.

We made it back to the after party at 5AM. Before I left the band I'd helped them load a huge case of beer into the van. With that much to drink we figured everyone would be sloshed on the floor sleeping. When I spied Adam through the window, lurking-drunk and dancing, I knew it was still a mess. Our entrance was a third wind and a dance party commenced. We danced for an hour and a half and finally found a bed, but not after moving the stereo and CDs and alluding several drunks. I warned Grath that he could sleep in the bunk above us if he didn't mind hearing our kisses, a stupid prediction. She had class at 9AM and my eyes were shut tight before I had time to drape my arm.

I woke up to the beginnings of morning. I figured she should go, I didn't want her too. I couldn't find a watch. I lay in bed looking at her, contemplating. I woke up again and she was gone. I made a frantic failed search. Not saying goodbye sure makes saying goodbye a whole lot easier.

I spend the next four days longing. When we made a wrong turn in Texas and saw Corpus

Christi I thought of the Avengers and her. Corpus Christi was on the other side of the Gulf of Mexico, the side we'd been staring towards. Sniff, sniff. Boo hoo! I missed her. Tour ended.

She emailed me and asked for my address. I gave her my family's address where I'd soon be for Thanksgiving. The Saturday after came and went with no letter. I was excited, then anxious, then worried. Her emails were hard to decipher. Was our kiss forgot? Was I out of line? Unjustly infatuated? Stupid? What would this letter say? Would it say sorry so long? Come and stay? I'll be there in a week? Maybe someday? Sunday I went back to Topton. I told my mom that I was expecting a Floridian letter. Would she please forward it? *"Love you mom."*

All week I worked 7AM to 3PM at the cheese factory. Every day I drove furiously home and checked the tin box. Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, nothing. Nothing, nothing, nothing. I worked my first Friday in nearly six months. That day the first snow storm of the season hit. I trudged out of the factory with the rest of my gray clad, grey clouded comrades and cleared an inch of snow off my weathered Buick. I drove cautiously, fearing rumors of accidents. The

main roads were fine. The five miles of back roads to Topton and the Cherry High House were worse. The roads had been cleared hours ago and were now snow drifted and slick.

I drove past the Amish vegetable stand reading "closed until spring." No more peanuts and potatoes and homemade bread. I frowned at this as a tractor trailer one car ahead slammed on the brakes. Its cab and trailer slid towards each other. The whole thing slid right and hit the power line. I hit my brakes hard and slid left, but with no oncoming traffic and at a fairly low speed I wasn't dead. Then I remembered to look behind me, which was now to my left. Braking to avoid my road blocking Buick was another jackknifing tractor-trailer. I looked ahead into the once corn, now snow covered field.

*"Fuck this,"* I smacked the gas to the floor and drove ten feet into the fresh snow. The second truck managed to save itself. The first truck had vanished over a small hill. I turned around and took an even more snow covered, but less truck traveled, back road. I let the snow and biting wind fly in while screaming *"I do not want to die,"* at the slush and ice all the way to the curb outside Cherry High.



I got out and kissed the cold pavement. There's nothing worse than dying for \$10.88 at the cheese factory. I vowed never to work again. I slipped and slid inside and rattled off my story. Still exhilarated and horrified by the closeness of death I pulled on my ratty jeans and rushed to the mailbox. There it was, finally. Never did warm Florida days seem further than in the middle of the first snowstorm of the season clutching that Tampa thrown letter. It was just as vague as her emails. But at least it didn't say "fuck off creep." She even closed with "if you're ever in town again." I wished I was.

I thought it  
was stolen, lew!

Columbus, Ohio. Three days until the end of another tour. Cold November night. Cute punk girl says hi. Hangs out with punks from the street all night. Making eyes. I make them too. Show ends. Pack up. Coat thieves! They've snagged my favorite coat. With the Avengers pin! I rode that coat in the first snow flakes of the year, the ones no one else felt but me.

I wore it in wind and rain, sun and shade. It had a map of Kutztown in the pocket in case I got lost. And matches from the Airport Diner in case a beautiful smoking girl needed a light. And my watch in case she needed time too.

No one else thinks it's stolen, just misplaced. I know it's stolen, but check the guitar cases five times anyway.

*"It's those punks from the streets,"* I cry in stupid desperation.

She wasn't after my heart, she was after my coat. She was the lookout. A clever ruse and I fell for it. Her friend, the one in the thin ill fitting coat, he took it. I ran out into the cold lamp-lit streets, hitting all the late-night spots. The all night donut shop, McDonalds, Wendys, the diner. Eyes peeled for that familiar coat, now running around on someone else's shoulders. Some guy stopped me to ask for a dollar.

*"Sorry man, I don't have a COAT!"* I blurted nervously.

After jogging seven blocks I realized it was forever gone. Still I looked. I knew I'd never catch the thief, but I wanted to spot him, chase him, dive for the coat, miss, and add some excitement to the

freezing night. It was making out to be a great story with a terrible ending.

That night I had a dream. It was spring in Kutztown. I was leaving the art building. As I walked past the corner of College Boulevard and Main Street I saw the punks standing on one corner, lobbing rocks at the townies doing the same on the other side. I kept moving, intrigued by the quarrel but not choosing a side. Not punk enough and not at all a townie. This dream is my reality. Always striving to make good with the punks, always sweating that they hate me and are trying to filch my coat.

Columbus Ohio. Two days until the end of another tour. Coldcoldcold January night. Cute punk girl making eyes again. This time I'm looking for her friend thinking he'll have the jacket on, not expecting me. I lurk around all night checking coat piles. Still completely certain it's been stolen. We load out. Coat still nowhere in sight.

*"What's that? You lost your coat last time you were here? Our friend has it,"* says the local band we met last time.

She had stuck it in the merch box, found it two weeks later, deemed it a lost cause and used it to test a silkscreen. It came in the mail three weeks



later not worth wearing. At least I have my pin, map, matches, and watch. Maybe I'll finally stop missing the bus.

# Carbondale

**M**ay the bird of prosperity shit on all your shoulders," the kindly, oil smeared, stubbled, gruff tow truck driver bellowed with a crooked smile as he clutched Jeff and Joe's shoulders. He slammed his rusty door, started, stalled, started, pulled away. Our first drama of tour was the best kind, fleeting but long enough to make us feel more alive, more resourceful, tougher. We would have been too if it had been us and not the AAA tow truck driver who tightened the throttle and got the van running. He was only supposed to tow.

"You better not tell anyone," he said.

We won't.

It was eleven or twelve in the morning. I'd been up for hours taking time to exploring the dirt strewn winter streets of Carbondale, Illinois. Another new town I thought I'd heard of but never

really had. And like most of the smaller towns on tour, I loved it. It was just my size. And when I was tired, sick, hungry, and dreaming of bananas it gave me a fresh fruit and vegetable store only three blocks in the direction I had set out in. I splurged on grapes too, went to the dilapidated park by the highway, and ate the two things that would serve as food for the next few days. Poverty hadn't set in, I was trying to avoid it. I snuck back into the sleeping house and "accidentally" woke everyone up.

We met that tow truck driver then went to a shiny giant bookstore. I read shiny giant zines and Japanese pick up lines. Everyone went to Ponderosa. I was determined to spend no more money that day so I drooled over potatoes. That night my surrogate band was playing the Lost Cross, the oldest punk house I'd ever met. For twenty-five years it has been passed from punk to punk. The basement was cold, dark, and cramped. Still the kids came out and packed in. Unfortunately this didn't warm things up.

After my band played I dragged the merch into the kitchen. One of the kids from the local band we'd be with for the next week introduced me to the five non-paying punks scattered nervously

about the kitchen. I threw the merch on the counter. Selling it at punk houses is futile so I made little attempt. The older crusty punk; with a Sandanista-inspired Mexican bandana around his neck, a tattoo on his chin, and homemade leather pants; offered me a beer. I hesitated, remembering resolutions to keep away from the stuff.

"*Whiskey?*" he tunneled.

I hesitated less. Took the flask. Let it warm me up. I felt like a cowboy or a tough old man. Neither of which I was. I sat hunched up on the tiny bucket next to my new friend. He had a bigger bucket. We talked: bands, train hopping, drinking, Carbondale.

I was beginning to like Carbondale more and more: vegetable stands, ancient punk houses, sagely whiskey sharing old punks. It was slowly becoming my new favorite town. The starry eyed girl in the corner didn't hurt it's chances. Her friend started talking to me. The old punk handed me an Old Style, Illinois' favorite beer. Three hits of whiskey and her eyes opened the bottle and pressed it to my shivering lips. She sat on the old punk's purposefully-vacant bucket. Her friend introduced us then left. We talked: Carbondale, Southern Illinois University, touring, medical



school, punk houses. We drank Old Style from bottles and cans until there was only one. We shared, then decided we'd both had plenty. The old punk sprang out of the living room and snuck me another bottle. She pulled me in that same room and kissed me. People whacked each other with sock loaded socks and lip launched beer from their bottles. An eighteen-year-old pissed in one. A twenty-four-year-old drank it, then threatened him. *"What should I do?"*

*"Run man."*

He took my advice.

Soon we were running too. Across the frozen night to the bar, kissing and avoiding curbs. The eighteen-year-old was there too, contemplating his new fate. I forgot how desperate small towns can be. And gossipy.

*"You better not tell anyone,"* she said.  
I won't.



# Kutztown stories

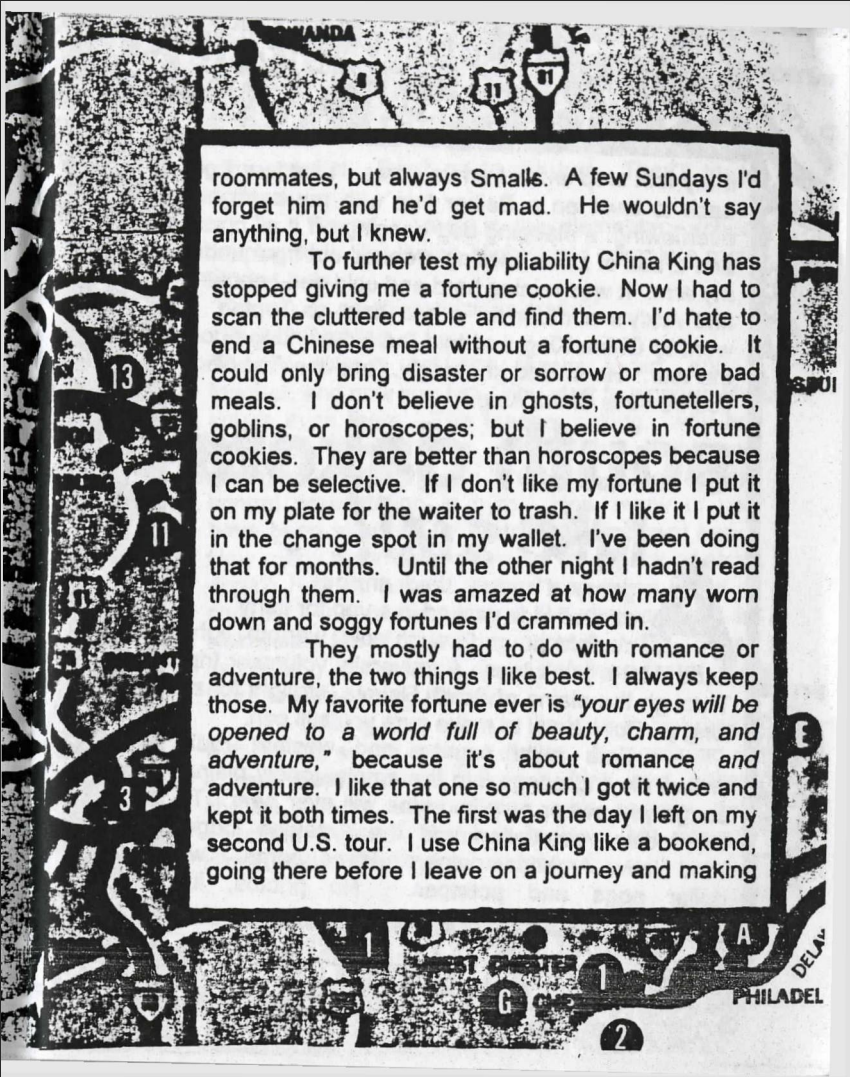
**Kutztown** (KUHTS-toun), borough  
(1990 pop. 4,704), Berks co., E central  
PA., 14 mi/23 km NNE of Reading. Agr.  
[livestock, poultry, grain, apples,  
dairying], mfg. (printing and publishing,  
trucks, apparel, food, bottled water,  
R+ steel foundry), limestone

# china king

I was bumming around Kutztown. Like always I ended the day at China King, my trusted most favorite supplier of sautéed broccoli and Coca-Cola. Something went wrong that day, the portion was too small, the sauce unsavory, the rice dry, the Coke flat. It was as if every thing I loved about China King had been reversed. Now my favorite Chinese restaurant was the worst. The waiter even pretended he didn't know my order. They *always* know my order. They know it so well that when I order a quart instead of a pint the chef comes out to double check.

The dry rice and flat Coke made me think about all of the weekly rituals and how grumpy I get when they change. China King started with one girl, then I left her and went alone, then I watched the other girl from my seat at the window, then she and I got take-out the day after we kissed for the first time. After she left town I went alone again. Three months later Smalls became part of the ritual. Then Andy too and sometimes all of the





roommates, but always Smalls. A few Sundays I'd forget him and he'd get mad. He wouldn't say anything, but I knew.

To further test my pliability China King has stopped giving me a fortune cookie. Now I had to scan the cluttered table and find them. I'd hate to end a Chinese meal without a fortune cookie. It could only bring disaster or sorrow or more bad meals. I don't believe in ghosts, fortunetellers, goblins, or horoscopes; but I believe in fortune cookies. They are better than horoscopes because I can be selective. If I don't like my fortune I put it on my plate for the waiter to trash. If I like it I put it in the change spot in my wallet. I've been doing that for months. Until the other night I hadn't read through them. I was amazed at how many worn down and soggy fortunes I'd crammed in.

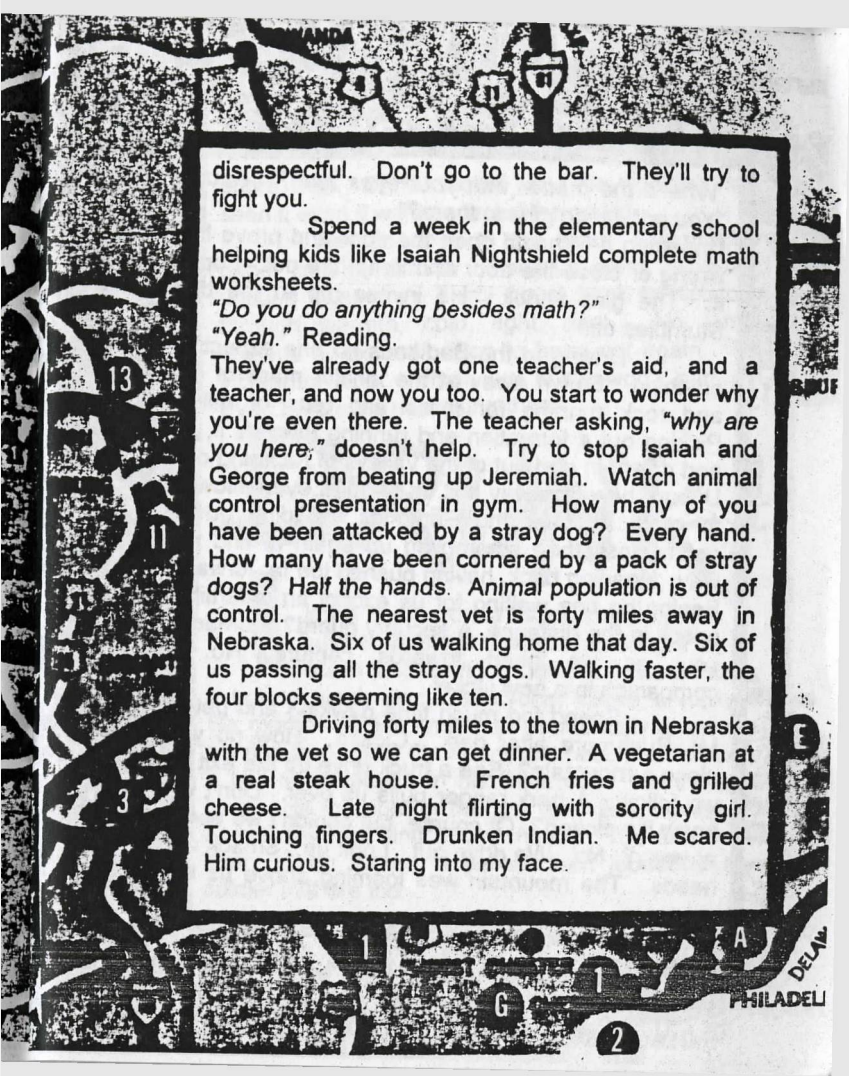
They mostly had to do with romance or adventure, the two things I like best. I always keep those. My favorite fortune ever is *"your eyes will be opened to a world full of beauty, charm, and adventure,"* because it's about romance and adventure. I like that one so much I got it twice and kept it both times. The first was the day I left on my second U.S. tour. I use China King like a bookend, going there before I leave on a journey and making

it my first stop when I arrive home. Last tour I got back to town on a Beiber bus with my backpack overflowing, a sleeping bag hanging off it all crazy, and a box of zines sticking crooked out from under my arm. It was raining hard and cold and I couldn't find Andy's number for a ride back to Topton. I went to China King and told the kid working about the tour. He smiled knowingly, *"and the first place you came is China King."*

## **south dakota take six!!**

**A** group of hungry, tired, anxious, excited kids packed in a van for thirty straight hours through cold, warmth, light, dark. Not a punk tour. A university volunteer trip. Through the plains of South Dakota, straight for so long you look back to make sure you still can.

Late night country and western radio shows playing songs into the empty, lonely plains; songs you swear only you nine will ever hear. To the Indian reservation and the Antelope lodge. Kind Native American owners. Three rooms. Two dollar eggs and potatoes. No photos, it's



disrespectful. Don't go to the bar. They'll try to fight you.

Spend a week in the elementary school helping kids like Isaiah Nightshield complete math worksheets.

*"Do you do anything besides math?"*

*"Yeah."* Reading.

They've already got one teacher's aid, and a teacher, and now you too. You start to wonder why you're even there. The teacher asking, *"why are you here,"* doesn't help. Try to stop Isaiah and George from beating up Jeremiah. Watch animal control presentation in gym. How many of you have been attacked by a stray dog? Every hand. How many have been cornered by a pack of stray dogs? Half the hands. Animal population is out of control. The nearest vet is forty miles away in Nebraska. Six of us walking home that day. Six of us passing all the stray dogs. Walking faster, the four blocks seeming like ten.

Driving forty miles to the town in Nebraska with the vet so we can get dinner. A vegetarian at a real steak house. French fries and grilled cheese. Late night flirting with sorority girl. Touching fingers. Drunken Indian. Me scared. Him curious. Staring into my face.



*"What's the matter with your eyes man?" Pause. "You got Indian girls in there?"*

Uncertain if I should open the door and prove him wrong or close the door and keep him out. I open it. The girls shriek. He invites me to the bar. Stumbles off.

Driving to the Badlands no one expecting anything. Blown away at the infinite mass of dirt and rock running for miles and tens of miles. Picking out a formation and running towards it, up and down, in and out of the valleys of rock and dirt. Unsure how far away it is or if you're even allowed to climb all over the Badlands. Sliding down, getting lost, then scrambling up again to find the way. Heading back, having pushed too far forward. Seeing no one waiting for us except an unfamiliar speck in the distance. A security guard? Stomachs sour as we head towards capture. No, a companion in a new jacket.

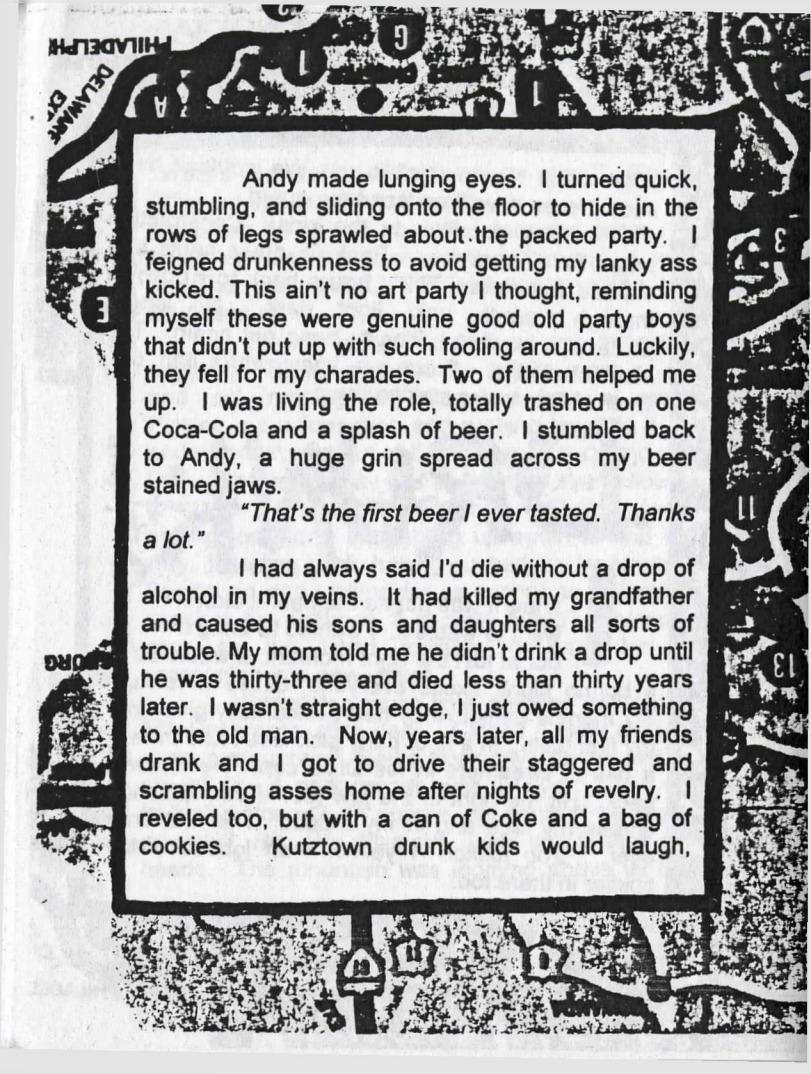
Spend too much time gawking and get to Mt. Rushmore after dark. Closed. How do you close a mountain? See a truck drive up the exit so we follow. A park ranger pulls us over. Don't we know it's closed? Of course, but couldn't we see it anyway? No. We drive out. Look up. Smack our heads. The mountain was looming above us the

entire time. Dark. Not lit up. We wouldn't have seen it even if we'd escaped the guard.

Say goodbye to the kids. Construction paper card for drawer. Pack up dress pants and unused sweaters. Thirty hours back to Kutztown through warmth, cold, light, dark. No longer anxious or excited. Plan to hang out again. The victorious nine. Plans we knew won't pan out. Even before we're making them.

# DRUNK!

I knew it was gonna happen. I didn't want to waste it. I wanted to bring it out at just the right moment. It would save a boring night, excite everyone, cause a ruckus. Six months earlier Andy had accidentally given me my first taste. In a fit of party sickness I had thrown a ball of streamers in his Dixie cup. He threw it back. Hit me right in the jaw too. Beer splashed across my face and in my mouth. The first drop ever. "You fucker!" I yelled, then lobbed a toy soldier in there too.



Andy made lunging eyes. I turned quick, stumbling, and sliding onto the floor to hide in the rows of legs sprawled about the packed party. I feigned drunkenness to avoid getting my lanky ass kicked. This ain't no art party I thought, reminding myself these were genuine good old party boys that didn't put up with such fooling around. Luckily, they fell for my charades. Two of them helped me up. I was living the role, totally trashed on one Coca-Cola and a splash of beer. I stumbled back to Andy, a huge grin spread across my beer stained jaws.

*"That's the first beer I ever tasted. Thanks a lot."*

I had always said I'd die without a drop of alcohol in my veins. It had killed my grandfather and caused his sons and daughters all sorts of trouble. My mom told me he didn't drink a drop until he was thirty-three and died less than thirty years later. I wasn't straight edge, I just owed something to the old man. Now, years later, all my friends drank and I got to drive their staggered and scrambling asses home after nights of revelry. I reveled too, but with a can of Coke and a bag of cookies. Kutztown drunk kids would laugh,



"Cookies? At a party?" I scoffed in disbelief at defending cookies.

I can vividly recall the years of stalwart teetotalling, but can't stab down the exact moment I knew that was all over. Years of watching friends drink started to wear down my resolve. Secretly courting Michelle, who had just broke it off with her boyfriend and spent hours confiding in me as she sipped a bottle of Boon's Farm asking, "*why don't you drink?*" might have had more to do with it. I swore she liked me, why else would she call right after kicking her boyfriend out? Why else would she demand to be the one to take me to my first bar when I turned twenty-one? The old college tradition I swore I'd never smile upon.

I went anyway. For the girl. We sat in a corner and played Megatouch, her favorite where you pick out differences between two painfully similar photos of nude women. When a kid from my curriculum design class spotted me and discovered it was my birthday he promised he'd be right back with a shot. I pulled Michelle's soft, sweated arm right out the door. We went to her house, she didn't kiss me, and I sulked home for the fifth time that month. I was in a bad way. I kept telling myself, thinking, knowing, but not really

knowing at all, that I needed a girl. It had been way too long and I was getting desperate. Four weeks earlier I'd sprung a desperate Fifth Street Diner invitation on a girl from photo class I'd never talked to. She said yes and ended up dating Andy two weeks later.

I was sort of sore until Michelle showed up in town again. But even crushing on her was a sign of utter desperation. She had been roommates with my last girlfriend when we were dating. She'd probably heard us having sex. Too weird, too desperate. But still I ended up at her house watching her drain a bottle of malt liquor. Dying to touch her I'd follow her to parties where she'd disappear, leaving me on the sofa amidst semi-strangers with no Coca-Cola in sight. Rushing outside to look for her I swear I see her forcefully kissing some BMX kid in the kitchen.

*"Yeah, I did kiss him. You saw that?"* she'd confide later.

*"That was the guy I used to hook up with. Do you think I screwed up? Should I not have kissed him? I don't know why I did it."*

She was sort of drunk, I thought.

*"Do you know how sometimes you just have to kiss someone. Anyone? You just have to."*

I did know. I knew with all my damn sneakers and socks. I knew right then staring at her sloshed eyes. And like every other moment I spent with her I was almost damn near certain that's what she wanted too. But I never did. I just sulked home for the sixth, seventh, eleventh time. Then I snapped. I needed a girl. I needed a kiss. Michelle drank, she kissed someone. I thought I knew what I thought I needed to do. But I couldn't possibly start drinking because of a girl. That spells certain and sudden alcoholism.

So I waited. And when I felt pretty good and girl free, I grabbed Andy's beer and took a sip. Silence. No cheers of awe and excitement. No fireworks. No shouting and merriment. No one had seen it. Save for Smalls who never gets too excited anyway. He told Justin. Justin told Andy. They didn't believe me. I did it again. They cheered. Finally, some fireworks. I took two more sips and by the time we started heading for the party I swore I was trashed. The air was sweeter. The cars faster and shinier, the lights brighter, Old Main older and more majestic, the night more



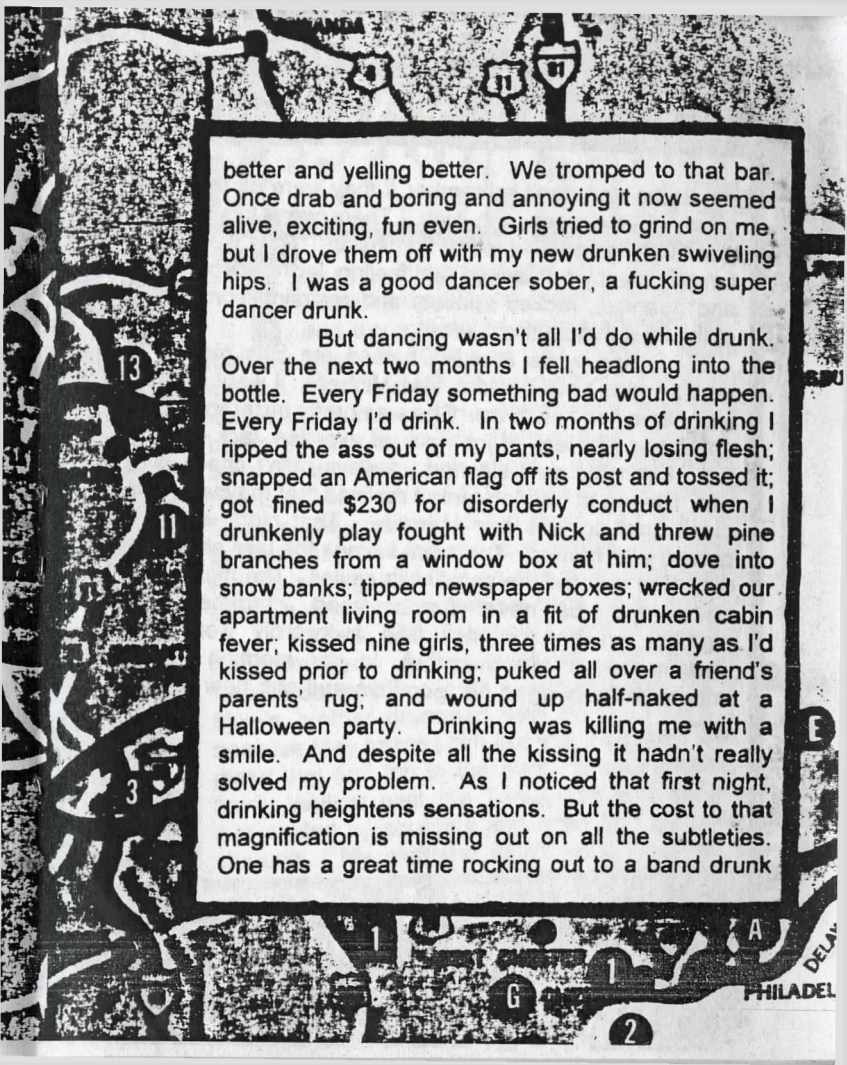
enticing. For the first time in my life I was a bit buzzed.

At the party I clutched my first Dixie cup of beer. It was terrible.

*"How the fuck do you drink this shit?"* I spit.

*"Fast,"* came Andy's reply.

I barely finished one when Smalls brought another. I started drinking that one fast too. In two beers I was loud, and jumping, and no longer buzzed. I was full on drunk. I hid my cup so Andy couldn't bring me any more. We all three went in the bathroom. There was a stereo on the toilet. I cranked it to ten and hopped up and down while I pissed. Andy was in the tub, Smalls in the sink. Pissing, all of us. After odd looks from those waiting in line I found another cup in my hand. Full. Soon I found myself "watching" a girl's bottle of Boon's Farm. Michelle's favorite. I was guarding it from others when it was me it needed guarding from. I soon realized why Michelle liked it so much. It tasted like candy. And smelt like girls. I'd finished half of it by the time the owner wrenched it from my berated knuckles. I'd gone from teetotaler to lush in less than four hours. And I loved it. Every minute. I was talking to girls and dancing



better and yelling better. We tromped to that bar. Once drab and boring and annoying it now seemed alive, exciting, fun even. Girls tried to grind on me, but I drove them off with my new drunken swiveling hips. I was a good dancer sober, a fucking super dancer drunk.

But dancing wasn't all I'd do while drunk. Over the next two months I fell headlong into the bottle. Every Friday something bad would happen. Every Friday I'd drink. In two months of drinking I ripped the ass out of my pants, nearly losing flesh; snapped an American flag off its post and tossed it; got fined \$230 for disorderly conduct when I drunkenly play fought with Nick and threw pine branches from a window box at him; dove into snow banks; tipped newspaper boxes; wrecked our apartment living room in a fit of drunken cabin fever; kissed nine girls, three times as many as I'd kissed prior to drinking; puked all over a friend's parents' rug; and wound up half-naked at a Halloween party. Drinking was killing me with a smile. And despite all the kissing it hadn't really solved my problem. As I noticed that first night, drinking heightens sensations. But the cost to that magnification is missing out on all the subtleties. One has a great time rocking out to a band drunk

but in the end can't remember if they were all that good. Same goes with girls. There were lots of them but it wasn't like other first kisses. They were fun and sloppy but lacked real feeling, lacked depth and nuances, lacked subtlety and restraint; some of the best things about kissing.

And while drinking helped me kiss nine random girls I still couldn't kiss Michelle. I went to visit her in her new town. She was pretty miserable about her life, lack of job, lack of exercise, lack of fun. Even my new sloshed up ways didn't cheer her. Staring at her fish tank, I realized that maybe I didn't want to kiss her anymore. That night we partied with friends. The more I drank the less she did. She reacted the same with smiles. The night ended with us never further apart, crammed together on her couch. She awkwardly went upstairs and I stretched out. In the morning I unexpectedly hugged her goodbye and she nearly cried.



# k-town punk k-town punk

**T**he radio station put on a punk show in the Student Union Building in 1995 and three hundred people showed up. I had one there in 2002 and 270 of them couldn't make it. My friend Mike's band played. His brother was their drummer. He drummed in one of the bands that played in '95. Both of them played in a band at the first punk show I ever attended in Kutztown, also at the SUB, also poorly attended. They've played the SUB too much they say. And so they know that the sound is terrible, and that the room's too big, and that no one is allowed from off campus, and that the campus cops get all nervous.

I lied. The first show I went to was in the Kutztown Park. A free show with the new band formed out of the pile of a local favorite, the one Mike's brother drummed with in '95. He'd quit because they treated him like shit. I couldn't wait to make that first trip to the park. It was exciting to finally venture past the Turkey Hill and hang out surrounded by squirrels and trees and no college students. My girlfriend didn't want to go to the

park. Too far to walk, stupid show, in the park. I eventually convinced her and she had a good time. Three months later I backhandedly broke up with her. More for lack of love than dislike of the park. Years after the break-up I still spend days and days at the park. And I always go there on first dates, just to be safe.

I set up another show at the bottom of Main Street, one block up from China King at Venue, a nonprofit art gallery. Sixty people showed up including three of the five girls on my crush list. One of the three was standing beside me, helping collect door money. She'd been first on the list and loved Kutztown Park.

Venue was in a basement with barely six-foot ceilings. It made for an awesome punk show. Before it was Venue the subterranean space was inhabited by "Just Shortys" one of the local bars that has since moved and dropped the "Just." When Nick learned of its old location and name he shot a spark before I could, "*now it makes*

sense." And indeed it did. Another Kutztown mystery solved. The Venue people loved me, and the show, and the money. But the owner of the China shop upstairs wasn't as happy. The bands still brag of how they rattled the China of Kutztown.

I came back after summer break ready to nourish the Kutztown punk scene and do more shows at Venue. I heard rumors that they'd moved out. I walked downtown and sure enough the space was for rent. Three years later someone finally took the sign down and put in an oxygen bar. Everyone laughed and gave it two months. Nick, Curt, and I went down on the Thursday of opening week. We asked if they'd be into doing "acoustic" shows. He'd have to wait and see he said. He'd only been open four days and we were the tenth group to ask him that. We felt stupid. The oxygen bar was doing really well and nine other people had the same idea. I left swearing to do a show at the laundry mat on Noble Street. *"Fuck legal shows. I hate those."*

Nick and Curt nodded in agreement, but still thought the oxygen bar might be better.

The hardcore twins used to set up shows in the fairgrounds next to campus. There was a day in Kutztown when you could say "the twins"



and everyone knew who you meant. Nowadays I get funny looks. A sure sign I'm too old to stick around much longer. The fairgrounds are terrible for shows. The room is one giant hallway. You could easily fit one thousand, but only fifty come.

No one supports the scene anymore. I say this often, but still had to force myself to shell out my last five dollars for the fairgrounds show set up by the new Kutztown punks. I made \$2 back by selling a zine, then spent one of them on a humus burrito and donated the other to the cause. I sort of had to; the girl who bought the zine lost her ass renting out the building to do the show. The bands were sort of terrible and the crowd quite bored, except for the six high school kids who smiled and whirled and stomped and sweated and had the time of their life attending their first punk show in Kutztown.

I might not have enjoyed myself as much as those six, but I haven't missed a punk show in Kutztown yet and I'm not about to start just because I don't like the bands. Besides, a few friends were there until they left halfway through. But new ones were there and they stuck around. A good sign. I bet *they'd* walk to the park with me.

# all this and more

I had kissed her before. Three weeks ago. We didn't do much else. She'd just got her nipples pierced. I figured they were sore. I was being nice. My friends said I was being stupid.

*"How could you not man, she was the hottest girl at the party."*

I knew that. I'd known it all summer as I replayed those vague traces over and over while throwing boxes at the box factory. Some would stay where I threw them. Some would fall and hit me on the head. Sometimes there weren't any boxes to throw and I'd sit around and be anti-social or, if I was feeling saucy, I'd defend Latinos and homosexuals. Arguing with Hazleton, Pennsylvania's white working class didn't change their mind about Latinos or homosexuals, it just changed their mind about me. They now suspected I was both and hated me for it.

When not sitting, throwing, or arguing I was making too many trips to the water cooler. Doing this I could waste one or two minutes every

PHILADELPHIA  
DELAWARE  
E

fifteen drinking water and five minutes every half-hour running to the bathroom to piss it out. No matter how much water I drank, the slow days were always terrible. Slow days meant a wandering mind and that meant more vague traces.

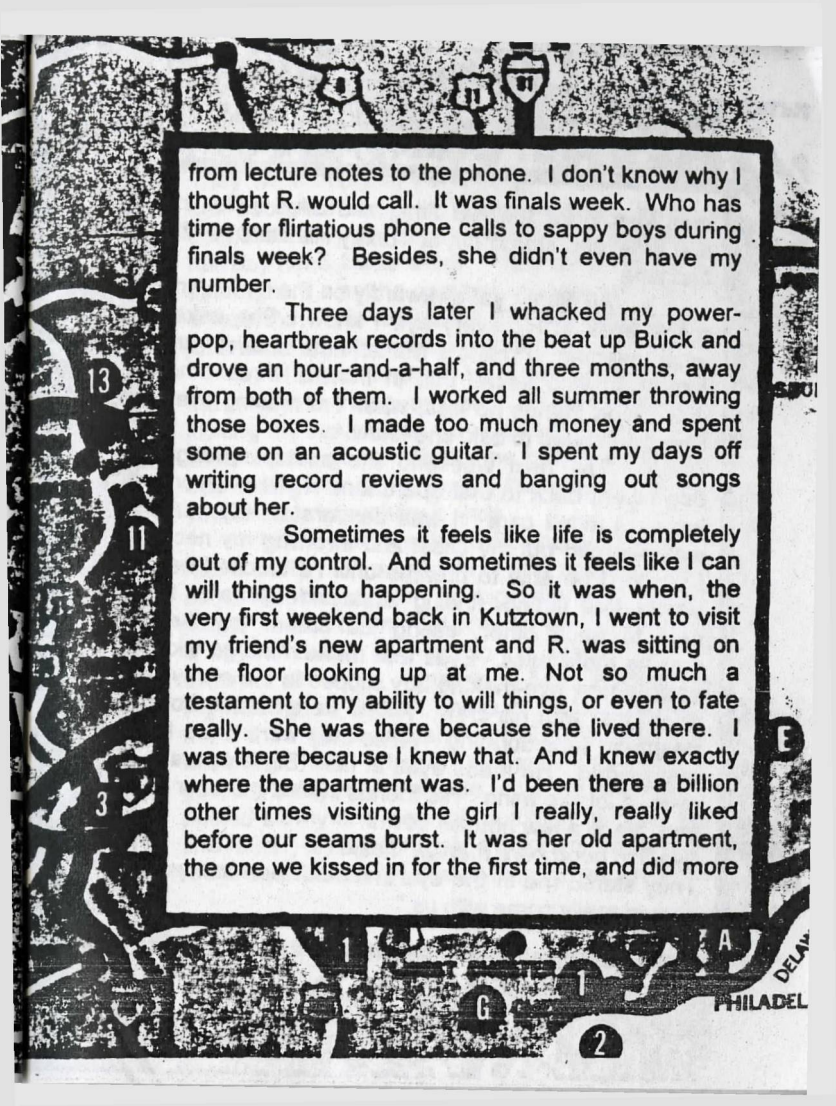
I only had two good memories of R. The first was from a party that fall at her house, but I had a girlfriend I really, really liked: I wasn't looking for new eyes to trip over. A month later me and the girl I really, really liked broke up. I tricked myself into thinking it was mutual. We both needed a break. When she called a week later to sew it back up I said no. My reason? R.

THE DAY after the break up a friend invited me to the Airport Diner and R. was there. It was the same diner the girl I used to really, really like and I had first crushed at. Now, six months later and three booths down R. was rubbing my hair, deliberately touching me when she needed to get out of the booth, and making crazy eyes. I started crushing immediately, false proof that not sewing with the girl I really, really liked was the right thing to do.

Now I was un-sewn but besotted with another. There was one week left until summer. One week to realize my crush. My eyes darted

13





from lecture notes to the phone. I don't know why I thought R. would call. It was finals week. Who has time for flirtatious phone calls to sappy boys during finals week? Besides, she didn't even have my number.

Three days later I whacked my power-pop, heartbreak records into the beat up Buick and drove an hour-and-a-half, and three months, away from both of them. I worked all summer throwing those boxes. I made too much money and spent some on an acoustic guitar. I spent my days off writing record reviews and banging out songs about her.

Sometimes it feels like life is completely out of my control. And sometimes it feels like I can will things into happening. So it was when, the very first weekend back in Kutztown, I went to visit my friend's new apartment and R. was sitting on the floor looking up at me. Not so much a testament to my ability to will things, or even to fate really. She was there because she lived there. I was there because I knew that. And I knew exactly where the apartment was. I'd been there a billion other times visiting the girl I really, really liked before our seams burst. It was her old apartment, the one we kissed in for the first time, and did more

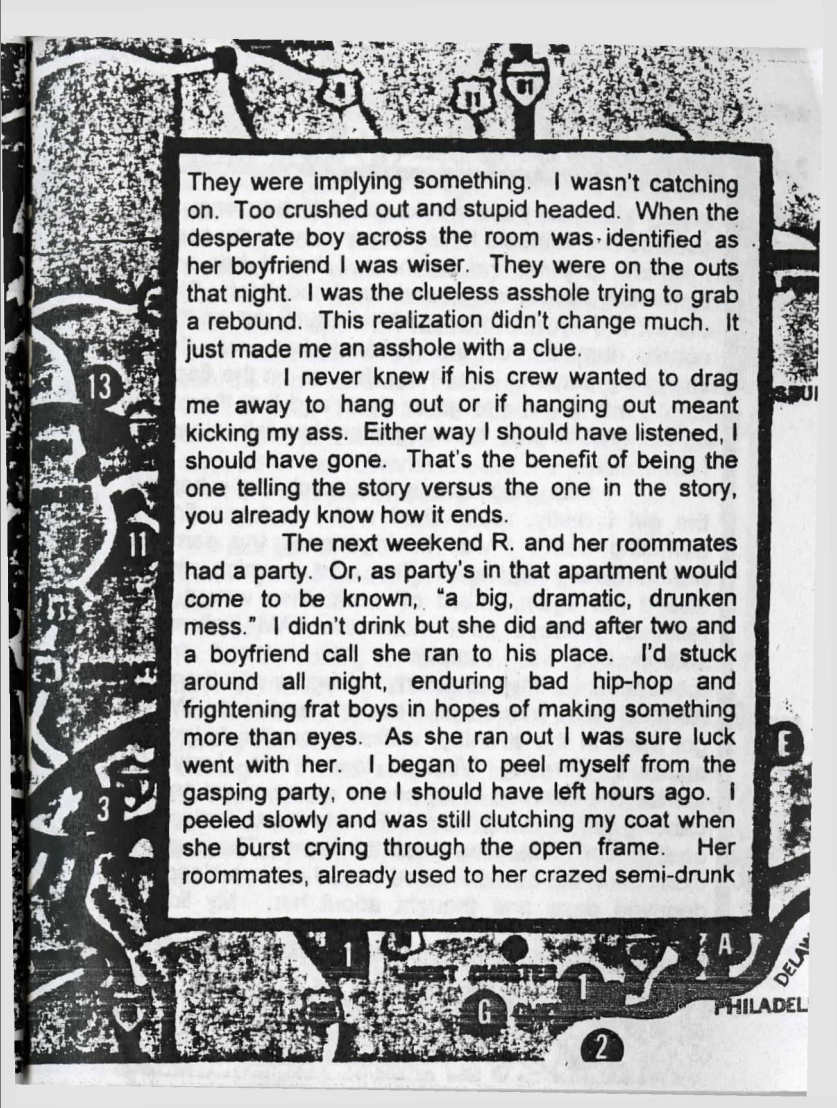
than kiss in for the first time, and cried in for the first time, and stared out at Turkey Hill stars for the first time.

All night I sat awkwardly on the couch and made eyes at R., every eye I knew. She asked what I wanted. I made a mental note to avoid any future girl who asked that in front of three other girls, good friends no less, when I'm making eyes. She didn't need to ask, she knew.

The next weekend like a stupid hungry dog I went back to that apartment. Now *everyone* knew. I didn't care. I was desperate. My heart was rammed out my chest and throttling my neck. I wouldn't be able to breathe until I'd touched her. We started flirting, finding useless reasons to sit next to each other, eating ice cream together, making more eyes. Eyes that made mine go wide when a new eye-making boy slipped in the always-open door with his crew. A few were friends from freshman year dorming. While they were there R. and I flirted. He made eyes at her. Big desperate eyes, a lot like mine. His friends invited me over to their place a few houses down.

*"No, I'm good here thanks,"* I said.

They stared me in the eye and said *"no man, you should really come with us."*



They were implying something. I wasn't catching on. Too crushed out and stupid headed. When the desperate boy across the room was identified as her boyfriend I was wiser. They were on the outs that night. I was the clueless asshole trying to grab a rebound. This realization didn't change much. It just made me an asshole with a clue.

I never knew if his crew wanted to drag me away to hang out or if hanging out meant kicking my ass. Either way I should have listened, I should have gone. That's the benefit of being the one telling the story versus the one in the story, you already know how it ends.

The next weekend R. and her roommates had a party. Or, as party's in that apartment would come to be known, "a big, dramatic, drunken mess." I didn't drink but she did and after two and a boyfriend call she ran to his place. I'd stuck around all night, enduring bad hip-hop and frightening frat boys in hopes of making something more than eyes. As she ran out I was sure luck went with her. I began to peel myself from the gasping party, one I should have left hours ago. I peeled slowly and was still clutching my coat when she burst crying through the open frame. Her roommates, already used to her crazed semi-drunk



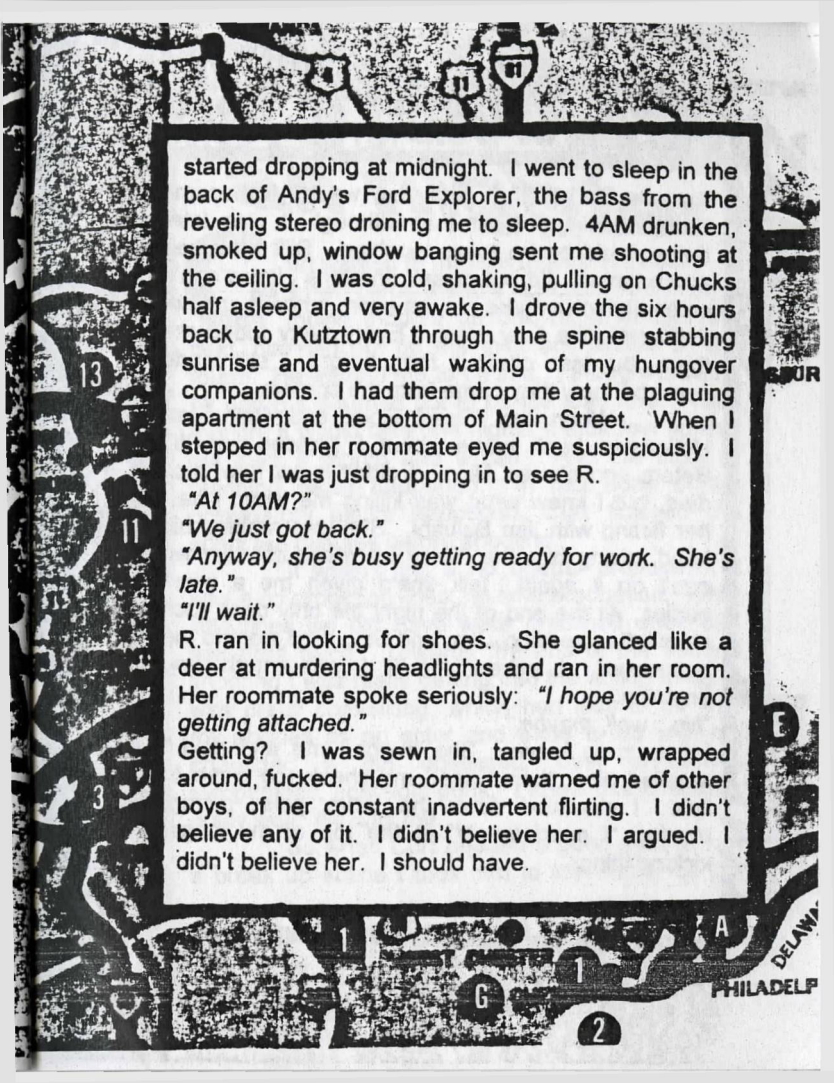
PHILADELPHIA  
DELAWARE  
E

crying after just three weeks, went to her room to console her. I should have put my arms in my coat. I waited to put them on her. I heard her sob something about him me and how I hadn't left. She rushed red eyed and hugged me, stuck me on the couch, turned out the light, kicked out the straggling partiers, kissed me, lay me on the floor, kissed me, told me to go to sleep and that there'd be plenty of time for touching later, then fell asleep. I never did.

GEORGE

I was lying across the exact spot where the girl I really, really liked and I had our first trembling kiss. I was having nearly the same breath stifling feelings. The next morning she kissed me again, called off work, then waved a relieved goodbye as I made the 9AM walk of shame back to campus. I'd promised my roommates I'd drive to a party in Virginia with them. As much as I wanted to, I couldn't back out. We got there in the evening; walked around a balmy, quiet, invigorating Virginia town; met Andy's friends; then partied. Fifty people were packed and dancing in the living room. Twenty were drinking on the roof. Thirty were on the lawn. The cops didn't care, the partiers cared less. I sat in a sleep-deprived daze and thought about her. My lids

12 11 10  
VIRGINIA



started dropping at midnight. I went to sleep in the back of Andy's Ford Explorer, the bass from the reveling stereo droning me to sleep. 4AM drunken, smoked up, window banging sent me shooting at the ceiling. I was cold, shaking, pulling on Chucks half asleep and very awake. I drove the six hours back to Kutztown through the spine stabbing sunrise and eventual waking of my hungover companions. I had them drop me at the plaguing apartment at the bottom of Main Street. When I stepped in her roommate eyed me suspiciously. I told her I was just dropping in to see R.

*"At 10AM?"*

*"We just got back."*

*"Anyway, she's busy getting ready for work. She's late."*

*"I'll wait."*

R. ran in looking for shoes. She glanced like a deer at murdering headlights and ran in her room. Her roommate spoke seriously: *"I hope you're not getting attached."*

Getting? I was sewn in, tangled up, wrapped around, fucked. Her roommate warned me of other boys, of her constant inadvertent flirting. I didn't believe any of it. I didn't believe her. I argued. I didn't believe her. I should have.

During the next few weeks it became heart-throttlingly clear that although it was later there would be no more touching. Still I crushed and haunted. I'd put myself on paths I knew she'd cross, trying to make run-ins seem random and not deliberate like they were. Every party found me there, but less obvious than before. I still made eyes, but now they came from the corners.

When the "Dead Rock and Roll Star" Halloween bash came about I dressed as Stiv Bators and she as Nico. I didn't know how Nico died, but I knew what was killing me when I saw her flirting with Jim Belushi. She was rubbing his hand, giving him the *"sorry we made out, but we can't do it again,"* talk she'd given me a week earlier. At the end of the night the only dead rock stars left were Nico, Jim, and Stiv. She went to the bathroom. I asked Jim if I was interrupting anything.

*"No...well, maybe."*

I got up to leave. She hugged me and said I smelled nice, then kissed my cheek too close to lips. I stumbled down the stairs, pulse racing, blurting *"I need lunch!"* at the top of my lungs, kicking things.



# all nighter

**C**urt wanted to make a movie. He had a new camera and a concept. A movie thought up one night, written the next, planned out on the third and filmed on the fourth. He wanted me to be in it. I thought it was a bit part but it turned out to be the lead role. I also thought it would take one night. It took four spread out over a month and a half. And the night of planning never happened. In fact none of the preparatory nights happened. Curt finished the script ten minutes before shooting.

It wasn't just a no budget production, it was a no props, no lines, no time production. What little lines we did have were practiced once and delivered twice. Towards the end of the second shooting I was really getting into the acting thing. I was pretty convincing, which had less to do with my abilities as an actor and more to do with my character: a girl obsessed, over emotional, sympathetic, nostalgic punk. I knew this character really well. He was me.

So when Curt needed a good spot to film a break up scene I took him to the bench by the

PHILADEL

PHILADELPHIA  
DELAWARE  
E

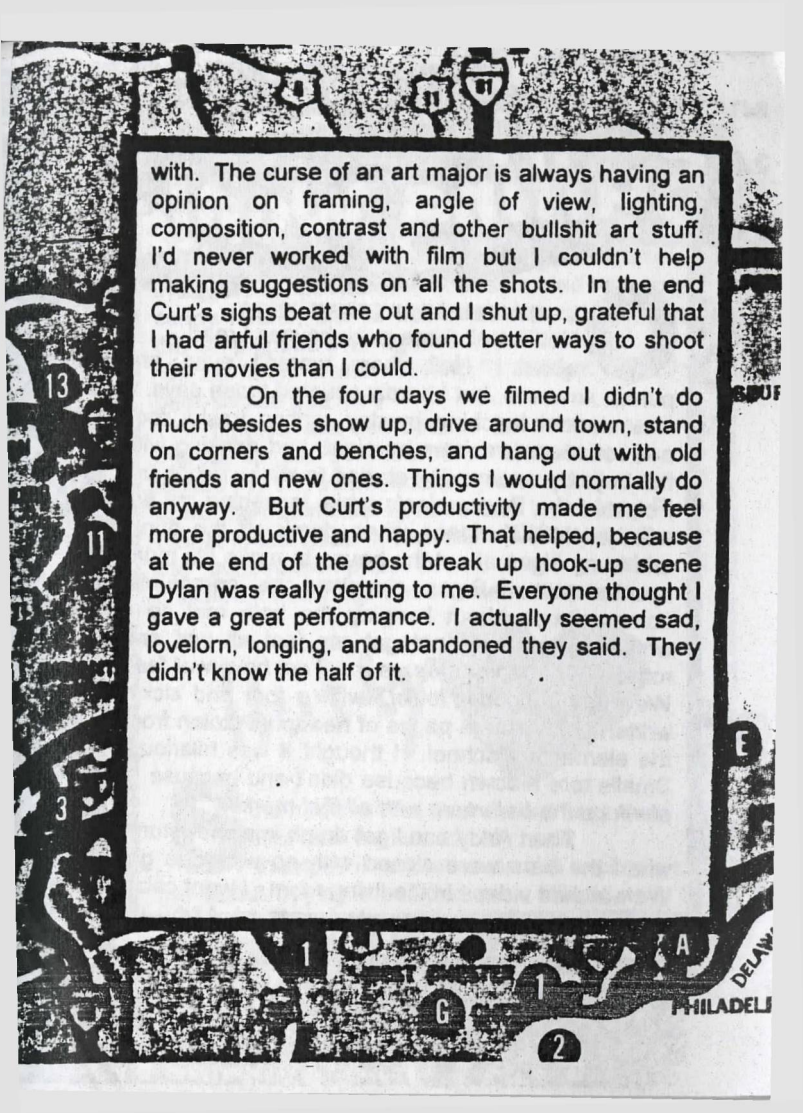
Quality Shoppe with the hearts cast in the feet where I once cried over a girl. And when he needed a song for the post breakup hook-up I knowingly popped on the most heart tugging, wandering Bob Dylan track on my mom's beat up best of. I make it sound like I was the only one doing anything. I wasn't. Nick was the bitter, semi-depressed, sarcastic, but adorable, smiling Indie rock kid who tormented me. He was all those things in his own life except *my* tormentor, he did that to himself. So much so that after Curt filmed Nick's suicide scene we all secretly crossed our fingers, hoping it wouldn't become prophetic.

ASHLEY  
ORD

Ashley played my love interest. Her friend Jessica played a random girl or, I think, a girl I have dreams of dating while dating the girl Ashley is playing. This is funny because while we performed multiple takes requiring me to stare lovingly into Ashley's eyes I was liking Jessica more and more. Their characters were named Gina and Janine, the same as my only real ex-girlfriends. This was ironic and scary especially since I'd only know Curt for three months and was single the entire time.

Curt was the strangest director I'd ever worked with. But, as I had to keep reminding myself, he was the *only* director I'd ever worked

11  
13



with. The curse of an art major is always having an opinion on framing, angle of view, lighting, composition, contrast and other bullshit art stuff. I'd never worked with film but I couldn't help making suggestions on all the shots. In the end Curt's sighs beat me out and I shut up, grateful that I had artful friends who found better ways to shoot their movies than I could.

On the four days we filmed I didn't do much besides show up, drive around town, stand on corners and benches, and hang out with old friends and new ones. Things I would normally do anyway. But Curt's productivity made me feel more productive and happy. That helped, because at the end of the post break up hook-up scene Dylan was really getting to me. Everyone thought I gave a great performance. I actually seemed sad, lovelorn, longing, and abandoned they said. They didn't know the half of it.



# Sailing world

**O**ur apartment was getting boring. Not like all those punk houses I read about. Hell, there weren't even any punks, save me, but I hardly counted those days. I was student teaching by day, writing trashy rock and roll record reviews by night, and drinking with frat boys by weekend. I started to shake things up. I blasted the Descendents while loosening my tie, watched NOFX videos when drunk off the drink, and hung signs about the house to make life more spontaneous. Signs disguised as communist communiques about hanging the bath mat so it would dry out and not get my feet all wet and rotten. *"Dear comrades we must not have wet feet. We must hang our towel,"* with a foot and sickle written on two huge pages of newsprint stolen from the elementary school. I thought it was hilarious. Smalls tore it down because didn't and because *"it stunk up the bathroom with all that marker."*

Then Andy and I got drunk in a snowstorm when the bars were closed with no where to go. We watched videos in the living room. I went cabin fever apeshit, spitting candy hearts at Andy, us

spilling beer on each other. I spied Jeff's sailing magazines.

"So unpunk," my beer-drenched brain mused.

I ripped them up, then went to bed; the apartment in shambles, beer on the floor sprinkled with soggy candy hearts, bits of sail boats interspersed, and the lamp tipped over right in the middle.

"It'll be funny in the morning," I thought. Another beer-addled bad idea.

Ten minutes later Jeff opened the door screaming. I crept to the bedroom door and locked it. He tossed my snowbank soaked jeans into the ice out front, then stumbled upstairs and tossed my Punk Planet in the toilet. It took me a week to dry it over the construction-paper-littered heating vent. I checked it every night as I loosened my tie.

Huffy 

**S**he had the bike chained out back the first time we kissed. My heart thumped in adoration as she excitedly told me about buying the faded pink, dilapidated, big

PHILADELPHIA  
DELMAR  
A  
seat, hubcapped bicycle from the thrift store on route 222.

"I never even ride it," she smiled.

*"Except the time I took it to the record store and strapped the record to the back."*

Most would think this stupid. After all, the record store was only two blocks away. But I was in love and so I found this cute, fun, and inspiring. She kept the bike chained in the back of her apartment building to a dying, chipped picket fence that was no longer white, no longer stranding straight, and no longer keeping anything out.

At the beginning of the summer we broke up and she moved back home. She crammed and packed all her possessions in her car, but couldn't make room for that bike. She gave me the combination to the lock engraved on a little tin circle that hooks to a key ring. She wrote it down for herself. She still planned to come get it or maybe just visit and ride it around town or just to that record store. But for the meantime it was mine, I could ride it if I wanted.

That Fall I lived at the top of Main Street far from the bike. It stayed chained to that fence for months before I finally walked down and freed it. My heart was in need of resuscitation, my veins

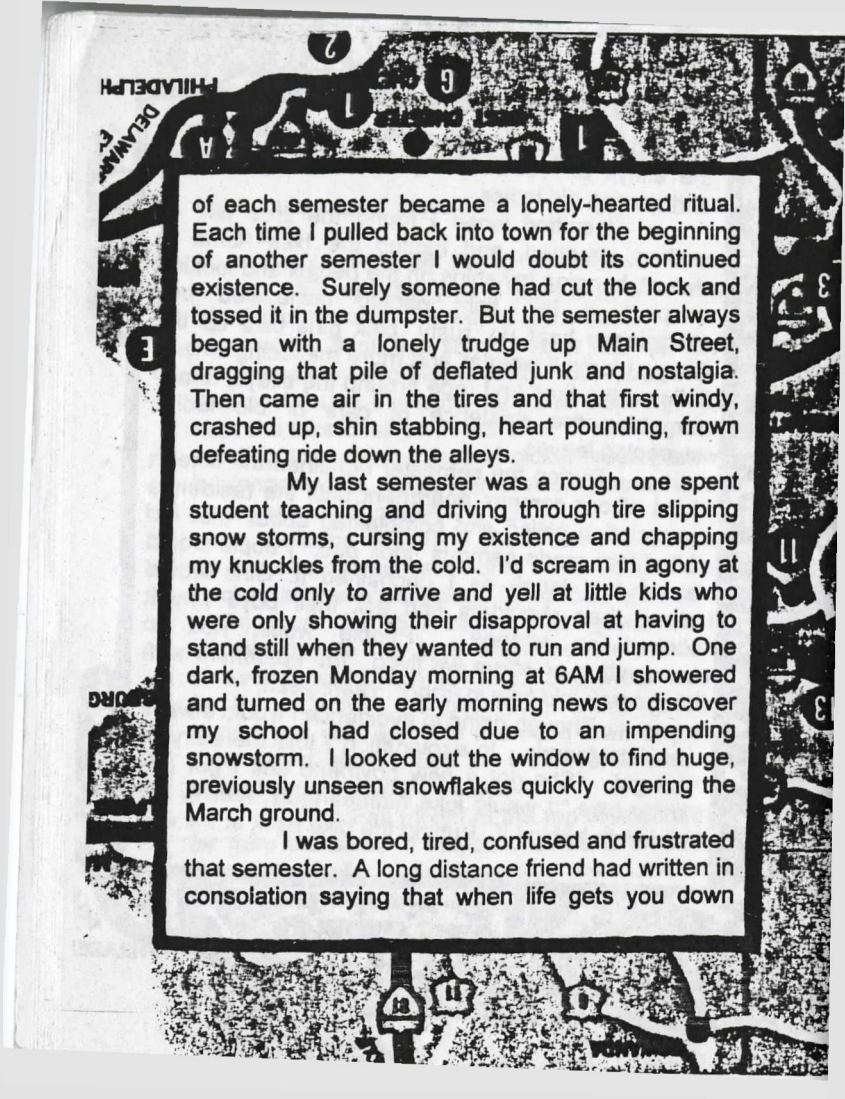


in need of adrenaline. I wanted to cruise around the alleys and throw things, hopping over curbs and scaring old ladies.

I sniffed when I found the tires flat. I walked, dragged, and battled the bike home in defeat; banging my shins on the pedals and looking suspect: a tall, tight panted disheveled boy dragging a beat up, rusty, pink girls bike up the alley. I looked weirder and more menacing when I inflated the tires and rode around the alleys, nearly forgetting the existence of cars or old ladies sweeping leaves.

During the semester I chained the bike in front of our campus apartment until the residence association called and complained about *"that old bike"* that made campus *"look bad."* People would sneer and laugh as I unchained it. Girls would shrug their shoulders and ask their boys why it looked so strange. People would nod in recognition of where we lived, *"the apartment with that crazy, old bike in front? Yeah, yeah."*

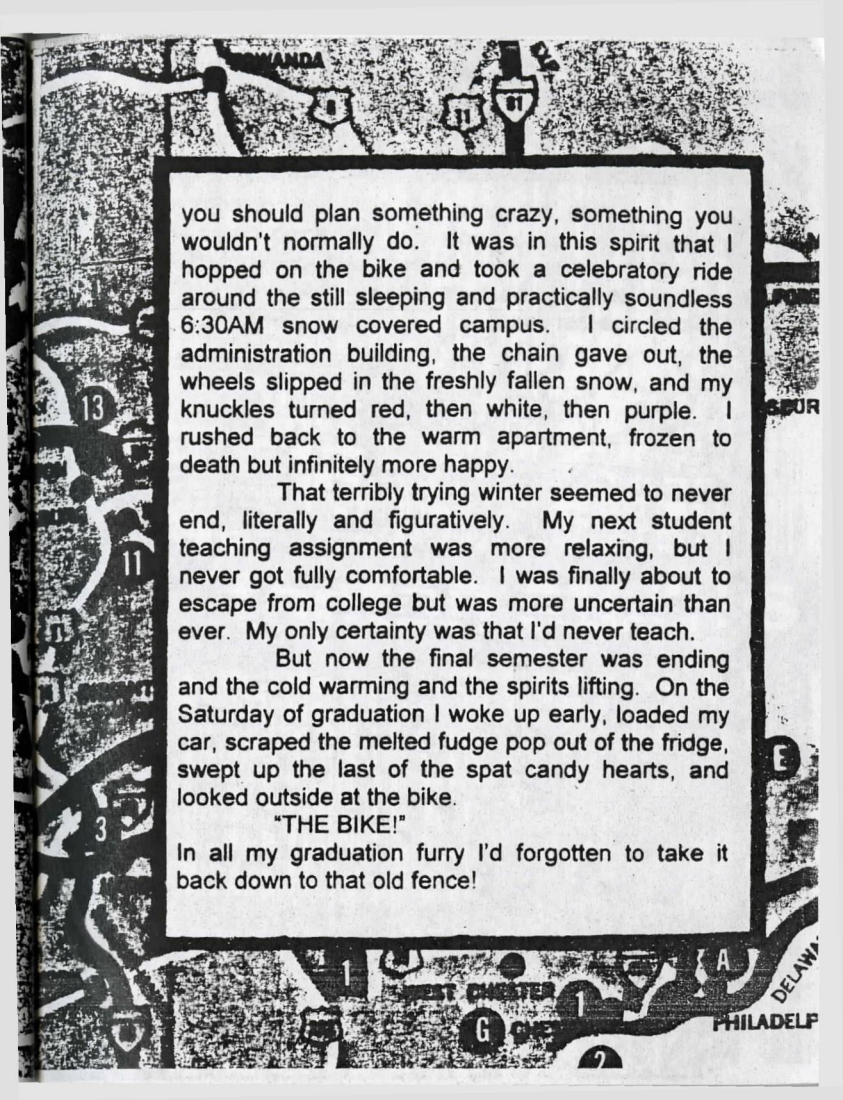
Though riding in avoidance I would always run into friends. In explanation I told the story of the girl. *"She got a new boyfriend and I got this shitty bike,"* I would joke halfheartedly, feeling the sad truth behind it. Putting the bike back at the end



of each semester became a lonely-hearted ritual. Each time I pulled back into town for the beginning of another semester I would doubt its continued existence. Surely someone had cut the lock and tossed it in the dumpster. But the semester always began with a lonely trudge up Main Street, dragging that pile of deflated junk and nostalgia. Then came air in the tires and that first windy, crashed up, shin stabbing, heart pounding, frown defeating ride down the alleys.

My last semester was a rough one spent student teaching and driving through tire slipping snow storms, cursing my existence and chapping my knuckles from the cold. I'd scream in agony at the cold only to arrive and yell at little kids who were only showing their disapproval at having to stand still when they wanted to run and jump. One dark, frozen Monday morning at 6AM I showered and turned on the early morning news to discover my school had closed due to an impending snowstorm. I looked out the window to find huge, previously unseen snowflakes quickly covering the March ground.

I was bored, tired, confused and frustrated that semester. A long distance friend had written in consolation saying that when life gets you down



you should plan something crazy, something you wouldn't normally do. It was in this spirit that I hopped on the bike and took a celebratory ride around the still sleeping and practically soundless 6:30AM snow covered campus. I circled the administration building, the chain gave out, the wheels slipped in the freshly fallen snow, and my knuckles turned red, then white, then purple. I rushed back to the warm apartment, frozen to death but infinitely more happy.

That terribly trying winter seemed to never end, literally and figuratively. My next student teaching assignment was more relaxing, but I never got fully comfortable. I was finally about to escape from college but was more uncertain than ever. My only certainty was that I'd never teach.

But now the final semester was ending and the cold warming and the spirits lifting. On the Saturday of graduation I woke up early, loaded my car, scraped the melted fudge pop out of the fridge, swept up the last of the spat candy hearts, and looked outside at the bike.

**"THE BIKE!"**

In all my graduation flurry I'd forgotten to take it back down to that old fence!



With an hour left until the ceremony,  
wearing my fancy pants and disturbing packs of  
trudging, camera wielding parents; I rode that pink,  
rickety son of a bitch on two flat tires down Main  
Street one last time

COMMONWEALTH OF PENNSYLVANIA		CITATION NO.	
NON-TRAFFIC CITATION		P2629911-4	
SUMMONS			
Case No. 22-0367		16666336	
104 Main St. Suite 178, Radwail, PA 19522		25566137	
LEWIS W		HOUSTON II	
175 West Wallon Rd, Nesqueh, PA 19875			
<input type="checkbox"/> White <input type="checkbox"/> Black <input type="checkbox"/> Asian <input type="checkbox"/> Hispanic <input type="checkbox"/> Native American <input type="checkbox"/> Unknown	<input type="checkbox"/> Male <input type="checkbox"/> Female <input type="checkbox"/> Unknown	<input type="checkbox"/> 16-17 <input type="checkbox"/> 18-24 <input type="checkbox"/> 25-34 <input type="checkbox"/> 35-44 <input type="checkbox"/> 45-54 <input type="checkbox"/> 55-64 <input type="checkbox"/> 65-74 <input type="checkbox"/> 75+	<input type="checkbox"/> Driver's License <input type="checkbox"/> Operator's License <input type="checkbox"/> Other
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<input type="checkbox"/> Disorderly Conduct <input type="checkbox"/> Harassment <input type="checkbox"/> Sexual Touch <input type="checkbox"/> Other		<input type="checkbox"/> Criminal Trespass <input type="checkbox"/> Public Drunkenness <input type="checkbox"/> Purchase, Consumption, Possession or Transportation of Liquor or Malt or Brewed Beverages	
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DEF DID RECKLESSLY CREATE THE RISK OF, OR CAUSE PUBLIC INCONVENIENCE ANNOYANCE OR ALARM BY A BREATHING A PHYSICALLY OFFENSIVE COMBUSTIBLE WHICH SERVED NO LEGITIMATE PURPOSE, TO WAST DEF PULFLO PLANTS FROM THE BEING LOCATION.		2/16/83 0118 Sat KUTSMAN 371 W. Main St.	
271 W. Main St.		410 81	

What I get for throwing  
drunken plants on main st.



# topton stories

Topton, borough (1990 pop. 1,987), Berks co., 16 mi/26 km NE of Reading, RR junction. Mfg. (fabricated metal prods.); agr. (apples, grain; poultry; livestock; dairying). See Mt. Ski Area to E. Founded 1859; inc. 1875.

Andy and I at the  
1st annual Cherry High  
house Pirate Party.

# Comin' round the bend

**A**fter graduation I left Kutztown and moved four cow-and-corn-infested country miles away to Topton with Andy, Kat, and Laura. Topton is a small town built of rows and rows of old houses, a hardware store, a florist, a few crafts stores, an old hotel, a ramshackle post office, and two pizza places. All the sidewalks tilt in different directions, and eyes look upon the young with suspicion. Especially college kids, as they are few, new, and most likely the ones who threw those beer bottles in the backyard.

Aside from distrusting glares no one bothers me. Not even the old men who wander the streets, sit on stoops and speak in deep Pennsylvania Dutch accents. They're quiet and content with no job and nowhere to go, just like me. Inspiring fall days were spent on the bleachers of the baseball stadium reading or trying to write. Nights were spent wandering past the 144-year-old Topton Hotel or skating on the small bank by the basketball court.



The benefit of our apartment was having the extra space that stuck off the building. Good especially because that's where my room was. My sleeping space was a twelve by four-foot sunroom with six-foot tall windows, too sunny in the summer and too drafty in the winter. I'm used to tight spaces but this would have crammed me to pieces it hadn't been for the foyer. It was bigger than my sleeping space and large enough for my broken copier, piles of scratched records, broken stereos, a smashed typewriter, my big blue bike, and hundreds of random photocopies. It must have killed my roommates to trudge through all that to get inside.

Outside my five six-foot windows I could see the corner of Cherry and High streets that gave our building its name. The three story brick building was once the volunteer Fire Company. Now it was pricey high-ceilinged apartments for college students and those like me who forgot to move away. Also outside my windows, only fifty feet away, were the train tracks. At first I was excited by their close proximity as I wanted to hop them. Then I found out they only went super fast. And came often, especially late at night, blowing their whistles from one end of Topton to the other.

Instead of giving me a ride they just woke me in a fright and made my traveling foot itch.

# shopping in topton

The hardware store:

**T**he teenager I wasn't expecting looked at me bemused and sympathetic. My debit card was over drawn and my wallet empty. I put the plunger back. I'd just clogged our toilet for the first time and I couldn't even afford to clear it. I picked up a stick on my way home. Cheaper and nearly as effective. Next time I went it was an old guy, the kind I was used to seeing at hardware stores. He measured six feet of rope. I asked if it was enough to save the bird stuck in our wall. He said he didn't rightly know. I pedaled fast back to our apartment. Our landlord came the next day and said the bird had probably found its way out. We all knew it had died. I knew it was because I was too scared to cut a hole in the wall. I only visited the hardware store in emergency situations.

### Tony's Pizza (both):

There was a Tony's pizza on one corner and a Tony's pizza on the other. We assumed they had the same owner. One was just bigger and fancier. When Jane said she'd been driving to Topton for years to eat Tony's we got some for ourselves. It was terrible, horrible, the worst pizza ever. Next week we went to the other Tony's to buy forties and pizza. It was apparent from just looking at the menu that this was a totally different Tony's. And it was really good, just like Jane had said. I called and apologized. The tale of two Tony's still plagues. And I still threaten to make *"death to false Tony's"* fliers.

### The diners:

There are two. But neither are open 24 hours or even after 7PM. So I don't classify them as real diners. I took Gretchen to one when she stopped by to confide in me about relationship problems. The food was cheap and really good; making it hurt that much more to know they close so early.

### Hess:

When living in Kutztown I became semi-obsessed with the Turkey Hill gas station/convenience store at the end of Main



Street. Hess is Topton's Turkey Hill, right at the edge of town and always open, you can buy cookies and a Coke anytime you want. And make eyes at the cute punk girl behind the counter, if she wasn't a teenage boy in an Abercrombie sweatshirt who laughs at your big dumb gloves when you slap them on the counter so you can scrounge quarters out of your too tight jeans.

#### The video store:

This never seemed to be open when I walked by. The first snow storm sent me there on foot in search of '80s romance films. My cracked, faded, scotch taped license had the owners suspicious. So suspicious that Andy and Kat said they called while I was making my way home. I freaked out, thinking they wanted the movie back. I cut him off and started screaming, *"fuck this bullshit, how dare you, blah, blah, blah."*

Andy said he was more proud of me than he'd ever been. He and Kat heard the whole conversation, they were standing right behind me. I told the guy I'd had enough and was going to return the video. I was even going to give him the two Cokes. If he wouldn't give me my money I was just going to leave them. He was fucked.

The minute I walked in the store I began apologizing, feeling stupid and childish for squelching. He too apologized and said I had misunderstood him. He was still sort of shitty but I felt so bad that I would have paid *again*. When I got back still clutching the bag Andy said I let him down more than ever before. I shouldn't have given in, he said. The guy was just trying to keep a customer. Now I felt doubly stupid. Stupid for yelling, stupid for caving. Not renting from Blockbuster was never this difficult.

#### **Herman's Drive In:**

Early October nights Andy and I would walk to Herman's Drive In for ice cream, then wander over to the soccer field to relive our sporty childhood while rooting for the Tipton High Bullets. Hidden in the shadows at the edge of the field we'd get way too excited. We'd get nearly as confused. We had no idea which team was which.

## how to get to Kutztown

I tried to walk to Kutztown but a couple picked me up. He said he knew how it was to walk. She laughed when I asked if they went to the college.

*"No...I'm expecting."*

They must be excited?

*"No, scared."*

But he had a good job and they had a new house and a good car.

I sunk down in the back seat. I graduated from college, had no job, lived in a parent-supported apartment, and had a car but chose not to use it that day. I didn't tell them any of this. I just thanked them when they dropped me off in the shopping center by CVS. I walked to the library and looked for a job but no one was hiring. No one I wanted to work for anyway. Later I called Jane for the first time ever from the payphone outside Letterman's diner, the only diner in Kutztown I had never been to. I don't care how good people say the food is, no real diner closes at 7pm. Jane and I drove without plans, ending up at the Starlite Diner on Route 100. I thought it was new. Jane knew it



was old. It had been torn down the day before I got to town and just finally rebuilt four years later. That's one of the good things about having friends with roots. They can fill you in on all kinds of mind cluttering local history. At the Starlite people were bursting out the windows, there was a twenty-minute wait. Instead of doing something ridiculous, like waiting in line, we went where all disillusioned, distressed, roving kids in Kutztown go: The Airport Diner. We ate grilled cheese and Jane gave me a ride home. This spoiled any attempt to walk, but it was late, dark, and cold. I really appreciated the ride.

I tried to walk to Kutztown again. This time I stuck to the train tracks. No pesky cars to take pity on me. I didn't want pity, I wanted to see if my fat bourgeois legs could walk the four miles to Kutztown. The trains keep me up all night with their banging and clanging. Unlike my childhood tracks these are actually still in use. So I stuck to the scenic tracks, the ones that run from Topton to Kutztown and split off from the still banging and clanging tracks one hundred feet from our apartment door. The scenic train doesn't run on weekdays, but that didn't keep me from leaping off the tracks every time I thought I heard a whistle.

With my ears perked I gawked at corn and cows and immersed myself in secrecy, feeling privileged to be cutting through the center of land I normally only see from the roadside. An hour later, and after making note of several good drinking spots never to be drank at, I arrived in Kutztown. This time I went to the campus library. But I wasn't looking for a job. I was sick of doing that. I looked up books on half toning and didn't find any. I checked my email and didn't have any. Feeling purpose-less I walked down the alley to Whiteoak Street where Nick, Curt, and Nathan live. I drank Nick's horrible wine, we talked more about the band we swear we'll never start, and then he drove me home.

I was all but giving up on my ability to transport my own self to and *from* Kutztown when I bought my first used bike from Weavers. I tried riding on those train tracks but my big bouncy seat bounced me right off. On a rickety old bike no one picks you up out of pity, they just muscle you off the road while you shoot them the finger

*"Nice bike,"* people would say.

*"Thanks, it's brand new,"* I'd reply.

They'd look puzzled until I'd add, *"to me anyway."*

Andy said it was too small for me, but that it was a good old bike. Andy rides his thousand-dollar bike 70 miles a day so I listened to him when he said I should raise the seat. Then I set out for town.

I don't really think I'll make it, but I do. And I even make it back, but just barely. I moo at the cows and marvel at the giant sky and the whispering corn. I dodge cow shit and eventually get used to the barging cars. I weave in defiance from one lane to another when they aren't around. I secretly start to hate them. They yell at me and I shaft them, even if I am one of them sometimes. Then I try to catch up dreaming of smashing their windows. They speed off into the distance over one of the many hills. The hills that start out as enemies and become friends. I scream "*fuck!*" from the bottom of my lungs trying to get to the top and smile wide on the way down.

One spirit-shaking fall day, after climbing a hill, I turned a corner past a barn and found cows in the road. I didn't moo at these cows. Instead I tried not to shit myself as I pedaled past and repeated "*cows are pacifists.*" The poor cows were so scared of me and my shiny bike they gave up freedom and hopped back over the fence.



Riding my bike to town made the trip seem more important. They always say that stuff about the destination and the journey and they're right, even if they jump in their cars right after. My roommate has Internet access and offered to let me use it. But I still ride my bike four miles to check it. How else am I going to clear my head, scope out the random yard sales, and contemplate stealing pumpkins?

Adrenaline!

~~Adrenaline!~~  
I sat in sat hills, on  
rickety benches next to old men,  
in the sun in the shade, in  
the baseball dugout, and still I

couldn't write. It was early in the afternoon and I was already worn out, more mentally than physically.

"A Coke would help" I muttered, pissed that I'd sworn off the stuff two days ago.

"Six weeks of hedonistic touring made you soft, time to toughen up."

I was bored all week. But at least I'd finally shrugged off the once stomach knotting job

hunt. Free time rules, but not when you feel guilty for not making money. Saturdays rule too, but not when the rest of the week was a Saturday and you still don't have a job. Can't do much about it on the weekend except worry. I do that well. Too bad no one is hiring worriers this week.

When in a lethargic slump I do what any post teen punk should, I pull out my chewed up deck and go skating. Topton, my new stomping grounds, has a sidewalk defect. Very few lie flat and those that do are wedged between crooked slabs. And so I find myself constantly jumping ship for fear of cracking my already bruised appendages on Mr. and Mrs. Topton's sidewalk while they peer in disgust, previously sitting sipping tea and enjoying the quiet, idyllic late August evening until I come clacking and grunting.

I get strange looks around here. Like I'm the first new person to join their midst since the town was founded. Aside from births, this could be true. I never really had neighbors growing up way out in the woods, so having distrustful ignoring neighbors isn't much of a change. Besides it's not the adults that scare me, it's the local high school kids. The best skate spot is a little bank by the basketball court that overlooks the park and

baseball field. Every time I rip it up there's a basketball game. One of the kids has a board and practices heel flips on the unused side of the court while I try skating the bank. We never end up saying hello. Maybe because I'm old and scary and he young and scared. Or maybe because I'm old and scared and I'm the one who should know enough to say hello. But I don't.

And so he doesn't help me when I stall on the bank and smash my six foot two inch, one hundred eighty pounds of lank into the rock laden black top. I fall awkwardly, unable to catch myself. A thin line of blood spurts up my arm from my elbow. I lie in misery for much longer than I should while kids are watching. But it's been awhile since I've skated and even longer since I've wrecked and bled. I finally pull myself vertical and retrieve my skittering, running board. I'm bruised and bloody but thoroughly refreshed, renewed, and ready for anything. Anything but talking to high school kids. I speed away, avoid the cracks, open the door, crash on my bed, hit the needle to the Descendents, and pick up a notebook, finally able to write something.



# anarchy means I step in SHIT!

I've been doing dumb little things lately to remind me that life is not preprogrammed, that I can recreate myself and the way I interact with my surroundings. I can walk forty-five minutes to buy a friend a record they'd given away as a birthday present but just had to have again. Or I can walk to the park and spend all day reading in the baseball stands of the little league field. Or I can park my car in town and walk around trying to find old friends, surprising some without a phone call, not being able to find others, and getting soaked by rain the entire time. Or I can stop at the local produce stand and buy beans, potatoes, and corn and cook up a meal totally devoid of a middleman, straight from ground to stomach. Then try to avoid the seemingly unavoidable center of town and walk straight from the park to our apartment building by cutting through the cemetery and into the woods along the train tracks only to find two too steep hills covered with picker bushes—one to climb down and another to climb up.

The thorns ripping at my jeans and fingers remind me that while life is not preprogrammed,

trying to take stabs at rewriting it can lead to defeat, pain, and embarrassment. Like walking past a dirt opening between an overpass and a wall in Philadelphia, surely a haven for homeless and drugged up deviants, but deciding it looked like a great place to finally take that overdue "city-lack-of-public-toilet" derived piss. My old self would have said "*certainly not, looks dangerous and uncouth.*" My new bold self thought not climbing in and peeing constituted a weak will and a lack of fun and free spirit.

My old self should have won. Upon entry I discovered it was certainly a haven for the homeless and that I was surely not the first to enter this crazy tangle of dirt and shrubs. Empty forty bottles and the smell of piss and shit gave this away as did clothes and shit stained rags. I was not the first to use it as a toilet. But still I persisted. I hobbled out of the underbrush relieved and proud of my ability to push myself to break my own constructed boundaries. I wasn't quite as proud when I noticed something stuck to the bottom of my left shoe. I couldn't look and so didn't for several blocks, trying to will it into bubble gum or mud. It wasn't. I scrapped it on the curb and kept walking, soul a bit freer, feet a bit wiser.

**M**y jacket, the bottom of my tightest jeans, my lousy work boots, my hat, and three fingers of my left glove. All soaking wet. What I get for going adventuring in the cold December rain. The rain that comes in after a big snow storm and turns the once quiet, softly beautiful, snow covered countryside into a brown soggy mess of dead grass, diseased leaves, tainted slush and snow that's been fucking all night.

I still won't take peoples' advice and so keep writing reminders on the palm of my hand, certain to be rubbed off. Today I tried to read what I'd scrawled yesterday. But it was washed, faded, smeared, smudged and barely readable. I gave it strange looks all day until I remembered what I had written.



**break into trains**

The day I pulled into Topton I made plans to explore the trains: the engine and two dilapidated old cars that rest 500 feet from our door. Two days ago I drew a line and wrote it on my hand.



No one was home, it was dark and rainy and warmer than the normal twenty degrees. Not the best night to finally visit the trains, but in my boredom it was.

I put on all that stuff and headed down the road, then over the bank so I'd be hidden from passing cars. I walked along the functioning train tracks and heard a whistle in the distance. I quickened my pace so I could get out of the open spaces before the train spotted me. I was thankful I wasn't wearing my holy Converse as I hopped in slush, mud, and snow and avoided gaps in the old unused tracks running along side the others. I made it to where the tracks split off in time to hide on a hill and watch the train pass. Another came from the other direction on the third set of tracks and both blew their lungs out in harmony. I watched until they had ripped through Tipton, letting the few waiting cars finally get on their way. Once at the parked trains I didn't break in and I didn't find any treasures, maps, or other cool shit. I did grab the big steel ladder drenched in thick, dull, black paint and hop aboard though. My first time ever on a train.

# mennonites!

**M**att thought they were mods. Two real ones, up the street, on bikes. He wanted to beat them up. I thought they were Amish. Jane didn't like people who thought that. I didn't tell her. She grew up next to a family of them. And so had a lot of knowledge and respect. I was gaining it.

On a bored Sunday countryside drive I discovered a one-room schoolhouse with thirty big, old, hubcapped bikes tossed in the front lawn. I peeked curiously in back and witnessed a game of volleyball being played by thirty kids straight out of Little House on the Prairie: girls in bonnets and ankle length dresses; boys in tight black pants, collared shirts, suspenders and old man hats. I wondered where I could get clothes like that.

Respect turned to envy. Every time I saw them they were riding bikes, sometimes through campus at 2AM, sometimes up hill in traffic; always effortlessly, always fearlessly. Sometimes they'd just be hanging out in their big yards playing baseball. Or they'd be furtively congregating at the

giant, lit up, shiny Sheetz gas station/convenience store buying secret candy bars and sodas.

Their life seemed perfect though my view was distorted. I never saw them slaving away in the fields or praying or attending church or doing chores. Still I was envious. For the last four weeks I'd been eating their fresh corn, beans, and potatoes. All the while I was living their life: working for others as little as possible, avoiding bureaucracy, riding my bike, and staying outside all day exploring the countryside.

I told Jane I wanted in. I wanted to be a Mennonite. She knew a girl who had become one. But she had to marry in. Marriage wouldn't be so bad. I think I'll ask that girl I saw riding peaceful and haphazard over the country roads; elbows on handlebars, chin in hands; staring off into the long blue sky, oblivious to the world. Oblivious to me.



# finding

# Wrku

I sat in the microfilm section of the university library so long my friends started stopping by to say hello. Even locked up in the far recesses of the library I couldn't get any quiet. They'd ask me what I was doing. "Researching the Kutztown University radio station," I'd reply.

They'd get quizzical.

I'd resume my work with renewed vigor.

I was researching the failed Kutztown University radio station, years 1967 through 2003. I went through ten rolls of microfilm containing too many pages of The Keystone, Kutztown University's student newspaper. It was nearly never accurate nor interesting, but it was dependable and the only source of information on the early days of the station.

I felt stupid spending so much time in the university library. Some of the sunniest of the final fall days were drained sitting by the giant windows overlooking the water tower. Not enjoying the view but speeding past headlines scanning for anything related to the station. Usually some other headline caught my interest. Like one from the early '70s

when sixty black students (the entire black population of the school!) took over the administration building demanding more rights. Or when a block party turned into what police called a riot, but seemed more like a drunken accident.

I felt stupid too because I was spending more time on campus than ever before. Not so bad, except for the fact that I'd graduated three months ago. Only the most obsessive would stay in the town that had bludgeoned them with four years of research, reading, and writing to research, read, and write. I was unemployed and fixated on uncovering the history of a radio station I no longer worked for that was part of a university I no longer attended. But I sort of started to like feeling stupid. My friends thought I was insane. No one would care about this zine I was compiling. No one cared about the station now. Who would care about its history?

I wasn't necessarily doing it for anyone else. Of course I wanted to educate and inspire others, but really I was satisfying my own inquiries. I wanted to learn why it had failed, when or if it had succeeded, what it had accomplished, what it could have, and why it never did. The idea for the project started when I found station zines from the late

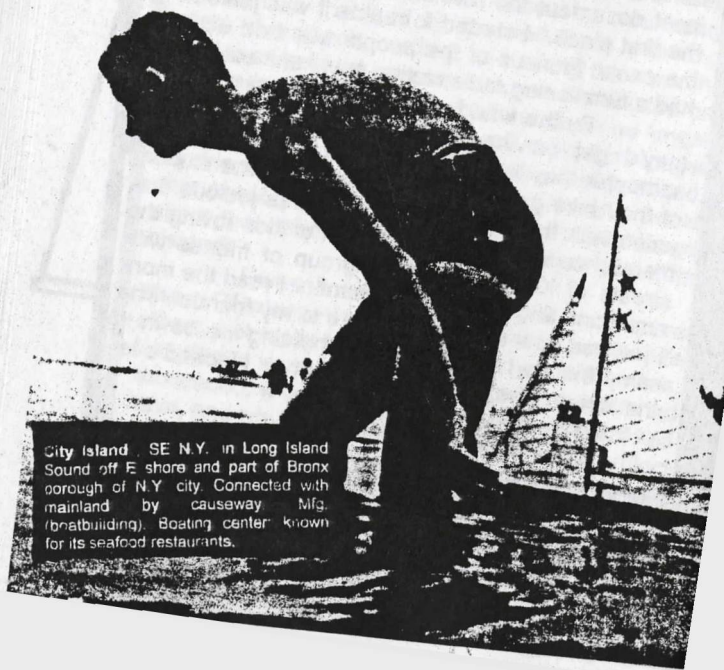
'80s and early '90s. All that remained were tattered originals constantly in danger of being trashed. I decided I should reprint them. Then I went through them. Most of it was poetry and reviews with very little Kutztown-centric writing. None of it stood the test of time very well.

Still, I wanted to print the picture of the '80s punks posing outside Rothermel Hall, or the list of the top ten makeout spots on campus, or at least document the fact that the station existed in the first place. I started to realize I was jealous of the past. Envious of the people who had actually had a functioning radio station every semester.

By the time I came in they were swearing they'd get on the air next semester but every semester they went further off. I was also jealous of their bike gangs and punk shows in the student union with three hundred kids. I was jealous that there once was an inspired pack of kids roving the streets of Kutztown, a tight group of friends with ambitions and creativity. The more I read the more I realized how similar they were to my friends. The same friends I was cursing for hunting me down in the library. The same I was ignoring. I looked over at the water tower and kept jotting.



# city island stories



City Island, SE N.Y. in Long Island Sound off E shore and part of Bronx borough of N.Y. city. Connected with mainland by causeway. Mfg. (boatbuilding). Boating center known for its seafood restaurants.

# stab stab stab

I pulled my knife out of my pocket. I was too shaken and nervous to flip the blade out like I'd been practicing. Just in case someone jumped me, or tried to steal me. A car had stopped at the edge of the dark, deserted bridge scaring me, then annoying AND scaring me. I gave them my best "what the fuck," look. They made a U-turn in explanation and sped back towards City Island, the same way I was headed. I was certain they'd be waiting at the end of the bridge. I kept my knife out. I imagined they would ask for money. I'd laugh while stabbing. "Money? Do you think I'd be walking to the island at 4AM if I had money?"

But only raccoons awaited, no real bandits. It was the first time I'd walked from the 3AM bus-less subway station since I'd learned about the path. It ran over the highway, along the park, next to the highway, then up through the woods and around to the City Island bridge. It was dark and rainy and cold. I'd had a rough night of walking in the city but found the walk to the island invigorating. It helped rejuvenate that sense of wonder and discovery I'd lost since moving to New York and spending so many days locked in the city.

Everyone says New York City is great. I thought it was shit. Sure there was Mayday Books on First Avenue and Bluestockings on Allen and ABC No Rio on Rivington and free museums and gigantic libraries and falafels everywhere. But it was too much and too many places and not enough friends. I wanted Kutztown, I wanted the Mennonites, and the rolling hills punctuated with never ending fields of corn. I wanted my bike and backpack and the back wall of the library and all my friends. I wanted to know that the Airport Diner was at one end of town and Turkey Hill at the other. I didn't want to have to remember to transfer to the six train at 125<sup>th</sup> street if I ever wanted to get home again.

Mostly I wanted to finally admit to myself and prove to my city friends that the country wasn't so bad. Even if I had to ride my bike eight miles to the copy center instead of an hour on the subway. Even if I couldn't buy Thai food at 3AM, or ever. Even if I couldn't hang out with the punks at ABC or consign zines at the radical bookshops.

This realization was a long time coming. The day I was born in a country hospital I started kicking at the dust. I used to see my hometown and then Kutztown as ships ready to explode



towards the city as soon as I got out. I used to laugh with my nose up high at the kids from high school who stuck around and got a job with their dad, or down the street at the car wash. Why didn't they want to move to the city where there were tons of young kids and all sorts of crazy things going on at all times of day and night, where there was *something* going on? Why stay in the country where there was *nothing*. But there is something in the country, lots of it. Solitude and simplicity and knowing that Friday night your friends will be at the Pub or Shorty's, or the only punk house for one-hundred miles, or silhouetted in their apartment window, or at the Strand or driving to Allentown. And knowing that Sunday morning you can walk around town for hours and not see a single living being or ride your bike into the hills and see no cars. In the end it's knowing that life is worth living and not needing giants blocking the sky to remind you that others have done it too.

I called my mom the other day. She said it was boring at home, not so busy and exciting as my life in the city. "*We're in the backwater here,*" she said. "*Not in the middle of the action like you.*" I frowned, paused, and looked forward to the backwater.

# Bieber Express

**B**ut there's ghosts in big cities too," she said in defense of her old haunts. "Even more than in Kutztown," I agreed. "But more spread out, and easier to avoid," she added. "Just like people who haven't left but you don't want to see anymore."

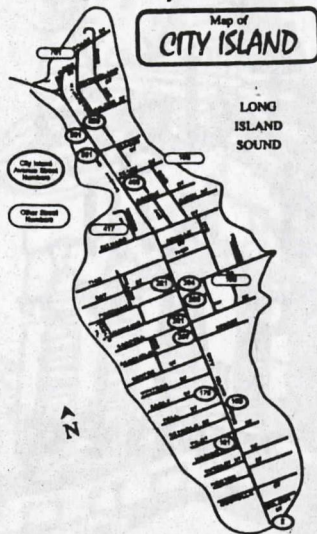
I couldn't disagree. But I don't avoid people in Kutztown and I don't know *anyone* in the city except her and a few others. And I'll never run into them randomly. Not like the other day during the final hour of my weeklong visit to Kutztown when Eric, who I'd been tracking down all week, yelled across the street right after Andy J. waved with two hands from his truck. I dodged cars to Eric who was meeting Andy at Uptown Café. I sat down for awhile even though I was on borrowed time.

Eric and I shared the last few months, Andy and I the last few days since we'd had 3AM breakfast at Letterman's. We were all three genuinely excited and for a moment all the ghosts disappeared. In their place were plans for art and

music and parties and friends and hanging out. We smiled for spring when I'd come back one last time.

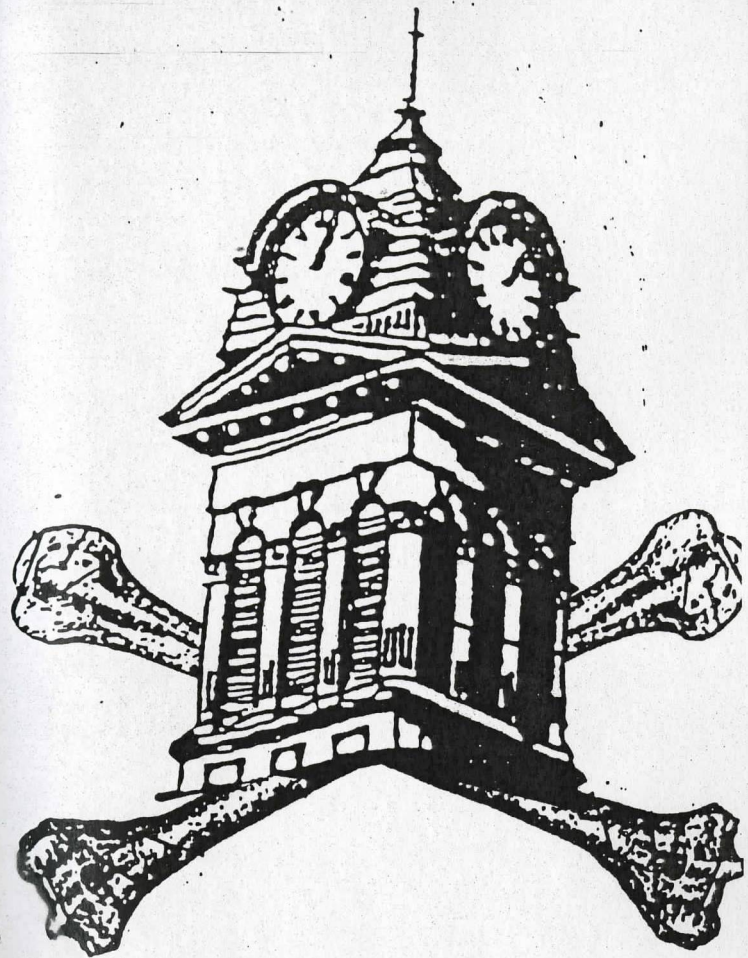
"You're going to fall in love with the city, get an apartment and stay" she teased wantonly.

"Or your friends are going to convince you that Kutztown's better and you'll never come back."





"Nostalgia  
will kill  
us all"  
-megan



more splattered ink



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