

John Burgess

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THESIS

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SUMMARY

A novel that revolves around the supposedly autobiographical manuscript found after the suspicious death of John Lowell (pseudonym John Burgess). The manuscript is prepared and edited by Nick Notou who also adds supplementary materials that contextualize the circumstances surrounding the real life of John Lowell, including interviews with relevant parties appended at the end of the novel. Essentially, Burgess views all of life as performance, and so this novel is a performance of that performance, following his life from birth to school to drug dealing to prostitution to wealthy seclusion to death. Besides the editorial presence of Nick Notou there is also the figure of Burgess' niece Nora, who acts as an editorial guide in the composition of the manuscript, her commentary and suggestions often detailed in the footnotes. In this way the reader follows the literal production of the manuscript as it is produced, in the same way the reader follows the production of Burgess' consciousness over time.

General Introduction

On January 1st, 2015 at 7:33 AM, Nora Lowell (then 18) placed a call to 911, and explained to the operator, calmly though haltingly, that her uncle, John Lowell, was hanging from the chandelier in the foyer of his mansion. He was pronounced dead when paramedics arrived, and subsequent forensic reports dated his time of death within the prior few hours.

Nothing was stolen, and Nora Lowell claims to have called the police immediately after arriving at the house. Yet, an unassisted suicide was almost immediately ruled out. The chandelier is twenty feet from the floor, and there was no ladder nearby, nor a perceivable way in which Lowell alone could have engineered the attempt from the second or third floor landing of the house. At the same time, there were no defensive wounds found on Lowell's body and his toxicology report was clean. Somehow, then, someone had either assisted his suicide, had convinced him that this way of dying was preferable to whatever they may have threatened, or for whatever reason had concealed the method by which he'd done the deed himself. He appeared to have walked to his death. Indeed, as if he had willed his body into the air.

January 1st, 2015, was John Lowell's 35th birthday, and by that time he'd risen considerably from his roots in the working class. He'd built a mansion in the county of his birth after having made his fortune primarily in Louisville, Kentucky. On paper, Lowell was the owner of any number of failed and successful businesses, including a chain of laundry mats, arcades, and automated car washes, as well as a lawn care business, two fast food restaurants, a jewelry store, an outlet store that sold used furniture and clothing, and various porn websites. He also ran two non-profits, one of which focused on the conservation of wildlife in Boone County, Kentucky, a

story I covered in two news articles.¹ The managers and employees of these various businesses, all started between 2000 and 2009, had little contact with Lowell, though confirm that he handled all accounting. Only the porn websites are briefly accounted for in the book. Indeed, the manuscript you are about to read paints a very different picture of Lowell's path to wealth, implying the primary function of these businesses was to launder the gains he made elsewhere, though every audit Lowell or his businesses underwent passed muster with the IRS.

In Burlington, Kentucky and the surrounding area he was a fairly remarkable man, and was indeed often remarked upon. He had few close friends and little family, but gave off significantly different impressions depending on the person you ask, from the oddball rich man living in relative isolation to the passionate and well-meaning entrepreneur, the life of the party and the quiet man that kept to himself, as both kind and mean, as easy to anger and quick to forgiveness. When I first met him, I found him to be an exuberant, sympathetic, and extremely likable person.² It turns out he fooled me like so many others, and through those who knew him best he is most accurately described as methodical, pensive, deliberate, and socially awkward. Considering his strange death and the suspicion and gossip it aroused, as well as the vastly different impressions people had of him, including my own, I jumped at the opportunity when Nora Lowell suggested I edit the book for publication.

John Lowell's safe was forced open the day after his death which is when the document that forms the core of this book was found, along with a reported 2.7 million in cash and travelers checks, notwithstanding the significantly larger fortune he had in real estate, stocks, various savings and checkings accounts, and a hefty IRA, having sold all his legal businesses

¹ See “Generous Donor Spruces up Local Parks” and “Charity Ball Brings in Thousands” in Appendix A.

between 2010 and 2012. The found document appeared to be an autobiography, and the lead Detective on the case, Joseph Murr, reacted to its finding in a way you might expect, as if he'd found the golden key. It's not often that the dead leave behind written accounts that allow one to suss out potential leads. These days reliance on social media is the best law enforcement comparison, but this bound manuscript seemingly contained all the vital details of his life, not just scattered updates relating to how one wants to be publicly seen.

Still, Murr didn't exactly end up celebrating what he did find--a document which spends as more time addressing the mundane than it does the dramatic. And a document which ends up presenting so much information that much of it runs together, precipitating several confrontational encounters in the final chapters, and exponentially raising the amount of suspects, if, that is, the county or state had wished to pursue a case. In the end, it was ruled an unassisted suicide despite the logistical impossibility. If anything were to be prosecuted it would be related to a charge of tampering with evidence, but local authorities assure me they consider the matter settled. However, looking closely at this document one finds a plethora of people who had good reason to wish John Lowell dead. At the same time, the lack of physical evidence, the odd and verbose document, and the general mystery and oddity of John Lowell, proved too great an obstacle for certainty, as most people who've picked up a newspaper in the last year or so are probably well-aware.

Nora Lowell had been staying with her uncle for a little over three years at the time of his death. Exactly 17 days prior Lowell certified a revised will, leaving all of his holdings and property to Nora. While the case against Ms. Lowell has been publicly debated in tabloids and junk news, after it was decided that John Lowell's case would not be tried as assisted suicide or

² See "Plans to Build Mansion Rile Locals" in Appendix A.

otherwise, she decided to release the document to my control in an attempt to clear her name. Despite this, Nora Lowell understands the book does cast some suspicion on her³, but seems generally unconcerned, noting that it also portrays several others negatively and as potential suspects, including, according to our more spiritualist speculators, the ghost of his dead best friend.⁴

John Burgess, the name adopted by Lowell in the following pages to protect himself against potential criminal prosecution, is here maintained. He can no longer face prosecution, but the name he chose might do some work explaining how he understood himself--or, in a Burgess-like turn of phrase, at least how he thought others understood him. Or, perhaps most likely, how he wished to be understood.

The word burgess is now primarily historical, at least in English usage other than as a surname, but contains the following meanings according to the Oxford English Dictionary: A) An inhabitant or resident of a borough, esp. of a town; a citizen. B) A person elected to represent fellow citizens in a deliberative or legislative body. C) Any of various officials exercising judicial or executive authority in a town or borough. D) In extended use: an inhabitant, a resident, a denizen (used of both persons and animals).

The word is derived from the French borgeys, and bears a close relation to bourgeois, defined as follows: Originally: a citizen or freeman of a town or borough in France (or occasionally in other foreign countries), as distinct from a peasant or gentleman (used as a

³ See my three interviews with Nora Lowell in Appendix B.

⁴ In the final and incomplete chapter, "Sixth Interlude: My Apparent Heir," our writer discusses his meeting with the ghost of Michael. If Michael was not a sign of the onset of mental illness, as Lowell/Burgess reasons is most likely, then either A) Michael never died, B) Someone dressed as Michael is a strong suspect, OR C) Michael was indeed a ghost. Speculations of the third kind are outside of the purview of this editor. I'll leave it to aspirin'g novelists to fill that in.

foreign equivalent of burgess or burgher, esp. in translations of foreign texts). Later, more generally a member of the (usu. urban) middle class of any country, sometimes spec. of the mercantile or shopkeeping middle class. In later use freq. with some implication of the values, outlook, etc., considered characteristic of the middle class.

Through the portions of this manuscript that were leaked, those that have circulated in anticipation of this book's release, and through colleagues I have trusted it with fully, many have indeed claimed that Lowell is a thorough representation of the bourgeois. Though, if his autobiography is to be trusted, in values he is changeable depending on his surroundings, and in wealth (at least at the end of his life and the beginning) either far above or below the middle. His occupation of the middle-class was a stop on the way to somewhere else--but, in some ways perhaps there's nothing quite so bourgeois as that. From the outside looking in he does seem a particularly dedicated laborer. Even watching television was work according to Burgess. But it's also possible the name means nothing at all, that it just occurred to him, or that he picked it so it might confuse people, and set them on the very track so many have followed.

In the end, it isn't really Burgess' work ethic that sets him apart. No, what makes him stand out is his claimed inability to experience a vast array of emotions, and that he often admits to this and questions its effect on him. Seemingly, it was this inability that created a range of inadvertent enemies throughout his life, as well as a confused Boone County Commonwealth attorney with no productive path to follow. It is what makes this document so fascinating, enlightening, and yet obfuscating.

Nora Lowell had the financial motive, as she readily admits, but her father Bill Lowell had motives of revenge and jealousy. Outside of family there is Finn McLaughlin, the brother of Michael McLaughlin--the murder of whom was indirectly Burgess' fault, and which episode

forms the heart of the so-called autobiography. Other suspects include any number of known and unknown drug and prostitution associates. Lowell as Burgess created so many enemies that one can only guess.

The level of detail our John Burgess provides in his autobiography is astonishing in some ways and underwhelming in others. It tends to be much more psychological than physical. His primary interests are clearly ideas and theories--and, in an ironic turn connected to his apparent inability, emotion. He also tends to explain the choices he makes as he makes them, and in a way the entire Prelude concerns compositional choices. One quickly comes to understand why any prosecutor would be wary to use the document as evidence, even excluding the seemingly random choice (though he thoroughly explains it) to imitate modernist writers in Chapter Fourteen.

The somewhat naïve yet effective way in which he manipulated others offers a particularly insidious avenue of interpretation of this document. If Burgess was always so conscious of motive and how to get people to do what he wanted them to do, then who is to say that the book claiming honesty isn't simply another attempt? But then again, maybe Burgess isn't Lowell--and where exactly does that lead us? He admits in here to dealing drugs, being a prostitute and pimp, and even to being a murderer. If Burgess is just a figment of Lowell's imagination, why does he approach these things as if he is confessing? Why does he go out of his way to make everything seem plausible and logical? Why convince Nora and others that it was all real? While not everything he writes can be confirmed, little to nothing can be outright denied. The ploy of an invented character, if it was a ploy, was meticulously maintained, for what could be substantiated from the document has been by myself and other dedicated investigators. In fact, investigating some of the details given, police have recently charged the

real-life analogue of the character referred to as "Tumbler's mother" with possession and intent to distribute.

Ultimately, we can't know what John Lowell planned to do with this document, or if it was really meant for publication, a plan he himself seems to abandon towards the end of the manuscript. My interviews did lead to some interesting answers and possibilities, but for the sake of suspense, a necessary quality of any book telling a story (and one my publisher assures me I should abide by), I will not divulge everything in this introduction. As Burgess might say, there is always more to learn.

Often the most debatable instances in the text are debated by Burgess as well. He seldom hits too firmly upon an idea, instead using an inordinate amount of qualifications in an effort, seemingly, to be as precise as possible. But these qualifications often further blur the issue in question. So, if you don't trust Burgess then you seem to be agreeing with him, that many circumstances deny a stable interpretation. He is both confident and diffuse, which makes sense when we consider that one of his primary goals in writing the book is nominally to figure out his motives for writing the book.

A last element that should be noted are the various instances of seemingly inadvertent humor. His detailed descriptions of emotional states, various processes and cultural understandings, often read as fairly blatant satire, and yet he does not often admit this possibility or that he is even aware of it. Considering his awareness elsewhere, this seems suspect. And yet, it fits with his generally catalog-based mind. As my journalist colleague Zadie Manning remarked on first seeing the document, "It's like watching someone continually reinvent the wheel. But much more entertaining than that should be."

We might sum it up by saying this is a document about interpretation that was then heavily interpreted. But it's also a book that hits on many other repeated and important themes, exploring shame in some depth, questioning how we can ever truly understand our own motives or emotions, and how we determine what in our lives possesses value. It's general oddity also holds its own merit, and whatever Lowell/Burgess did or didn't do, I am thankful he left this text. It is the project of this book as a whole to detail the phenomenon of John Lowell. I hope all readers can share in my fascination.

Nick Notou

February 1st, 2016

Textual Introduction

Many chapters throughout the book remain incomplete. However, with the brief outlines Lowell composed and outside references to the times in question, one can fill in most of the blanks.

Other than this authorial omission, some longer sections have been cut from the document in an effort to spare the reader undue repetition (these cuts as well as footnotes by myself are marked as Editor's Note, opposed to Burgess' footnotes). All of the cut sections may be accessed online through my website archives.

The Index planned by Burgess was never completed. However, some planned indexed items can be found following the primary document.

Appendix A is a compilation of news articles I wrote relating to John Lowell, Appendix B of interviews conducted by myself with relevant parties.

Nick Notou

Acknowledgements

The editor would like to thank Nora Lowell for her permission to reprint this document, as well as for all the time she granted for three separate interviews gathered in Appendix B. The editor would also like to thank the Boone County Herald for allowing the reprint of his articles. And finally, he reserves his deepest gratitude for his wife and child. They've gracefully put up with him as he has become lost in the prose of a man who remains to him largely incomprehensible. He would like to apologize to his wife and child if he has sometimes begun to speak as if he were channeling John Burgess. Like Burgess, he understands this was probably sometimes frustrating or confusing, but he hopes it was worth it.

The following is based on a true story.

Prelude: Reasons.

As I currently understand it, there are three primary reasons I may have for writing this document.

1) A guilty conscience. This is a phenomenon said to expose a person's legal or moral crime after creating in them the intense desire to be fully known. My understanding is that guilt is manufactured when the mind turns against its past self. Many call it a desire to unburden, as if the mind were literally weighed down. The guilt-producing object is supposedly set free through a confession, either secular or sacred.

I have no way of knowing for sure if this is true in my case, if that is the reason I'm writing this, though I do often think about Michael without trying to. For instance, I will be thinking of something else, like the expected dividends on Apple stock, when I suddenly see his body and hear his voice in my thoughts. It is not necessarily unpleasant to see him and hear him, but there are reasons I might feel guilty concerning his death, in which case this may be a sign, this constant return in thought to the subject/object in question, that which one would set free.⁵ While I consider this least likely, I start here because part of the assumptions concerning a guilty conscience are that someone wishes to hide it until it becomes unbearable. I don't want you to think I'm trying to hide anything because that is not the purpose of this book.

⁵ The story of his death and my indirect role in its occurrence can be found in Chapter Fifteen: Michael's Death in His Own Words.

2) The arrival of my fifteen year old niece. Six months ago Nora showed up on my doorstep with an overnight bag and a note from my brother. I would like Nora to know things, to be able to manipulate the world to her advantage. If I can transfer my years of knowledge to her consider the time she'll save, and consider also how I am made to live through someone else, how my own self continues in this way.

3) The money this document could produce. Though I understand the book industry at least vaguely and it is unlikely this will make much. Considering opportunity costs, probably not enough to cover the hours I am dedicating to the task: 5-7 pm, daily.

I cannot be certain of the determinative source, which is unlike me concerning the projects I take on. But whoever may read this, I hope you can come to understand through my experiences. I've always learned much from my experiences, so I believe you may as well.

I will explain about my niece. For most people this kind of thing is probably thought odd. I understand it is not a normal occurrence to have a child appear on your doorstep. However, concerning Nora, I had a sense of my brother's troubles even if I did not know them in great detail. And there is nothing to do about such things.

Might I say no to her? Might I bumble with surprise? Might I shut the door without response? Might I hug her and hold her close? I imagine any number of people might do these things, reacting with the emotions they experienced, or the emotions they thought appropriate to parody. The condition of the circumstance need only change in the person receiving the Nora, and the reactions are infinite. But for me there was only acceptance and a desire to understand. After all, it had already occurred. There she was.

I said hi to Nora and then read the note from my brother William, copied below.

John,

Jennifer left me. My guess is you're asking, Well, what happened William? Even though I've been telling you for fifteen years that I go by Bill now.

I'll be clear since I know you need me to be.

What happened is she's getting tired of living in a trailer and watching me drink myself to death.

Her words, not mine. She's gone to live with her mother.

Maybe you can imagine how difficult it would be to care for a teenager and a house when you only work a part-time job at Walmart.

I'm in debt again. I shouldn't have listened to dad and enrolled Nora at IHM⁶. He forgets tuition didn't cost s____⁷ when we went and it's now like paying for college. She's out, but I'm deep in debt. And I can't afford St. Henry where I enrolled her. It's because that's where all her friends are going for high school. She didn't want to be separated. I shouldn't have took Dad's advice, but I guess that's on me.

Besides, I drink and smoke a lot. That costs money. Please don't lecture me. I'm not like you.

I'm going to work on getting a better job. If you could spare a few gold pieces from your McDuck vault to take care of Nora and pay her tuition for St. Henry for awhile, that would really help. You'd be doing me, Nora, and Jennifer a favor.

⁶ This is the common abbreviation for Immaculate Heart of Mary, the name of the grade school my brothers and I attended, which I write about at some length in Chapter Three: My Church and School: Of Sexuality, Bullying, and Belief.

⁷ The censorship is my own doing, not William's. To read through some of the reasons I've chosen to censor curse words and culturally upsetting terms please see the end of Chapter Four, a brief section in Chapter Five, and the beginning of Chapter Six.

I'll owe you one. The next time you need something from me tell me straight out and I'll do it.

It'll save us both a lot of time.

Thanks,

Bill (not William)

I looked at Nora, who stared at me in a way that suggested annoyance and impatience, her eyes rolled up and her lips down-turned, her shoulders slumping. I believe this potential annoyance was connected to the time I took to read the note while she stood silent and waiting.

The note was a good expression of William as I understand him: inept with money, quick to anger, a chip (as one might say) on his shoulder, submitting to life as if he had no control over it, and his words towards me always with a gesture of veiled hostility (as it is called), or outright hostile. Despite our differences I've never meant to do William harm, only to profit myself. But William has always been a poor salesman and businessman, his future a blur, to the point that he compares me to a cartoon duck known for hoarding gold pieces--as a child we both watched the show referenced, DuckTales.

I've found many people have a tendency to mentally project their failure or inadequacies onto others. He might not compare me to a cartoon duck if he was also wealthy. At the same time, he may be joking or complimenting me in a roundabout way--Scrooge McDuck is generally thought good in certain ways, and is the protagonist of the show in question. Still, the latter option seems a remote possibility.

Did you read this? I asked Nora.

No, she said. I knew it was unlikely she was telling the truth, especially as the note was in an open envelope, but I did not tell her that at the time. I attempt to become a reflection of

people's will-belief if at all possible. It produces fewer complications. People expect you to believe them even, and sometimes especially, when they say unbelievable things.

It says you'll be staying with me, I told her. I put on my kind eyes, which are round and wide-open.

Yeah, I got that part, she said. She lifted her bag towards me and raised her eyebrows in what I understand is a typical, sarcastic teen way. I'm not stupid, she added.

It was a cloudy day outside, mid-Fall. It looked like rain might be coming or might stay away. It was one of those days when forecasters keep the chances around 50% all day.

Do you want to stay with me? I asked Nora. I hadn't had a roommate in a long time. It is good to have people around to learn from, children especially. They possess what my mother describes as a natural tenderness and openness to love, but what I understand as a more direct relation of want and need.

I didn't know Nora's entrance would result in this writing, and maybe it hasn't. As I have said, there is no way of knowing the reason for sure, only that it is logical that there is a reason, as if there weren't then this wouldn't be. That is why I begin here, as it is a beginning of sorts. A potential beginning.

I never liked in medias res, a style favored by classic writers (Greek and Roman) which means in the middle, preferring to start the story there rather than the beginning. I prefer to understand from beginning to end. It is similar to showing your work on a math problem, demonstrating you understand how you arrived at your conclusion, and therefore, that it is duplicable. When it comes to human beings and institutions, process has always interested me more than product, as process allows reproduction.

This place is awesome, Nora said, answering the question I wrote about three paragraphs earlier in a roundabout fashion. How many rooms do you have? she asked. She glanced to both sides of my wide lawn as she asked this, though the rooms are inside the house.

I told her I didn't know. I was considering whether to count spaces like the foyer, balcony, and home theater. Technically no, but what does my fifteen year old niece expect? Knowing the person you're talking to is almost always more important than knowing the correct answer.

How many bedrooms?

Seven.

How many bathrooms?

Seven and two half-baths.

That's a lot. She nodded and eyed the interior of the house behind me in a way some people do when they wish to express material admiration. Combined in this look is usually both jealousy and disgust. I'm not confident enough to say what combination she displayed then⁸.

It's a considerable amount compared to most houses, I told her.

No. She shook her head. I don't think I'd call this a house.

I believe a house is just something someone lives in. A roof may be necessary. But what would you call it?

A mansion, she said, nodding. Maybe a villa.

While you could perhaps refer to it as a mansion, a villa is generally connected to vaster estates and those are usually, if we refer to connotation, located in European countries or novels. But Nora seemed excited, smiling and nodding, and the material composition of the building is

not changed by what you call it. I told her she could call it whatever she preferred and asked if she wanted to come inside.

On that first day Nora suggested the biography, though not in those words, but in the way she piqued my interest. After she came inside she almost immediately went up the grand staircase, subsequently claiming two separate bedrooms. One on the second floor and one on the third floor. She came back down to tell me and ask if it was alright. I told her that was fine though it seemed excessive as she clearly could only sleep in one bed at a time.

Why live in such a big house if you don't use it? she asked. It was a good question.

I told her I liked the quiet and emptiness, and that it projects the proper image. Also, I said, the real-estate will be worth much more in a few years. There's a lot of development in the area. Boone County is the second fastest growing county in Kentucky behind Jefferson County, and that's where Louisville is, the most populous city in the state.

I don't think many people could afford this place, she said, wrinkling her nose to express there was something I was missing in understanding. It is a facial expression that appears most often when people feel you are too stupid to understand them, or perhaps as if you were willfully misunderstanding them.

You're correct, I told her, but I'm not talking about the house but the land. I own fifteen acres and we're near where they're building a couple new subdivisions. Even if they tear down the house, I'll still at least break even from the money the land brings in. Developers will buy it.

Yeah, Dad says you have an explanation for everything.

That was nice of him to say.

⁸ Nora is unable to recall this specific incident.

She looked at me with her chin pointed downward as her eyes veered up to show the white beneath her pupils, I believe to express--Are you serious? Are you kidding me? I knew I'd misinterpreted William then, but we never really got along, so that makes sense. I guess I should call him Bill, but it seems incorrect. He was William for the first years of my life, and while I don't have a problem with him changing it I've never changed myself with him.

He is violating a rule as I understand it. I don't change around family. I can only be what I always was. Consistency is important. While people don't like being called out on their consistent behaviors, disliking their seeming predictability, they're also upset when someone they know is inconsistent. This is generally how they determine if they should trust someone or not. The purpose of any change or affectation on my part is both to put people at ease and garner their trust, or sometimes their fear or respect. With those who knew me already this purpose could never be served. I cannot erase the past, only begin a new history, of myself as others might come to understand me.

I understand now, I said. He meant it as an insult.

Yeah. I don't think he likes you very much.

Nora and I were standing in the large living area on my first floor where antique furniture from the late nineteenth century sets atop wood flooring. At this point, Nora went and plopped down on a day-bed and then stared up at the vaulted ceiling.

He doesn't understand me, I told her, looking down on her averted eyes. People often dislike what they don't understand. I understand William, and I like him as well as anyone else.

Shouldn't you like him more? she asked. I mean, he's your brother.

That's generally thought true, that you should like your family more than others, I said. But you just told me William doesn't like me, let alone more than others.

He goes by Bill. He doesn't like being called William. Didn't you read the note?

Yes. And so did you.

She blushed and turned her face so that she wasn't making eye-contact with me, towards the day-bed she was sitting. Then she shrugged her shoulders like she was trying to hide between them, which is a simile I hope provides a good sense of her embarrassment as I understood it.⁹

It's okay, I said. It doesn't matter to me, but if you're going to lie you should be sure you can maintain the lie. There are some things that are hard to extricate yourself from.

Extra? Kate? What are you talking about? She turned back towards me.

To remove. There are some situations it is difficult to remove yourself from. If you place yourself in a lie, make sure it's a lie you can live with as if it were a truth.

Nora laughed. Are you telling me how to lie better?

I laughed too, as I do when others laugh. I guess I should tell you not to lie at all, I said. That's what I understand you to be communicating, but if you're going to be living here you might as well understand me and the world better.

What?

Everyone lies, Nora. Some people try not to lie, that's true, but even these people still sometimes lie. And what is even odder, they often don't know they're lying. You could say that some people are such good liars that they've actually convinced themselves of their own lies.

Okay, Nora said, elongating the word and playing with her inflection in order to communicate that she understood but thought it was weird, and maybe also that I was weird for

⁹ I wasn't embarrassed, Nora said. You just surprised me.
I disagree, I said.
Well, I'd been the one to know, wouldn't I?

saying so. On the Disney channel¹⁰ I've seen many children do this. I do not have much reason to interact with children otherwise, Nora being the only one from my immediate family.

Huh, she said after a long pause. Actually, that's pretty cool. To know that.

It is cool to know, I replied, adopting her language.

I appreciated her understanding and found the word cool very appealing. The word vibrated as ideas sometimes do. Not literally, of course, but figuratively, for the potential contained within it was already stretching towards conceptualization, begging (as one might say) to be fulfilled. It is the feeling I get with beginnings, with potential investments. Maybe this is what I was born with. I've found people enjoy saying they were born certain ways.¹¹ If it is true that everyone is born a certain way, then I might say I was born to recognize beginnings.

People don't really tell me things like that, Nora continued. Not adults. Not on purpose.

Typically, people do not like to communicate certain truths directly, I told her.

I realize this is a somewhat paradoxical statement, as the person who states it appears to be saying the opposite. That is to say, if people don't like to communicate certain truths directly then the person that says this is also likely to not be communicating directly, if this is one of

¹⁰ Nora finds it odd that I watch the Disney channel. She said, It makes you seem like a weirdo. Since you're an adult. The Disney channel is for little kids. I stopped watching it two years ago.

I asked her how else I could know what cultural norms were influencing children's behavior, which of course has an effect on the population as a whole.

You could just get to know kids, she said.

However, as I say in the following text, I didn't have any reason to interact with children.

Also, Nora tells me she is not a child, she is a teenager. I agree the distinction is important enough to note.

¹¹ For a fuller description of this please see Chapter Four: My First Job: An Introduction to Diversity, which is largely concerned with diversity.

those truths. Although even in that case the contradiction of the statement would verify it. I did not explain this to Nora, but she is reading this as I write it, I assume.¹²

Okay, she said, then why not?

Sometimes because they don't understand what they're doing, but also because they have selfish motives either concerning how they want to be perceived or how they want you to perceive other things.

Huh, she said, nodding and looking appreciative. Cool, cool. She then rolled off of the day-bed, got to her feet and walked out of the room.

I focused on the word cool again, a word of approbation and appreciation, of sometimes agreement and sometimes calm dismissal. I thought about cool, about the word so often used by those my age, the generations before and following my own, and even older people as time progressed. How was the truth as I understood it cool? I sensed both freedom and containment in my mind. An investment opportunity is a containment of money and resources, a narrowing of possibility that might later expand into a greater freedom in its excess.

Nora found me in my office a couple hours later. I was watching money come in and go out at remarkable speeds. My money accumulates without any necessary effort. I can stare up at screens stretched across my office and watch it rise and fall--I've set up ticker boards around the room that follow, respectively, my individual stocks, ETFs (Exchange-Traded Funds), and mutual funds. My fiduciary takes his fees and manages the individual stocks, so that it all exists in a closed loop. The previous sense of accomplishment and pride I experienced in the minutia of money is replaced by its quick and constant accrual, by the micro-managers I've employed, human and otherwise. The money is diversified and self-sufficient. My past work reached a

¹² Nora confirmed she read it, but said that didn't mean she understood it.

figurative plateau, and from here reproduces itself. Like governmental systems of oppression. Like forests. Like aged alcoholics, which concludes a series of similes. It does not interest me as it used to. Then again, it is a task completed so that I might busy myself in other endeavors, like this one.

The TV in my room is huge, Nora said appreciatively as she walked into the room, her eyes wide.

It is considerably larger than most TVs, I said. In case I have guests they will be satisfied and given an appropriate impression.

You know, I was thinking about what you said. How to lie, that people lie without knowing it. Why did you tell me that?

Because it was relevant to what we were discussing. Because you lied and seemed to demonstrate guilt in your reaction to being called out for it.

She shrugged. But don't you feel bad when you lie? It's wrong, right? But I guess if everyone's doing it. She paused to pace across the room. She stared down at a photo of Michael and me from our high school graduation. It sits to the left of my computer monitor, on my desk.

I was thinking, she continued. If everyone else is lying, how can you trust anything? And then I was thinking that it was nice for you to tell me at least. Stuff might be a lot easier if people knew things like that. If they didn't mind saying it. I don't know, she said, letting her fingers trail over my pen holder.

That's unlikely, I said. People don't usually like it when you explain them to themselves.

She laughed. You're such a weirdo, Uncle John. It's funny sometimes.

I wasn't sure what she then thought people wanted to hear. The truth or weirdness? What was cool or interesting? I know I am odd compared to others when not consciously giving them

the responses they need and expect, but that oddity was never something people expressed interest in other than occasionally thinking it was funny, as Nora did here. Usually, they expressed a general distaste, disgust, fear, or annoyance. But cool, was it cool? Then I understood I could learn my life over again by writing it, and in this way allow others to learn with me. And perhaps by doing so I could learn the reason for the cyclical nature of my recent thoughts concerning Michael.

It seems reasonable to write that one of the reasons I'm writing this is to figure out why I'm writing this. There is so much knowledge stored in our pasts that it cannot all be accessible simultaneously.

I'm not sure I follow you completely, I said, and in this way left it up to her what point of discussion to expound upon.

How'd you get so rich? she suddenly asked.

That's a long story.

You should write it down.

You're suggesting I write an autobiography?

I don't know, she said. I'm just talking. But it's nice to have an adult not just lie whenever something makes them uncomfortable. Like you said. Liars. Like Mom said there wasn't room for me at Grandma's. But I've been there a million times before. I know she wanted to get away from me, that I stress her out. She says it all the time. And Dad says he can't take care of me. But I'm fine there. I can take care of myself. He just doesn't want me to be there without Mom, I don't think. But they're definitely both liars. I'm not sure if I'm right in how they're lying, but they're not telling me the truth. For a long time I wasn't sure. But I had a feeling for what was going on, you know? Besides, they'd talk bad about each other in front of me with other adults,

with Grandma and Grandpa and with friends. I remember that. And then if I asked how they felt about each other, they always said they liked each other. Or that they loved each other. So I understand about lies, I think. I hate liars. I'm glad you're not one.

I'm sorry to hear these things, I told her. I am sometimes a liar, I added, but I will refrain from lying to you to the best of my ability, if you prefer it.

Yeah, Nora said very quietly.

The problem is the final category, I told her. From what I was saying before. It may be impossible to know all the lies we tell ourselves. That we do lie to ourselves is what makes this an impossibility.

Watching Nora got me thinking then of something I've often considered, what sadness feels like in its purest form, if such a thing exists. I could tell she was sad because she got quiet, reserved, and because the things she related are generally things that make people sad. I wondered if sadness really feels like an emptiness inside you, like you are figuratively hollow, which must be very unpleasant.

I have always felt full, I suppose. I guess that is this feeling, like everything is okay and like I might as well be doing things. I'm not sure. I usually feel the same, unless I am tired or hungry or thirsty, unless I am in pain. I visited an evangelical church once with a high-school friend that invited me. The speaker talked of the peace that passes understanding, referring to a Biblical verse and also to a sense of contentment that is unexplainable in its origin, though specifically connected to Jesus in this context. I felt I had it, as generally I have always been calmer and more content than others, as much as I can see their relative content or calmness

expressed outwardly. Perhaps that is what I was born with, or something else I was born with, peace and fullness and the ability to recognize beginnings...¹³

Nora spent a good amount of time by herself reading in my library, but she also regularly had her friends over to the house. They tried on makeup and wigs that I bought them at Nora's request. They talked about boys in some of the conversations I overheard. Sometimes they explored the wooded area on the east of my property. They laughed and smiled, and watched TV and internet videos. They drank alcohol and smoked cigarettes on occasion when they thought I didn't know about it. I wasn't sure how to interact with them, what they would like to hear, what would make them feel comfortable, and I reasoned that when the time came I might be unable to properly interact, and therefore cause Nora or myself trouble. So for some time I avoided them when they came over, spent the time in my office or scanning through Facebook and Twitter and Tumblr, learning.

I eventually came upon a solution. It was a calculated risk to use these affectations in front of a family member, therefore connected to people who had always known me. A risk I had never taken before, but I was interested in trying something different, in developing a new pattern, in learning about myself and others more thoroughly. I wanted to allow Nora to learn with me, to see me as I am, which is me as I change, which is myself. Also, she'd asked me not to lie to her and I was and am her guardian in the ways it is typically understood, though nominally I am not.

I spent much time running over the dialogue I'd use and had adopted from television fathers and watching families at public places like neighborhood pools as a child. I rehearsed

¹³ *Editor's Note:* Deleted here is a repetition of earlier points concerning why he might be writing the book.

gestures in the full-length mirror of my bedroom until my mind caught upon (as one might say) the proper rhythm.

I approached Nora and two other girls from her class as they sat in a small triangle beneath a large maple tree, picking at grass and giggling on occasion about things I could not hear.

What's up, little ladies? I asked. I placed my hands on my hips and swayed slightly backward in a jovial gesture. Looks like you're awfully busy with that grass there, I added, smiling widely.

Nora looked up at me with a facial expression I am familiar with, one of cautious confusion. Thrown off from the predictable patterns of the past the face struggles backwards and forwards, tensing and releasing, searching for its answer. Or perhaps more accurately, searching for the correct question. The true understanding of the facial gesture lies in the quick pace of changes.

Oh hi, the brunette one said.

Yeah, we love this grass, the blond one said, rolling her eyes and then laughing with the brunette.

You three haven't been drinking, have you? I then tipped my head forward and looked at them as if from over the top of glasses I was not wearing. I pursed my lips while maintaining a slight curl at each side to express amusement and kindness. You seem awfully slap happy, I said.

Her friends laughed like they were embarrassed for me. They thought me uncool, and so laughable, and so comfortable to be around.

All rhythms run in loops, and for this reason the figurative first note is always the most important. I searched for jokes and found poor examples, just-offs that produced embarrassment

for everyone but myself, who is to remain oblivious. Everyone can feel better in my presence.

Everyone knows I just don't get it.

No, the two friends finally said, laughing more, making eye-contact with each other, giggling, rolling their eyes. Making faces.

The brunette half-whispered to Nora that I was nothing like she'd said. I didn't know Nora talked about me. However, people are usually comfortable thinking they are better at understanding someone than others. The friends could feel pride that they could figuratively read me better than Nora, and Nora would still know she was correct, that this was different. It seemed a win-win scenario (as one might say).

Well, I continued, I just wanted to make sure you guys weren't hitting the hard stuff. As long as you stick to juice boxes and pop I can live with it. I winked and smiled with half of my face, looking away as if abashed, and as if I also feared the consequence of laughing at my own joke if I made the mistake of eye-contact.

You're being weird, said Nora. Stop it.

The two friends laughed some more. A little harsh, the blond one muttered.

She's rough on me, this one, but I still love her. I went over and ruffled Nora's hair as she produced a lip curl expressive of disgust while also attempting to pull her head away.

I'll leave you crazy kids to it.

When the friends went home Nora found me in my office. Her cheeks were red either from embarrassment, anger, exhaustion, or perhaps the cold tint of the outside air.

What was that? she asked.

Did you not like it?

No, said Nora. It was awful. You were weird. You were smiling so much and...it was scary. I was literally scared.

I'm sorry, I said, I didn't mean to scare you literally. I thought it might be better. I wanted you all to be comfortable.

What does that mean? she asked, throwing her arms up with an expression of exhaustion, as if we'd had this discussion many times before, though this was the first time. It did remind me of many discussions I had with my own parents. Mainly my mother, as I did not discuss things often with my father. I tried to not assume that Nora knew anything I had not already related to her.

You asked me why I was the way I was, why I watched television to learn things, why I scanned through social media, I said. There were a couple different occasions where I explained to Nora how I learned to exist effectively in the world. The anecdote concerning lying in the above-text is one such incident, but we had frequent misunderstandings where an explanation was required from myself.

I don't remember asking you that, she said.

Well, I continued, you implied the question by not understanding how I learned from these things. Either way, I do so in order to be the person I need to be. I don't want people to look down on you because of the way I act. I know it can be unappealing.

I guess, she said, looking more curious than upset as her back straightened and her gaze leveled on me. But it's worse when you change like that.

I was only being myself, that self. Your two friends will only ever know that person, me. It's true there have been a couple accidents, but you're the first I've adapted for on purpose other

than my deceased friend Michael. I thought maybe you would think it was cool, different, or interesting. Funny even.

She left the room before I'd finished speaking, so I raised my volume slightly towards the end.

I looked up at the screens, at the lists of numbers and acronyms that streamed by in the early afternoon with their continuously shifting information. I like to picture each penny of change dropping on top of the others, touching the zenith and clinking down, like Scrooge McDuck's vault I suppose. Otherwise, sometimes I feel as if it doesn't exist. Which is a strange feeling/thought, I believe.

Nora found me later in the day. I was still in my office. I'd made \$2317.34 that day so far, though I'd lose about \$500 of it by market close.

Look, she said, I have a couple things I want to ask you. She seemed very serious, taking on what one might call an adult tone, meaning the tone used by adults to talk to children, generally low-toned and condescending in nature.

Okay, I said, then you should ask me.

It's kind of weird, but so are you.

I think that's a fair judgment.

Okay, so first, what you did before, it's kind of cool thinking about it, she said. That you're such a good actor. But it didn't feel cool when you did it. It was creepy. I didn't know what you were doing. What were you doing?

I was trying to be agreeable, to be nice, familiar to your friends. When one is not pretending to be someone else, one is pretending to be oneself. There is no essential difference.

Why not just leave us alone? she asked. You didn't have to talk to them. They weren't like dying to meet you or anything. This last comment was a metaphorical expression of Nora's which would indicate, I suppose, that in some circumstances one would be willing to die to do something. However, it makes little sense that anyone would die to do anything, as you wouldn't be around to collect and enjoy whatever benefits it produced.

It's likely that if you continue to live here, I began, that at some point I will need to interact with your friends or their parents. For instance, I understand it is common for the parents of other children to call whoever is currently watching them to check in. If and when a parent does this, would it be appropriate if I didn't know who their child was or what their name was? And then, finding that strange and discomforting, the parent would probably not let that friend of yours come over to the house anymore, and I assumed you would dislike that.

Alright, Nora said. That actually makes a little sense.

I strive to always make sense, Nora.

You're not very good at it sometimes, Nora said.

While I could have corrected Nora, citing that the problem was her understanding and not my lack of sense, I understood that it made her feel better to think I was the one who was confused.¹⁴ People appreciate it if you bear their faults for them. They consider this a kindness. And it often seems easier for people to accept outwardly that they are wrong at a later time if you make them think they are right in the present time. People like to be right, and being right makes

¹⁴ Nora tells me that I, in fact, make less sense than her because I am not normal. And that she didn't understand me because I was talking weird. I told her that's not how sense works. I told her normativity has nothing to do with sense, and that talking weird may be hard to understand, but as long as it follows the rules of the language in question, that does not make it nonsensical.

people feel good. People who feel good are easier to engage with, and more willing to accept new ideas.

I'll try to do better, I told her.

Okay, Nora said, sounding the word out much quicker than usual, for her. So, I have another question for you. The way you changed your voice. Can you sound like other people?

Do you mean can I imitate them?

Yeah, like can you impersonate them?

I can manipulate my voice to impersonate some people, though I usually just adopt their rhythms, not the exact sounds.

Do you think you could sound like my dad?

We have similar voice registers, so I probably could, though I'd need to practice to find out.

Good, she said. That's good.

I suppose so. Why are you asking me this?

Because I want you to impersonate my dad.

Why?

I want you to call my mom.

This seems like a risk-laden plan.

I want you to ask her what you need to do to get back together. What she needs you to do.

You mean William?

Yeah. I want you to be him and ask her. Also, try to figure out why they started having problems. They won't tell me. Nora then turned away from me and looked down at the floor. Is it weird for me to ask?

Yes, as in abnormal, I said, but it is not weird that you'd like to know these things. It significantly affects your life.

She flipped around quickly. That's what I think, she said. I should know what's going on.

It is likely that no one will be affected as much as you other than William and Jenny.

So you'll do it?

But what if your father finds out? He will be angry, and he already doesn't like me, as we've mutually established.

He won't find out, she said.

There's absolutely no way you could know that, I said, and it is almost completely improbable that he wouldn't eventually find out.

Well, so what if he finds out? Maybe he'll take me back then.

You're saying if he gets angry at me he may take you back home?

Yeah, and that would be good, right?

That seems somewhat reasonable though it still significantly damages my relationship with him, which is necessary to maintain to some degree for my relationship with you and other family members, like my parents. Also, it depends on how you define good.

Well, if you get caught, you can tell him it was my idea, and like...I wanted you to do it because I love him and mom so much. I mean, I do love them. That's not wrong, right?

I can never answer for you whether something is wrong, I said. Morals are based on ideas you've been convinced of. I do not know what you believe is wrong, what is wrong for you.

Fine. Nevermind. Will you do it?

Yes, I will do this for you, I told her, but would you do something for me in exchange?

She threw her head back, dropped her mouth open, and said, Ugh. This is typically an exaggerated gesture of extreme exasperation. What? she asked.

I'd like you to help with my new project. You can point out what needs explaining, or needs to be changed, and you can help me think through the ways I might structure it. Do you think you could convince me why it would be good for me to write an autobiography? I need convincing, I said. I don't have enough reasons.

But why do it in the first place if you need me to convince you? You're an adult.

Because it's cool. Because it's different. Because it would be interesting. It could make money. It would teach you valuable things. And it would certainly present a task to be completed, which is a good thing.

She shrugged. I guess I'd read it, at least the parts about me.

Yes, people like hearing about themselves. Does this mean that you'll agree to help me as well? I asked.

Yeah, okay, Nora said. She stuck out her hand. We shook hands.

Okay, well, she said, people like it when stuff happens. People like to be excited and moved, you know? And they like suspense.

Things have happened to me.

Things happen to everyone.

An excellent point. But I'm different, weird. Remember?

Yeah, but still.

We were quiet for some time. I've found many people think better in silence.

Well, she said, have you ever had bad stuff happen to you? Like traumas?

Not particularly. I found myself in some dangerous situations, but I calculated my plans beforehand. Despite what many people may imagine, even when I was drug dealing and a prostitute I was seldom in any exceptional danger. Well, a couple times, but clearly I extricated myself without any lasting harm.

What?

I've already explained this word, Nora. To remove. Ex-tri-cate.

No, I mean, you sold drugs? Her mouth hung open and her nose was pulled up--both, I believe, in order to express disbelief. You were a prostitute?

I did, and I was, but the circumstances often disagreed with popular notions of such things, I told her. That's the main reason I sometimes ran into trouble. You can never predict all possible futures. Mathematical precision fails in the face of human inconstancy and feeling. And while television is educational, it can also be deceiving.

Look, she said, and she stood up from the floor to put one of her hands on my forearm in a confiding gesture. Seriously, listen to me, she said. People love hearing about drugs and prostitutes. Less about math.

That seems generally true, I said.

So you've got money, drugs, prostitutes, and you're weird. It could be pretty cool. But you might make people mad. Like they might feel like you tricked them if you talk about your different persons.

Affectations, I corrected. Actions. It's me doing them. It is myself. And you may be right about the anger, but I see that all the time. Authors write about whatever they want with no concern for who they might hurt. And everyone is pretending, Nora. Is it so much worse to pretend to be multiple things than it is to pretend to be just one?

Even if that's right, and I don't think it is. But even if it was, are you sure you want to hurt people?

Maybe it would help them, I said. To know why I did what I did, to see I had reasons and that I was doing my best with the information I had. I have always done my best, of this I am certain. And the truth will set you free. People say that. I am told many people believe that.

Maybe, she said.

Okay, I said. Let us pretend we've solved that problem. I can at least say that anyone that would be angry is probably already angry. Angry people tend to self-perpetuate reasons to be angry. It is part of their performance.

I don't think that's right, Uncle John. I don't think people like being angry.

Then why do they spend so much time being that way?

I don't think they can help it. And when are you going to call my mom?

One thing at a time, Nora. Once we've established a beginning, I'll call whoever you like and pretend to be whoever you want, as long as I can effectively do the pretending. It is helpful to me to think out loud, to hear your opinions. My own opinions are often considered odd.

Yeah, she said. Your opinions are odd. She stressed the word odd, a way I've heard people do when they are implying that your use of a particular word is strange or stupid, and they wish to draw your attention to this apparent strangeness or stupidity. Okay, fine, she said, we'll do this first. She then sat down in one of my office chairs and spun in a few circles. After a minute or so she said, It's illegal to sell drugs and be a prostitute. Aren't you worried you'll get in trouble?

I could use a fake name. Or I could call it fiction.

People like true stories better.

They do, yes. But many non-fictions are remarkably false.

And then I knew what I would do. I saw in my mind the familiar words that flashed before so many movies that were fictional in the majority of their happenings and characterizations.

We'll say the manuscript is based on a true story, I said. I do believe all manuscripts and stories are if they involve anything which we understand based on living in the real world. To expound on what I said to Nora, let me add that even made-up beings like elves are understood based on their distinction from human beings. Without recognizing something as true, we cannot identify what is false. So all thinking, all being, all doing, all telling, is based on a true story. Alice's Adventures in Wonderland is a perfect example. Everything is a perfect example.

That's not what people mean by it, said Nora.

But that doesn't change the fact of it, does it? It won't be untrue. Next concern. I've never written a book. There are standards in every business that one must be aware of. What could I do about that?

Nora shook her head like she was dizzy before speaking. I don't know why you're asking me this stuff, she said. I don't why you think I can help you.

Because you're smart, I told her. You have great potential. And I want you to help me.

I've found compliments are a good way to get people to do what you want them to do.¹⁵
Also, Nora is very intelligent for her age.

She smiled. Thanks, she said. She then tapped her head somewhat impatiently, as if she needed to physically shake loose her thoughts. Well, I guess you could find examples, like the

things you read in school. That's where our teacher says you should start with most stuff, with imitation.

Understood, and that's good advice. But if the primary point of interest is my difference, then how do I also make it similar enough to popular works so that it sells while still maintaining that point of interest?

It'll still be you writing it. With your experiences and stuff. I don't think anyone's going to forget about you. And you just include the stuff other books have. And you can tell people how to make money. And about your family. And obviously the prostitutes and drugs.

Well, I do have some examples in mind. I very much admire Daniel Defoe and Charles Dickens.

There are many examples to work from, but Defoe was the first I thought of. He has a way of constantly accumulating and moving the actions forward, but of also trailing back when necessary mid or end-sentence. It shows how understanding remains in motion (as one might say) even while under the pen, or fingers on a keyboard, though Defoe may have used something like a quill considering his time period.

Alternatively, modern prose often proceeds as if knowledge occurred without cause. And yet, each individual fields different choices and has different experiences that contribute to their learning. If I leave most of the work dependent on assumption, I know there might be many unnecessary misunderstandings. At the same time, for expediency's sake, I cannot explain all things. For instance, I am assuming you understand English.

¹⁵ Nora first asked that I delete this comment and when I said no she asked that I add that it bothers her that I wrote it. I told her everyone acts out of self-interest and the compliment is not false just because it produces a benefit for the speaker, but it didn't change her mind.

Nora made a face that expressed she was grossed-out by these authors, which seemed to me an inappropriate reaction, but again, one I'd often seen on the Disney channel. Charles Dickens is boring, she said.

That's your opinion.

And who's Daniel Defoe?

Perhaps you've heard of the life and strange surprising adventures of Robinson Crusoe, of York, mariner: who lived eight and twenty years, all alone in an un-inhabited island on the coast of America, near the mouth of the great river of Oroonoke; having been cast on shore by shipwreck, wherein all the men perished but himself. With an account how he was at last as strangely delivered by pirates?

She glared at me, clearly a little angry. Do you mean Robinson Crusoe?

Yes, that's the full title.

Well, you don't need to say that. People just say Robinson Crusoe. She made her eyes large, mumbled whatever, then shook her head, creating a physical gesture out of her need to mentally dismiss what had annoyed her about me. In children this is generally a feigned gesture, but I've found many adults can no longer help the gestures they feigned in youth. In this way, faces actually do stick if you keep doing them.

We returned to the subject a couple more times, but I felt confident enough after the previous conversations to begin the project. Nora looks over the pages with me, makes comments and suggestions, and I will attempt to continue to credit her where appropriate, though I cannot include all of her comments as that would slow the progress of the manuscript to a point

of in-feasibility. The phone calls I've made for her sake have caused some difficulties, but I will return to these once I can fully write of their conclusion.¹⁶

At this point, the biography is begun, and so you've read of both the conception and beginning of realization, for I finish any task I begin if at all possible. You've also read how this biography will work as an investment in multiple ways. To make money, to teach Nora and my potential reader/s, to codify my knowledge in print as my memory might degenerate in time, as happens with many people. And if it is a guilty conscience I expect it will rid me of the peculiar circularity of my thoughts. Guilty consciences are perhaps most remarkable for the fact that they can be exterminated through confession.

I've found it's always best if time or money spent is multi-layered in the benefits it might produce. This way, if one potential fails, another can take its place.¹⁷

¹⁶ See Second Interlude: Call me Bill for a full account of the phone calls and their effects, which came to a fairly conclusive ending a few months after the drafting of this Prelude.

¹⁷ Nora was concerned I include that she apologized for calling me a weirdo and weird on several occasions. She says it makes her look mean. I told her then and I'll repeat, it does not bother me for her to say this. I am weird as I understand the term, though I suppose she was apologizing for the negative connotation. But Nora looks even more uncomfortable when I say it's okay, telling me I shouldn't just accept the insult as true, that that makes her feel worse. I told her it did not insult me, but she said I was still making it worse.

So let's just say apology accepted, even though her reasoning makes little sense as part of the reason I'm writing this is because we both think my weirdness may sell, that it is maybe funny or interesting, that it is cool. But as I've said in various ways and will continue to say throughout: life is less complicated if you play the part offered—by this I doubly mean the part expected and the part needed. I'll do my best.

Title-Page:

The Strange and Unaccountable Series of Life Events of One John Burgess Who Was Fourteen Years a Drug-Dealer, Ten Years a Prostitute, and Emerged an Exceedingly Wealthy Man in Position to Live His Remaining Years in Ease; And With the Company of His Young Niece Nora For At Least A Time.

Chapter One: My Time, Place, and Immediate Family.

I was born January 1st, 1980. I was a third son even though my mother wanted a daughter,¹⁸ because often what you want is irrelevant to what you get. I was the last child and separated by several years from my two older brothers, of which only the brother closest to me in age still lives. Being ten years younger than William I spent much of my childhood alone or with my mother, who was good at caring for and entertaining small children, as others have told me, and as her near-constant attention towards me until high school seems to indicate.

I was raised in Burlington, Kentucky. A small town that borders the more well-known, though also likely little known, Florence, Kentucky. The most remarked upon landmark of Florence is a water tower that stands by the mall and reads: Florence Y'all. As place is important in constructing a biography, the water tower's history may be of interest.

During the construction of the mall, which is the primary entertainment for those not of drinking age in the area, they painted on the newly-constructed water tower the advertisement: Florence Mall. However, since the mall was neither fully constructed nor open it was said to be false advertising. In order to save money the city of Florence changed as little as possible, making the minor adjustment to the word Mall so it instead read Y'all. It has become a local eccentricity often remarked on. So much that the annual city fair was renamed The Florence Y'all. From what previous name I'm unsure.

¹⁸ Despite my mother's definition of gender being dependent on genitalia, through many contemporary understandings of gender, you could argue that I am genderless. To read a thorough analysis of gender and how I understand it please see Chapter Fourteen: The Streets of Louisville.

To further geographical specification I'll add that Florence, as well as Burlington, are each located at almost the furthest northern tip of Kentucky on a map. They're both about fifteen minutes drive going the speed limit to Cincinnati, Ohio, a place more people are likely to be familiar with. Where I grew up has sometimes been described as vaguely Midwestern. I've heard some people say with a laugh and shrug, Vaguely Midwestern. Or some, if they live on farms in the area or have family members with strong accents, will call the area the South. Many appear to have no interest in regional belonging, claiming neither Midwest nor South.

It's possible this mix of self-identification with the nation as a whole can be traced back to Kentucky being a border state during the Civil War. Slavery was practiced in Kentucky and yet they sided with the union. The Emancipation Proclamation did not apply to union states, which is to say it did not apply to any states, because the proclamation was made by the union. Typically, the governments of foreign countries cannot make enforceable laws within other countries. Slavery wasn't outlawed in Kentucky until the ratification of the 13th amendment. Self-identification is largely dependent on one's understanding of history, which is interpreted differently by different people regardless of the affirmation of fact and/or myth.

It's also possible some don't like being called Southerners because some Southerners are racist and because some people assume Southerners are racist as a whole, and because most people (whether racist or not) do not like being considered racists. While racist is sometimes implied when some people who are not Southerners say the word, it depends on tone, the race/gender/sexual orientation/religious affiliation/political party, etc. (perceived or actual) of the speaker and listener, and in general on the context of the usage of the word. This is the case for all words.

Beyond time and place, family is also important when writing a biography. I'll give you a brief description in addition to a scene with each of my immediate family members, so that when they reappear later in writing, you'll have an idea of them already established in your mind.

My father got into sales early in life. At different times he sold food, machinery, stationary, and when first beginning, knives. He retired two years ago from a place that sells industrial supplies where he'd worked for fifteen years. He often encouraged me to follow a similar career path as himself. When I visit him now, he still occasionally mentions it, even though I have been a salesman for several years. It's possible he suffers from dementia or does not understand the ways in which I have been a salesman.

My first memory of him imparting career advice came a little after my oldest brother's death. I was six and it was Fall, which season I identify based on the colored leaves in the memory. Also, that day in first grade I learned how to paste cut-outs of blood-red and red-orange and yellow construction paper on a white background. You continue to paste more and more faux leaves until eventually it seems as if the blank white page never existed, even though it is just beneath the colored paper.

It was likely near Halloween as I remember the sight of a Jack-o-lantern on a neighbor's porch when I exited the school bus. Some people like to make objects look like human beings. Beyond this, in general many people seem to imagine the faces of human beings where they are not. This makes me question the general phenomena, and I wonder if it is possibly an expression of loneliness, if it makes them feel comfort to think of objects as subjects, as if the materials know them. I have no desire to see faces in objects so I'm not sure, but I understand that many

people often feel lonely and dislike being alone, and that they tend to project these feelings onto both subjects and objects.¹⁹

My father stepped down the front stoop as I stepped up. I was incautious and we bumped into each other. My head hit his knee, causing me to fall and for involuntary tears to spring up (as one might say). To my knowledge, I've never had voluntary tears except at Michael's funeral when it seemed people would be angry if I didn't. There is a season for all things, is something people often say, seems applicable here, and is originally a Biblical quote attributed to King Solomon.

My father might personify what I've heard called a man's man. My understanding of the phrase is that it refers to men with rigid understandings of gender roles. Men who are besides this handy, occasionally violent in manner, and consistently good providers. For as long as I've known him he's had a full-beard of black on a tanned face of leathery texture, though in appearance, not to the touch. His black hair was usually neatly combed and parted, and his eyes very large and grey with red-blotched periphery. These eyes often showed disinterest, but when focused seemed intensely so in the directness of eye-contact and the slow movement of the head forward. What some people might refer to as deadly focused. This use of language seems to imply the extremity of desire or intent, as if you were going to murder the subject in view. In this case, I am using the description of the eyes as an example of what seemed like random volatility

¹⁹ A good example of this would be the literary device called the pathetic fallacy, wherein nature is made to reflect the emotions of people, even though this is not how nature works. I cannot offer a short enough explanation of how nature works. I wrote one out and Nora said it was too long and boring. She's made this complaint several times, and we've worked out a deal where she can pick one of each ten things she identifies as long and boring and I will significantly edit that thing or delete it. But what is relevant here is that the emotions of people are not connected to weather patterns, unless you consider the mental disorder called SAD

in my father. He is calmer now. This may have to do with his body's weakness or the dementia, if he has dementia. He dislikes going to doctors.

Dressed in one of his many suits, all purchased at the JCPenny within the Florence Mall, he looked down at me crying on the ground.

John, are you okay? As he looked angry with his eyes narrowed, chin pulled inward, and face generally contracting towards the center, it seems odd he asked that question. I must have then nodded, for he continued, Why is it, do you think, that women are so bad at taking care of money?

I didn't answer because I didn't have an answer. Also, in retrospect, I'd identify the question as rhetorical, an interesting kind of question as it seems to defeat the ontological purpose of questions, to be answered.

He helped me to my feet and started dusting me off with his hands, the force of which made me unsteady. After this, he rubbed at his knee. I had caused him pain as well.

Can you do me a favor, John?

I can try, I said. I thought he'd yell at me for being clumsy, an admonishment I was familiar with. I'd become notorious to him for spilling my cereal, as I'd done it on two separate occasions.

Two things, he said, then leaning down close to me so I could smell the coffee and tang of cigarettes that flavored his warm and moist breath. First of all, don't get married, he said. Make a living on your own and help out the family you already have. Or, if you do get married, marry someone who has a lot of money, can make a lot of money, or is really good at managing

(Seasonal Affective Disorder), but that is how weather effects people emotionally, not how people effect weather emotionally, which they don't.

it. Second, become a salesman, because there are always things to sell and you always need people to sell them. Don't become some idiot who spends twenty years on an education so they can teach high school for s___ pay. Don't even think about getting into that video games or computers crap. The world needs people to sell the parents and teachers on the school. It needs people to sell the video games and computers. Ideas or products, it doesn't matter. You always need a salesman.

I'd stopped crying at this point.

Do you understand anything I'm saying?

I think so, I said.

Then he grabbed me tight on each of my forearms and pulled me closer. I could make out the individual scraggly lines of red that marked the whites of his eyes, which should give you a good impression of how close I was.

You listen to me, okay? The world always needs a salesman. Because he, regardless of the product he sells, is only ever selling himself. So you learn that skill and you're set. You're done learning. The inventors and creators of the world are morons who think people are going to pay them for their good intentions. But good intentions never pay.

He released me.

After that he walked quickly towards his car and drove off. At the time, I thought he might never return. There was something very conclusive in what he'd said and done, from what I understood as conclusive at the time, and perhaps it reminded me of television shows.

However, he returned within an hour. I found later that he'd had an argument with my mother directly before I ran into him, presumably over finances. My father repeatedly suggested

salesmanship as a career in what I believe might be a reaction to my two brothers, both of whom ended up in circumstances that caused him and my mother economic and/or emotional pain.

My oldest brother, fifteen years older than me, went at twenty-one to Alaska, having decided he'd spend a summer as a fisherman. He did not tell my parents what kind of fishing he planned on doing. It was for King Crab, the pay being high in accordance with the risk. However, the risk was apparently too considerable as he was tossed overboard during an extremely violent storm. To say a storm can be violent is an example of using the pathetic fallacy as it implies intent, and storms don't have intentions.

News of my brother's death arrived sometime in mid-July, 1986. I was sitting under a large Mulberry tree in our backyard, eating mulberries and also occasionally moving to avoid the multi-colored bird droppings. While doing this I heard a single scream followed by a loud thump. At first, I continued to sit there staring at my house, which was on a slight hill and so stood fairly massive above me, as I was small. I probably did that for five or ten minutes and I can't remember a single thought that entered my head, though I believe it is impossible that I thought nothing. Then, I jumped to my feet and began sprinting in circles around the house. I had a lot of energy and it felt necessary to run.

I don't know how long I did this, but when my father came home around four or five he found me half-jogging around a corner of the vinyl siding, covered in sweat.

John, what the h___ are you doing? He looked at me with his head pulled back in fatherly shame, as I now understand it. There are many expressions of shame, if I am correct in my understanding of the concept. In this instance, when the face pulls away, when the eyes become small but distanced, when the cheeks bunch up, when the force of something attacks the psyche in unpredictable ways, concerning a previously unknown fear. Different from guilt in its

connection to one's sense of self. Guilt represents a known thing, understood as wrong in reflection, whereas I believe shame is connected to the identity of one's being. For example, you might feel guilt for murdering someone and shame for being someone who murders. In this case, I could conjecture he felt shame for being the father of someone who runs without cause around the house in circles, or more generally, shame for being the father of someone who does unexplainable things that look odd to outsiders who do not do them.

I tried to answer but couldn't catch my breath. I kept running. In a couple large strides he caught up to me, scooping me into his arms.

Calm down.

I'm calm, I said, cradled like you would a baby, though much larger. And I suddenly was calm. It was hard then to understand why I'd had so much energy a moment before.

He set me on the ground. Don't do that anymore, he said. You look like there's something wrong with you. It was a good thing to know.

He approached the front door. I followed. Inside, my mother lay on the linoleum floor of the kitchen in the shape of an S. People sometimes say my mother was beautiful, with long yellow-blond hair that was naturally curly and framed a round face most people described as cute. It's my understanding that when people call something or someone cute it means they want to protect that thing or person, that they have a desire to hold that thing or person close and coddle it/them. I think my father felt this towards my mother. He wanted to protect her, to keep her close, and though I believe he did and does love her, I'm not sure he's ever liked her. To like is often defined as enjoying one's company, taking pleasure in it.

Love is inadequately defined,²⁰ but it seems to often produce an extreme loyalty in people and an inability to live apart for long periods of time from the loved-one in question. All the same, it does not imply that one enjoys the loved-one's company. It's a difficult concept and emotion to understand.

A once-famous quote concerning romantic love by the comedian, actor, writer and director Woody Allen is: the heart wants what the heart wants. Since being accused of incestuous child molestation, people tend to consider things Woody Allen did, does, and wrote less seriously. More often than not it is more important to people who the speaker is rather than the truth of their claim, though concerns in the public as expressed through news sources, social media, etc., are often forgotten or replaced as time passes. It is likely people might start to believe Woody Allen again in the future. Regardless, I cannot say for certain if his claim is true or not. But if true it does imply love is involuntary, which seems correct based on my observations.

An injury was noticeable on my mother's head where bright red blended with the yellow-blond. Seemingly, this was a result of the thump I'd heard. Her sky-blue eyes were open and she was mumbling to herself, though nothing distinguishable. Some spit sprayed out from her pale lips.

Diane, my father screamed. When she didn't respond he started shaking her. At first gently, and then with slightly more force.

Stop it, I said, I think she's sleeping.

He told me to leave the room.

²⁰ As a noun, it is defined as: 1) an intense feeling of deep affection, and 2) a person or thing that one loves. As a verb, it is defined as: feel a deep romantic or sexual attraction (to

She didn't respond to anyone for about two hours. Eventually, my father found the open letter on the kitchen table about my brother being dead, which explained her condition to others and was then explained to me. That was the only time I saw my father cry. If this is the first mark of a pattern he will cry again when I die, or when my brother dies. Some people cry often and some very little, and some what I suppose is a moderate amount.

Risk assessment is an important feature when considering employment. I've heard they've improved the safety of King Crab fishing. So much that one death every few years is now the average rather than some few each individual year, which is good news for the fisherman and their families.

I was only six when my brother died and it did not affect me much except indirectly.²¹ It didn't cause any economic problems for my parents as they were awarded his salary in full for the summer he was to work, which paid for his body to be shipped home and for his internment.

someone).

²¹ Nora interrupted my writing here by hanging her face down at my side while her eyes were slightly scrunched and her mouth open with the left side angled up slightly more than the right. Her hands were held out at her sides palm-up, fingers very slightly curled. Generally, these expressions collectively mean—what are you doing? what is that? how could you do that? or a variation of these.

What? I asked.

You seem terrible here. Like a terrible person.

Why?

Because you write about him like he didn't matter at all.

That's incorrect, I said. He did matter in an emotional sense to my parents, your father, and many other people. It is simply that he had little affect on my life specifically as I was so young when he died, and because our large difference in age resulted in him not being at home very often. If someone dies that you never knew well or at all, it does not typically affect you in a direct or immediately perceivable way. That you're ancestors, such as my great grandparents, died, does not affect you except indirectly, as I noted Henry's death affected me. I may have acted at times like it affected me more, but that was a lie so that people would not think I was terrible as you just did.

You could have just written that, she said.

As I have written it here, that should suffice.

His gray tombstone reads: Henry Burgess Jr./ 1965-1986/ Beloved Son. It did cause emotional problems for others.

Though my mother was labeled insane by some she was also what is called good-natured and affectionate, and liked spending almost all her waking hours with me, so much that I often became frustrated by her company. I wanted to do things on my own and my mother was always helpful, so that if you wanted to perform even a simple task, such as pour your own cereal, you first had to contrive some way to find yourself alone. I wanted to learn things, and her presence often hindered that.

Besides that, as I mentioned, she was disappointed that God hadn't made me a girl, and had instead given me a penis, which was the basis of her definition of gender. Perhaps it was my mother's desire for a girl that gave her the idea to give me dolls and have me play dress-up, though if my father found me she'd act like it was my idea, though it usually wasn't. This dressing-up and dolling (as she called it) began before I can recall. From my earliest memories it was a routine. She liked for me to put on fashion shows. I liked doing it also as I could imitate the patterns and mannerisms of people I'd seen elsewhere, on television and in person, people whose imitation was inevitably less successful when I wore supposed boy's clothes. I now understand that many people consider this wrong, because they think it is wrong for someone with a penis to wear a dress, because they believe someone with a penis is necessarily a man, and they do not believe men should wear dresses or other so-called women's clothing, which is something the Bible addresses.

Deuteronomy 22:5:

The woman shall not wear that which pertaineth unto a man, neither shall a man put on a woman's garment: for all that do so are abomination unto the Lord thy God.

Even accepting a stable definition of gender²², which is generally not helpful when trying to understand people, this is still confusing as what a man wears and what a woman wears completely depends on the time period and physical location of said man and woman. One could pose several questions relating to the logistics of this command.

For instance, consider the kilt. Is a kilt worn by a man abominable to God in America, but not in Scotland? In other words, does a kilt in America cease to be a kilt and instead become a dress? And even if we accept that kilts are abominable for Americans in America, are they when worn by Americans in Scotland? And are kilts, since primarily historical and connected to tradition, actually abominable when worn by any man because it is no longer a fashion trend, and therefore closer to women's clothing than men's? These are a series of questions I cannot answer satisfactorily.

Referring to my last question, I suppose you could say it is wrong if you do not wear the current fashion of men and/or women of a certain place and time. And yet, how much time must pass before a change in fashion is considered a rule? For instance, if today in Kentucky a man wore a long red dress, presumably the Lord would find him abominable, but if men start wearing them for a few years, or months, or decades, or any other amount of set time, then presumably it would no longer be abominable. However, there is no set time period for changes in fashion listed in the Bible or elsewhere, which makes me wonder whether we are not supposed to be dressing as all men and women did at that time, BC (Before Christ), in which case we are all abominations.

²² I've already referenced the chapter in a previous footnote that I will now reference again, but if you'd like to read a more thorough analysis of gender then please see Chapter Fourteen: The Streets of Louisville. For the sake of the argument I make in this portion of the text it is required that I assume gender has a stable definition, even though it does not.

However, I have never heard anyone express concern with this final scenario, and my mother was unconcerned about the dolling unless my father was there, or if I asked her about it outside of the following times: when it was occurring, about to occur, had just occurred, was suggested to occur. Considering these last details and some conversations I've since had with her, it is also possible that my mother thought the dolling was wrong, which is odd since she suggested it on many of the occasions, but people often do things even if they think they are wrong.

During summer or other school-breaks, or before I entered the school-system, we took trips to the local Goodwill in Florence, and once there perused girl's clothing, as it was labeled, in my size. My mother tended towards pink: dresses, sparkling shirts, leggings, ballerina shoes. I tended towards shorts of neutral color and shirts with some sort of decal. One of my favorites had a picture of a black horse looking fierce²³ as it lunged up into the air, above which picture was written: I'm An American Princess Who Loves Horses! I liked that it was fierce, and I've always liked phrases, and language generally.

²³ Its teeth were bared. Originally, I just wrote of the teeth being bared to explain why I chose the term fierce, but was reminded by Nora that it has other important connotations. In particular, it is a much-used word by the LGBTQ+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, others) community. If someone looks fierce in this context, it means they look homosexual/bi/trans/queer/other in a good way. Nora told me that's not quite right, and offered the following: Fierce is like looking like you can take over the world.

I'd heard it used similarly during my days of prostitution and pimping, and sometimes on television since, or when speaking with members of the LGBTQ+ community. However, when I was younger if I were to use this term that is not what I would have meant. I would have meant an excitability or energy expressed through the intensity of a particular feature, aligning with the second definition below.

The dictionary definition is as follows: 1) having or displaying an intense or ferocious aggressiveness; 2) (of a feeling, emotion, or action) showing a heartfelt and powerful intensity; 3) (of the weather or temperature) powerful and destructive in extent or intensity.

Price was always an object, which is a play on words because the typical phrase is price is no/not (an) object, which phrase does not make sense, as one's income, no matter how large, is always limited. Once she purchased a few outfits we went home, and my mother discussed what poses she thought would best complement the different costumes.

I didn't consider any of this odd, though I also understood I shouldn't tell my friends as my friends never told me stories of themselves dolling. The only exception was Michael, who would sometimes ask to try on the clothes once he discovered I had them. Our sizes were close though not exact. He did not, however, doll with his parents, and he sometimes told me he felt bad about doing it after he did it because he knew his parents didn't like it. I told him he didn't need to feel bad, but that didn't seem to help him emotionally. Also, I do not recall people with penises, or assumed males, wearing dresses or other so-called women's clothing other than as objects of ridicule on television, at the time. So I was fairly certain it was not to be discussed, in the same way I've since learned you're not supposed to talk about sex, religion, politics, and poverty. There are some things that make people nervous, angry, sad, depressed, or generally uncomfortable. There is usually no good reason to produce these emotions in others. They find the experience unpleasant, and people in an unpleasant mood will make things more difficult for you.

One day we purchased five outfits and all of them together were less than fifteen dollars, which was relatively a bargain. I was looking forward to wearing a Minnie Mouse shirt with red parachute pants as I was curious to see if I could move like a girl I'd seen on the Disney channel, which channel we had for brief intervals when there were free previews. My mother was excited (as she said) to see me twirl in a pink tutu. I'd just slipped out of the tutu and put on the parachute pants and Minnie Mouse shirt, and was entering the sanctum of our living room. I didn't call it a

sanctum. That was my father who enjoyed the large, padded chair in the corner from which he said, This is my sanctum. As I aged I learned to laugh when he said this. It made him smile when I did, which typically indicates that someone is happy, which is usually a good thing.

My mother hadn't purchased her new carpet yet so there was a gray shag that was distressing (aesthetically, in color and shape) to my outfit. Still, I could imagine it as something like the stage from the show I'd seen, dancing around different people in large costumes pretending to be cartoon characters. I find it difficult to imagine completely new things, but I find it easy and preferable to perform as if in scenarios I've read about or observed on television or in person before.

I walked in just as my mother was saying, Honey, what in the world are you doing?

As what I was doing was obvious, it didn't make sense for her to say this. I was about to ask in a practiced diva voice I'd learned from a few singers if I should put on the black leggings and pink sparkling shirt, when I saw my father in the other entrance to the living room. I'd come from the kitchen, but the living room also met the brief square of tiling that in optimistic times we called the foyer, which times of optimism were invented in our minds, the word here used sarcastically to signify it wasn't a nice entrance according to many people's standards. It was a joke my mother sometimes made.²⁴

My father had a similar look I'd later see early in the day the news of my brother's death arrived. His eyes were large, and his cheeks lifted, and the overall impression, as I came to interpret it, was as if someone had just stolen something from him he didn't think could be stolen. What some might call bafflement or general confusion, mixed with disgust.

²⁴ To read of the origins of the joke, see Chapter Four: An Introduction to Diversity.

Shame is complex, and from the reactions I've seen people give to it, I might call it the worst of feelings, though I cannot definitively state this. I can say that it seems similar to grief in some ways, which many people seem to think the worst. The difference with shame is that what dies, albeit metaphorically, is an idea that someone had of themselves, their loved ones, or their pasts. An idea that was part of their identity is proved invalid or something they believed wasn't part of their identity is affirmed. I believe my father always wanted me to be like him.²⁵

Son, he said, but that's all he said before leaving the room.

My mother called after him, I don't know where he gets these ideas!

Since a young girl was not part of our family I can only imagine my father was thinking the appearance of the outfits odd and likely not a purchase of mine, even if the dolling was my idea, which on this particular occasion it was not, though it would be on the next occasion and many in the future.

I will be clear here, as Nora says I should be, and as I know I should be based on similar situations as represented in popular culture: I didn't feel bad or good about this. I did feel I was supposed to be feeling something I wasn't feeling, if that is a feeling. I knew there was something I didn't understand, and I wanted to understand that thing. I learned in high school, and more thoroughly in college, that when things like this occur in other books they are meant to prompt

²⁵ Nora said, Grandpa looks strange and mean here. It makes me uncomfortable. How do you know he was ashamed of you?

I am in no way certain he felt shame, I replied, as there is no way to conclusively determine the emotions of others. However, based on what I know of his belief system now, and based on seeing reactions similar to this in others, I have come to the best conclusion I can, that it was shame which was expressed through his various reactions.

I didn't listen to most of what you just said, she said. But, couldn't you just ask him?

This is true, I said, and yet one of the things I understand about shame is people don't like discussing it, and people avoid topics they don't like discussing and sometimes lie about them. Therefore, there's no reason to think I could be more conclusive after discussing this with him.

the reader into considering psychological effects, because when parents disapprove of things that children approve of it can hurt the child mentally. I was not mentally hurt.

These misunderstandings recurred with frequency throughout my life. There was often a disconnect (as one might say) between me and other people, which always increased my curiosity.

My mother told me to change while making strange eyes and nudging her head towards my bedroom in slight jerks, in what I believe was an attempt to non-verbally that I should change clothes before my father reentered the living room. People can be odd. That is why I've tried to get out of the way of people. I can never completely understand them, and I can tell they often want me to understand. It upsets them. And as I've grown older, I find large groups difficult to manage, as there are many competing demands. It can be physically exhausting.

As to my other brother, William, the defining characteristic I will assign him for the sake of your memory is better located much later in time. In 1997, a few months after Nora was born, he obtained a bank loan of about fifty thousand dollars that he subsequently invested with one other man in a chain restaurant that sold pizza. I do not believe it is wise to trust my brother with money. The bank clerk that approved the loan must have had some sort of incentive to do so, like a bonus, as it is unlikely that someone who understands how to make money would talk to my brother and then think to give it to him.

For instance, he doesn't know how to talk about business and at the time frequently used slang, such as brother or what up?, even when talking to people much older than him. This demonstrated his lack of knowledge concerning what people wanted to hear, or even what words certain people were capable of making sense of. He's not a good salesman, as my father has said.

This was the 90's when almost every investment seemed to work out, and even before the bubble popped, as they figuratively refer to the economic downturn, my brother's business failed. Even at the age seventeen, I understood it was poorly planned, because some people doubt relative intelligence depending on age. He set up his pizza franchise between a McDonald's and a Wendy's that were both already financially insecure from their relative distance from any interstate exit, and besides were both in poor exterior shape so that the clean, new business in between may have looked better by comparison, but also looked like a polished turd (as William sometimes said of other things), if you'll pardon the vulgar expression.

I remember standing outside the restaurant with him the day before it opened. My mother and father had already left, but I was still looking at the building. I was trying to see what William seemed to see that caused him to stare so long. Pride, I believe, evidenced through his slight smile, large eyes, and tendency to nod to himself while looking at the building, while his hands rested on his hips with his chest projected forward.

Do you think your pizza is better than the burgers? I asked him. My favorite is the Wendy's single.

No one cares what your favorite is, he said. People like options. My partner understands that. People want cheap options. Food that'll fill them up but that doesn't skimp on flavor. And a name they can trust.

That may be true, but even though your food is categorical different, you're the third cheap option with a name they can trust, and in an area that doesn't seem to be doing well financially, I said.

If I want your advice, I'll ask for it. Don't be an a__.

I wasn't trying to be, I said, knowing by that point in my life that a__ in this context meant one was being purposefully mean or misunderstanding.

You don't have to, he said, then walking away from me, implying that without trying I was still an a__. I had recourse to come back soon, but I'll write of that later.²⁶ This episode should work as a good example of our relationship as we've aged. I now understand ways I could have acted to better suit him, but I can't change how I acted in the past. That is one of the things about people and the past to always remember, how it necessarily predetermines the future to a large extent.

I'll add that besides choosing a poor location he also hired poor workers in skill level and competence. Most of the employees were on drugs for the duration of their shifts, which I know because I sold them the drugs.²⁷ So it was that with lack of through-traffic and employees drugged and stealing the business failed in less than six months, and the house my brother put up for collateral (in which he owned around nine thousand in equity) was taken along with his car (worth maybe two thousand). And so the bank lost much money from the venture even as my

²⁶ You can find this story within Chapter Nine: My Marijuana Farm at the Local Park.

²⁷ If you're trying to show that dad is mean to you or whatever, Nora said, you're not doing a good job.

I'm not trying to show that your dad was or is mean, or that I am or was mean, or that either of us was nice if we refer to the typical opposite. I am only attempting to detail the events and our relationship to the best of my ability so that potential readers and yourself might see how I understood William and how he understood me, as I understand it.

She sighed, and then said, I'm just saying I don't think I'd like you if you sold drugs to my employees either. If I owned a restaurant or had a theater or like a hotel or something.

That's a reasonable thing to think, I said, but your father doesn't know that I sold drugs to his employees so he doesn't have reason to dislike me for it.

That's, Nora said and she was quiet for a few moments with her mouth open before concluding with the words, not the point.

That's precisely the point, I said. You can't dislike someone for something they did if you don't know what they did.

Fine, she said, just keep writing then.

brother was dug so deep in debt that it appeared he'd never dig out in his lifetime, metaphorically, if you imagine the debt as dirt that is removed from a hole that the person in debt is standing in.

He, Jenny, and a very young Nora moved in²⁸ with my parents and myself when he was twenty-eight and me eighteen, though I'd leave the home shortly after to go to college. They moved out again about a year later.

You may now understand why my father wanted me to become a salesman, though as long as I didn't do something risky with either my life or money, I don't believe he would've complained outwardly.

He knew how to be a salesmen and was good at it, and logically wished to pass on this skill, as I am now attempting to pass on skills to Nora. He was good enough that my mother never needed to work, and that he was always able to provide clothing, food, shelter, and education for me and my brothers even accepting the above given circumstances.

I do not mean to imply we had a lot compared to middle class standards as they were then understood, because we didn't. To give a more exact impression, I believe my father made around twenty thousand a year for the majority of my childhood, reaching somewhere near thirty-five thousand when I entered adolescence. They also had a mortgage, two car payments, and carried credit card debt until recently when I paid it off for them. It was around nineteen-

²⁸ I don't remember any of that, Nora said.

You were only three when they moved back out again, and many people don't remember things from when they were three.

My mom and dad never mentioned it. Actually, neither has Grandma and Grandpa.

It's likely your parents were ashamed, and avoid experiencing this shame over again by not telling you that this happened. They did not like having to rely on my parents for help when they were past the age when someone typically lives with one's parents, as William told me on one occasion.

thousand dollars when I paid it. My father says it is a loan but I do not foresee any way in which they will be able to repay it. I have a lot of money, so I don't mind (as one might say). It will not significantly affect me in a negative way.

Chapter Two: My First Investment, My Introduction to Michael, and My Mother's Mental Condition.

I learned from the examples of my brothers that it was best not to be perceived as a financial or emotional burden, and to at least conceal what might otherwise cause burdens. I wanted to be able to completely care for myself in the world, and I pursued this goal in two important ways:

- 1) Accumulating as much knowledge as possible.
- 2) Accumulating as much money as possible.

I started saving money as soon as I could. My mother began giving me five dollars a week allowance for completed chores when I turned six. This is a good sum for a small child in the 80's, in Northern Kentucky, living in a below-average income household, because context is very important especially when considering money. In exchange for this weekly sum I gave up both birthday and Christmas presents, which still significantly exceeded the money I'd received before, which was nothing.

I was told by my mother not to communicate the frequency with which I was given my allowance as my father understood it to be bi-weekly. But I earned my allowance, if I am to compare it to others and what they said they were asked to do, and what they then received as compensation. My cleaning skills were good, and I even took over many chores not directly assigned to me, as I saw my mother became stressed, evidenced through her grabbing her hair and crying, or yelling at no one in particular, usually just looking at the wall. It happened when too many things were on her mind simultaneously (as she said). As much as she wanted to do things for you if she could, she also became mentally overwhelmed sometimes.

Other kids I knew spent their limited funds on candy, action figures, or baseball cards, or as Michael preferred to spend most of his money, on fishing tackle he thought looked cool but never used to fish. And then there were strange fads such as pogs. I never understood the attraction of these cardboard disks. They are just cardboard with pictures. In fact, many products are just painted plastic or painted cardboard. I don't understand how they appeal to people, though I admire the acumen of the companies that produce them. They understand people.

I saved up for something bigger. I didn't have a definite idea of what I wanted but I knew I didn't want any of the things other kids used their money on. I was happy (as one might say) to do my chores and save my five dollars, although sometimes I was forced to use a quarter to get a piece of candy if I knew I'd be hanging out with others my age at the arcade in Florence Mall.

By my seventh birthday I'd saved up \$246.25. I kept detailed accounts, tallying everything in a journal my mother gave me, and ending each year, as I came to do this every year, with a summary, so I might get the gist of where my income came from quickly.

The first year ended with the following report:

Source of Income	Time Spent		Money Made	Total
Allowance	50 weeks	x	5 dollars a week	= \$250
(No Other Source of Income)				

Source of Expenditure	Time Spent		Money Lost	Total
Candy with Friends at Arcade	15 Times	x	.25	=3.75
(No Other Source of Expenditure)				

(250) (3.75)

SOI-SOE=SAVINGS=\$246.25

My knowledge of the length of a year is not at issue here because there were two weeks when I was not given an allowance, though reasons for this were never explained. I did not have any expenditures not listed, and this seemed to worry my mother who threatened to stop giving

me an allowance altogether if I wasn't going to spend any of it, complaining that pretty soon I'd have more money saved up than them, which would turn out to be true in the long-term, and which she implied was a fault. Technically, it was my fault, if you consider fault as one's contribution to an undesirable outcome, but I don't think most people would consider this particular thing as necessarily undesirable. As for the layout of my accounts (as I called them), my mother spent time teaching me the necessary language and math skills, the basics of multiplication taking most of my sixth year to learn. But I learned fast when it came to my accounts, and math-related tasks generally. I also learned how to use a calculator.

I looked forward to the time when I could be alone with my accounts. Not because I wanted to hide them, as some people assume, but because I liked having something of my own (as one might say).

I enjoyed going through and counting the money. I liked feeling the money. There was the chill of the coins, and the smell of the dollar bills, and that particular rough feel of paper I only associate with printed money. I appreciated that something so abstract--just a number, but one that could be exchanged for anything else--had such physical properties. It is nice when something has a corporeal form. You can turn it in your hands, and use your senses to understand it in a different way.

I flattened the bills and then stacked them. I did not use rubber bands since they might physically deform the bills. I liked to roll the coins in my hand and out again in a pile that clinked as each piece slid down.

My savings accumulated similarly until I was nine, when I decided on a large purchase, and my first investment. By this point in the video-gaming world Nintendo was considered best, better than Atari in retrospect. I presume some will note that that year (1989) was when the Sega

Genesis was released, but I did not want to try something completely untested by the market and so dismissed the idea of buying one of those.

As my friends insisted on playing games, and as I needed to go with them because they were my friends, I was searching for a way to cease the small expense of candy. At the arcade I'd buy a piece of candy and while slowly eating it watched others play games, because I knew everyone would find it strange if I didn't do or buy something, as no one else did that.

By buying my own Nintendo system I'd benefit in multiple ways:

- 1) I wouldn't have to spend money on candy.
- 2) I'd get to play the games if I wanted.
- 3) I wouldn't have to get someone to drive me there.
- 4) My friends would be grateful as they'd save money and time themselves.
- 5) If I could work out some sort of deal where I bought the system and others brought the games to play I would get all the rewards while spending little of the money usually required for them, because since my friends didn't have Nintendo systems they might as well keep the games at my house, effectually making them mine.

I worked out that last condition with my friend Michael, who was good at forwarding messages. Not that I was trying to trick him, because as I've written in other words there's a fine line, or maybe no line at all, metaphorically, between manipulating and convincing. If you think of what people often consider devious or underhanded (as it is sometimes called) it is rhetorically the same as good-intentioned arguments concerning moral inclinations, and things like laws and why people should obey them. People are trying to get you to do what they want you to do, and what they want may often be to your benefit. It would be helpful if more people understood that.

Michael was tall for his age and skinny, two characteristics that would define him during the entire time I knew him. He was also very expressive with his hands and facial muscles as well as being excitable, understood through his tendency to talk louder and become even more expressive than usual when he liked an idea, movie, video game, dress, etc. When people wanted to insult him they sometimes called him a spaz. I never completely understood his attachment to me, but he always called me his best friend, so I called him likewise. I spent more time with Michael throughout my life than with any other person, so perhaps this is a good partial definition of best friend.

Starting in first grade he'd follow me around most places, a few paces behind if we were walking, or in the doorway of my room if I was counting my money, or enlisting me in a game of The Michael if we were on the school playground.²⁹ But no matter what we were doing he would typically be talking. He liked the sound of his voice, is how I've heard people describe like-figures, but the sound wasn't enjoyable as defined by most aesthetic standards, high-pitched and squeaky from his childhood through puberty, after which it deepened slightly but contained also a certain lilt, as if he were purposefully making his voice higher than it naturally was.

We met sometime in late summer directly before I began first grade. When not counting my money or doing my chores I preferred to walk around the neighborhood and think about my accounts, how I could make more and spend less, and how I could learn. This was in a time when most parents in Northern Kentucky allowed their children to go where they pleased. There was not much concern for abductors and perverts³⁰. Depending on a particular person's understanding

²⁹ Information regarding The Michael can be found in the following chapter on school and church.

³⁰ Pervert is further defined within Chapter Fourteen: The Streets of Louisville: Finding New Customers and Revenue, in connection with the clients of prostitutes.

of right and wrong, their understanding of pervert will contain more or less people. For instance, some people consider transgender people perverts because they think going against normative ideas of gender is wrong³¹, and they think if someone does this one thing wrong then they must want to do wrong sexual things, because they seem to be confused about the difference between gender and sexual proclivities.

However, in this particular case I am referring to people who potentially wanted to have sex with children, something which is near-universally considered wrong, though ostensibly not by the people who do it. Also, I'm not sure if abductions have picked up percentage-wise, if the ones occurring were not advertised as much, or if new parents are more cautious. In any case, no one was noticeably worried about children walking around by themselves at the time.

As I walked around a curve past houses that were only a slightly distorted reflection of my own, Michael metaphorically materialized with a squeal from the bushes in front of his house. Then he ran at me and shouted, Boo!

Hello, I said. My name is John.

Michael looked at the ground and kicked it. Then he looked up at me with his nose scrunched. Weren't you scared? he asked.

Of what?

When I jumped out of the bushes. Didn't you think I was a ghost?

I don't think ghosts jump out of bushes, I told him. Looking back, I can still agree with this assessment. A ghost, if it did exist, has no reason to jump out of a bush. It has other means to

³¹ See Chapter One: My Time, Place, and Immediate Family for a detailed discussion of men and women wearing women and men's clothes.

scare people, such as the fact that it is the soul of a deceased person. You'd think that would be enough as it defies most people's understandings of reality.

I bet they could, he said, seemingly excited at the potential to argue.

I don't think ghosts are real.

That's a lie, he said, then putting his arm around my shoulder as if he wanted to put me in a headlock, though he stopped short of completing the maneuver. He continued, My Great Aunt Alice died in a car accident and everybody says they hear her moaning in the garage.

What's moaning?

I don't know. It's like ghost talk.³²

Did she live with you?

For a little while, until she died.

I'm sorry, I said, because I knew you were supposed to apologize when someone died even if it wasn't your fault. In this case the word sorry seems to mean: I recognize it is unfortunate that someone you knew died because that probably made you feel bad, and you may still feel bad because you miss them. I'm fairly certain I miss Michael. That may be why I think of him often. I believe, according to the general rules of grief, that if I mentioned Michael it would still be appropriate for someone to tell me they're sorry.

That's alright, he said, now pulling me forward, pressing me back into the walk he'd interrupted. She smelled pretty bad, he continued. And we've got a ghost now, so that's good.

I've never had a ghost. Are you sure they're real?

³² Moaning is defined as: making a long, low sound expressing physical or mental suffering or sexual pleasure. Presumably, people are referring to the suffering aspect with ghosts as I do not believe ghosts (in the myths concerning them) can typically engage in sexual intercourse.

As real as you are.

I looked at my hands. I'm pretty real, I said.

You're funny, he said, and he laughed.

After that I couldn't get rid of him (as one might say). I believe Michael was someone constantly in search of an audience, and that my lack of resistance to his presence worked as a de facto endorsement. He understood I was willing to listen to him. I was also one of the few children exactly his age in the neighborhood.

Three years later, we were likewise walking around the neighborhood when I introduced the Nintendo idea. I'd waited for Michael to stop talking about his fishing lure that was really an alien baby that he was raising up to be a human.

Michael, I began, what if I told you about a way we could play arcade games without going to the arcade?

Though he typically did most of the talking between us, he was good at paying attention when I had something to say, perhaps for this very reason. When I initiated a conversation, it was with a purpose in mind. In this instance, I was dramatic and gesticulated heavily with my hands in order to communicate the importance of the idea. This entertained Michael. Over time, I noticed he liked when things were related dramatically. I'd rehearsed this particular conversation in my head, and in front of the mirror, over the past couple weeks. It always started with the interest-inducing question written above. I've learned it's best to create interest before making your intentions fully known.

That would be awesome, he said, nodding quickly and repeatedly. Then, with a grin on his face and squinting his eyes at me, he asked, Are you going to buy an arcade game?

I mean, I continued, what if we could play the games for free by spending more money at first? Like an investment. I was already a devotee of television and how a character went about revealing a plan. So I knew how to create anticipation, and that anticipation often produced the desired results of the speaker.

That'd be really good, he said, nodding more.

Well, I said, then hanging my head in what I understood was a mope-y gesture, I would be okay with buying a Nintendo, but I can't afford the games.

Then I guess you shouldn't buy a Nintendo, he said, noticeably upset via the turning of his smile upside down into a frown. He was interested and desired the same thing as me.

As a series of rules: Provoke interest. Reveal intention. Make an ally.

But, I said, if you guys helped out, then we could all play them together.

How?

I buy the system and you buy the games.

I buy the games?

All of you.

All of who?

Our friends.

Oh, you mean like all of us that go to the arcade. But why would we do that?

A Nintendo system is very expensive.

I know, so why would we buy one?

I'd buy one, and I'd do it because it's less expensive than going to the arcade.

I don't think that's right, Michael said, then veering to avoid running into a stop sign and stumbling into the road slightly as he did so. That was close, he said.

How much money do you spend at the arcade? I asked.

A few bucks.

But that's each time, right?

Each time I go, yeah.

So, add up all those times.

That's too many.

Right, there's too many, and that adds up, to hundreds.

Hundreds? That's more money than anything, which saying was an impossibility and use of extreme exaggeration, known as hyperbole. It doesn't add up to that much, he said.

Yes it does. Like, if you spend three dollars each time, then if you go thirty times you spend almost a hundred.

I don't think I've gone that many times.

Yes you have, and you have to think about all the times you'll go later.

Maybe a lot.

Yeah, so if I buy the system, and you all chip in on games, you'll be able to go to the arcade as often as you want. And because of all the times you'd go, you'll actually save money.

He agreed.

From the way I've written of Michael thus far, perhaps it is possible for you to surmise whether or not I have a guilty conscience. I remember him and our conversations better than many things, so that is at least probably a sign of affection.

I purchased what was called the Action Set for \$149.99. It came with the Control Deck, two game controllers, a NES Zapper, and a dual Game Pak containing both Super Mario Bros.

and Duck Hunt, so I actually provided the first two games as well. I purchased this on my ninth birthday. My accounts recorded it in the following way:

Savings: \$839.95

Nintendo Action Set Investment: $\$149.99 + \$8.99 \text{ (tax)} = \$158.98$

Expected Yearly Dividends: $\$15 + \text{cost of games}$

$S(839.95) - I(158.98) = \text{SAVINGS}(680.97)$

If you've noticed the discrepancy between my allowance and the amount of savings I'd accumulated, it is because I received \$120 for my first communion.³³ The Nintendo performed as a better investment than I anticipated, for when the regular Nintendo was outdated I convinced Michael, and Michael convinced the others, that we should sell all of the games and the system and use the money to purchase a Super Nintendo and games with that. I did this again with the Nintendo 64. I currently own a Wii because it seemed reasonable considering I'd bought the other Nintendo systems. It seemed a natural conclusion and I like when I can conclude something. I never play it, though sometimes Nora swings the remote around in her hand for awhile, or plays the bowling game within Wii Sports with her friends.

A lot of the time when my friends came over to play games I didn't actually play with them. Instead I did chores, watched the small television in my parents' bedroom, or spent time with my accounts. On a few occasions my mother walked in on one of my friends, usually Michael, and asked them what they were doing there, and where was John, and why are you playing by yourself, Michael, can't you play by yourself at home? I told her I liked to share and

³³ Nora tells me no one is going to notice the difference, and no one cares.
But what if they do? I asked.
So what?

she generally let it end at that, though she forbade anyone from playing games past 7:30 PM after a few incidents where one or more of my friends, twice Michael, woke up my father, who usually went to bed at 9:00 PM.

It was also around this time (the age of nine and ten) that my mother's behavior began to be apparent to me as abnormal. As a younger child her seemingly unprompted screaming and crying, sudden spastic behaviors, emotional breakdowns, and panic attacks all seemed to me typical behavior of human beings, and nothing odd or worth assigning particular meaning to. Without much of a comparative base, I could only assume she represented women or mothers or humans generally, a type of categorical mistake I'd make somewhat regularly throughout my life.

She only occasionally had what people sometimes called episodes. It wasn't how I acted, but I saw others display erratic behavior, especially a couple friends who performed tantrums, laying on the ground and hitting it while screaming and crying, when they were denied something. I tried a tantrum once when I wanted a piece of candy. It was a chocolate bar. My mother laughed and didn't get me the candy, but I hadn't honed my acting skills at that point so maybe it could have worked. It is impossible to know.

One incident in particular should work well to demonstrate my mother's sporadic mental condition as well as the effects of the frequent arrival and departure of young boys coming to my house to play Nintendo.

From my room I heard an intense conversation, identified as such through the unsteady voices raised about typical volume, taking place as I counted through my money. My mother and my friend Yancy were making strange sounds, as if they were discussing politics, like what I'd

As this takes up relatively little space, I decided to keep it, as *so what* didn't seem a sufficient argument to delete it. It is also generally a dismissive phrase, meant to invalidate the

seen between my parents and my uncle, or some other thing that seemed to inherently cause disagreement, and boredom. To an extent I still find politics boring as it is rarely useful to learn from. Politicians seldom say anything that will allow you to understand how they will actually perform while in office, which I for a long time presumed was the purpose of their public speeches. It is not, and I believe the speeches are more designed to simply say what people want to hear, whatever it is the politician assumes they desire collectively. At the same time, politicians are bad actors as I understand it, and watching bad actors might negatively affect my own ability to perform. Their ideas often conflict or change over a brief period of time, creating an unnatural and irregular rhythm. While this is similar to the patterns of many people, I often hear people say they specifically don't believe politicians. And the purpose of acting is to be believed.

As I heard my mother's volume rise higher I began to be concerned for Yancy and his ability to appropriately act within the situation. I worried he'd broken some sort of house rule he was unaware of, such as eating in the living room. This was forbidden by my mother after the purchase of her new carpet sometime when I was seven. In accord with my concern I walked out of my bedroom. However, being cautious not to enter into something I misunderstood, I crept to the open doorway of the living room so I could overhear and oversee the conversation before engaging in it.

My mother was explaining to Yancy that he'd hurt her feelings by not telling her he was alive.

Mrs. Burgess, he said, I don't understand what you mean. I am alive.

other argument without providing any support for doing so.

Of course you are. And you call me Mom. I can't believe you spent all this time hiding from me. Here I am worrying myself to death and this whole time you're fine. You wait until I tell your father. He is going to beat you within an inch of your life. Sometimes I really can't believe the things you kids do to me. Don't you know that that hurts me?³⁴

To be clear, my father did sometimes shake me, and both he and my mother were proponents of spanking, which I know some people consider hitting since it is. But there are important connotative differences to point out. Particularly, a distinction can be drawn between what I'm here calling spanking and what I heard from some people throughout the rest of my life who smiled and said something like, Yeah, my father beat me, meaning that there was corporeal punishment but catching within the verb beat a significantly more severe connotation. I do not believe I was beaten. There were never scars or lasting marks. Sometimes my rear-end was red for a few minutes. It depends on your definition of beaten.³⁵

I don't, I don't, Yancy said, stuttering and making little progress towards a coherent statement. He may have been the worst of my friends my mother could have picked to misidentify. He had an especially weak constitution (as one might say) and looked as if a strong gust of wind would snap him in half, fold him over, and toss him in the trash.³⁶ Mean kids at school sometimes called him Yammy, explaining he had the constitution and personality of the

³⁴ Is this real, Nora asked. Are you making this up?

No, I said. It is real.

So Grandma sometimes thought people were my dead uncle?

She sometimes seemed generally confused on who people were. It's possible she was pretending, as I believe everyone is to a large extent. But it's unclear what reason she would have for pretending to be mentally unstable.

I never knew any of this. She doesn't seem crazy to me.

³⁵ Synonyms of beaten include the following: abused, battered, maltreated, ill-treated, mistreated, misused, downtrodden.

³⁶ Nora contributed this line.

potato's cousin. I believe they meant he didn't have a personality, even though that is impossible. Similar insults were sometimes directed at myself.

You don't what? my mother asked. Why don't you think for once of your mother?

But I love my mother, Yancy said, whimpering, tears magnified in his enormous, coke bottle³⁷, meaning very thick, glasses.

You're d___ right you love your mother. I don't understand why you would do this to me.

I understood this was more serious than typical at this point. My mother seldom cursed.

Is this because of something John did? Yancy asked, now crying more obviously, with his face bunched up and red, often expressive of fear, confusion, and/or sadness.

John, my mother yelled, you're not getting out of this by blaming it on John.

It was at this point I entered the room. Thinking to distract my mother I told her quickly that I thought I saw a cougar in the backyard. That I heard all sorts of screeching-like sounds and the scream of a young boy, and I was very scared, and I'd run inside, but not before it nipped at my heel. I was able to add this last bit as I'd had a fall earlier in the day when I was standing on a chair to get my money down from the uppermost part of my closet. Leaning forward I'd miscalculated the balance required, and slipping from the left side of the chair I'd completed a semi-circle before my right heel slammed up and into the bottom corner of my dresser, creating a significant puncture. I hadn't told her earlier because I thought the wound was interesting to look at and I knew she'd cover it up. I did not have a good understanding of health concerns. The pain wasn't bad enough for me to seek help.

³⁷ See further information on this particular idiom, and my mistaken usage of a different phrase in its place, in the following chapter.

I showed my mother the wound. She was focused enough on treating it and calling me a poor baby and putting strictures on backyard play that she effectively forgot the incident with Yancy, who sat by during this time crying. I looked at him and moved my eyes repeatedly in the direction of the door to signal he should leave while she was distracted, and eventually he did. After this incident I explained to my friends that if my mother ever began speaking to them as if they were someone else that they should give out their full names and relation to me ASAP (As Quickly As Possible). Luckily, this was not repeated, although I often regretted the cougar excuse.

You may not know much about Northern Kentucky. In that case, it should be written that it'd be extremely rare to spot a cougar in the area. Most likely only if one had escaped from a zoo. Both our backyard and front yard bordered a street, so it wasn't in the middle of the wilderness (as one might say). Florence and Burlington are effectively suburbs of Cincinnati, areas filled with neighborhoods of like-houses that span the breadth of most incomes, and not the habitat of cougars. It's conceivable that a cougar from the mountains could stray that far but unlikely it should reach the middle of a neighborhood without anyone contacting some sort of authority. I thought of the cougar because it was something I'd often heard. People liked to tell stories about seeing cougars in the area, and I knew they could be dangerous, that they could eat people, though only partially.

The reason I regretted my excuse later was the constriction put on my alone time when outside. Even my friends weren't allowed to walk alone after dark either to or from my house. This made it so it was only during the summer, when the sun shines longer, that my friends stayed until the full time allotted, 7:30 PM. My father's occasional assertions that it was ridiculous to fear cougars in the area found no corroboration with my concerned mother or

myself, though I know we each had different reasons, though they both had to do with protecting me.

When my mother warned other parents of cougar sightings I stood behind her making consolatory faces, via wide eyes and my head tipped to the side while also shrugging my shoulders, to indicate it was an oddity of hers that we all needed to get used to, a gesture I saw in many children's shows when parents did things the children thought were strange or stupid. Most people, I think, were aware that my mother was mentally abnormal while remaining harmless to others. I learned to compensate (as one might say) for her strange beliefs, even the ones I caused. It seemed like she needed protection. I came to understand why people called her cute.³⁸

³⁸ Nora asked if I thought her grandmother is bi-polar or something. I told her I did not know as my mother has never seen a doctor for her mental condition, and I am not a doctor. In general, my family does not like doctors. My mother once said that you should pray because God can heal anything, though she still has mental health problems from my observation. My father once said that he preferred praying because it's free.

Chapter Three: My Church and School: Of Sexuality, Bullying, and Belief.

From first through eighth grade I was enrolled in a Catholic grade school. If you were a parishioner and gave at least twenty dollars a week in offering the school only charged two thousand dollars for tuition. While this was still a significant price for my parents relative to their overall income, they felt that the education I'd receive would be significantly better than the public schools, even though they later sent me to a public high school. It was primarily financially feasible for my parents because of the large age differences between my brothers and I, so that I was the only one in private schooling during my time. The school was institutionally connected to the church we attended weekly: Immaculate Heart of Mary. It was named for the figuratively spotless heart of Jesus' mother, and almost everyone abbreviated it to IHM in conversation. I was forced to wake by 6:30AM on Sundays so that my father, mother, William and I could arrive at 8 AM Mass on time, though we were always a half an hour early.

I think my father understands time as something to defeat. Though William complained that we were always early and can't we sleep a few more minutes, we still arrived a half an hour early, every week but one or two, when we arrived about an hour early. I did not complain, as I understood it would not be helpful. Such precision and control over scheduling is one of the primary habits of my father I've attempted to imitate. There is a saying that to be early is to be on time, which is illogical but refers, I think, to the fact that if you are early you will be on time when that time comes and you won't be late, which is logical.

Because we were always a half an hour early we had to listen to old men and women as they muttered the Rosary--a pre-Mass ritual. I disliked it because it never changed. I only needed to hear it a few times to know it perfectly, and as it was not a required activity to save my soul it

seemed a misuse of time. But either my parents did not agree or my father was somehow incapable of not arriving early. Also, the church was old and drafty, therefore cold because air entered through old windows with poor insulation, and that meant we had to be cold for an extra half-hour.

Among other things, Catholic Mass and the faith generally, demonstrated how thoroughly people prefer ritual and tradition, even if they have little understanding of it. Based on historical accounts it seems that this was even more the case pre-1969, when Mass was conducted in Latin, and therefore unintelligible to a large portion of the faithful. While my preferred routines in life have revolved around work and my accounts, others revolved around work, church attendance, astrology charts, prayer, charity work, child rearing, sex, violence, movies, books, music, toys, fashion, drugs, and many other things.

However, I found beliefs could be figuratively significantly distanced from the actions that implied them. For example, I learned that about fifty percent of the congregation didn't understand that they adhered to the concept of transubstantiation. This is the Catholic doctrine whereby you understand yourself to be literally eating the flesh and drinking the blood of Christ when you partake of communion. Once the wafers and wine are blessed by a priest they are then gallons of blood and heaps of flesh. If specific flesh, I suppose skin, though despite their certainty in this claim the priests I asked never told me what body part we were consuming.

I know this because after I learned about transubstantiation in school I conducted a poll by asking different members of the church whether they believed it. It seemed a fairly extraordinary thing compared to other things people believed. About half said of course not or some variation of that, while the other half said of course or some variation of same. Once I told the of-course-nots that it was the Catholic belief that it was the blood and body, they changed

their positions about 40% of the time. When I asked the remaining doubters why they continued to be Catholic despite not believing in a core doctrine, most shrugged or smiled at me and patted me on the head. So then, I learned not just about the human devotion to ritual and tradition, but the great willingness of people to accept contradiction with relatively little resistance. Though perhaps my interest and concern should lie more with the 40% that so easily changed their minds. I'm not sure. Both are remarkable in their own way.

Our priest, Father Josiah, was never accused of child molestation. I say that because there were a couple priests in the general area who were, and I think it would be inappropriate and confusing for you to be thinking of him as a potential child molester as I relate stories of him. He was a large man with a voice that boomed out pleasantly (as my teacher said) as he went through the various incantations and prayers of Mass. I did not think of it as pleasant at the time but when I heard other priests I knew that Father Josiah had a good voice comparatively. Bad singing voices are not a reason for denial of priesthood however much certain parishioners complain they should be. Which, of the fundamental things that make one a Catholic, I found two large consistencies: a propensity to complain, and a usually begrudging weekly or bi-yearly (Christmas and Easter) Mass attendance. Those who seemed more convinced of Catholicism's correct interpretation of the world and the afterlife attended on the required holy days as well. We formed part of this group, never missing a required Mass.

There were those few parishioners who were more involved and understood and practiced doctrine more faithfully or accurately, but generally you could count on almost everyone's annoyance: for Mass running too long, for how a visiting priest bumbled around on the altar, how a homily on child-rearing was inappropriate coming from a childless man, how an organist or singer unnecessarily elongated notes, how certain singers added a little too much rock and roll

to the hymns, or whenever they had us sing every verse of a song--it was customary to sing only two verses, not all four or five. From these things I came to understand Mass as a measured event, generally not meant to go beyond an hour, and usually around forty-five minutes. Most people seemed to agree that was the amount of time required by God.

When very young, before I could properly understand the symbolism of physical gestures or pay attention to what was occurring, Mass was a series of odd aerobic motions. Stand up. Sit down. Kneel. Bow. Shake hands. Fold hands. As many children and elderly people nodded off (as one might say) during the ceremony, for about a year I believed we did these things to help everyone stay awake. That is not the case. We do them to respect God.

Father Josiah always acted oddly around me, like he didn't trust me. What I identified in time as a certain wariness to my presence began after my first confession. Father Josiah believed I was a liar. I did lie to him, so he was correct. But he believed I was always a liar. It is more natural than most might assume to label someone as an adulterer, cheater, liar, etc., based on very limited instances, and despite the fact that they are not the thing-in-question the majority of the time. You could lie and you'd be a liar, but if immediately after this you told the truth then you'd be honest.

For non-Catholics, I should explain there are two basic kinds of sins: venial and mortal. Mortal sins, like murder, must be confessed to be forgiven, but venial sins do not need to be confessed to be absolved, which is necessary for you to go straight to heaven instead of having to wait for permission in purgatory. However, if you don't have any mortal sins then you have to offer a random sampling of venial sins to fill in confession time. Our teachers understood we were unlikely to have engaged in mortal sins, being only seven and eight years old, and so

having limited time and incentive, and so they suggested menial sins we likely committed as routines.

Like if we lied on many occasions or if we started fights with our siblings or disobeyed our parents. I wasn't a liar at the time. I hadn't come to understand how to do it effectively, though I would lie in order to meet the demands of the sacrament, though ineffectively. I didn't disobey my parents as I didn't have a reason to. And concerning fights with siblings, William did sometimes tease me or hit me, but I couldn't recall having started any of these fights.

First Confession (or Reconciliation, or Penance) came during second grade as a seeming preparation for First Communion. The sinner is figuratively purified from sin so they may literally receive Jesus' blood and body. I was not nervous as my classmates appeared to be and expressed themselves to be, but I was confused. I knew I was a sinner since it had been explained repeatedly that everyone is a sinner, but I couldn't figure out my specific sins, which would be required for the confession. Being confused, I sought out my parents and William for advice.

I first asked my father as he sat in his large chair in the sanctum³⁹ of our living room. He was drinking a beer and watching baseball on television.

Dad?

Yeah?

Can I ask you something?

He looked at me with his eyes somewhat squinted and a frown on his face, and said in a slow voice, I guess so. He may have thought I would ask about the dolling or about something considered adult-oriented that he didn't like discussing.

³⁹ For an understanding of why this specific word is used here, see Chapter One: My Time, Place, and Immediate Family.

What sins have I committed?

All kinds, I'm sure.

Really? Like what?

Why are you asking me?

Because we're doing First Confession this week. I don't know what to say.

Oh, he said, his facial muscles relaxing slightly. That's supposed to be between you and God. Ask your mother.

You don't have any I could confess?

You could listen to your parents more, and respect them more.

I listen to my parents.

Then why haven't you gone to ask your mother?

I understood, and I had two sins, both lying about listening and not listening, as I went off to ask my mother for her advice. I was grateful.

My mother was in the kitchen preparing Hamburger Helper for dinner, which is seasoning for beef-based recipes.

Mom, what sins should I confess?

She furrowed her brows. What is it you did?

I'm not sure. That's why I'm asking.

She squatted down over so that we were on eye-level. Is there something you're going to do? Something you feel bad about?

No.

It's okay, honey. You can tell me anything you need to.

I explained again.

Oh. She laughed. I thought maybe it was something with Michael, she said. He seems like trouble. Then she covered her mouth slightly. I didn't say anything, she said, creating one of the most obviously untrue statements I can recall hearing in my life. Interestingly, I believe this lie was meant to prompt me to forget the statement she'd made. Though I've found the opposite true, as supported by my recitation of her words.

I tried to be more efficient as I approached William, who was then seventeen, knowing at that point that I should begin my inquiry by saying why I needed sins, that it was not normal to just ask someone what your sins were. He was lying on his bed listening to a Walkman when I found him.

Hey William, I said.

Go away, he said, without looking at me.

Hey William, can I ask you a question?

Go away, he repeated.

Please.

He threw his headphones off and sat up in bed. What is it?

I'm doing my First Confession this week and I need to know what sins to confess.

He smiled. Sure, little brother. Come take a seat on my bed and we'll figure out some.

In retrospect, I believe he understood exactly what he was doing, which, after I explain what he did, some people will likely consider a mean trick. But all of my experiences caused me to learn, so it is hard not to be grateful. He manipulated me, and there is perhaps no better way to learn how to manipulate others than to have oneself be manipulated. Manipulation is the primary skill needed to exist in society.

Rather than writing twice what William said I'll just write the scene of my confession where I repeated much of what he advised.

All of my classmates were gathered in the church, strung out between a few different pews. I kept repeating my sins to myself so I wouldn't forget them. Not out loud, but as thoughts. I sat next to Michael and asked him what he planned to confess. We whispered.

I accidentally saw my neighbor naked, he said.

Does it count if it's an accident?

I don't know, but I kept looking even after I accidentally saw it.

Oh, so you watched on purpose.

Yeah, but only after the accident.

That's not too bad, I said. That's a pretty good sin.

He laughed, and our teacher, an old nun, made a cross with her fingers across her lips. That meant we should be quiet.

Soon after this it was Michael's turn for confession. He looked at me with his eyes crossed, and then blew up his cheeks like he was choking on something. It was what they called a funny face. Generally, people laughed at things termed funny. So I laughed.

Sister Margery walked over towards me as Michael made his way to the confessional box.

You think this is funny? she whispered.

Do I think what is funny?

Don't be smart.

I'm sorry, I said.

I'm not so sure you have the right attitude to partake of this sacrament, she said. What do you think about that?

I don't like it, I said. I want to confess. And I did, because I did not want to go to hell. It sounded terrible. In hell, they said, there are flames and torture, an eternity of pain. I cannot verify this, but a large amount of people claim it is true, including some oblique references in the Bible which many people believe is the literal Word of God, meaning God said it or wrote it Himself. So, God appears to believe this. Please let me confess, I said.

She seemed to grow less angry. Okay, she said, but one more outburst out of you or anyone around you and you're going to the principal's office to wait while the rest of us finish.

Yes, Sister, I said.

She left me.

I added the laughing to my sins. I added the being smart. I kept repeating all my sins in my head. One sin after another.

Michael came out of the confessional and gave me a thumbs-up Sister Margery didn't see, which was good because it was the kind of thing she didn't like. I approached.

Father Josiah greeted me by calling me his son and asking if I was enjoying school.

Yes, I said. Then I made the sign of the cross and asked Father Josiah to bless me since I had sinned, and I told him this was my first confession.

These are my sins, I began. First, I didn't listen to my parents and then I lied about listening. Second, I coveted my neighbor's wife very strongly. Third, I have a strong hankering for whiskey. Fourth, sometimes I'm a real dirty boy and I touch myself and think bad thoughts about vaginas. Fifth, I called my brother a tard and he beat me up because I deserved it, but I should not have called him a tard, and I am sorry. Sixth--

John? Father Josiah asked.

Yes, this is John, I said. I thought maybe he couldn't see me well enough through the partition to identify me, and that perhaps he'd forgotten who came into the confessional booth.

You need to take this more seriously, he said.

I am serious.

You coveted your neighbor's wife? he asked.

Yes, I very strongly coveted.

Do you even know what the word coveted means?

I did not, and I told him so.

How can you have done something if you don't even know what that thing is?

While I understand Father Josiah's frustration now, you can do something and not know what that thing is. For instance, if you drive over the speed limit even if you don't know the speed limit or that speed limits exist, you have still done that thing.

I have done it, I said.

No, you haven't, he said. That's ridiculous.

I needed sins, I told him.

Excuse me?

I needed sins and these are the ones that were given to me. Also, I laughed in church and I was smart.

I'm sure you think this is all very funny, he said, but your soul is something you should take more seriously. You shouldn't joke about these things, John.

I'm sorry, I said. I joked about things that I shouldn't have, Father.

You need to leave, he said. I'll be talking to Sister Margery and your parents about this.

I'm sorry, I said.

Well, I don't believe you. And neither I nor God appreciates your sarcasm. You should not mock the Lord. When you're ready to take this seriously, we'll try again. In the meantime, you should pray that God makes you repentant.

I wanted to tell him that I was sorry again, but I knew that I had worked myself into a situation I could no longer extricate myself from. It was a problem based on lack of knowledge, as most problems are. For instance, I did not know what it was to covet my neighbor's wife, and so I did not question whether a child would do such a thing. Clearly, they probably would not, unless they coveted the wife as a sort of substitute mother, but in this instance covet generally means that one wants to have sexual intercourse with the person in question, and very young children are biologically incapable of having sex, so I appeared to want something I was not even capable of acting upon. I understood these and other things later, when I looked up definitions, when I asked teachers about commandments and their contextual meaning.

But I learned something valuable about lies despite the punishment that followed, which included two weeks of detention at school, and at home a denial of television watching for a week. If you lie, you must be able to follow through in the lie in all ways. You must know the stories around the lie, you must work it into other narratives. Lies multiply and take on metaphorical lives of their own. Lies can never be forgotten if they are to be maintained. The best way to make them work is to just think about them as if they were true, as if they happened in the same way you ate cereal for breakfast, or some other very normal activity that you may engage in on a regular basis.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ For more on lying see Prelude:Reasons.

As I said, after this Father Josiah always looked at me oddly, squinting his eyes with his head turned sideways generally, and seemed to question whether anything I ever said were true. This is another thing to keep in mind concerning the effects of lying: if you get caught in a lie then everyone will always think you're a liar. It's hard to remove that classification, as all information related by the liar becomes suspect. The most suspect phrase of all being: I am not a liar...⁴¹

It was third grade when a few of the boys I was often around on the playground and elsewhere began speaking of liking girls. It was a strange thing to hear, as it seemed to indicate that they disliked the entire gender before. This was an important development in my knowledge. It was my first real-life experience of sexuality and its strange and contradictory influences on people. Information that would become increasingly important overtime as it was built upon, eventually making it possible for me to become a successful prostitute.

The first boy to declare a so-called liking of the opposite gender was Yancy.⁴² He was often picked on for being quiet, overly sensitive in that he showed embarrassment and cried quicker than others, and finally, for being dorky looking. Dorky here refers to his large coke bottle⁴³ glasses, the fact that he always tucked in his shirt, and that he wore what were considered

⁴¹ *Editor's Note:* After a repetition of information from the Prelude concerning lying, Burgess spends the next several pages of the document introducing his teachers and more of his specific classmates, none of which is directly relevant outside of this section, though Burgess would probably argue otherwise. However, as with all cuts, you may access this material through my website archives.

⁴² I have mentioned him before in connection with my mother's confused identification of him as my dead, older brother. This story is available in Chapter . I will also mention him later in relation to my marketing campaign for marijuana in Chapter Seven.

⁴³ I was mistakenly using the term bottlecap to describe his glasses, but it was on this second use of the term that Nora pointed out that she didn't think that was right.

uncool shoes, white ones with thick soles that were not of a well-known brand. Children, and people generally, tend to form cliques. A clique by nature is exclusive, as are nation-states, clubs, and expensive restaurants, which are all similes to help you understand exclusivity.

Yancy was not included in any cliques and his liking of a girl, Cindy Lucas, only worked to further ostracize him from cliques. I was also generally not included in cliques except when Michael was around. You could say that I was in the Michael clique. He was well-liked in that people wanted to be around him, smiled and laughed when they were around him, and talked about him using what are termed positive characteristics. He encouraged others to include me.

My first seven years at IHM were spent at the old site where the church and school were separate buildings. The property was eventually purchased by the airport like the abandoned neighborhood,⁴⁴ though it wasn't abandoned until after purchased by the airport, and many other buildings in the area, for potential expansion and noise pollution concerns. The new building was ready my eighth grade year.

Our playground in third grade included a merry-go-round and some swings, as well as the parking lot in front of the school if we wanted to play tag or other games that required running

She said, Why would you describe thick glasses as bottlecaps?, which is a good example of how helpful Nora has been as an editorial assistant.

I said I didn't know, but that I had heard my father say that, and that idioms and colloquial expressions often made no sense.

We used the internet and found that the term was actually coke bottle which was when I changed it.

My use of the term bottlecap is an example of a malapropism, which is a term derived from a character called Mrs. Malaprop who is in a play called *The Rivals*, written by George Sheridan in 19th century England. It is called a malapropism because she would frequently use words that sounded like the word she meant but were not the word she meant. In my case, I believe I correctly heard my father, in which case the malapropism was my father's, but it's also possible I misheard, in which case the malapropism is mine. Either way, there are no glasses made out of coke bottles. There are just thick glasses that people call coke bottles.

and open space. Yancy was sitting on a swing. The two swings on either side of him were empty. My classmates often claimed that he smelled bad in addition to his other societal faults, though I never noticed him to smell particularly bad or good.

He sat silently on the swing, not moving except the slight pull of gravity that caused his feet, which dangled a few inches from the mulch underneath him, to move in small, concentric circles. Through the thick lenses of his glasses I followed his gaze to Cindy Lucas, a small, red-headed and freckled girl wearing the school-approved uniform of plaid navy and light-blue skirt with the top a t-shirt (preferred over the polo by boys and girls) that read: Immaculate Heart of Mary, under which phrase was a picture of the Virgin Mother with her hands outstretched and a halo emanating light, illustrated by white lines shooting out from the back of her head.

He watched her quietly, though I believe he sighed a couple times. Michael was behind me, talking with a few others about a game he'd made up, a slightly more complicated version of tag. The game was called The Michael. At the beginning of the game, one person was it. This person was called The Michael. Generally Michael was The Michael. Everyone else playing was to be chased, and they had three lives/timeouts. You could use a timeout directly before getting caught if you wanted to instead of actually being tagged, though the effects were the same. You couldn't be tagged more than once at a time either. The Michael had to give you a head-start each time you were tagged. Once someone lost all of their lives they also became it. At the end of the game, the remaining person was chased by a team of The Michaels. The game ended when everyone was The Michael, a collective body of its.

⁴⁴ For information on this neighborhood see Chapter Five: My Second Investment and Information on Finn in the Words of Michael.

Yancy was seldom invited to play things. He did not seem to want to most of the time either as he seldom approached those playing games. I walked over to him while Michael was talking because I was tired and did not want to play The Michael.

Why do you keep looking at Cindy? I asked.

He sighed. I can't help it, he said.

Is there something wrong with your eyes?

No, I just can't help but look at her. She's beautiful.

I looked at her. I supposed you could call her beautiful, though she was not the kind of beautiful I was used to people identifying. However, I've found that if people like or love someone then they are likely to find that person beautiful, even if the culture at large does not support the person-in-question as properly included within the definition of beautiful, which gathers its most practical and consistent definition through ideas of symmetry. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, is an applicable phrase here.

She's okay, I said.

You don't understand, he told me.

Michael then noticed my absence and wandered over to us on the swings, the rest of the group following him.

What's up, Yammy? one of the other boys asked.

It's nothing, he said, pressing his glasses up the bridge of his nose and sighing again.

Others then attempted to follow his gaze.

Are you looking at Cindy? Michael asked. You look like you're looking at Cindy. Do you want to marry her or something?

The children laughed. I still hadn't completely figured laughing out, so I was quiet. It took me a few more years before I laughed at the majority of the appropriate times. I still sometimes fail at this. The rules of laughter can shift very subtly depending on context.

He thinks she's beautiful, I said, thinking they might understand it better and then explain it to me.

Gross, another boy said.

Oh my God, you like Cindy? Michael asked. A general seriousness then figuratively settled on the group. I could see it in the way their faces shifted from the smiling expressions until some of their lips formed O shapes, as the tones of their voices became deeper and their volume lighter. I've found many people forget about this as they grow older, which is strange since children seem to feel it so often. It happens when something completely new occurs, something adult (as one might say) that seemed impossibly distant from their thought-process until the moment when it suddenly was not. I believe it is a kind of shock.

There was then much high-pitched whispering.

That's disgusting, one of the boys finally said, breaking the metaphorical trance of seriousness. Girls are gross, Yammy. Especially Cindy.

They laughed. Then I played The Michael with them because I could tell they'd think it was odd if I stayed with Yancy, and Yancy was just one person while they were many, and I understood it was more advantageous to have many people like you rather than one. Though I wanted to talk to Yancy more, to ask him how he could tell that Cindy was beautiful.

It was a couple days later when someone communicated this information along to Cindy. This always tended to happen fairly quickly. Someone accidentally (as they said) revealed the information or very purposefully communicated what they considered a secret. Almost

everything was considered a secret during my grade school years. Secrets were used as a kind of currency. You could pull someone aside, gather a crowd, do pretty much whatever you wanted as long as you promised a secret as reward/payment.

As more people knew, Yancy was ridiculed more. Directly after some girl friends of Cindy's told her, after they'd been told by Michael or one of the other boys, Cindy ran around pretending to be sick. She stuck her finger in her mouth and produced gag noises. She ran around like she could somehow escape the pretend sickness if she ran to the right place. She ran from one side of the parking lot to the other over and over. Yancy was watching her. Most other people were watching her and laughing. One boy was rolling on the ground, he was pretending to laugh so hard. Michael told me what was happening.

I went and sat on the swing next to Yancy.

Why is Cindy doing that? he asked.

Someone told her you liked her, I said. Now she's pretending to be sick.

If I could go back, I would have lied to Yancy, but I did not think to. I could and can still see that I caused him pain. All the pain I have caused in my life has been unintentional. Hurt is often a byproduct of our actions, despite our intentions.

Oh, he said, looking down at his feet. They spun in their small, concentric circles. There was something I found appealing in the slight and repetitive motion. Then he ran away, behind the school, away from the playground and parking lot. A teacher found him and brought him inside about an hour later. He'd been crying. The other students mocked his red eyes.

I was bullied in a way similar to Yancy, just not when Michael was around. When he was out sick for a day, my supposition was verified. The bullying was fine as no one tried to physically harm me, and it did not seem to have long-term effects on their liking of me because

of Michael's acceptance of my presence. Besides Michael's presence, I believe the reason Yancy was made fun of so much more than me is because he reacted to the taunts and mean remarks. He would cry or snivel (as one might say), sigh or look at the ground. I've noticed that if someone appears mentally or physically hurt by something then this encourages the bully. I believe bullies enjoy seeing the effect of their words, which is understandable if their intention was to have effect, and generally everyone's intention is.

Also, I did not originally intend that the Nintendo should keep kids from bullying me, but it did have that effect to an extent. I started inviting over anyone who made fun of me, and they generally stopped after that. Similar to addictions I would encounter later in life, there is a great power in controlling something others want in a market. Knowing I was the outlet for their Nintendo needs they became much more reticent to bully me. Though I did not mind the bullying as I was not hurt by it, and often appreciated it, as it allowed me to learn what of my behavior was considered abnormal or socially incorrect...⁴⁵

You would probably like to know of my general academic prowess. I was very good at math, social studies, science, and English. I was not very good at literature, art or religion. I was fairly good at music...⁴⁶

⁴⁵ *Editor's Note:* Burgess here lists several instances of "socially incorrect" behavior and how he learned from them, even though if you wanted, you could basically describe the whole book that way. Much of this behavior comes up elsewhere, and it's largely unnecessary in its exhaustiveness, which Burgess admits at a couple points, wondering "if [we] really need to know all of this" but deciding "it is best if [he] relate[s] this as [we] may ignore it if [we] choose." I've chosen this for the reader.

⁴⁶ *Editor's Note:* Burgess goes on to list several specific assignments and the grades and comments he received. I've left one here to stand as a general example. Something which also further hints why Lowell's particularities were never officially diagnosed.

Mrs. Brock asked the class to draw a picture of what made them most happy. I drew a large pile of coins with Michael playing video games in the background. When she handed back the assignment she asked if this was supposed to be poop and she gave me a C. I went up to her desk and told her what it was.

Money?

Coins.

That's interesting.

I think so.

She changed the grade to a B.

Later that year Mrs. Brock asked my parents if the school could conduct a test to see if I had any learning disabilities, though it's unclear whether this had anything to do with money making me happy. It is an assignment that primarily stuck out to me (as one might say) as it demonstrated how people can interpret the exact same image in very different ways. My parents declined the test, citing my good grades and general rule-following.

On the phone, I heard my mother say, There's nothing wrong with John, thank you...⁴⁷

The last thing that should be explained here also relates to sex. Sometime in seventh grade I started to have erections, my armpits started to smell badly, and hair started growing in places it had never grown before.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ *Editor's Note:* More assignments and responses have been removed here.

⁴⁸ Nora left the room here, and told me that she'd come back when I stopped writing about gross stuff. I've found many people find discussions of the body's natural functions gross. This must make their daily lives difficult, always feeling parts of themselves to be gross, what is typically considered an unpleasant thing outside of horror films and mass entertainment generally.

When I finally realized what I was supposed to do with the erection it felt both good and bad. I liked the feeling, the release, but I did not like the loss of control. Something seemed to switch off in my mind. I mean literally, a part of me seemed to break or malfunction. I could suddenly think of nothing but release. It was not connected to other bodies, only my own. My orgasm was a physical experience, a series of experiments that lead me to know what my body desired. When I prostituted it was the same, and this was a valuable trait to have. I do not desire bodies. The full realization of the oddity of this came sometime after I figured out what gay and straight were, what all these sexualities were.

As I'll return to shortly⁴⁹, I believed I was none of these sexualities, and that was good. It seemed I was the only one in control of my body. It is unfortunate that many people who feel a strong desire for someone else are not desired back, as there is little to do about such things. Some people rape or kidnap or murder or blackmail, but this causes hurt, is in fact one of the better examples of people's selfishness. Strange and selfish, people often seem to go against their own interest, unable to see beyond the moment in question.

Still, despite momentary lapses, everyone exists according to a pattern, a rhythm. All rhythms run in loops. It is just that most people appear unaware of the repetition, or seem to want so much to be unaware of it that they actually are, and that is a lie.

I have repeated this often enough that I feel I should add that writing, All rhythms run in loops, is akin to writing, All rhythms are rhythms. Part of the definition of rhythm is that something be a repeated pattern, which two-word phrase is again redundant, but I believe makes the point as clear as possible.

⁴⁹ If you'd like to know right away, see the chapter entitled My First Job: An Introduction to Diversity.

Interlude: For Clarification: You Have the Power to Believe Anything.

At Nora's suggestion I took the prelude, title page, and the first chapter of my autobiography to a local reading. The events here detailed predate this writing by a little over a month.

Readings do not typically happen in the NKY (Northern Kentucky) area. It's something for which there isn't any significant demand. I should maybe be concerned about this, considering I might best appeal to those who can identify the exact places they grew up within my writing, but I think the specificity of place will work regardless. Reviewers often praise place and locality. Provinciality. Consider the enduring fame of *Madame Bovary*.

Briefly, for clarification, *Madame Bovary* is a famous novel about a French woman who reads too many books about romance and then marries a French man while thinking about those romances. However, he has not read the same books and does not understand her well or what her romance is or what she wants. She is bad with money. She then commits adultery with people she does not understand because they are different people than her husband and that excites her and reminds her of her books. Then, when she can't have the things she wants, she commits suicide because she thinks it is a pretty idea, but it is not aesthetically pretty when it is described. It ends with a line about an alchemist winning a medal. It all takes place around a small town, and people who write about novels think it is important for the details about the small town and the people there. It is about everyday things instead of kings and queens and emperors, which was what most people liked to read about at the time, according to scholars.

There is no art scene (as one might say) in the NKY area I'm aware of outside of churches, where there is much original and remade Christian music. Jesus is the primary content

of these, concerning towards Him unworthiness, redemption, and above all gratefulness that He is going to let us into Heaven. There is no real literary scene at all.

Sometimes at Northern Kentucky University they have readings, but not generally in the vicinity of Burlington. One time, someone told me the location of the Creation Museum in Petersburg, Kentucky--which borders Hebron, and is also within ten minutes of Burlington--perfectly explained the absence of a literary scene. I don't understand why a place that believes in the coexistence of dinosaurs and people should prevent appreciation of the literary, as you'd think it would mean that the local populace is more imaginative. The owners of the Creation Museum do not believe the earth has existed for millions of years, but rather thousands. Believing either of these things does not affect the actual truth, though the truth is debated. I want to be clear about that because sometimes people suggest words are as important as actions or facts, but they are not. For instance, you could say that you were a dragon, but you are not a dragon because dragons are not real. In any case, perhaps knowing of this museum will help you understand the absence of the literary. He said, That sums it up.

I did some work to set the reading up, paying fifty dollars to a coffee shop, and then enlisting Nora to spread the word with fliers. There were five local people excepting the staff. I'd told the coffee shop to bill it as an open reading, and the others were there to read from their own work.

They read poems about abuse and sexism and genitals and poverty. And then one read a short story about a pornography addiction. Applause was consistent if also short and arrhythmic. As each reader stepped away from the open mic I stepped up to them, patted them on the back, thanked them for coming, and told him/her that I enjoyed their work, and that it was raw and inspiring. I learned this language in college. I've never met a reader that didn't express pleasure

in hearing it. I see this pleasure in the quick-opening of the eyes and the brief smile, or quiet nod, acting embarrassed but seemingly pleased with the compliment. I wanted these people to like me, to read my work, to come back if I had another reading, and people are more likely to like you if they think you like them.

I debated with Nora and myself what aspects of character were necessary for the reading. As my coffee shop audience wasn't necessarily literary in profession I decided to just read it as I thought it, as words that run one after the other in a long catalog of other words. As information to be relayed. I pronounced the words clearly but with as little intonation as possible, except when meaning was dependent on it, as it is sometimes with questions. Only slight adjustments should be made, such as smiles and gestures of general affection towards various characters, incidents, words.

I was last to read and Nora introduced me because she said she wanted the chance to write something and read it to people too. I was glad she wanted to do it, and believed even if she said something people thought inappropriate or odd that they'd forgive it based on the fact that she was fifteen. People can be very forgiving of young people when they're odd, but odd adults often scare them. Because she thought it would be fun to try, she asked that we come up with some characteristics for her to imitate that did not necessarily define her as I'd come to know her. She performed as someone slightly younger might have, as well as someone more naive and not as intelligent. Our collective agreement on this was that it would make those listening like her more, as youthful innocence (as one might call it) is something people are sometimes charmed by.

Thanks for reading, everybody, she began, swaying back and forth in front of the windows. People outside smiled in when they saw her there. A couple customers entered and she

swiveled in their direction, and then stood and stared at them with apparent stage fright, meaning when someone is scared of speaking in front of people in a formal setting, such as on a stage. An older woman who'd just come in said, It's okay, dear, go ahead.

Okay, Nora said, so this has been a really fun night for me, to see what people write about. I think you'll find Uncle John's writing pretty funny, even if it doesn't make sense sometimes. Also, I think you can learn from it sometimes if you want. It tells you about people, as Uncle John might say. And he is really rich and probably could teach people some good things. I really like the prologue⁵⁰ because it talks about when I came to live with him and how he came up with the idea. I don't remember saying all the things he says that I said, but they sound like things I might say. So, he's trying to be accurate I guess. So, Uncle John is...

She paused for awhile to stare down at the floor, acting as we'd planned, as if she couldn't recall what she was going to say next and was nervous. I did warn her that excessive nervousness might make others nervous and uncomfortable rather than strictly sympathetic, as was our general goal.

...He's currently a freelance investor, making most of his money in... mutual puns and etifs. Before that he worked in one restaurant that sold pizza and one that sold Cincinnati Style Chili⁵¹. And sometimes he made money doing other things that are illegal. Like drug dealing and

⁵⁰ This is before I changed the Prologue into the Prelude because Interlogue is not a word while Interlude is. I needed a way to title interruptions that detail what is called the narrative present of the writing, which is, in this case, right now, as I am writing this. It is also common for books to use the language of another art form to title its various parts. And Interlude can mean both A) an intervening period of time, and B) a pause between the acts of a play OR something performed during a theater intermission. In the case of this book I am using the first definition. This chapter is an intervening period of time between my writing of the rest of my mostly chronological autobiography.

⁵¹ For an explanation of Cincinnati Style Chili see the beginning of Chapter Four: My First Job: An Introduction to Diversity.

prostitution. But he's not a bad guy, at least not completely, and he says he's sorry about that stuff, or for hurting anyone. He didn't mean to hurt people is what he says.

Nora cleared her throat. Even though he's sorry for stuff, he hopes you'll be entertained by his life and experiences. I think it's pretty entertaining sometimes when it's not boring. Because Uncle John can seem stupid but he's not. It's just that he's facing something for the first time, or he doesn't know what people want. I can understand that, how facing something for the first time is really hard. And Uncle John changes really quick. It's pretty cool actually. Once you get used to it. So that's one thing that makes me feel good about Uncle John's writing, that everyone has trouble figuring things out when something happens we don't expect, and that sometimes we change because of it. I guess that's probably all you need to know. So, please join me in welcoming John Burgess.

Two people clapped. One man slapped his leg with one hand since the other hand held a coffee. One woman snapped her fingers.

I made my way, thanked Nora and hugged her, as we'd agreed this is a typical thing for readers to do with their introducers. You hug them and show the audience how close you are emotionally through this literal gesture, and it also shows how much you appreciate what they are doing for you, as they are supposed to be the biggest fan of you in the room.

I began. I read for about an hour and a half. I did not look up from the papers as I flipped them because I wanted to read them in exactly the way I'd thought them. One word after another placed on the page. When I looked up at the end there were three people remaining, and this included Nora and an employee. The other one was a reader.

Thank you, I said, to signal I'd completed my reading. The employee was wiping off tables. Nora sat with her head down. She may have been sleeping.

I've finished reading, I said, knowing that a reading isn't really over until there is some recognition of its end, generally applause. The reader clapped. This roused Nora who looked up and clapped too.

The man who'd read about genitals was looking at me intensely from the back of the room, his eyes squinted, his forehead furrowed, his lips slightly pursed.

I went over to Nora and he approached the two of us.

Are you really his niece? he asked. Is this like a real thing?

Yeah, I'm his niece.

This is a real thing, I told him, holding the manuscript in my hands.

So, you're name is John Burgess?

No, I told him, because it is not.

Who is?

Probably many people, I said. It's not the most popular name, but still very popular.

But who's the novel about?

The autobiography is about me.

Oh, so you're using like a pen name?

I think that just refers to the name of the author.

But you're the author, and that's not your name.

Right, but I thought you were referring to the character, the protagonist and narrator of the book.

They're the same person, aren't they?

Well, yes, I said, but they're usually different people.

Okay. Are you purposefully being confusing?

Am I being confusing? I was trying to be clear.

Yeah, alright, he said, laughing a little and then rolling his eyes slightly. Anyway, I wanted to say that the project seems interesting, but you're probably just going to pretend that it's not supposed to be interesting, or like, I don't know. I don't really get your whole deal here. Like, when does the performance stop?

The performance of self?

Jesus, he sighed. Yeah, you're real clever, dude. You know, everyone's pretty over that whole super-meta postmodern s____, which I thought an odd thing for him to say after he'd expressed interest, but I believe he changed his mind because I was annoying him. Or, even more likely, pretended to change his mind because he did not want to give someone he disliked a compliment. He was also clearly implying that my project was engaged in super-meta postmodern s____, which I will take issue with below.

I hadn't really meant for it to be postmodern, I told him.

Of course, I hadn't not meant that either. I had simply meant for it to be a biography to the best of my ability, a kind of instructional guide for Nora and any other readers, all while keeping market demands in mind. Also, as I have said, and as I repeat so that you know I am attempting to be honest to the extent that this is possible, possibly because of a guilty conscience.

Postmodernism, in certain mainstream understandings, is primarily concerned with truth's relativity and with questioning traditional methods of narration and story-telling. I can understand this because I prefer to question things as well, knowing that many things are assumed true in day to day life without any real interrogation of the ideas concerned. I suppose my habit of pointing out how people and language operate is also shared by the postmoderns, or metas. Still, I believe all good writing questions its antecedents, as do intelligent people. As I've

written, the primary reason I enjoy Daniel Defoe is his concern for explaining things in as thorough a way as possible. Also, opposed to postmodernists (or, more accurately: opposed to certain interpretations of postmodernists), I am often convinced of at least the limited possibilities of meaning. Otherwise, I would have no way of communicating with anyone. Context creates the meaning more than the word used. Consider the word gay.⁵² English teachers call this using context clues.

The whole bit with the guilty conscience is cool, he continued. Though I think I've seen that used in a lot of other stuff. Obviously the narrator is hiding something. Right?

It's supposed to be the opposite. He is trying not to hide things. I'm sorry, I corrected myself, I am trying not to hide things.

A little break in the performance, huh?

No, I was just imitating your usage. You said the narrator, not you. And so, referring to the narrator I said he. But since the he in question is me I wanted to clarify.

I more fully understood then that I was making this all more complicated than it needed to be. I was trying to explain myself, keeping with the determination I'd made for the reader's voice, but this man needed something different. I adjusted my posture slightly, letting my shoulders drop, and I let a smile slowly work its way (as one might say) across my face. As if I were emerging from hypnosis. I hope that simile is useful.

I'm just kidding, dude, I said. It's all a performance. Sorry if I was frustrating you. I know it can be a bit much for people. But I'm doing what I can to keep it going. I laughed and shrugged my shoulders to communicate that sometimes things work and sometimes they do not.

⁵² For a thorough discussion of this word and the conflicting things it meant to those around me when I was growing up, see Chapter Four: My First Job: An Introduction to

Ah, he said, laughing. No, you do it well. I mean, you were p_____ me off a little. But it's pretty cool you keep it going. Like Andy Kaufman or something. I was also thinking, it reminds me a little of Tristram Shandy too, you know, the way it just keeps building, but like backwards half the time?

Yeah, that's a little of what I'm going for, I said, even though that is not true because my autobiography is consistently moving forward, but he wanted me to agree, he wanted me to tell him he was right, because people like that. Thanks for staying for the reading, dude, I continued. I really appreciate it, and I hope you'll keep an eye out for the book.

Oh, definitely. And let me know if you do any more readings.

He gave me his phone number, we shook hands, and then he left.

Nora looked at me with her eyes narrowed. It's still weird, she said. Cool, but weird. I assumed, and it turned out correctly, that she was referring to my shift in voice and posture.

I hope so, I told her, there is much more to write about.

To be clear, this is not all a performance, and I am not imitating Tristram Shandy or any other fictional characters that I know of. However, if it helps you to enjoy the writing more, or if it helps you to understand the project I am undertaking, then please believe that it is all a performance, even though it is not. At least, not in the way that the genitals man meant, that I was pretending to be someone I am not. In the sense that everything is a performance, in that all things are done out of a motive to get something, or have something else done, then yes it is, as one should assume based on the reasons I have for writing this, which I repeated in writing fourteen paragraphs above. The genitals man, however, was implying that all of the happenings and the narrator (myself) were made up. You could say that all things are a performance, as I

believe they are, like the following much-quoted line of William Shakespeare's addresses, but I do not believe that's what the genitals man was referring to.

All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players.
They have their exits and their entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts,
His acts being seven ages. At first the infant,
Mewling and pucking in the nurse's arms;
Then the whining schoolboy with his satchel
And shining morning face, creeping like snail
Unwillingly to school. And then the lover,
Sighing like furnace, with a woeful ballad
Made to his mistress' eyebrow. Then a soldier,
Full of strange oaths and bearded like the pard,
Jealous in honor, sudden and quick in quarrel,
Seeking the bubble reputation
Even in the cannon's mouth. And then the justice,
In fair round belly with good capon lined,
With eyes severe and beard of formal cut,
Full of wise saws and modern instances,
And so he plays his part. The sixth age shifts
Into the lean and slippered pantaloon,
With spectacles on nose and pouch on side,

His youthful hose, well saved, a world too wide
 For his shrunk shank; and his big manly voice,
 Turning again toward childish treble, pipes
 And whistles in his sound. Last scene of all,
 That ends this strange eventful history,
 Is second childishness and mere oblivion,
 Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.

--William Shakespeare's *As You Like It* (2.7:139-166)

Usually people just quote the first two lines or the first four lines. I presume the reason is because after the first four lines it starts to become very specific because it comes out of a specific time within a specific play that has its own specific plot. The more specific something is the less people it can be applied to. For instance, not everyone becomes a soldier full of strange oaths, and not all people are men. Also, it's possible they only quote the first few lines because they have bad memories, or perhaps because the end of the dialogue concerns death and people don't like to think about dying. I'm not sure, but I wanted to give you a fuller quote so that you can see how people have made use of it, which is often very different than its use within the play in question. When they quote the first few lines it doesn't have anything to do with the Shakespeare play, it is just about how people fill multiple roles through their lifetimes, and importantly it ignores the focus on how age is the primary determinant in these roles, as Shakespeare's fictional character Jaques understands it.

In any case, we are all free to believe whatever we like. It is a free country, people often say, even though it is not free for prisoners or anyone in the sense that we do not have a direct

democracy. There are many other examples. Still, I think the phrase makes sense here: It is a free country. Believe what you will. You have the power to believe anything.

Chapter Four: My First Job: An Introduction to Diversity.

You are unlikely to be familiar with Cincinnati Style Chili unless you are from the Cincinnati area, and so I will explain it as yet another way to geographically specify this manuscript. At its most basic it is chili you put on spaghetti and hotdogs. More specifically, it is finely ground beef that is mixed with water and some spices.

It is popular in the area I grew up in. So much that a few chains of restaurants, a couple with over a hundred franchises each, only exist in the fairly small tri-state area of Ohio, Kentucky, and Indiana. I didn't mention how close Burlington is to Indiana before because I don't know anyone that is very familiar with Indiana. It was also common growing up for people in my area to disparage The Crossroads of America, as Indiana is referred to on signs sometimes.

I've always assumed most people dislike Indiana because most people I've known who talked about it have told me so directly, or indirectly through jokes. I also generally dislike as traffic there seems worse. There seems to always be road construction, though I understand it has to do with the times of year I've typically traveled through the state, and probably not because they do more road construction than other states. Sometimes me or other people make a rule out of something that is a coincidence.

This is all relevant because my first job was at one of these Chili franchises. So that all people will be satisfied who claim to have a stake in the debate over which franchise has better tasting chili, I'll just write that I worked at the best one. I believe I did. It is good chili.

The reason I applied at the franchise was connected to its distance from my home. I could walk there. I remember what I wore. I walked up to the restaurant with a loose polo shirt and somewhat baggy khaki pants that bunched slightly on top of large black shoes with buckles. It

was the 90's and as I've been told on a couple occasions since the end of the decade in question, people were not good at dressing. At that point, I still did not put much thought (as one might say) into my clothes, unless I was dolling and putting on a fashion show for my mother.

Otherwise, I wore what was serviceable, and at that time I wore whatever off-brand material my father was willing to pay for, or whatever hand-me-downs were not worn to rags, which here implies that the cloth was only good for using as a rag, and not wearing, a common metaphorical expression.

It was three o'clock on a Saturday when I entered. There were no customers. My father advised me to go during the slow business time between lunch and dinner.

The employees were kind and obliging. There was Jeneen, the drive-thru attendant, a high-school-aged, overweight and excitable woman, understood via her laughing often without any clear prompting. Then Candice, a severely skinny woman who was angular at almost all junctures of her visible body. She was in her mid-forties and was a waitress. After Welcome-tos were said by each respective employee I approached the counter and there met Candice who asked how she could help me.

Hi, I was looking to apply for a job, I said.

How old are you?

Fourteen, I said.

Well, they're starting them earlier and earlier, aren't they?

I laughed. As I've discussed elsewhere, it was a habit of mine to laugh at things that were meant as jokes. When I was little I saw my friends laughing all the time at cartoons and movies and clowns, and other things. I realized it was a necessary aspect of character. So I started to practice laughing. I watched reruns of Looney Tunes and made so-called loud cackles and gentle

giggles, as well as belly rolling laughter meant to bring tears to my eyes. My father once walked in while I was doing this, and putting his hand with a moderate amount of pressure on the top of my head, said, Calm down, it's not that funny. I learned my father didn't have great sense when it came to humor, but I tried to keep the extent of something's funniness in mind. I trained myself to laugh when appropriate and found it put people at ease, though only if I stopped laughing at the proper point. If I went on too long people started to look nervous, via pulling their heads back while narrowing their eyes, and sometimes looking at other people in the given location, seemingly to verify if their response was shared by others. So after laughing for the appropriate time, I said, Yeah, I guess so.

What is it you want to do? Candice asked. This question was beside the point as far as I was then concerned, and as far as employment generally works. It's usually not relevant what you want to do, only what you are capable and willing to do, and which of the options presented makes the most money, and will allow you to keep living with relative comfort. Still, I understood an answer was required.

I could do drive-thru, waiting, or work in the kitchen, I told her. I'm up for doing whatever is currently needed.

Do you have any waiting experience? she asked, and then I noticed something in the way she crinkled her eyes. It was the suspicious face I was familiar with from various detective shows. It was the look you gave the person you mistakenly or correctly thought was the criminal.

No.

Then you can't be a waiter.

Well, like I said, I'm happy to do any job that is currently needed.

Well, like I said, you can't be a waiter, she said, then placing an application before me.

Once I'd filled it out I asked if there was a manager present I might speak to. Candice rolled her eyes and went through a swinging door that I'd learn led back to the office and the dish room and the walk-in freezer.

Don't worry about her, Jeneen said. You get used to her.

And then she laughed. I laughed too.

Or not, she said, after she stopped laughing. But she seemed to think her last comment funny as well, and so laughed more. I obliged with an echo of her laughter.

From the back of the restaurant emerged a man with a well-trimmed mustache in his thirties. This was well before mustaches were established as a fashion, or well after if you consider the seventies or the nineteenth century, or even further back in time. He wore a black shirt while the other employees wore red, and he had pleated khaki pants, and a way of carrying himself as if he were always about to start walking in reverse.⁵³

He approached me and said in what is considered a feminine voice, meaning high pitched and softer than most assumed male people, My name's Sam, then offering his hand to shake with his soft palm held upwards. I heard you're looking for a job?

Yeah, I'd really like to work here. I love the food and it's close to my house, I told him. My father'd advised me to not only expound upon what I liked about the business but also the reasons I'd make a dependable employee.

That's good, Sam said, figuratively brightening. We don't have a lot of need right now, but we could use someone to help in the drive-thru a couple hours a week. Not much work, but a little to start you out.

⁵³ I'm not certain what this last phrase means exactly, but Nora insisted on it when I demonstrated the walk for her.

I'm really excited to do whatever I can. This would be my first job, and I'm happy to learn and work whenever you need me.

This one's malleable, he said, turning to smile at Candice, who glared at him from a corner table where she was wrapping silverware. We could use more of that, don't you think?

You're the manager, Sam, Candice said, mumbling something under her breath afterward.

She's our ray of sunshine, he said as he turned back to me, being ironic I believe considering Candice's glare. I tell you what, he continued, I'll take a look at your application and get back to you. Your number's on here?

I located my phone number with my index finger on the application.

Great, it was nice meeting you. What was your name again?

I didn't say it before. But it's John, John Burgess.

John John Burgess, huh? They run out of names?

I don't think so.

Looking back, I understand he was making a joke. I should have laughed.

*

Within a week I was in training. I was a good onion dicer and cheese grater, and excellent at repeating the Welcome to...How may I help you? throughout my dinner shifts (4-7) with a smile that seemed to please most customers.

Most important was the introduction I was given to what is called diversity. By this word people usually mean straight, white, cis-gendered⁵⁴ people meeting both minorities and people of

⁵⁴ Cis-gender is defined as: denoting or relating to a person whose sense of personal identity and gender corresponds with their birth sex. See Chapter Fourteen for a detailed discussion of gender. Also see Chapter One if you are specifically interested in gender in relation to clothing.

alternative life styles (as one might say). I've noticed a place isn't considered diverse if only straight, white, cis-gendered people occupy it...⁵⁵ But perhaps for people of others colors or lifestyles, interacting with straight, white, cis-gendered people is diverse.

When I took a gen-ed course on diversity in college my instructor told a story of when she was flying out of Mexico. On seeing her id at the security checkpoint the Mexican looked at her and said KFC. When she didn't respond he began to repeat it, gesturing at her with the id while he said it over and over with a large grin painted (as she said) across his face. She grew angry and started screaming Taco Bell at him repeatedly until she realized that he'd been referring to the fact that her license said she was from Kentucky, not to her skin color, which was black, as there's a stereotype that black people like fried chicken, though I find most people like fried chicken. Some people laugh when I tell this story. Some people look uncomfortable. Some people look angry and say the woman was an idiot. It gives you a sense of how different people respond to mistakes concerning diversity, and diversity generally. I believe she made an honest mistake based on her previous experience of the world, which is, of course, the best anyone could do, and which was the purpose in her bringing up the anecdote, to explain it was a mistake. She'd been trained to remember her race, to assume people were referring to it. She was diverse and operated in the world as such. However, she gave this example to explain it is not always correct to assume others are referring to your diversity, or lack thereof. So, sometimes people are

⁵⁵ *Editor's Note:* Considering the exceptionally long footnote about being offended that comes later in the chapter, I've cut much of the discussion of diversity, which it indirectly addresses.

thinking about your diversity and sometimes not, and sometimes you should be thinking about your own diversity and sometimes you shouldn't...⁵⁶

Every time I've met with diversity it has represented an opportunity for expanded knowledge. My particular introduction to diversity began with a mistake. Like most people, I see how others react and then imitate that behavior to a greater or lesser degree. But I learned people are diverse and do not always react equally to different words, faces, phrases, etc. I already knew old people were different, but I didn't realize how many differences there were among similar age groups, races, etc. It's astounding how different groups and individuals can be.

I have found only two things to be true of all people: they are strange and they are selfish.

My mistake occurred while I was doing prep. It was a Sunday afternoon and not many people were ordering chili. On a long steel table I was filling up small containers with ranch dressing for the few customers that preferred salads when they ate at the Chili Franchise. My manager was telling me about a band he liked named The Cure. He was doing inventory but he talked as he wrote down the number of each product.

The eighties will always be the best, Sam was saying. That weird, somehow completely engulfing electronic sound. I just get lost in it. It's lovely. Hypnotizing. And The Cure is always going to be the best of the eighties. Have you ever listened to them?

I hadn't, but I'd heard others reference them, and I had a ready answer for things I didn't understand or know how to talk about. No, they're gay, I said.

⁵⁶ *Editor's Note:* Again, I've cut material discussing diversity here. Understanding that Burgess took so much of life literally, you can imagine the difficulty he had with this. However, this section gets especially repetitive and circular, and all of these points are made in differing forms elsewhere. And many are sufficiently made in the uncut sections above and below.

He wasn't currently in my view but instead somewhere in the storage area behind me. I waited to hear his assent, what I'd mostly been assured of in the past. When I was growing up many things were gay, at least according to the connotative meaning I currently understood. I didn't rely on denotative meanings as much as I might have as they could be extremely incorrect, especially among those my age. An example of a time when a dictionary definition was insufficient was when I was riding my bicycle through our neighborhood and wearing the helmet my mother insisted on, when someone yelled f_____ at me. I mention the helmet, as helmets were thought uncool, and in retrospect I believe this is why I was called a f_____. However, at the time I did not understand this, and though I stopped to look for the person and ask them what they meant, they were gone. In the dictionary later I found it was a bundle of sticks or a cigarette, or a tired British person (fagged). This was clearly the incorrect meaning. Why would someone call me a bundle of sticks or a British cigarette? I later understood it's connection to gay. It is an insult supposedly derived from the previous habit of people burning gay people, hence the connection to a bundle of sticks, something that is often burned.

I ceased using denotative meanings for many words I didn't understand around this time, finding they often confused me further, and so was unprepared for the multiplicity contained in the word gay. Gay was never a word that met with disagreement in my previous experience. It was accepted by my peers that anything you didn't individually like was gay, and that if someone you didn't like liked something then that thing was gay. Also, the person you didn't like was gay. But I'd witnessed people use it much more liberally. Anytime someone felt flustered or unsure about something they called it gay and all the other person could do was agree or be quiet. It had been very useful to me, helping me out of many confusing situations. So, unaware of any

potential conflict, I continued to watch globs of ranch pour either too fast or too slow into the small containers.

Sam approached me without saying anything. He stood at my side with his breathing audibly disordered. I'm gay, he said. Is that going to be a problem?

This didn't make sense to me, that someone would claim to be the thing that embodied uncool and dislike. Also, it was a pretty abstract term at times, so not really something you'd claim for yourself. I hadn't yet known people who were cool by being uncool so I didn't have that potential either. While I understood the term homosexual in a vague sense from my religion class, I did not yet connect it to the word gay. I'd never heard anyone use it that way, and as I said, I had come to mistrust denotative meanings, especially concerning words frequently used by my peers. People can make a word mean anything they want. In fact, people are constantly making up grammar rules and definitions, and so access to knowledge is constantly shifting.

Why would you want to be that? I asked him.

His upper lip curled into his finely trimmed mustache. I know now that it was an expression of disgust. I didn't choose it, he said.

I don't understand.

I've always liked boys, and then men.

I like boys and men, I said. It seemed he was using the term gay in the opposite way I'd heard it. One unlikely possibility that crossed my mind was that it was opposite-day. Kids at school sometimes claimed this before proceeding to insult good things and praise bad things, and most often insult students they didn't like by complimenting them.

What? he asked, pulling his face backwards slightly.

I like people, boys and men, I said, because as far as I understood it I did like people, or at least did not actively dislike them.

What is it you're trying to tell me? Are you gay?

I guess so.

You guess so? His face softened, the apparent anger and disgust no longer discernible in his features. He shook his head. Darling, he said, placing a hand on my shoulder. You either are or aren't.

I will note that as you got to know Sam he became more effulgent and affectionate in his actions and words towards you. When new employees first started you could see him correct and deny what seemed like natural impulses to be both touchy and kind. I appreciated this understanding, as it implied he didn't want you to take him the wrong way, which was something I was often concerned about.

I either am or am not gay? I asked.

Yes, he affirmed. I should say here that he was wrong according to certain politically liberal understandings. In college I learned of a continuum of sexuality. At the same time, people still claimed to be born a certain way. I understand now it is more politically expedient if you can claim you are born into something. I also understand that people like thinking they were born exactly as they are and that no one else had anything to do with it. At the same time, people often claim their surroundings are responsible for certain hardships or successes. Logically, both things are probably factors, though I can't see why it matters as it is ultimately impossible to determine to what extent each contributes. You are whatever you pretend to be, and that is okay. But people can get very angry when you put it that way.

That's what I always thought, I told him.

I'm confused, he said. What is it you think we're talking about?

Being gay.

Right. So what is it you think being gay is?

I explained my current understanding as best I could.

Sam smiled and then frowned. Are you messing with me? he asked.

I don't think so.

So you don't actually know what it is to be gay? You don't know why people use that word to say something is uncool, that that comes from something else?

You said it means you like boys and then men, I reminded him.

And what do you think I mean by that?

What else would you mean but what it means? I understand what it means to like something. You enjoy it or them. It or them gives you pleasure.

You're getting a little closer, Sam said. But I'm getting a little uncomfortable. Why don't you ask your parents and get back to me, huh?

Whenever Sam looked at me the rest of the day he'd start laughing, and I laughed too. Sam was nice to me, and mostly took the time to explain things I didn't understand.

I asked my mother as soon as I got home. I'd learned it was unwise to ask my father questions if I could help it, as he often seemed to get angry. She looked startled when I asked, looking distractedly around our sparse living room, eventually resting her eyes on a clock with pictures of a different bird at each hour hand.

It's almost time to start dinner, she said.

That's true, I said.

She looked back at me, her brow furrowed. Is this about the fashion shows, about the dolling? I always wanted a girl. That's not your fault.

Is it about the dolling and the fashion shows?

There was silence for almost a full minute.

Are you trying to tell me something, John?

No, I wanted you to tell me something.

Her mouth twitched as it sometimes did before she was overcome with anxiety (as she called it). Do you think you're gay? she asked.

How would I know?

It seemed as if she were purposefully misunderstanding what I was saying, or being an a___, as William sometimes called/calls it when he thought/thinks I was/am doing this. I went over and lied down on the couch. Sometimes it helped me to think if I stared at the patterns on the ceiling. I was frustrated, but I know now it is a general rule that sometimes when you ask people questions they actually think you're giving them an answer. People sometimes assume you're trying to say something that you're not saying, which is often true, but wasn't in this case.

It's okay if you're gay, she said. She spoke from the opposite side of the room. I couldn't see her face so the words were not perceivably connected to a physical form, something I dislike. So I sat up and looked at her.

Just don't tell your father, she said, pausing awhile before adding, Or your brother. Or actually, don't tell any of your relatives.

What would I tell them? What does it mean?

It means you like boys.

Why wouldn't I like boys?

Because you're not supposed to.

This is my commandment, that you love one another.

But this is different, honey.

How?

It means you like boys instead of girls.

Instead? She wasn't making any sense. Why can't you like both? I asked.

She blushed. Well, you can, but you're not supposed to do that either.

The world is full of so many rules. Of course, one of the great lessons of my life was that you only have to follow rules in given contexts. Each person carries their own rules and it is your job to decipher them through clues they figuratively drop in speech and action. I knew my parents were conservative but so was everyone I knew in person. I did not yet understand the distinction. I did not understand how religion and politics entwined, how morality was simply something someone else had convinced you of, and that each person was convinced of different things by different people.

I think everyone is using the word like in a different way today, I said.

Exactly.

That was enough to finally help me to the conclusion. I was reminded of the liking of school, the strange back and forth between boys and girls that was somehow connected to their genitals, though no one ever mentioned them in the context, or if they did were giggled at and then ignored.

Oh, I'm not gay, I said.

Thank God.

What I didn't tell her is that I wasn't straight either. Of course, the word straight wasn't in my vocabulary at that time, not connected to sexuality, though it would soon enter along with everything else I learned at the Chili Franchise. But I understood that not only did I not like boys, or boys and girls, but in fact liked neither, in the sexual sense. I also understood why my use of the word gay had insulted Sam. I apologized to him the next time I saw him.

In my area, many people seemed to assume gay people didn't exist, implying they were lying about being gay, or argued these so-called gay people simply wanted something they weren't supposed to want, which they compared to things like having sex with dogs. It was not a way of acting they would openly acknowledge as normative. In 2007, the leader of Iran said they didn't have gay people in their country. It's an easy thing for people to believe, as easy as anything else as far as I can tell. People will believe most things, and can believe anything they choose.

Knowing then that gay was a thing, and that it was connected to the seemingly embarrassing topic of homosexual, as when this was brought up my religion teacher she spoke very softly, a new way of understanding occurred to me. I understood it was a chosen way of being for some people, and that they'd hide it in my area where it was believed to either be a myth or reason for going to hell, and that if I used the word they would privately or publicly be offended every time I said it. So I stopped saying it. As a substitute I adopted the term stupid, though people argued with that much more often and I was forced to develop many new opinions.

Directly after this discussion my mother had one of her episodes, screaming from her bedroom for about an hour as my father tried to calm her, implying through these actions that our discussion might be the cause. When she did eventually come out she walked slowly into my

room where I was double-checking my accounts, and while smiling said through her teeth, Dinner is ready. But when I went in to the kitchen there was nothing there except a half-eaten bag of chips and my father looking very tired. Later that night, in an effort to make her not sad or angry or stressed, I suggested we go to the Goodwill that weekend so I could put on a fashion show, something she always enjoyed in the past. I was curious what we might get in my new size. I'd grown a lot recently. That, and we hadn't done one in about a year. They became sparser and sparser as I grew older. But the suggestion upset her more, so I left her alone in her bedroom.

That was the alternative lifestyle I met with. I was also lucky that one of the two African-American children that went to my high school also worked at the Chili Franchise, and I found both groups, black and gay people, experienced similar prejudices from the general population. At the time no one was making that comparison, at least not publicly that I witnessed, but it was clearly patterned throughout recent history. Both were feared as degenerates⁵⁷. Both were denied certain rights, like equal employment. And both were considered generally un-American by conservative politicians. The main difference was that Republicans on television would sometimes blatantly say gays were un-American, degenerate perverts, where they typically used negative connotations to say this of blacks, referring to them indirectly as thugs or other racialized terms that can be used generally and not be racialized, but are usually racialized. This way, they could pretend to not mean what they actually meant.

⁵⁷ An interesting contradiction characterizes this idea of degenerate, as some people seem to believe gay people are not born that way and yet are natural perverts. Most people, as I've learned, have no problem with contradiction. To see other examples of supposed degenerates and perverts, refer to Chapter One and Chapter Fourteen.

Julius worked what we called the steam table, meaning he made the food for customers. As time went on, I sometimes worked it as well. We scooped ladles of chili onto hotdogs and over spaghetti, and then we added onions, sometimes beans, and covered it with freshly grated cheddar cheese. Sometimes we did this to fries.

Julius was clearly a cool person. He had many friends. I realized I could learn much from him. He wore a doo rag over his dreadlocks and he wore pants and a polo shirt that were particularly baggy even for the 90's. When he talked it was like listening to a musical instrument (as one might say). There was a kind of bounce to it, as there was to the way he walked. He listened to rap music on his Walkman and he often sung along to it. I did not know much about music at the time other than The Beatles, a band my mother and father both liked a lot, and which limited understanding of music would cause another mistake.

Everyone at the Chili Franchise smoked cigarettes. It's where I first tried it, finding it unpleasant, though I still smoked if it was offered, careful not to inhale. Many of the younger smokers clearly didn't inhale either, though they did as they grew older, eventually realizing one day that they'd become physically addicted. The concept of addiction became important to me. I found I was largely immune to it, but if you manipulate addictive behaviors you'll be a much better salesman.

We would smoke in the prep area, and one day when we were all gathered during a slow afternoon Julius asked what kind of music I was into.

You probably wouldn't like it, I told him.

It's cool, whatever it is. What do you like, man? He was sitting on the steel prep table, his legs dangling back and forth as he grinned at me.

I don't really listen to any rap, I said. I was disappointed in myself. I feared Julius might hold it against me, and that as a result I'd be unable to learn from him the things I wished to learn, as he was a well-liked cool person, like some people thought of Michael who taught me quite a bit.

Candice and Jeneen were both smoking in the same semi-circle Julius and I were a part of. When I said the thing about rap Jeneen pulled her lips inward, made her eyes big, and backed away a little. Candice took a long drag on her cigarette and muttered Jesus in her throaty voice, expelling the word through a stream of smoke. Sam stood outside the circle smiling wider than usual.

Julius stopped swinging his legs. What, you think I only listen to rap?

I've only ever heard you listen to rap.

He shook his head and smiled. I listen to other things, he said. I'm aware that music other than rap exists. I don't live in a f_____ hole.

He was clearly offended⁵⁸, so I apologized.

⁵⁸ The definition of offended is: resentful or annoyed, typically as a result of a perceived insult.

In many ways, what someone is offended by appears to be defined by political position. Many liberals are offended by perceived or actual insults to either chosen (such as sexualities, personalities, clothing, gender, etc.) or birthed identities (such as race). A slogan that may be helpful here is: Just be you. This refers to being what one is assumed to be at birth, which works in accordance with the idea that one is born that way, which I wrote of earlier in this chapter.

Similarly, many conservatives are offended by perceived or actual insults to chosen (such as religion, regional identification, bearing arms) or birthed identities (being white, ancestry within the Confederacy—though this is also chosen as they choose to interpret the Confederacy as good).

It's alright, man, but you can't be telling black people that they only listen to rap.

The black⁵⁹ people part confused me further. I already understood on a basic level that the primary mistake I'd made was simplifying his behavior and self. I'd done this other times. One time, a few years prior, I bought Michael a couple of fishing lures for his birthday and when he thanked me and asked how I knew he'd like them I said because he only ever bought fishing lures and clearly that was his primary interest in life. He was upset. One time I told my brother about a nudist colony and when he asked me why I was telling him about it I said because he spent much of his time looking at pictures of naked women. He was upset. In my attempts to understand others I could only go off of observable data. I tried to remember that people didn't like being told what they did all the time, that they didn't like being simplified. Eventually, I

At the same time, many conservatives appear to not believe in the concept because when they call people things like r_____, f_____, or n_____, they think they are stating facts and that people should be okay with it. However, these are not facts as they are generally understood. These are words with clear negative connotations developed over history and are generally meant as insults (actual). It is my understanding that it makes these conservatives feel bad when people say they are offended by something they said, and it makes them mad that people are making them feel bad. Sometimes they call people who get offended or upset snowflakes, which seems to reference perceived uniqueness of individuals, similar to the uniqueness of snowflakes. Snowflakes are water that freezes in the atmosphere, and is also a word sometimes used as an insult to gay people, because some people think of snowflakes as feminine, which is difficult to understand.

It's possible the conservatives, who feel bad when others say they feel bad because of them insulting the others, may feel shame.

In any case, if people are mentally handicapped or gay or black and someone uses one of the above-referenced censured words in reference to them it hurts their feelings, though often when connected to identity (chosen or birthed) it's called being offended (which then hurts the feelings of the people who used the insult), or not politically correct, which is a confusing term because of how often politicians are known to lie.

⁵⁹ Nora is surprised I didn't know this was considered racist. I asked her how she knew it was racist. She said it was obvious. I asked her how it was obvious. She said it just was, which is not an argument to which I can respond and is also nonsensical because the understanding of racism is a human concept, which means it was invented and not simply existent. Therefore, not obvious because not logical and not natural, though tribal mentality is something people attempt to explain through biology.

made a rule of it for myself. Don't simplify people even if the people turn out to be simply understood.

I'm sorry, I said again.

Alright, alright, so what music you like?

The Beatles.

That's some old s_____.

Candice and Jeneen laughed. I laughed too.

But it's pretty good, I like The Beatles, Julius said, smiling at me.

After that Julius talked to me about music a lot. And after a couple other similar incidents, unrelated to race or sexual preference, my co-workers started calling me The Innocent One. Whenever Candice said a curse word she'd follow it by dryly saying (as one might say), I didn't mean to offend The Innocent One's ears.

And then if someone was telling some sort of sex story, which was pretty common, Sam might squeal, You're defiling The Innocent One!

Julius would shake his head, smile, and say something like, His parents are gonna hate us, man, when he comes home talking about blowjobs and smoking blunts. We have truly f_____ up The Innocent One. He's lost his pearly white shine.

I made sure to laugh anytime someone said it and we all seemed to get along. And I was not going to tell my parents about blowjobs and blunts, knowing by that point that they found these topics unpleasant to consider or discuss.

Julius and I became friends and he once invited me to his house for dinner, where I came to better understand the diversity of class, and how it effects behavior.

His father picked us both up in a black Mercedes after work one day. The car was nice, the leather comfortable with a pleasant odor, so that I noticed the strong contrast with the grease and chili smell Julius and I emitted. It was an unpleasant mixture, a dirty and clean smell (as one might say). I may have also sensed that it was a poor and rich smell, but I may be incorrectly adding that now when it makes sense to me in a different way.

I was never envious of material goods, though I was sometimes envious of the ability to procure them. I knew it simplified life.

This is my dad, Julius said, and his father, an angular man in his forties dressed in a nice suit, reached a hand towards the backseat to shake.

It's nice to meet you, John. I've heard a lot about you.

Okay, I said, shaking his hand.

He laughed. Yeah, he said. Not all of it good, but all very entertaining. I laughed.

Put on The Beatles, Julius said.

His father laughed again. Uh, sure, if that's what you're into now. I laughed again, and Julius elbowed me, so I stopped.

Dad, you know I like The Beatles, Julius said.

Alright, alright. Grab one of the CDs.

This was the first time I'd ever listened to a CD outside of an electronics store. They were becoming more popular, but most people still just had cassettes. I liked rewinding them. It was a small accomplishment.

Julius flipped through a small black case that he picked up from the floor. The White Album is the best, don't you think?

It's very good, I said.

Julius lived in an economically much nicer neighborhood than me called Thornwilde, which is located in Hebron, a town that also borders Burlington. The sign is a large piece of rugged-edged gray stone engraved with the word Thornwilde. There were then long stretches of cared-for lawn abutted by forests, and the occasional pond with running fountains, and a couple neighborhood pools, and then houses and different streets with more houses. They were all two or three stories tall with long driveways, three or four car garages and big yards. His house was located towards the back of the subdivision, off a cul-de-sac and surrounded by trees.

Your house is very nice, I said, as we got out of the car. I was taught by my mother to compliment people if a compliment was obviously available to use, and people like thinking their houses are nice.

It's alright, Julius said.

You're supposed to say thank you, his father said, smiling at us as he corrected Julius. I smiled back.

It was the biggest and nicest house I'd ever seen, excluding television. The entrance had ceilings about twenty feet up and a long staircase that lead to a balcony that overlooked it, which is very similar to the foyer in my current home. That was when I started referring to the small tiled area at the front of my house as the foyer. My mother laughed when I said it, so I repeated it a lot. She added the part about optimistic times. My father didn't think it was very funny. I stopped saying it around him.⁶⁰

We went into what is called a formal dining room, not just an extension of the kitchen, which was my previous understanding of dining room, but people with formal dining rooms

⁶⁰ If you need to remind yourself of this joke or of my father's use of the term sanctum please refer to Chapter One: My Time, Place, and Immediate Family.

would call said kitchen extension a breakfast nook. There was a long wooden table covered with a red runner, which in turn was decorated with covered dishes and a wide purple candle that burned in the center of a glass encasement. Julius' mother came into the room wearing a red polka-dot apron. She hugged Julius and then greeted me. She was a beautiful woman considering the following factors: bodily symmetry, color (like copper) contour and clarity of skin, height (probably about 5'8") and weight (at most, 120lbs). Julius could be considered beautiful for many of the same reasons, but most people prefer to call beautiful men handsome.⁶¹ He's is taller than his mother (maybe 6'2").

His mother wore blue jeans and a loose fitting black blouse under the apron, and with his father in the suit and this beautiful woman, it seemed Julius and I were out of place in our dirty, relatively inexpensive, and smelly uniforms. However, no one made note of this clear juxtaposition.

She prepared a dinner of roast beef with French green beans, mashed potatoes, and a little salad. Once the food was distributed we all ate quietly. I watched them use a fork and knife in a way I'd never seen. They held the knife in their right hand and used it to both cut the food and scoot food towards and onto their forks. If they stabbed the food with the prongs it never went very far beyond the tip of the fork and they consequentially didn't need to put it very far into their mouths. It seemed like a delicate procedure. This is a normal way of using silverware for

⁶¹ For information on how anything can be gendered, see Chapter Fourteen: The Streets of Louisville: Finding New Customers and Revenue.

many people. I found this out later, especially during my time in France.⁶² This is called continental style, referring to the continent of Europe and how people eat there.

The way I was taught to eat was to only use a knife when something needed cutting, as many Americans seemed to inherit from the English. So I held the roast beef in place with my fork, sawed at the meat, put the knife down, switched the fork to my right hand and then took up as much food as I could on the fork, after which I put the instrument into my mouth, sometimes scraping the metal against my teeth in an effort to fully clean the utensil of food. They may have noticed the scraping. His father squeezed his eyes shut as if something hurt him.

Easy there, John, he said.

I'm sorry, I said. I don't think I know how to use my knife and fork correctly.

Julius laughed and his father glared at him.

You're using them both fine, his mother said. Just ignore these idiots. She smiled. Despite her comment, I was well aware I wasn't using them fine in the context.

I tried to use the knife and fork like they did, but it was very hard. It was the first time I'd tried that way. While I did it, I noticed his mother and father made pained expressions, via their cheeks bunching up as their mouths opened and eyes squinted. I accidentally knocked some food off my plate and onto the floor. Julius laughed again.

Julius, his mother and father said almost simultaneously.

I'm sorry, I said.

Really, it's fine, his mother said. So, how was work today?

It was alright, Julius said.

⁶² *Editor's Note:* The absence of the footnote referencing the chapter on France is seemingly because Burgess didn't finish it. Though he does elsewhere reference material he did

I noticed throughout the rest of the dinner that Julius talked differently around his family than he did at work. He was sparser in his conversation, gave quicker and less rhythmic responses. This seemed to me correct. I also tried to do what different people expected of me at different places and times. I understood though that Julius had a difficulty I did not as his particular affectations would inevitably be racialized. People can pretend to be whoever they want, but depending on what you look like and what behavior you engage in people give different reasons for the pretending.

At the time of my mistake with Julius I didn't know that saying that someone who was black only listened to rap music was a stereotype. I've learned lots of stereotypes of black people since and most of them are oddly specific. Like eating fried chicken and watermelon, and not being able to swim and yet being naturally athletic. Like being given to certain ways of life, like drug dealing and soft-shoeing. If you combine all these features you end up with a very specific person, and yet, as is the nature of stereotypes, people apply it to a large group of people. If one were to imagine the stereotype in physical form, combining some of the features it might look something like the following:

A man on a street corner in the downtown of a city holds a large watermelon. As you approach him he takes large bites out of it, spitting the seeds out between an enormous grin. He soft-shoes up to you, and pulls a baggy of crack rocks from the interior of the watermelon. In his retreat, he takes the fruit and dunks it in a basketball hoop nearby.

I've never met anyone like this, or seen anyone like this on television or in film, though some older racist cartoons get the closest to imitating said stereotypes. And yet, despite a general absence of evidence, people still believe in stereotypes.

not actually compose.

It seems that in order to dislike a group the bigoted person must envision them as a unique individual with particular habits who was seemingly cloned millions of times. Clearly people wanted these stereotypes to be true, as they often gave up trying to explain them with a shrug and the phrase, there's some truth to it. There's some truth to most things⁶³, and this line of understanding is similarly logically dangerous as saying everything is willed by God. If you start with a conclusion and move backwards you can almost always find the truth that is to it, or evidence to support it. Deductive reasoning is often useful, but also a large contributor to individual stupidity.

This is part of the problem with figuring out whether it is a guilty conscience that made me start this project, as I may now be finding evidence that was meaningless to this conclusion previously. However, it is important to not ignore what seems the likely conclusion as well as not assuming the likely conclusion is true.

My co-workers at the Chili Franchise accepted me as part of their group and often made it their goal to educate me on things my family and school seemed too embarrassed or uninterested in talking about.

Also, I apologize if the occasional vulgarity, of which there is much in this chapter and elsewhere, is hard for some readers. I've learned it mentally hurts some people. I have censored it for this reason. Additionally, my mother always loved for-tv movies, the way everything that disgusted her (as she said) was blanked-out and cut, and I want to encourage this kind of consumer to keep reading.

⁶³ This is similar to everything being based on the truth in the sense that both a false and true depiction are based on understandings of reality. So, all falseness is based on the truth. For

At the same time, I understand many people's minds can fill in the blanks. Nora tells me I shouldn't censor it, that especially young people enjoy culturally forbidden words. I explained to her that people could fill in the blanks if they liked the words, and those that couldn't are the very people for whom I am doing it, as I assume they are either too young to know or have learned to protect themselves from the words, and can this way remain protected. I am simply trying to give an accurate impression of things as I understood them, and as I came to understand them, while at the same time avoiding mentally harming people to the best of my ability.

Chapter Five: My Second Investment and Information on Finn in the Words of Michael.

In retrospect, the Nintendo wasn't a good investment. While it saved me and my friends money, it didn't make any money. As I learned in college, both Marxists and Capitalists agree that it takes capital to make capital. Money breeds money (as one might say). Nintendos do not, not unless you're dealing with them in mass quantities or manufacturing them.

The Nintendo was the last significant deduction from my savings until I was fourteen. An important year for me as it was the same year my mother opened a savings account with me, and when I got my job at the Chili Franchise and entered high school. My savings, in cash and coins in my closet, had reached \$1904.93. I presented my mother with a thousand dollars thinking I might need the excess cash for something she wouldn't approve of.

Seeing the money my mother went to her own cash savings to see if I had stolen some and claimed it as my own. As everything was in order she had more reason to chastise me as she had in the past, telling me it's not healthy to have such a love of money and if you don't have something specific you want to spend it on then what's the point in having it?⁶⁴ Her arguments had no effect on my decisions.

My financial situation improved considerably after I took my job at the Chili Franchise. Though I only worked about 13.5 hours a week on average, I made \$5.25 an hour, so I was making about 1350% more (this does not exclude taxes) than when I only had my five dollar a week allowance to rely on.

⁶⁴ See Chapter Two: My First Investment, My Introduction to Michael, and My Mother's Mental Condition, for more information related to my mother's concerns over me not spending my money.

My allowance continued in my fourteenth year, in addition to which I made:⁶⁵

Chili Franchise : 649 hours x 5.25 an hour = \$3,407.25

Tax Deduction: (-204.43) Net: \$3,202.82

In my fifteenth year my wages at the Chili Franchise generally maintained along with my allowance, but there were also the following investments, which resulted in an additional income of \$750:

Investments

(DD)	Date	Amount
	02/03/94	\$525
	03/01/94	\$150
	04/01/94	\$300
	04/15/94	\$300
	05/17/94	\$450
	06/15/94	\$450
	07/01/94	\$300
	07/15/94	\$300
	08/01/94	\$300
	08/15/94	\$300
	09/01/94	\$600
	10/01/94	\$600
	11/01/94	\$750
	12/01/94	\$750
Total DD Purchase Cost		\$6,075
Employee Benefits Cost		\$2,475
Info On Finn Cost		\$100

At the end of my fifteenth year my savings were the following:

BANK SAVINGS: \$7,849.14

CLOSET SAVINGS: \$1,654.93

⁶⁵ Nora has suggested in a continuation of her concern that people are uninterested in math, that the tables from my accounts are largely unnecessary. In a compromise, after the following section I will only list those numbers that are germane to the part of my life I'm writing about, though one should know that I keep making money even when I do not mention it, and that this money is continually more than I previously made, because it always was.

The coded deduction (DD) totaling \$6,075 as well as the money appointed to employees of \$2,475, and \$100 for information on Finn, resulted in the comparatively meager profit of \$750. DD stands for Drug Dealing. While I am not proud of the sum I made that year, it was a year of learning and did result in the establishment of a significant network. I was okay with bringing in little in what I understood as the initial phases of a larger project. And as you'll read later, I did much to improve my profit in my sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth year. On average, my income from the endeavor grew about 850% a year during these initial phases.

I was first introduced to marijuana on a cold night in late January, 1995. Michael's birthday was January 23rd while mine is January 1st. He suggested we meet with his older brother and a couple others on a Friday night to celebrate. My father generally did not care how late I stayed out, though my mother sometimes had panic attacks if I remained absent past eleven pm, so I told Michael I'd go as long as his brother could get me back by that time.

We waited for the others at Michael's house. He was showing me his new spinner bait-- by this time he'd begun to use the lures for fishing and not just as alien eggs, decoration, and sharp toys. As we grew, he pretended this was always the reason for their purchase, and I only corrected him once. Most people don't like being corrected, especially not more than once.

Michael's older brother is named Finn, and Finn drove up in a red, beat-up (it had several dents) Honda Civic hatchback with two other boys his age. They were all three years ahead of us in school, and so seniors while we were freshmen. Everyone had to get out of the car so that we could get in. Michael and I squeezed into the backseat with a boy everyone called Tumbler. I asked Michael later why people called him that and he said it was because the boy was fat and once tumbled down the stairs leading up to the high school entrance. I told him that made sense

but that I didn't understand why Tumbler let people call him that since he clearly disliked the nickname and would often wince when it was used. Michael told me Tumbler didn't exactly let people call him that. They just did. The only person who called him by his real name was Finn, who called him Joseph. The reason for this may be connected to information I would subsequently receive on Finn, and which is detailed later in this chapter.

Tumbler took up a lot of space but both Michael and I were fairly small width-wise, and it wasn't especially uncomfortable. In the front seat sat another of Finn's consistently present friends, Brett. Brett asked us if we were ready to get f_____ up.

I have to be home by eleven, I said.

They all laughed.

Aww, Brett said, he needs to get back to his mommy.

That's correct, I said. And then I laughed, which I'd learned was a way to sometimes signal that what you said was a joke, and that said joke was funny enough you couldn't keep the laughter in (as one might say). Once done, others could reinterpret what you'd said as a joke. It worked. Everyone else laughed.

This kid's alright, Brett said.

He's kind of weird, but he's Michael's butt buddy.

Shut up, Finn.

Don't lose your temper, little Michael.

Michael turned red but didn't say anything. The phrase butt buddy was somewhat common among my peers. If you had a very good friend that you enjoyed spending time with more than others then some people seemed to assume you were having anal sex. I learned, however, that this was usually said with sarcasm. Though, that being the case, I'm not sure why it

upset Michael, as everyone in the car probably knew we were not having anal sex. And further, if we had been, Michael's blush would've simply made it more apparent. Blushes, as I understand them, are often embarrassed admissions of truth. And yet, Michael knew better than anyone that we weren't having anal sex.

We drove to an abandoned neighborhood in Hebron. It was not abandoned for what I understand are typical reasons, because of poverty or because the houses were condemned, but because the airport bought out the area. The Greater Cincinnati airport is actually located in Hebron, KY, and because of that they often bought places both because of certain restrictions having to do with sound pollution and for potential expansion. All but three of the residents of the neighborhood had sold, which meant that while about fifteen houses remained, only three were occupied. The neighborhood was nameless as whatever advertised it was already demolished. There were many rumors about the people who'd stayed. Brett filled us in on some of these once about three minutes of silence passed.

There's Mr. Brown, he began. They say he was in the Vietnam War and that when he saw the demolition crews at his neighbors he was yelling and s____, like f____ you g____, and shooting at them. He's got PTSD and thinks everyone is the Vietcong. We'll have to be careful around him.

But worse is this old maid, he continued. She lives in the last house and if she sees any young men she tries to seduce them. Like to have sex with them. There was somebody, I think Jason, that followed her inside one day and he said her house was like a mausoleum. He said that's what it felt like. She took him into a dining room where there was this moldy-a__ wedding cake because apparently she was abandoned at the altar and she's like still waiting for her bride.

Jason said he would've f_____ her but he was afraid that her vagina was going to be moldy and dusty too and he didn't want to lie down on anything in the house.

I had not yet read *Great Expectations*, though either Brett or whoever started the rumor about the old maid most likely did, considering the strong coincidence of behavior. Or, more likely, had seen a film version. Many people will not read a book if they can watch a film instead.

And then there's a family that still lives back there, he concluded. But I think they're normal. They just like the neighborhood.

We drove through two-day-old snow over streets that no one would plow or salt, something the area wasn't very good at in any case, even if you weren't in an abandoned neighborhood. It was also very dark as there were only a couple house lights and no street lights in operation.

Why are we driving all the way back here? Michael asked.

We need somewhere covert to smoke, you f_____ moron, Brett said. I have chosen not to censor the word moron because while some do find it offensive, it is often accepted even among those that are otherwise what is termed politically correct⁶⁶ by conservative politicians. If I censored all potentially offensive terms I could censor nearly a third of the material I've written, especially if I consider the idea of what is called trigger warnings and sensitive content. If someone has been personally traumatized by something then that thing and the things surrounding it are imbued with meaning they did not before possess (as one might say), becoming sensitive because of their particular relation to that individual. That is to say that I can

⁶⁶ See the previous chapter for a discussion of politically incorrect and its connection to the idea of diversity and offended.

by no means accommodate every individual--even if I accommodated all of the individuals I personally know or know of, the possibility of some other individual being offended or frightened or traumatized still remains.

Don't call my brother a moron, Finn said.

What are you talking about? You call him that all the time.

I know, moron.

To give Finn some credit where due (as one might say), Brett never appeared to be an intelligent person, though he was a decent employee some years later, even though he stole from me.⁶⁷ And to give Brett some credit as well, Finn did often call Michael a moron.

It was odd seeing a neighborhood so sparse. All the roads still maintained their suburban structure, veering off and into cul-de-sacs and other small roads, and yet the landscape was relatively barren, houses visible sooner than in any other subdivision I'd seen and looking larger for the gain in perspective. Because of the snow it looked especially blank. At this point in time the neighborhood is completely demolished except for one house.

Finn stopped his car in front of a boarded-up house. Finn and Brett got out. Tumbler, Michael, and I struggled to wedge ourselves between the angled seat and door-frame, and we each tripped slightly as we moved into the cool outside air. Brett approached the door of the house and found it locked.

We'll just smoke on the porch, he said.

Won't we be more conspicuous in an abandoned neighborhood, standing outside, in the middle of winter? I asked. I'd been thinking about the logic of Michael's question from before,

⁶⁷ See Chapter Nine and Chapter Fourteen for information related to this.

why it was we were going this far out. It seemed the police were more likely to survey abandoned places than populated ones, and we had no cover if we smoked in the open air.

Brett laughed, and then stared at me. Don't think so much, he said. Clearly he thought this was an error. If so, it was not an error he seemed to commit himself, often appearing to do things without thinking (as one might say). You're just being paranoid, he added.

No, I said, I was trying to accommodate your paranoia, which I assumed was the reason we came out here in the first place.

He's got a point, Finn said.

Shut up, just get the joint.

That rhymed, Tumbler said, laughing slightly.

No it didn't, Brett said.

Joseph is right, Finn said. It did rhyme.

Who the f___ cares? Brett asked, which seemed like an odd question as all three of them cared enough to bring it up in order to either affirm or deny it.

A very bulky and loose piece of paper containing marijuana was then lit and passed around. When it reached me I pulled the smoke into my mouth and blew it out without inhaling, as I was accustomed to doing with cigarettes when offered.

He didn't f_____ inhale. He's just wasting the s____, f_____ p_____,⁶⁸ Brett said, red-eyed and waving his hands in my direction.

⁶⁸ One boy calling another boy a word for female genitalia was common when the latter did something the former thought was un-manly given general cultural understandings of manliness. In this way it made a degree of sense, even if it was used in a literal fashion. For more specific information regarding gender norms and expectations and how they can be manipulated, please see Chapter Fourteen: The Streets of Louisville: Finding New Customers and Reven

Tumbler smiled and told me in an instructional voice, speaking slowly and maintaining the smile, that I needed to inhale for it to work. Give it a shot, he concluded.

I gave it a shot (as he said), coughing until I couldn't see. Everyone laughed. Once I recovered, I laughed too.

Over the next few minutes everyone but me became very excited. Brett, Finn, and Tumbler laughed whenever two of them made eye contact. Michael said things such as: whoa, this feels awesome. And many variations of that. I didn't feel anything and was fairly certain Michael didn't either, but the others were clearly not their usual selves, which is to say that they were more excitable and seemed more thoughtful and inward-looking (as one might say), and yet more social and happy.

It wasn't long after the joint was finished that we saw an old man walking towards us down the middle of the street, holding a rifle between his two hands. The reactions of the group were various but there was a general consensus of fear. While I do not seem to experience the typical range of emotions of most human beings, fear of bodily harm is common, I believe, amongst all living organisms capable of experiencing fear.

We all headed towards the car, pushing at each other to get inside, but we stopped when the old man raised his rifle and said that if we didn't want to get shot then we shouldn't get in the car. An odd command as he didn't seem to want us in the neighborhood, as we would learn.

He lowered his rifle and continued in an unhurried walk until he was a couple feet from the car. He had fine creases all throughout his face and had long gray hair and a long gray beard. Sometimes, after that, Michael referred to him as The Wizard. Knowing now that he was a Vietnam veteran, I'd guess his age at the time to be around forty to forty-five, but he looked significantly older.

What are you kids doing out here?

Nothing, the group responded.

Then why are you here?

I took the opportunity to speak for the group. It seemed like a fun place to explore, I explained. Abandoned neighborhoods are attractive to young people.

He laughed when I said this, so I laughed too. The others laughed. The communal laughter seemed to figuratively unsettle him as his face became again very serious.

Does this look abandoned to you?

Mostly, I answered.

Correct, he said, mostly. Cause if it was abandoned I wouldn't be here, would I?

Correct, I said, but my response appeared to anger him more.

Don't mock me, you little punk. I've been through too much to put up with s___ from teenagers. Young, dumb, and full of c___.

This last phrase he mumbled somewhat quietly. It made the others laugh.

You think that's funny? Huh, fat boy?

Why he singled out Tumbler at this point is hard to pinpoint, but if I had to guess I'd say it was because he seemed the easiest target. I've noticed people are more likely to pick on overweight individuals, skinny individuals, acned individuals, bespectacled individuals, odd-voiced (usually too high) individuals, and generally anything that sets apart a particular person. If they are different in an obvious way that is undesirable according to the mainstream culture or a certain sub-culture, then they can be made fun of for this reason. When people made fun of me they did so because I was: robotic, idiotic, cold, monotone, strange, unsettling, obedient to my parents, overly practical, etc.

No, sir, Tumbler said.

Then why were you laughing?

I don't know.

You usually laugh when someone threatens to shoot you? You think I'm not serious?

You're trespassing, you little p____ant. This isn't an abandoned neighborhood, and I'm tired of a bunch of punks coming out here to do drugs and f____ where their mommies can't see them. Does this look like a brothel to you? Or an opium den? Were you confused cause there wasn't a sign?

I don't know, Tumbler said again, looking at the ground.

You don't know, you don't know. F_____ stupid to boot. What is it you all were doing out here? Doing drugs? That's it, isn't it? You think my backyard's a good place to get high?

We were clearly not in his backyard. Besides this logical inconsistency, I felt Tumbler was receiving undue attention, and at this point I'd decided that the old man was not going to shoot us. It would've been far too much trouble for him. True, if this was Mr. Brown, as it would turn out to be, and if he really had PTSD, then he may very well shoot us. But he was clearly not misidentifying us as enemy combatants, and if his goal was to get us out of the neighborhood so he could enjoy it by himself, then shooting us was not the way. It would likely result in his arrest and thereby removal from the very neighborhood he seemed to appreciate so much.

We smoked a marijuana joint, I said.

You did, huh? Was it good? Was it worth it? He poked me with the butt of his rifle.

It was okay, I said. I believe Brett or Finn has some more. Did you want some?

This tactic was either going to succeed or fail, as is the case with all tactics. My mind was figuratively on other things, particularly how much all of them seemed to enjoy smoking the marijuana--even Michael, who felt forced to pretend he liked it. I was making plans and Mr.

Brown was already a potential customer, so it seemed worth doing. I was also, like many people, taught that it is good to share.

You're offering me drugs?

It seems the polite thing to do, I said. Considering our trespassing.

He seemed confused by this. He scratched his head and then I watched his face tip back and forth, and I watched his eyes roam. Alright, he finally said.

Brett retrieved another bulky and loose joint from a pack of cigarettes and handed it to the man, his hands slightly shaking, generally indicating nervousness or stress, and probably indicating nervousness in this situation.

The man held it. No one has a lighter? he asked.

Brett handed him a lighter.

This is terrible, he said as he inhaled the smoke. Where'd you all get this?

From my friend, Brett said.

I hope he didn't charge you much. This was information I'd keep in mind, the fact that according to a more experienced man we were smoking an inferior product.

He took another long inhale before passing the joint to me. I pulled the smoke into my mouth, but did not swallow it. Instead I produced tension in my face like I was trying really hard to hold it in and then I coughed a lot as I expelled the smoke, like I had the previous time. I passed the joint.

I guess lightweights like you all have to start with the garbage weed, he said.

After we'd finished the joint Mr. Brown--as he finally introduced himself--led us back to his house. We sat on old, dusty furniture and passed around a bag of Bugles and a box of Wheat Thins. He also had some hard candies he distributed after the Bugles and Wheat Thins were

eaten. Over the next couple years, Mr. Brown was the only client I personally sold to. He seemed to like me and I had no fear that he'd tell anyone, the primary reason I did not directly distribute marijuana to others. I don't think he had anyone to tell (as one might say).

As we drove back home Brett asserted that I'd handled the situation well.

You were like cool as s____, man, he said. For a second I thought we were all dead.

He was never going to shoot us, I said.

Yeah, but we didn't know that, Michael said, apparently a little angry at me, as he gave me a glare.

Calm down, Michael, Finn said. Be cool like John. He laughed. I laughed too. We all laughed.

Then I asked, Hey Brett, where do you get the marijuana?

Dude, stop calling it marijuana, you sound like a f_____ r_____. I later asked Michael what I should call it, and he said weed or pot. I believe the reason Brett thought it made me seem mentally disabled was because it was abnormal.⁶⁹ As I said, abnormality was the reason people were made fun of. I do not believe Brett actually thought I had a mental disability, but I'm unsure whether Brett thought much about why he said the things he said.

Where do you get the drugs? I asked.

My buddy Alex. Why, you want me to get you some? It's twenty-five for an eighth.

An eighth of what? I asked.

Of weed, dips____.

An eighth of what measurement?

⁶⁹ To see my fuller understanding of this, see Chapter Seven: My Marketing Campaign and Cost-Saving Measures.

How the f___ should I know? I look like a mathemagician to you? He did not, neither like a stereotypical mathematician or a magician, or whatever combination he was referring to.

Of an ounce, Finn helpfully added.

Who does Alex buy it from?

Michael looked over at me like he understood what I was thinking. He may have. He knew I was looking for an investment.

Jesus, man, you're like a question machine, Brett said. I don't know who he buys it from. You want me to get you some or not?

Could I buy it from him directly? I asked.

He doesn't really like selling to new people.

Tell him I'll buy a lot. I knew the promise of larger amounts of money was capable of convincing most any person to do most anything. For example, when I saw the movie An Immodest Proposal, I found the reticence in accepting the offer to be the oddest thing. And in some ways, the most immodest, as people generally find those with money to be decent, though maybe not humble, which is the other part of the definition.

Finn laughed. He's already hooked, he said. S___, maybe we shouldn't have brought him.

Just don't tell his mommy, Tumbler added. He rarely chimed in (as one might say).

Nice, Finn said, but Tumbler looked annoyed at the apparent compliment.

Yes, please don't, I said. And then I laughed. Everyone else laughed.

Man, you're f_____ weird, Brett said. But I'll tell him and get back to you. What's your house number?

I didn't want Brett calling my house, so I told him to call and tell Michael. He asked me why.

Because my mom and dad won't like you, I said.

Brett looked hurt, communicated through his face contracting as he looked at me in the backseat. That's a s_____ thing to say, man.

I guess it is, I said, and then I laughed. Everyone else laughed. I avoided giving Brett my house number.

They dropped me off at my house around 11:15. When I walked in my mother hugged me very tightly. It hurt my arms a little.

You can't do that to me, she said.

I'm sorry.

My father walked into the room wearing only briefs. His eyes were red, deadly focused.⁷⁰

You come home after your mom says again and you won't be able to walk for a week, he told me. I knew the threat was exaggerated, but I didn't have a reason to come home late again anyway. I was more careful after that. The thought of the investment and the subsequent events that put it within my figurative and literal grasp excited me, and I'd figuratively lost track of the time.

I won't, I said. And I didn't.

I met Alex three days later, but first needed to solve a problem.

Who could provide me transportation and wouldn't have an issue with concealing that I was purchasing marijuana in large amounts? I knew most adults looked down on the usage of drugs. I'd seen many commercials to that effect, warning all people, particularly children, and of those children, particularly teenagers, to Just Say No. I also knew my parents were against the

idea not just for effects it might have on others' health but for moral reasons they'd been convinced of.

I also knew the effects of marijuana on people were greatly exaggerated by commercials and other propaganda. My experience revealed none of the dangers I'd been warned of: No one ran over a small boy on a bike after we smoked marijuana. No one masturbated for days at a time afterward, that I knew of. None of us murdered anyone in a delirium. Therefore, it seemed reasonable that misinformation was the reason people condemned it, as with communism, which understood as a philosophy rather than a fascist political radicalism, does not seem as threatening.

Finn was clearly okay with marijuana, seeing as I'd smoked it with him. There were other people at school I could've asked but I already had this information on Finn. And I knew I could first ask Michael who I trusted to keep secrets because he always had. I then needed to figure out a way to make sure Finn didn't tell others after we went to get the marijuana. I believe in the importance of Risk Assessment. The more people who knew I was buying and selling marijuana, the higher the risk.

I wanted to gather information on Finn that I could then use to keep him from delivering information on me, what some people call blackmail. Michael was the most obvious source for this, and I assumed he'd want to help me as he often demonstrated a dislike of his brother and what could be termed a poor relationship. I was not completely correct in this.

Michael and I were playing Super Mario Kart when I mentioned it. My mother and father were not home.

⁷⁰ See Chapter One: My Time, Place, and Immediate Family.

I know what I'm going to invest in, I told him, as I shot a banana peel out from the rear of my Koopa go-kart to send Michael's Mario go-kart into a tailspin. I'd found it was often good to introduce propositions while engaged in a distracting activity.

S___, Michael said, still a poor imitator when using curse words and so putting more emphasis on the word than experienced cursers tended to. So what are you thinking? he asked.

I'm going to sell pot.

Are you sure that's a good idea? he asked. His cart had recovered and was passing by computer players in the lower screen. He was under the influence of a star, and so consistently sent cartoon racers up into the air as he got nearer to my first place position.

Since I can't invest in stock without my parent's permission, I think it's the best way I can make money for now.

Yeah, but aren't you afraid of getting caught?

No. I'll plan it right. But I do have a place for you in mind.

No way, dude.

I gently applied the brakes with the B button so that Mario's go-cart could pass me.

Nobody cares, Michael. You can talk to anyone at school. They think smoking weed is both fun and funny to talk about. The only people that judge are the evangelicals and a couple of the more devout Catholics. No one else cares.

But like the cops care. And our parents.

Only if they find out. They can't care about something they don't know about. And anyone we sell to then has a good reason not to tell anyone else unless they want to get caught too. Self-preservation is the best tool we have.

So that he wouldn't know I was letting him win I struck him with a red shell but also made sure to pass him at a somewhat leisurely pace (as one might say). We entered the last lap of the race. I'd found winning games put people in good moods, and that people were more receptive to ideas when in a good mood. Like when my father wanted to have sex with my mother and he'd buy her flowers or help with the dishes. I knew when this was going to occur because they locked their door and told us to make sure we slept in our own beds, even though I always slept in my own bed. Over time, the dish-washing and flower-buying emerged as patterns clearly connected to the door-locking, and therefore my conclusion.⁷¹

What do you want me to do? he asked.

First of all, your benefits. I'll supply you with a free eighth of weed a week.

Mario's go-kart moved past me in the final portion of the race. H___ yeah, Michael said, pumping a fist in the air. Wait a minute, an eighth a week?

Yes, an eighth of an ounce of pot.

He set his controller down. I don't know, said Michael. What would I do with all of it?

Smoke it. You seemed to really enjoy it the other day.

Yeah, Michael said, in what seemed wary via the slowed way he said it and the drop of inflection as he elongated the syllable. It is possible he wanted to both tell and not tell that he hadn't actually felt anything, ultimately deciding not to share this as it would make him look like a poser, which is someone who pretends to be something they are not. But I don't want to like get hooked, he added.

⁷¹ Nora says this information is unnecessary, but I find it to be a relevant example of what I am describing. She says she doesn't want to think about her grandparents having sex. I asked her if the fact that she wasn't to think about it changes its general relevance in this context,

Let's start another race, I said, then picking the Rainbow Road course, as it was the most difficult and the one that required the most concentration. Look, I said, you can smoke with whoever you want, including girls⁷². Girls will like that you have pot, that they can get it from you. It will make you more popular. Also, people don't get addicted to pot. That's a myth.

It is?

Yes, in fact you can't even overdose on weed. You can smoke as much as you want and you'll never overdose or become physically addicted.

I'd been doing some research at the school library. I did not at the time fully understand mental addiction, that anything that feels good can become addictive. I was also not aware that you could overdose if the marijuana was ingested through a food item, like the very popular Space Cake. Though I believe you'd have to eat quite a few cakes.

Cool, he said, I didn't know that. Wait a minute, but what do you want me to do?

Two things actually. The first is I want you to be one of my salesman.

His Mario go-kart careened over the edge of the colorful board of Rainbow Road on the television screen. I let go of the gas button so that my driver slowed. I didn't want to be too far ahead of him. It is difficult for any racer to catch up being more than a lap behind.

Why do I play this if I can't win? he asked. Then he said, I think you mean dealer, dude. And I don't know. Who am I going to sell it to?

already knowing the answer myself, but in this way attempting to teach her. She squinted her eyes at me, did what is called huffing, and briefly left the room.

⁷² I wrote extensively on why girls' attention would be appealing to Michael but Nora claimed this was common knowledge, repeating many of my explanations before I'd even showed them to her, therefore providing sufficient evidence It has been deleted. It is worth noting that Michael claimed to be bi-sexual, something which is discussed at further length in Chapter Fourteen and Chapter Fifteen. In this case, I perhaps should have said it would make boys like him as well.

I'll take care of that. I'll tell you who to approach and all you have to do is get the money from them and provide them with weed. You then return the money to me and I resupply you as you run out. I'll figure out where and when all of this should occur. I'll do all the planning, and all you have to do is take care of the actual transactions, and for that you'll receive essentially unlimited free pot.

I understood this was a lie. It was in no way essentially unlimited free pot. It was both limited (an eighth a week) and not free (in exchange for labor).

I guess that would be pretty cool, he said, to have as much as I want. I don't know, though. What is the other thing you want?

I need Finn's help, and I need your help to get it.

What do you want from Finn?

I need a ride to Alex's house to purchase the weed. I assume I'll need multiple rides in the future as well. When I resupply, and until I get my license and a car. I need someone who I can trust not to tell anyone else.

Finn's not going to tell people you bought weed. He doesn't care.

He won't tell authority figures, but he'll tell his friends. He'll think it's funny. And Brett tells everyone everything. It's bad enough he already knows I'll be buying a lot this one time.

So what can I do about any of that?

We need something that will keep him from telling so people don't know how much and how often I'm buying. After that, I'll tell Brett I never actually bought any, and I'll convince Alex it's best if he doesn't tell Brett either.

Wait a minute, wait a minute. So you want me to tell you something that you can threaten Finn with?

Yes.

He pulled his head backwards. What's wrong with you?

What do you think is wrong with me?

Dude, you're messed up.

But how?

At this point, I understood I'd made a mistake in my method of delivering the information, but it was too late to begin again. And as with all of my mistakes, once it occurred I was determined to learn as much as possible and be straight-forward (as one might say) with my thinking.

That's mean, John. You don't ask people for things they can use to hurt their family. That's not something people do.

First of all, you two hurt each other all the time. He makes fun of you. You try to make fun of him. You both look hurt and frustrated, angry or annoyed, sad or depressed. These are not enjoyable emotions, and yet you both produce them in each other even though you're family. Also, for example, I've seen both my mother and father say things that were clearly untrue on multiple occasions in order to hurt each other's feelings. And then, when they especially want to hurt each other's feelings, they say true things in very blunt ways, using what people call hurtful language. And about ninety-nine percent of the things my brother says to me could be interpreted as insults.

Well, yeah, sometimes people get mad at each other and say things they don't mean, but that doesn't mean you want bad things to happen to them.

Okay.

Sometimes I want to call you an unfeeling robot, but I don't do it, do I?

I understand what you just did. That's clever, Michael.

Yeah, well you asked for it. And did it make you feel good? When I said that?

No, but it didn't make me feel bad. I understand what others think of me. If what you said surprised me, then it would've made me feel bad, that I didn't already know it. I paused for what I felt was an appropriate time, time for the benefits to metaphorically sink in, and then asked if there was any way he was going to tell me something about Finn that I could use against him. I won't tell anyone, I assured him. I only need to make him believe I will.

Michael sighed and shook his head.

I'll give you a hundred dollars.

Fine, he said. I regretted that I hadn't said a lower number. Probably fifty would have worked.

But you're really not going to tell anyone, right? I mean, it would embarrass the s____ out of Finn. And I'm sure I wouldn't exactly look good either. People use whatever ammunition they find, you know.

I will absolutely never tell. I'll only make Finn believe that I will if he tells anyone I'm buying weed.

Well okay, Michael said, rising to his feet and stretching. It was only last year, he began. Michael liked to tell stories.

Summer before last, he continued, but it's made stuff pretty hard on him, and he can't go to Tumbler's house anymore. That, and he's had to go to therapy, and Mom and Dad look at him weird a lot. You really can't tell anyone, John. I'm serious.

I won't.

It's kind of weird that Tumbler still hangs out with him, though I guess Finn doesn't really pick on him anymore. I don't know, maybe Tumbler feels bad for Finn. There's been a lot of fall out.

Please, Michael, just tell me. I promise I'll tell no one. I should explain the reasons I now break this promise. The first and most important is that Michael is dead. He can no longer get upset about it or called out for it. The second reason is that this information is at this point generally known, though it is considered a rumor and the source of the information is nameless.

--Information on Finn in the Words of Michael⁷³--

So Tumbler lives over in Oakbrook, and they were out at the neighborhood pool. It was Brett, Finn, Tumbler, and Jason all hanging out along with Tumbler's mom and dad and his little brother. They used to go out there a lot in the summer, at least once a week. Just sit around and watch the girls and drink pop and stuff. Nothing better to do. Sometimes I went too if Finn let me, but my mom told me I couldn't go until I finished mowing the grass, so I didn't show up until things were already pretty out of control. You went with me a couple times, I'm sure you remember. I know you don't forget much.

Well, so they're lying there and they run out of Coke and Tumbler's mom says she'll head back. And Finn says that that's alright, he'll do it instead. And Tumbler's mom is saying thank

⁷³ Nora asked why this story of Michael's is so long. I told her that's the way he told it. She asked if I could cut it down, but she already picked one of ten things for me to cut so according to our agreement I did not have to.

People, like Michael, do tend to expound where they do not need to, but sometimes it is exactly this that lends uniqueness to their performance, solidifying their person as person to the audiences they choose to cultivate.

I have also learned it is a well-received gesture to honor and/or praise the dead. Michael's voice and rhythm will demonstrate the person he chose to be in speech, at least at the age of fifteen. It is also possible I loved Michael, that I am grieving him, that I feel guilty for his death, and this is somehow an expression of that.

you and what a gentleman he is. And Brett, Tumbler, and Jason are like, what are you doing, man, she said she'd get it? But Finn shrugs and says he doesn't mind.

They don't live far from the pool so Finn just has to walk down a street or two but he has to lug this cooler with him because he doesn't have his car because I think Brett drove that day. So Finn walks off with the cooler and they're watching the girls and hanging out and Tumbler's mom starts getting concerned about Finn carrying that big cooler all by himself with a bunch of Cokes and ice in it. And she's worried he needs some help so she tells Tumbler to go and help.

Tumbler's annoyed because he's like, if Finn had just let his mom take care of it then he wouldn't have to leave to go help. And Tiffany Clark was there, and she was showing off and kept rubbing on lotion and sunscreen and stuff, and it was about the best thing they'd ever seen, and it was fine if Finn was going to be gay⁷⁴ and go and get the cooler, but why did they have to miss out on the show just because Finn was trying to impress Tumbler's mom or something?

So Tumbler's p____. And at this point, by the time Tumbler's mom got him to go and help, it's already been like twenty minutes. Tumbler was kind of hoping if he argued with his mom long enough then maybe Finn would already be back and he wouldn't have to leave. But he did because Finn still wasn't back. And the longer he was gone, the more reason Tumbler's mom had to say that Finn needed help, and it was the polite thing to do to go help him.

So Tumbler says it takes him like two minutes to get there because he times it thinking like, what the h____, Finn, why are you taking so long? When he gets to his house he doesn't see Finn anywhere, and he walks in the kitchen and the cooler is sitting on the floor, still completely empty. And so he's like, what's your problem, Finn, and where the h____ are you? And he says he

was stomping through the house thinking about Tiffany Clark and how Brett and Jason are going to tease him for missing out.

Then Tumbler gets this creepy feeling like something's wrong, like maybe something happened to Finn or whatever, and he gets kind of scared. Because it's pretty weird when he thinks about it. The empty cooler and Finn being gone so long. So he gets quiet and he heads to his bedroom and grabs his wooden Louisville Slugger bat, the one he won in the school raffle, and he starts checking in the different rooms and finally walks back the hallway to his parent's bedroom. When he's coming up on the bedroom he starts to hear these noises. Fast breathing and something else, and it creeps him out. So he takes it real slow. He's got the bat raised above his head as he's making his way down the hall, listening to see if he can figure out what's going on.

It was probably around that time that my mom dropped me off at the pool. The first thing I did was jump right in. I didn't take a shower after I mowed the grass and they weren't wrong about Tiffany Clark. She was definitely showing off. When I got there she stood up and stretched for a long time and then kept adjusting the top of her bikini. And so I jumped in to clean myself but also because I wanted to hide. But you know that doesn't work that well because when you get out of the pool your trunks are sticking to you. Unless someone throws a towel over to you right away it's pretty obvious. I didn't really think about it when I got in, so the towel was all the way over hanging on a chair. So I had to wait at the side of the pool for a really long time. Like trying to think about things so I'd stop thinking about Tiffany Clark.

--Information on Finn in the Words of Michael (interrupted)--

⁷⁴ See Chapter Four: My First Job: An Introduction to Diversity, for more on this word being used as a pejorative, though I believe in this instance it was also being used to mean homosexual.

I would've asked Michael to abbreviate his story telling, but I'd found if you hurried him he got upset and still took a long time to tell the story. That, and it is always best to listen to what others want to say. It costs you nothing, and often the information is worth something. Of course in this case it did cost me something, so I was that much more interested in hearing every detail Michael offered.

--Information on Finn in the Words of Michael (continued)--

While I'm in the pool waiting Brett and Jason are like, where's Finn and Tumbler? They're like, Jesus, how hard can it be to carry a cooler full of Coke between the two of them?

I figured that was as good of an opportunity I was going to get, and so I say to them that if they just throw my towel to me then I'll go and check on Tumbler and Finn.

Brett smiles and gives me this look and he's like, why do you need me to throw you your towel? And I say I'm just trying to do you guys a favor by going and checking up on Finn and Tumbler and the least you can do is throw me a towel. And he goes, it's like five feet from the pool. It was more like ten feet, but I say to him that I don't want to be cold when I get out of the pool.

Brett and Jason are both laughing. And then Brett gets up and goes to get the towel. He acts like he's going to toss it to me but he doesn't. And I'm like, come on, man, just give me my towel. And he says, why don't you just get out of the pool and get it yourself?

I don't know why I did it then, but for whatever reason I take that moment to look over at Tiffany Clark and she's staring right at me and Brett with a smile on her face. I almost died. I was so angry I forgot about what I was waiting for and jumped out of the pool and grabbed the towel from Brett. But I'm not like The Flash or anything, so they still see it and they're both laughing their a____ off. I wrapped the towel around my waist and left the pool trying not to

look at anyone, and I yell back a _____ at them. Tumbler's mom gives me a look, and I say I'm sorry. I can't wait to get out of there.

So Tumbler was walking down that hall with the bat and he's got it raised above his head, and when he reaches the bedroom he can't believe what he sees. There's Finn, and in one hand he's holding a pair of Tumbler's mom's panties, and in the other, well.

Yeah, so Tumbler just goes apes____. He can't even think straight he's so grossed out and angry. So he charges Finn and swings the bat as hard as he can. And then there's these two simultaneous snapping noises. One of those noises is Finn's leg and the other is Tumbler's Louisville Slugger. They both broke at the same time, the Slugger with a long crack down its middle and Finn's leg more completely. Finn crumples to the floor, giving out this long moan. And then Tumbler is about to hop on top of him and start punching his face. But Finn is sitting there and he's got like his mom's panties tucked in his pockets and like in his hand and his fly is still open. So Tumbler's too grossed out to even hit him anymore and that's when he storms out of the bedroom and the house.

I walked up to see Tumbler coming out of the house and I don't think I've ever seen someone so mad. Not even my dad when Finn ran over the mailbox. It scared me. Cause Tumbler's a nice guy and kind of quiet, and it's weird to see someone who's usually so calm and cool look that mad. I knew something was wrong and so I ask, is something wrong? And Tumbler looks weird and his face is red and he's so angry, but he smiles at me. It kind of creeped me out. And then he asks, would you like to see? Just as calm as anything, but with his face boiling red. I said, I guess.

As soon as we walk in the house I hear Finn crying. It's not something I hear much but I take the opportunities I can to make fun of him, and I'm thinking this is going to be awesome,

whatever happened. That I've got something I can hold over his head for awhile. But I didn't expect what I saw.

He'd at least zipped up his pants at that point but the panties were still all around him and he's crying there on the floor and telling us he needs help and he thinks his leg is broken, and can we please call a hospital. And he's sorry, but please call a hospital. And I was so surprised by what I was looking at that I couldn't even call him a crybaby, but just stood there like frozen. I don't think anyone would've told me what happened if I hadn't walked in on it.

I remember thinking at the time, what are you doing, Finn? Tumbler's mom's panties? I could maybe see Tiffany Clark's, but Tumbler's mom? Then I'm starting to feel bad for Finn. He's never looked more pathetic, clutching at his leg and his face all red and crying with snot all over him. And there wasn't blood or anything, but when you looked closer you could see the bone like it was trying to push up through the skin. A little tepee on his leg but coming out the side. And so Tumbler's pretty out of it and still looking evil or something, and I'm thinking, I've got to do something. So I tell Tumbler we're going to have to call an ambulance or maybe tell his parents so they can take Finn to the hospital.

When I say the thing about telling his parents he gives me this look like he's about to murder me but then he turns it back on Finn. And then he says, there's no way I can tell my mom what happened. I say, okay, I totally get that, but like whatever happened man between you and Finn we still have to do something about him because he looks like he's about to die. And he did, John. I swear I've never seen someone look like they were in so much pain. Like my own leg started hurting.

So I get this idea and tell Tumbler what we'll do is clear up all the panties in the room so we don't have to say anything about that part to his parents. And then we'll just say we found

Finn after he fell down the basement stairs and broke his leg. And Tumbler's like, Michael, those are my mom's panties, I'm not touching them.

And I shouldn't have said this, but I wasn't really thinking and I joked saying, well, better you than him, right? He kind of smiled for a second when it caught him off-guard, but then he looked more angry.

I say, okay, I can clean up the panties and you go and get your parents at the pool so they can come and get Finn, or ask them if they think we should call an ambulance instead. And then Tumbler looks at me, and I was scared, and he's like, you f_____ pervert! And I go, dude, I'm just trying to figure a way out of this situation. I don't want to touch or think about your mom's panties. And I'm trying to be respectful and stuff but this is some weird s____.

Then Tumbler started to calm down, and he's tired looking all the sudden and he says, I'll help you clean it up. So we walk over to Finn and start picking up the panties off the floor. And then we have to stop because Tumbler runs out of the room to go throw up because we figure out the panties weren't like. Well, they weren't clean.

So Tumbler's losing it again and while I'm picking up the rest of them and throwing them back in the hamper I have to keep an eye on Tumbler to make sure he doesn't kill my brother. And then I'm up close to Finn and I have to get this one that's in his pocket and I start to pull.

--Information on Finn in the Words of Michael (interrupted)--

Michael stopped and started making gagging noises. I'd seen him feign gagging before, and this was different. So I noted the difference. It's remarkable what things the mind can do to the body.

--Information on Finn in the Words of Michael (concluded)--

That one was really dirty. So I manage to finish and I manage to keep Finn alive and now we have to tell Tumbler's mom.

I'm not actually sure Tumbler is going to be able to tell his mom if he goes. And at the same time I'm afraid to leave him there with Finn if I go because I still think he might kill him. So even though Finn is wailing in pain we both left together to go get his parents. And Finn is begging us, saying like, don't leave me, oh my god, it hurts so much. But I told him we're going to get help and we'll come right back. I felt awful leaving him there.

On the way to the pool Tumbler is walking painfully slow, stopping every few seconds and saying, this isn't going to work. And even though I'm pretty sure it's not exactly going to work, as far as people not finding out what actually happened, I also know Finn is in some real pain. And pervert or not, he's my brother. So I keep telling Tumbler it's going to be alright, and everything is going to work out just fine, even though I know nothing is fine and it's not going to be.

When we get there both Brett and Jason look at us and are like, where the h_____ the cooler guys? Did you forget the cooler? Isn't that why you went?

Tumbler's mom looks at them and she's like, language boys. And they say sorry, and Tumbler's mom asks, where is Finn? And I just straight up say he fell down the stairs and broke his leg, which makes Brett and Jason laugh, and then they ask, am I serious? And because Tumbler's face is so red and he's covering his eyes I just point at him and I'm like, does it look serious?

Tumbler's mom wakes up his dad whose been sleeping all day as far as I can tell, and she tells Brett and Jason they should go ahead and go home because we can't all fit in the car, and they're like, we'll stick around the pool for awhile. And I look over and Tiffany Clark is putting on more sunscreen, like particularly at that moment on her cleavage. Tumbler's mom sees what we're seeing and she just sighs and says, that's fine and would they at least look after Matt,

Tumbler's little brother. They're like, sure thing. And so me, Tumbler, his mom and dad all head out from the pool area. As we leave I hear Brett asking Jason, I didn't know Tumbler cared so much about Finn? And then I hear them laughing.

When we get in the house his mom and dad head straight for the basement stairs, and I have to be like, no he's up here, pointing back to their bedroom. And Tumbler's dad is like, why did you move him, what were you thinking? And I say, we wanted him to be more comfortable, so we put him on your bed. Tumbler still hasn't said a word since we met up with his parents.

So we get into their bedroom and Finn's moaning and crying on the floor, and Tumbler's mom is all cooing over Finn and calling an ambulance because she's worried. But Tumbler's dad is looking at us like, what the f____? Like specifically not just h____. And he asks, how did Finn get on the floor, and why is Tumbler's bat cracked on the floor and lying next to Finn? And I say I don't know about the bat, but that Finn must have rolled off the bed. This must not sound right to his dad because he gives this face and then looks down at Finn like to say, this kid isn't rolling anywhere.

It takes the ambulance about fifteen minutes to get there. The whole time Tumbler's mom is hanging over Finn with a wet cloth that she's damping on his head, and she's saying, it's going to be alright, honey, and I called your mom and dad and they're going to meet us at the hospital. And me and Tumbler are standing there looking at the floor because we don't want to make eye contact with his dad. And I can tell all the attention his mom is giving to Finn is killing him.

They let Tumbler's mom ride in the ambulance with Finn because she insists and she's really worried, and then me and Tumbler follow behind in the car with his dad. As soon as he starts up the car he asks us what really happened. Tumbler makes a noise like a dying animal. I don't say anything.

Then his dad is like, someone is going to tell me what happened, you did not carry him up from the basement to put him on the floor in our bedroom. That makes no sense, not even for idiot teenagers. Tumbler makes the noise again. I start to say, well, he was really begging us to get him out of the basement. He was scared, I say. Michael, his dad says, if you're going to lie, stop talking. So I stop talking.

We get to the hospital, and Finn's already been taken into a room and my mom and dad are back there with him. So it's me, Tumbler, and his mom and dad in the waiting room. I watch Tumbler's dad start whispering to his mom. And she starts to look suspicious too where I think she was too worried for Finn before to really think much about it. And after awhile his mom stands up and she says, boys, let's go outside for a second. So all four of us head outside of the hospital.

When we get out front and away from the people that are smoking out there, Tumbler's mom puts on the mom face, that real calm face when they're looking nice to make sure you tell them the truth, with her eyes all big to show you she's going to be real disappointed if you keep lying. So she asks with that pretend calm, now boys, what exactly happened?

It was too terrible, so I ask, do I really need to be here? Isn't this something I should sit out on? Like a family thing?

And Tumbler's mom is like, Michael, why does Joseph look so upset?

And I'm like, Finn broke his leg.

And she goes, well, I know that, but Tumbler looks like it was his leg that got broke. Tumbler makes the noise again, and she goes over and puts her arm around him and she's looking more worried again now, and says, honey, what is it? And he starts crying and through it he only manages to say that he can't talk about it.

Did you do it, his mom asks, did you break Finn's leg? Tumbler just shakes his head, not like no but like it's too hard to say.

I can see Tumbler's dad's thoughts are going in a different direction because he just looks mad, and he asks, why was he in our bedroom? Did he think we kept the Cokes in our bedroom?

He may have, I said.

And Tumbler's dad is like, Michael, you tell me exactly what happened right now.

And I say, well, I don't really know exactly what happened. Which was true at the time because Tumbler hadn't really told me anything, I'd just kind of pieced things together. I mean, when his dad first asked about the bat it seemed pretty obvious that Tumbler did it, but I couldn't say for sure.

Tumbler's dad's face gets red, and he says, well then, tell me what you do know.

Alright, I sigh, just let me think, because I don't know how to put it exactly. So I say, well, when I got there Finn's leg was already broken and he was already in the bedroom.

Okay, his dad says.

So, but it was strange, I say, because the room was very messy.

And his dad looks annoyed and he's like, it wasn't just strange that Finn's leg was broken in our bedroom, you also took note of the mess is what you're saying? That we're not very clean? Is that what you're telling me, Michael?

That's not what I said, I say, what I was saying was that there were clothes kind of all around and stuff, and the cracked bat.

There were no clothes all around, his dad says, what are you talking about?

Well, Tumbler and me cleaned them up.

You call my son Tumbler? his dad asked.

And I'm like, everybody calls him Tumbler.

And then his dad is like, nevermind, but what is it you cleaned up?

The clothes, I say.

What clothes, he asks, why does that matter?

And I say, I'm not very comfortable talking about this.

And his dad's like, tough s____.

And I look over at Tumbler's mom who is just looking more and more worried. And I say, a lot of your underwear was laying around Finn on the floor.

At that point Tumbler broke away from his mom and runs off and she runs after him, and I was just left with his dad.

I think I understand, he said. And I told him I was sorry.

That was not the entirety of the story, Michael claimed, but he was interrupted when my mother came home.

I called Finn the next day and set up a time for him to drive me out to Alex's house to purchase the marijuana. The information Michael provided worked to keep Finn silent and a good worker, and I was able to purchase what I wanted, though things did not go well with Alex--they could've gone better. But I'll save that for another chapter. I think this one's already too long according to typical chapter standards. I will end by adding that Finn's particular fetish was also an important building block in the understanding I'd develop concerning sexuality and how to manipulate it in others. A good thing to know when you're a prostitute, though I didn't at the time predict that was in my future.

Second Interlude: Call Me Bill.

Listed below are some of the different calls I made on behalf of Nora in exchange for her acting as an editorial assistant and general guide in the production of this manuscript. A few calls were made by me as William, all of which are detailed below, though over the course of a year I've made calls as many other people for Nora as well, and I'll continue to do so as she continues to help with the manuscript.

I had to get William's voice down (as one might say) before making any of the calls. I did this by concentrating on his pronunciation of certain phrases he tends to use repeatedly. The two I focused on were: 1) Call me Bill. 2) Don't be an a___. I would frequently say these phrases and then move into more complicated speech patterns, remembering the conversations we've had over the years.

I also bore in mind some gestures of William, as when he performed these gestures it would be in place of speech:

1) Various expressions of disgust made with both the face and body, a couple of which I've previously described.

2) Various expressions of anger, though primarily through clenched teeth that made his lips near perfectly horizontal.

3) His laugh, which besides the somewhat cut-off sound from the back of his throat, also included a repeated slight shift of his head and chest backwards with the laugh.

4) The roll of his eyes up and the barely perceptible smile that indicated he was enjoying something in a sarcastic way, meaning he seemed to think the speaker stupid and that this was

funny or entertaining, and yet he did not wish the speaker to know that he was feeling this, mainly as he did not think the speaker capable of understanding.⁷⁵

Also, William was, in many of his interactions, what some may call a gruff character, usually meaning someone who drinks, smokes, and does perhaps various other drugs, while also being more direct and vulgar in speech and action than most people. He was not like this when he was young, but instead began to imitate said character more thoroughly in his late twenties. This makes sense as part of the understanding of a gruff character is that they be at least what is considered an adult (18 or older), as part of the gruffness is identified via living a so-called hard life, as perhaps evidenced through the above reference to drug use, and people don't typically use drugs prior to puberty, though some do.

Nora sat in the room while I made these phone calls, listening on speaker phone, and occasionally writing notes of what she wanted to know or thought interesting and wanted to remember. She also sometimes mouthed speech to me when she wished to communicate her message quickly.

Phone Call One (June 15th, 2012, 3:15 PM)

Jenny: Yeah?

Me as William: Hi Jenny.

Jenny: Who's this?

Me as William: You know who it is.

Jenny: Yeah. (long pause) Well, I'm gonna hang up.

⁷⁵ Nora confirms these characteristics are accurate and also that they do not fully encompass William's gestures.

Me as William: Listen Jenny, I wanted to talk through some s____.

Jenny: I can't really think of anything new to say, Bill. Not sure what you'd have to say either.

Me as William: No, listen to me. I'm changing. And I'm thinking through the things I did wrong. It's a lot, I know, but I want to be better for you and Nora.

Jenny: You stop drinking?

Me as William: I've slowed down a h____ of a lot, I can tell you that.

Jenny: Jesus, Bill. Why'd you even call? Just to feed me bulls____?

Me as William: No, now listen to me, alright? We need to figure things out for Nora, Jenny. What's happening isn't her fault. We need to come up with a plan for her future, you know? I don't want her living through my mistakes. Your mistakes. I don't want this whole s____show to f____ up her life. She doesn't deserve that.

Jenny: You lose your memory recently? What the h____ is wrong with you?

Me as William: I'm not sure what you're talking about. You know I mean well Jenny.

Jenny: Well, how many times you want to have this conversation?

Me as William: As many times as we need to. I mean, you just want me to leave Nora with my brother forever? I don't know about that, Jenny.

Jenny: Putting her with your brother was your idea, idiot. We're both dealing with a lot right now. But there wasn't no forever about it. And if it's bothering you so much why don't you just come out and ask for the money up front? Either way, we both agreed it's important she stays with her friends and gets a good education at St. Henry.

Me as William: You know I can't ask that a__ John for s____. He just stares me down, talking like a f_____ weirdo until I leave out of exhaustion.

Jenny: Jesus. Settle down. I don't know why you're so angry all the sudden. Obviously asking him to take care of her and pay her tuition is asking for something. Different than just asking for a loan, yeah, but sometimes you don't make any godd___ sense.

Me as William: But her just staying there. I don't know. Sometimes I hate myself for even asking for that, you can be sure.

Jenny: Neither of us can take care of her right now. Too much work and too little money. Your brother might be weird, but he ain't got anything going on, and he's got the money to do for her what we can't. It's not a perfect plan, I'll agree with that. I have been wondering if we shouldn't have just asked for the money, but...I don't know. I don't want her around you with the drinking anyway.

Me as William: He doesn't have anything else to do with his money. Maybe we should just ask.

Jenny: You just said you couldn't ask him for anything. You're changing your mind awfully quick.

Me as William: Well, what do you think about the whole thing?

Jenny: I just told you what I thought. Nora's doing good. I don't think we need to worry about her.

Me as William: Yeah, but, we need to get her back, right?

Jenny: Look Bill, I appreciate that you're thinking this all through again. And that you're worried. I'm worried too. But it ain't gonna do us any good to sit around and worry. Even if we had her back and some money with it, can you take care of her? Cause I can't. I mean, I can't hardly look at her sometimes. Just thinking about what you did. To both of us. And now you're calling and acting like I'm the heartless one here.

Me as William: Don't be an a___, Jenny.

Jenny: Who you calling an a___ mother f____? Or you think I don't understand insults like your brother? Cause I will rain h___ down on you, you cheating piece of s____.⁷⁶

Me as William: He understands insults. It's just--

Jenny: Wait a minute. Who's there with you? Who the f___ is there with you?

Me as William: It's just the TV, Jenny. And look, I'm sorry about the cheating. You know I am.

Jenny: I'm not talking about that right now. You just watch your mouth.

Me as William: Will do, Jenny.

Jenny: So, that why you called? So we could rehearse the same s___ we both already know? You just bored, I guess?

Me as William: Look, Jenny, it's not just Nora. I want to know what it'll take. For you to take me back. I'm sorry. Sorry for all of it.

Jenny: (laughter)

Me as William: Jenny?

Jenny: You're a funny man, Bill.

Me as William: What's that supposed to mean?

Jenny: I got a customer, Bill. Hair ain't gonna cut itself.

Me as William: Yeah, alright.

(I hung up.)

⁷⁶ Nora seemed to briefly forget that any talking by her could be heard as she then said somewhat loudly, I knew it, even though if she knew it, it seemed the verification would be unnecessary, but sometimes people pretend they knew a thing after it occurs even though they did not know it.

Phone Call Two (June 18th, 2012, 2:30 PM)

Jenny: You get a new number?

Me as William: Yeah, I guess so.

Jenny: Cause I like to know who's calling. I got your last number listed as do not answer.

Me as William: Guess it was a good idea to get a new number then.

Jenny: So what you want this time?

Me as William: I found another part time job. At a bar. Thought you might like to know.

Jenny: And why's that?

Me as William: With the extra income, I thought maybe you'd want to reconsider things.

A little more cushion, you know?

Jenny: (Short pause, sounds of breathing.) What is it you think I might reconsider?

Me as William: Our relationship. What the h___ else would I be talking about?

Jenny: You think I left because of money?

Me as William: Well no, not exactly. But I figured it didn't help. And then with Nora and--

Jenny: No one likes being poor, but I don't imagine a measly part time job at a bar is going to fix it. I gave up hope of you bringing in the big bucks when you ran that restaurant into the ground. If I was gonna leave you because of money it woulda been then.

Me as William: That was bad luck. That place should've done great. Just wasn't the right time. And I got a s___ draw when it came to employees. But look, you don't care that I got more money?

Jenny: It's good news for Nora, I guess. Maybe! Put that jar down! Where the h___ is your mother?

Me as William: What now? What are you saying to me?

Jenny: I wasn't talking to you. It was maybe.

Me as William: I'm not sure what you mean.

Jenny: That's someone's name. Maybe. Her full name's Mabelline. And her dips___ mother ain't anywhere around here. Maybe! Maybe! You be sure and tell your mom that this ain't a godd___ daycare. Bad enough as it is. And I see you touching the cancer jar again I'm gonna spank your a___, I don't care what your mother thinks.

Me as William: Nora misses you.

Jenny: Yeah, she knows I miss her too.

Me as William: You should visit her.

Jenny: You want me to go to John's?

Me as William: Yeah well, that's where she is.

Jenny: You ain't never been to his house, and you want me to go?

Me as William: To visit our daughter, yeah.

Jenny: You told me, Bill, you straight-up told me never to go over there. You said he was manipulative, but he'd look out for his investments, that he'd take care of Nora. Which, you know, I thought that was a f_____ up thing to say about your brother and Nora. But whatever, I went along with your plan. I want what's best for Nora even if we ain't a big part of her life. And you know, it's hard even having Nora there, what you say about him. You know we ain't always agreed on him. I just...I'm finding it hard to go along with what you're saying. You keep changing your story. God, I swear it's like I'm talking to different versions of you every day.

Me as William: Well, things change. And I'm changing. And I can't be holding a grudge forever against my brother. He does the best he can, I think. I'm drinking less. I got that new job. Just yesterday I--

Jenny: I don't have time for this.

(She hung up)

Phone Call Three (June 21st, 2012, 2:17 PM)

Jenny: Why you got two phones? And why you lying to me about having two phones?

Me as William: What? I don't--

Jenny: You dealing drugs or something? Why the h___ would someone need two phones? You starting a business?

Me as William: I'm not starting a business. And uh, I don't have two phones. Not sure what you're talking about--

Jenny: There's two different numbers, Bill! That's two different phones!

Me as William: Now, settle down a bit. It's just that I'm borrowing a phone from someone for a minute. A work friend. Mine's charging is all. It's not--

Jenny: Did you or did you not tell me three days ago...or was it...maybe yesterday--

Me as William: Jenny, let's just forget about the phone s___. It doesn't matter. That's not why I'm calling.

Jenny: You can work me up over the dumbest s___, Bill. I swear to God. It's not the phones I care about. It's that you're lying about the whole d___ thing.

Me as William: Look, we're getting sidetracked here. I'm just...I get a little frustrated sometimes. Confused, I guess. But it's not what I'm going for. It's not important. I just talk about

things that don't matter sometimes. It's that I can't say what I mean to. I just can't always communicate the way I want.

Jenny: Not being able to express your feelings because only f____ do that, as you love to tell me, is not the same as straight-up saying things that don't make sense.

Me as William: I'm sorry, Jenny. I'm sorry that I'm being so confusing. And I'm sorry about all that's gone down. And it's just...I get confused when I think of what I let go. I've been working through my head and trying to figure out how the h____ I coulda lost someone like you. You're just, you're perfect, Jenny. I don't know how else to say that. But when I start thinking about all the stuff that's happened. When I start to think about it...all the s____ in my head just gets all jumbled up. And I don't think I can--

Jenny: Maybe! Get your a__ over here. You gonna do some work. Write this down. Don't backtalk me. Write this down. You ready? Bill is a crazy motherf_____, but he wouldn't be all bad if he didn't spend half his time making s____ up and f_____ other women.

Me as William: I don't...is that really what you want to be saying to a kid?

Jenny: Everybody knows what you did to me, Bill. Her mom's told her everything anyhow. I know that b_____ well enough to know that. You know the other day this man whose hair I always cut--I mean every time--she just snatches him right up. Just runs over there. And it's not even her turn I'm saying. And she just snatches him up. And then she leaves her brat her with me while she goes and does who knows what. So I'm babysitting her daughter, she's stealing my customers, and I know everyone's just talking behind my back. Just laughing about what you done to me. Cause that whore can't keep her mouth shut either. And this whole thing is just spreading like wild fire.

Me as William: Christ...I'm just so--

Jenny: What do you want, Maybe? Oh, I see. Oh, that's hilarious, Maybe. That's real funny. Yeah, you better run, spoiled little brat. You know what she did one day? She wrote loser in shaving cream on my car. That girl--

Me as William: I won the lottery.

Jenny: What...what the f___ are you saying?

Me as William: I won a hundred thousand dollars. I'll send you a check for a twenty thousand to prove it. But now...just don't bring it up in the future. I don't want to talk about it around work or home. Cause you never know who might overhear once you got cash. People'll just jump all over ya. People you haven't seen in like ten years, just out of nowhere. So it's got to be over and done with right now. I'm gonna send it. You're gonna cash it. You're gonna see I'm not all bad.

Jenny: Are you drunk?

Me as William: Nah. I'm sober. Unfortunately.

Jenny: Then maybe you should have a drink.

Me as William: I thought you wanted me to stop drinking. Why are you--

Jenny: Cause your brain's addled. You need something to counteract whatever is going on up there.

Me as William: I'll send you the money and you'll see it's real. You'll see that--

Jenny: Maybe! The f___ is that? Is that a dead bird? Bill, I gotta kick this girl's a___. Get you some help.

(She hung up.)

In the following phone call, Jenny called the number of the phone I'd been calling her from as William, a cell phone plan I purchased specifically for this task. There is mention of a twenty thousand dollar cashier check, which I sent to her after telling her I won the lottery. It's my experience that when offered money many people will reconsider how they think about the person who gave them the money, usually in a positive way, which can sometimes be called bribing, if a specific thing is desired in exchange for the money. As far as the expenditure, as I've mentioned before, I have a lot of money, so the relative effect on my income was not significant.

Phone Call Four (June 28th, 2012, 7:22 PM))

Me as William: Yeah?

Jenny: I mean, I didn't think, since you didn't say anything else about it. I just thought, well, I guess I didn't think much of it. Just some bulls___ or something. But is this real?

Me as William: Is what real, Jenny? My love for you, cause that's the realest thing I can offer, I'll tell you that. I don't want anything more than you and Nora. It's real, Jenny. I know I don't express it enough--⁷⁷

Jenny: No. What? It's not that. It's that... well I'm holding a cashier's check for twenty thousand? Is that, is this real?

Me as William: Of course it is, Jenny. I told you what happened with the lottery and how things are going, and what I was hoping for. I just, I want this to be a step forward in the right direction.

Jenny: (Long pause.) So, I called the other phone for a reason, cause I was thinking maybe you got something going on you don't want everybody to know about.

Me as William: It's nothing illegal. It's good luck. Well deserved if you ask me. I've had enough s___ luck in my life. Seems all the good luck went to John. But not this time. This time it's me coming out ahead.

Jenny: Well. It's okay if you're doing something on the side or whatever. I just don't want there to be any lies between us. Cause I...I just want you to know you can tell me if it's something else.

Me as William: It's not. Don't you worry.

Jenny: What do you want from me then?

Me as William: I want us to get back together. For Nora. For both of us.

Jenny: You saying the money is to get me back?

Me as William: It's just to show you how serious I am. I will work until I drop dead. I will care for you, take you fancy places, spend time with the both of you whenever I can. It's you that can give me the strength to finally put down the bottle for good. I'm getting better because I want to show you who I really am. But, at the end of the day, I'm who you make me. I'm only the good that you see in me. You've shown me who I can be.⁷⁷

Jenny: Bill, I'm...I've never heard you talk like this.

Me as William: That's right, because I'm not the same. I'm not the person you met, I'm the person you made, the one you always wanted me to be. I'm reaching out, Jenny. I'm hoping for another chance.

Jenny: Bill, I'm listening, and this really means a lot to me. It's...I guess I just never really knew how you felt. You never hardly would say you loved me. I think, hearing this... that maybe

⁷⁷ This particular dialogue was mostly written by Nora on a notepad.

⁷⁸ Again, this particular dialogue was mostly the work of Nora.

we could have a chance. It's a first step for sure. But, Bill...it's you told me about the affair. And, I told you before and I'll tell you again, you only get to have one of us.

Me as William: The affair's over, Jenny. It's history. It's in the past, you hear me?

Jenny: Yeah, I...God, Bill, I just...I can't believe this. But, let me be clear because you're putting a lot on this...if this check bounces I am gonna set that trailer on fire with you in it.

Me as William: It won't bounce. Cashier's checks don't bounce. It's like having cash. There's nothing to worry about.

Jenny: Well, alright Bill. I really...I can't believe I'm saying this, but I really look forward to talking to you again sometime soon. I think maybe we're heading in the right direction.

Me as William: You don't know how good it is to hear that, Jenny.

Jenny: Alright, bye Bill. Take care of yourself.

Me as William: You too, Jenny. You too.

(I hung up.)

I'd mentioned to Nora on several occasions that it was extremely unlikely that neither Jenny nor William would notice that I was making calls as William. In the above conversations you can see several calls became confusing at points when the real William's words conflicted with my William's words. It was clear Jenny and William were having conversations in-between our conversations, and the assertions I made like that of having a new job, having a new number, having won the lottery, were unlikely to be confirmed by the real William, unless he found them to be advantageous in some way, or if he coincidentally did a thing that I had first made-up in collusion with Nora. Nora was excited (as she said) after the previous conversation, saying

repeatedly that she believed that we could bring them back together.⁷⁹ However, I knew that if they found out, and they were almost certain to, that the positive effects we'd had on their relationship would be eradicated while potentially adding new negative effects. In this way, the following two conversations were predicted by me.

Phone Call Five (July 5th, 2012, 3:42 PM)

Me as William: Jenny?

Jenny: I know it's you. I can't hardly believe it. But I know now. You can't pull this s____ on me anymore.

Me as William: Well yeah, it's Bill. It's good you know it. I'd be worrying about you otherwise. H____, we've spent enough time talking to each other over the years. I think I know your voice better than my own.

Jenny: It's f_____ amazing, really. I don't know how you do it. Some of the stories about how smart you were, about the stuff Bill had heard about...I didn't really believe it. I thought, there's no way that guy did all that, was behind all that stuff. You know, for a long time I defended you. I was telling Bill, I'd tell him you were just different and he shouldn't be so hard on you. But I get it now. I understand why he hates you. And even he didn't know you could do something like this. Like be somebody else. He'd heard stories, but this is...I can't believe it, John. What the h____ did we ever do to you to deserve something like this?

⁷⁹ That's not what I said, Nora said.

Well, I said, that is how I remember it. Would you like me to write something different? No. That's fine I guess. I just want people to know that's not what I said. Not exactly.

Me as Me: I'm sorry. You didn't do anything to deserve any of these things, nor do I believe that anyone deserves something like this, as this isn't an ordinary thing. It is not the kind of thing that someone would say someone else--

Jenny: Like, how the f___ do you do that? It's like...you're just. It's not like acting. It's like something else. You're too good.

Me as Me: I appreciate you saying that.

Jenny: It's not a compliment. You can be really cruel, you know that?

Me as Me: I did not mean to upset you. I did this for Nora.

Jenny: Yeah, well, one of you is a teenager. The other is a f_____ adult. What kind of thing is that to say?

Nora: Mom! Just listen.

Jenny: Nora? You been doing this with him? I don't...what is wrong with you?

Nora: I just...I didn't do it to hurt you or Dad. I wanted to know what happened and how we could fix it.

Jenny: Some problems aren't yours to deal with, alright? I know...I know this has been hard. But, you can't just do something like this. And you know how your dad feels about John. This is just...you're playing with fire, Nora.

Nora: I did it because I love you. I love you and Dad. And I want to go home.

Jenny: You should be grateful for what you have. I mean...I don't much like your uncle right now, but he can give you things we can't give--

Nora: But you can too. Things that he can't--

Jenny: That's enough. I'm not talking about this anymore. You put your uncle back on the phone, alright?

Me as Me: The phone is on speaker.

Jenny: You creepy son of a b____, I swear to God.

Me as Me: I'm sorry. Nora has listened to all the conversations while we had them. The phone has been on speaker every time.

Jenny: Well, you know what, John?

Me as Me: What?

Jenny: I appreciate you taking Nora. I appreciate it. But this is...you can't do this, John. I don't...nothing gives you permission to treat a person like this. (Crying).

Nora: Mom, don't cry. I'm sorry. I wanted to make things better.

Jenny: You can't just give someone hope and rip it away. You can't do that.

Nora: (Crying.)⁸⁰

Jenny: It's done now. It's done. Maybe you two belong together up there. I guess...maybe we did the right thing.

Me as Me: I will take care of her to the best of my ability.

Jenny: Just...I don't know what kind of person. And if I could...if I could I'd take her back. But you know how things are.

Me as Me: I don't believe I know what you're referring to other than your financial status.

Jenny: It's not. I...I don't know what else to say. I do wanna ask you something.

Me as Me: Okay.

Jenny: Should I...do I keep the money?

Me as Me: If you'd like.

⁸⁰ You don't have to put that I was crying, Nora said. But I believe it better communicates the emotional resonance, as people call it.

Jenny: Well alright. And Nora?

Nora: Yeah Mom.

Jenny: You be good for your uncle. Don't go doing stuff like this. Don't ask him to do stuff like this. It's not right, okay? And I'll...I'll come see you soon, alright?

Nora: Okay. I--

(She hung up.)

Nora was not present when I received the phone call below.

Phone Call Six (July 7th, 2012, 9:32PM)

Me: Happy birthday, William.

William: That's not why I called, you lying...I dint calla hear you say some. I'm not calling to hear that...you understand?

Me: Okay, I understand you didn't call so I could tell you happy birthday. However, I am having a difficult time understanding your speech in general.

William: (Clears throat. Coughs.) You just listen forra minute, hear? I was having a little drink...and it's my birthday. But with all you done, I couldn't stop thinking. How you...you almost like...just by yourself...how you ruined my life. You always been so different, like a f_____ alien. Thaswhat people said. And I heardem, you know? I heardem, and sometimes I'd, I'd stand up for ya. You know that?

Me: I did not.

Yeah, alright.

William: Yeah, sometimes. You were hard to talk to. I just. I tried...Mom knows. She knows I did. You can't just...you just can't help yourself. Can ya?

Me: I can't help myself in what way?

William: In just sticking your nose everywhere...in any place it don't belong. In...just...anything you can ruin...you just do it. This stuff with Jenny. I can't. I can't even start. You're...I didn't even...I mean, even me, I couldn't think you'd do it.

Me: I made the calls to Jenny while imitating you because Nora requested it.

William: See? That. That's it. You just find a way...you always...you just...you find a way to. Ta splainitnallway. And, but it don't do it. That's not...it's not enough. You can't just do whatever...whatever you want. I'm. You know...I was doing good. I hadn't...not one drop in two weeks. Then this all comes down. And I couldn't...cause I'm not. I'm just. That's not me. That's you. And I think, how can I...how did I let you. I mean, what was I thinking? Letting Nora? I just...I don't even know any more.

Me: You know I will not harm Nora. You know that I will give her the things she needs, that I will buy many things that she wants. You know that I can afford many things that you cannot. I understand why you sent Nora to live with me just considering the financial circumstance. And I understand it is difficult for you to not drink alcohol. And I also understand that you and Jenny are separated and that this most likely causes emotional stress.

William: (Slow but loud breathes for about seven seconds.) Bingo, brother.

Me: I'm sorry that I did the calls, William. I told Nora that it would negatively affect our relationship. She thought that it might make you wish to take her back.

William: That's...Jesus...breaking my heart. Godd_____ John.

Me: I did not want to cause you harm.

(He hung up.)

Considering the relatively short amount of time spent performing these phone calls for Nora compared with the time she has spent working with me on this manuscript, I told her I would imitate others for her if she wished. I did several prank phone calls for her as Arnold Swartzenegger, Sean Connery, and other famous celebrities. I called one of her friend's parents as another of her friend's parents and said that one of the friends was bullying the other, because Nora was concerned for her bullied friend and thought this might help. I called into a radio station and pretended to be Howard Stern for her. I once called her school and told them the FDA required that they cease serving Salisbury steak because of chemicals known to severely harm adolescents. I made many calls, some for Nora's entertainment (as she said), and some for a good cause (as she also said). I presume I will continue to make phone calls as long as we're working on the manuscript together, as long as the potentially revealed identity of myself as the caller will not result in legal consequences.

Chapter Six: The Positive Results of a Confusing Encounter.

You think you can f___ with me? You want to give it a shot? What, a fifteen-year-old doesn't intimidate you?

But no, it wasn't quite right. More speech seemed to produce less fear if the representations were correct. And one shouldn't draw attention to shortcomings such as youth.

I began again in silence, practicing a steady and confident posture and gestures of the hands outward that were clear but not overly enthusiastic, standing before the small mirror in my bedroom. Above the mirror was a poster of the album cover for Nirvana's Nevermind, a naked baby in clear blue water who appears to be reaching for a dollar bill attached to a string. I believe it is a symbolic commentary on capitalism. Nirvana is a band known for a type of music called grunge, and for the fact that the lead singer committed suicide by shooting himself when very young. In a rare attempt to connect with me through a culturally relevant thing, my mother had purchased the poster for me the year before. However, before giving it to me she'd blacked-out the baby's penis so that the center-left of the poster was a scribbled square of black marker. This got me thinking about censorship. There is an interesting correlation between age and views of censorship. It seems possible and logical that older people wish for censorship more because they already know everything, because they find it repetitive. Why see another penis? Why witness sex or hear a curse word? It is all already known, a waste of time. The young seek out newness perhaps. I'm not sure, but I've noticed a correlation. At the same time, I often find

repetition helpful, at least to the point of understanding the pattern, that which requires repetition⁸¹.

Concerning speech, censoring some can create a certain mystery and mystique, allowing curiosity and fear to grow within the undefined space (as one might say). I was seeking the practiced restraint of a man who keeps his own counsel, meaning that he counsels or talks with himself about things, so that he doesn't need to talk about said things with others.

I practiced the posture of all-knowingness, added a figurative touch of boredom and sadistic delight, by slowly rolling my eyes and allowing a slight, crooked smile to occasionally emerge. Slumped yet straight-backed at this angle, acting as if rage was within me but being continually pressed back down (as one might say). As such, I waited for nothing but the moment of emotional release, and yet pretended to exercise control of this feeling I was pretending to experience. No fear through steady eyes. Wise beyond my years only because I didn't give a f____. Language like that in the previous sentence began to produce itself from cultural notions, from television and movies. It was remarkable the cache of language I possessed without having to do any research at all.

I asked myself not just what drug dealers looked and acted like, but what people fear. To the extent that I produced fear or paranoia already, I had to determine why this was the wrong kind of fear. I must give them cause to fear my unpredictability and confidence, not my lack of understanding or typical human behavior.

⁸¹ Nora finds this thesis unconvincing, and claims it fully rests on moral notions, though she specifically called it: what they think is right or wrong.

Going into the meeting with Alex, I did not properly think these things through, hence the necessary changes in my person in like future interactions, leading to the process begun above and after the meeting with Alex concluded.

Alex had no previous understanding of me and was a committed pothead with what I learned was a fairly typical accompaniment of paranoia. I did not prepare for his mental state adequately and our meeting was consequentially fraught with miscommunication and mistrust. A new kind of imitation was becoming necessary. Not just a basic set of responses that continually adjust themselves in the moment, but also a change in my very thought patterns that could then be expressed through gestures and speech without the delay. If the scene in question moved at too quick of a pace, then my constant readjustments would call attention to themselves as adjustments. I needed something fuller, something more complete to embody...⁸²

Between Michael's relaying of Finn's fetish and indiscretion and the next day when he offered to drive me, I figured I might as well use Finn's services in more ways than one. If my business venture was as successful as I thought it could be I knew I'd need more than one salesman.

I met up with Finn at Michael's house to avoid any unnecessary suspicion by my parents. Finn didn't seem at all put-out (as one might say) by having to take me to Alex's. In fact, he seemed a little excited about it, smiling and shaking his head as he looked me over. Michael

⁸² *Editor's Note:* Here begins a fairly exhaustive list of the characteristics of drug dealers as they are mythically understood through cultural representations Burgess encountered. The ultimate goal appeared to be, as it is throughout the text from this point forward, to figure out what patterns of behavior could be returned to in order to effectively convince others he was the person in question without having to actively question each individual choice he made as he was making it.

wanted to come, but I told him to stay home, that it'd be better if I explained things to Finn without him there.

This time I got into the passenger's seat of the hatchback car.

This is a pretty fast turn-around man, Finn said. Straight back for more. You liked it, huh?

Yes.

What you'd like about it? For me, it's like I get to get outside of my own head in a way. Even though it's like at the same time you're going deeper into your head. Weird, isn't it?

I appreciated Finn's attempts at conversation. His convivial attitude was not one I was familiar with, but overtime I've seen from almost all people that they are significantly different when alone versus with crowds. One reason seems to revolve around ideas of being cool. Some people, like myself, are usually not thought to be cool, and therefore positively interacting with said uncool person decreases the relative coolness of the inter-actor, I think. There is also what is called mob mentality, wherein individuals seem to lose their strangeness, though not their selfishness, and then engage in collective behavior, like turning over cars, setting buildings on fire, or lynching someone. I can also understand the intimidation of a crowd (as one might say) as it calls for frequent changes in person in order to satisfy the demands of each individual. I do find this physically exhausting and it is one of the primary reasons I prefer to keep avoid people when possible these days.

So Finn, I said, thinking I'd get to the point quick. I know how you broke your leg.

He opened his mouth as if he would say something, and then closed it. He coughed in a forced manner.

I have a proposition for you, I told him, watching his cheeks began to turn red.

I'm going to kill Michael, he said under his breath. It was barely audible, but of the potential things he could have said it was the most logical. Some other options I considered: I going to mill, Michael. Slowing to fill Michael. I'm going to will nickel. I'm growing to hate Michael. I've taken some liberty with the last phrase, adding the word hate in an effort to make sense of it. The sound of his words did leave open a number of possibilities, though the one I directly related to you as his words seems the most likely in all the times I've thought it over, as I thought it then, and as I think it now.

You cannot kill Michael, I said.

As I write this I recall Michael's death. It seems strange that we should discuss killing him when he ended up being murdered. But I understand one shouldn't put too much meaning into coincidence. This is one of the primary reasons that undesirable things are reproduced. For example, some people think that the large male African-American population in prison must have something to do with them being male African-Americans. This sometimes produces what is called an essentialist argument: African-American males are inherent criminals.

I always prefer arguments based on social conditioning, as I have seen and imitated this conditioning, though I will allow that some people seem given to certain emotional states naturally. But, more to the point: African-American males make up a disproportionate percentage of the prison population because people see them as criminals (here, we see the reproduction) and because of historical conditions of racism, such as cycles of poverty (as they are called), and the historical consequences of slavery. It only has to do with them being African-Americans in the sense of how they are seen by others, which is to say, how one interprets African-American. It need not have any interpretation at all, though to some degree everyone seems to have an interpretation of it

Then I'm going to kill you, I guess, he said.

That's unreasonable, I told him. You couldn't get away with murder, Finn. At least not before I have had the chance to tell everyone the story. And I believe it would seem suspicious to Michael if I am found dead the same day that he knows I am relating to you my knowledge of this secret. Please hear me out.

You're a f_____ psycho, he said. Talking like a f_____ alien and telling me to be reasonable when you're like bragging because you know something about me.

Finn's eyes remained ahead of him as he drove and expressed these sentiments. Knowing that he was probably processing a lot of information⁸³ I appreciated his concentration on the task of driving. It showed a concern for self that I was planning on using.

⁸³ It's not a lot of information, Nora said. He was just angry at you.

You're telling me that emotion is separate from information? Is there not often a material cause for the emotion?

Yeah, you.

I was the material cause?

That's what he said, isn't it? That you're a psycho?

To the best of my recollection, yes, but I imagine he was also processing amongst his rage whether there was actually anything he could do to get back at me, anyway he could use the rage against me. Whether he could kill me, for instance.

People just say that sometimes. They don't mean they're going to literally kill you.

That's a fair interpretation, and usually correct, but you'll need to observe the behavior he later displayed. Finn is a fairly violent individual.

I would be too if you did that to me.

You're saying I made Finn violent, and that I could make you violent?

You push somebody enough and they'll blow up. You should have seen this kid everybody bullies just a week ago. My friend Alice said he was fat and ugly and should shut up because he was talking about Star Wars or something. And then this other kid pushed him and said, Yeah, shut it Chewbacca. And Ashley lost it and started punching Jacob, the kid who pushed him. He didn't stop until a couple teachers walked by and pulled him off. It was nuts. I didn't know Ashley could do that. Not until then. That's my point.

So you're saying anyone can be pushed far enough to commit violence, that everyone is capable of violence and that there is not necessarily an inborn impulse towards violence, just circumstances where the necessary conditions of violence have been met?

No, that's not what I said. I said if you push somebody they'll blow up.

Listen, I am not gloating and I do not plan on telling anyone the story, I told him. My purpose in learning it is purely practical and a matter of business. I need you to never reveal that this trip occurred. You are to tell no one. You will do the same with subsequent trips. Further, you will explicitly tell Brett that I never went in the first place. You can make up something about me becoming scared. That should work. In addition to this, you will become one of my salesmen.

What the f___ are you talking about?

I plan on selling the weed after I purchase large quantities from Alex. And in order to completely distance myself from the act I need salesmen as my proxies.

Uh, definitely not, you f_____ manipulative a__hole.

Hear me out. I will provide for you a free eighth of weed a week in return for your services, in addition to not revealing to anyone that you were caught masturbating with Tumbler's mom's dirty panties.

I should kill you.

That would solve your problem. But the chances of you getting away with it are very small.

I promise you, man, I am going to pay you back for this.⁸⁴

It is also my understanding and personal experience that if violence becomes appealing given alternative outcomes, that people will also use it. This has less to do with anger than with necessity and survival, but perhaps Nora would just say it is another way in which someone is being pushed.

⁸⁴ Finn did follow through on his threat a few times, though it was never terribly detrimental to me. If you would like to see an instance of what I take as the direct result of my blackmailing Finn and his threat, please see Chapter Thirteen: My Last Party, a Shifting Customer Base, and the Expiration of my Virginity.

We arrived at Alex's. Or, what was at least the entrance to his place of business. Finn stopped talking, and I had said all I needed to. We walked silently for about a half-mile from the side of a country road, down through an unmarked trail that had the occasional cigarette butt. It reminded me of the story of Hansel and Gretel, when the children leave breadcrumbs so they can find their way back home, if Hansel or Gretel had been smokers.⁸⁵

We reached a mostly dilapidated log cabin with a sagging front porch, broken windows that were boarded up, and ivy sprawled over the sides of the structure. Similar to using an abandoned neighborhood to do illegal drugs, I feel the out-of-the-way nature of the cabin (as one might say) was probably more suspicious than if Alex had simply run the operation out of his house. He was only seventeen at the time, and he could've just claimed a large amount of friends. Whereas having a cabin in the woods that I later learned did not even belong to him, risked continually being caught and charged with things other than distribution. Like trespassing.

Alex was outside as we approached, sitting in a lawn chair that had one broken arm. He smoked a cigarette and stared at us red-eyed. He looked suspicious of me. Similar to when people think you are stupid or crazy or dangerous, he narrowed his eyes.

Who's this straight-arrow? he asked. I believe he was implying that I looked too clean. This often happens during illegal interactions. People don't want you to be too good, too clean, too honest. I learned you are supposed to be a perfect combination of trustworthiness and seediness. The reason you don't tell on others is because of your own safety--it is the selfish desire that is supposed to protect everyone else, which makes sense considering everyone is selfish to some extent. It is a trait you can count on and use to your advantage. It is assumed that clean people will tell on you because they supposedly think the activity they're engaging in is

⁸⁵ Nora contributed this comparison when I mentioned the cigarette butts.

wrong, and will therefore result in a guilty conscience. I believe I was wearing a t-shirt and jeans, and very white tennis shoes that my father bought me. I hadn't had time to dirty the shoes as was more acceptable with my peers. I had showered that day, and at the time I had somewhat long hair that puffed from my head. It was called a bowl cut because some people used bowls to do the haircut.

My brother's friend John, Finn said, not looking at me when he spoke, but instead shrugging in my direction, his shoulder and arm rolling towards me somewhat lazily, what I understand as a dismissive gesture.

Hi Alex, I said.

The f___? How you know my name?

Brett told me, I said.

I was just joking, he said. He narrowed his eyes again. Are you a cop?

Would a cop tell you that he was a cop if he was pretending not to be?

Why don't you just answer the question, Poindexter?

No.

Alex stood up and rolled his shoulders back, pushing his chest forward. Apes, humans, bears, and other animals do this when they want to intimidate someone. Looks like we got us an attitude problem, Alex said.

Finn was smiling.

I don't have an attitude problem, I said. At the moment, I can't write that I really had any particular attitude. I was just there to buy marijuana. Maybe that is a business attitude. I suppose you could say that I generally have a business attitude.

Then why won't you answer the question?

Oh, I see, I said. You thought I was answering your second question?

There's only one question, Mr. Robot. Are you a cop?

Right. I am not. That's why I said no, but you thought I was saying I wouldn't answer the question. I'm sorry about that.

Alex looked at Finn. Is he for real? he asked.

Finn spat on the ground and briefly raised one eyebrow, I believe to communicate-- maybe, I don't know. Or perhaps--I don't really like him/know him.

I did not mean to do that, I said.

You talk like a real weirdo. You sure you're not a cop?

I'm fifteen.

You could be eighteen, Alex said, then narrowing his eyes again. Well, he said, reconsidering. Maybe.

But I'm not eighteen, I said. I would like to purchase three ounces of pot.

You don't really seem like someone who smokes that much?

I wasn't completely sure how to answer this question, and we were silent briefly while I considered an answer. I'm new to it, I said eventually.

Three ounces is a lot, he said. Do you know how much three ounces is?

I'm very good at math, I told him.

Jesus, Alex said, you're a real funny guy. But he said it in such a way that communicated he did not actually mean what he was saying. It was what people call a dry tone of voice, the words coming out monotone. It did not sound funny or amused, so I assumed he meant the opposite of what he said, which is called verbal irony.

Continuing in that vein, I replied: yes.

Let's get this over with, he said, leading us both into the cabin.

Inside was a moldy yellow sofa with some of the springs poking out and a picnic table on which sat many bags of marijuana and a scale.

So you know I'm legit, he said, explaining why he measured each ounce in front of me.

That's good, I said.

It's going to be \$600, he said.

No, I replied.

What do you mean, no?

I'm not paying that.

Finn stood to my side and I saw him shrug again in my peripheral vision.

This isn't a negotiation, Alex said.

I'm buying in bulk. There should be a discount.

There's no f_____ discount, bowlhead. You're just going to have buy less white shoes next time.

That marijuana is brown, I said. It is cheap. It should not cost \$200 an ounce. That is overpriced.

I'll smoke you out, Alex said, but I'm not lowering the price.

I didn't answer him. I needed to talk him down (as one might say) at least a little. I would make nothing if I paid such a high price. I began to walk around the cabin, noting the evidence of decay.

Your cabin needs a lot of work, I said. How much do you think it would cost to fix up this cabin?

\$600.

How about \$6000? I asked.

That's a good number, Alex said, but I thought you were trying to pay less.

I can buy somewhere else, I said. But if I keep buying from you, that'll add up. Numbers accumulate over time. That is the wonderful thing about math. The precision and the accumulation. You can be exact and you can predict the future based on the present and past. Formulas of accumulation.

What language is he speaking? Where the f___ did you find this kid?

Finn decided to respond this time. He's speaking nerd, and I have no idea what planet he came from.

You make me nervous, Alex said, looking at me again with his eyes narrowed.

I'm sorry, I said. I did not mean to do that.

Like that, he said. Talking like that. Like, talk like a human being, mother f____. Use those, what are they called? Like, when you put two words together?

I think it's a subtraction? Finn said.

No, that's not it. You don't speak in subtractions.

Contractions, I corrected. It's when you contract two words together.

Of course he knows, Alex said. You know what, I don't want to sell to you, man.

Look, I said, why don't we smoke? We're here, you're obviously already high. We'll smoke and then we'll talk some more.

Why would I give you free weed?

I put a ten dollar bill on the table. A gesture, I said.

Who the f___ do you think you are? A gesture? Who says that? You think this is a movie? Then he picked up the ten dollars and handed me a joint. Smoke away, he said.

I need a lighter.

He threw one at me. I didn't catch it, and since it was coming towards my face I ducked. It hit the wall and rolled onto the floor. I picked it up.

I lit the joint and I pulled the smoke into my mouth and held it there. I understood the person I was becoming in the moment, how I could change, how I could become more likeable. Marijuana changed people, and I needed to take advantage of the opportunity presented to correct a poor first impression. I thought of all the people I knew that people liked. I tried to move beyond mere gesture and response. I attempted to become, hearing patterns in my head repeated again and again. I heard comment, response, comment, response, laugh, shrug, wide-eyed and surprised, comment, response, laugh and sigh. I heard the pattern of Michael's voice, the pattern of Finn's, the pattern of Alex's. I was, in my thoughts, in the black space where words appear, seeing the phrases I could use, seeing the advantage I could take. I could hear it in my imagination, the natural sound, the way we fall into familiar rhythms.

I blew the smoke out. I coughed. I took more smoke into my mouth and held it. I was Father Josiah suspicious and nervous. I was Michael concerned and good-humored. I was Finn embarrassed and perverted. I was William disdainful and angry. I was Yancy shy and hopeful. I was myself, asking for clarification. I was my father tense and threatening. I was my mother anxious and full of affection. I've consistently used the two descriptors that I believe most accurately represent the people in question. I thought of much more than this at the time, but for the sake of representing the point succinctly, I've only chosen two. The fact is that all of these people shared qualities as well, especially in the ways they sometimes reacted to me.

I was hundreds of television characters faced with drama and comedy and suspense. I was the beginning of a pattern that predicted its end in every word, moving forward with purpose and determination.

I blew the smoke out. I then made a cough of enormous proportions. I beat at my chest like the kids from a made-for-television movie I'd recently watched. I bent over coughing. I played a cough.

Then I laughed, but made it a cheery rhythm. Joyous and low-toned, similar to Santa Claus, entertained by my own apparent intoxication, by the apparent effect of marijuana on the brain, numbing brain cells, making me single in attention, seeing only Alex at the table.

Jesus, I said, I'm sorry about before, man. I was like a total f_____ weirdo. Paranoid, I guess. I laughed more.

I passed him the joint and he laughed too, choking out smoke while he laughed.

Finn gave me a sideways look. He took the joint from Alex. He pulled in too. He coughed too. He smiled wide. That's better, he said.

I let them start conversations about video games, about movies and special effects and girls, and I contributed with surety. Yeah man, I said, Terminator Two is like the only sequel I can think of that's better than the original. F_____ bada__. The original Terminator is about a robot that is sent back in time to kill a woman who is carrying a child that will lead a future war against the robots who have taken over the planet. The second Terminator is about two robots who are sent back in time. One is meant to protect the now-grown child who will lead the future resistance. The other robot is trying to kill the now-grown child--that robot is made out of liquid metal or something, and many kids found that very cool and so thought this sequel better than the original.

H___ yes, Alex said, now you're my homie for real. He put a hand up and I missed it on purpose, because I was supposed to be intoxicated, because the opportunity presented itself. I seized all the opportunities, is a phrase used with the term opportunity. Because people like to imagine themselves literally holding the opportunity. Literally invading it and using it to their advantage, as if it were a town or a kingdom. If opportunities were kingdoms, then I conquered and ruled them. That is a metaphor.

I laughed at my own ineptitude. I'm high as f___, I said. We all laughed. Finn was no longer angry and Alex was no longer suspicious. We all laughed.

Alright, Alex said after an hour or so of conversation, I guess I can make it a little cheaper. You seem like a cool dude. At least when you're high, but you know, that's why you're here I guess, so I shouldn't hold it against you. I can get pretty tense when I'm not smoking. I'll drop the price per ounce by twenty-five. So \$525 for three. That's the best I can do.

Dude, I said, pretending I was touched in what is now sometimes referred to as a bro-way, in the way that cool males on television at the time expressed what are considered their more feminine emotions. You'd do that for me? I asked, sarcasm in my voice through intonation and in my eyes through the way they bent down and pulled back up.

He laughed. Yeah, man. For sure.

We left about fifteen minutes later. I was working on the person I needed to be in this particular situation.

Back inside the car, Finn looked over at me. He looked sad. I could tell through what they call a thoughtful expression. Lips curled into the slightest frown. Eyebrows slightly curved down. Eyes wide open. Look, he said, I know that I f_____ up with Joseph's mom and stuff. Like, I really know it. But I don't think I could stand it, you know, if people knew.

I won't tell anyone, I said, as long as you don't tell anyone about me buying. I don't want to tell anyone.

But you're still threatening me? he asked, a little anger in his tone, in the vibration of his voice.

Think of it as you like, I told him, but you'll get free weed out of it. All you have to do is say nothing, and I'll do the same.

It was at home that I began the rehearsal. The rhythms I'd imitated during my meeting worked well-enough to reverse the negative effects of the beginning. But I knew I needed something more, something that communicated not just confidence and likability but fear and respect. Because I was nothing familiar to Alex he thought I was an actor...⁸⁶ It is interesting in this sense then, as familiarity would comfort him, and yet is exactly what an actor would base a performance on, as I did.

I was entering a world that people nervously negotiated. Control was required. Real control is created when one projects confidence and intimidation so strongly that others don't just feel questions and disagreement are not options, but in fact never even think to consider these alternatives because they are so captivated by the fear and the moment. True control is predicting and creating a singular path for all.⁸⁷ To the extent that this is possible, I have attempted to do this, while also attempting to cause no harm.

⁸⁶ *Editor's Note:* Repetition of an earlier point concerning how being thought of as an actor means you're a bad actor. See Chapter Two.

⁸⁷ Nora claims this comment is creepy. It sounds like something Hitler would say, she said.

I asked her if the fact that Hitler would say it made it untrue.
He's not known for being right, she replied.

Chapter Seven: My Marketing Campaign and Cost-Saving Measures.

In the second semester of my sophomore year of high school, I took a psychology class. The most interesting and useful knowledge I left with concerned subliminal messages.

Similar to songs getting stuck in people's minds (as they call it), and in the same way rhythm works, the success of subliminal messages depends on repetition, not just initial or singular unconscious exposure. I write here of more than what is generally understood by those who do not study psychology and sociology, as quiet messages whispered below the level of typical human hearing.⁸⁸

You could consider many beliefs the result of subliminal messaging. For example, if everyone keeps saying that lying is wrong, if they say it enough times, then people believe it, without really questioning why they believe it, understanding it to somehow be common knowledge. They do not question why they believe it. It is consciously heard, but it is unconsciously accepted and believed. Never mind the fact that those saying it may be lying. This is irrelevant to the point.

People in advertising understand the worth of subliminal messages, encoding products as patriotic or liberal or the desire of the rich (which will supposedly make any owner appear rich)

A person can be mostly right or right just once, or never right. But there is never a point where all statements are invalidated because of past untruths. People may be less likely to believe someone at a certain point, but that doesn't effect the actual truth value of their statements, only the truth value that others assign it.

I think, Nora said, you should stop listening to someone when they murder millions of people.

That's reasonable, I said, but it is not reasoned. In any case, as far as I know I am not quoting Hitler.

or sexy/able to get the buyer sex, or convenient. Or anything you can imagine or want. There is a clothing company, Abercrombie and Fitch, which, on looking through their catalog, I noticed a majority of the models were naked. They were advertising clothing by showing naked people, which on first viewing seems counter-intuitive. But not when you consider subliminal messaging.

They wanted people to think about being naked when they thought of their clothing. This clothing will get you/others naked. This clothing is similar to being naked. If you want to have sex then put on this clothing, because this clothing is meant to be taken off. People will want to take our clothing off of you, and this is not because it is bad clothing but because it is such good clothing. I believe this is something of what it figuratively said.

Without directly approaching students, I needed to make marijuana desirable. Through DARE and other anti-drug advertisements, I knew I needed to make it appear both harmless and fun. A safe rebellion. There are few things teenagers seem to dislike more than their parents' instructions, and if I could provide for them a physically and psychologically safe way to disobey their parents, I believed I could sell them marijuana. In addition to this, I needed to get past the censorship authority figures in the school would inevitably impose, as the drug was both illegal and thought morally wrong.

So, I needed to make marijuana appear wrong and safe simultaneously within an environment publicly hostile to it. My eventual solution, created in part with Michael on several occasions when he was high, was to create anti-drug posters that were actually pro-drug.

⁸⁸ According to the dictionary, the definition of subliminal is: (of a stimulus or mental process) below the threshold of sensation or consciousness; perceived by or affecting someone's mind without their being aware of it.

As printing was not nearly as affordable, accessible, or accurate at the time, and as we didn't have a computer at my house in any case, we were forced to create hand-drawn posters. Michael was fair at illustrating things, though he generally stuck to a singular subject, little demon/devil figures that looked friendly, via smiling heads with pointy ears and thin mustaches. Goth was something to be at my school, and heavy metal was enjoyed by some, and other things that Christian parents worried were satanic. Sometimes the material explicitly claimed Satan as an influence, though none of the kids that claimed to be Goths worshiped Satan, to my knowledge. Rather, I believe they thought Satan was cool. Coolness is difficult to define, but in this case the rebellion against their Christian parents, obsessions with death and the pointlessness of life's endeavors, seemed to represent coolness.

The devil is often pictured as red in attire, skin-tone or wholly, and playing off of this (as one might say) Michael and I created the following advertising slogan: The Devil has red eyes too.

Under this slogan Michael drew a picture of a teenage with bloodshot eyes holding a lit joint, next to a picture of one of his friendly devils. The idea was to make people who smoked marijuana seem more like the devil, as the devil was thought cool. I witnessed people laughing when they saw the pictures, but it also upset the teachers, and the posters were removed too quickly for a large enough market share to see them.

Repetition with variation--seeing or hearing the same thing day in and day out in slightly alternating forms. That is what I wanted. I needed people to see the phrase a few times, and I needed the administrators of the school to leave it up long enough for that to happen. I needed them to see marijuana and subconsciously understand it was fine and thought wrong but not actually wrong, and cool and felt good, and fun. I needed then to know this, not just think this.

Our next slogan was: Life's hard. But most of us do it without drugs.

For the five copies of this poster we found appropriate cut-outs from magazines.

Underneath the slogan on one side we would post an image of people working, and on the other side a picture of people partying. As we couldn't find advertisements that were pro-marijuana, these pictures were of people drinking, from alcoholic beverages ads.

Our next: Just Say No to Drugs

This is a classic slogan of the anti-drug segment, so our purpose was to manipulate it so that when seen in other locales it would prompt people to desire drugs rather than avoid them. Michael drew pictures of high-schoolers having fun underneath this slogan, sitting in a circle and smiling. This one was also taken down especially quick. We were not allowed to post things on the wall at all, so they all should have been taken down immediately according to school policy. However, certain posters drew more or less attention to themselves and then were more or less quickly removed.

Our most successful, however, was the following: On drugs, you don't even know what you're laughing at. Is it really funny if you don't know what you're laughing at?

The use of images to ironically undercut messages was maybe too obvious, and so for this one there were no pictures. This was the most successful as it left a certain amount of interpretation up to the viewer, though technically all interpretation is always up to any viewer viewing any thing. But with this in particular, age would largely determine the context through which it would be interpreted. People could see what they wanted to see. Authority figures could interpret that it meant you acted like an idiot on drugs, and who wants to act like an idiot? Students could interpret that it meant you had fun without having to actually do anything.

We put up the posters both before and after school, but always in different locations so authority figures couldn't predict our movements. There's no way to figure out how successful these posters were as we did not survey people when they purchased marijuana. People did not like being questioned on why they wanted the marijuana, or what made them think about it in the first place. I can confirm our sales went up dramatically over the course of the first year.

I pointed out customers to Finn and Michael that I knew would be interested or afraid to say they weren't interested. Many of my fellow classmates feared having their performances of self being accurately understood as performances. Most of the performances could be summed up as: I don't give a f___ about anything, which is a colloquial expression I've often heard to describe teenagers.⁸⁹ It was important to these teenagers that people believed their performances, and I believe many thought others would think they didn't give a f___ if they willingly did drugs, as drugs were often described as an indication that you didn't care about things.

⁸⁹ That only describes some teenagers, Nora said.

I am aware, I told her, but there was no way of getting a hundred percent of the teenagers to do the drugs unless we somehow did it without them knowing it (like slipping it into their food), in which case we would not have made money from it. My point is that these were the teenagers we thought most likely to buy drugs.

Maybe. But I think it's mostly sad people who do drugs, Nora replied. It's not because they don't care. It's like they care too much.

Well, I told her, I think we captured that market as well. From what Michael told me about himself, I'd say he was a part of that market.

You shouldn't talk about your friend that way, she said.

What way?

Like he was a thing and not a person.

A market always refers to people. People operate the market, make up the market. The market is an abstract term that refers to a collection of individuals who share similar interests in a particular thing or usage. Things don't buy things.

I don't I'm ever going to understand why Michael liked you.

Nor do I, I said. I've previously mentioned this concerning our very first meeting. In general, Michael just seemed to like being around me. I'm not sure I can explain it more convincingly. We knew each other well, we helped each other make money. We may have loved each other. It is impossible to prove for certain why he liked me.

The customer network expanded at a fast rate I could've predicted, but did not.

There was briefly a rash of people (as one might say) caught smoking around the school and elsewhere. Juvenile records were established. Students were suspended and expelled. But these instances seemed to work as examples for others, and eventually the scene of drug use was contained to a figuratively underground network of people, of which I was the unknown supplier.

However, the repercussion of so many people doing drugs openly over a relatively short amount of time was still apparent. A school assembly was called, a mandatory meeting that took up the final period of classes, which for myself meant I did not attend Newspaper, something my teacher told me I was good at because I was very impartial in the articles. At the same time, Mrs. E (as others called her) also encouraged me to develop a voice. In this context, voice refers to style. Style is defined as the collection of attributes of one's writing. For instance, part of my style is to give examples of phenomena when I think it will be effective to communicate a particular point. Voice in particular is thought to be unique to an individual. In this sense, she was telling me I needed to develop a unique style of writing that others could recognize as uniquely my own.

Sometimes, she said, and please remember this is foremost a compliment, but also a slight critique. Sometimes it seems like your articles are computer generated. Don't get me wrong, the fact-based nature and the description of happenings is very good. What you're doing, you're doing really well. But you want to have a little flavor. A lot of times journalists kind of sneak it in. Often, the best way is through juxtaposition of different factual phrases which can create a third and ironic meaning. For example, a journalist will report that a certain political candidate is divisive for whatever reasons, and then in the next line quote that candidate's

opponent as saying that they are divisive. So what we're left with is one person being divisive, while the other calls them out as divisive, which is also, of course, divisive in a sense.

You're saying that accurately labeling something in this case makes that person culpable for the very thing they are identifying.

Yeah, actually. That's exactly what I'm saying. She seemed surprised that I understood so quickly, evidenced through her face pulling back as her eyes widened and a smile formed on her lips.

I liked Mrs. E and appreciated her attempts to teach me voice and how to create more meanings. I was disappointed to miss Newspaper class that day.

As the students moved en masse towards the auditorium, Michael found me in the crowd. He looked high, as his eyes were red and his pupils dilated. He confirmed my suspicion immediately.

This should be fun, he said, going to an anti-drug assembly high.

Irony, I said.

Is it ironic?

I believe so, as you represent the opposite of what they want.

Don't forget that you're a dealer.

I didn't, I told him, but please speak quietly.

So you're ironic too, he said.

Yes, I said, I guess we are both ironic.

Dude, Finn hasn't said a word to me in like six months. He's holding a grudge hard. I wish I hadn't told you. He's kinda creeping me out. The other day he just walks into my bedroom

and stares at me. Doesn't say a word. Just stands in my doorway staring like he's thinking about how he's going to kill me.

It's fine, I said.

You don't have to live with him, John. He's losing it.

You're right, I don't have to live with him. But why should this be any different than before you told me? Only one other person knows, and that's me.

Yeah, but you're blackmailing him.

Not for much. Just car rides.

You're forgetting about the dealing.

He gets paid for that, I said. That's not blackmail.

But you forced him into the job.

You're saying he doesn't want the weed?

I mean, no. I don't know. Maybe he would've done it anyway if you'd asked. He's not exactly an open book these days, so who knows? He's just like a mean, silent presence. Just like sitting there and being f_____ angry all the time.

And that is different than before?

Yeah, it's pretty different. He doesn't even make fun of me anymore.

Don't you appreciate that?

You'd think I would.

We spatially broke apart briefly as everyone was literally herded by teachers through the four sets of doors. We sat in the last row because that's where Michael preferred to sit, though I disliked not being able to see everything without obstruction or unnecessary distance.

I turned to Michael and asked, How will they find new ways to tell us not to do drugs?

He laughed, so I laughed. Then he said, There are a lot of words in English.

He was absolutely correct.

Within a few minutes the assembly started.

Alright, the principal began, so you all know why we're here. There has been a disturbing trend developing of students using marijuana, and in particular, using it on the high school's campus. First of all, let me be clear. You will be expelled if you are caught with illegal drugs of any kind. Second of all. You will be prosecuted as juveniles for the crime.

I whispered to Michael, He called it marijuana.⁹⁰

Right, well he's a douche.

I understand, I said. Because I knew then that it was authority figures that tended to use this particular term. Douche technically refers to: a jet or current of liquid (as a cleansing solution) directed against or into a bodily part or cavity (as the vagina). Comparing someone to the liquid used to clean vaginas was an insult, as was calling people vaginas or other words for female genitalia, and male genitalia. As douching is not practiced particularly often anymore to my knowledge, you could say that it is a way of saying the person named such is useless, without purpose. I and others did use it while prostituting, but disease was a concern in this setting, and I did not use it for a vagina, because I do not have a vagina. I used it for my anal cavity. Either way, I was well-aware that it was an insult, and I understood I was a douche when I used the term marijuana in the past because I then resembled authority figures against the usage of drugs. The reason I maintain the use of marijuana in this writing is for clarity, and because I prefer

⁹⁰ To see my previous confusion with people disliking this term, please see Chapter Five: My Second Investment and Information on Finn in the Words of Michael.

proper names for things, or the name by which I am first introduced to something, in which case there is less confusion.

After the principal finished telling us how serious everything was that was happening and that we were being told, an ex-drug-addict came onto the stage.

You don't think, he began, that pot is addictive. But weed, man, weed'll eat you're a__ up.

Students laughed. The principal gave the speaker a sideways look while frowning, which generally indicates disapproval.

That's funny, I know. It's all real funny at the beginning. You know, I saw a poster that someone pinned up in your halls and I was thinking about it.

I feared I would need to take the posters down, or alter them depending on what he then said. I nudged Michael so that he'd pay close attention, and he said, I know, it's like we're famous.

What I was thinking, the ex-drug-addict continued, is that poster really sums up both sides of the coin. What it says, if you've somehow not noticed it, On drugs, you don't even know what you're laughing at. Is it really funny if you don't know what you're laughing at? He paused, and the students laughed.

Like right now, he said. Do you all know what you're laughing at? I don't think you have a d__ clue.

Again, student laughter. The principal made eye contact with the speaker this time, again with a frown on his face.

You see, it's like that at the beginning. For years, I'm just chilling in my house, getting high, and laughing it up. Some of my friends are going off to college, and I think I got all the time in the world, and I'm just smoking up a storm and laughing. Years fly by with me high all

the time. I still live with my parents, and they call me lazy and everything else, and I don't care. I just keep laughing. I'm playing video games, watching movies and tv. I don't care about a thing outside my bedroom. I'm eating everything in sight, getting terrible acne and getting fat. Cause I don't care. It's all about the moment, each moment. I live in the present. Which you might think is a good thing. But it's insanity. When you kill off the past and the future, you're living in an asylum.

So I'm killing time, floating in my world. And it gets to the point that I need something more because as you keep doing drugs, as you let them take over your life and all of your routines, as you do that you develop a tolerance and you also develop an ability to understand your mind on drugs. You become more conscious of your self, and you realize that what you want to get away from is you. You're constantly outrunning yourself and for years the drugs are doing it. The weed is keeping you from collapsing. It's holding you up. But then you get to a point where you can see yourself on the drug because the feeling of the drug is so normal. The past and the future start to come back into view. And when I woke up one day in my thirties and I saw myself, I was ugly.

Someone yelled, No s___!

The principal stepped up to the podium. If I see a person yelling something, he said, then I am going to expel them. Grow up, people. He stepped back down.

Thanks, principal. I hope you guys appreciate having him. Anyway, I was ugly, and I don't mean physically, though I was that, sure. Laugh it up. What I'm saying I saw was how worthless I'd made myself, how completely devoid of purpose and direction in life. I was ugly because I was nothing. Just a burden on the few people who still cared about me. And then I

finally see the other side of that poster you got on your walls. That's when I see it. I'm laughing at nothing, laughing at my own stupidity. And what's worse is everybody else is laughing at me.

I can feel it, he said. I can feel them laughing at me like you all just were. It's so strong that I hate myself in that moment, in every present moment, and I can't stand it. And weed just isn't going to cut it anymore, you feel me? No, it won't do it. I need something better, stronger. I need to get away from myself. I need to not be able to hear those people laughing.

So I knew this guy, you know, I'd been buying from him for years, and I know he sells some harder stuff, though I'd never been interested before. But I ask him, what else you got? And, you know, he didn't ask me why I needed it, he didn't seem at all surprised. He just got it out. For years I'm thinking that I'm doing good, staying away from the hard stuff. It's just weed. And I think, at least my dealer's gotta understand that, right? But he didn't give a d___ about me. As soon as I asked he was quick to grab at something stronger, something that makes him more money, you know? That's all he cares about. He's just a business man.

So I get myself a little buffet of good stuff. I pick up some cocaine and a little heroine and figure I'll see which one suits me. Like, I'm still approaching it like what I'm doing is remotely sane. I just gotta find a way to escape myself, to get away. I've spent so much time wasting time I don't know what else time is for. It's like I'm carrying out a life sentence, day in and day out, doing time.

I can summarize the rest of what the speaker said. It's fairly predictable material if we consider popular representations of same, relating to his addiction to heroine, his overdose, his hospitalization, his time in and out of jails and how this in no way compared to his time doing drugs, that that metaphor became stupid and juvenile as he realized his situation, that it was

awful facing himself day after day. He ended by saying what gives his life purpose now is helping people avoid the same fate as himself.

It is true that the earlier you do drugs in life, the more likely you are to become addicted. In part, I was counting on this. I was building a customer base, and the best customers are regular customers.

They used to, and some people still do, call marijuana the Gateway Drug, because once you did it you were more likely to use other drugs, like the gateway to a driveway that leads to a house full of drugs, which is a somewhat developed simile. I believe the reasoning is that once people cross a certain metaphorical line in their minds, against certain moral convictions, and everything remains okay, then they feel they should cross another line because the last time they crossed a line it was okay. This is faulty logic, an example of the fallacy referred to as slippery slope, which is sometimes valid, but I don't think so in this case.

For example, if beating someone up is considered a line, just because you don't get into trouble for it does not mean you will next decide to murder someone. I'm not sure it was ever the case that people's minds worked this way, but clearly many people believed minds did, or do. Regardless, statistics have shown a significant decrease in marijuana as a Gateway Drug in recent years as marijuana has received a less negative view. This demonstrates that it is sometimes more important what people think about a drug rather than what it does. If you think marijuana is a hardcore drug (as one might say), then once you partake of it, you're more likely to partake of other so-called hardcore drugs, though I believe it makes more sense to call marijuana softcore.

The speaker gave us the idea for our last and largest advertisement. Michael and I created the banner by stapling together various sheets of paper and then using a black marker to write our message boldly and clearly, along with a red marker we used for our illustrations.

Finn, who'd graduated high school the year before and spent much of his time playing video games or at his job at Flick's (a local grocery store), drove us to the school campus around four am, along with Yancy who was our lookout. Yancy was happy to be included in any groups, and I attempted to use his grateful inclusion as often as I could. It helped us both. He did not know we had a financial reason to put up the banner, but instead believed our purpose was to make people laugh and generally defy authority.

It was dark outside when we arrived. We untied the ladder from the top of Finn's hatchback, and Michael and I carried it between us. Yancy stood about twenty-five yards down the street and yelled out that all was clear at semi-regular intervals. Finn stayed in the car.

We tacked the banner over the large, red, metal front doors with duct-tape.

When we came back to school a couple hours later the janitorial staff was already taking it down, but a group of students were gathered around the message watching and laughing. The principal watched the janitors do their work, his face red, which was likely a sign of anger in this context. Although the banner was taken down quickly, it also became somewhat famous, locally. I mean by this that it endured in memory, and was even brought up when I attended our ten year high school reunion when one person called it a hoot. To the best of my understanding this means it was oddly enjoyable, or enjoyable in a different/odd way, though it was more often used in the past, and typically only owls are thought to hoot.

The banner read: Don't be ugly. Smoke weed, Not heroin.

Under the word weed, Michael drew a laughing crowd. Under heroin, he drew a fat and ugly corpse.

After my marketing campaign and the expansion of my customer base, I needed to address the limited amount of money I was making, considering the capital put forward and the time I was investing. I considered three options:

1) I could stop giving free weed to my salesmen, give them less, or give them money instead. I didn't give them money initially because of something I observed at friends' birthday parties as a child. On several occasions I witnessed a child opening a card, shaking out money, and looking disappointed. I cannot and will never understand this, as money gave them the opportunity to purchase whatever they liked. However, I understand this as an example of people sometimes being needy in an immediate sense, preferring the object itself rather than the object to purchase it. Directly receiving the marijuana, I hoped Finn and Michael would appreciate it more, not having to go out of their way to get it. They also had to use the marijuana, as sometimes people like having to use something, being forced to use it. For instance, they will not buy themselves something like candy but they will eat it if it is given to them. People sometimes fear their needs and wants, and prefer others to supply them, afraid that they won't be able to control their own consumption.

2) I could raise my prices. While I would eventually raise the price, I also understood the low quality of the marijuana I was selling. My research and Mr. Brown's comment⁹¹ solidified this presumption, and I didn't want to figuratively push customers away.

⁹¹ See Chapter Five: My Second Investment and Information on Finn in the Words of Michael.

3) I could find a way to lower my purchasing costs by either finding a new source/dealer, or by creating my own source/growing the marijuana, or both, which is what I eventually did.

I purchased a 1992 Saturn that was a stick-shift for \$1500 at the end of my sophomore year, let Finn know his duties in that area were no longer required, and began stalking Alex so I could figure out who he was buying from. Even with the discounted price, he was still making money, which meant he was purchasing the marijuana at a cheaper price. It is ideal to have complete control of production and distribution of any product.

Alex spent much time alone in his cabin. I saw him play solitary sometimes on the porch. Sometimes I heard music playing that I believe was punk rock as there were fast, heavy drums, a consistent and repetitive electric guitar, and screaming with British accents.

I saw Brett approach to buy as well as a few others. Those who knew of Alex still used him since he had lower prices. However, his customer base was fairly small even if they tended to buy in bulk like myself, though I believe I was his best customer. Alex, like Finn, had graduated from high school at this point. And besides his dealing he also, like Finn, worked at Flick's. Flick's is a local institution, or, it was until recently when Krogers, Remke, Walmart, and other chain grocery stores put all of its locations out of business.

During the first two weeks watching Alex, I attempted to construct a schedule, recording when he worked, slept, etc. His work schedule was sporadic, but the shifts were consistent, so if he was at Flick's I could generally figure out how long he'd be there based on when he began. His sleep schedule was long. His house, which I found through a phonebook listing, was actually in the same neighborhood as my own, so it was easy to watch his comings-and-goings with the help of Michael, despite the fact that Michael often complained that what we were doing was

creepy and weird. Rather than explain why he thought this, I will just repeat the conversation in scene below⁹²...

Michael was smoking a joint. We stood between a couple trees on the side of one of the many cul-de-sacs of our neighborhood, blocked from anyone's vision within Alex's house, though visible to our right if a car approached or someone walked down the street.

So, what makes this creepy? I asked, because Michael had just said it made him feel gross and like a creep to stand out there.

We're stalking someone, John.

And why do people find that creepy?

It doesn't creep you out to think about people watching you when you don't know about it? That's like, the definition of creepy.⁹³

I'm fairly certain that's not the definition, I told him. But if you mean it's a good example of its production, then I guess I understand.

It's not just a good example, Michael said. He stopped talking to cough, inhale, and then cough some more. It's like, he said, the perfect example.

Okay, I said. But why do people fear being watched?

You don't know who's watching you or what they want.

That does seem like an unpleasant thing to know, but can it matter if you don't know? Because I can agree Alex would find it strange and frightening if all he knew was that someone was watching him, as he would not know their motive in doing it. But, not knowing, how can it matter?

⁹² *Editor's Note:* Another repetition. This time of an earlier point concerning using scenes. See the Prelude.

But we're creepy, Michael said, for doing this.

Why?

Dude, we're like creeping on Alex. That's like, what we're doing. We're watching someone without them knowing it.

But our purpose is clear. I don't plan on doing anything to Alex, other than finding a way to give him less of my business. We're not going to steal from him or molest him in any way. What is creepy should be defined by intent, I think, because it is not creepy to think we just want to know where he's buying his weed. Most people wouldn't find that motive creepy, I don't think.

We could just ask him, Michael said.

Why would he tell us?

Because he likes us? Because he doesn't want us to stalk him?

He doesn't know you. And I'm not sure he likes me. And we are doing something that isn't in his interest. I've never told anyone I buy from Alex and neither has anyone asked, and I assume the reason is that they know I have no reason to tell them. Whether we like each other or not doesn't factor into it. I'd lose money by giving out that information and so would Alex.

The things we do for money, Michael said, like he was quoting a movie. He said it in a dramatic way, with his voice raised and head high, so maybe he was quoting a movie.

If you're actually more worried about getting caught for doing something people think is wrong, I said, then you should stop smoking that joint.

Michael threw the joint on the ground, stomped on it, and swiveled in place. Is someone coming? he asked.

No.

⁹³ The definition of creepy is: causing an unpleasant feeling of fear or unease.

Then why'd you say that, dude?

I meant we're more likely to get in trouble for smoking weed than we are for stalking Alex. No one will know we're stalking Alex by standing here. It will be apparent you're smoking weed.

He reached to the ground and picked up the joint. It's ruined, he said. Be careful what you say when I'm high, man. I get paranoid.

This was true.

In retrospect, considering Michael's responses to me, I believe he was less concerned about money or the threat of trouble than he was of the personal, of what he thought was correct personal behavior, such as the Biblical understanding of doing unto others as you would have them do unto you. Either way, you could call what we did right or wrong, creepy or not, depending on your moral code and frame of reference, but I think it is appropriate for you to know that we considered the potential. I do know that it was productive, as we eventually found Alex's source. And as Alex never found out about our stalking, there is no one to think it is creepy. Except for me and you and Nora, who says she agrees with Michael.

From television I'd been taught the source was most likely a black person or Mexican or Columbian, but this was not the case. Stereotypes should be learned so that they can be both interrogated for accuracy and used effectively with others that believe them. Sometimes, if you inhabit a stereotype (as one might say) you are that much more likely to be what you need to be in the situation. For instance, if you are the kind of drug dealer they fear you might be (such as dangerous, unpredictable, and/or violent) then you will be able to more easily manipulate the circumstance to your advantage. This is just one example.

We'd been watching Alex for about a month when he finally led us to his seller. Michael and I followed him in my car down the winding roads near the Ohio River. Long, curving roads that go down and up repeatedly, most turns blocked by the trees that bend in above the road. There is a lot of speeding up and slowing down, and it can be physically tiring to navigate with a stick shift. Appropriately, the major road in this area is called River Road.

Eventually, we found ourselves at a small collection of baseball fields behind which you could see the large, slushing Ohio river with its black water (from our distant perspective) and periodic coal-hauling barges, and barges carrying unidentified things. It was three different fields set up at angles to each other with a concession area in the middle, a small concrete figurative oasis with wooden boards as roofing. We arrived when all three fields were in use. It was a meeting of multiple adult, softball leagues, and I learned the fields were typically used for this purpose, excepting Saturdays when children's league games were mixed in.

We pulled into a large parking lot and watched as a softball landed on someone's windshield. It was two cars over.

Maybe I should move my car, I said, but we might not be able to see Alex.

They can't do it that often, Michael said, or no one would ever park here.

This logic was good enough for me to remain in place.

A couple minutes later a man came out and looked at the broken windshield from multiple angles, while doing what people call cringing. He made slight grunting noises and wrinkled his facial features as if he were in physical pain, even though I don't think he was.

Alex was parked a row ahead of us, five cars down to the right. He stayed in his vehicle and we stayed in mine. Waiting for him to do something we watched people mill about from field to field, sliding on and off the small sets of bleachers. Watched them grab hotdogs and

fountain soft drinks. Some had paper bags with bottles in them that they drank from, or small flasks that they concealed when not in use. A lot of people ate peanuts, littering the ground with the shells. It was perhaps a typical baseball scene, though they were playing softball. It was summer in July, early evening on a Wednesday, which gives you multiple images to associate with what was happening.

I'd made stalking Alex a summer job, when I could watch him more often, and after I'd purchased my car. It was fairly pleasant weather for July, clear skies and the temperature in the high 70's. Humidity was close to 90%, I believe.

We had the windows rolled down and Michael was chain-smoking cigarettes (as it is called). He'd begun the habit as something to do once he was high. Finn purchased the packs for him. Within the last couple months he'd also reached the point where the free eighth of marijuana was no longer enough for him, and he often bought an extra eighth or quarter per week, which money he received by working at the Chili Franchise, a job I recommended him for about six months prior to the day in question.

What the f___ is he doing? he asked. This has got to be it, right?

It seems likely some kind of transaction is taking place since he hasn't moved from his car. It is suspicious.

Right? I mean, he's just sitting there. I'd say like a creep, but you know, here we are.

Right, here we are, maybe being creepy.

About ten minutes later another car pulled up and parked next to Alex's, on the opposite side of our view.

Did you see who was driving? I asked, because I had not. I was watching a young boy who was running around the enclosure of fields over and over. It reminded me of myself,

running circles around the house the day we learned of my oldest brother's death⁹⁴. He'd just stopped to pick up a stray softball when Michael called attention to the car, which was a white minivan.

I did, Michael said.

Who is it?

This s___ is unbelievable.

I will believe it. Who is it?

It's Tumbler's mom.

On further inspection, this was confirmed. I did find it odd myself, but people also did not suspect that I was the one supplying the marijuana in the high school. They believed it was the Brothers' Weed, as Michael and Finn were sometimes called. But me and Tumbler's mom, we didn't look the part (as one might say). We didn't fit into the stereotype that people held in their heads, in the black space where words and images appear.

But I suppose what is actually odd is that we thought it was odd. People can do and be whatever they choose and want to be. While stereotypes can be useful, they are ultimately limiting in thought...⁹⁵

We watched as Alex got out of the car, gave Tumbler's mother a hug, and then received a package from her. It was about twice the size of a gym shoe box and had birthday wrapping paper and a red bow on top.

⁹⁴ See Chapter One: My Time, Place, and Immediate Family.

⁹⁵ *Editor's Note:* Burgess goes into excruciating detail here concerning all the ways he could've interacted with Tumbler's mom, but did not. Notably, one of the strategies he rejects is blackmailing, apparently disliking the consequences from Finn even though he claims elsewhere they were not very detrimental to him.

That's smart, I said. Making it look like a present. It's not Alex's birthday, is it?

You know that I haven't talked to her since all that stuff with Finn, yeah?

I didn't know that, I said.

Yeah, I really don't want her to see me. This is bad, man.

No, it's good, if that is weed and not a present. She'll be easy to approach. It'll be easy to create an excuse to go to Tumbler's.

But he doesn't even live there anymore. He's at U of L now, which is an abbreviation for University of Louisville.

Has Finn seen her since the incident? I asked.

Are you kidding me?

I think you know I'm not.

Yeah, I know you're not kidding. And it's ridiculous. Of course he hasn't seen her. Would you want to see the person whose, I mean, would you want that?

I don't know. I suppose I am not in a position to say.

Well, let me tell you, you wouldn't. That would be the last person you'd ever want to see again.

This seems important to consider in the figurative light of guilty consciences. Finn's guilt seemingly prevented him from approaching the woman he had, in a sense, wronged. He had abused her property at the least, using it in ways she had not intended and did not wish for it to be used. She was then the source of his guilt. If guilty consciences can be cleared via confession, then Finn should've already felt better, as his apparent wrong-doing was discovered fairly

As mentioned in my introduction, the information concerning “Tumbler’s mom” was used to investigate and later arrest her real life analogue.

quickly. But he did not, and his anger towards Michael and me for knowing actually seemed to increase overtime. It would seem in this instance that something more than guilt was operative. I suppose Finn may instead have felt shame....⁹⁶

For this reason, shame as opposed to guilt, is near-impossible to remove. And the object/subject that produces shame is often avoided. For instance, my father seldom spoke to me unless I spoke to him first. William ignored me when possible. My mother, however, talked to me and told me she loved me and tried to get me to do things with her. If it is true that William and my father were ashamed of me, remain ashamed of me, then this would appear to be the reason for their relative absence from my life.⁹⁷

⁹⁶ *Editor's Note:* As elsewhere, Burgess again defines shame at some length as connected to one's sense of self.

⁹⁷ Nora tells me she is not ashamed of me, and her dad just doesn't like me.

I don't think it's shame, she said, as I composed the above section with her standing over my shoulder. I think you just don't have anything in common. He told me one time that he doesn't like you because he can never tell what you're thinking.

You can never tell what anyone is thinking, I told her.

Yeah, but sometimes you can guess pretty good. When me and Sam were standing outside together, we were standing really close. I knew we were both thinking about kissing. It was like, between us.

That's romantic, I told her. A romanticized version of events. Though it's possible pheromones caused it.

No, she said, her tone expressing some annoyance through a shift to a lower register. That's what happened. That's the truth. I'll ask him if you don't believe me.

Okay, ask him, I told her.

She said she'll get back to me once she gets the chance, and I'll be sure to inform you in a proper place when she's done so.

She got back to me the next day, and I reasoned I might as well include the conclusion here.

She said, He said he felt it in the air. Like when you feel you'll get shocked if you touch something metal in the winter. Pretty corny, but I think it makes my point.

Okay, I said.

A day after I asked him, he wrote a crappy poem about it too, she said.

Sam's poem is transcribed below:

My lips and your lips.

Michael and I left the baseball field shortly after Alex and Tumbler's mother, and I thought about how I could get close to her, an opportunity to let her know I was interested in the product she sold, that I could be her best customer. I'll relate that in the next chapter when I'll also conclude my high school career. I'm spending far more time on this project than I anticipated.

My thoughts are going more and more to Michael's death. The circularity of thoughts sometimes makes it hard to remember other things. I'm trying to keep my goals in mind as I continue writing this, but I am becoming frustrated with the figuratively slow movement of my life on paper.⁹⁸

It's been almost a year now since Nora has come to live with me. Yesterday, I spent two extra hours writing, extending my work period: 4-8 PM. I am not sure this is a valuable use of time, but I am eager to get you where I want you to be, metaphorically in the story of my life. These things have all already happened, and it sometimes bothers me that I can't tell you all of it at once, perhaps similar to the way Sam and Nora felt about the kiss, like they could read each other's minds. It would be helpful if you could read my mind.

Electricity.
The meeting.
Lightening and love.

After reading the poem, I asked Nora if she loved Sam.

No, she said, but boys are like that sometimes.

⁹⁸ *Editor's Note:* Perhaps in an effort to expel the "circularity" of his thoughts, Burgess skipped ahead quite a bit in his story. The last four completed chapters do spend a decent amount of time on Michael and his increasingly dangerous behavior, though we don't see any sort of organic escalation, but instead huge jumps. We also don't learn of what is clearly some complicated development in Burgess' ability to socially interact.

Chapter Eight: My Meeting with Tumbler's Mom.

Purpose:

To demonstrate continued growth of drug-dealing business.

Cheaper product. Larger profit.

To demonstrate my better imitation of necessary persons with new people. Continued struggle with older acquaintances, like Tumbler's mother.

Scene possibilities:

Talking with Michael about talking with Tumbler's mother.

Talking with Tumbler's mother.

Talking with my mother about talking with Tumbler's mother.

Seeing my father get especially angry.

Chapter Nine: My Marijuana Farm at the Local Park.

Purpose:

To demonstrate control of production as well as distribution.

Scene Possibilities:

Finding the perfect spot of land.

Getting Michael to guard the crop. Bribing Brett.

Difficulties of harvest. Proper gardening. The abandoned house used for drying.

My mother smelling weed.

Storing and delivering marijuana through William's pizzeria.

Chapter Ten: The Beginning of College and a new Base of Customers.

Purpose:

To demonstrate those who formed our base of customers and workers.

Hipsters. Band members. Fraternities and Sororities.

To demonstrate the characteristics I consistently displayed in an environment that was completely new.

Scene Possibilities:

Being cool at orientation.

Parties (five).

Kissing and sexual propositions (three).

Meeting Tumbler at a party and adjusting accordingly.

Chapter Eleven: Michael's Problems and People of Note.

Purpose:

To demonstrate the increasing instability of Michael's mental health and its effect on business.

Drug addiction. Sexual promiscuity. Cross-dressing.

To introduce characters who would have some continued influence in my life.

Janette. Professor Hicks. Jonas.

Scene Possibilities:

Alcohol poisoning and hiding off-campus.

Michael in the mirror.⁹⁹

⁹⁹ *Editor's Note:* This reference is the most oblique of those listed. It is likely, if we infer from elsewhere (even disregarding the conversation with Michael's seeming ghost), that Michael was a transwoman. The above references of "Drug Addiction. Sexual Promiscuity. Cross-dressing." all seem to apply to Michael. It is not for me to say whether this was truly the case, but there is much evidence suggesting he was trans even outside of the text, and it felt irresponsible to not note it. If this is indeed the case, then "Michael in the mirror" could refer to any number of things having to do with his/her identity. Even knowing this, it is hard to decide what if any relevance it had to Burgess/Lowell, and on the following events, and what reason Burgess would have for including it. There was also some evidence of Michael being a transwoman revealed in the interview with his brother (see Appendix B). It's also argued over for some time between John and Nora in the chapter on Michael's death, as well as being taken up by Nora in our first interview. Perhaps it is inappropriate to guess at this, but mysteries around Michael are so obsessed over in the text that I think this is something the reader should bear in mind.

Chapter Twelve: Michael Understands.

Michael saw me in more diverse situations than anyone else, such as in front of my family, different groups of friends, in classes, with others from the dorm, talking to security guards, talking with potential customers, and, of course, alone with him, and many other places as well. It occurred to me on several occasions before the time I will now detail that he'd probably noticed many changes in how I spoke and acted depending on the circumstance. There were my typical adjustments, like my laughing when others laughed, but there were also the larger patterned changes where I would attempt a fuller embodiment (as one might say) of a personality.

Michael was a fairly consistent person, generally excitable and upbeat, somewhat feminine in certain gestures (crossed legs diagonally and very closely, wrists more flexible/limp when moving outward and inward, swayed hips when walking, chest up and forward slightly when walking, especially if in a hurry). He was what people sometimes called flamboyant, or a spaz when he was younger, if they meant to insult him. Considering his general consistency, it seemed likely he might be more observant of changes in others than people who are very changeable themselves. Then again, this might have the inverse effect, as it might have meant he was unaware of how others changed since he changed so little himself, though the drugs and his education certainly changed the way he spoke and acted over the next few years.

I never feared Michael would do me harm if he was making observations of my changeability, though I certainly understood there was a low percentage risk attached to him knowing so much about me. The risk was primarily connected to potential accidental exposure. I

feared with his relatively large and rapid increase in drug use that he might inadvertently reveal something about me that was not in the interest of either of us.

This turned out to be an unfounded fear, as most of my fears concerning Michael were. I believe Michael believed in loyalty, though I'm not completely sure why he believed it so strongly and practiced it so consistently. But Michael was my best friend, and I believe that is part of being a best friend, according to many people.

We were sitting in the dorm one day counting money, a task Michael came to do along with me. I believe we shared an appreciation for the physical quality of money, for what opportunities the money presented. He was high on some pills and marijuana. It was noon on a Saturday.

Janette knocked on the door and I answered it. The previous night she'd come to our dorm room drunk and asked to make out¹⁰⁰, which I did, which here designates kissing involving tongues, some groping of breasts, butts, and genitals, all accompanied by elevated breathing. I did not have sex with her because I didn't want to or understand how it worked very well, beyond the simplest definition of a penis being inserted in a vagina. I did not want to disappoint her. I reasoned it was best to do what others did, but to avoid doing them badly until I knew better. This way, people would like and trust me.

Michael covered the money with a blanket as I opened the door.

Hey girl, I said.

It's one of those days, is it? Janette asked, smiling, and probably asking that because depending on what was going on I would address her differently. Mostly I took this casual approach which I knew indicated that I was attracted to women, and it was best to indicate this to other people because that way they would think I was like them and that would make them feel better. Also, I think Janette wanted this.

I reached forward to hug her and she complied. From observing others in relationships it was becoming more and more likely that Janette had what is called a crush. The term signifies that one has romantically-oriented thoughts and feelings towards the individual in question. Also, Michael told me that she had a crush, and we'd made out, which is sometimes indicative of a crush.

You want to hang tonight? she asked.

Can we hang tonight? I asked Michael, looking generally unconcerned by maintaining a neutral facial expression and a relaxed posture, via shoulders slumped, facial muscles relaxed, and one leg slightly bent while leaning on the left side of the door frame. I'd received advice from some television shows and two men, Michael and someone at a party, that women are sometimes attracted to seeming disinterest.

¹⁰⁰ Nora claims the following specificity is unnecessary, but I disagree. It took me a long time to understand what different actions might be implied or assumed within the catch-all (as one might say) term make-out. For instance, some people just meant kissing. Similarly confusing was the phrase fooling around. Generally, it seems to imply that at least one person had an orgasm, usually the male if referring to a heterosexual couple. However, people that wished you to think they had done more with the person in the sexual encounter than they actually had would sometimes use the term to describe other things. For instance, Brett once said he'd fooled around with Tiffany Clark, but reports from others claimed he'd only hugged and kissed her briefly. You could call this a lie or a misunderstanding.

Do we need Michael's permission? she asked, laughing a bit and leaning on me as she did so.

I laughed a little bit too.

Michael was silent, smiling slightly as he sat on his bed, watching us.

So just the two of us? I asked.

Yeah, there's a reading I'm going to, she said.

Reading is boring, I said, in a condescending manner by expelling air through the nose at the same time as smiling, and letting that air press my head back slightly. I did not think reading was boring but most people did. I was being condescending because I saw boys that wanted to impress women be condescending, though it didn't necessarily help them to have sex with the women, which was often their primary goal.

Don't be like that, she said, sticking his lips forward and frowning in what is called a pout.

Sure, I'll go, I said.

Cool, she said, smiling and touching her hair. Based on a couple books concerning romantic attraction I'd read, and advice I later received from prostitutes and others, signals of attraction to another include self-touching as well as other-touching. I include the detail about her touching her hair as it seemed to indicate her desire to look good for me, that she wished for me to look at her hair and how nice it looked, and/or that she was nervous concerning her appearance because of her attraction to me. Another hallmark (as one might say) of romantic attraction, is simply the attention that someone gives to another. She seemed to like giving me attention. I was indifferent to whether I gave her attention, but knew I could learn things through her. I might also here consider that Michael almost always gave me his attention, which would

mean he was perhaps attracted to me, which would make sense considering many things he would later say, but something he never confirmed. It might also mean I was attracted to Michael considering the attention I gave him, though I don't believe I've ever been romantically attracted to anyone. At the same time, this information seems relevant to consider in relation to my potentially guilty conscience.

Meet me in the lobby at six, she said.

See you then, I said, so she knew she could leave.

Okay, she said. She left.

Michael reached over to his desk, pulled out a joint, and then lit the joint with a lighter that had a picture of Bob Marley on it. Bob Marley is a famous singer and drug-user from Jamaica. He is probably the most popular artist ever within the musical genre Reggae.

It's fun watching you, Michael said. He blew the smoke out through an empty toilet paper tube that had a dryer sheet appended to the opposite end with a rubber band, which was supposed to lessen the smell of the marijuana, something it accomplished.

Why is it fun watching me? I asked.

You're like a, he said, then waving at the air in a way that he did when smoking and searching for a word in his mind. He inhaled from the joint, blew the smoke out, coughed slightly. Um, he said, like a chameleon.

Chameleons are lizards known for changing colors, I said.

Yep, he said.

So why am I like that?

It's like you change people.

What do you mean by change people?

Become different people.

Oh, I said, so you noticed.

He laughed. Yeah, he said, I've noticed.

I laughed too. Then I said, I'm just trying to be who people want me to be. It makes things easier.

But like, who is the real you?

I am, I said.

He looked at me for a few seconds in silence. His eyes were very red. Okay, he said, I think I understand.

You do?

Yeah, I think so.

Can you explain it?

Can you? he asked.

Yes, I said. Or, I can explain how I understand it, but that may not be the same.

You first, he said.

Okay, I said, and I told him how people are whoever they pretend to be, and people pretend to be different things depending on who they are talking to and what they want, and generally what I said was similar to some of the things I said to Nora about lying and people not understanding sometimes when they were lying.¹⁰¹

And then he said, But what do you want?

I want to complete things, I said. I want to understand things. I want things to run smoothly, in a figurative way. I want to understand all the patterns so that things are made easier.

That's a lot to ask for, he said.

I'm not asking for it, I said. I don't think anyone can give it to me.

I mean, that's a lot to expect. Like, that's a pretty big goal. I'm not sure anyone can understand everything.

Of course not, I said, because if you wanted to understand everything you'd have to interact with everything. There's not enough time for that.

Well, it's a cool goal, I guess, he said. I like hearing what you want, how you see things. It's always so different.

Is that good?

Yeah, he said, it's good.¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ This information can be found in the Prelude.

¹⁰² I know you've gone over this like a million times, Nora interrupted, but I just don't get why Michael was so nice to you. I mean, I like you Uncle John. But most of the time, you kind of seemed like a jerk. You used people. And even when you didn't it doesn't seem like you really cared about them. You did it because you thought you were supposed to.

And people used me, I replied. But I was simply operating according to how I understood others to operate when they wished to accomplish things. My purpose was to effectively exist in society as a whole as well as within the various subcultures.

Right, whatever, she said. But with Michael he saw all of this manipulation and he still kept hanging around. Other people didn't really see it, like you just wrote. I just wonder, do you think he liked you or something? Sometimes that explains things that don't really make sense.

Yes, I've said that Michael liked me many times.

But like, do you think he liked you liked you?

You mean in the sense of romantic attraction?

Yes.

I don't know.

Are you gay, Uncle John?

No.

Why aren't you married?

I explained this in an earlier chapter which you claimed to be reading as I wrote it.

I was reading. You don't like sex. But that doesn't mean you can't love people in a romantic way. Does it?

And then I said, I'm glad you understand me.

For sure, he said.

Michael was really the only person who ever talked to me in a way that seemed to mean that he understood me and was trying to understand me. At least up to this time, as Nora attempts to understand me as well.¹⁰³ Maybe that is why I have a guilty conscience about his death, if it is

I did not write that I don't like sex. I wrote that I neither liked nor disliked it. It just doesn't matter if another person is present (see Chapter Four). And perhaps I do love people, but love is a difficult concept to define satisfactorily (see Chapter One).

But I mean, be in love, she said. There are people in love and they don't have to have sex, or want to have sex. Or whatever your deal is.

Yes, that's true, but rare. You are talking about asexual people.

Yeah, you're asexual. I googled it.

Yes, I am according to most definitions. However, as I explained, I also have not fallen in love, or perhaps ever loved anyone. Not according to my general understanding of what love is. I do not seem to desire others in the same way that others claim to desire others. Or need them, or want them. However you would like to put that.

Stop. You're confusing me. So tell me, why do you do nice things sometimes? Like, why are you nice to people? If you don't love them and aren't in love with them then what's the point?

It is easier to be nice than to be mean. It is easier to do what the majority of people would prefer you to do.

So you don't like being nice?

I like to see others do well and to see myself do well. I like to see that various systems are operating according to different, yet definable principles, and I like to operate according to said principles. Perhaps I like being nice. It is certainly preferable to being mean given equal benefits between the two, though the benefits are never perfectly equal, as long-term effects tend to be better if you are nice. More accurately, I would say that I neither like nor dislike being nice. It is simply a way of being that I sometimes imitate.

I'm going to McDonald's, she said. Then she left. She came back about an hour later when I proceeded to finish writing this chapter.

¹⁰³ Nora says this is nice of me to say.

It is true, I said, because I wanted her to understand that I wrote it not to be nice but because it was accurate. This is important because sometimes people do things simply to appear nice to others, and in this instance that was not my intention. This is not to say that it was somehow against my intention, but was simply irrelevant to it.

God, she said after reading what I wrote above, I'm just saying I'm glad you noticed. You don't have to insult me by explain

I'm glad that she's glad. It's true that it's nice to be in agreement with others. It simplifies interactions. All of this then was nice for Nora and I.

true I have a guilty conscience about his death. This might be further evidence to support that conclusion.

Third Interlude: William Burgess: My Older Brother.

Around the time she suggested I expand on the material addressing her father, William asked if I would come with Nora for a visit, and this seems like a good opportunity to describe in scene a contemporary understanding of our relationship. However, this scene broke many patterns established between us in the past, such as our mutual disinterest in each other. My own disinterest has generally had to do with the relatively small impact his choices have on me as an adult. His disinterest is probably connected to his general disliking of me. However, in the recent past, especially with Nora moving in with me, his decisions were and are effecting me more. Also, most people believe I should care about what my brother does even if my brother doesn't care about what I do, and even if it is irrelevant to our respective lives. Family is supposed to be considered relevant, as Nora often reminds me in other words.

After the phone calls I placed as him we spoke even less than usual, though he did start coming to the house on occasion to see Nora, though then he generally only said the following words to me, Just here to check on my girl. After saying this or some slight variation he would follow Nora to one of her bedrooms, or walk outside if the weather was nice, and sometimes they would watch television, but he did not say anything else to me, not even goodbye despite how typical it is for people to say when leaving. At the same time, William would that day initiate a change in his behavior towards me, which adjustment I will speculate reasons for below.

It was a Monday afternoon, June 17th, 2013, and William had just finished a morning shift at Walmart. He works there thirty hours a week and is currently seeking another part time job to supplement his income, or a full time job to replace his current job. When I drove up in my Toyota Prius, he was sitting in a green camping chair under a large maple tree, smoking a

cigarette with a beer bottle in the netted cup holder on his right side. The tree is large, about fifty feet high and fifteen feet wide, and is rooted approximately thirty-two feet from where his trailer is currently parked. He lives on land he rents for a hundred a month from a friend, who doesn't have anything he wants to do with it anyhow, as he has told me.

Some defining physical features of William include:

- 1) Five feet nine inches tall. Skinny with a small pot-belly, as they are called.
- 2) Light brunette hair and receding hairline.
- 3) Ears and nose well-proportioned to his head.
- 4) Hazel eyes around which there are several wrinkles, often referred to as crow's feet, a metaphorical expression that makes sense if you imagine the bird resting its feet over each of his eyes, though the wrinkles are smaller than a literal crow's feet.

5) Several wrinkles elsewhere on his face, including particularly noticeable creases moving in a diagonal from outside of his nostrils towards the periphery of his lips, referred to as smile lines, though he smiles less than most Americans I know, who smile more than the French, and presumably more or less than others, when compared to all national and sub-national cultures.

- 6) Pale skin and many freckles.

He wore a tee-shirt, worn jeans and construction-style boots as he sat in the camping chair, which is typical attire for him to wear. The image of him sitting there, under a tree, drinking a beer and smoking a cigarette, by his trailer, in open land in Kentucky, is a good imitation of white poverty as generally represented in the media, even though some poor whites live in apartments or poorly maintained houses or their cars or nowhere, being homeless, etc. There are many ways to be poor as any race of people. You need only have a certain income

based on inflation and living standards of the time and place, though people use that income for different things. I do not believe William was attempting to imitate rural white poverty, but was rather doing what he liked with the money he had, which coincidentally corresponded to media representations, as happenings sometimes do.

After I parked the car next to his own, a 1990's model Saturn, Nora and I got out of the vehicle and walked over to him until we also were under the shade of the tree.

There's my girl, he said, moving his right arm up and then gesturing towards himself with his right hand while making eye contact with Nora, apparently signaling she should come to him. Nora leaned in towards him and let herself be hugged by that arm. Is your uncle treating you right? he asked.

Yeah, she said. He took me shopping the other day. Check it out. She pointed at her gym shoes, which I purchased for her.

Sure is a bright, shiny new pink. Hurts my eyes it's so pretty. He smiled at her.

They're not that pink, she said, and then smiled back at him.

He turned his face to me. Thanks for coming out here, John.

You're welcome, I said. Is there anything in particular you wanted other than to see Nora? I asked. I can leave her here for a few hours and then come back if that's what you prefer, because I knew that William did not generally enjoy my company...¹⁰⁴

No, William said, I'd like you to stay if you don't mind. Talk some things over with you.

I assumed he meant to tell me things he disliked about me, as he often did, like how I acted and spoke, perhaps reiterating how angry the phone calls had made him, how I should call him Bill, that I had more money than any human being should have, how I always was mom's

favorite, and other things he'd said repeatedly to me over several years that implied or explicitly indicated wrongdoing on my part. Some of these things I directly caused, but even some of those were not directly harmful towards William's interest in the world, though his angry recitation of them implied they emotionally harmed him. It is also possible he was jealous of my wealth, a common response by one individual to other individuals who have more money.

Over the next sixty-seven minutes I stood while William and Nora sat and talked under the tree. I listened but did not contribute verbally to the conversation, as much of what she said I already knew or had explicitly discussed with her, and so assumed she primarily wished to talk with her father. She told him about school and her friends, and her part in the upcoming play as Eliza in *My Fair Lady*. She talked about seeing her mother recently, and some ideas we'd recently discussed, like why are people nice, and how do advertisements work, and what drugs are okay and what drugs are not okay, though William said all drugs are not okay.

He lifted the third beer he'd opened since our arrival and looked at the glass and said, Worst mistake I ever made was thinking this could help me, and despite this proclamation, then took a two-second drink of the beer.

But it's not always bad, is it? Nora asked, probably because she enjoyed drinking alcohol, understood via her increasing habit of doing so.

No, not always. But it's always bad for me, he said. He smiled, even though this is something people would not typically smile at, as it would generally be regarded as negative, but in this particular case seemed to indicate his awareness of his own weakness, which he then seemed to think entertaining, or perhaps he was smiling to mask his sadness (as one might say). I don't want you to get the wrong idea, he continued. I don't just drink for fun, Nora. You probably

¹⁰⁴ *Editor's Note:* Burgess repeats some of the ways he can tell William doesn't like him.

already know it, but the last thing I want is you falling down the same hole as me. Plain as I can put it, your father's an alcoholic.

Then stop drinking, Nora said, which is something I'd often said to William over the years until I realized he already knew what he should do, and that the reminder did not help him in this goal. Despite William understanding he should cease the behavior of imbibing, this knowledge and mental desire was consistently overcome (as one might say) by a physical addiction he'd developed, as my understanding of addiction indicates.

Knowing this and thinking to be helpful and show William I'd come to understand some things he wished me to understand, I said, To say that doesn't help him, Nora.

William looked at me with anger for the first time that day, his eyebrows contracting towards the bridge of his nose, his lips becoming a near-perfect line as his facial muscles tightened. It's possible the anger was because he didn't want me to correct his child (as one might say), though I wasn't correcting her, but rather informing her. I understand it to be common of parents to dislike it when others tell their children things relating to what to do or how the world works, even if those things are helpful or true. However, instead of then insulting me, as he typically did following angry expressions, he closed his eyes and took a deep breath, then opened them, the anger washed away (as one might say).

He's right, William said. But I know you mean to help. He reached out his right arm and patted Nora's bicep while smiling slightly, what one might describe as begrudgingly. It's not something you can just quit, he continued. That's the whole thing with being an alcoholic. With admitting all this. You got to accept you can't control everything.

That's true, I said, because it was, because there are always things out of the control of different individuals.

His eyebrows again furrowed. Wasn't looking for approval, John. Still, I know you mean well too.

Okay, I said.

Well alright.

About six minutes after this Nora asked if she could go and visit a friend of hers that lived in another trailer, about a quarter of a mile back down the gravel road we'd driven up.

You got your phone with you? he asked.

Yeah, I always have my phone, Nora said.

Be sure to answer if me or your uncle calls, and you be careful going down there, alright?

I'll be fine, she said, and then started walking down the gravel road.

William invited me inside the trailer and I said yes. Once inside he asked, You want a beer?

No, thank you, I said, because being polite is usually considered a sign of respect to the person your politeness is addressed to, and because I do not like alcohol.

Mind if I have another?

No.

He opened a new beer and told me to have a seat. I sat on a couch against one wall while he sat in a chair against the opposite wall.

There's a lot of things we're never gonna see eye to eye on. A lot of things we'll never agree about.

That seems accurate, I said.

Just let me talk, John, he said. I got some things to say.

Okay.

Despite everything that's happened between us. Despite all the bad. All the arguments and misunderstandings. I want you to know what you're doing for Nora is something I can't ever thank you enough for. You see what it is I've become. I can't care for a kid. And then, when I talk to Nora, I just, she's so smart. And she tells me all you're doing for her, the stuff you give her and the conversations you all have. And yeah, it makes me a little jealous. But I also see it's not something I can give. You got time and money. You got a way in the world I don't have. You and me, John, we've always spoke in different languages, you hear me?

I hear you, I said, and we both speak English, but I assume you mean it metaphorically, implying we communicate our meaning in different ways but also that we understand the world differently.

Yeah, he said. Just like that. That right there sums it up. Not just how I meant it but how you explained it. It's like you think in a straight line and everybody else's thinking is crooked and going round in circles. It's not bad though, I'm seeing that. I always thought it was bad, but I'm trying to know myself better. You've always been so good at things. At school, the smartest. At work, the model employee. At business, a success. Look at all you got, and you're just over thirty. That's amazing, John. But I understand the things you're missing too. One thing you've never had is love, not like you should. I could have given you that. Dad, he just, well he's not suited to it. Doesn't understand it. Or, at least, can't say it if he means it. Mom, I know she loves the h___ out of you, but she's hard to reach sometimes.

What do you mean by hard to reach?

I mean she's out of it, lost in her own head. Maybe it's that she loves too much, but that sounds too sappy. I don't know what it is. But she's always had a hard time of it, especially after Henry died. But that made me your only brother, and I should have been better to you. An older

brother should be there to protect. To guide. When I think of how kids bullied you and pushed you around for so long, I'm ashamed of myself. I knew why they were doing it. I knew why they went after you. It's the same reason I did. I didn't get you. Couldn't. Didn't know what you wanted. And it scared me. But I wasn't listening cause you always kind of said what you wanted. It's like, maybe you just don't trust someone when they're so forward. Or maybe you just, I don't know. But I'm your brother, and I should have tried harder. When you talked to me, it's like, who the h___ is this? I just couldn't get you. You know what I'm saying?

I believe so.

I'm sorry, John. For all that.

Okay.

Well, do you. Do you forgive me?

I accept your apology, I said, even though it was unnecessary for William to apologize, because he had not actively harmed me, and if anything had caused confusion that further allowed me to learn, but people like it when you accept their apology, as it is called. I understood why he felt at fault for certain things, but I am okay. I have always been okay. I have learned how to exist in the world. When others were mean as it is understood or acted in ways that expressed their dissatisfaction with my behavior or presence, I learned things. I like learning and understanding. And mostly, William did not hinder that. Also, it's my understanding that generally the act of being sorry is more beneficial to the person who is expressing sorrow than the person who is receiving the apology, in the same way a confession and sorrow on my part in relation to Michael might expel my guilty conscience, if I have a guilty conscience.

Alright John, he said. I appreciate that. I do. I'll admit, there's some things I wish you'd apologize for, and that I could know you meant it. But I know that's not really you. And maybe

it's because you don't hold grudges. Or can't. I've been trying to understand you more. The phone calls, that was hard to get over. But the more I thought it over, and when I talked to Nora about it, I understand you did it for her. And it's hard to hold that against you. Don't get me wrong, though. You try that again and I'll kill ya, and then he smiled, seemingly to indicate he was exaggerating, though I understood it would still upset him.

Is that all you wanted to tell me?

There's a little more, and it makes me ashamed to ask it, but I could use a loan.

Okay.

I want to go to a treatment center. He lifted the beer bottle as apparent evidence of what needed treating. And I want to go to a good one, he continued, and those can set you back quite a bit.

At this point, it was my impression that his apology was most likely meant to prompt me into liking him more so that I would be willing to give him money, even though I do not like him more or less than I have ever liked him, to my best understanding of like when applied to other people. This is a strategy I had used on others many times in the past...¹⁰⁵

However, knowing me as he did, it is also possible he knew this strategy would not work on me as it might on others, and so perhaps he both felt sorry and needed money. Regardless, if he asked for the money without saying these things, I would still have given it to him. I made money and saved money for a long time, but now it reproduces itself in ways that do not require much effort on my part. I will recuperate the sum discussed below within a month or less. Also, it is good if my family members like me more, because then they will interact with me in ways

¹⁰⁵ *Editor's Note:* This is a repetition of events we see elsewhere concerning how Burgess made people feel better so that they'd do what he wanted.

that make life easier for me and Nora and themselves, and people usually like you more if you give them money.

How much is it? I asked him.

He took a drink of his beer, frowned while looking at the floor of his trailer, and said, It's forty thousand for everything. Room and board and the treatment for three months.

That's a lot for a treatment center, I said.

Yeah, it is. But you should see this place. It's out in the desert. Real peaceful. And the best doctors and therapists. And just a lot of nice things to keep your mind off the drinking. It's, you can look it up online. It's a good place. It's worth it, I'm telling ya.

Okay, I said. Tell me where to send the check.

You serious?

Yes.

Alright, well. Jesus, he said, smiling and standing from the chair he was in. Let's go corral Nora and tell her the good news. He shook my hand and we walked outside. Then he decided to let Nora stay with her friend for awhile longer, and William kept talking to me when we got outside.

I wasn't all bad as a brother, was I?

No, I said, even though I wasn't fully certain what he meant, though I knew he probably wanted to hear that he had sometimes been a good brother, though for myself I'm not sure what would have represented good brother. Perhaps if he had taught me more things so that I didn't need as much time to learn them, like when he taught me how to fish, which is detailed below.

I remember that one time, he said. When it was you and me and Dad. When we all went fishing together a few years after Henry's death. That was fun. I remember teaching you. You were always a quick learner, and you were a funny kid.

He was referring to when I was nine and William nineteen. After the incident with my oldest brother in Alaska, my father stopped fishing for a couple years, as I believe it reminded him of his son's death, something seemingly unpleasant. However, the memory of dead people is not always unpleasant for everyone, though usually some amount of time must pass before this can be true. Grieving is a process, people often say. But after the required time, memories of the deceased may make people happy, as some people laugh and smile while recounting stories of someone they loved that is no longer living. I suppose an appropriate amount of time passed, and my father could think of my dead brother without feeling sad or depressed or other unpleasant feelings, and therefore thought to again go fishing, because it was something he liked to do.

The pond was in Kenton County, about a twenty five minute drive from our home. It was well-stocked with fish because no one was allowed to fish in it unless the owner said they could, as in this case with us, and also because those who did were told to throw the fish back after catching them. One side of the pond was filled with cattails, so we primarily fished on the other side where there was also a bench we sometimes sat on. As I knew how to use it, I chose the cane pole, which is a long stick with a string attached to the end that further has a hook at the end of the string, different from typical fishing rods in that it lacks a reel. My father and William each used typical fishing rods. After we'd been fishing for about an hour, William walked over to me. I was standing closer to the cattails' side at that point because I'd crossed my father's fishing line with my own, and he yelled at me that I should go further away.

You wanna know how to fish with a real pole? William asked.

Isn't this real? I asked, looking at the cane pole.

I mean like the experts.

Okay, I said. Yes, I'd like to know that.

He sat down next to me and he took my hands and he pressed the button that releases or holds the line in place through my fingers, and then he took my hands and we moved the fishing pole backwards and forwards, and then he told me when I should release the line, which is when your arm is just past the ninety degree angle that it forms within the arch of your cast.

Then he said, Well give her a shot.

So I gave her a shot, as he'd said, and my line went into the pond and did not appear to cross my father's line, which was the goal.

Good job, John.

Thank you.

Then he waited with me for a few minutes as we watched the bobber attached to my line, which was red with white stripes. It started to bounce at irregular intervals, which generally means a fish is biting the bait attached to the hook, or that the water is moving. He told me to do very slight jerks backwards with the pole.

You're trying to hook him when he goes in for a nibble.

After I did this a couple times the bobber went under the water, the line tightened, and William yelled, You got one.

Now reel her in, he said.

So I reeled her in, as he'd said, winding the lever attached to the reel until I could see a small blue-gill fish in the shallow water near the shore.

That's it, he said. Keep her coming.

I kept reeling until the fish was dangling in the air, presumably trying to swim and breathe even though it was no longer in water.

Then William took my hands and placed them on the fish, which was wet and slippery. Get a good grip with one hand under the head, he said, and with the other you reach in and pull that hook out of his lip.

I did it, even though I was a little scared that the fish might bite me, but William said the fish would not bite me. The fish flopped out of my hand and onto the ground and William told me to push it back in the pond. I kicked it and it hit the water and then swam away.

You're a quick learner, brother. Nice work. Then he held his palm in the air, a signal I should high-five him, which I did. He smiled at me.

Yes, I remember, I told William, standing outside his trailer twenty-four years after this had occurred.

That was fun, he said. It was one of the few times I felt like I really helped you.

Yes, you helped me to fish, I said.

In many ways, this memory of fishing is what one could term typical, though it was atypical for myself, in that William and I got along. People in movies, on television, on social media, and in real life relate similar stories of fishing, or of being in nature with one's family by hiking or camping, or family memories on a playground, or on a vacation at a beach or Disney World, or Europe, or perhaps on a cruise, or other places depending on the income and relative interest of those paying for the trip/excursion/recreational activity.

I did not choose to describe it in the first chapter or other chapters both for its atypicality in my life and its typicality in others. Concerning atypicality, I thought it might confuse the overall pattern of my relationship with William and my family generally, giving an accurate

impression of a singular moment, but an inaccurate impression of our moments generally.

Concerning typicality, I thought such a familiar memory through popular culture representations would have little interest to others, as they could likely imagine it without my describing it. But, as I further consider the reasons for William bringing it up, it seems possible the very typicality of it makes it important to him, as most people like to think of themselves as normal. It is a moment usually representative of emotional connection (as one might say), and it is a moment that seems to indicate our family's normality as considered within mythical representations of American families. It corresponds to things like one playing catch with one's father, where a family member shows attention towards a younger family member, apparently demonstrating care. I have never considered myself typical, but perhaps in this moment I was typical, and William was typical, and perhaps that is something good.

Nora came back about a half hour after this, and before her arrival William continued to recall other memories like the fishing memory. Typical memories.

You're alright, John, William said as Nora and I got back in my car. He smiled at me.

I smiled back. You too, I said, because I understood he wanted me to agree with him and to demonstrate a shared understanding that could be summed up in a couple of words, as is common at the end of television shows and movies and important conversations in books, and sometimes in real life.

That was nice, Nora said.

It was, I said, because it had been a relatively easy and productive visit, because there were no negative effects that were immediately discernible. Everyone was nice to each other, and appeared to have a nice time, and left the interaction after achieving nice, mutually beneficial, outcomes.

Chapter Thirteen: My Last Party, a Shifting Customer Base, and the Expiration of my Virginity.

First, I will explain the use of the term expiration in connection with my virginity. The typical phrase concerning virginity is to say that someone lost it, as if one did not know where it went, even though one usually knows and virginity is not physically palpable. Generally, having one's virginity taken is to either:

- 1) Insert one's penis in a vagina.
- 2) Have a penis inserted in one's vagina.

It's less clear what people mean by it when dealing with homosexual couples. However, virginity is an almost completely abstract concept, other than when defined as the breaking of a woman's hymen which results in bleeding. Still, many women have hymens that break without penetration by a penis. And, as I infer above, many women are lesbians, and may therefore never be penetrated by a penis, though perhaps a dildo. And what if the men do not orgasm? Does this mean sex did not occur as many seem to assume? Similar for women? Unlikely this last considering historical understandings.

Interestingly, it is mostly men who are interested in women's virginity without visa versa being true. Some cultures still check to see whether a woman bleeds on her wedding night. If she doesn't they think she is a liar and that she does not belong to the man in the way he wants, as someone who has never had sex with anyone else and will never have sex with anyone else. Many rituals concerning men and women were begun when men were thought to own women-- this is why a father gives away his daughter. It is an exchange of property in its original usage.

Regardless of one's personal definition of virginity, the reason I use instead the term expiration is because after a certain point people do not want to be virgins as it is no longer a

desirable status. Many people told me they thought that by the time you left college you should have had sex with at least a few people, presumably because it feels good and provides practice for an activity most would engage in as often as possible the rest of their lives. I do not think the metaphorical understanding of lost makes as much sense in my case, or in most cases. I could've simply lied and said I had engaged in sex, but without a witness I feared I may not be believed, which would likely produce the inverse reaction I wished for.

After recent preliminary practice with Janette, I was actively seeking to have sexual intercourse, worried by the increasing implication of others that it might not happen after college otherwise. In that sense, it seemed I was about to metaphorically expire, as my virginity would no longer possess value, like an expired coupon, if a simile is helpful. This turned out to be an unfounded worry, but I was eager to learn about sex, to gather first-hand knowledge so as to be like other people and operate in the world effectively. I felt I'd reached the point of knowledge where when I had sex I would have sex well, being sure to make the woman orgasm multiple times if possible, therefore producing a sex story that she could tell others, as most sex stories seemed to be told at some point in the college atmosphere I was a part of.

I arrived on time at the party that took place on May 17th, 200_ , between approximately 6pm-2am, and not as I sometimes did when I traveled with others, fashionably late. Fashionably late generally means late enough that most everyone else has arrived. It also implies that not everyone can be fashionably late, as if everyone was late then everyone would be actually be on time, though they might be unaware of it. It would make more sense if everyone showed up at the agreed time like I did that night. They could walk in together and avoid the awkwardness that people seem to fear when crowds are sparse. For myself, being early is never awkward because I

don't care when people don't know what to say, or if there is nothing to do. This is why I was on time instead of fashionable.

I could think to myself and plan out the night based on each of the arrivals, their manner of dress and general behavior. As we often did, Michael and I came to the party after overhearing a few others speaking about it. This was the primary way we advanced our customer base our first two years at the University of Louisville, which customer base was sold to by Michael and ten others we'd hired in each of the dorms. I only helped Michael with recruitment of customers, and otherwise handled preparing and moving our product, and the distribution of funds.

I stayed by the snack table for the first hour, sipping wine, eating cheese, and attempting to figuratively read the crowd as best as possible, nodding politely, via a slight smile and slight tip of the head, at those who looked at me. Michael came in at 7:38 pm. I remember the time because I looked at my watch, and I might call his entrance a dash as it seemed like something a comedian might do, like he had planned this dramatic entrance of sliding into the room. Many people turned to look at him. He also displayed a general hyperactivity and tension, like he was drugged but also being chased by policemen. Only the first of these was true.

Michael approached me immediately. Dead here, he said. You think anyone has any coke?

Looks like Pepsi, I said, glancing at the snack table behind me.

He laughed. Was that joke on purpose or accident?

Does it matter?

He smiled.

At this point, playing off my flaws and misunderstandings was much easier. When it was clear a misunderstanding had taken place, I attempted to go along with it. If purposeful

misunderstanding follows the initial accident of misunderstanding, then typically no one can tell that an error occurred, though Michael knew me better than anyone else, which is why he knew to ask. I would've understood he was referring to the drug cocaine if I hadn't been standing in such close proximity to a 2-liter of Pepsi.

You think we have a lot of future customers here? he asked, wiping quickly at his nose afterward, something he often did after snorting cocaine, which I presumed he'd done before arrival despite his question.

That's always what I think, and it's always true. It's about finding the right way to approach them, to make them feel safe and excited.

Anybody in particular you want me to hit up?

Not yet. We should let people get drunk first.

Yeah, he said, I guess you're probably right.

You seem particularly high, I said, because he didn't seem to be able to stop moving, and his body parts were moving in arrhythmic and sudden ways independent of each other. For example, his shoulder moved up to touch his chin several times while the rest of his body remained still. Besides this arrhythmic movement, he was sporadically making a popping noise by pulling his lips inward and blowing them out again. None of this behavior is considered normal for an adult.

Weed, alcohol, X, and cocaine, he said.

That's a lot.

He laughed. That could be a song title, don't you think?

That's a lot? I asked.

No, what I said. The drugs. Weed, alcohol, X, and cocaine. He then sung the words in a quick, aggressive way, meaning he strongly punctuated each syllable. He made a thumping bass sound, figuratively dropped the conjunction, and repeated, Weed, alcohol, X, cocaine several times. A couple girls in nice cocktail dresses looked over at us.

Those girls are looking at you, I said, meaning it was a bad thing because he was drawing seemingly negative attention.

H___ yes, he said, and he slid over next to them, pulling his favorite hoody over his head. Hey, he said, you ladies wanna' get f_____ up? I promise I'm not a creep.

They laughed. Michael always seemed to look earnest to others, and I believe he was, as usually saying you are not a thing on greeting someone will make them suspect you are actually that thing. His enthusiasm and earnestness made even what might be considered his more awkward, blunt, or odd introductions usually somewhat charming, meaning he was likable. He liked people and they seemed to like him. At least, this is what he pretended to be, and it seemed to be believed by almost everyone.

One of the girls blushed a little. The other spoke. We're always looking to get f_____ up, she said. She lifted her half-full wine glass as apparent proof of this assertion. You have a hookup or something?

I am the hookup, he said.

This motherf_____ has some good weed, I said. It was early to be doing our sales pitches, but Michael had begun, so I needed to play my part. I looked at the blushing girl. She had light-brown, shiny hair and wore a skinny, black dress with a pearl necklace. Don't be nervous, I told her, you can ditch us as soon as you get high. We don't mind.

She laughed and looked at her feet, indicating that she was shy.

We like to treat the ladies, Michael said. It's all we desire.

I leaned over towards Michael. A little too abrasive, I whispered. I believe we're coming on too strong.

A few more people entered the room and someone turned the music up slightly. It was a song called American Boy. Michael sang along to it. He knew all the words, and the drugs made him confident, as he'd said and demonstrated on many occasions. He sounded a lot like Kanye West, who sings the verses of the song. The girls seemed perhaps impressed if also uncomfortable at his display, via smiling but also looking at each other and laughing, and occasionally pulling their heads backwards with sudden jerks.

I had to shout slightly, but leaned in again towards the blushing, silent one. You need some of what he's on, I said. Otherwise, he's ridiculously obnoxious. I smiled after everything I said. A close-mouthed smile that I thought looked boyish when I practiced it in the mirror at home. Boyish implies innocence, opposed to a man's experience I suppose.

You're an a___, John, Michael said, but he smiled.

Let's head outside, the other girl said. We learned her name was Monica. The quiet one was Vanessa. We introduced ourselves by name as well. We then followed them outside even though it was unclear whether they wanted us to.

There was a large gathering of cigarette smokers. Michael and I always carried packs to give out individual cigarettes to women and potential customers. We always tried to be generous. If you appear not to need money then people are more willing to give it to you, thinking you must understand it if you possess it. This isn't an incorrect assumption in my case, as I've found I understand money better than most, but it's an interesting problem in the society at large if you consider the circulation of money. Which is to say, if you think it is a problem that the wealthiest

keep growing wealthier, and many people do, then it is a problem that people always want to give their money to people who already have money.

In undergraduate we perfected the generousness that lead into Michael introducing himself as a dealer at the end of the night, or earlier in this case. Sometimes we treated people twice before telling them of his services. It depended on our evaluation of their trust of us and us of them. Michael's early introduction of himself as a dealer was not ideal, but we'd dealt with similar situations before. Michael was sometimes unpredictable, especially if he'd taken a large amount of drugs.

Michael had a cigarette pack, half-full of cigarettes, the other pre-rolled joints. He offered a joint for the girls to share.

We can't smoke one all by ourselves, Vanessa said, the first words she'd offered (as they say) other than her name.

Now you're just selling yourself short, Michael said. That can't do attitude is gonna seriously hold you back in life.

Yeah, I said, Michael is very can do. You should see him drink. No matter the challenge he accepts.

I am a machine, he said.

I'm not as skilled myself, I said.

Nah, he said, you can drink if you're thirsty enough.

I'm pretty thirsty tonight, was a line of dialogue I often used in like situations.

You guys are hilarious, Monica said. Aren't they hilarious? She turned to Vanessa.

Vanessa smiled, laughed a little, looked away, and said in a monotone, Hilarious.

Michael laughed. I laughed. Monica laughed.

She's been holding back, huh? Michael asked.

She's the life of the party if she let's herself be.

Michael lit a joint, passed it to Monica. When Monica was passing this joint to Vanessa, Michael lit another and passed it to Monica. Monica laughed, shook her head, smoked it. As this second joint was passed to Vanessa, and the first passed to me, Michael lit a third joint.

Too much, Monica said, laughing and coughing as she took her third straight inhale. I did not inhale any of them, but my performance of smoking had been refined over several years at that point. I looked to be the most effected, and poked both of my eyes during separate put-on coughing fits so they would redden appropriately.

What the f___ is that? an older man who walked up to us asked, all of us coughing, and the air filled with the obvious fragrance of marijuana.

I adjusted. I'm so sorry, I said, straightening my body and steadying my voice. We didn't know this was a drug-free zone.

He gave a half-smile. By then maintaining a stony expression (as one might say), I tried to make it impossible for him to tell whether I was being serious or sarcastic, though I was being serious. Michael had a large smile on his face and was unusually still and silent, which I believe meant that he was holding back laughter.

Well, I wouldn't call it drug-free exactly, the older man said, sighing a little.

I touched my hand to his shoulder and walked him a short distance away from the group. You might want to know, I said, there are a couple under-aged drinkers here. I knew for a fact that two boys I'd seen inside were only twenty, and thought to metaphorically sacrifice them to this man's sense of injury, implied through his seeming admonishment of drug use.

He shook his head. Zack told me no one under-aged, but I swear he does s___ sometimes just to p___ me off.

It's the way of kids, I said.

He laughed. You call yourself a kid?

If it's appropriate. It's possible to understand how young you are and that you can learn from others.

That's a very mature attitude, kid.

I know, I said, and I smiled. People sometimes think its funny if you are confident in what you're lacking, as it ends up actually demonstrating that you are knowledgeable of your lack of knowledge. I smiled so he knew I was aware of this and so he could feel free to laugh.

He laughed briskly. Look, how about you guys just take the pot a little ways from the house? Use the gazebo or something. We're not close to any neighbors, but the b___ that lives on that hill would do anything to screw me. I got the historical society to block an expansion to her house, and the gazebo's out of her view.

I love these old homes, I said.

They're gorgeous, aren't they? Admired them since I was kid.

Me too, I said. I'd researched the architecture, thinking it might come up if the owner of the house was present, and for a long time I talked about all the things I said I liked. About the brick, the molding, the kind of wood. About the imperfections and creaks, the ways in which the material seemed to age elegantly. A word I frequently repeated concerning the house was character. A word that implies a house has a kind of personality even though it is an object. People like to hear this concerning their possessions as they believe it reflects well on them, as if they figuratively absorbed some of the supposed personality of the object, or as if the object

reflected themselves, when in fact usually all they did was buy it. In summation, it demonstrated what they were willing to spend money on, which was generally my concern.

The house was located in a neighborhood called the Highlands. The kind of people who lived there were usually rich, or what they call hipsters, or rich hipsters. It is my understanding that a hipster is hip to new trends, usually fairly open and accepting concerning ways of life, typically dressed in a somewhat restrictive costume of seeming nonconformity, and widely disliked for their effect on housing and other local markets. This effect is too raise the prices of a market because of their sudden presence and frequent willingness to overpay for items, and some say also because they are white if the area wasn't mainly white before, because then the white hipsters make racist people feel better about living there, and sometimes racist people have more money than poor people of color. The party was for Zack's birthday and he seemed to know many hipsters judging from the crowds' style of dress which included much of what is called ironic dressing, where you wear things you pretend to hate. There were also many people dressed in clearly expensive clothing, like the two girls we shared our joints with.

D____, the house owner eventually said, I think you know more about my house than I do. It's true that I probably did.

Architecture has always been an interest of mine, I told him. This was not true, though I was interested in the real estate market more lately. But people like it when you act like you have a lot of interests, especially if they share those interests.

I tell you what, he said, why don't you let me have one of those joints, and we'll call the whole thing even?

Did you want to smoke with us?

With a bunch of college kids? Are you out of your mind? He shook his head. No, I think I'll spare myself that embarrassment.

If you want, I know someone that sells it. I mean, he'll give you some for free, but if you ever want more I could give you his number.

The man smiled widely. I interpreted this to mean he saw what I was implying and so I thought it best to acknowledge the motive more clearly. Being honest about being sly (and in this slyness, being dishonest) often ingratiates you to people. More, at least, than continuing in the manipulative behavior if you're certain they've identified it.

What can I say? I asked. He gives me free stuff for promoting him.

Ha, he said. Well, let's just stick with the one joint for now.

Sure thing.

I went over to Michael who was still with the two girls, but had also been joined by a significantly larger crowd. About fifteen people were passing around joints in various points of the smoking process. I would find out later that Michael had laced several of the joints with other drugs including LSD and codine. If I had known this I would not have allowed him to distribute the joints, and I wouldn't have contributed to said distribution, because giving people drugs they don't know you're giving them will most likely make them angry if they understand this is what you've done. My intention was to make them happy, not angry. Angry people don't buy things from you. Also, we weren't yet selling the drugs Michael laced the joints with. Michael later claimed he had not distributed these particular joints on purpose, which I believed, because sometimes he rolled the joints when he was already on several drugs, and sometimes his memory could be very bad.

You have any left? I whispered. He handed me one. Take people over to the gazebo, I said then. He said he doesn't care if we keep it out of sight.

Sure thing, boss, Michael said, announcing immediately afterward that he and his wares were taking a short trip, and any who wished to partake further should follow.

I went over and shook the man's hand, the joint pressed in my palm. I winked and smiled at him in such a way that suggests you are doing something that you aren't supposed to be doing, and yet also suggests that the caution you're taking is more for fun's sake. I pretended that I was pretending to be secretive.

He laughed and said thanks.

I felt tired after carrying these different conversations back to back and was on the way to the bathroom to rest when a sober (as I'd learn) philosophy student cut me off in the hallway.

And do you think Jesus was raised from the dead? he asked, standing in the way so that I couldn't reach the bathroom. He stood with his arms folded across his chest, and with a self-satisfied smile, what is sometimes called a s____-eating grin, though why someone would be satisfied with themselves after eating s____ is almost perfectly incomprehensible. But that is the saying.

Only a pea-brained bumpkin would think that, I said, knowing I should debate with anachronistic language and a condescending tone. I can tell you my relatives do, I continued. But I think a better question is why you're asking people you don't know about the resurrection of Christ. It would seem that you're mocking others in an attempt to have your own faith in the risen Lord confirmed. Deep down, you're holding on to the shame of your belief. You can't live with the doubt.

F___ you, he said, smiling slightly. I'm merely trying to figure out who my friends and enemies are.

Ah, so you make it a habit of condemning Christians. How original, I retorted.

It will probably seem to some that I was being cruel or mean, but people who approach philosophy and confrontation the way the philosophy student was doing generally enjoy it when you trade insults. To them, it means you think they're smart enough to take them, or understand them, or something of that nature that applies to their ego. I'd learned these patterns from a couple classes, some other parties, and the local readings I went to with Janette. Still, despite knowing how I should act, I was feeling very tired. The philosophy student was requiring a lot of my energy, and I was tired even before his bathroom obstruction.

Condemning Christians? he asked. Who's condemning anyone? I'm just giving people a chance to declare their beliefs.

Oh, I see, I said. You're seeing if they're hypocrites. You're assuming that the majority do believe in Christ's resurrection but will take the question as a challenge to that belief, and to avoid conflict, will deny their savior.

Lots of people denied Christ, he said. The Bible's not shy on saying it. Even the first Pope.

Speaking of Peter, I have to go to the bathroom, I said, using this remark to exit his exhausting presence. Peter is sometimes a synonym for penis.

The bathroom was small but nice. I turned on the fan. I threw up in the toilet. I was sweating a lot. My head hurt and I felt tired, but I needed to go back out to the party. I needed to help Michael sell our product, to make sure things went smoothly in a figurative way. It was the reason I was there.

Heading towards Michael at the gazebo I was detained in my walk by Finn, who before that moment I was not aware was at the party. Michael later informed me he was not aware of this either. It seems that Finn had followed us. He stepped directly in front of me.

So this is what you're getting up to these days, eh f___nut?

We're at a party, I said.

I know you're still dealing, he said.

And I still know a secret about you that you don't want others to know, I said, as it was apparent that he stated the obvious to threaten me.

Finn smiled with his mouth closed and expelled air somewhat forcefully from his nose, indicating, I believe, that he found me audacious, or perhaps generally hard to believe. A seeming combination of anger and disbelief.

Play it that way if you want to, Finn said. He pushed me and I stumbled backwards slightly. I got my eye on you, he added.

Okay, I said. I walked forward and he didn't impede my progress further.

At the gazebo about fifty percent of the crowd was leaning or sitting while staring in the near-distance, while the other fifty percent or so was laughing or talking loudly. The drugs were having their typical effects, and Michael was vocally celebrating our product.

All American, he said. None of that brown, Mexican s____. Let's get some personal testimonies. You sir, can you tell the crowd how you're feeling?

The philosophy student came up behind me while Michael was talking, and tapped me on the shoulder with his index finger.

Religion and opiates are the opiates of the masses, he said, looking haughtily at the group. The haught in his look was perceivable based on the raising of his head in combination with down-turned eyes and a frown.

Drugs help the mind escape the predetermined paths of tradition, I replied, knowing my way through a pro-drug philosophy argument. They free the soul from the oppression of the mind.

I was feeling very tired.

Yes, said the man Michael had indicated in order to testify on his drug use, I feel very good. Almost too good, though. I'm a little wobbly.

Who doesn't want to be wobbly? Michael asked. Who here, he repeated with force, gesturing his arms outward in a way similar to military figures in movies when they address troops before battle, wants to be wobbly? Something in the patterning of his language and his outward gestures reminded me of Braveheart and Saving Private Ryan, and other military films. I believe he was imitating these specific movies, and that it was not just coincidence.

A few of his listeners cheered.

That's just an excuse people use to hide their pain without self-judgment, the philosophy student said, moving in front of me so that my vision of Michael was obscured. Drugs ease the pain of an irrational world, and people justify their use by rationalizing that irrationality.

Words upon words, I said. Everyone rationalizes everything constantly. People are able to live with themselves because they rationalize what they do. They know that a better life could exist if they did certain things. For instance, if they exercised instead of watching television, or if they read a book on how to build a house for people that need one instead of jerking off to porn. Our lives maintain their relative stability only because of our ability to rationalize our daily

choices when we all know we could be doing something greater, for ourselves and the world outside of us. Drugs can make apparent the way we rationalize the world, breaking down the boundaries we set up to protect ourselves. They also allow us to rationalize things in a different way, shifting our perspective.

The older man from earlier walked up to us, his eyes very red. He looked confused as he leaned against me slightly with his left hand. Jesus, he said while holding the half-smoked joint in his right hand, what the hell is in this?

My head was aching. My eyes hurt.

No, the philosophy student said, drugs allow us to forget about our life, not to think outside of it. It is a demolition of perspective, not a shift.

We'll have to agree to disagree, I said, growing increasingly tired. I turned to the older man, and said, It's just marijuana, but it's good s____. I wasn't aware that I was lying.

Are you a dealer? asked the philosophy student.

I turned to him. No, I said, I am a compassionate person who seeks to ameliorate the constraining influence of rules and tradition on the suffering people of this world.

So you are a dealer?

No, I just know one, if you must know.

You're talking different, the older man said. Why are you talking different? Like a cartoon aristocrat.

Let us rise, Michael was saying, let us rise from the ashes of mediocrity to become a wobbly army of love and understanding.

There were a few more cheers from his listeners than before.

The quiet girl, Vanessa, stumbled slightly through the grass over to me and asked, What do you know?

I thought it best not to respond to her.

So you were using a philosophical argument about the benefit of drugs to further your capitalist motives? the philosophy student asked. I wanted to say yes and leave because I was so tired, but I could not. Michael's performance was going well.

As I said, it is my friend (I pointed at Michael) who is the dealer. I just help out.

Get paid, you mean?

The older man said, Do you even know Zack? Are you giving my kid drugs? Then he stared at the group around Michael and asked, Zack? Zack? Hey, Zack? Are you here?

The older man wandered off, and I was relieved slightly by this because each person present required a certain amount of energy as I needed to change not just the diction and syntax I used, but the physical gestures and the tenor of my voice.

Vanessa began tugging on the sleeve of my shirt. You're different than your friend, she said. He's nice.

Hey, the philosophy student said, so do you get paid? Are you selling your intellect for cash?

I found this an especially illogical question to ask, as it seemed to suggest that there were people who existed in the world within a capitalist market who in some way did not exchange their intellect/relative skill-level for money. I suppose you could argue that those that subsist on government welfare do not, but in fact they still receive money based on skill level--it is simply based on a lack of skill and ability within the market, and the money is supplied by those who are successful in said market. Which is to say, if you are in a capitalist market and you receive

capital, then you selling your intellect for cash. I felt slightly upset, unsettled. I was becoming very tired.

I asked him, What is it you plan to do for a career?

He said, You mean, what do I want to be when I grow-up? He smirked¹⁰⁶.

I said, Yes, that's exactly what I mean.

He looked suddenly less haughty, a bit more receptive, the tension in his eyes and around his mouth dissipating. I guess I'd really love to be a teacher, he said. Showing interest and care towards others often figuratively disarms them.

A teacher? I asked.

Yes.

And do you plan on getting paid?

Obviously, he said, and the tension returned to his face. I know what you're doing, he said, and it's not the same thing. Teaching allows us to make better choices.

Better choices about what exactly? I asked.

Vanessa said, Are you ignoring me?

Better choices concerning the reformation of a corrupt and unfair system, he said.

But you will be working to change the system from within it, I said. You will be accepting cash, you will be interacting in the market, and you will be preparing your pupils to interact in that same market in the way that you are, as long as there remains a demand for socialist or communist teachings. Your chances of teaching rely completely on a free market and the laws of demand and supply.

¹⁰⁶ Smirk is defined as follows: smile in an irritatingly smug, conceited, or silly way. This is another way to describe a s____-eating grin, or a self-satisfied smile, as I do above.

He shook his head. You're like an embodiment of the man. You're the man in sheep's clothing.

Capitalist pig, Vanessa said. She punched my upper-arm and laughed.

I in no way said I supported the system. I'm just explaining how it works. Ignorance isn't going to change the inner-workings of capitalism. Ignorance merely encourages the continuance of the status quo, which in this case is your seeming-enemy, capitalism.

You're calling me ignorant? he asked, and it was then I noticed he was getting angry, noticeable through the rising of the volume and tone of his voice. F___ you, he said, then turning to walk away, which merely substantiated my supposition of his anger. Similar to the older man, I was relieved by his absence. I was very tired.

Vanessa said, That conversation was boring. Who cares?

I turned to face her. Don't worry about it, I said, trying to relax my body and move into less formal speech. He's just the type that looks to argue. A real d___-bag. I'd borrowed the phrase from Michael who probably borrowed it from someone else. People tended to enjoy it.

She laughed. A bag of d___s, she said. That's funny.

The older man was being escorted towards me then with the help of someone near my age. It was a boy I would learn was the aforementioned Zack, with long hair in a pony tail and rings in his ears. He looked unhappy. He was frowning.

I looked up and saw that Michael was doing the macarena to a metaphorical chorus of laughing and boos. The song was not playing. He was moving to the beat of a different song.

Can you drive me home? Vanessa asked.

The older man and the boy stopped in front of me.

Did you give my dad drugs? Zack asked.

I don't know, I said.

You don't know?

Is this your dad?

Yeah.

Technically my friend gave it to me and then I gave it to this man, who you say is your dad. So yes.

He punched me in the face. I fell down.

He's a recovering drug addict, he said.

Then it seems pretty unwise that he sanctioned this party, I explained.

He kicked me. Stop talking like a douchebag. I've debated on whether to edit this word or not, having used another form of it in an earlier chapter, and have decided that its dual-purpose as insult and a word for a female hygienic product makes it acceptable to print.¹⁰⁷ I do not know of any other words for this product, so I think its literal character can assuage anyone who might otherwise be offended.¹⁰⁸

I attempted to find the right kind of words. Sensing Zack's displeasure when he approached, I had switched back to logic and reasoning instead of layered and metaphorical language that I might have used. I felt some fear for myself. I was in some pain. Okay, I said, then it was f_____ stupid for your dad to throw a party where everyone is getting s____-faced.

He kicked me again. I didn't understand what he wanted, and I did not know how much he would hurt me. I was afraid, fearful of bodily harm, of death. I didn't know who he needed me

¹⁰⁷ See Chapter Seven: My Marketing Campaign and Cost-Saving Measures, for a more detailed discussion of the dual meaning of the term *douche*.

¹⁰⁸ Nora tells me it doesn't matter, and reminds me that she thinks the censoring in general is unnecessary.

to be to stop. I believe the fear and the pain and my physical exhaustion were all making it difficult for me to think clearly (as one might say), because I could not come up with a good solution.¹⁰⁹

The older man said, I don't want my mistakes to ruin my child.

A small crowd gathered around.

Zack kicked me again and again.

Don't hurt him, Vanessa said. He's my ride home.

Michael was no longer doing the macerana, but was instead standing near and looking down at me. I watched him approach.

Hey Zack, he said.

What? Zack asked, turning towards him.

Michael kned Zack in the crotch, and when he keeled over Michael kned him in the face. Zack fell on the ground next to me, his nose bleeding. I quickly got to my feet. My stomach, chest and face hurt from the hits, and my head ached because I was tired.

We should leave, Michael said.

Zack's father punched Michael in the face and then Michael punched Zack's father in the face.

¹⁰⁹ Nora has asked why I didn't fight back. I did consider the option and whether it would produce the optimal result. However, I feared that hitting him back might attract others or further enrage him, putting myself in a more difficult position. I was and am in good physical shape, but would not have been able to fight more than two or three people effectively. I also saw Finn in the crowd and reasoned that he was looking for an opportunity to join in based on his earlier behavior. Mob-mentality is something that is real in my understanding. I suppose people fear standing on the outside of a conflict makes them into potential victims, and so they choose the side of dominate numbers. At this point, there were no clear sides as only Zack was engaging in violence. Any reciprocal violence might make those around feel they needed to choose sides, and

People grabbed both of them to hold them away from each other.

Vanessa said, Why does everyone keep punching each other? Are you going to take me home?

Yes, I said. And then I said louder, I need to take Vanessa home. We're leaving, okay?

The groups released Michael and Zack's father, and Zack's father immediately charged towards Michael. I told Vanessa to run with me, and we did, and Michael was able to avoid the intended assault and follow after.

As we jogged towards the car I heard Finn screaming my name over and over again. John Burgess, he was saying. That guy's name is John Burgess! Except he was saying my real name.

He was clearly attempting to get me into some sort of trouble. I found later that he told everyone that I was a dealer and their f_____ up night was because of me and his stupid brother, that we'd drugged them, that we were trying to steal from them and rape them, and other things to portray us negatively.

Michael drove because it was his car, though I would have preferred to drive considering the amount of drugs he was on. I sat with Vanessa in the backseat.

She touched my face. Why do I like you? She asked. I don't know you.

I wasn't sure how to answer her question. I said, Maybe I remind you of someone else.

Maybe, she said, her face very close to mine and her right hand touching my cheek, resting there.

You can't f_____ in the car, Michael said.

Vanessa said, I can do whatever I want.

I was in no way certain that they would choose mine, especially as I'd figured out at that point that it was his party.

Not in my car.

No one's ever going to f___ in this car, Vanessa said. She laughed. She asked, Are you guys poor? Are you guys like homeless?

No, I said. We live in Old Louisville. That's where Michael is driving, I think. Is that where you're driving, Michael?

Yeah, John.

We just came down for the party, she said.

Where from?

Lexington. Do you know where that is?

Yes, I said. I think most people in Kentucky know where Lexington is.

That's a funny thing to say, she said.

I laughed. She looked at me with her eyes squinted, her head slightly cocked to the side. Are you laughing at me? She asked.

No, I said, it was a funny thing.

Michael said, John's a self-proclaimed weirdo. By the way, are you two flirting right now? Because I can't tell.

Are you jealous? Vanessa asked.

A little bit, Michael said.

Well, you can't have me, she said.

Who said I wanted you? Michael asked.¹¹⁰ Then he laughed.

You guys are gay?

No, Michael said.

I said, I'm not gay. You mean homosexual, right?

What else would I mean?

I just wanted to be sure, I said.

Michael said, I'm not driving you all the way to Lexington tonight.

That's okay, she said, I can stay with you two tonight. Unless you have some gay sex planned. Unless you wanted to be gay together.

I said, We weren't planning on being gay together.

Michael asked, Do you guys see that bear in the road?

I looked through the windshield. That's a person, I said. He pressed the brakes and the person stumbled across the road. Then he hit the gas. Then I said, Tell me if you see any more bears. And stop if you see anything in the road other than a car that's moving.

Should he be driving? Vanessa asked.

No, I said.

Are you as drunk and high as me? she asked.

As I didn't want to explain how I pretended to do drugs I said instead, You're much more talkative than before.

¹¹⁰ *Editor's Note:* There's a glaring omission here, though it's an omission that Burgess himself later admits. By the end of the book it seems willfully ignorant to deny that Michael was in love with John. He later addresses whether Michael loved him at a couple important places, though he seems to do so only to ignore apparent evidence as it can never be conclusive. Regardless, I question why he doesn't at least mention the possibility here so he can deny it as

I'm high and drunk, she repeated. Vanessa touched my face again. I knew that these were considered signs of attraction, the ways in which she was touching me and moving close, but the look in her eyes was hard for me to interpret. It seemed more curious than anything. I was trying to understand exactly what it was that she wanted, and what she thought I wanted, and what she thought Michael wanted from the way they were talking.

Michael parked on the street. We had to walk a block past the run-down (as they say) late Victorian era houses to our own where we lived on the third floor. The name of our neighborhood was Old Louisville, and was perhaps most remarkable for the diverse economic and racial mix of the area. There were those who owned the Victorian era houses and lived in them. You could tell when this was the case because the houses were well-cared for and didn't have chipping paint, or leaking roofs, as one of our rooms had, which was eventually fixed. The rest of the neighborhood was comprised of poorer people, who were generally black, as well as college students like ourselves, as the University of Louisville was in walking distance.

In our apartment Michael stopped and stood in the middle of the living room. Then he laughed very loudly. We made it home, he said. Did I drive?

Yes, I said.

You let me drive?

Yes, I said.

Are you out of your mind? Then he stared up at the ceiling. The stars are out, he said.

Okay.

elsewhere. It's unlike Burgess to not make reference to what he would assume his readers would be thinking.

Vanessa pulled me towards the couch and we both sat there and watched Michael stare at the ceiling.

Then someone knocked loudly at the door.

Did you hear that? Michael asked. I think it's God.

It's not God, I said, going to the door.

I opened it and saw Finn.

Things aren't going so well for you, he said.

Do you want me to tell people? Is this a way of asking me to tell people what you did? Is that what you're doing? I asked.

Do what you gotta do, Mr. Robot.

Why are you here?

Just to gloat, he said. And then he asked, Can I sleep here?

No, I said, but Michael said yes from behind me.

That's Finn, isn't it? he asked, looking directly at his brother.

Yes, I said.

Come on in, brother, have some drugs. He escorted Finn to his bedroom. Finn winked at me when they passed into the other room and shut the door. Vanessa asked me to sit back down on the couch with her.

It's not the worst apartment in the world, she said.

No, I said, it isn't.

The springs in the couch were broken so we were slowly sinking into it.

Do you like my pearls? Vanessa asked, running her fingers beneath the beads around her neck.

I do, I said. They're very pretty, because people like to hear that the jewelry they own is pretty.

She placed her hand on my right thigh. It felt cool.

Your hand is cold, I said.

I'm sorry, she said, and then she cupped my penis from the outside of my pants with her hand. Is that better? she asked.

Not really, I said.¹¹¹ It was still cold. In retrospect, I understand she was using innuendo. I would learn to manipulate sexual innuendo expertly over the next few years.

She removed her hand. I can't tell, she said, leaning close and looking into my eyes, what exactly are you?

I'm a human being, I said.

That's a strange answer.

Though the answer did not in any way seem strange to me I obliged her by saying, I suppose.

Are you gay or straight?

I don't believe that I'm either, I said.

So what are you?

I didn't know how to answer since she seemed to not like the last answer I gave her. I don't know, I said.

Do you think I'm pretty?

¹¹¹ Nora tells me that Vanessa was clearly a thirsty b____. I asked her what she meant by this.

She wanted to have sex, she said. That's what people call it.

I told her this was the first I'd heard of it and thanked her for the clarification.

Yes, I said, because she was skinny with proportional breasts and a symmetric face, and light-blue eyes that were aesthetically appealing according to most people. And I liked the shine of her light-brown hair. These things were pretty as I understand them. She was not unpleasant to look at, and some people were aesthetically unpleasant to look at.

Do you want to have sex with me?

Do you think we should? I asked.

Okay, she said, laughing and leaning close, putting her right hand down the front of my pants. I think I understand you now.

She knew how to manipulate my body so that it felt good and she taught me how to manipulate hers to do the same. Soon I discerned a clear pattern, a clear rhythm to the movement of our bodies, what things we should do with each other, how we could use each other's bodies to our own advantage, how the body makes signals to the other body present without actually speaking, showing what they want to be done.

Though my body willingly engaged in the various motions, and I was taking note of the patterns, my mind was also busy with other thoughts. I knew that a serious mistake had been made that night at the party, that we would have to be scarce (as one might say) for awhile, and that our customer base would shrink as a result. I thought of other people who did drugs, who liked the feeling of drugs, and from any number of shows and movies I arrived at the market of prostitutes. And as I thought through this idea, my body was engaging in the correct motions, and Vanessa was enjoying herself, and I knew how to make my body enjoy itself too, and I thought of how I would pursue these prostitutes as customers, how I would introduce myself to their market.

Also, I reasoned that there I could be one self instead of many. The night had exhausted me, and I was learning about certain limits to my body and mind. I did not want to be that tired again.

In the morning I drove Vanessa to the airport instead of driving her to Lexington because she said that was fine, even though flying is significantly more expensive for such a short distance.

She said, You're really good at sex.

I said, That's good.

She laughed and got out of the car. I laughed too.

Chapter Fourteen: The Streets of Louisville: Finding New Customers and Revenue.

In an effort to speed up the process of writing this biography¹¹², this chapter will summarize the ten years I spent as a prostitute, seven of which years I was primarily a pimp, all while maintaining my drug-dealing business. There are precedents for this representation of time in many novels and biographies, such as the section entitled Time Passes within Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*.

Certain areas of every moderately sized and larger city contain prostitutes, and probably many smaller cities as well. A corner or corners, a street or streets, a couple businesses, or perhaps an alley way. A place likewise familiar to police, prostitutes and their customers. Many people are surprised by this, that it is knowable and known if you search for it, that it isn't shut down as a result of this knowledge.

This can be explained simply in economic terms. According to economic theory, people have endless desire. However, acting on desire is limited by their means, so they must make several value choices throughout their lives. They must determine the relative worth of different

¹¹² *Editor's Note:* In occasionally cutting material from the manuscript, I've hoped to better situate the reader in this often verbose document, which spends as much or more time explaining how and why things are done as the things themselves. However, I only cut one very short section from this, the largest chapter in the entire book. I am simultaneously entertained and frustrated by the fact that this is Burgess' idea of summary, and so think the verbosity here should stand as an example of what this man considered to the point.

Despite apparent brevity, this chapter contains, primarily through the modernist imitation, some of the most damning evidence against Burgess as a criminal. It also marks a clear departure point in his relationship with Nora, one fraught with more and more contention as the document continues (something we talk about at length in her first interview in Appendix B).

activities or goods, and decide which are worth more to them, despite similarities in market price. Sex is understood to be a strong biological imperative. Men especially are thought to value it in all the cultures I am familiar with, indicating that sex is high on the list of priorities within the endless desire of people. That being the case, there is always going to be a market in response to this demand, as there will always be people who believe their skills can best be employed to exploit this market opportunity.

I'd long been taking advantage of this categorical market demand through my sales of drugs, but the events detailed in the previous chapter called for a change (of myself) as well as an expansion of the available market. This, combined with my recent sexual activity, and knowledge I'd derived from Michael and entertainment sources, culminated in my choice to become a prostitute.¹¹³

It was my understanding that prostitutes are generally drug-users, though this is not a rule despite its ubiquity as common knowledge. However, the people that end up working in the profession are usually considered outcasts, either sexually, financially, socially, or mentally, as well as drug addicts. While it is sometimes called the oldest profession, prostitution is rarely a career people actively aspire to. For instance, it is unlikely a five year old will say that they wish

And yet, even in this very long summary he elides many details of the business, and how many individual enterprises were begun. If so much of the book is meant to teach Nora or the reader how to get along in the world, and get rich in it, the specifics lacking in the later sections of this chapter largely undermine that. Still, it also demonstrates an increasing impatience with getting closer to the events surrounding Michael's death.

¹¹³ That doesn't make any sense, Nora said.

Which part?

All of it, she said. How this stuff could make you want to be a prostitute. You act like it was obvious.

If you prefer and think it is necessary, I said, I could discuss the other options I considered and why I ultimately decided against them.

No, she said. Don't do that.

to be a prostitute when they grow up, as opposed to a fireman or a marine biologist. A few reasons include:

- 1) It is illegal outside of Nevada and therefore carries with it the risk of lawful punishment.
- 2) Having sex in this way with strangers significantly raises the risk of exposure to sexually transmitted diseases, many of which are fatal if not treated, and which besides can require a lifetime of treatment.
- 3) Because the profession is itself illegal there are not any government regulations in effect concerning its running, and therefore the people employed in such a way are at a higher risk of being harmed physically or financially, which is the primary reason why pimps exist.
- 4) Many people are convinced that it is morally incorrect behavior.
- 5) It is uncomfortable, and sometimes very painful, especially if lubricant is not effectually used.

There are other reasons any number of people might have, but I believe the above cover the primary objections.

I was planning to enter a high risk environment, but I also viewed it as a way out of my current risk-filled environment. I would no longer directly associate with the college crowd of customers, not even in the limited way I had been, as the recruiter for new customers. My name was then circulating (as one might say) connected to drugs, and specifically connected to drugging people. By becoming a prostitute I could extricate myself from the other environment while inserting myself in a new one with significant business potential. Michael would lay low (as one might say) for a time before returning to college parties in Louisville, and I would

develop this separate base of customers and income so that the growth of our business was less dependent on a singular factor.

Gender is extremely important in an environment determined by sexual attraction and consummation. I often considered the supposed differences between men and women. As I was assumed to be a man, I generally imitated the expectations of such, though these expectations were different depending on the people I was with. When attempting to understand gender, I rarely asked others, at least not after receiving several answers narrowly based on said person's individual experience. People often seem to think that if they identify as either a man or a woman that then their own characteristics define said gender almost wholly, and this leaves one with an infinite amount of definitions of men and women. It is best formulated in the following way: Women are what I am because I am a woman. Alternatively, in the previous sentence replace the word woman with the word man.

Of interest, I've found if one falls into certain historically stereotypical understandings of gender, such as women being more emotional, then one is more likely to consider men and women as stable and understandable categories. For example, a man that claims to love sports and fighting will often think of men and women as more apparently different than a man who claims to love ballet and dresses.¹¹⁴

Genitalia, then, seems the most obvious distinction. However, if someone with a penis appears to be what is culturally understood as a woman, or someone with a vagina appears as what is culturally understood as a man, and people treat them as they would said perceived gender, then the distinction of genitalia ceases to be useful in most interactions. As, for example,

¹¹⁴ For a brief analysis of clothing and its relation to understandings of gender, please see Chapter One: My Time, Place, and Immediate Family.

to treat someone with a penis who wishes to be understood as a woman as instead a man, is often to treat them in a way they don't want. Also, others might not understand this treatment as they themselves think said person is their perceived gender, regardless of known or unknown genitalia. This seemingly incorrect treatment (though correct if strictly based on genitalia) can then make the gender-questionable individual or others confused or angry or sad or other seemingly negative emotions, which then produces unnecessary difficulties.

I always prefer considering how one is treated or performs as the ultimate determinants in categorical understandings, as it in general determines how one interacts in society as a whole, which is the only reason to consider the distinction useful except for sexual purposes (if one desires specifically a penis or vagina) or for purposes of procreation. Also, hermaphrodites exist. And some people have deformities or medical issues, and varying levels of testosterone or estrogen, which is what people who are convinced of strict understandings of gender usually consider the second-most important determinant after genitals.

Despite the plethora of potential definitions, there are certain ways by which people identify a man or woman. Outward traits that will prompt one to call another either sir or m'am, miss or mister. There are biological identifiers as well as performative ones. Some of the performative identifiers include: hair length, the movement or lack thereof of hips, posture, jewelry, hand gestures, tone of voice, shaved or unshaved legs, smell (not meaning natural, but the use of perfume and/or cologne, choice of deodorant, soap, etc.), tendency to cry, crossing legs diagonally or horizontally, laughing, smiling, pouting, growling, general comfort with passing gas or burping, dominant or submissive sexual preference, passivity or aggression in conversation, nail polish, aesthetic choice in movies or games or books or toys or furniture or

music, color preference, word choice. This list is incomplete because anything can be gendered, and differently depending on the culture and person in question.

In literature, you will often find that men shout when women scream, that women sob when men cry, that women murmur and men mutter. This is an example of how gendered ideas are omnipresent. Anything can be gendered if one wishes to gender it.

With these ideas, and various gender role models in mind, such as Rachel and Monica from *Friends*, Hillary Clinton, the aforementioned Tiffany Clark, my mother, Julia Roberts character from *Pretty Woman*, and every woman I could remember from life and television, I became a woman. My task was more complicated than this, as I would need to adopt the traits that men are attracted to en masse, as well as the traits men are attracted to in biological males (people with penises) who are female (in self-identification), but that was something I needed more time to learn.

I could've remained what is culturally considered a man, but I believed being a woman would be more profitable. Especially considering the assumed sex-drive of males, and that the majority of males claim to be straight and/or attracted to femininity. It also became apparent to me in my research that people who are considered perverts tended to visit prostitutes more often than others.¹¹⁵ In this way, I could possibly appeal to a large array of the preexisting clientele, because having sex with transwomen (or transvestites, if you are familiar with older terminology) is considered perverted by many in our culture, and perverted things are by definition found outside of supposed normative life routines. In order to do this effectually, I

would need to not pass, the term for when one doesn't look biologically like their self-identified gender, while at the same time being considered attractive.

Pervert is an example of when the competing definitions of a word have dangerous implications for otherwise law abiding people, as it can equate those who have sex consensually, like transgender people or gay people, with people who assault/rape others. Or people who like to do other supposedly odd things while having sex, though I've found most people like what are considered odd things while having sex. This confusion in the use of the term pervert is the case even though when asked directly almost all people will tell you rapists are worse, and most everyone, other than ostensibly rapists/assaulters, considers non-consensual sex wrong, because one person is forced to do something they do not want to do. Whereas the second category represents an outward physical threat, the first and third categories only represent supposedly non-normative ways of being, even though for the people who are these things it is normal.

To be recognized as a woman by others, I put on the seemingly necessary clothes, jewelry, makeup, and shaved my face and legs as well as significantly trimming my eyebrows. I was not good at this at the beginning other than the shaving, but reasoned even doing this poorly would demonstrate a desire to fit into the set I wished to sell drugs to. In addition to this I imitated various speech patterns derived from my gender role models, specifically my understanding of the characteristic of sassy, of which characteristic I know of no masculine equivalent, though gay men are sometimes said to be sassy, but these gay men are generally considered particularly feminine. Sassiness is primarily evidenced in insulting people in a way

¹¹⁵ Pervert is defined as: a person whose sexual behavior is regarded as abnormal and unacceptable. The multiple meanings of pervert may be compared to the multiple meanings of gay, and how one's understanding of what is morally wrong can significantly change the

that also works to defend oneself mentally, and usually includes a strong defense in words of particular fashions of dress and appearance. It also implies a lack of care about what others think of oneself, and is often considered funny for its brashness. In many reality shows you will find what could be termed sassy women. It may also be used as a racialized term, fitting in some ways with the stereotypical understanding of the angry black woman, implying one understands all black women to be more angry than most people. However, my particular usage was not intended to be racialized, nor was this the dominant meaning I was familiar with.

The question then became how to make my initial entry into the prostitution culture. After spending several late nights driving around poorer areas of downtown Louisville, I composed a list of streets and corners where people who appeared to be prostitutes gathered and prostituted. To protect myself in the eyes of the law (as one might say), and to protect any of the prostitutes which may still be active in the profession, I will not name any of the specific streets. However, I arrived on June 10th at the corner of _____ and _____ at about one AM, and then approached what I believed to be a group of prostitutes, though I was wrong.

They stood on the corner smoking cigarettes. They each wore a hat that looked like a penis or a shirt with a picture of a cartoon penis. One was sipping out of a straw that looked like a penis. This advertising of an obsession with penises as a form of fashion seemed to me a way to attract the male sex. Generally, men like it when someone they wish to have sex with communicates that they like penises, specifically their own.

I'd parked a couple streets over and it took me longer to walk there than I'd planned. I was wearing a blond wig, a heavy amount of foundation (it blocked my pores and made my face hot,

meaning of a word. See Chapter Four: My First Job: An Introduction to Diversity, for a thorough analysis of the term gay.

causing me to sweat), dark eyeshadow called lady of the night, black mascara, a little blush, dangling earrings, blood red lipstick, three rings, two bracelets, a V-cut blouse under which I wore a push-up bra with padding, and a pencil skirt, with what are called stilettos for shoes. Because of the shoes and the skirt and my inexperience with them, it was difficult to walk, and my feet hurt after a few minutes.

They were laughing loudly as I approached, swaying arrhythmically from time to time. The swaying seemed an indication of drunkenness, which made sense with my current understanding of prostitutes, that they were always on some kind of drug.

As I approached, the one with the penis straw looked suddenly at me and then started laughing, and then stopped. I laughed too.

She asked, Oh my God, are you a prostitute?

Cheryl, another one interjected. You can't just call someone a prostitute. I'm sorry, she said. She's drunk.

That's alright, honey, I am what I am. I'm not making any apologies for it, I said. This dialogue mimicked much of what I'd seen in media as prostitute dialogue, though it was not accurate among actual prostitutes, though I did not yet know that, and would not learn it from these particular women. As they weren't actual prostitutes, they seemed to accept the stereotypical understanding easily.

Wow, Cheryl said, I never thought I'd meet a prostitute.

It was at this moment that I was certain I'd made a mistake, as the initial surprised reaction to my presence had suggested it, though not confirmed it. Why would she say she'd never met a prostitute if she and her group were prostitutes? But before I could clear up this confusion another one of them asked me a question. In the case that my supposition was correct,

and it was, I reasoned that at the least this would provide practice being a prostitute with non-prostitutes. In this case, the stereotypical dialogue continued to convince them I was a prostitute, which I was.

What got you into this life? Cheryl asked, smiling slightly with her eyes wider and her face leaning forward in what seemed to represent fascination, as I've seen on the faces of people when first confronted with something/someone they consider anomalous, like a gay person, African, Muslim, corvette, etc.

The money is what, hun, I said. There's no one doing this for their health.

A couple of them laughed. I laughed too.

Cheryl then tripped and fell into me. I had my hands in front of me making female-assumed gestures, my right arm cradling the elbow of my left arm, the left wrist bending back and forth with the rhythms of my speech, my butt jaunting to the left so that the weight of my torso was largely resting on my left hip. With the stilettos on, I reasoned moving backwards would be unsafe, and I didn't want to get my left wrist caught by doing nothing. So I straightened my back and quickly adjusted my hands outward to catch and push Cheryl back. I was standing on the street while she was standing on the sidewalk so that she fell at a slight angle and my hands cupped her breasts and then used them to push her back up on the sidewalk where she stumbled backwards and fell on the ground.

Oh my god, I'm so sorry, I said, because that is what people say.

He just grabbed my breasts, she said.

I'm a woman, I said. More of a woman than you anyhow. In addition to being sassy, I knew only strict affirmation of an identity would solidify the idea in other's minds, or at least in their behavior towards me, as I cannot read thoughts.

That f_____ she-male just grabbed my breasts. And we were being nice to you. You don't know what you just did. My fiance is going to kick your f_____ a____. This seemed like a pretty extreme reaction to her breasts falling into my hands.

Honey, I said, it was an accident. I wasn't trying to cop a feel.

Don't call me honey, Cheryl said.

Then another one of them said, Calm down, Cheryl. He didn't mean to do it.

How many times do I have to say this? I'm a woman, I said again, emphasizing the word woman.

She then, Jesus, the same one said.

Another one of them stumbled forward to seemingly look more closely at me, because that is what she did.

You're not a woman, she then said. I don't know who told you you could go around calling yourself one. You don't live a woman's life. You don't know what it means. And I'm pretty sure you have a c_____ underneath that skirt. She laughed. You think you know what it means to be a woman because you put on a dress?

Many of her words were significantly slurred, but for clarity I decided not to phonetically spell them out. Also, it was not my intention to communicate that I understood all women because I was a woman, which is an absurd thing for any person of any identification to ever assume as each person is individually different to some extent, though there are still many who make this categorical assumption, seemingly more than do not.

It occurred to me that they were treating me considerably different than I'd ever been treated before, by other women especially. I knew that assumed-women were treated differently than assumed-men. Based on the cues I discussed above people will act differently around a

person. They will be nicer or meaner. They will shout or whisper. They will flirt or angrily dismiss. They will take more or less seriously, which is the last example I'll write though I could write many more.

What I found most interesting about her way of treating me was her general lack of fear in being confrontational. I'd observed at some parties and during school late at night a certain wariness on the part of females when approached by a strange or unknown male, and even more so when approached by more than one male. The reason for this is primarily fear of sexual harassment or rape if I understand correctly. As rape is physically painful and is considered psychologically harmful, it makes sense to fear it, especially considering the assumed strength of the male sex-drive. As far as sexual harassment, it is generally considered annoying and a potential sign of forthcoming assault and/or rape.

Despite her assertion that I was not a woman, she was treating me much more like a woman than a man, in her general dismissal of me as a person to be treated with respect and her absence of fear in my presence. What might have been a certain wariness or fear of reprisal if I wore different clothes, cleaned off my makeup, and spoke differently, was substituted with disdain, anger, and I believe disgust, as evidenced from her vulgar and angry reference to my genitals, her furrowed brows, and the asymmetrical curve of her upper lip. I reasoned this might be because I accidentally grabbed Cheryl's breasts, but this did not seem a sufficient explanation for the extremity of the reaction, especially given that it was clearly accidental. I did not choose for or in any way cause Cheryl to fall into me, unless my near proximity was considered a fault that lead to her tripping.

Guys, just leave him alone, another girl with a penis shirt said.

She, I corrected. You all deaf?

I was becoming frustrated (if it might be called that) that they continued to use the wrong pronoun. As I wrote above, genitals do not wholly explain ideas of femaleness, maleness, or in general what the absence of genitals would mean, or the presence of both sets. Further, we can consider women who take testosterone, or no longer produce estrogen. Is a woman defined by how she experiences pleasure, or how she experiences the world? Is she defined by how she thinks about the world and behaves within it? Is she defined by what others believe her to be? Or who she engages with in the world and by extension does not engage with? With appropriate modification, you may ask the same questions concerning men.

Each explanation makes as much sense as the other. Which is to say, none of the explanations are satisfactory as they are not inclusive. I've found there is only one inclusive and conclusive way to determine gender, and avoid the limitations of categorization elsewhere. Only one's individual self-identification will consistently work as it is necessarily conclusive, at least at the time that the person in question declares their gender. In each present moment they may change their identification, but in that present moment one can know if one asks and the other answers, unless the other lies, but in that case you are still thinking of them as they wish to be thought. At the same time, regardless of what you believe individually, other people will continue to believe other things.

Interestingly, I've found those with strict definitions of gender seem to want to affirm another's gender primarily for the following three reasons:

- 1) To figure out if they want to have sex with them.
- 2) To understand how they should treat them generally.
- 3) To figure out if they're worthy of going to hell, or are generally morally wrong in their behavior.

4) To effectively sell them something, though in this case it seems to be less that they care what gender the person is than that they understand people buy certain things when they align strongly with a particular gender.

For example, when transwomen are murdered, it is often a result of a man hitting on them (as one might say) and then feeling shame¹¹⁶ for having hit on someone who was biologically born a male (with a penis), because it threatens (as one might say) their understanding of their own masculinity, which strict definition of gender these particular men seem to define partially based on their ability to tell if someone was born with a penis or not. As a result of this shame, they murder the transwoman in question, which is also a good example of how important understanding shame can be.

Despite the general confusion around defining gender conclusively among adults, this can be heightened among children, who are not yet producing either testosterone or estrogen. It seems many people feel a desire or urge from a young age to attach themselves (as they say) to one gender or the other, as I've heard and read and seen. However, this is only noted when one is not the gender that others assumed they were based on their genitals when they were born. That is to say, no one notices that a boy is a boy, but they do notice if a boy is a girl. That statement is for clarity sake, as clearly in the latter example the boy would actually be a girl from the start. But to write that people notice that a girl is a girl would not have communicated the message I was attempting to convey.

For myself, I neither felt nor feel like a boy or a girl. I do not know what it would mean to feel like a boy or a girl, or a man or a woman. I only feel like me. I tended to act as a boy/man is thought to act because that is what other people thought I was, and because it made them feel

better if I did. This is a natural extension of my rule of projecting people's willed-belief if at all possible¹¹⁷. At this point, I begun acting as a girl/woman.

In summation, boy and girl and man and woman are often not helpful categories in understanding. People are strange and selfish, each individually so. In fact, almost all categorical assumptions will fail at some point, which is frustrating. As I have written elsewhere, people are whatever they pretend to be and that is okay.

The woman who'd been insulting me continued to insult me for a while longer, until a woman who was not a part of the penis group approached. This was Tapanga, who would be influential in my entrance into the prostitution profession.

She had long pink hair, an oval face, what is called an hourglass shape, toned calf muscles, large hands with moderate sized arms, large breasts and buttocks, copper colored skin, and her nails were pink to match her hair. She wore a black jacket that cut off at her midriff, under which she wore a form-fitting dress that was purple and decorated with reflective material, and black heels. She approached from around the side of the block we were on and I saw her before the others. She made eye-contact with me, then squinting and inverting her lips slightly to express apparent suspicion. This suspicious expression was then replaced by a general relaxation of her facial muscles, followed by a smile. When the penis group heard the sound of her heels on the sidewalk they turned to look at her.

It's another one, Cheryl said.

¹¹⁶ For analyses of shame see Chapter One and Chapter Seven.

¹¹⁷ See Prelude: Reasons.

B____, what did you say to me? Tapanga asked. I've found that immediately being confrontational in speech is only wise when you understand the situation you're entering to already be confrontational in speech and/or action, which is what I believe Tapanga assumed.

You're a prostitute, Cheryl said. Probably a she-male too.

Tapanga smiled. You wanna suck my d____? Is that what you're saying?

What?

You wanna know if I'm a she-male because you wanna suck my d____?

F____ you. How about you go and suck a d____? Or, suck your own d____. You f____ c____.

Well, which one is it? C____ or d____? Cause I'm getting confused. You bothering this girl?

That's not a girl.

Darlin', tell me, do I come to your work and tell you you're not sucking that d____ right, and what kinds of d____ you should suck? Do I criticize you for your d____-sucking skills?

I don't. I don't know what you're talking about. I don't suck d____. You do. You're the prostitute.

I'm not a f____ prostitute.

Yes you are. Look at you.

You got d____ all over you. You and your friends. I've never seen so many d____. Like a d____ parade. And call me a prostitute again and I'll cut your f____ nose off your face, and then we'll see how many of those d____ you get to suck.

Much of what Tapanga was saying was clearly meant to be funny, as forms of bullying often are, and so I laughed. I knew laughter in this situation would indicate I was taking sides (as

one might say) since this was a hostile confrontation. But it seemed wise at this point to side with Tapanga who seemed to wish to protect me. A couple of the penis group looked at me when I laughed.

What the f___ you all doing down here anyway? Tapanga asked.

It's a bachelorette party.

You see any other bachelorettes down here? You see a bar full of frat boys looking to rufie you? Are there some dualing pianos around here I don't know about?

No, Cheryl said as she started to cry. Why are you doing this? You ruined my night.

How the h___ did you all get down here? Who planned this party?

Monica, Cheryl said, crying harder. Why the f___ are we down here?

You said you wanted to see a prostitute.

You all better f___ off before I break my heel off in your a___.

Real original, one of them said.

Then Tapanga approached the girl that said this, took off one of her heels, and swung the heel into her a___, as she'd said. The heel did not break, but the woman fell down and clutched at her hind end in apparent pain. Then she started crying. Then the non-crying penis group members got the crying penis group members and they all walked off together down _____ street.

When they left Tapanga turned to me and asked, And who the f___ are you?

I'm Minnie, I said, because that was my name. And thanks for that. Those girls were pretty mean.

Yeah, they weren't the sweetest crowd I've ever met. But I've met worse too. Then she stopped talking and looked up and down at my body. Darlin', she said, you look you just got run over.

Why would you say that? I asked, certain that she was insulting me. I said the last two words with a quick rise and fall in inflection, attempting to communicate disdain and hurt feelings (as is often said).

Your face, what did you do to your face?

I put it on, I said. I guess you're saying I did a s___ job. When people ask what you did even though what you did is clear, they are usually implying you did the thing in question incorrectly or poorly.

She smiled and removed a pack of cigarettes from her jacket. She offered me one and I took it, as sharing habits is a good way to make friends. She lit my cigarette and her own. She inhaled hers deeply and while exhaling said, It's way too much, what you got going on there. I don't know what you're going for, but you look more like a rodeo clown than a lady.

Your eyebrows are crooked, I said. I raised my own eyebrows when I said this and moved my face somewhat from side to side, communicating that I was making a come-back (as one might say). Her eyebrows were not actually crooked, she'd just been looking at me with her head slightly cocked.

You come down here to see if a real lady can fight, because I don't have a problem dusting up that face, as f_____ up as it already is.

No, I said, I was just wondering if a real lady wanted some weed. Maybe something to take the edge off.

So you're a cop. Cause now I think I get it, why that makeup looks like a five-year-old's first time face-painting.

I'm not a cop, I said.

F___ off, she said.

Look, I didn't mean to come off as a b____. I'm just trying to make a living. Same as you. Appealing to similarities with others often convinces them to listen to you via creating sympathy, as I've written of elsewhere.

She smiled. So you think I'm a prostitute too, huh?

I wasn't sure what to say, as I did not know why else she was in this neighborhood unless she was also attending a bachelorette party, though I understood it was odd to have a bachelorette party in such a dangerous and poor part of the city, hence my mistaking the penis group as prostitutes. No, I said, of course not.

You're not a terrible liar, she said. But, for your information, I am not.

I said, So what's with the outfit then? Night on the town gone wrong? I was being sassy.

Oh, you're funny, she said, but she did not laugh or smile.

Anyway, I said, I was looking to see if any of the girls down here might like something to help the hours pass, you know?

You're not great at innuendo, she said. And you already said you sell drugs. Why you being all sly now?

I wasn't sure how to adjust my speech. The affectations I had did not make room for such frequent interrogation of said affectations. The adjustments themselves were being critiqued, so it was more difficult to further adjust, so I didn't say anything.

Now you're speechless, huh?

Well, you're making it pretty hard on me, hun.

When you say hun, you sound like an actor or something. Hun, she said, deeply, with some irritation expressed through the upturned lip and pull of her head backwards. I never said hun again when I was Minnie.

I'm not an actor. Don't think actors prostitute and sell drugs, do they?

With the cigarette still in her right hand, she raised said hand and began rubbing her temples, likely to express exasperation. Look, she said, if you're down here to get in some work, that's fine. But you should know what you're getting into and the kind of people you'll have to deal with.

Like who? Your pimp? I was assuming at this point that she was lying about not being a prostitute because she feared legal retaliation and that my insistence of her as a prostitute and revelation of myself as same, would eventually get her to admit to it. However, I was wrong.

Watch yourself, she said. I don't have a f_____ pimp because I'm not a prostitute. Remember?

Okay, I got you.

Do you? she asked. She stared at me for a few seconds, and then asked, You got a place to stay tonight or what?

Did you wanna try some of my stuff? First one's always--

Tapanga took her forefinger and tapped it on my temple. Anybody in there? she asked.

I laughed. I'm sorry I'm being so weird, I said. I guess I'm just nervous. It's my first time down here, and no I don't have a place to stay. I was hoping to earn enough to get in somewhere.

Where you get the drugs?

My man. Told me I better come back with some cash and customers. We used to work out of Chicago, but it's too d___ cold up there.

Well Minnie, I don't know what the f___ to do with you. But if you need a place I can take you in for the night. It's not safe out here without someone looking out for you. And I'm not gonna be that person. Where is your man, anyway? Don't seem like he's doing his job.

I found it odd that Tapanga so quickly and willingly offered to help me, but when I learned of her job later this would explain the particularity of her offer. What remained unexplained was why she would trust someone she'd just met to stay in her apartment, but in general she was always very trusting of the girls (as we all called them and as they called themselves) in the area.

At some party somewhere, I said. Said I need to earn before I rest. Michael was the person who I would introduce as my man later. He was currently at a party, though it was in Lexington, not Louisville, as he was still laying low, as I wrote.

Well, come on. I don't need your death hanging over me. Then she started walking down the street. I followed her.

About twenty-five minutes passed between the time when we left that corner and when Tapanga opened the door to her apartment. The building was old but looked like someone was doing general maintenance regularly. Her apartment was clean and the walls were white, and it included a living room, two bedrooms, a kitchen, and one and a half baths. Over the next couple hours, as I drank two cups of tea Tapanga provided, I learned of the recent past of Tapanga's life as well as what was then the present. For about four years Tapanga had been a prostitute, until she was saved (as she said) by someone with New Hope, New Lives, a non-profit that she herself had worked for the last three years. Like the woman that saved her, and presumably whoever

saved the woman before her, and so on, Tapanga did her work among those in the life (as she called it), making sure they knew that they always had an option for at least a couple nights if they needed it, that this could be their first stop out of hell (as she said). Despite all the religious imagery that she used she was not a Christian, and only some of the non-profit workers were. Beyond providing food and shelter through people like Tapanga, the non-profit also offered those committed to quitting prostitution the option of drug treatment programs or job placement, or both.

Being around it everyday helps me keep perspective, she said. I know how to reach these girls. But I think that's enough coming from me. What the h___ are you doing down here? she asked.

Just trying to make a living and keep my man happy.

What's this about Chicago? You running away from something?

I thought we all were.

Not me, she said. Not anymore. You can't run forever. There's a reason people say that.

But you can run for a real long time, I said, using wordplay to modify the phrase she'd just used.

She smiled. Yeah, you can. Then she paused for about five seconds, and then she said, You know I can't let you sell to my girls. I'm supposed to protect them.

You saying they don't already have drugs? Because I'm not sure I believe that.

Some of them do. But the harder they get on drugs, the harder it is for them to get out. Addiction feeds into it, as I'm sure you know.

Hmm, I said, because I did not know what else to say...¹¹⁸

When I lay down in her spare bedroom that night, I thought for a long time of what I could do to get Tapanga to support my business, or at least not hinder it. She had been kind to me, and this kindness could be attributed to her desire to help the girls, which in turn would hinder my business. It seemed I needed to have her in my debt (financially or otherwise) in order to successfully conduct drug and prostitution sales in the area, though I didn't think she'd hinder the prostitution specifically, as she hadn't said she would. I slept well, which I note because often people claim to not sleep well in beds that are not their own.

In the morning, I first woke not because of my alarm which was set for 6:30 AM, but because someone was knocking at the door, repeatedly and strongly. I went to the half-bathroom because it was closer to me and I checked on my makeup, which was smeared and looked even worse aesthetically than the day before. I wiped off the parts that were smudged and I listened as Tapanga opened the front door.

Oh great, she said.

That's right. It's me. You're not surprised, are ya? It was a voice primarily influenced by testosterone.

No, I'm not surprised, Tapanga said. Figure I know you well enough to know you'll do everything you can to make my life difficult.

¹¹⁸ *Editor's Note:* Over the course of about 1500 words Minnie and Tapanga talk about television shows they both like as well as the celebrities they find most attractive. Nothing relevant outside of the moment other than Burgess/Minnie saying she is bisexual. Otherwise, Burgess claims the primary reason for the inclusion of these details is to demonstrate how he cultivated shared interests to endear Tapanga to her/him, though one assumes the money and violence following this conversation had a lot more to do with it. Still, as with everything concerning Burgess, he saw it as an accumulative effect.

That's not fair, the person said. It's not fair to say I'm making your life difficult when we both know it's you. It's you not paying your rent on time. It's you bringing in whores and junkies at all hours. It's you with your, whatever the f___ you call this get-up. This like whole thing. It's you.

Hmm, she said. You know, I like you. You're not like other people. You're much more-- Handsome?

No, that's not it.

Charming?

No, no. Actually, you know what it is. It's that your face looks like a testicle.

That's hilarious, Tapanga. You been working on that one for awhile?

No, I'm just inspired in your presence.

I think you know what I want.

Same thing as last time then? Tapanga asked. Cause we can make pretty quick work of this.

That's what I'm saying.

Darlin', we're not talking about the same thing.

You know I love it when you call me darlin', but everything equal, you better pay up. I can't have people like you coming in and out all of the time without a little extra income to supplement. You know there are some normals living here too.

Jesus, she said. I really hope you're not talking about Al.

Al's alright.

Al's living room is a shrine to Star Wars and Lord of the Rings, and his apartment smells like the bedroom of a fifteen-year-old boy. Like semen and dirty laundry. That s___ wafts into the hall.

We're getting off topic.

Are we?

Yeah, cause you know what I need and it doesn't have anything to do with Al. It's got to do with you. If you just give it to me then we won't have to worry about any more misunderstandings.

You need to go. You got your money. I gave you the check yesterday.

It was due last week, not yesterday. Now you got late fees.

How much?

A hundred.

Then Tapanga made a noise that wasn't speech. I've since seen her when she makes this noise. Her head is usually lowered, eyes then looking up at the person in front of her. Her whole face is tense. You can tell that she is clenching her teeth and that her cheek muscles are straining. Then there is a low grumble that would otherwise be a shout, if her mouth were open. It's how she expresses frustration when she's extremely angry.

I'll get you that tomorrow then, she said after making the noise.

I'm sorry to say that's not going to work for me, the person said. Everyday it gets a little bigger. You know what I mean. And like I said, we have to consider the circumstances. How your particular case is more difficult.

As I listened I considered intervening several times, and yet wanted to be sure I could appear helpful and be appreciated by Tapanga, and not harmful and unappreciated. It was clear

her help in meeting the prostitutes and setting up drug distribution could save me a significant amount of time and effort. Would hurting this person at the door help Tapanga? Would she accept money in exchange for her service as she seemed to need money? Would she like both of these things? Were there ways I could hurt this person that didn't involve an immediate physical confrontation? If I did physically confront this person was it better to be seen so they knew who to fear, or better to be unseen so as to avoid typical legal consequences? However, if unseen in my infliction of harm, how might I communicate to Tapanga that I was the one who did it, so that she could be grateful and willing to help me despite the job she did and the morals she'd been convinced of, and also communicate to the person that they should leave her alone?

Despite potential legal consequences, I was becoming more convinced of immediate violence against this person. Through innuendo they seemed to be communicating that they wished for Tapanga to give something other than money, and presumably sexual in nature, as sex is the topic most often referred to in the use of innuendo.¹¹⁹ Tapanga cleared up (as one might say) any remaining confusion (for myself) the next time she spoke.

Look, the person said, I just can't see a way of us working this out without a boost in the rent or some kind of alternative payment.

I don't think we need to dance around it anymore. You're saying you want me to suck your c____, right? That's what you're saying.

Whoa, whoa, the person said. Those are your words, not mine. But, I mean, if you wanted to, I could be amenable to that. As two consenting adults.

I think you're confused about what consent means, she said.

¹¹⁹ The definition of innuendo is: an allusive or oblique remark or hint, typically a suggestive or disparaging one.

In general, there seems to be much performative confusion concerning consent when sex is what needs to be consented to. Men especially act confused about what a woman is asking for (as they say) when it concerns sexual intercourse. Much of this may be related to my previous identification of sexual harassment and rape as potential outcomes of approaching men. Even when women say no, some men claim they mean yes. But if this were the case, then it is difficult to know what word would actually mean no. This purposeful misunderstanding seems primarily a way for said men to get what they want while pretending what they want is also what the woman wants. In this particular case, the person seemed to be understanding her no as a yes, and sexual coercion and rape and assault are all illegal activities.

In summation, as what this person was doing could be considered illegal, I believed there was only a slight possibility that they would report violence against themselves to any kind of authority. And so I left the bathroom with the intention of harming this person physically just enough to avoid having to take them to the hospital, which might be necessary if there was extensive blood loss or broken bones, etc. Also, something I've not written of as it hasn't been relevant but now is, is that when I could I spent an hour a day doing cardio and another half an hour lifting weights, and still do, so that I was relatively strong and in good shape (as one might say).

I walked down the hallway and into the living room where the front door was located.

Jesus, the man said, seemingly in reaction to how I looked, as he was clearly a man as it is generally understood.¹²⁰

This was the beginning of three primary acts of violence I would commit that ultimately lead to me becoming a pimp, which simplified my use of the prostitutes as both customers and salesmen of drugs, and provided the additional income of a percentage of their prostitution sales, once I was a pimp.

I approached the sexual harasser/landlord/coercer/man and said, I think you better be leaving now.

¹²⁰ If you review the above writing you'll notice I avoided gendering him explicitly the entire time I've written of this conversation, because Nora suggested I should as she said it would be an interesting experiment for the reader after she considered what I'd written and what we'd talked about concerning gender, though it is becoming increasingly unlikely I will ever publish this, considering the events I plan on soon describing.

I presume through his speech and Tapanga's reaction to it that you have assumed that he was a man. This is an example of how people will gender things even in the absence of explicit gendering, though I did write of his voice being influenced by testosterone, but so was Tapanga's, and she is a woman. Similarly, from Tapanga's speech you may have inferred that he had a penis, which he did, but again, so did Tapanga.

I presume Nora's experiment will support what I've generally found to be true, which is that it is difficult for people to hear about a person without imagining a very particular instantiation of a gendered person. I assume this because of people's expressed concern with knowing the gender of people I speak of who have what are called gender neutral names, meaning the gender of said names is ambiguous, not absent. For instance, you could posit that I am gender neutral (or genderless in certain understandings), but the name John is not understood as gender neutral, so the people in question wouldn't ask about the gender of a John. You can call a thing whatever you want, but that will never change its material composition, and probably won't change its behavior, if it is a living thing.

Tapanga, the man said, where do you find these... He gestured for a while at me, at my face and my body, and he had a look of disgust, his cheeks and nose pulled up so that his lips curved up as well, though his bottom lip and jaw did not move. Seemingly, this was his way of searching for a word in his mind. These things, he finally said.

Before he had finished saying the word things, I had begun to arch my right arm backward in a semi-circle, my hand curled into a fist, then pulling the arm back so that my fist came down on his left eye from an upward angle, making contact that snapped his head and neck backward and to his right, so that his head hit his own shoulder, which further propelled his torso backward, followed by his legs, which caused him to fall to the floor.

The f___? he asked, laying on the floor.

I then quickly moved on top of his body so that my legs straddled his stomach, and in quick succession I punched with my left and then right fist, each punch taking approximately half a second, so that he was not able to respond as he was significantly confused as to what was occurring, as I've learned consistent and surprising physical attack and harm can cause, disallowing him to think of hitting me back or defending himself, though he did eventually move his hands towards his face, but then I punched his face through his hands. My own hands hurt significantly, and I'd later realize I'd broken three fingers and a bone in my left hand, but

Also, based on villainous or unlikeable characters as described in writing and shown in film and on television, you may have presumed he looked certain ways even though I have not physically described him. Nora said she imagined him as having a pot belly as well as being bald with a scar on his right cheek, wearing a dirty white undershirt, sweatpants, and well-used slippers. In fact, he was a skinny man with what could be called nice hair, full and black and parted on the left side of his head. He wore a clean t-shirt with a University of Louisville decal on it, straight jeans, and what are sometimes referred to as loafers on his feet. His face was not attractive considering general aesthetic standards, but he did have nice hair, as I wrote. There were prominent veins on his forehead which is why I believe Tapanga said his face looked like a testicle.

adrenaline managed to keep that sense of pain from reaching my brain until after I was done punching his face, which I did for about forty-five seconds before Tapanga pulled at my shoulders so that I fell off of his body.¹²¹

I got up from the floor and with my legs pushed his entire body past the threshold of the door, as before only his torso was in the hallway while his legs remained inside Tapanga's apartment. I then shut the door and turned to look at Tapanga.

Her eyes were wide and her mouth open, though she wasn't saying anything. She was, what is often appropriately named, speechless, as it implies that one does not know how to respond to a particular thing, whether that be other speech or action. She stood that way for about five to six seconds. Then she expelled air like she was about to laugh, but did not. It sounded like a laugh that was begun and then halted. And then she actually did start laughing, in what I believe was a kind of relief, what is sometimes done by people in situations in which they are grieving. At least, I believe it is either relief or an understanding of absurdity. For many people,

¹²¹ That's terrible, Nora said.

Which part? I asked.

You were acting like an animal.

Humans are animals, I said.

But, you were so violent. I mean, Jesus.

Animals are violent, I said, when they are threatened or hungry. Fight or flight theory accounts for this, which indicates how human beings respond to life-threatening moments in particular, flight here meaning running away, and fight meaning violence. Tapanga was threatened, and if we are to continue an animal metaphor of some sort that is non-human, you could perhaps say I was acting as if she were part of my pack, if I was a wolf, or part of my pride, if I was a lion. It was my hope that this action would demonstrate that I would defend Tapanga, and that I was capable of defending myself.

Okay. I get it, but still. And are you really that strong?

I am stronger than most people, especially people who do not lift weights on a regular basis.

That's, she said, pausing for a few seconds. I guess he deserved it. It's just. But then Nora did not say anything else for about twenty-five seconds, after which she told me to keep writing.

both violence and death seem to be thought absurd or relieving, especially in one's initial reaction to such, after the violence or death is over and certain.

She laughed for a fairly long time, longer than I have ever laughed since learning that excessive laughing makes people nervous.¹²²

I touched my hand to her shoulder and said, I'm not sure it was that funny, as someone (like my father) might have said to me if I laughed that long.

What? Are you some kind of psychopath? she asked.

I just don't put up with s____. Not from johns, not from people buying drugs, and not from misogynistic, rapist pieces of s____, which dialogue was a conglomeration of what are considered tonally strong female/feminist reactions to oppression (perceived or actual) based on gender, and which dialogue concerning the man was accurate, excepting the s____.

No, she said, then walking over to her couch and sitting down. I guess you don't, she continued, looking down at the floor. I'm not sure you made things any easier on me though. And you know, I don't need protection. I got my s____ together. And beating someone half to death doesn't usually simplify things.

Don't worry, I said. He won't bother you anymore. I'll be talking to him, and if that pervert wants to press charges I'll make sure they stick him with something that'll keep him away forever. He asks you again for sex and I'll f_____ kill him.

Settle the f____ down, she said. You act you never met someone like him. If I killed everyone who acted like I owe them a blow____ just because I'm living and breathing, I'd have to murder half the population.

¹²² See Chapter Four: My First Job: An Introduction to Diversity.

I then understood that what I had done was probably not going to convince her to help me in my enterprise, but I also understood that she didn't have a problem with it necessarily, and that it could at least show that I was supportive of her safety and general interest.

I heard you last night, I said, knowing how I would solidify my interest in her personal well-being, if not her support in my business venture. I know it took strength for you to get away from prostituting. I want you to know I respect that. I'm not here to make things worse for the girls. If they're gonna hook, then that's what they'll do. But if they're gonna I'll make sure they get as much out of it as they can. And if they need something to calm their nerves or help them get through the hard parts, then that's what I'll give them. You know they're all here because they don't have anywhere else to go. You know it because you went through it. Because you made it out. But I want you to think about how what you went through coulda been better. How if you were gonna be there anyway, there might have been a way to make it a little less awful. A little less scary. And a little more profitable so you could get off the street quicker.

Jesus, she said, then sighing. You sure are something. I'll be honest, I didn't think much of you when I met you last night. But this, this is something else. A violent motherf_____ whose on a crusade for prostitutes. Aren't you special. I ain't getting behind you in the drugs whatever you say. I heard most arguments. But I am going to let you clean up the mess you just made in my hall, because if I get evicted or that a_____ comes back asking for more, I'm blaming it on your psycho a__.

Over the rest of the day Tapanga and I talked, and through speech similar to that above, which communicated sympathy and what is called righteous indignation, and through ideas of feminist progression concerning prostitution, I convinced her to introduce me to some of the local girls, though not to sell drugs, as I said, but just so I knew some faces in the neighborhood.

In a couple days I would approach them all again and in those meetings offered free drugs of their choice and told them how they could contact me, though I made it clear that I was working for my man at the same time, so that they thought I was at least partially being forced into what I was doing, which I believe made them feel sympathy for me.

I visited Tapanga's landlord later in the day. He tried to shut his apartment door on me but I pushed inside. His face was swollen and some blood and spit was drooling out of his mouth, seemingly a reaction not within his control. I told him if he harassed Tapanga again, or asked for anything beyond what she owed for rent, that I would do this again. I told him if he tried to report this I would set him up for a crime he had not actually committed. I told him the police would find drugs and guns, and if not that, they would find his body, beaten beyond recognition, meaning no one would recognize the body was him because he would be so physically deformed by the violence I would do to him. I told him that he might see me around the neighborhood, but he would never know my name, that I was no one, that I could disappear, but that when I came back I would make sure he was dead. Through the blood and spit, and I believe a few crooked teeth (they were too red to tell for sure), he mumbled I'm sorry, and he began to cry. I left him that way because he was shaking, and I believed the fear that he was expressing through his body was beyond his control, and would cause him to do what I instructed.

Besides the introductions that Tapanga offered, I also told her if she helped me I would make sure that any girl who wished to get out of the profession was referred to her for help. In addition to this, I promised to donate a thousand a month, or more based on relative income, to her non-profit charity. However, I always made the checks out to Tapanga, so that she was also given the choice of keeping the money for herself. My hope was that she would keep the money

on at least a few occasions, which I then hoped would make her feel morally complicit in my activities, which I again hoped and accurately predicted would keep her from ever turning me in (as one might say) or in any way hindering the illegal activities I was engaged in. Once the checks and the referred girls were received (two in the first month), Tapanga ceased to criticize my drug sales.

I stayed at Tapanga's for a few more days before moving into an apartment of my own. I stayed so that I could make sure the landlord did not return or in any way threaten Tapanga. I also stayed so that Tapanga could teach me how to dress better and look better as a woman, specifically as a woman who is also a prostitute. While prostituting myself presented particular issues of safety, I knew I needed to do this in order for the girls to think I was one of them, which I believed would make me seem nonthreatening to them so they could trust me.

I quit attending college classes a week after entering my new environment. I quit speaking with my family because my father said he would not speak to me until I returned to school, but I knew I could continue to learn from books, and that the knowledge not available in books was only to be gained through interaction with people, which I could do in any environment. I would call home once a month to learn if he had changed his mind (as one might say), and my mother would speak to me for a few minutes, but only if my father was not in the house with her.

Over the next three years I prostituted myself exactly one hundred and four times, which was significantly less than most of the other girls who often had about six clients a night. However, my primary goal remained selling drugs, and in turn eventually recruiting several of the girls to sell drugs for me to both their clients and others if possible. While I significantly expanded our market in this way, Michael continued to expand our market via college students

and their parties. At our highest point of sales, we employed fifty-six dealers. We were still transporting the marijuana from Northern Kentucky where Brett¹²³ was in charge of guarding and tending to the crop, shifting the location to different public and private lands at a semi-regular basis that mostly alluded the attention of the authorities, though four of our fields were found and burned over the years. Other drugs, such as cocaine, heroine, and amphetamines, were obtained through the supplier we met through Tumbler's mother.

Our largest problem then was laundering the money, a metaphorical expression referring to making illegal gains seem as if they came through legal means, implying one is cleaning it like clothes, as the money we had was dirty (in a legal and sometimes moral sense), and coincidentally one the primary ways we did this was through a chain of laundry mats. Even with the various legal businesses we started, and whose accounts and bills we significantly inflated, at the end of my prostituting and pimping career Michael and I had \$553,212.44 in cash.

Michael occasionally helped out with the prostitution related business, primarily as the supposed source of all the drugs, and the reasoning behind my own selling of my body and drugs. He also would be involved in a couple of violent incidents which would lead to my becoming and remaining a pimp, or madam, for a more accurate gendered expression. These violent events will be explained below.

It's been two years since I started this manuscript. As Nora will eventually turn eighteen and likely move away to go to college, and as I am increasingly eager (if it might be called that) to understand whether I have a guilty conscience, I think a stylistic change for the remainder of my

¹²³ See Chapter Five for some detail on Brett as a younger man. Also see Chapter Nine for the reason that he was an employee both during that time and until I stopped selling drugs.

time as prostitute/pimp/dealer is a practical approach to finishing the manuscript while maintaining the goals I began with¹²⁴. I will continue to note many of Nora's comments, so that some confusions of the proposed style will be explained, though much of the confusion is exactly why I am using it, as it does not thoroughly explain many things. Concerning variation in style, I believe this may be appreciated, as all patterns employ repetition with variation, and now variation will be more apparent. Also, Nora has often called this writing boring, so perhaps this will be less boring.

I will here imitate what is considered a modernist style of writing, that used by authors such as Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, and William Faulkner. Besides the ability to move quickly or slowly through time and place depending on rhetorical purpose, the modernists also often rely on the supposed movement of thought and the symbolic power of individual images. I've also been told it is a more emotionally charged (as one might say) way of writing. Something I know my own writing often lacks, as I do not seem to experience emotion as others do, but something I will here imitate through my years of experience and knowledge accumulation. By using emotionally charged language and producing more variation and by not being boring, many aspects of this writing that may be considered faults elsewhere will be corrected here.

In order for this to accomplish what I want, among other things, I will need to imaginatively place motivation in people such as Tapanga and Michael, which motivation I will base on their speech and actions as I observed it in their lives as a whole, particularly using future events to detail past motivation, as I've already lived all of this. I will also invent action on others' parts that is consistent with things I heard and the repetitious behavior I observed in people even though the specificity of the actions and thoughts are things I could never know.

¹²⁴ See Prelude: Reasons.

While for the most part detailing two nights in particular, those in which violent incidents took place, which I know people like reading about, I will allow the future to occasionally be detailed as if it was apparent at the time even though it wasn't. The specific images of the two nights may be associated with the time as a whole, even though over time different things were more or less important, or more or less spoken of. However, many repetitions occurred. For example, Michael often spoke of the same things, ideas, and events on multiple occasions, in particular telling me about his recurring nightmares.

Some patterns I will imitate include:

1) The semi-frequent switch of the point of view of one character to another, sometimes within the same sentence, where point of view refers to the text simulating the thoughts or experience of the world through the body of a particular person. Though it requires a lot of guessing and reliance on what was said, the use of multiple points of view will allow me to describe an event and the consequences of the event (perceived and actual) in a short amount of writing.

2) The extension of sentences with more than usual use of conjunctions, semi-colons, and commas, in order to thematically connect different events and ideas so that many things may be written of consecutively and quickly.

3) Many of the long, particularly abstract, sentences will be followed by short sentences that affirm something so that the reader is more situated (as it is called) in the moment that is being described.

4) Frequent use of metaphorical and abstract language, as well as frequent return to certain images so that they might gain symbolic importance.

And many other patterns. But if I described them all then I would fail to achieve the purpose for which I'm using them.

--The Rest of Said Ten Years as a Modernist May Have Written it--

I

"I think he's dead," said Michael, his face lifting from the cracked pavement smeared with blood and stray pieces of the man's flesh and then from the red spattered graffiti-ed concrete wall facing them, turning somehow easily from the violence, to see how Minnie might be saved from this. Because he was only in this dark place with dull street lamps reflected in trash and puddles to help Minnie and Tapanga. Their faces lifted to meet his own, makeup daubed expressions projecting a future of repentance (if Minnie could feel such a thing), though this day seemed inevitable for years. The man's eye sockets were empty yet pooled with blood.

"I don't think there's a doubt," Minnie said, speaking in her own adopted voice tweaked and refined over three years, when it was first born out of a desire for change, monetary and personal; change that reflected desire within Michael, making him see this person, who he'd known through so many adaptations and years, anew, so that he now called her beautiful on occasion where before the compliment must be handsome. Even speaking this desire, Michael never moved too close to it.¹²⁵ That lilted and slightly lisping voice of hers ran on with authority

¹²⁵ Wait a minute, Nora said. I thought you said you didn't know if he loved you.

I didn't, I said, I don't. He never used the word desire and I use it here because it then parallels what I just wrote of as my desire to change, because of what happened at the party, and because of the expansion potential for our business.

about a man who deserved to die. But what else could we do? Minnie asked. Would have killed Denise if we weren't here. Left her body rotting in a dumpster. Just like Charlene two years ago. Different man. Same type. You know them, but Michael could not hear her speaking anymore but only the sound of his fist landing quick and then the jabs Tapanga and Minnie pierced in the man's body, moving in his mind back towards the scene and then away from it, screaming in that empty place only he inhabited, because he could not scream there, then, at that time, because he hid in his mind when reality bent too far. "Better pick him up," Minnie said.

After Tapanga and Minnie each took one arm while Michael grabbed hold of the legs and the silence settled and they were moving, the girl came running to them, back from where she'd hidden across in an alleyway ducked down behind a dumpster until the violence ceased. Denise was relieved and scared and grateful, and cried, blotched tears dropping black onto the pavement, as they hauled the body forward, muttering through her sobs how grateful she was.

"Not now," Michael said, and Minnie immediately made eye-contact with him to speak how they must bring Denise into the fold, make her pliant, willing to work for the life they'd

Right, but he called you beautiful? And what's this about not getting close to it? You make it sound like he's afraid to f___ you.

I'm not sure you should use such vulgar language. Not everyone is accepting of it. You're avoiding the question.

spared, and that they must accept her gratefulness with humility, that this was the way. She brought them in to show them her love in the only way she could understand it, through action; the love of a benefactor and employer. Love that provided shelter and protection, the moral product of their capitalist project. "It'll be alright," Minnie told her. "You're okay now." Denise nodded and ran away.

As they shuffled forward with the body on uneven sidewalks under blinking street lights pregnant with dead insects, Minnie's eyes caught hold of three of the girls across the street, standing in an imperfect triangle, smoking cigarettes and watching silently, and they didn't think anything of it. They'd say to each other the next day how it was nothing, good riddance, and why hadn't someone killed the b_____ before? they asked, leaning in close to each other and laughing because of the man's face when he realized he was dying (Mandy claimed she saw it though she was forty-five yards distant), and how Denise's swollen eye and bruised ribs and the cuts on her arms spoke of what he'd deserved. A man like that, they'd say, is born, not made. He can't be saved. But watching the body that night, as Tapanga, Michael, and Minnie maneuvered it, they were silent and struck by how brutally destruction descends. When the body and the bodies carrying it moved out of sight and a police car careened around a corner, they knew they

No, I was just giving you advice while it was still pertinent. Yes, he did call me beautiful. And yes, perhaps he was in love with me. You seem fairly convinced of it and if I recall details of us being together as we got older, and what some other people have said to me, it is valid to think he was in love with me. Regardless, for the purpose of this section it is fitting that I should pretend as if he did love me as it makes his motivation to help me clear, which motivation you otherwise seem to have a hard time understanding. But, of the signs of love that is romantic in nature, Michael seldom touched me, and he never asked to kiss me or have sex with me. He often stayed at my apartment. We often spent time together. He was often under the influence of a lot of drugs. Despite repeated opportunities, he never made his physical desire, if that is what he had, clear to me. I can say for certain that he told me he was bi-sexual, so he claimed to be attracted to both sexes, or penises and vaginas, however one might like to understand that, in

must hide what had occurred because it was him or them. This was a war zone and it wasn't about being on the morally upstanding side but the side that kept you alive, though they believed they were morally in the right, believed in the good intentions of the girls as a whole, and Michael, sweet Michael, they called him baby boy Michael. They moved towards the police car waving their hands, the collective motive leading them. Officer McClenan pulled over and rolled his window down, until one of them emerged among the others; Mandy, leaning down, pressed her hands against the metal gap in which the glass sheet now hid.

"Whatcha looking for honey?" she asked, speaking like some ditz Marilyn Monroe played, all smiles and upturned cheeks, her cleavage pressed forward to fill the officer's view. She was a southern girl who'd adopted the speech patterns of 50's movie stars or anything to put the johns at ease, to make them feel safe and in control. A feeling of control on their side of the transaction meant they didn't need to enforce it, make the woman feel their lost control through a violent outburst of rising shame. Officers of the law aren't always so different.

"Somebody called in, said they heard screaming. A woman and a man. You don't know anything about that, do you?" How could Mandy know a thing about that as she'd just been here with her girls smoking, and the night was as quiet or loud as any night; maybe the sound of a moan or scream of ecstasy; a television blaring the late show; gun shot fired a few streets over; a car horn when some bum struck out into the middle of the road to ask for change; the hard wet smack of a body hitting the pavement drunk or dead tired.

"Same as always down here. Nothing out of the ordinary, officer. We appreciate you looking after us though." She smiled wide and dipped her head to the side, playing innocence,

which case I am likely included as someone that could potentially attract him. But my potentiality as a partner was never actualized.

and McClenan shoved her away from his car and pulled forward, eyes wide to see what he knew the girls were lying about. Bunch of sluts that decided they wanted to get paid for it (McClenan thought), and now he was paid to shut them down in the ways he could, to monitor and contain; keep the stink of them from reaching anyone outside these blocks.

Denise watched the officer drive away from her hotel room window, same place the man started cutting and hitting her just a while ago before they came in to drag him out. He ran and they ran him down. That officer didn't listen, nobody listened, cause it was their own fault for doing what they did, as they'd all say; you think she hadn't gone down there before and told those pigs what these men did to her, what some of the shamed ones did, how they tied her up and broke her nose; how they cut her back and her arms and laughed; how they pressed into every orifice of her harder and faster after she cried and told them to stop; how their eyes glazed over and you knew there was nowhere left to go? Denise's left eye was already swelling; she'd feel grateful until the day she died. Nobody ever did anything for her since she left home five years ago because if they did she wouldn't be here, though it wasn't all bad. She didn't want anyone to think it was all bad. Most of the johns were fine.

Two days later Michael and Minnie would tell her to round up all the girls so they could tell them they'd always protect them, that those with and without pimps could exist under the umbrella they'd cast. But if they wanted out, if they ever wanted out, then they were free to go and Tapanga was there to guide them to safety and alternative employment; there were only the rules of the job, but you can quit a job. This is a free market, Minnie would say, with that lilt of hers and that smile that undercut almost everything she said so you were never sure she meant it for real. You could believe what you wanted.

Denise always believed her after that and besides wanted to pay her back when feeling at her face, chest, arms and stomach, and thinking about the pool of blood they'd left behind them; how they turned him into mush. She thought she could never get enough revenge, and when a year later Minnie would start the websites geared towards the upscale clientele (those looking for an escort, not a prostitute) she'd be one of those who stayed on the street, because she felt like she owed it; she knew she was needed and liked to be on the front lines--seeing herself as a soldier in the cause of business enterprise--and watch Minnie take care of those who hurt her, give them something to be afraid of. When, still a year after that, they shot Julian in the head and left him bleeding where every working girl could see, there wasn't another pimp left in the area to pick at them, not for a long while, until Jacques and those he'd bring with him. Big money from some big city somewhere (Denise thought). She knew Minnie would keep her safe.

Minnie and Tapanga walked backwards with Michael walking forward until Tapanga spoke up. "I'm thinking the ones without shoes should be walking so they can see what the f____ is in front of them." They'd left the murder weapons in a dumpster Tapanga would soon return to. Four stilettos stuck in and out of a man's eyes and his stomach and chest and his swelled manhood, stomping down on him after Michael and Minnie sent him to the ground. Michael sighed and standing in the middle of an alleyway they stopped and swiveled around with the body, when Minnie started giving him directions, and he still ran into a dumpster, and would later crane his neck in a mirror to see the bruise purple and swollen in the top center of his back. It was time to let the girls go, time for Minnie and him, for John and him, to move somewhere else, find something else to do, another market to inhabit and exploit. This was too much, the drugs were too much and it was starting to weigh on him. They weren't any more wrong than

others in this business, that was true, you could rationalize that, but he didn't want to think about the girls anymore; it gave him nightmares, and the nightmares carried into the day too often.

Arched in the air was how Michael always pictured the girls when he couldn't see them, caught in some kind of religious ecstasy that only they knew how to perform; all of them arched at the same time over a series of beds with their taut bellies as the point from which the body declined, like inverted cats hissing. Not something of beauty but a horror show, their mouths open in little O's and purring out either an exhalation of feigned pleasure or a death rattle. And this was before the men arrived; this was them in repose, their bodies stretched to the utmost, alone in some dirty room forever rehearsing like even their own private speech was denied to them. He guessed it was the past bearing down on him, that he could not see anything else but how others saw him and them, as dregs, even though they liked the same things as everybody else, wanted the same things. Some did harder drugs like himself, but who doesn't drink a little? and who doesn't want love or like watching some corny sitcom on a lonely night, eating ice cream or popcorn as an indulgence? and who doesn't want to think that there is a kind God somewhere? and who doesn't fear death or becoming obsolete? But maybe the answer to this all was Minnie. It was unclear if she wanted the same things, or it was clear that she didn't. Minnie gave something to him. Maybe that was it. Some kind of purpose to go after or hold onto. But John could make a living anywhere, do almost anything; he just needed time to learn the rules. So why couldn't they go and learn the rules of some other place? ¹²⁶

¹²⁶ I don't think that's how Michael felt, Nora said. I can't understand everything here. But I don't think that's how he felt. I don't believe you. That he liked you so much. It doesn't make sense. You say maybe he loved you. But you weren't giving him anything. You ruined him. You let him get addicted to drugs, watched him get worse for years, and never stepped in to help him. And here, you're writing that he wanted to leave, that he didn't want any of this with the prostitution stuff, and you did nothing. And, oh yeah, I forgot, you're a murderer.

They got to Tapanga's little Chevy and heaved the body into the trunk, the whole car bouncing with the weight as the body settled in place. Tapanga tossed her keys at Minnie, ready to be done with the thing and not knowing how to take responsibility for whatever had happened, though not regretting the act, regretting where she was, that she didn't know what to do with this emotion and this body and had made a series of choices that lead her here.

"I'll take him. You two don't worry about that part. Just get cleaned up and burn your clothes. And Michael, clean up the blood before the sun rises. Get Mandy, Jessica, and Olivia to help if you need it. They saw it anyway. Tell Denise she should get some rest if you see her. And Tapanga, get rid of the heels." Minnie confidently stroked her long hair behind her right ear, offered the slightest smile, went and slammed the trunk shut, turned then with a fuller smile directed at each of them in turn, and got into the driver's seat. The smile was meant to reassure. They wouldn't see her for two days and everyone but Michael would think she was gone, in prison or dead, that something irreversible had occurred, but she'd show back up with new clothes, smiling and shiny, clean as she'd ever been. Michael sometimes thought Minnie was a god or a devil, something eternal, free from human harm and concern. I know you could never

I think I understand, I said. You're saying that I should have a guilty conscience, that I am to blame?

I'm saying, she said, with her eyes slightly red and moist and her voice choked (as one might say), that you should have helped him. No one could love you. Not when you're like that. How you are. Then she left the room.

I understand that this upsets Nora emotionally, that hearing these things is something which causes emotional pain, but I still do not know if Michael loved me or was in love with me, why he was my best friend, or if I have a guilty conscience, whether or not I have reason for one. Also, it seems to me that if Nora is to truly understand how to operate in the world effectively, that she needs to learn what will cause her apparent emotional pain, so that she may either manage it or avoid it.

die, he'd say, late nights when he couldn't close his eyes and she lay near him, maybe listening and maybe asleep.¹²⁷

Michael looked at Tapanga once the red tail lights disappeared and knew something important was stolen from him. It was in Tapanga's eyes; sometimes a reflection speaks louder than the original.

"Do you want me to take you home?" But Tapanga shook her head and started to walk away in bloodied stockings, careful to step over used condoms, fast-food trash, broken bottles, the occasional used needle, old newspapers, plastic bags, and wet and ragged clothing. "You got a job to do and I got a job to do. Cleaning up a murder scene, what I always dreamed of. No use wasting time," she said, wondering how her life had gotten worse since she quit hooking.

Minnie drove two hours on the interstate exactly three miles per hour over the speed limit, eyes focused on speed traps, out of Louisville and back towards the town of her birth, out of the way then down country roads, knowing exactly what she would do with the body since before the murder occurred. Gravel popped beneath the car as she approached her destination, the sun rising among the multi-colored trees of fall that lined the rocky road and blocked an extended view. It kept one thinking the road might be infinite or about to drop into a hole. It was possible Brett was working late or early, either tending the crops or guarding them, and the more

¹²⁷ Why would you say maybe? Nora asked.

Because it was often very late when he said things and he never asked if I was awake, and most of the time he did not ask for a response. Since I heard him speak on multiple occasions, it is likely he sometimes did it when I was asleep, as he almost never knew whether I was asleep or not.

Why was he sleeping with you? Are you really still telling me you don't know if he loved you? I'm not saying having sex means you're in love, but it's a little weird you kept that detail to yourself.

that needed to be explained was the more to be covered-up and paid away, but there wasn't a better place to go. She always kept things separate if she could and Brett was a liability, had been since stumbling on the crop six years earlier. They'd bribed him with a job. Minnie could tell from his books that he stole, but the stealing was consistent and it was better to let him think he was taking advantage; better if others think they are in control even when they are not, even when they have the least control they've ever had.

The sky was a pink orange by the time she reached the abrupt end of the gravel road. She parked directly behind Brett's pickup truck, two vehicles inconspicuous if you imagined them as early-morning hikers or hunters seeking some isolated place to kill or take in the view. She got out of the car still barefoot with the rocks of the road cutting into her feet, making something else she'd need to clean up. She made her way down the slight incline into the woods, twigs cracking underfoot, hands grasping the dry and mossed barks, following the slight signals at the base of these crowded and undernourished blue ash, birch, and maple trees, the little red dots she remembered spray-painting with Michael. The early birds chirped and some squirrels bounced from branches above as the barn emerged from nowhere, blending so well with the grays and browns and dark greens they mixed so that it was in accord with the trees surrounded it, camouflaged. Minnie, painted up herself, needed to transform, and found in the barn the work clothes and boots she'd left behind. She scrubbed at her face, changed her clothes like she changed affectations and thought patterns, until she was he.

Here, in this barn. There where thousands of dollars of marijuana sat there would soon be more, and that marijuana became cash, and that cash was filtered into pockets and bank accounts

He wasn't sleeping with me, either in the same bed or in a sexual manner, as the phrase sometimes indicates. He slept sometimes on my couch or on the floor next to my bed, especially

and dummy corporations and charities and more marijuana. The pile would keep growing, become a pyramid; a zenith from which each new bill would struggle not to tumble. There was never an excess because there was never enough; you cannot have an infinite amount of money. And when he later described this vision to Michael of how the money would grow, Michael fell into his obsessive vision of the girls, about how far their backs could stretch; how they became upside down U's, impossibly back-breaking stretching up towards God. Like the Tower of Babel, he once said, because people working together can even exceed their creator. But who is their creator in this scenario? Minnie asked, though Michael didn't answer but with a laugh.

Brett was definitely around, and he didn't know Minnie. He only knew John, who found a black tarp up in the rafters and pushed back through the forest towards Tapanga's car to fold the body in plastic, then dragging it by its feet, back past the red dots that marked the way.

The girls brought Michael the cleaning supplies and kept an eye out for Officer McClenan and any other prying eyes. The sun would be up too soon; he needed to get home and clean himself. He ran bleach over the sidewalk and street and the concrete building, soaked blood and cleaner into towels that he tossed in large black trash bags. Got down on his knees and scrubbed. The girls took separate cars and went and dumped the trash in different places around the city; the next day it would all be collected and there would be no one to know what was compacted among the rest of the city's refuse.

He wished he wasn't high because his hands kept shaking and he couldn't stop thinking about who was coming for him; how they would find him and stab him through the eye with a spiked heel. Something so pretty and feminine driven through the skull of a man, if he was a man. But Michael would learn over time how to go through a day, a week, a month, years,

if he was too high to get to his own home.

without the memories dogging at him, the sight of a bloodied corpse. But he couldn't drive it out of his dreams, not completely. Even excepting the corpse, there was always the bending bodies of the girls in the imaginary dorm of his mind, arching up ever closer to heaven, their faces stretched low and angular, gaunt bodies pressing, their feet rising to a near-perfect vertical, en pointe; all before the entrance of the male gaze brought them back to earth. Something like that. It took him years to understand his dreams, to figure out what to do with them.

The morning came and the evidence was as gone as it could be. He got inside Minnie's apartment as the sun rose, removed his clothes and stuffed them into one last trash bag; he sat down in Minnie's shower and let the hot water burn him. Still shaking with the drugs when he came out wet and steaming, so he took two percocets and lay down naked on the couch to wait for sleep as the room grew brighter and tinged with a orange-pink light; the same light that haloed his nightmares from that day forward, but at least it was beautiful. He wouldn't come back to these blocks for a year after the meeting with Minnie and the girls two days later, and when he did he tried to make it short. Wasn't until Minnie couldn't help it, until he was needed for more violence, and then needed to clean it up. Until the girls wanted to see him, liked to see him, liked to hear his laugh and so he made them feel safe, just that laugh of his. But until then he'd return to the beer-kegged skimpy-clothed frat-boy-pulsing parties, making others laugh, and showing them the freedom and release drugs offered, how to show their friends who showed their friends, how to deal drugs to bring in some extra cash. The network never stopped growing, but sometimes the roots stretched too deep and wide too fast before spiking upward for more room, bending the earth around them in an unanticipated jolt.

A wood chipper stood back behind the barn. After the ax split the body into manageable parts they were introduced to the hungry blades, an idea John got from a movie though the

machine was often unwilling to grind bone. He knew Brett would hear the angry sound so early in the morning if he was anywhere within a mile or so, because that grating would call a deaf man, and it woke Brett from a brief nap at the edge of one of their fields, his shotgun held close as he walked back towards the barn jumpy from the harsh sound. There were four fields in this area, all at least a couple acres distant from each other. They used land owned by the state and sitting dormant, or land purchased by one of their dummy companies that would occasionally call in aghast to find weed being grown; the local authorities thanked them for their help and set a fire that got people high two counties over. Every time one got burned they planted three more. Every time some brave soul stole from their crop they found someone to blame and beat the s_____ out of them. Every farmhand only knew two other farmhands, the person who hired them and the person they hired. Brett was the beginning of this dotted line and he gave off the same impression as the rest. Somebody hired him and he hired someone else. He spread rumors of the big boss though, a violent motherf_____ who would blind you and murder all your friends and family if you ever stole or turned to the police. Did you hear of that family out in Kenton County, all of them slaughtered, blood messages written on the walls? he'd ask. You watch them each die. Then you lose your eyes so it's the last thing you ever see. Brett liked making up stories and Michael encouraged it because Michael was the big boss that Brett made up stories about. He was never sure what role John played in the whole thing.

Brett wouldn't shoot an intruder, not unless that intruder shot first. He had his orders but wasn't there to risk his life, just to report back to others, and could be some kids playing around with the wood chipper, sticking action figures in to see what happened. Could be something else. Whatever possibilities he may have conjured, they did not include the limbless torso of a man being pressed down and spat out the other end a red-dyed aerosol.

Brett threw up, and John first spotted him as he hunched over with pink and tan liquid projecting onto the ground. He shut down the wood chipper and walked over to him.

"He tried to kill Michael. Michael was in the eastern Boone County barn and this man came in with a gun and told Michael to start loading the weed into his truck. I came up to check on things. Michael gave me orders to come up every other Wednesday at ten AM to check on the product and the local hands. The man turned and fired at me as I approached. He then took his gun and beat Michael pretty bad and told me if I tried anything he'd kill him and then me. I got back in my car and drove down the road about a hundred yards, just out of sight. I came back up with a hiking pole I had in my car and surprised him from behind. Once it started, there wasn't any way to stop it. We didn't know what we could do with him. So Michael gave the order. Now we have him hidden in a place in Louisville where he can heal for awhile, but he asked me to get rid of the body. It's done now." John could see Brett wasn't hearing him that well, but he didn't know what else there was to do about it and so he went back to work, and Brett never said a word about it, nor did he when he saw John again two years later, another body being ground to a pulp-ish spray. Brett knew he wasn't in a business where he could rightfully complain, and he knew one body grinds up as well as another.

Minnie retrieved the second body in a like manner, approaching an apartment the girls used with Michael and Tapanga in tow. She liked to have backup, someone there to watch for what could occur and handle any witnesses, to make sure she wasn't physically overcome.

"Oh Jesus, we gonna do this again, aren't we?" Tapanga asked, though she knew the answer, but to project the question outward, to express doubt was to somehow disconnect herself from the certainty of forthcoming violence. A way for her to claim innocence, though none of them were innocent. Over the years Tapanga took fifty-three girls off the street, but more than

that replaced them in the same time period, and she was there helping it all along. They even started doing some of the webcams in her apartment, and this weird pose they'd do for Michael sometimes; photos he'd use to advertise, where they'd stretch like gymnasts in as perfect of an arch as they could with their bellies high and their toes pointed when they practiced enough. They'd do about anything for Michael because he was always nice to them and brought them things and did drugs with them and then drove them home; they were all a little in love with Michael. Tapanga too, even when they approached something like this. She could look at Michael's face and see the fear yet determination, the self-loathing and the love, the terror and shake of his drugged limbs, the bloodshot eyes like he was looking up from a deep pit and doing all he knew how to do.

"I just got these shoes," she whispered, and Michael smiled back at her and then looked like he might cry. Then he smiled again, and he said, "Too soon." They could hear what they'd learn was a belt repeatedly coming down on Cecilia's face and torso; it snapped and the leather creaked. Cecilia barely made a sound, but Julian grunted a bit with the effort; occasionally exclaiming the words they'd all heard so many times that they were empty of meaning: b____, slut, thief, whore, c____, c____-sucker, and any variation Julian could summon.

Minnie knocked on the door and asked, "Everything all right in there?" That innocuous question could mean a lot more than it seemed to; if she was somewhere she did not typically needed to be, asking anything at all, it didn't matter how sweet she turned her question with the lilt and lisp of her trained voice, it was not something sweet she intended, not for Julian.

"Everything's fine. We're just talking," Cecelia said, because that is what she always said when Julian hit her. If it was someone else, she'd ask for help, tell Julian about it, who, outside of his own inflicted violence, saw such behavior as a damage of property. But most of the time he

was sweet, holding hold her close after they had sex and telling her he'd buy anything for her; he loved her more than anyone ever could. She knew they were lies, or was pretty sure, but lies can be so sweet. One time he got her a gold necklace and one time a pair of pearl earrings and one time he took her out to a fancy restaurant and then to a play downtown; she looked just like anyone else.

"Julian, are you in there too, honey?" Minnie asked, like she wanted to know because she was looking to give him a present or a kiss on the cheek; like she missed him and couldn't figure out why he should avoid her like this when she was so eager to see his face. An hour later and he would have a bullet in his head. Dumped on the sidewalk where Minnie knew everyone would see, tossing the unregistered firearm in the Ohio river where they'd dumped drugs and cars and anything that connected them to something suddenly under suspicion. They made sure to clean the site of physical evidence, minute in the procedure, and yet they left the body.

Minnie said no one would care, because he was a known pimp and people wanted him dead; the girls would never say a word because they were better for his absence and they knew that she would protect them, and because they loved Michael and they knew Tapanga had their best interest at heart. Didn't stop Cecilia from haunting the blocks, pocking out of corners and yelling how they'd ruined her life, that she was lucky to have someone as bad as he could be, that she needed someone, a man, a real man, something Minnie never was. There were others that shouted or whispered their disdain, some connected to Julian and others to Minnie's past, Michael's brother Finn making occasional appearances with a sadistic smile drawn crooked on his face.

But what after all is one night?¹²⁸ There were many nights that followed and preceded, and they must warrant the time and consideration of these singular ones, these moments of violence not just conclusions but also beginnings. Yet it was seldom a night was remembered; part of the job of each of the people involved in this enterprise was to forget. All excepting Minnie who kept track of each transaction and interaction, each piece of knowledge and wealth that was brought into their world. But for the others, if they didn't let each night go then they couldn't stay, and some didn't. Some wandered off, some just sold drugs but moved to a better part of town, some sought shelter with Tapanga, some only participated in the escort business, and some just did webcams.

To each their own, I guess, Michael would say.

"This is a free market," Minnie once said with all the girls gathered at a hotel room she'd rented for the occasion, a suite that still barely held all of them. "A free market is about choice, girls. So here. Think of it. You got these different competitors and one of them ends up being the best, alright? So that one takes over. Like McDonalds or Walmart or some s____. On the other side of things, you got options. Not just in what you buy and where you buy it, but also what company or business you wanna work for. And whether that business wants you. There's different ways to bring in cash. You choose what you're good at or what you can stomach. But it's about choice no matter how you spin it." But Michael liked it better when Minnie didn't talk about business like that, when the business and the motives weren't hiding behind the lisp and lilt and idioms otherwise foreign to the speaker. As Minnie, with that voice and that look, more and more beautiful and set and confident over time, it felt like a lie. Through John, or through Minnie

in the hours Michael spent alone with her, the voice was settled and methodical, never missing a beat or eliding one with an affectation.

Most of the girls got along fine and couldn't understand the reticence of the others. "Best paying job I've ever had," Denise once said, smiling with her eyes glazed from heroine. And Mandy would chime in, "You know, it don't matter where I am. Some guy's gonna be trying to get at me. Might as well get paid for it." And many of them had nowhere else to go, had left abusive homes; ramshackle tenements; bigotry; religious families; rehabilitation centers; cold climates; warrants for their arrest.

Besides, not all the clients were bad. There was Mr. Pendleton, and Joe Mandle, and Vincent Mulvaney, and others who just wanted some company, lonely people for whom they did a good thing. Mr. Henrick wanted to watch *The Simpsons* and cuddle, while Mr. Flannery desired to get a back rub while being pronounced beautiful. But there were others still.

There's nothing more dangerous than a man who hates himself. Not regret, or guilt, or even shame to some extent, but a deep and abiding hate, a force that follows the man through every interaction in life, reminding him he doesn't deserve to live but neither does anyone else. For this man everything reaches a point of equilibrium, equally detestable, equally good and bad as the world is already ruined; any violence of his own is merely an extension of the logic of the world and makes him no worse as he is already the worst he can be. And then there are psychopaths and extreme narcissists, but the both of these groups have stronger care to not be caught as how they appear to the world is of primary importance; in the watchful eye of Minnie and the ones she employed, they did not commit the acts that might have tempted them otherwise.

¹²⁸ *Editor's Note:* This line is a direct quote from *To the Lighthouse*.

The self-hating man could be set off by the slightest things, by an unconscious laugh, the repulsed pull of a chin backwards, the wide eyes of a comment ill-received, an unconvincing moan, an imperfectly feigned interest given away by a dull nod or an underwhelming hmm, a quick grunt of pain, misapplied eye shadow, an adamant demand to use a condom, a disliked finger, a crossed eye, a bleeding lip, a misplaced word; anything when the man sees himself as he knows himself to be. Once set off this man disregards consequence because the world becomes purely present, a joke meant to tear him apart, something he could no more stop than he could his mommy's lack of love, father's callous hands, or the religious leaders' admonitions. The moment had already occurred somehow; now he is just living a memory. It was this kind of man they killed for Denise, and who they later killed for several of the girls. The kind of man who never comes to understand his own volatility and thinks therefore that it is out of his control, thereby fulfilling his own suspicion.

Though knowing this it was still understood that both the murders were mistakes, misinformation delivered via television and late night shows and preconceived ideas of what kind of enforcement is necessary. The truth was there were other ways that all of these things could have been handled, better ways to push these men out of their lives; Minnie could only think of what she had thought, of what she knew and observed at that point in time; the television told her examples must be made, that death in the business is inevitable. But everything seems inevitable until it is not.

Despite the violence that sometimes erupted and the occasional overdose or severe depression, for many days, weeks, months, and once for a couple years, there was a mundane quality to the job much like any other. Day to day interactions that involved good mornings and good evenings and genuine laughter in the presence of loved ones, as many of them came to

think of each other as family, saw how things could attain a normalcy, and for those like Denise it broke their hearts joyfully. The exchange of drugs and funds and bodies more often than not went by smoothly, allowing both employee and client to leave satisfied, to buy new furniture; to return to an empty home recently bereaved and not be beset; to purchase a shiny new car or that dress displayed in a downtown window; to feel for a brief moment unalone and loved even if they knew it was feigned, because the performance itself could work to replace sordid memories. Through the escort service they sometimes had so-called normal couples looking to try something new, one of the partners watching the other engage in a kind of trance as if they themselves were not present but watching a computer screen in some distant place where these actions were monitored. Single women sometimes took the girls on dates through the site and never made a sexual move, and some men as well. And some women watched the webcams and said how beautiful, how perfect, how wonderful the girls were. It was business, and often business was uncomplicated and good.

Minnie was herself for ten years. Minnie was she. The patterns of her speech were perfected, the lisp and lilt settled and defined, and sometimes, for a brief moment, she forgot she'd ever been so many adaptations of John. But she was still he too, was both, had always been. She was what she pretended to be and that was okay, and becoming John again would be no problem when it became necessary to begin a more secluded life. Misunderstandings undoubtedly continued with those she interacted with, but they were slighter and less detrimental to the daily business; this was the only real problem with eventually becoming John again, how misunderstanding was a necessary pattern of his person.¹²⁹ But that was another time, and in this

¹²⁹ What do you mean here? Nora asked.
I mean that I can only be myself.

time and place, in the blocks and alleyways of forgotten Louisville, things went smoothly, relatively speaking, in a kind of way.

III

But necessary pattern, what does that mean? You're purposefully misunderstanding me and other people?

No, I said, I am not. I am just often understanding you literally, or based on the multiplicity of things one might mean when speaking to me, since the same word and phrases can mean multiple things. People know I often misunderstand things because I understand a different though still valid meaning of a particular word or phrase.

Wait a minute. No. You need to explain this better.

People know that I often misunderstand because I am understanding literally or a different meaning that they might be applying to a word or phrase, and so they engage with me with that potential misunderstanding in mind. This is to say that since they believe I misunderstand and speak to me in this way, I must then respond by misunderstanding at times because it is impossible to know to what degree they understand my misunderstanding. So, if I did not misunderstand then I would actually misunderstand even more, because this pattern of behavior was established in interactions with me a very long time ago.

Nora placed her hands on either side of her head and clenched her teeth. Then she released air from her throat and through her clenched teeth so that it sounded gravelly (as one might say) and a little like it sounds when there is an explosion on television. As she made this sound she pulled each of her hands up and away simultaneously as her fingers spread out. This is a way in which people sometimes pretend like their heads have exploded. After doing this she stood up and walked to the door.

You finished the calls with my dad months ago. And I don't care about you doing any more of the calls. I'm leaving, she said. Do you understand me?

Yes.

I'm going to go out with some friends, she said. And when I get back I'm going to go to my room. And I don't want to talk to you. Do you understand that?

Yes.

I'm seventeen years old and I'm getting really tired of this s____. I'm just going to pretend I have a normal life for awhile. I'm going to do the things other seventeen year olds do. Have sex. Drink. Party. And basically act like the future doesn't exist. At least for awhile. I don't want to live with my creepy uncle who pretends to be a woman, then prostitutes and pimps, and then kills people. This was not my dream.

Did you want me to finish this chapter without you then?

I think you know the answer to that.

I do, I said. She left the room.

The new men arrived all at the same time, crowded on one of their popular corners, some one or other breaking from the pack to occasionally patrol, asking the girls who was in charge before Minnie finally appeared alongside Michael, hanging on his arm like she was just decoration.

"You the man to talk to around here?" Jacques asked, buying into the myth of Michael that the girls had long since seen through, knowing Minnie was behind everything that did and did not occur. But as a decoy he was still often used; sleight of hand is always dependent on misdirection, and Michael didn't mind standing in place and pretending, knowing well at this point what was required of him.

"These are my blocks, my girls," he said.

"You're not much to look at. Neither's your girl for that matter. But I guess you deserve some respect. I hear you run all of this by yourself." Jacques' eyes moved around Michael and Minnie as he spoke, attaching to the placement of the girls, the numbed movements that marked the distribution of drugs, the few men who seemed to work for Michael, this little chicken-s_____ motherf_____ who was going to make things pretty easy on him. Wasn't everyday that you walked into a chicken coop without a rooster, a lion's pride with only lionesses, a worn metaphor of easy pickings, so fond was he of things repeated. Even had a cane, like he was auditioning for the part of pimp number three, to walk past the main players in the background and be easily distinguishable to even lazy viewers.

"Why is it you wanted to see me?" Michael asked, shaking from the uppers in his system, the amphetamines speeding his heart along, the alcohol dulling the burn in his brain and making his limbs slow to react, energy released and contained in a battle against itself. The shake made a

lot of people nervous, an unpredictable body on the edge of breaking apart and something he didn't have to pretend about, waiting himself for a stroke or heart attack to cut him down.

Jacques smiled, and released the slightest laugh, his chin and chest barely bouncing with a hum. "I'm looking to get into business myself. Wondered if you had any pointers? If you gonna get in the game, ask somebody who's played, right?" His briefly extended metaphor did little to distract Minnie from knowing that Jacques knew exactly what he was doing, that he had done it before and would do it again. No one looked for advice in this business from strangers, or pretended to any compassion with competitors as legal businesses sometimes do. The facade was poorly maintained.

"Don't get killed," Michael said, responding in such a perfect way that Minnie could not have scripted it better, because threats outside of the normative life as it is understood much be wielded with subtlety and irony, contained within an otherwise dull and uninteresting statement, for just imagine someone giving you advice not to be killed--how evident, Minnie thought, and useless--as you made your way to a nine to five job.

Jacques responded by pulling his head back in feigned fear, tapping the men on either side of him and saying, "alright, alright," like he might to a young niece who claimed to be stronger than him. The group broke apart and drove away in their separate cars, and Minnie knew they would encounter them again soon and that one of them would be dead by the time it was finished, which would come much sooner than she could've predicted, within twenty four hours a decided move by Jacques and his group of lumbering thugs who must've been observing them for some time before approaching.

Slipping through the rain the next night, Minnie was aiming for Tapanga's apartment to let her know what had happened after warning all the girls to stay away and stash their drugs and

keep off the streets for a bit, though a couple didn't listen. Tapanga would shelter a few of them if Minnie asked, and she might be needed for something more severe like the times before, because she always helped when she thought it was in the best interest of the girls, and she knew Julian and the John were just going to bring more violence; those who start down that way can't come back from it.

As Minnie grasped the metal doorknob of Tapanga's building, her umbrella furled and laying against the concrete as she pulled, the rain dripped down through the long brunette hair she'd grown over the years and slipped onto her forehead, just barely stinging her eyes, when a hand grasped her shoulder and pulled her to the ground. Her head hit first, a muted sound that ached forward to her eyes, then her back and legs scraping the wet pavement. The rain was lit by a street lamp almost half a block over, which wasn't much light, but was enough to show it white like milk spilled and leaking down, the rain beading on her face and exposed upper chest, leaking into her blouse, running up her bare lower legs and underneath the skirt. Jacques stood over her, ran dripping from the top of his head down from his clean-shaven face to splash upon her own.

"You gonna tell your boy about this," he said, putting his cane to good use; raised like a god's scepter and cursing her right hip as it swung down and snapped. Minnie couldn't help but scream, the pain sudden and overwhelming as it spread through her body, blacking her eyes out as it descended again onto her chest, partially blunted there because of the padding in her bra that imitated breasts, but still excising the air from her lungs. "I know you're not a real girl," Jacques said. "You want me to make you a real girl?" The cane landed again, this time against her left arm, before Jacques grabbed her blouse and pulled her up towards him, told one of the shadowed men with him to hold her up so he could hit her face a few times until the daze of her body was near-total.

"You see anyone around?" Jacques asked, and one of the men said no, and one of them walked down towards the distant light, and then Jacques turned her over, her body limp and pliable, and he raped her.

She lay there all night, in and out of consciousness, no one coming home late or leaving exceptionally early, the girls too far distant to see her in the partial light cast from a half a block's distance. Sleeping in Minnie's apartment, Michael woke before the light had yet entered and went to find her to discover that her bed remain empty. Knowing the danger the new men posed he began a frantic search of the area, enlisting many of the girls, on the edge of tears as he confronted Denise in her hotel room.

"She's missing. And this is different. I'm telling you it's different." Denise did not offer an argument, as Michael may have been paranoid or overly energetic, when not exceptionally lethargic, much of the time, but he was seldom wrong about Minnie. It wasn't long before he ran to tell Tapanga, with Denise and Jessica just behind him, caught up in the diversion from their typical lives. He saw the body and thought it was trash at first, only a vague pale light cast from the rising sun on the inanimate matter, like some old furniture someone had left before moving on. But then he ran, knowing it was her from the hair and the muddied color of her yellow skirt, even if her body was twisted up. He stopped before her with each girl to his side, and Minnie saw them all blurred together, looking down at her, Michael's eyes red with tears, feeling safe then to slip back into unconsciousness. He bent down over her and held her head, and while aggrieved, could not prevent the familiar vision from visiting him, all the girls stretched up towards the ceiling of his mind; the snap of the bones as the placement of their bodies became perfect in uniformity. But for the first time the vision expanded and he could see what before had been his camera-eyed view, the point from which he observed; he had been looking through

Minnie's eyes in the vision; her hands pulled upwards slowly with the rise of their bodies, orchestrating this grotesque manipulation of reality.

Denise called 911 while Jessica stood unsure above Michael's kneeling body, and he only said two words while he cried and felt the anger rising that he would soon expel.

"It's Minnie," he said. For there she was.¹³⁰

¹³⁰ *Editor's Note:* This mimics the last two lines of *Mrs. Dalloway*.

Fourth Interlude: Nora Expresses Concern.

What is wrong with you? Nora asked, on several occasions, over two weeks following my writing of the last chapter. She refused to read anymore of the manuscript or help me with it for these two weeks, often locking herself in one of her two bedrooms when I attempted to speak with her, or simply leaving the house in the car I purchased for her. She has agreed to continue if I thoroughly detail her concerns.

Her primary concern, in general, lies around how easy it was for me to kill people and use the prostitutes (as she has said). I believe that I have explained why I did the things that I did to the best of my ability. I think it is clear, even through the modernist style, that my violence created more good (as it is usually morally defined) than the absence of my violence would have. What I did was in order to get something financially or to effectively interact with others, but it was also good (in most moral perspectives), as I explicitly was doing harm to those who wished to do harm to others, and my interference kept that harm from being furthered. I could have limited the violence. I could have stopped before these two men were dead. But if I had done that then there would have been negative consequences for all of us working in that area. At the same time, I understand I could have handled it so that I in someway tricked them into leaving or going somewhere else. I understand there were things I could've done differently, but I did not understand that at the time. I regret this.

Below is a conglomeration of things Nora said to me over some time concerning myself and the events I wrote of in the previous chapter:

You're a monster, she said. I've seen people do awful things, but not like this. Even the mean kids, the mean adults, the people I've seen in my life, I'm not sure they knew they were mean. And when they did, they regretted it. At least a little. Maybe they didn't know they regretted it. Maybe they were liars. Like you. Seeing you write about that stuff, and hearing you talk about it. The way that you talk about everything. Like you're not a person or something. What kind of person can see all of this, do all of this, and then look back and not feel bad? How do you not die of guilt? It's not just the murders. That's something else. Because those people were awful. But you didn't kill them because of that. You killed them to help yourself. You used those girls, and you use other people. You don't care. You use me. You act like you don't understand but you understand perfectly. You're not stupid, that's one thing I'll say.

You don't want people to think you're awful, but you don't care if you are awful. The reality of something, that's doesn't matter. The only thing that matters is how things look. That's not right. Maybe people do lie to themselves. Maybe everyone is terrible in ways that they don't know. But at least in the ways that they know they feel bad about them. They want to be better.

But you. You want to be smarter. You want to have more money. But you don't care if you're better. You ever think about your life and wonder if anything you've done has been even a little good for other people? Don't you ever ask yourself if you've done anything that's helped anyone? Or the world? Or even your family? Even me? You say you want to help me. You say you want to teach me. You're definitely teaching me but I don't know that you're teaching me what you want. I don't want to be anything like you. I can hardly look at you without feeling awful. You make it seem like nothing is real.

When I look at you I see a face with nothing behind it. The world is pure s____ when I listen to you. There's nothing good. People are just a description. A bunch of stupid details. A

way of talking. An act. A repetition. Mom and dad and grandma and grandpa. Stupid f_____ patterns. Everyone is pretending to be things. Pretending to be a person. But we're people even if we don't pretend. We exist! Some people are born certain ways! People are real!

And what kind of seventeen year old even thinks about this? You've got me saying this stuff. Seeing how old I am, and how young. How small. When I talk to my friends now I can barely hear them. Instead I'm thinking about what they want to get from me, how maybe they're manipulating me, how the stuff I say and do makes them feel better or worse. I'm thinking about how when I push my hair behind my ear it's like saying I like a guy. I'm thinking about how when I raise my hand in class too much people think I'm a nerd. I'm thinking about how all the bullies are just trying to show that they're tough, when really they're just insecure a_____. It's like every moment of my life is being filmed by someone. I always see myself. Doesn't matter where I am. I can manipulate people. I do manipulate people. I can't even really help it anymore.

I hate it! And I hate you! Because you're the f_____ reason behind it. Because you use people. And you know people but you can't see them. You don't talk about souls, and I don't mean like with God and stuff. I don't believe in God. God is bulls____. Maybe we agree on that, even if you pretend to believe sometimes. But there's more to us than just minds. Just blood and bones and tissue. There's like, the ability to know what is there, that we are these things, that we are what we are. We come to know ourselves.

You should be turned into the police. I should call dad and tell him what you did. I'll tell him about the murders. I'll tell him about the drugs in his restaurant. I'll tell him everything. Why should you be the only person that gets away with things? Why should you be so special?

And I don't even know if you really care if it's your fault Michael died. I don't know that I believe you when you say you want to understand if you have a guilty conscience. I want you to.

I think you should suffer. That's what you deserve. And if you suffered, if you do feel guilty, then maybe you aren't the monster I think you are. Because it is your fault that Michael died. You haven't even told me how he died yet. But it doesn't matter. I already know it was your fault. Because you let him keep doing drugs, because you gave him the drugs, because you were there from the beginning of it and you didn't do anything. You let him do that to himself. You handed him the gun. And yeah, that's a metaphor, dips____. And that's a whole other thing, how you've been pretending you don't know what people mean, when you know exactly what they mean.

You don't belong with other people. You're like a disease! You're like some kind of demon! You're the last thing people see before they enter hell. Like that dog I was reading about in Greek myth. The dog, the two headed dog. But you're worse because people can't tell you're a monster. Because it's unclear that you're guarding anything. They look at you and they only see what you want them to see. You welcome them in and tell them everything is fine. And then. And then they're like in a f_____ pit of flames for eternity. You tell them everything will be alright. Just like mom told me. Just like dad. Just like grandma and grandpa. Everyone telling me everything is fine. But it's not. It's not fine. Things won't be alright. That's complete s_____.

I wish I didn't know everything I know. I wish I was stupid. And I wish you'd leave me alone. I wish I'd never met you. You're right about us. We're ashamed of you.

Chapter Fifteen: Michael's Death in His Own Words.

Michael went to check on the girls and primarily to make sure they went home and hid their drugs. It did not seem wise for any of us involved in the business to be visible in the area until some sort of solution was arrived at. I did not, however, properly predict how Michael's anger over what had occurred to me might make him respond, nor how his recent expressed depression might influence him. I should add his extreme drug usage as a potential influence, but drugs had altered his behavior for a long time at this point, so it was not a new factor and therefore not something I was considering newly relevant.

In retrospect, as soon as Jacques and his employees entered the neighborhood and made their intentions known, Michael and I should have left with our money, drugs, and lives intact. We could have depended on legal businesses and investments we'd made to sustain us for the remainder of our lives. We could have moved back to Northern Kentucky and lived in my mansion, once I built it, no longer needing to make money through extensive effort or interact with so many people, though Michael would've likely chosen to continue interacting with many people regardless.

However, I do not know how his continued and escalating drug habit would've influenced our future lives, if his expressed depression would worsen and what effect that might have, or if other negative things might have occurred. It's possible that even excepting the events I will describe in his own words that he might have died of an overdose or by doing something

dangerous when the drugs made him brave (as he often said). And if that is the case, then I'm not sure it is logical for me to have a guilty conscience, whether I have one or not.¹³¹

After the beating I could not get out of bed for several days without my body hurting severely. I couldn't walk for a few days and so needed a wheel chair if I did manage to get out of bed. Eating was difficult. Laying still was difficult because it hurt too.

Tapanga kept me company and took care of me after my initial wounds were treated via a doctor we independently employed so as not to draw attention (as one might say) to our illegal businesses. She stayed in my apartment while I healed, helping me eat, drink, go to the bathroom, and clean myself. She sat on the edge of the bed much of the time and told me stories of her growing up, of why she was the way she was, of who she thought she was and who she wanted to be.

Way back before you came along it was just Jessie and me looking out for each other, she said. I didn't want a pimp. Wouldn't have somebody shaking me down, even if it cost me an occasional beating. I'd had enough of being controlled.

¹³¹ Bulls____, Nora said.

Could you please explain the reason for your reaction in more detail?

If you don't already get it, she said, then you'll never get it. You started all of this s____. Michael was there because of you. You made him a drug dealer and a murderer. And I'd probably do drugs too. The only thing that surprises me is that he didn't kill himself before because of how awful you are.

I was not awful to Michael, I said. I did my best for Michael within our business enterprises. It was not my intention that Michael should die.

Yeah, well, she said, but then said nothing else.

Her response concerning understanding, that I either will have already gotten it or never will, does seem apt. It is seeming more apparent that determining whether I have a guilty conscience might not be dependent on how much evidence I gather. But rather a feeling, and if I already have the feeling then clearly I cannot properly recognize it. However, I will continue to gather evidence and reach the best conclusion I can, as I wish to finish this project, like every project that might be finished.

With my lisping affectation, which I slightly enhanced over several years, I said, I know. I know all about that.

Yeah, you do, she said, looking at my body, much of which was bruised and bandaged. I ever tell you why I got into hooking in the first place? she asked.

No, don't think you did, even though I knew that she had not, because this is a figure of speech and many people doubt the accuracy of memories as good as my own. It is possible my memory is not as good as I believe it to be, as I understand memories can change and be manipulated over time, as I have read. But, to the best of my understanding, I have what is considered a very good memory.

I've been thinking through all this s___ that's been happening over the last ten years. Since you showed up, she said, sitting on the edge of my bed and looking down at me while frowning, a cigarette she was smoking held loosely between the pointer and middle finger of her right hand. Half of it doesn't seem real, she continued. Never thought I'd have this much money. Never thought I'd get out of hooking once I got into it. Never thought I'd get back in when I left. Even in the way I'm in now. Worse than the way it was. Before I was just using myself.

You're not using the girls, I said, as her speech implied she was using others. They made the choice. Nobody was forced into this. They came down here to do what they're doing. We just showed them the ropes and gave them somewhere to go if things got rough. Nothing else. And you've helped a lot them get out. Don't let yourself forget that. They'd be a h___ of lot worse without you.

She smiled slightly and then frowned. You are so full of s___, Minnie. And I guess that's why you're exactly the person I want around when I'm feeling like s___. She took a deep breath before she continued, I believe to signal what she was about to say was difficult for her to say,

presumably because it did not reflect well on her in a moral sense. This whole f_____ thing, she finally said. This violence. I shoulda known it'd wear itself out. I was never meant to be here in the first place. I should be out pretending to be a man, doing construction or some s_____.

My mom and dad, she continued, they wanted me to be in the military. Grew up a military brat, living in all these places, learning how to make friends and lose em just as quick. My mom, she was a classic girly girl. Used to dress up like she was a 50's housewife. Unbelievably gorgeous. I couldn't describe it right if I wanted. She wore these dresses you could twirl in. That's the best I can do. But that was hers, it belonged to her. That beauty. That was what women got. To look pretty and get f_____. The men got to work. Go out and shape the world. But the woman, she got to stay home and make a nice house and be beautiful, and wait for what was coming.

Never mind the dream they had was given to them by a bunch of white people called them n_____ behind their backs. Right to their face sometimes. But anything like that comes out of someone's mouth they're thinking it a h____ of a lot more. She stubbed out her cigarette then lit another.

You learn over time that almost everybody's dream was got through somebody else, she said. You inherit dreams like you inherit a f_____ disease. And my dream was to be like my mom. A dream my family assured me I couldn't have. There was my sister, that was hers to inherit. I had to be like my father, even though I knew better. Knew for as long as I could remember, I wasn't a man. Knew that before I knew I was a girl. It's easier to know what you aren't than what you are sometimes. Course, you try to explain that to someone and they can't get it cause they never woke up one day knowing they were a woman if everybody was telling them that already. Guess you know that as well as me. Like somebody realizing they got their own

feet, that they belong to them. You can't think something like that unless everyone keeps telling you don't have em. Everyday, they look down at your feet, which seem a lot like everybody else's, and they say to you, those aren't your feet, they're someone else's. You try to believe em, but something like that can't stick forever. And the rest of people, who got their own feet, who everyone assumes got their own feet. That can't be realized. It's just there.

Then Tapanga paused and without any contextual information said, I wanna marry Michael.

Well, I said, you'll have to wait on the courts for that. That or move yourself somewhere they don't mind.

Two men can't marry, she said. I'm not a man.

Then I said, I know, but I don't think they'll sign off as long as you're carrying the same birth certificate and that big c___ of yours. Tapanga appreciated jokes related to genitalia and generally whenever anyone referred to her penis as being large. It didn't bother her (emotionally) as it did some other transwomen I knew. Tapanga was on testosterone blockers as well as taking estrogen. She'd had laser hair removal and electrolysis on much of her body. She did not, however, have a sex change as some transgender people do. She said she didn't need it, that she'd made her peace with the thing.

She laughed, and I smiled demurely, meaning similar to a lady from a nineteenth century novel, which meant I smiled while somewhat hiding my face by moving it to one side or the other and by moving my eyes from the object/subject of my smile.

You think Michael loves me? she asked, looking at me with her left finger and thumb resting on her chin and her lips slightly curled into a smile. I believe it was an inquisitive and

suspicious look simultaneously, like she was perhaps being sarcastic, somehow testing my ability to answer correctly, or investigating a mystery, like a detective on TV.

Could be, I said. He's hard to read sometimes.

I know he's in love with you, she said. But you don't know what you got. I'm not sure you love anyone. Not sure you can. Cold hearted b____. Then she smiled, even though I was near certain this was an insult. If I had said this to anyone they would've taken it as an insult. I remained silent, my lips pulled tightly together, often a sign of hurt feelings or annoyance.

You been stringing him along for years, haven't you?

Pull him along? I asked, my inflection rising to express incredulity. No, it's him that's been following me for years.

But don't you think he's got his reasons for following you? He respects you, needs you, has said he loves you more times than I can count. I'm sure even someone as f_____ clueless as you can see some of that.

Yeah, he's got his reasons for sticking with me. We've all got our reasons. And he's said he loves me before. But it's not like that.

You're lying to yourself. You sound like me when I pretend eating a hamburger is good for me cause of the tomato and lettuce.

We can't ever know what others feel, I said. Least of all if they love us, or how they love us, because it is true that there is never a definitive way to know. There is only supposition derived through facial expressions, bodily gestures, actions, and the words that people speak. The disconnect between what they think and feel and how they express it is impossible to measure.

That's depressing, she said. You really believe that?

How can I not?

Yeah alright, she said. Well, then I'm definitely marrying Michael. Somebody needs to grab him up before you get em killed.

I smiled. When you gonna propose? I asked.

As soon as he comes back. As soon as he walks in the door I'm gonna tackle his a__ and drag him to a minister. Before you open your big mouth, I'm thinking a unitarian minister. Michael knows how to treat a woman right. He's sweet even when he's bouncing off the f_____ walls with drugs.

He's kind, I said. Selfless. But he's hard on those drugs. I'm not sure there's any getting him away from them. They'll kill him.

Yeah, you would say that, in a way that I believe implied that I was foisting the responsibility for his impending death onto something other than myself, considering she'd recently said I was going to get him killed.

We waited in silence for a couple hours, and I thought about what Tapanga had said. I do not believe Michael was in love with me, in the way of romantic attraction, but perhaps he was. Perhaps that is the only way to make sense of the things that occurred and of the things he said and did for me. Yet if so, he did not ever pursue any sort of consummation in any way that was apparent to me...¹³²

I did not know Tapanga liked or loved him enough to marry him, but maybe she was joking. Often when she joked, I did not understand that she was joking, but I still spoke in

¹³² *Editor's Note:* Burgess repeats evidence of Michael's affection as noted in "The Streets of Louisville," though continues to evade drawing the obvious conclusion.

accordance with what she'd said, thereby either elongating the joke or building on what she wanted to discuss seriously.

She did care for Michael as I understand it as represented through action and speech. She cried a lot at the funeral, even as a large portion of his family gave her suspicious and angry looks and whispered things like, Is that a man or a woman?, as if they expected the answer to such a question might explain Tapanga's sobbing. But whether man or woman (and she was a woman in the only conclusive way), context clues indicated she was crying because Michael was dead and it made her sad.

This conversation and much more occurred the same day that Michael died.

The following represents a conglomeration of several conversations I had with Michael over the years as well as the brief version of events he was able to explain to me at the hospital before his final surgery, and some writing he left for me and that I received upon his death.¹³³ I focus here on his pain and obsessive thoughts (as he said), on the topics that recurred to him, and the sensory experience he related to me. In this case, I will allow his metaphorical and abstract expressions to speak for themselves (as one might say). Discrepancies between his voice as a younger man (as evidenced within Information on Finn) and his voice as he grew are purposeful, as his language developed/changed over time. Michael was an English major in college before dropping out like myself, and he continued to be an avid reader his whole life, and his language changed in accordance with this as well as the drugs.

--Michael's Death in His Own Words--

¹³³ *Editor's Note:* If this is true, the document was never recovered.

The day started like most. Wake up, take a hit then a pain pill. End the morning routine with a Bloody Mary. That drink's a meal if you make it right. I sat on the balcony of my apartment in the downtown area, looking out at Minnie's world, all this crazy s____ she was putting together.

I am the drugs. The drugs are me.

They say, First you do drugs, and then the drugs do you. It'd been like that for awhile. Funny in a way. I learned to laugh at my own stupidity. Hard not to after so long trying to quit something. All that failure, the only way to live with it is to laugh.

Used to be I'd wake up with this pit in my stomach, this deep unsatisfied feeling. Still do, except the drugs keep the feeling at a distance. It's like you have this person screaming in your house all the time. When it's at its worst, the person is standing right in front of you, up in your face. So close they're spitting on you while they yell. And they're saying how worthless you are, how useless, how strange and ill-fitting to the world. When you take the drugs it's like you lock that person in a sound-proof room. You know they're still there. You can feel their presence in the house, but you can't hear them. Their voice is just out of earshot, but you know they could come barreling out of that room any moment if you let up. Ready with new hate to tear you down. So I got used to hushing that voice in my head. Best I could do.

It was hard seeing Minnie so beat up. She looked somehow younger with all those bruises. Fragile, I guess. For a long time they always seemed older, almost older than anything because things didn't touch them like they did everyone else. So I was happy to take over for the day, make the rounds, see if the girls were alright. I wouldn't have minded killing Jacques in the process. Murder wouldn't have occurred to me until the last few years. You see enough though and you start dividing people into categories. Those who should live. Those who should die.

I drove the van down there, thought I might need to pick some people up. Thought about what else Jacques had probably done that we hadn't noticed, long as it took to find Minnie half-dead in front of Tapanga's place. I saw Denise early in the day, passed out on one of our corners. I'd left her on the street the night before after we'd picked up Minnie. Drove up next to her and told her to get in. Then I had to get out and pick her up since she wasn't answering. There was blood on her. I could tell what had happened. Still, hard to tell if she'd taken the drugs before or after someone beat the s___ out of her. Jacques was behind it in some way, out to show he owned these streets instead of me. Well, Minnie. But he didn't know that.

To own streets. To take the world in hand. That's weird.

I've always admired Minnie's ability to make a plan and then execute it, but I wondered where things might be heading. If they were actually heading anywhere. The prostitution had been going on for too long. I told her that a few times, warned her we'd be better off stepping back. Stick to drugs and somewhere far away from here. Still, I trusted Minnie knew what she was doing. She always ended up on the right side of things in the end. A f_____ miracle if you think about it.

Mandy hailed me when she saw the van. I pulled over. I wasn't sure why she was out, and forgot to ask when we started talking.

Hey doll, she said, You know I had to run earlier?

What? What does that mean?

From some big guys. Told me I couldn't suck, well you know, around here.

What'd they look like?

A_____.

Can you be more specific?

Some young white guys and black guys with real short hair. Tough types, I guess.

You can't think of anything else?

No, not really. But no, they were wearing baggy clothes. Not real fashionable. But I guess we all got our different ways. I don't think you'd miss em. Don't seem like they're hiding exactly.

Where'd you run from?

Down there, she said, pointing down the road. At the intersection of _____ and _____.

I took Mandy back to her apartment, unloaded Denise with her, and then drove down that way. Not really planning on doing anything in particular. Just check things out. See if everyone was safe, if Jacques was waiting to do more damage. I'm lying though. I wanted to kill someone.¹³⁴

There was a time in my life where something like this would've scared me. I used to have a hard time approaching dangerous situations. Like for two years I couldn't be in the same room as my father. You can see violence in some people. I knew what he was capable of. One time, when Finn ran over the mailbox, he just straight up punched him in the face. Is it weird to say that I felt relieved in that moment? It's like this pressure was building up for months, years, and finally a little bit of it was let go. You wait so long for the worst to happen so that when it happens it doesn't feel as bad as the wait. Something like that. Anyway, it was easier for me to be around my dad after that. I figured he might punch me in the face, but I could survive it.

¹³⁴ Oh my God, you're such a f_____ liar. How can you possibly know this? Nora asked. The way that he'd put it like this?

Michael sometimes said something, then said what he'd just said was a lie. When he explained it, he would say that each thing separately felt true at the time that he said it, that sometimes he needed to try to explain something before the truth of a thing became clear enough to accurately identify. Another way to understand this is simply to say that he rationalized his behavior, and then doubted his own rationalization. He would also sometimes say that he thought out loud, that this was the expression of his thought process.

At the corner there was an old-a__ liquor store, some store fronts with broken windows boarded up and graffiti tags sprayed on the wood, and two passed out homeless men. I didn't see Jacques. I pulled the van over, got out and lit a cigarette. I was thinking about what it was I was expecting to do. I didn't have a gun or anything. Was I gonna yell at him? Was I even protecting anyone standing out there? We couldn't guard territory. We weren't a criminal organization. We were like a criminal club. We were like the misfits of crime, a ragtag group of prostitutes and drug addicts. Something stupid like that. As violent as we could be and as much as we'd done, we weren't strong enough to hold out. It really didn't make sense that we had the power we did. But maybe not. Minnie could be pretty scary when she wanted.

I had no plan at all. The problem with the drugs. I was just driving around thinking I could fix things if I stumbled into them. To an extent, this had worked out in my life. I stumbled behind Minnie/John, or in front of them to clear the way, or beside them to see what was coming next.

I think Minnie was stumbling too. Like, why did she think to prostitute and pimp? She'd explained it before. She made it sound reasonable. But it wasn't reasonable. Her brain was capable of doing a million things. And yet, it felt like so often she just did the first thing that occurred to her.¹³⁵

¹³⁵ See, Nora said. It's like I said before. You make it seem like it was obvious to become a prostitute.

It was not obvious, I said. It was, however, an opportunity I understood how to make use of. And seemed the most logical business opportunity at the time as it could coincide with our sale of drugs.

Yeah, Nora said. You keep telling yourself that.

I will, I said, because that is the truth as best as I can understand it.

I was almost done with my cigarette when I saw him. A toadie of Jacque's, some square-looking black dude, like he used to box or something. Standing about twenty yards away from me. Made me a little nervous. Just standing there, across the street, staring. I hadn't noticed him when I pulled up so it was a little unsettling. Didn't sit right.

That expression, didn't sit right. That expression gets on my nerves. Doesn't sit right. And because I hate it so much, it comes to my tongue easily. That's the problem with hate and love, how it bubbles up so quick, makes you fixate on it. I don't understand how everyone isn't high all the time.

I stared back at him, smoking my cigarette, and then I said loud so he could hear, It's a beautiful day we're having, isn't it?

The weather was f_____ awful that day. So hot and humid I already had rings of salt dried and then redried all over my shirt. The pavement shimmered with the heat of late summer. All the rain from last night had dried and was hanging in the air around us.

Are you trying to be funny? he asked.

I guess not hard enough, I said.

You know you and your tr_____ friend are f_____ dead, right? You two are over. You'll all over.

Not til the fat lady sings, I said.

She's going to be singing at the graveyard.

At whose grave?

Also, the phrase she used, that one keep telling oneself something, generally implies that one is lying to oneself about something, but it is unclear what motive I would have to lie about why I became a prostitute, as she seems to be implying that I wished to do so because of something beyond money.

F___ this noise, he said. He started to cross the street and I got back in the van. By the time he'd reached where I'd been standing I was envisioning that I had a gun, tried to play at having a gun held below visibility, resting out of his sight, underneath the passenger side window. Something like Minnie might do. The appearance of the thing is sometimes as good as the thing itself. I told myself I was holding a gun. I rolled the window down.

You packing? he asked.

Does pepper spray count? I asked.

You're f_____ hilarious, you know that?

Yeah, I know.

You're dead. You and the f__ are dead. All the girls that don't fall in line, they're dead.

Well, it sure has been nice catching up with you, I said.

I drove away, further into downtown, went to the riverside. I walked down the slope of grass and watched the cool air rise from the river and I did a couple bumps and then lit a joint. I talked out loud to myself for awhile, asked myself what I was going to do. It helps my brain from getting the best of me when I'm high and nervous. Because there is a thin line from the drugs keeping me upright and sending me spiraling to the ground.

I called Mandy to ask after Denise, and she said she woke up and then went to her own place. I called but Denise didn't answer. I drove over to make sure she was doing alright. I rang the bell. Nothing. I knocked. Nothing. So I used Minnie's key. Denise was laying on the living room floor dead, a needle dangling from her arm.

--Michael's Death in His Own Words (interrupted)--

Around the time Michael discovered Denise's body, Tapanga was making the two of us a late breakfast/early lunch. She was making things that were easy to chew since my mouth was tender to the touch (as one might say) and swollen from Jacque's fist and cane.

When she brought the eggs and the fruit smoothie to me in bed she asked, So you think you're done now? Is this enough? Or does enough not exist for you?

I had thought extensively about whether my recent beating constituted a sufficient reason to extricate myself from the business, in the same way that the knowledge of others of myself as a drug dealer and someone who drugged people unwillingly, had caused me to become a prostitute. I wondered if there was any way to recover the reputation that was necessary to do the job while still not engaging in anything else illegal that would draw attention to our business. Could I still protect myself and the others? As I've already mentioned, if I could do it over, I would have left as soon as Jacques showed up, but hindsight is twenty-twenty (as one might say), and you can't do anything over, not in the sense that it would actually change the past.

Seems I should be, I told her, but I don't know that I'm smart enough to quit.

Nobody's smart enough to quit, she said. Thought I was, and then you came around.

F_____ persuasive b_____.

But what would I do if not this? You know I started at it for a reason.

Your reason was bulls____. Everybody knows now Michael didn't have anything to do with it. That story you tried to sell me when we met. I don't hold it against you. But don't try telling me otherwise. And what could you do? I'll tell you what. Something rich white men do. Get into finance or something. Do something with money. You're good with it. If someone could actually invent a money tree, it'd be you.

People tell me that, but you gotta work in some way or another. I can't just make money appear by snapping my fingers. There's no money tree. I still got needs.

There you go, she said. Full of s____ again. I'm not saying you're a f_____ magician. I'm saying you can make money somewhere else as well as here. I'm saying I know you and you're not like the rest of us out here.

To be full of s____ is usually to be a liar, and I was lying. Not as the person I was, as me at that time, in that moment, in that pattern and rhythm. But as the person I am, right now, as I write this, as the person with the motivations I was cognizant of having, and with the understanding I have of the word need. I have never needed money in the common way of thinking of it. I have always had food and shelter and clothing. I have always had more than I needed to survive and continue. But collecting money is not a project with a natural end like so many others.

For instance, there are two necessary and natural ends to this project:

- 1) When we arrive (as one might say) in the present of my life.
- 2) When I die or when I lose the cognitive or physical ability to compose.

The risk escalation after Michael's death was statistically too high for my business concerns, and my relative fear of physical harm and death. Also, the absence of Michael was the absence of an employee I could almost completely trust and who almost completely trusted me. This was a business loss I could not effectively recuperate. Tapanga could not do all of the things that Michael did, and would not have done them even if I asked. It was Michael's death that made my need to find alternative employment apparent, not Tapanga's argument.

I started telling you, she said, about why I got into hooking, but I didn't finish. Maybe if you listen hard something will get through. Cause there's what you gotta do and there's what you wanna do. And what you're doing now has to do with wanting a thing.

Told you I was a military brat, that my mom was some beautiful creature. It went along with it that my dad was as sturdy as a f_____ wall. I mean, the f_____ size of him. Huge. Could run ten miles with a hundred and twenty pounds on his back. Could bench press 250 ten times. S_____ he'd show me and tell me about hoping I'd follow after. But that wasn't me.

I wanted to do ballet. I know. Hard to see my awkward a_____ dancing around. But I'd seen some girls on the base got into this little local troupe. I went and watched one day through this big glass wall, my face pressed up to it until some of them started to look over and giggle. Until the teacher came out frowning and told me I better get moving. I was so jealous of them. Spinning around, their hair tied up tight, wrapped up in the stuff I'd always been drawn to, the things I'd get into in my sister and mom's closet even if they were way too d_____ big for me. Things that made you petite, like you could glide through the world. I wanted to be pretty.

I asked my mom about getting into it. She says patiently, Now honey, ballet is for girls. Nevermind that that's bulls_____. She knows it well enough herself. Who does she think is picking up the girls? These light, perfect beauties. And she knows what I am even if I don't say it as much as I used to. All the time when I was four and five. I'm a girl. I'm a girl. But she just pretends it never happened.

I start crying and she starts getting more frustrated. You can play any sport you want, she says. You name it and you can play it. I said I didn't like sports. I didn't like getting dirty. I was always kind of staying in place, and sports seemed rough and ugly. I've always been elegant any way I could even if I can't dance for s_____. But there's nothing elegant about football. You gotta

go for something with straight and curved lines. Something with symmetry, something that at least tries to look perfect. Too much uncoordinated movement in most sports, bodies all gangly running for one ball or another. But ballet. All that coordinated dance, those bodies telling stories, making movement speak.

I will cut off Tapanga's story here (spatially) to more accurately follow the day's time line. I will return to it.

--Michael's Death in His Own Words (continued)--

I could tell she was dead right away. Her eyes were open. Glassy and unmoving, set on a filthy ceiling fan that was barely turning. Had two of the four blades missing. Even with all the money we were making she did enough drugs she still needed to live in a s___hole. Broken fan was the last thing she saw. I called an ambulance. Took two more bumps and smoked another joint. My skin felt hot. I wanted to see someone bleed. I left the place. She was already cold when I got there. Nothing else to do.

Denise was around since the beginning, and I was closer to her than most. She understood what it was like to need drugs to quiet your mind. Some drug trips with her lasted a couple days. Or longer. I couldn't always tell. We once took Minnie's Cadillac to the Horseshoe Casino. Had about five thousand in cash between the two of us. Spent most of it buying drinks for people and drawing a crowd. All those people and the feeling of the drugs was sometimes as close to feeling alive as I could get. I'm carrying on a conversation with like twenty people. Gamblers and young couples and cocktail waitresses all listening to me cause I'm getting them drunk. The lights are that casino bright and the slot machines won't stop dinging and I'm swiveling on a bar stool and telling a story about Minnie and this client who refused to use a condom. The circumstance being what it was, she didn't think she could make a safe escape at

first. Big motherf_____ who worked out. She'd have to get to him without him seeing it coming. So she says that's fine and it'll be twice as much but he's got to pay up front. And he wants to f_____ her in the a_____ without a condom. And she says that's fine. Except when it happens she s_____ on his d_____. At first the guy's too grossed out to try to hurt her, this second she somehow knew would occur. A moment of shock. She's ready when it happens, takes that moment of surprise to kick his a____, steal his money and take his clothes. So he's left naked and covered with s_____ in some hotel room that doesn't even have a working bathroom. A real piece of trash place.

And I'm making them laugh or they're being polite by laughing. But as Minnie says all the f_____ time, there's not really a difference since we can't ever know for certain why people do the s_____ they do. I love people and I hate people. When I'm around them I feel alive, but they drain me. Sometimes I can't escape the feeling that I'm performing. On the drugs I know I'm performing and I'm doing a d_____ good job. Denise and I spent the night at the casino gambling and drinking and snorting in the bathrooms. Spent the next day doing the same. At one point she's up three thousand at black jack. Then three hours later we're broke. We head back, sleep for almost a day, and can't remember most of what happened. Denise had a long cut on her back and neither of us could figure out where it came from. What else had we done? We'd been blacked out for about half of our lives.

Denise was always there for me when I hit bottom, when talking to Minnie wasn't enough. Minnie couldn't really understand sadness, even if she could give you a handy definition. Sure, she learned how to perform that understanding, but she couldn't do it with me. I knew it wasn't real. Denise was bi-polar and had run away from home when her parents refused to let her take meds for it. She was afraid of going crazy and her parents were telling her God would take care of her, that's all she needed. The things people think God takes the time to give a

s___ about. She stopped taking the mood stabilizers anyway. Guess at some point you just give up. Lose enough and everybody does.

I drove back down to our corners. It was about two in the afternoon, I guess, and there was no one around except for the same two homeless men down on ____ and _____. I parked the van and moved over to the alleyway where the girls would work fast sometimes. Hand____ and blow____. No penetration. Quick and easy. Keep the customer satisfied. Like a f_____ fast food restaurant.

I must have smoked a whole pack of cigarettes waiting there. And a lot of the time I was pacing back and forth I was thinking about blood. Which isn't really like me. At least, to think about anyone's but my own. Or maybe, it hadn't always been. I'm not a violent person, I don't think, but that was something in me that had been ripped open over the last few years. The sight of Minnie on the ground made it too real, especially when I saw what else he'd done besides beat her. Yet, even wanting some kind of revenge, it seemed it would be alright if I was the one bleeding. Or Minnie. Or one of the girls. It didn't matter somehow. I mean, it did. It wasn't really about wanting. Because as far as that went I wanted the blood to come out of Jacques and his jerk-off thugs. But it seemed as long as someone bled it would be alright. Like the universe was out of balance. That waiting feeling was in me. That pressure building. I couldn't stand the wait. I wanted the thing to happen already.

I had a competing impulse at the same time. I wanted to go shopping. It was so stupid it caught me off guard. I was staring at a f_____ dumpster and started thinking about shopping.

I was walking through the aisles of a Nordstrom, into a Bloomingdales, Burberry outlet, somewhere expensive where they treat you like royalty. Strolling into the women's section and not caring. Not caring. Like Minnie. Not feeling the pain of social interaction or isolation.

I wanted to pick out a beautiful red dress, something long and flowing with a deep cut V. I'd wear a push-up bra with padding, and Minnie would show me how to look good. She'd buy too, and not because I couldn't afford it. I had more money than I knew what to do with. Minny too. But she'd pay because she was there to protect me, because I was hers. She'd escort me through with my arm through her own, do all the talking with the employees, handle all that day to day s____. The performance of self. We'd go out to a fancy dinner later. And as I thought about it sometimes it was me in the dress and sometimes it was Minnie, and sometimes it was both of us. The same dress shifting in my mind. We were moving easily between worlds. I could shave my chest down real close so that you couldn't tell, and my legs and my face. Pluck my eyebrows and the thicker hairs on my chin that would come through blue even with the foundation. I could be clean and washed. I'd wear black mascara with liquid black eyeliner and a purple eye shadow, and lipstick. A dark red, I guess. Something that seems deep, full, like the dress I'd wear. I would get one of the wigs from the girls. Black. And I'd get long earrings, dangling ones. Some earrings only work with dresses. I wanted something that could only work with the dress, that was made for the dress. And no one would be able to tell. I'd fit right in, a woman as far as anyone could know.¹³⁶ I'd been working on the voice for a long time when I was alone, hearing my pitch

¹³⁶ I don't understand why you don't just say Michael was a transwoman, Nora said. If he said this stuff to you then that's what he was saying.

He never said he was a transwoman, I replied, and he never pretended to be one. He sometimes said he wished he was a woman. When he was young and trying on the dresses my mother bought for the dolling, he would say he wished he was a girl. He didn't say it all the time, but that was what he sometimes said. That he wished it. This implies that he thought of himself as a man, which makes him a man. For example, Tapanga was a transwoman because that is what she pretended to be, because that is what she said she knew. That she was a woman.

But how is it about pretending? Look, as much as I hate you sometimes, you are teaching me a lot. Some of it, I don't think you're doing on purpose. But if I take seriously what you've been saying the last couple years, he clearly repressed that s ____ and couldn't figure it out. He was ashamed. You've written about it a lot, and we've talked about it a lot. How can you not see that? I've been reading stuff about transgender people, and it makes a lot of sense.

Nora, I said, I can agree with much of what you're saying. I do believe that Michael felt shame, but I think it was connected to his desire to be a woman while knowing he was a man—

Hold on—

If you let me finish this point you might more properly argue with it. There is no way to identify someone is a transwoman if they themselves do not identify that way. Gender, as I explained in the previous chapter, is ultimately only conclusive via someone's claimed gender. He did not claim to be a woman. He said he wished he was a woman, which is very different. This meant he thought of himself as a man who wanted to be a woman. That is different than just being a woman.

He was a woman! Nora yelled. That's what I'm saying. He just couldn't understand it because of, well, because of people like you.

If he said he was a woman I would have believed him, I said, and he knew that as well as anyone could have known that. He knew better than anyone how I think and act in the world. If I did not believe he was a man then I would not have been believing Michael. It would have required me to think of him as a liar, which most people dislike even if they are liars. Now, we could posit that he was lying to himself, I understand that. But to the extent that gender can only be conclusive via self-identification, you are then positing that the gender of many people is not what they say it is, and by doing so you are treating them in a way they do not wish to be treated, whether or not they are lying to themselves. Further, by doing so, you are potentially supporting the argument of those with very rigid understandings of gender, which is not something that the transgender community, by necessity, wishes to do.

I don't think you're right about this, she said. You're making sense, but you're not getting it. People can't accept certain things. That's why they have to come out. Like, I have three gay friends and they haven't told anyone but me and a couple others. They didn't always get it because they didn't even know that was something they could be. Not everything is a performance. It starts to seem that way when you believe it, but that's just because you can't stop thinking about it. It's nice you wanted to believe him in the way you could. That's something, I guess. But that's not everything.

You have made a good argument, I said, but in order that I should treat people as they wish to be treated, and therefore successfully exist in the world, I cannot accept your argument. Because even accepting its possible truth, it is not knowledge that is useful in daily interaction. If someone has not accepted something about themselves they will likely still not accept it even if you tell them they are this other thing. And if people do not believe that certain ways of being exist, it is unlikely you will be able to convince them otherwise. Therefore, while you may be correct, it is not useful to think in this way when interacting with others. And so, as with your gay friends, it would seem incorrect to consider them gay until they told you they were, at which point they incontrovertibly were so.

Maybe, Nora said

higher and higher. Attaining a consistency. Asking Minnie what she thought. Somehow that performance felt real. How is that?

Sometimes I had to ask myself what kind of freak I was. Was I like Tapanga? Some transvestite weirdo? Not that I thought of her that way. She was herself. A transwoman was the word they were starting to use more. But I knew what others thought, and I knew what I thought of myself. An in-between something that nobody wanted to take the time to understand. That I couldn't understand. Pariah. Historical non-entity. Abomination. And then I looked at Minnie and I could almost kill her, how easy it was to become someone else.

And was it just because I wanted to dress in drag? Wear some makeup? Hear someone call me pretty? Was it because my mind felt other than body, felt somehow at odds with itself, in the way I was treated and the way I moved through the world? I knew no one back home would ever accept me. A man saying they were a woman. There's no way that the God they believed in could help them understand. Tried to tell my brother once about something being off and he said it was because of that f__ John, that it was John's fault. A lot of things might have been John's fault, but that wasn't one of them.

Does everything have to mean something? I never used to think so. I used to think the world was random as h___. Minnie convinced me at some point that everything was performance, and that seemed right, and weirdly lent meaning to everything, every little detail. They always had an argument to back it up, an example to set me straight. But I wasn't so sure anymore. Something in me wanted to get out. Something that seemed real.

I was stuck in my head for awhile, for a long time, walking back and forth and thinking. A couple hours passed at least. Slow hours and fast hours.

The cocaine made my face tense, pounded in my blood. The weed dulled and condensed my thoughts, and dissolved the body aches from a poor night's sleep. The percocet numbed my body. Even with the tension from the cocaine, I was numb and drooping, my skin falling down. I could've slept for a week or stayed up until I dropped dead. My body was at war with itself, just like the split of my thoughts. Blood and dresses.

--Michael's Death in His Own Words (interrupted)--

In the most accurate construction of the time line I can manufacture, it was sometime during this long pacing (as he called it) that Michael sent me a series of texts.

Michael texted, You want me to kill Jacques? I'm afraid I'm going to kill someone.

I texted, You shouldn't do that.

Michael texted, The f___ am I supposed to do?

I texted, Keep the girls safe. Get them off the street. Tell them to stay home.

Michael texted, Denise is dead.

I texted, How?

Michael texted, OD. After Jacques beat her senseless.

I texted, If you have an opportunity. If it is easy, then do what you can. If not, then don't.

Michael texted, I don't think it's easy to kill anyone. My face hurts.

I texted, I didn't tell you to kill anyone. What's wrong with your face?

Michael texted, IDK. Feels like I got bugs under it.

I texted, You don't.

Michael texted, How do you know?

I texted, It's the drugs you've taken. Probably an unsafe mixture.

Michael texted, Probably right. You tell Mandy to go back to work? The f___?

I texted, No.

Michael texted, Who you want me to kill first? You or Jacques?

I texted, I didn't tell Mandy to work. She doesn't even work the streets. You know that. Don't kill me.

Michael texted, Lol. You're a f_____ riot. (emoji of middle finger)

I texted, I'm not sure you're okay. Maybe you and Mandy should come back. If Mandy is with you.

Michael texted, Nah. I'm fine. (poop emoji)

Here is perhaps where a guilty conscience might react. In this instance, I understood his language literally, as I often do. Even understanding the figurative and abstract nature of language and how I manipulated it with others and with certain affectations, Michael knew me better than anyone, had seen me in more situations, and generally seemed to understand how I approached problems and language logically and in as literal a way as possible, when possible. In this sense, I am unsure why Michael would expect anything different from me, that I should not understand his fine as fine, regardless of the poop emoji, which he used frequently.

Perhaps he was feeling insecure (as one might say). Thus labeled people sometimes need to be convinced more exhaustively and repetitively about their worth and what they should do, compared to so-called secure people. But, as I wrote above, Michael understood me well, so why should he have thought I might react differently? Did he not know better (as one might say)? Or, was this a way in which he was seeking out death, attempting to absolve any apparent guilt of mine in the process? And yet, I think of him very often, so if this was his intention it is unclear whether it was successful. I can only base my conclusions on what he said and what he did.

It was late afternoon (about 3:30) at this point and Tapanga was smoking and reading through some fashion magazines she'd picked up for the two of us.

You see, this, she said, this is what I wanted. Something glamorous. Something that tries for perfection. It's fake obviously, but it's the kind of distraction I wanted, the fake world that appealed to me. Not a bunch of sweaty boys on a basketball court. Though I like them that way well enough. She smiled.

You gonna tell me the rest of your story or what? I did not actually ask this question, but have inserted it here so that her telling of the story more accurately follows the time line of occurrences leading to Michael's death. She actually told the story from beginning to end once she had begun.

My mom leaves while I'm balling my eyes out about the ballet s____. Tells me I'm stressing her out and she's going to get her nails done. I guess that's ironic cause I'm pretty sure getting my nails done woulda helped my stress too. But that wasn't for me. That was my mom's. That was part of the dream she inherited. I got sports and sweaty jock straps. Facial hair, narrow hips, and a flat butt. Least before I was able to get on estrogen and have laser treatment. Then I got angry motherf_____ yelling at me late at night.

So there was my sister. She was always sweet to me, two years older and a protector, and involved in all the things I wanted to do, taking after my mom cause she could. I was so jealous of her, of who she was allowed to be. She knew it, but it's not like she rubbed it in. Helped in the ways she could. First time she caught me trying on one of her dresses she says, You look very pretty, but you better take it off now. Dad'll be home soon.

She was smart. Not against me but knowing how my parents were. She felt bad for me after hearing me cry so much over the ballet. She came in and said we could play dress up for a

little while. So I put on something I could twirl in. And I could breath again when I looked in the mirror. There I was for just a second.

My dad came home, but we didn't hear him. She was playing Cyndi Lauper and we were jumping around to it, having fun like the song said. My dad comes in and sees me. My sister shuts the music off. I'd never been more scared in my life.

It's not his fault, Daddy, my sister was saying, me shaking in the corner. It was my idea, she tells him.

Then he took off his belt and started hitting her. Didn't stop for some time. She was bruised and bleeding when he did. Before he left he said, You don't ever put my boy in a dress. Knew I'd leave as soon as I could after that. That smug, hateful look on his face like he'd won. It was one thing for me to be treated like s____, take on what the world thought I had coming. It was another to let my sister take the beating, to have someone else step between me and a loaded gun.

So I bottled it up for ten years. Found some people in online forums who were like me. Found a community of queers like me, hiding out in small towns. That's the only way I could make it all that time. I needed to hear people tell me I was real.

Took off the day I turned eighteen. Worked a couple retail jobs for s____ pay around a bunch of phony a_____. All those people living the dream because somebody'd written a part for them. Never a part for someone like us, so we find our way outside the dream. We gotta wake up and tiptoe around so we don't wake those sleeping p____. You wake up somebody caught in that dream and you risk losing your life.

It was too late to wait anymore though, and I couldn't stand working retail. It'd been too long. I needed to see the real me, and so I needed cash fast. Found some people who knew where

I could go. Started hooking and used the money so I could be the classy b_____ you looking at. I guess it's strange, but I'd do it all over again.

--Michael's Death in His Own Words (continued)--

Mandy showed up around three. You don't find many johns that time of day. It's not the kind of thing you get in real quick before dinner with the family. The creeps come out after dark. Some bedtime stories make a lot of f_____ sense.

The only reason the girls were out in the morning was because of the s_____ that happened with Minnie. The ones who'd ignored her message to go home and lay low for a bit. And then because she wasn't there to take them home, to tell them their work day was over. She had her rules and they followed them. As much as Minnie claims she isn't violent with them, there's lots of kinds of violence. Minnie pretty much controlled their lives. Though if you asked them they'd never say that. At least not to me.

I was standing in the same alleyway, waiting for I don't know what. For the world to bleed, I guess, because I'm an idiot. Mandy comes around the corner smiling at me.

Oh Michael, you darling. Are you out here to catch the big bad wolf?

I laughed. I think you'd be better at blowing his house down.

That's my guy, she said, coming over to me and taking my arm. Always with a joke for his gal pals. When you gonna take me out to dinner and a movie? You drive me crazy.

She leaned her head on my shoulder, and I felt a sudden and intense attraction to her. I wanted to f_____ her right then. I can't explain it. Mandy was maybe the craziest person we worked with. She talked like she was from another time, a performance that was still extremely charming. She'd stopped hooking on the street, but not from a lack of interest from the clientele. She made more money being an occasional escort for the men with extra money to burn, but

spent the majority of her time doing webcams and a porn site she did with two other girls. All of them were owned by Minnie, but she was better off than most. Still, you couldn't tell what the f___ she was really like and it freaked me out sometimes. With Minnie, the best actor I'd ever known, you couldn't tell she was faking it. Least not after she'd had some practice time. But with Mandy, you knew she was faking, but still that was Mandy, that was all any of us knew about her. She didn't have a past as far as anyone could tell. And it was especially scary when I was high. Sometimes listening to her talk was like listening to a bird chirp in a cartoon about princesses.

Mandy, do you want to kiss me? I asked, because the thought went straight from my brain to my mouth. She was so beautiful standing there. Her flaxen curls, plump lips, doe eyes, round doll cheeks. I think maybe I wanted to be her.

More than anything, she said.

We kissed, and I couldn't stop, and within a few moments we were groping at each other, and then somehow we ended up in her apartment. I'd seen her naked a lot, though mostly on the sites we operated. Still, seeing her then it was like finally I could see how beautiful she was. She was close to thirty-five and she had d___ near perfect skin. There wasn't anything beautiful about the business we were in, and so sometimes, as gorgeous as some of the girls were, you didn't really see it. It wasn't the right setting for it.

She did most of the work, but we were at it for a good hour all the same. The drugs did that to me. Not the worst of the side effects.

Mandy sat naked on the bed, a dull streaked light of early evening coming through the blinds and marking her body. She lit a cigarette.

The girls are gonna be so jealous I hooked you. All this time and not one of us could pull you in. The longest time, we were betting on it. See who could get ya to give em some attention. But then you never did. And after so many years you kind of give up on a thing. Like Santa Claus, you just stop thinking it's real. I always figured you saved yourself for Minnie. You'd make a cute couple.

Oh, I said. No, Minnie only f___ money.

Oh you're funny, she said, and she laughed lightly, and turned her smile to me. You know, I think Denise is gonna be the worse. She won't believe it. That girl talks about you nonstop. Her and Tapanga spend hours just praising your charms. That hair, and those brown eyes. And you know, such a perfect square chin. Boys these days grow beards so they can pretend they have one, but you don't need to. We're all amazed how good you look with all the drugs. I mean, you can tell, but not much at all. How is it you take care of yourself?

What can I say? Drugs keep me skinny.

Yeah, she said, and you're skin and bones. I was afraid I might break you. But you held out, honey. You're impressive all over.

Denise is dead, I said.

Well that's not very funny, she said. What's the joke?

It's not a joke, I said. She overdosed this morning.

Well, she said, pausing to inhale and exhale her cigarette, it's a cruel world. She ain't the first and I guess she won't be the last, but that don't keep ya from hoping for a thing.

She didn't say anything else, and I didn't either. There were no tears, no outward change in either of us. There was no way to tell how either of us felt looking in from the outside. Maybe she felt like me. At this point my emotions had a hard time actually coming to the surface. Anger

was about all I could find, and even that seemed rare sometimes. Mostly I just made jokes, laughed, and smiled. It made things easier, like Minnie might say.

I better go, I said.

You ain't gonna go and do something crazy are ya? You know us girls think the world of you Michael. We'd be crushed to lose you.

Why do you think you'll lose me?

I'm just thinking you're not saying all you could. This doesn't have anything to do with Jacques? With what happened to Minnie last night?

It does, I said. I guess it does. I guess everything has to do with everything else.

Well I'll be, she said, you're just our little philosopher now, aren't ya? I was never much for it myself. Best not to over think things, that's my motto. That's one of the reasons I worry so much about you. You can think yourself into a lot of trouble, dear.

Don't worry, I smiled, there's no danger of that.

She laughed her laugh. I got dressed, said goodbye, and left. I didn't understand what I'd just done. For ten years I'd been working with prostitutes, with girls who offered themselves for free on more occasions than I could count. I had never accepted. And then this. And with Mandy.

It had been simple in the past. I didn't want to take advantage of them. I didn't want to be a pimp. I just wanted to help. But I'd just been pretending, I guess. Pretending to myself, but I don't think it fooled anyone else.

Did Mandy have sex with me because she thought she had to? There was no way to ever know this. And I had done this to myself. Maybe like they say about grief in the movies, when someone just randomly f_____ someone else after a funeral. Wanted to feel something else. And now I did. I felt guilt.

I ignored the cocaine, just smoked a joint, went back to where I'd been standing. I knew if I waited long enough in that alley where we'd been working for years that eventually Jacques would find me.

So what then? What about when he did show up? I didn't have a weapon. I didn't have a plan. I had a pocketful of drugs and a strong desire to die.

There was never an easy explanation for all of this, how it came together in my head and then in the world. But there I was, around 6:30, an hour or so before the sun would go down.

The drugs are me. I am the drugs. When did that become a comforting meditation?

First couple people I saw were regulars. It's a holiday, I told them. Employee appreciation day. Look at the websites.

A website can't suck my c____, one guy said, and I kicked him in the balls. He keeled over and I told him that if that's what he wanted he should stick his d____ in a vacuum cleaner. I had to stop myself from doing more. I could have killed him. I was ready for it to be over.

When one of Jacques' guys showed up, I told him, I give up. We all give up. It's yours.

That was quick, he said. But I ain't in charge. Me and you'll wait for the big guy, yeah?

So we waited. We talked for awhile about local sports and there was a general acceptance of each other despite the circumstance. When I could tell he just thought I was some lucky idiot that stumbled into all of this, I offered him some cocaine that I'd laced with rat poison. I'd never offered it before. I kept it on me just in case. It was Minnie's idea. I snorted some of the other stuff. Showed him. See? Safe? Want?

He took it and pretty soon he was on the ground with blood coming out of his mouth and nose. I didn't want to live anymore.

The time Jacques finally got there I just rushed up on him. I felt free. Freer when the bullets hit me. Freer when I lay there, forcibly stopped, staring at the sky, the pain intense but fading, kept away by all the drugs. Anyway, it was better than staring at a dirty ceiling fan.

--Michael's Death in His Own Words (interrupted)--

Michael was in the hospital for five days, undergoing several surgeries before he died. I went to see him twice. I wanted to go more but it was difficult and painful to move, and it required a lot of help from Tapanga and others, even after which help I needed to be wheeled around in a wheelchair. However, during my two visits, we talked a lot, which is why I could relate so much as I did of what occurred. And I was there before he had the final surgery during which he died.

--Michael's Death in His Own Words (concluded)--

After days of being in and out of consciousness and surgeries, I was feeling a little more lucid. Told Minnie all I could remember. Hours I was just talking, one thing after another pouring out. Told her I sensed what was coming. I wanted her to know everything. Somebody to carry the things I'd been carrying. The only person that ever knew me.

There's one more thing you have to do for me, I said.

If I capable of doing it, she said, then I will.

I told her, play Another One Bites the Dust when they wheel me down the hallway to surgery.

Okay, she said.

I smiled at her, and soon they were wheeling me away, to damnation or salvation. Queen merrily thumping was the last thing I heard. I pictured the dying patients faces and I hoped they appreciated the way I did. How the acceptance of a thing makes it easier. How screaming out

that you know what everyone else knows can be a freeing thing. I hadn't been that happy in a long time.¹³⁷

¹³⁷ How can you know how happy he was? Nora asked.

He looked happy, I said. I thought it would be appropriate. Often, things like this will end with a line that communicates something similar, like something is being experienced for the first time, or remembered for the first time in a long time. It is also a way in which a reader can feel better about Michael's death, as many people dislike death and thinking about it. Something positive attached to its happening seems to make them feel better.

You know what I would've wrote? She asked.

What?

He was sad and then he died.

So you're saying I should communicate a more somber tone, that something sadder and with more finality would be appropriate?

No, she said. I'm just saying I don't think he was happy. But it is pretty hilarious that he had you play Another One Bites the Dust.

He seemed to think so.

Chapter Sixteen: My Year in France

Purpose: To demonstrate how I placed myself in a different environment in order to distance myself from the criminal activity of recent years, as well as Michael's death and the general violence surrounding it. To demonstrate what I learned of people from different European countries as well as people from different states in America other than those I typically interacted with while in Kentucky.

Scene Possibilities:

Getting a job teaching English.

Thanksgiving dinner with roommates

Trip to Amsterdam (bringing marijuana back).

Meeting the German.

Chapter Seventeen: Moving Back to Burlington: A Life of Routine.

Purpose: To demonstrate my routines before and after Nora's arrival. To demonstrate how Nora changed as she aged.

6-6:30AM: Wake up. Drink coffee. Have bagel or scone, or eggs and bacon.

6:30-8AM: Read Wall Street Journal and New York Times.

8-9AM: Read online news.

9AM-12PM: Monitor stocks. Read financial news.

12-1PM: Make and eat lunch.

1-4PM: Free time. Typically used for research.

4-5PM: Make and eat dinner.

5-7PM: Write autobiography.

7-10PM: Watch television or film. Scroll through social media.

10PM: Bedtime.

Scene Possibilities:

Hiring Yancy to draw up the plans for my mansion.

Watching television.

Going through social media websites.

The biography's effect on my daily schedule.

Nora having parties.

Fifth Interlude: Diane Burgess: My Mother.¹³⁸

I went to visit my mother at my childhood home three days prior to Thanksgiving, a week after we set the appointment, because she said she couldn't see me before then. In order to understand the general concerns my mother expressed during my visit, it is necessary to first explain recent events concerning Nora, though these issues should not have come up if Nora's speech in the below conversation was completely true.

About a year after William returned from the treatment center, Nora told him I was a prostitute, pimp, and murderer, which resulted in her moving out, because William doesn't want her living with a godd___ murderer, as he said.

Nora called to tell me she was sorry about what had happened the day after William came to my house, yelled at me, and told her to pack her things and come with him.

I didn't know how he'd react, she said.

Okay, I said. Though it seems unlikely you didn't know he'd react badly.

Well yeah, I knew that. No one wants to hear their brother's a murderer.

So what is it that you would like me to understand, Nora?

It's just that I didn't tell him so he'd hate you more or anything. That's not why.

Okay, I said, knowing that it was unlikely that was the reason, or the primary reason, though it was clearly a consequence.

¹³⁸ *Editor's Note:* There are no footnotes in the original manuscript in the fifth and sixth interludes. One of the reasons is made almost immediately apparent, as Nora's absence clearly meant she couldn't comment. As far as the absence of self-reference to other chapters, Nora informed me that the footnotes, other than those concerning her, were typically added when he went back through the pages after the initial composition.

It's just, she said, I can't keep that kind of stuff to myself. I needed to tell someone. And I couldn't tell my friends. Who knows who they'd tell?

I'm glad you didn't tell your friends, I said, but why did you tell your father?

You just can't keep something like that to yourself, she said. It'll kill you.

Clearly, it would not kill you to not say it. So, could you please be more specific?

It didn't feel right to not say anything.

Why didn't it feel right?

Cause f____. People are dead.

So, you're concerned about the dead John and Julian? You feel bad they died? You feel guilty about it?

Not exactly, she said. Not at all actually. They were obviously terrible. But still. And why would I feel guilty? I didn't kill them. You did.

I know that. Part of why I'm asking for specificity is because I do not understand why you should feel guilt for something you had no direct role in causing. And yet, the language you're using indicates you felt bad for them, that you felt guilty for knowing and not telling people. That their death was something worth feeling bad about, that perhaps you had a guilty conscience and needed to confess.

Feeling bad for not telling is different.

Okay. How is it different?

If you know someone was murdered, and you know who did it, then you're letting that person get away with murder. It's like you're insulting the dead person.

Okay, I said. Would it then be correct to say that you told him so that he'd get me arrested? And, once this outcome is achieved, you will no longer feel yourself to be insulting the dead people?

I don't want you to go to jail.

So, to what extent do you think I deserve punitive treatment in order to not insult the dead? Because you stated that knowing who the murderer is is the issue here. To know who the murderer is and say nothing is to insult the dead. I am the murderer in this case.

Stop with the dead insults thing. That's not what I meant.

Then please explain yourself clearly if you are able to do so. I believe you are capable of this. During most of our discussions you did not have this much difficulty in expressing your intentions or feelings. To continue our agreement of honesty, I believe you may be being purposefully vague in meaning so it seems as if you have adequately explained yourself when you have not, because said adequate explanation is something you may believe I wouldn't like. To be clear, you seem to either be telling me the truth and you wish for me to be punished so that you won't feel guilty for knowing I'm a murderer; or, you are lying because the true motive behind your decision is one you don't want revealed because you think I'd like it less, or you are perhaps embarrassed by what it means about yourself. Though I should say that I think I would prefer an alternative motive to you wishing for my punishment, so I am not sure why you would hide your true motive. If you are hiding your true motive.

Huh, she said. Guess I can't pull one over on you. I guess you really got me on this one. She spoke as an adult sometimes speaks to a child when they are pretending the child understands something better than the adult, but do not. She spoke slowly and with less inflection than normal.

If what I said is true, I responded, then in this instance, I suppose you cannot pull one over on me, as you said. Also, I'm fairly certain you're being sarcastic. At the same time, I do not completely understand why you would be sarcastic. I am uncertain of the purpose it's serving, as I am unsure of why you told your father about my past legal crimes. However, if I must tell you before you tell me, my primary theory is that you felt this would result in him taking you home with him, that this was a desirable outcome for you, as you said it was in the past, as this was the reason you had me make the calls, as this is something you've said you wanted since you moved in with me. You seem to have surmised, and correctly, that by making him hate me more fully, or dislike me more, you would then make him feel like he couldn't in good conscience--as one might say--allow you to continue living with me, a person who is a murderer, prostitute, and pimp whom he hates. It is good logic, and if that was your intention it was a very intelligent thing to do despite the difficulties it will cause me, cause my difficulties are irrelevant to the intelligence of your decision. However, it would be helpful if you'd tell me if this is correct.

I, she said, then pausing for some time before continuing. Are you mad at me? Her question seemed to imply that my theory was correct, asking then if I was mad that she had these motives, though it's also possible she was asking generally if I was made that she'd related that I'm a murderer.

No, I am not mad at you, I responded. I am confused. I would like to understand why you told him in as definitive a way as possible. Can you at least tell me if you will be informing legal authorities about the murders, or whether William will be?

He doesn't want anyone knowing about it, she said.

And what about you? Do you want anyone else knowing about it? You already told one person.

I don't want anyone else knowing about it either, she said. It's possible this was a lie, if she wanted my mother to. Or, she lied about what William would do. Or, she did not know what William would do.

She was quiet for about forty-five seconds and I was also quiet. Then I asked, Were you silent because there is something you wanted to say that is difficult to say? Are your feelings making it difficult for you to communicate with me? Because if that is the case Nora, you should understand better than anyone else living, that you will likely not hurt my feelings as it is generally understood. You have frequently implied or explicitly told me I don't have feelings. And I understand that I do not experience emotional pain as others explain the concept. So, you do not need to feel bad on my behalf, if that is what you are doing. I will not be mad at you, or sad.

Just stop, she said.

Okay.

I didn't want it to happen like this. I love you, Uncle John. I don't know why, but I do. I just needed to be with my dad for awhile. He needs me.

Okay.

But there was something my dad wanted me to ask you. Well, he just told me to ask it, not to tell you he asked me to ask it. But I know you'd figure it out anyway.

What is it?

Will you keep paying my tuition?

Yes. If you want me to.

How about other stuff?

I will pay for any expenses having to do with maintaining the lifestyle you currently lead, as I was planning to continue this anyway. I've recorded all your expenses. I can send you monthly checks based on these records, and you can let me know if your expenses change.

Would you prefer I make the checks out to you or William?

Better make it me.

Okay.

I'm afraid he'll spend it on something else.

Okay.

So, why are you doing this?

Why I am doing what?

Why are you still giving me money?

The same reason I was giving you money before.

What's that?

You need money. Your father needs money. Your father is my brother. My brother is my mother and father's son. It is good to have a good relationship with your immediate family. You have to interact with your family and it is best if they like you, or at least do not actively dislike you. It is unhelpful to make enemies, and it is helpful to make friends. Whenever it is possible you should do these things. It makes existing in the world easier, as I've often explained. Also, I wish to pass on my knowledge to you, to somehow continue to exist through you, as one might say, and gaining knowledge is easier when financial constraints do not exist.

Yeah, okay, she said. There's no other reason?

I believe I know what you want me to say, I said. Do you want me to say it?

Yeah sure, she said.

Because I love you, I said.

I love you, too. She hung up.

I had not seen any family members since the night when William came to get Nora, until I saw my mother three days prior to Thanksgiving.

It was Monday, and I arrived at my mother's home around 3:30 PM. She usually takes this time to do her Bible study or to garden depending on the season of the year. As it was fall I found her in the front yard, placing some decorative gourds and pumpkins around the base of some trees and abutting the door, and on some window ledges, though not simultaneously.

Hi John, she said, not looking up from her gourds and pumpkins, but continuing to place them after she took each one out of the bushel that sat in the driveway.

Hi Mom, I said.

What was it you wanted to talk about? she said, currently in a crouched position over the bushel.

You wanted to meet with me, I reminded her.

Oh, she said. She stood up and turned toward me. She smiled, her bottom lip rolling inward slightly more than usual, and the rest of her face not correspondingly adjusting to the smile as it generally did. For instance, her eyes remained fully open, not squinting slightly as was the familiar pattern. Considering what occurred afterward, I believe this could fit within what people sometimes term a sad smile, in which cases the person smiling appears to be simultaneously happy and sad to see the other person or object, the sadness generally the result of forthcoming news, which news the person sad smiling seemingly assumes the other person won't like.

Why don't we go inside? she asked.

We walked up to the front door, then through the aforementioned optimistic foyer, into the living room, where the carpet was installed when I was eight had recently been replaced with faux wood flooring.

The floors look nice, I said, because people like to hear that the new things they do with their looks or their things are nice.

Thanks, honey, she said.

She asked me to take a seat on the couch, and I did.

Do you still like jasmine tea? she asked.

I said yes, because I do.

After about ten minutes she came back into the living room with two cups of tea.

Thank you, I said, when she handed me the tea. Where's Dad? I asked, because I had not yet seen him.

Your brother took him to a doctor's appointment, she said. Finally got him to go. He can't remember most things, and his knees have been bothering him a lot lately. He can't walk more than a few feet hardly. I prayed for him but I think the Lord was telling us it's time to accept some outside help. I know faith can heal a lot. But. Well.

It's good he's going to the doctor, I said.

I guess it is. I'm glad you could come over today. I miss you.

I'm glad I could come over too. I miss you too.

Okay, she said, then pushing her hair back behind her ears with the hand not holding the cup of tea. That's good to hear, she said.

Why was it you wanted to see me?

I thought it would be best if I was the one to tell you.

Tell me what?

About Thanksgiving.

Did you want me to bring the turkey again? Or should I bring something else? Or would you like me to bring something in addition to the turkey? I could also hire a caterer if you'd like.

It's not that.

Okay.

We don't want you there this year, she said, and she started crying.

It's alright, I said, meaning she did not need to feel bad and cry, as people often do, assuming that the reason the person is crying is because they believe something isn't alright. Why is it you don't want me there? I asked.

She kept crying for a while, which seemed to prevent her speaking. She started making a slight moaning sound in the back of her throat as the tears ran down her face (as one might say). I got up and went to get her a box of tissues that were on an in-table that she could not reach from her current seated position. This is generally thought a kind gesture when someone is crying. I handed her the box of tissues. Her mascara was spreading from underneath her eyes down to her cheeks because of the liquid.

Is there anything else I can do for you? I asked, because this is the common response to people when crying. It implies you wish to help. When they are crying it is usually because they are sad, so if you help them...¹³⁹

¹³⁹ *Editor's Note:* Burgess reiterates why life is easier if the people around you are in a good mood.

No, she said, continuing to cry for a few more minutes, at one point setting her tea down so that she could grasp at her face with both hands, either to cover the tears from my view or to further express distress and sadness. I waited.

Did I really raise a murderer? she asked.

Did someone tell you that you raised a murderer? Or are you asking me if you raised a murderer?

I don't want to believe it, she said. She was not looking at me when she said this, but instead to the left of me, at the front window.

Then you don't have to, I said. You have the power to believe anything.

But I do believe it, she said, still looking at the window.

But why believe something if you don't wish to? If it would hurt you to believe it, then why believe it?

God help me. I can't hide from the truth forever. She then looked up at the ceiling, as if she were looking for God, who many people believe resides in the sky or above the sky.

She started crying and moaning again. I waited until she was done.

I regret so many things, she said.

What is it that you regret? And how is this connected to Thanksgiving dinner?

I don't know why I did some of things I did. I, and then she paused for about a second and a half, made you this way. It wasn't God. And it's no fault of yours. You should know that.

Made me how? What isn't my fault?

I don't know why I did it.

What did you do?

The dolling, the dress-up. All the attention I gave to you. Your father said I was making you something you weren't. I won't say what he called it, but I didn't give you the opportunity to become a man. I was selfish. Especially after Henry died.

I believe she was inferring that she'd made me gay or had stunted my growth as an adult, or had made me a murderer through giving me attention and the dolling, though this makes no sense. Seemingly, people often like to think there are reasons for everything, that everything is somehow in their control. Perhaps it made my mother feel better to think she had somehow caused me to murder, though the actions she described have nothing to do with murder. At the same time, they are actions she seems to believe are wrong, and wrong actions are often thought to lead to other wrong actions, even if those actions have nothing to do with each other categorically or behaviorally.

It wasn't right, she said, then looking at the floor. Then she again rose her eyes to the ceiling, But do I deserve this?

Is there a way that I can help? I asked.

She did not respond, so that it seemed she was continuing to ask rhetorical questions, or questions directed at no one/God.

This was all confusing because my mother had never told me I shouldn't attend a family get-together, though both my brother and father had. This was a significant change in her typical behavior. While she had asked questions to no one as well as God before, the questions in this case clearly concerned me, and she wasn't allowing me to answer them, and yet seemed to be asking for answers. In the past, the questions she asked herself were more general, like: Why? Why is this happening? Where is he? Is that you? God please help me, why won't you help me? What is wrong with me? Why do I feel this way? I hate myself, doesn't everyone else? Can you

see how ugly I am? Does everyone feel this way? Why do I always do this? Is there a better way?

All of these questions were generally asked between crying fits (as they are sometimes called), or during what others called episodes, when she had a hard time explaining what was wrong to me, my brother, or father, depending on who was present. But she was not then having an episode as the outward signs might have indicated. While she was crying, she was not clutching at her head and rocking back and forth, nor was she periodically screaming, and she was making sense, as her questions had a logical progression and were clearly connected to one another, and yet she was not really directing the questions at me, and was literally directing them above me, below me, and to the side of me. Perhaps most accurately, she was directing the questions to herself, and yet she was not saying the answers out loud.

She looked me in the eyes. I'm trying to say I'm sorry.

It seemed to me that if she was sorry that she was uninviting me to Thanksgiving, then she could invite me again, and cease being sorry, but her apology seemed much more general than this.

I'm sorry I wasn't a better mother, she said.

You were a good mother. You took care of me. You taught me things. You were affectionate toward me. You supported me in school, and told me I was good at things even when I wasn't good at things, which is something good parents do. But, to be clear, you invited me to your house so that you could tell me that I'm not invited to Thanksgiving dinner?

She stared at me but did not say anything.

Then I asked, Do you not like me? Do you dislike being around me? This was the impression I was getting in her refusal to answer my questions directly, in disallowing me to fully understand, and in telling me I shouldn't come to Thanksgiving dinner.

I love you, she said.

I love you too, I said, as is the typical response.

But this is beyond me to let go, she said. So many things have happened over the years, John. She reached towards me and took my right hand into both of hers, generally a consoling gesture. Her hands were soft. With the drugs, she continued, we heard things, you know. But we were never sure. And I always thought the best of you. Your brother wasn't as kind. Neither was your father sometimes. But I, I defended you. I've always known you were different. And different doesn't always have to be bad.

That's true, I said.

But there's some things, she said, then choking up (as one might say) as she continued. There's just some things not even a mother can forgive. I don't know how to look at you anymore, John. When you were little, other parents and some kids, I heard them, they'd say you scared them. And it made me so mad. I could've killed them. So I defended you. I told them you were different, but you were good. That you had a good heart and did the best you could.

I always do my best, I said.

I know you do, honey, she said. But in this case your best isn't good enough. How do I justify having a murderer around my young niece, even if that murderer's my son?

So Nora told you, I said, thinking at that point that denying the fact would not succeed, and so deciding to defend my decision. I murdered people that had murdered or almost murdered

people in the past, I said. They were not good people as it is usually defined. There is no connection between them and Nora. So why--

Stop, she said. There's no good reason for murder, John.

What about self-defense? We were defending women from these men.

But why were you there in the first place? What in the world were you doing down there? How do you even get the idea to become a, a, I can't even say it. You just. She stood up and screamed. Then she said, I love you, but you have to go.

Okay, I'll call you next Sunday. Have fun at Thanksgiving, I said, as we always talked on Sundays, and it is common to tell others to have fun at things you will not be at but that are supposed to be fun.

No, John, she said. I don't want to hear from you anymore.

Okay, I said. You are speaking literally?

Yes, she said. Never. You can't be around us anymore.

Okay, I said. Then I left.

It is becoming increasingly evident that this project of honesty was not well-planned overall. In general, I did not properly consider the risk telling Nora of the murders presented. I had not necessarily planned on telling her at the beginning, but she kept telling me how people liked hearing of drugs and prostitutes, and when I told her there was violence, she said people liked to hear about violence, all things which my experience confirms. Of course, her liking it did not preclude her having negative reactions to it. And if one of the primary reasons for the project was to teach Nora, then I have succeeded, as Nora has learned such things as what she must tell others, what she finds morally wrong, and how to manipulate her father into doing what she wants.

At the same time, the project does not seem like it will be helpful to the rest of my life, as I will most likely never publish it because of legal risks, and as my family now seems to dislike me considerably more than when I began, and in that I cannot conclusively discern if I have a guilty conscience.

For these reasons, it is unclear to whom or for whom I have written this chapter. In this way, I have not yet discovered why I am writing this manuscript as a whole. Though it is a project, and it is good to finish projects. It is begun and significantly far along (as one might say), and that remains a reason to finish it.

Sixth Interlude:¹⁴⁰ My Apparent Heir.

I detail the following, which took place on December 13th, 2014, in order to document a potential psychological disorder, of myself.

I saw Michael through my bedroom window. He was standing in my driveway. I asked myself the following questions:

1) What was the likelihood that Michael was still living considering I'd seen his body and he was declared dead?

2) Was it possible he'd survived and decided to fake his death?

3) Had someone dressed as Michael come to my driveway to stand there and stare at my house, attempting to intimidate me in some way?

4) What were the chances Michael had a son early in life that had grown up enough to almost exactly resemble his features when he died at the age of 29?

5) Was I experiencing a psychological effect of a guilty conscience? Or, was my mind in some other way malfunctioning?

It seemed the least likely scenario was that Michael was in some way still living, had faked his death, and then remained in hiding for the last several years. This left a potential mind malfunction, an undiscovered son of Michael's, or perhaps most likely, someone pretending to be Michael for some reason or another. I have had some interactions with people that suggested they might wish to do me harm, some of which had explicitly stated their intent to do so. Perhaps they would pretend to be Michael in order to make me question my sanity.

¹⁴⁰ *Editor's Note:* Presumably, the reason this is called an Interlude instead of a Postlude is because Burgess planned to continue the document, though it is unclear.

I collect information on the world around me. If there is some sort of mental incapacity I am unaware of, then I am already operating according to it. I have no way of knowing. While a mental infirmity would not be a lie to oneself, you could say it metaphorically operates as a lie the mind tells the body. Some mental illnesses do have a late onset, and psychosis connected to this is perhaps the most likely possibility considering what soon occurred. Again, I have no way of knowing. In a similar way, I may already have been acting in accord with a guilty conscience, and this may have been an extension of that.

I omitted at first the question of it being a ghost, but also noted the interesting coincidence that when I first met Michael he pretended to be a ghost. Though, even if it was a ghost, it was still most likely because of something malfunctioning in my brain and not because his spirit returned to earth from heaven, or elsewhere, depending on your religious belief. Which is to say, my brain might be malfunctioning to a point that it created a ghost.

I still do not believe ghosts are real, but if shown evidence to the contrary, then I'd believe in ghosts. Was this then the evidence necessary to establish ghosts as real? And yet, if ghosts were real, why hadn't I seen one before? I'd known other people who died, such as my grandparents, a high school classmate who drove into a tree when drunk, my eldest brother, an uncle on my mother's side with lung cancer, Denise the prostitute, the men we murdered, and of course, Michael. Then again, if ghosts only appeared to those who were closest to them, as some theories of the paranormal implied, then it made sense that Michael would be the only ghost I'd seen, or would see.

I concluded the best way to learn the truth was to approach the person or figment who seemed to be Michael and who was staring at me through my window.

My driveway is about eighty-five yards long, and it curves through some trees and goes up and down a couple times before it reaches the side of my house where it connects to a four-car garage. Michael's potential ghost stood about ten yards back from the four-car garage to the furthest left side of the driveway, leaning casually against a tree. Casually here is inferred via the angled body, one buckled leg, the arm against the tree forming a triangular resting place for the head. From my position at the window, Michael's potential ghost was about twenty-five yards away, accounting for my position at the farthest left side of the house. He was at a slanted forty-five degree angle from the window, and he stood just outside of the glow cast from my security light. A light snow was falling and creating what some might consider an aesthetically pleasing sight; each snowflake fell with a slight twirl as it passed through the light and then onto the ground.

To ascertain his ability to abandon his slouched position at the tree before I could get down to him I stood for a minute or so at the window, thinking of the quickest way to him that would also allow me to keep him in view. It occurred to me that if this was a hallucination that obscuring him from view might cause him to disappear, literally, from my potentially diseased mind. I feared this because I wanted to be able to talk to him, whether he was a product of my mind or not. I reasoned that in either case speaking to him would be beneficial. If he was representative of a malfunctioning brain, then I thought I could get a better sense of the extent of the malfunction or the nature of it. If he was real, either as faked-death, son, or impersonator, then I could move from there (as one might say). If he was a ghost, I could reconsider my understanding of reality.

I went through the hallway leading from my bedroom, which passes other bedrooms, including Nora's two bedrooms, straight to the foyer where windows make up almost the entire

wall above the front door. I immediately turned to look out these windows, or window, if you simply consider it a very large singular thing. I was pleased to see he was still there. He no longer leaned against the tree, but instead stood up straight, now in the middle of the driveway, smoking a cigarette, or perhaps a joint, knowing what I did of Michael. I locked eyes with him as best I could as I moved from the balcony, down the grand staircase, and towards the front door.

Outside, in the just below freezing air of mid-December, he was still there, now very clearly staring at me and not the house generally.

Michael? I asked, but he did not respond. He may not have heard me. Or he may have been a ghost or brain malfunction incapable of talking. Or he may have been manipulating me in some way if he was a real figure of some sort.

I approached, and I believe I felt fear. Primarily, I feared the unknown, the harm already done to my mind somehow or the physical harm that might result from this encounter. I did not know what to expect, as I had nothing that seemed like a plausible scenario to compare it to, but I could not think of another way to learn exactly what was occurring or how I should handle it other than approaching him.

I walked up to him until I was about five yards distant.

His hair was long and wavy, as it had been the two years preceding his death. Similarly, his figure remained tall, though he was also skinnier, and I might say, gaunt. Considering that the word gaunt is sometimes used when describing dead people or dying people, it seems apt here. He had a well-worn brown corduroy jacket on, a band t-shirt, and loose-fitting jeans that touched scuffed red Converse shoes. I found it hard to doubt if this was Michael when I saw his eyes, the

light brown. And his nose, the bump that rose up in the center. And his ears, slightly large and angled forward.

Michael? I asked again.

Nice house. How's it going, John? He took a long drag from his cigarette or joint, and then coughed deeply.

I thought you were dead, I said.

You and everybody else. Pretty good trick, I guess.

Where have you been?

Here and there. He glanced from side to side as he said this, as if he had been wandering around the grounds of my property since the years of his assumed death, though presumably he hadn't.

Why didn't you come and see me before?

I thought you were bad for me. Well, I mean, I knew you were bad for me. S____, people had been saying it for like twenty years. Just finally decided to listen to them. And to stop listening to you.

What do you mean, bad for you?

You didn't exactly lead me down a straight and narrow path, John. You almost got me killed. A couple times. Michael seemed to be making a Biblical reference.

Matthew 7:13-14: Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it.

Working for me almost got you killed, I corrected.

Not looking to argue semantics, John.

I wasn't arguing with you.

Yeah alright.

Does Finn know you are alive? I asked. Since Michael's death I've been receiving threatening phone calls and letters from Finn in which he would blame me for his brother's death. Logically, if he knew his brother was living, I thought he might cease these threats, and that would be beneficial to my overall well-being.

No, Michael said. Nobody knows I'm alive. Nobody that used to know me. But I figured it was time to say goodbye.

What do you mean by that?

I never really got over you, John. I was out of my f_____ mind half the time and you were the only constant. I used to think you kept me stable in some way. You were the obsession of a lifetime.

What does that mean?

Do I have to spell it out? Is that really necessary?

You don't have to spell it, but I'd appreciate it if you would be as clear as possible.

I know. I should know at least. I forgot talking to you was so hard. How much work it was. Like writing a computer program. Starting from scratch every time.

I'm sorry that it is work for you to talk to me.

Don't be. I've known for a long time that it's not really something you can help. Or, not something you know how to help. Guess it's the same thing. But if I have to be perfectly clear about it, I loved you John. I was in love with you. He threw whatever he was smoking on the ground and then smashed it with his shoe.

Tapanga thought you were in love with me, I said. Other people mentioned it sometimes. Nora, that's my niece, she thinks you were in love with me. You said you loved me but never said you were in love. I was never certain as you never made yourself clear like now. You never touched me in a romantic way. You never requested that we have sex.

That all you have to say about it?

What would you like me to say?

He laughed. It's funny, talking to you. He laughed again. You know, it's funny too that you should mention Tapanga. Helped me to figure out who I am, though it's still taken some years. But you see someone living what they call an authentic life and you think about things different. You think, what is it I haven't been telling myself?

Are you saying that you are a transwoman? I asked.

Look at you, she said, making an inference all on your own. She stopped speaking to look down at herself. Actually, these are my old clothes, she said, some of the few I decided to take with me. I thought one more performance as Michael might do the trick. Then I can really disappear.

If you are a woman then why did you never say that? Why are you only pretending to be that now if it was a cause of pain? Why is it something you needed to find out, when you could have been it by saying it?

She looked at me but didn't say anything.

If you are not a ghost, I said, and if you are not representative of a malfunctioning mind on my part, then why are you here Michael? That is, why are you here after so much time?

A ghost? she asked. She laughed. You don't believe in ghosts.

I laughed too.

A malfunctioning mind? That one I can see coming from you. I'd have never guessed a ghost though. I guess the machine isn't what it used to be.

What does that mean? I asked, though I understood she was insulting me and referring to my mind, but I also reasoned that if she was the product of a malfunctioning mind that a description of the machine of my mind, as she was saying, would be helpful.

Never mind, she said. Point is I needed to see you. I needed to finish things.

Are things finished now? Is there more you need to do?

She smiled and laughed. I smiled and laughed. She reached her hand into her inner coat pocket. At that moment, I thought she was going to pull out a gun and shoot me. I am not sure why I thought this. Perhaps it was related to movies I'd seen, as what would represent a conclusive ending after someone seemingly comes back to life. Also, there are many cultural references to finishing things as referring to death, of either the speaker or the listener. And then again, she'd referenced the negative impact that I'd had on her. She'd claimed that I'd almost gotten her killed. And perhaps, in revenge for this, she would shoot me. But she did not shoot me. She pulled out a pack of cigarettes and a lighter, and she lit a cigarette.

There's just one more thing, she said. She then turned around and starting walking down the driveway.

Why did you come here? I asked, because I found her explanations inadequate. She told me a couple things about herself that I was not before certain of, but nothing had changed materially, and I didn't know if anything was wrong with my mind. The world was the same. Nothing seemed to have been finished. She was a woman. She claimed she was in love, but not anymore. These things were true even before she told me about them. The only difference was that I then knew them.

As she did not respond to me, I asked again, Why did you come here?

I walked down the driveway after her, about five yards behind. I wasn't sure why she wasn't responding to me so I kept asking, Why did you come here?

Was it possible that she could not hear me? Was it possible that she was a projection of my diseased brain, in which she remained a he and was perhaps never in love with me? Was it my diseased brain then that was refusing to answer my own question? Or, was my diseased brain was somehow incapable of answering the question?

We walked for some time, until we came to Camp Ernst Road. She turned onto the sidewalk that appends the road and she kept walking, and so I followed her down the sidewalk.

Thinking from her odd behavior that she may indeed be a projection of my mind I asked her, Are you the results of a guilty conscience? Is this what it feels like to have a guilty conscience? Have you been in my thoughts so much that you are now projected onto the material world from my mind?

She stopped walking a couple seconds after I finished asking these questions. Many cars were driving by us and their headlights would temporarily obscure Michael from my vision with white light, and they would light up the snow flakes and that's all I could see. And then they left little red dots in my eyes, through my perspective, as others would not have been able to see them. The wind from the cars also blew little pieces of trash such as cigarette butts and small pieces of paper into the air, up from the road. I felt very cold. I wasn't wearing a jacket. I hadn't thought of it because I wanted to make sure she didn't disappear, as I wrote.

I stopped walking too. She turned around to face me.

You want a cigarette? she asked, and she took one from her jacket pocket for herself and then offered me one. She must have finished the previous one as I followed her, though I don't remember her throwing it on the ground or passing by it.

No, I don't like cigarettes, I said.

Just pretend, she said.

Okay, I said. I took the cigarette and she lit it for me, and I pulled the smoke in my mouth, and I imitated satisfaction, relaxing the facial muscles as I blew the smoke out, much like I'd pretended earlier in life, for several years and for several different people.

D____, that's good, I said.

Now, she said, I want you to pretend that you're in love with me too. Act like you know people who are in love act. Like in the movies and on TV. Like Janice and Tom from undergraduate. You remember them? You remember how they hung all over each other?

Should I be the boy or the girl? I asked. There are of course representations of male-male and female-female relationships, but they are rarer. The general cultural notion of being in love in America follows the relationship of a masculine man and feminine woman who usually birth a male and female child, creating a symmetry that is admired in art and elsewhere. Also, Michael referenced a male-female relationship in asking me to pretend, so I imagined this was the general example we were working from.

Be the boy, she said. I'll be the girl.

I made my eyes slightly larger and smiled just slightly on the right corner of my mouth. I assumed a more relaxed posture than I typically do, allowing my back to bend slightly, my arms to hang more loosely. I imitated what I believed was the comfort that one experiences around a loved one. Perhaps more accurately, the posture of one who is in love. I laughed a little. It was

barely perceptible, a satisfied hum (as one might say) that originated from the back of my throat while my mouth remained shut. I moved closer to Michael, approaching slowly but steadily, until our faces were about six inches apart. I then moved towards her left side and swung my right arm up and around her shoulders. It was not the kind of affection I'd seen between two men who were friends, where a tight squeeze was generally followed by playful (as it is termed) shaking. Instead I slowly pulled her body closer to mine, what might be called gentle. My right hand rested on her right bicep, my fingers curling onto the bicep but exerting very little pressure. She then let her head fall so that it rested on my right shoulder.

Your hair smells nice, I said, placing my nose into the wavy, dry and frizzed hair at the near-center of her scalp. I made my voice softer than usual (as one might say), and added a musical quality, lifting an octave higher on the word nice. Her hair smelled somewhat smoky, but otherwise clean. I believe it was a Suave product. I don't know if I usually would have called this scent nice, but it seemed appropriate to the role.

I love you, she said, softly and under her breathe (as one might say). I wish we could run away together.

We could, I said. We could pick up all our stuff, take my money, and get out of this town. We could go wherever you want. Where do you want to go?

Just away, she said. Anywhere with you would be okay. Just some place different from here. Somewhere where we don't have to think about this place.

Do you want the moon? I asked. If you do, I'll throw a lasso around it. And then you can eat it. And as it dissolves the moonbeams will shoot out of your fingers.

She looked up. And then she was Michael as she'd been a moment before. That's not right, she said. I know that quote. Don't quote. Just be.

Alright, I said. Do you have any other instructions? I'm cold. I forgot to bring a jacket.

One more time, she said. Then she lay her head back on my right shoulder.

In my head, I mixed the quotes, the words, the tones. I imitated the rhythm of love, eschewed exactness as best I could, though I still quoted typical phrases, just not exact ones. Phrases that are used so often that they are not attributed to a specific speaker.

Dear heart, I said. Do you know you mean more to me than anything? That I would die if you left? That this world is meaningless without you by my side?

Do you really mean that? she asked.

I've never meant something more. Here, with you, that's the only place I'm supposed to be.

Then kiss me, she said. I'll know by the way you kiss me.

She lifted her head and I slowly moved my hand up from the base of her skull until it rested in the center, cradling the head, my fingers interlaced with her hair. I put my left hand partially on her cheek and partially on her chin. Then I slowly pulled her toward me, my breath disordered, fast and arrhythmic. When her lips were a couple inches away, I then moved my own face forward and took her bottom lip between my two lips. I rested there, then pulling slightly at the lip. I moved my face slowly away.

I said, There, now don't you see?

She smiled. I've always wanted to see you like this, looking at me like this. Your eyes seem so kind. How do you do that? Jesus, how you do that?

It's nothing, I said, to love you. That part's easy.

The phone in my pocket emitted a noise, so I took it out and looked at it.

Nora texted: so what are you doing? still mad at me, I guess

I texted: I was never mad at you. I'm talking to Michael.

Nora texted: michael who

I texted: My best friend.

Nora texted: thought he was dead (inquisitive emoticon)

I texted: I suppose that isn't true. Because I'm with him.

Nora texted: u on drugs?

I texted: No.

Nora texted: whatever. you see dead people

I texted: Okay.

When I looked up from my phone Michael was no longer standing in front of me. So I looked to my left and right and what had been behind me. I did not see anyone.

Michael? I asked, very loudly. Why did you come? Are you a ghost? Are you a malfunctioning part of my brain? Michael?

There was no response. I waited about two minutes and then repeated all of the questions.

I walked back to the house, and I became progressively colder as I spent more time outside. I only had a t-shirt on with jeans and slippers.

I reached the driveway and when I was about halfway up it I saw someone to my right, behind a tree.

Michael? I asked. Is that you?

Hey f___nut, the person said, walking towards me. It was Finn.

Hi Finn.

You thought I was Michael, huh? You forget you killed him?

I didn't kill her. She died and I was not there when she was shot with the bullets that precipitated her surgeries and then death.

Who's her? There's no her. I'm talking about Michael, my brother. And I know you weren't there. Couldn't be there, right? Couldn't make it down there for that one.

Michael is alive, I said. I just saw her. I was acting under the assumption that what had just happened was real, as it seemed it would be helpful if Finn knew Michael was alive. If what had just happened wasn't real, it seemed equally likely this wasn't real, in which case it didn't seem to matter what I said.

I'm not as stupid as you think, Finn said. You can't fool me like you can everyone else. I've known you for a long time, John. People don't change.

Okay, I said. I'm cold so I'm going inside.

Guess I'll be seeing you.

I went inside to start writing this.

I understood that it was possible that my mind was malfunctioning, that I was diseased, that I may not soon be able to understand things outside of my mind, which I never could, because no one ever can, but in this case it seemed even my own mind was being inconsistent in how it translated the outside world. It had long been apparent to me that besides knowledge, the best thing I could give Nora was money, which is something that always makes everything easier, and so considering my possible sickness and how I might better complete the project of passing my own self on to Nora, I set up an appointment with my lawyer the day after the incident detailed above. I made out a new will, one with Nora as my sole heir. I drove out to Bill's trailer

the day after the will was changed ,when I knew he would be working, knowing also that Nora would be home since it was her Christmas break from school.

She came outside when I parked.

You shouldn't be here, she said. Dad will be back soon.

That's okay. I just wanted to tell you that I'm leaving you the entirety of my estate.

What? she asked, leaning closer to me and squinting her eyes, as people sometimes do when they either didn't hear something well or think they didn't or are pretending they didn't.

I made out a new will, I said.

Jesus, she said. Are you sure?

Seemingly

To Be Indexed:¹⁴¹

Father/Henry Burgess Sr., salesmen, man's man, (Year of Birth-Year of Death if applicable)

Mother/Diane, cute, affectionate, mentally ill (Year of Birth-year of death if applicable)

Michael, best friend, employee, confidante, maybe in love (Year of Birth-Year of Death)

Control

Rhythm/Loops/Patterns, people and institutions

Censorship

Contradiction, belief, people

Gay, sexuality, insult

Perververt, identity, proclivity

Guilty Conscience, of past selves

My Accounts, pride, accumulation

Drug Dealing, occupation

Manipulation, moral certitude, lies, truth

Marijuana/Pot/Weed/Drugs, synonyms

Prostitution, occupation

Trans, gender

Affectation/Performance/Action, people, of myself, me

Fear, threatened, physical harm

Nora, niece, (Year of Birth-Year of Death if applicable)

¹⁴¹ *Editor's Note:* The hodge-podge of organization here is a bit bewildering considering his fastidious elsewhere, though the combination of ideas, what seems like callousness, and

William Burgess, older brother, prefers Bill, (Year of Birth-Year of Death if applicable)

Henry Burgess Jr., older brother, fishing accident (Year of Birth-Year of Death)

Shame, of oneself

Born This Way, of authenticity

Appendix A: News Stories Relating to John Lowell

Preface

I was not able to acquire permission to print what has circulated in the tabloids and elsewhere concerning the strange life and death of John Lowell. Speculation especially heated up when "Second Interlude: Call Me Bill" found it's way onto the Internet. Many called the document a hoax, something some bored blogger typed up and passed off as the odd hobby of a rich man. But those invested in it as real released venomous critique on all of the people involved. Criticism of Nora's role was as strong as that of John's, that two people could attempt this kind of manipulation of their own family members. At the same time, many criticized Jennifer and Bill Lowell as parents, pawning their daughter off on their weird, rich relative. The reactions were hateful and judgmental, as most reactions on the Internet are.

A simple google search will yield most of the more melodramatic and sensational headlines. What is included here are the few stories I wrote on John Lowell as part of my duties working for the Boone County Recorder. As I mentioned in the introduction, I found Lowell to be extremely likable, but the impression he gave me appeared to be as manufactured as most of his interactions after his high school years.

Nick Notou

Boone County Herald: May 3rd, 2010

“Plans to Build Mansion Riles Locals” by Nick Notou

Local entrepreneur John Lowell has purchased sixteen acres off of Camp Ernst Road and recently submitted plans to build a three-story mansion in the center of the property. Residents worry that the plan will significantly detract from the rural environment.

"I've been living here for all my life," said Miriam Lawson, head of the local conservationist group Burlington's Character. "And all my life I've watched as more and more subdivisions plow over our beautiful woodlands. This isn't just a concern for the environment either. That thing is going to stick out like a sore thumb."

Mr. Lowell responded to residents concerns. "You know, I understand their complaints. I grew up in this town and it means a lot to me. But it's exactly for that reason that I'm doing this. I've employed a local architect, and all the construction work will be handled by resident contractors. And for every tree I cut down, I'll plant another. And no one will see the building that doesn't want to. I'm being careful to set it a good ways back from the road so it doesn't mess with the beautiful scenery we've got around here."

Miriam Lawson, in accordance with local historicists and other conservation groups, encourages concerned locals to sign her online petition. "We put it up there for everybody. We want this Mr. Lowell to see exactly what he's doing to our community. I don't know him, and I wish him the best with his plans, but he can do it somewhere that doesn't harm our local ecosystem. I think I speak for a lot of concerned residents when I say, 'We're sick and tired of paradise being turned into a parking lot.'"

John Lowell disputed this comment in our interview. "Look. I promise there won't be a parking lot. No one will even notice it's there. I'm going to make sure the footprint I leave is a positive one."

Boone County Herald: August 14th, 2010

“Generous Donor Spruces up Local Parks” by Nick Notou

As part of his lifelong passion for parks, John Lowell has agreed to invest significant funds towards maintaining and expanding the parks of Boone County.

"I've always loved the nature around here. That's why I had to come back after living in Louisville for so long. This is a unique part of Kentucky with its own history and environment. All the little details that make a place home."

Among his plans for the parks is an orchard of apple trees that families can come and pick fruit from in late summer and early fall. "I'm working with the park employees to come up with an interactive family environment. New and safe playgrounds. A pool with a full time lifeguard. And the orchards. I think they'll be just beautiful. Parents will never want to leave."

The planned changes will start to take effect in two months time. Most residents seem to share a similar view as mother Cindy Mitchell, "What John Lowell is doing is going to change my life. It's like a free babysitter. I'll be floating in the pool while my kids pick apples and tumble on the playground. I can't wait."

Boone County Herald: May 17th, 2011

“Charity Gala Brings in Thousands” by Nick Notou

John Lowell opened up his house to the community this last Friday night, bringing in thousands for his favorite charities, including the one he founded, Conservation for Northern Kentucky, which focuses on maintaining and expanding green spaces in the area.

For two hundred dollars per plate, guests were treated to a steak dinner, live music, and some up-close and personal time with local celebrities, such as Cincinnati's favorite weatherman, Charlie Chase.

Local resident Maggie Deveau couldn't praise the event enough. "I always knew John would bring great things to the area. I just had a ball."

I also spoke with Miriam Lawson, a previous critic of Lowell's when he announced plans for his house, which required the removal of several trees in a particularly lush area of the county. "At first, I didn't know what to think of him. But it seems like his heart's in the right place. He followed through on his promises to replace the trees he's uprooted. And now he's raising money for the right things. He's alright in my book."

Boone County Herald: January 2nd, 2015

“Body Discovered in Local Philanthropist's Home” by Nick Notou

Yesterday, local authorities reported finding a dead body within the home of local entrepreneur, investor, and philanthropist John Lowell, located off Camp Ernst road. No details beyond this have been made official.

In a shocking and abrupt turn, Bill Lowell, brother of the home-owner, said, "I wouldn't be surprised if he murdered someone. People think he's smart, but he's something else too." When asked why he would believe this, Mr. Lowell declined further comment.

We have been unable to reach John Lowell for comment, but no arrests have been made at this time. Authorities say they are launching a full investigation into the death.

Appendix B: Interviews Concerning John Lowell

Preface

There were several people who declined to be interviewed or refused to return for follow-up interviews. Diane Lowell would not answer my phone calls, and when I found her at home she said neither she nor her husband had anything to say.

Brett Lawson, seemingly the real-life analogue for the Brett who grew marijuana for John Burgess, as well as possible witness in two murder cases, also refused to sit for an interview. He did, however, offer the following statement: "I never worked for John Lowell, and had no contact with him after he moved out of Burlington following high school."

Because Burgess references the porn websites as having emerged through the prostitution business, I attempted to track down some of the performers from the site. Those I was able to reach claimed to have never met anyone like Minnie or John Lowell. And none admitted to or eluded to also working in prostitution. I was unable to locate any apparent prostitution associates at all, so that information on this time in his life is very slight, though Finn McLaughlin offers some insights. Burgess' claimed time in France is completely unsubstantiated, though he was, for all intents and purposes, untraceable for an entire year.

I did meet some of his college classmates in Louisville, and many of them gave enormously divergent descriptions of Lowell. He was described as casually philosophical, a real party animal, and a shy nerd, just to name a few.

The following interviews were more revealing, and so have been included with only minor editing.

Nick Notou

First Interview with Nora Lowell: June 15th, 2015

For all three of our interviews, Nora and I met in the office of Lowell's mansion where the manuscript was composed. Nora is now eighteen, and has both a youthful candor and razor sharp wit. Indeed, she is by far the most intelligent eighteen year old I've ever met. She dresses casually, usually in all black, her hair accented with purple and pink streaks, and a diamond stud in each of her earlobes as well as her right nostril. The youthful dress and appearance is something she claims helps her to catch people off guard. "They always think my head is full of air," she says. When she fixes you with her stare, set firmly amongst severe cheekbones that form an oval face, there's no doubt of her intelligence.

Nora Lowell: Before we get into the questions, I want to say something.

Nick Notou: Go ahead.

NL: I just want people to know I'm not the Nora in this book. I was fifteen when we started this. A lot's changed, and I'm a little embarrassed when I look it over. Especially the Prelude and the first couple chapters. I sound really naive.

NN: I don't think that's the case at all. On the contrary, I think you come off as extremely intelligent and mature for your age.

NL: For my age. Yeah. But I'm afraid some people will read this and then think I'm just this little teenage ditz. And that's not me.

NN: Okay, I can appreciate your concern, though I don't think anyone will think that. Is there anything else you wanted to add?

NL: Not now, no.

NN: So first, I'd like it if you could describe your day to day life with John Lowell. What did a typical day look like?

NL: Sure. Our day to day. In general, we talked a lot. At first, I couldn't stand it. I've never known anyone who could talk that long, and intelligently. But I couldn't always tell it was intelligent. That was the problem. And that's what I was saying. About the Nora that moved in with him. When I started living there a lot of what he said just sounded like nonsense. I'd catch an 'In that case' or 'Seemingly' and I'd pretty much ignore the rest. But when we'd been working at the manuscript for awhile, I started to get really interested. Uncle John had a lot of theories, and when they were just theories they were boring. He understood that, so he tried to show how he learned, not just what he learned. When I started reading and hearing about what he lived it was actually pretty cool. Almost everything he believed was based on experience. And then I got to start using that experience. So, we talked a lot and I spent more and more time in this office. Other than that we both kind of did our own thing. The last year or so I spent a lot of time reading in the library. His collection is pretty amazing. The list of routines he gives in one of the missing chapters is pretty accurate, though he broke it more and more to talk with me or work on the manuscript. We didn't really have much in common outside of it, so he stuck with his own stuff. Oh, he did help me when I did plays for school. He was a lot of fun then.

NN: I wonder if you could explain more of what you mean when you say you got to start using the experience he relayed to you.

NL: I was in school. I was dealing with a bunch of kids who wanted to impress everyone else. There are lots of ways you could apply Uncle John's experience, but just in high school it was pretty helpful. I'd look at other people and start to think about why they did the things they did. It's not like everyone doesn't think that at some point, but you don't realize how universal

some reactions are, and how specific some others. And how predictable people can be depending on what they're feeling or what they want. Like, everybody warns girls that guys just want to sleep with them. So sure, you can see that in some guys when they're being nice to you or whatever. But that's a fake rule. It's not always the case. You have to start thinking about motivations that are much more specific sometimes. Not all guys want to sleep with every girl. A lot of them think they need to pretend that though, sure. And it's not like you forget that it might be that they're just trying to get in your pants. But you don't assume that either. You keep in mind the general rule, but you allow that there are divergences from that rule. Like, this guy that's my friend now, he was always hitting on me in really public and annoying ways. I'd be with some of my girl friends, and he'd like yell across the hall, 'Hey sexy!' or 'Nice ass!' Obnoxious and completely tactless catcalling. So I started to think about it. Did he really think yelling at me in front of everyone was going to get him laid? And yeah, there was the possibility he was just an idiot. But I knew he was a smart guy. I'd talked with him a few times, knew he got good grades and stuff. And when it was just the two of us he never said that stupid shit, and he never tried anything. So, as a test one day, I walk up to him after school. I'm not with anyone at the time, and he's not with anyone. And I go up to him and I say, 'So, you wanna fuck?' And you should have seen his face. (Laughs) He starts to stutter out yes, and it's totally unconvincing. I mean, I wasn't going to sleep with him anyway. So then I'm suggesting times and stuff and he keeps making up excuses. So I ask him why he keeps talking to me like he does, what it is that he thinks he's trying to do. He's so nervous and eventually just walks away. We meet up for coffee a week later and he tells me he's gay.

NN: I see. So, basically you'd use your understanding of performance to better understand others?

NL: Yeah, and manipulate them. Cause John was right about the manipulation thing. People are always manipulating others, whether it's for the right reason or the wrong reason. I mean, this guy was trying to use me so that his friends wouldn't think he's gay. He was manipulating me, even if he didn't know it. So I pushed it back in his face and gave him a chance to admit the truth. Uncle John understood both how people lie to themselves and how they treat others so that they can gain something. I don't know if this guy was thinking, 'No one will know I'm gay if I harass Nora,' but you could still figure it out even if he couldn't. People are strange and selfish, right?

NN: Concerning performance a bit more, there is the first interlude where John says you pretended to be less intelligent, and kind of put on a show in order to make people more sympathetic to the both of you. Is that correct?

NL: Yeah. That's another way I tried to apply what I was learning. I wanted to test out some of what he was saying. Of course you need to be a pretty good actor for any of this to work. And you can't be thinking about what you're doing as acting. You need to understand the motivations of the person you are. To the best of your ability, you have to become that person. I started doing plays a lot in high school, and so as that got going a lot of what he'd been saying started to click. I'd give Uncle John the script, and he'd watch different versions of the play, and he'd write out these lists of patterns and the presumed motivations, and the rhythms of the speech. And then he'd go through the whole play with me. He'd be all these different parts. And he was good. He could've been an amazing actor. And you know, he was an attractive guy. Wouldn't have hurt. I asked him once why he didn't go into it. He said it was too unpredictable of a career path, and that the relative talent of an actor didn't necessarily correspond with pay. But, obviously, he was an actor. Just in a very different setting.

NN: Were you ever afraid that your uncle was manipulating you? Do you think he did?

NL: No and yes. I know he manipulated me, but I wasn't afraid of it because half of the time he would tell me he was manipulating me, or I'd find out when he wrote about it. So that's not really the same thing, if someone tells you they're manipulating you while doing it.

NN: Much of what you've said thus far implies that you got along with John pretty well, and that you did agree a lot of the time. And yet, you often disagreed with John throughout the manuscript. Was some of that disagreement manufactured to make the text seem more interactive?

NL: Oh. No. We disagreed a lot. We had arguments. Sometimes, especially that last year, we'd talk all night, and I'd get angry at him. But he, he was always calm. It drove me fucking nuts. But he was also pretty convincing in the long run. Sometimes you just hold onto an idea cause you want to be right. That's what I was doing a lot of time. Though I definitely didn't agree with Uncle John on everything. There were sometimes where he was logically right about something, but completely missed the point. And what's crazy is that if anyone could explain emotion, it's John, and yet he couldn't get a lot of things that seem obvious to everyone else, and yet are pretty hard to explain.

NN: So, you'd say that John taught you a lot?

NL: Yeah. A lot a lot. You read the manuscript. So, imagine living with that. Imagine you're in a house for three years with that. Cause it felt pretty constant sometimes. And I don't mean to sound like he was forcing me to talk to him or anything. He didn't. I was interested in what he was saying. But it was so much. And it could be pretty frustrating sometimes because either I couldn't understand him or I couldn't get him to understand me. Or, he was just explaining things way longer than he needed to. So, three years with that makes you really hone

your thoughts and ideas. There were no normal conversations with Uncle John. Sometimes I really regretted telling him to be honest with me.

NN: Why is that?

NL: That's why he explained so much to me. Like I said, sometimes he'd tell me what his motive in telling me something was. He'd explain his choices as he made them. He didn't do things a lot of time. Instead, he explained how he could do things. How he might do things. Almost everything he did was so purposeful. And I think that's why he didn't like leaving the house much anymore. It was just too much work.

NN: So, you've referred a couple times to that last year you lived with him. Starting especially towards the end of "The Streets of Louisville," there's a lot of volatility and contention between the two of you. At least, as far as Burgess recorded it. Could you tell me a little bit about that?

NL: I'm sorry, do you mind if I smoke?

NN: It's your house.

NL: (Laughs) Yeah, I guess it is. Old habit though. John didn't want me smoking inside. I still did sometimes, but I did it pretty far from the rooms he usually was in.

NN: This brings up a different issue, which maybe we can just address here. Would you say that John Lowell was fairly permissive as a guardian?

NL: Fairly permissive as a guardian? Yeah, he was fairly permissive as a guardian.

NN: Would you like to expand on that?

NL: He let me do what I wanted as long as it didn't hurt him or someone else. That was the rule.

NN: Well, let's trek back then. Tell me about the evolution of your relationship, about when you heard about the murders and the prostituting. How this effected how you thought of him and got along with him.

NL: Yeah. So, I was expecting to hear about prostitutes from the very beginning, but it's not the same when someone starts telling you their direct experience. And when you look at somebody and can really imagine them there, doing this stuff. It's not cool anymore, it's just kind of dirty. So I guess that was a wake-up call. But the murders completely caught me off-guard. And Michael. Jesus. He really let her flush herself down the toilet. It was just hard to hear about and think about all the time. Made me angry he didn't do anything.

NN: So, to be clear. You believe Michael was a transwoman?

NL: We really had that argument in the chapter on Michael's death. Except it was much longer than that, and we had it more often. For several days off and on actually, but he usually only noted my first reactions. And yeah, as far as Michael, I'm gonna err on the side of overwhelming evidence. Which, by the way, that exaggeration there, that sarcasm, I couldn't have said that to Uncle John, which really slowed down our conversations. He would have spent a half an hour telling me why the word 'overwhelming' was being misused. Sorry, there I go again, exaggerating. Ten minutes probably. Anyway, after he explained something or questioned me on it, often he'd rehearse his whole fucking argument over again. I mean, do you know what it's like living with someone who can't understand sarcasm? Or well, I shouldn't say that. Someone who insists on asking you every time you are sarcastic if you're being sarcastic. Yeah, I learned a lot. But he was exhausting.

NN: Could you continue with how your relationship changed during "The Streets of Louisville" chapter?

NL: Right. Sorry. Let me put it this way. If you were angry at Uncle John, you were probably just going to get angrier talking to him about it. Because you're starting to get emotional about it. You're trying to explain this basic human response to a situation, and he's being logical, and like, attempting to disprove your feelings. So, we had a lot of that during the time he was writing that chapter, which I think took about four months. The murders threw me off. They came out of nowhere. At first, I didn't have anything to say about them. I didn't know what to say about them. I just sat there and read what he was writing as he wrote it. I guess maybe I was scared. I don't know. But then I was reading and he gets to that part about misunderstanding. Where he basically admits that he misunderstands people on purpose, that this is part of being John. A necessary pattern, he wrote. I almost strangled him. I think, holding in that anger and fear and seeing something like that, I just kind of lashed out. But, you know, I still argued with him about it. I didn't walk out immediately. The footnote makes it all seem way faster than it was. Truth is, I needed a break.

NN: So, what do you think about that all now? About his purposeful misunderstanding?

NL: I think I get it better now. It's not so much that it was purposeful misunderstanding, as it was a particular way of understanding. So, depending on who he was, or what he was imitating, or however you wanna put that, he was capable of understanding different things. So, like the dad character he does in the prelude. That character didn't understand how embarrassing they were. Sarcasm is only like half-understood by that character. And there's different levels of it with every person. As John as he was, he'd always understood people literally. So if he starts understanding them in different ways, there's a number of things that can happen. First, they'll probably freak out. Second, they'll have a hard time adjusting to what he could then understand. Third, and probably most important to Uncle John, it would disrupt the pattern. Not just the

pattern of himself but the pattern of the other person. Their reactions would change based on his reactions, and he always preferred being able to predict any encounter. It's like when people talk to me like I'm stupid because I'm young. I just act stupid because it's much easier to just play into it if you can, and you can see what people want really easily when they think they're better than you. I just, but in Uncle John's defense here, I'm not sure he could be himself. Not in the way that's usually understood. And that's why we disagreed so much about being trans or whatever else. What people call authentic was something Uncle John could never understand, because he didn't see himself that way. He was a collection of patterns, so others were a collection of patterns. And because he was so often correct, because he learned how to manipulate people, he basically just kept proving himself right. You couldn't convince him of something being completely authentic or true. Even when he admitted the possibility, he wouldn't act on it. Because John wasn't really interested in truth, he was interested in what works. In the appearance of things. He was a pragmatist.

NN: I think I can reiterate from earlier just how intelligent and mature you are, and obviously even more so now than when you arrived at your uncle's. That's an impressively complex understanding of your Uncle.

NL: Yeah, young and pretty always throws them off.

NN: I'm sorry. I didn't mean it that way.

NL: That's alright. What's the next question?

NN: To keep with what we've been discussing. You referenced the footnote where you walk out on your conversation with John after you realize he's maybe misunderstanding you on purpose. Presumably, as there are no other footnotes with you, he finished the chapter on his

own, as that footnote implies. Did you go back and read the rest at the time? Or have you just read it recently? And what do you think about what else occurred?

NL: I guess you're referring to when he was raped.

NN: Yeah, and the other concluding material.

NL: I read it while we were working on the chapter after that. As far as what I thought of it. Well, it made me sad. But...I don't know. I'm not sure what you want me to say.

NN: Did you ever talk to him about it?

NL: I asked him once if he wanted to talk about it and he just mirrored it back to me.

NN: What's that?

NL: He just asked me if I wanted to talk about it. I asked if he was alright. He said he was fine.

NN: Do you think he was fine?

NL: Yeah, I do. It was clearly the pain he remembered most. Because of...well...because of who John was, it's not like he felt humiliated or anything. Or, it didn't effect him like it would have other people. He didn't feel social pain. Emotional pain. Whatever you want to call it. He learned a lot, obviously, but he was never concerned with fitting in for the sake of fitting in. He says he was sometimes, but what he meant by that is that people put unnecessary obstacles in your way if don't act like they think you should. But his learning wasn't a result of that interaction-based pain people feel when they don't fit in, when someone embarrasses them or hurts them in a way that traumatizes them. He wanted to fit in because it was easier, not because it hurt his feelings not to. And so the rape was...more so a failed prediction than anything else. And...I'm just not sure how else to talk about it.

NN: Well, to continue on the contention in your relationship a bit more. The chapter "Nora Expresses Concern," was that pretty accurate at the time?

NL: Like I said before, I was lashing out. I said a lot more than that. I was pretty mean. I feel bad about it now. Because Uncle John couldn't help who he was. In a weird way, he was more authentic than most people.

NN: Okay, and a final question for today's interview. Do you think John was really a murderer? In some of what you just said, that seems to be the case. But relatively speaking, you seemed to have taken it pretty well.

NL: I don't know if I'd say that I took it well. And do I think he was a murderer? Yeah. But not then. Not when I knew him. So I wasn't scared of him or anything. I was scared sometimes, but not of him. Not exactly.

NN: Could you elaborate on that?

NL: Minnie was a murderer because Minnie was a madam, or pimp or whatever. And Minnie protected the girls that worked for her. I don't think Uncle John in any incarnation wanted to kill people. Want wouldn't quite factor into it. He weighed his options, and when he saw the threat in the present and the future that those two men posed, then he killed them. Or she did. What I was sometimes scared of was more to do with how people might react to him. I was afraid of who he might pretend to be, like with my friends. And I was also afraid other people wouldn't get him. I wanted people to like him.

NN: So, are you saying that you think the murders were justified? That that behavior was okay?

NL: No, I don't think it's okay. I'm not advocating murder. But justified, yeah. And I can say that I think it's better than if those two men murdered any of the girls. If it was one or the other, then Minnie clearly made the right choice.

Interview with Maggie Deveau ("Tumbler's mother"): June 23rd, 2015

Mrs. Maggie Deveau and I met in the visiting room of the Boone County Jail. She is a striking woman at the age fifty-six, and maintains both a professional composure and sweetness even in this setting. She is polite and humble. After exchanging greetings, in which she strongly insisted I call her Maggie, we got right to it. Our time was limited to thirty minutes.

Nick Notou: When did you first meet John Lowell? And what was your overall impression of him as a boy?

Maggie Deveau: I met him through my son Joseph a couple times. I couldn't say exactly when. Joseph was friends with Finn for awhile. Sometimes Finn would bring Michael along, and pretty much anywhere Michael was, you could find John. As far as my impression, I kind of felt sorry for him. He was so strange, but very sweet too. If you laughed, he'd laugh, and if you smiled, he'd smile. And sometimes it was kind of like looking in a mirror. But it's this boy doing it, and I know some people say he scared them, but I didn't get that from him. He was so nice and polite. A little stiff, I guess, but just the sweetest. He never said an unkind word that I can remember. And I know kids picked on him a lot in school, so I felt sorry for him. Kids picked on Joseph too. For his weight. But John was a sweet boy.

NN: So, what you say was a sweet boy, how did you take it when he approached you about drugs?

MD: Well, I can tell you I wish he hadn't written the book. That's not exactly sweet. But there's no helping that now. As far as how he approached me, he was very kind. He came over with some flowers, and said it was on behalf of Michael and him, knowing what had happened

with Finn, wanting to still be friends with Joseph. It was a while after it had happened. No one else was home with me at the time, and he probably knew that, knowing what I do about him now. But I wasn't thinking anything of it. I invited him in for some tea and cookies. He always liked tea. I offered him a soft drink, but he always drank tea. That sticks out to me. It's weird for a teenager to like tea, but it was his own little thing I guess. So we were sitting there talking and he tells me he knows. Now, I'd tried to be careful. I only ever sold to that boy who is mentioned.

NN: You mean Alex?

MD: I don't remember what his name was in real life. Wasn't Alex.

NN: Okay. Please continue.

MD: So he tells me knows. He just says to me, 'I know you sell drugs.' Just like that. No BS. And I'm pretty taken aback, you know. I didn't know what he wanted. Like I said, he was a sweet boy, but I didn't know what to make of that. So, he must've seen that I was upset or something, and he says, 'Don't worry. I'll never tell anyone.' Which isn't really true, is it? Because he wrote this book. But it was true for a long time. For the whole time we worked together.

NN: You mean when you were selling him drugs?

MD: It wasn't always that. After awhile he started selling to me. Of course, he ended up stealing all my customers in the end. I only recently did any selling again. And it was very minor. But these prosecutors, they're out for blood.

NN: Could you describe a bit more of the day he approached you?

MD: So he tells me he won't tell anyone else. And I say, 'Thank you, John. I sure do appreciate that.' And he's very sweet right back to me, and says, 'Of course, I'd never do anything to hurt you.' Honestly, it was a little weird to hear from a kid, but coming from him it made sense

somehow. And we got along great. He told me he wanted to buy. And it's not like I preferred anyone else. He was easy. He was smart. He was always on time with payments. Even loaned me a bit a couple times. I could tell even then that he was going to be rich someday. A lot of people around here were surprised. Didn't surprise me at all.

NN: How many times would you say you sold to John over the years?

MD: Oh, I don't know. A few.

NN: Can you give me a more specific number? And how long did you maintain your relationship?

MD: You know, I really couldn't say.

NN: In the manuscript, John mentions that he bought drugs other than marijuana through a seller you introduced him to.

MD: I don't know anything about that. I mean, like I said, he was a sweet boy, but he could tell a tall tale too.

NN: Okay. One last question, and I'll let you go.

MD: We got time. Even if you only got one more question, you might as well keep me company a couple more minutes.

NN: Of course. We'll just wrap this up first. What I wanted to ask about last was your impression of Michael McLaughlin and his brother. In fact, you mentioned earlier the incident with Finn. Could you tell me a little about what you knew of the two of them?

MD: Well, you know the story about Finn. That's in the book, right?

NN: Well yes. If you're referring to the incident with your--

MD: My delicates?

NN: Yes.

MD: Well, there was that whole thing, which didn't exactly endear me to Finn. But don't get me wrong, I wasn't mad at him either. People make mistakes and he was a young boy, and I can understand is all I'm saying. After that we didn't let him in the house by himself, but we forgave and forgot the best we could. Of course, the story came out a long time ago. I guess probably about ten years ago now. A long while after it happened, but people haven't been kind to Finn since they learned. And, even if I did forgive him, I have to be honest and tell you I didn't really like Finn all that much. He could be very mean. I heard him picking on Michael a lot, and John, and sometimes my boy. You better believe he changed his tune with Joseph after what happened, but he wasn't a nice boy. Not like John. And not like his brother Michael. Michael was a sweetie too. He had the best laugh. And he was a talker and performer. When he told you a story he was jumping all over the room acting it out. And he would get so excited. It was a real tragedy when he died. And from gunshot of all things. Everybody knew he had trouble with drugs, but you never expect something like that.

NN: Did you attend the funeral?

MD: I did.

NN: Can you tell me anything about it?

MD: One of the saddest funerals I've ever been to. I had a friend from college. Her three year old died in a car accident. That was the only funeral I've been to that was worse than Michael's. It's just that lost potential I guess. When someone young dies. And everyone loved Michael. About the only thing they didn't like about him was that he was attached at the hip to John. But most people didn't like John. Still, he was always sweet to me. But at the funeral, it was painful. There were so many people there. Most of them I didn't know. Some from when he

still lived in the area. And some from Louisville. And there was all sort of terrible gossip because there were some women who attended who were. Well, I'm not sure what the right word is but--

NN: Transwomen?

MD: What's that?

NN: Generally, as I've come to understand it through research, transgender means someone who doesn't identify as the gender they were born as. For a transwoman specifically, it means someone who was born the male sex who transitions socially to a woman, and sometimes has sex reassignment surgery. They identify as female.

MD: Oh. You mean all that coming out with the bathrooms?

NN: Yes, I suppose that's what I mean.

MD: Well, there might have been. I don't know. Well, there was one, yeah, but I didn't see her. I heard others talking later. But what I was saying was they were...ladies of the night.

NN: How could you tell?

MD: It was just the way they dressed and how they hung together. It was an odd group to see around here. I don't know exactly how I knew. Maybe I'd heard stuff about them before. It's hard to say now. Oh, and there was a real rukkus between Finn and John there.

NN: What happened?

MD: As well as John knew Michael, he wasn't asked to speak at the funeral. And really, a lot of people would've preferred he hadn't come at all. Finn, however, he got up to say something. I think he was just supposed to read a Bible verse. It was a Mass. I'm not Catholic, so I don't really know how they're supposed to go. But after he reads a verse. Something from Ecclesiastes I think. After that he says, 'It's a shame because I think we all know why we're here. I think we all know why Michael is dead.' Already, I turn and can see Finn's mother Barbara

heading up towards the lectern, but he goes on. 'Michael was a long time drug addict. But it wasn't the drugs and it wasn't the bullets that killed him. It was that mother.' But he said a little more than that. There were a couple gasps. Just like you see on TV sometimes. It was shocking in that quiet church, and so many people just so sad, and then to say something like that. And he pointed right at John when he said it, who was sitting all by himself in the back. So everyone is turning around to look. And John just starts crying. The only time I ever saw or heard of tears coming out of his eyes. They just started pouring down. And Finn didn't say a word. And I thought then, looking back at John, 'If someone had just loved that boy, I mean really loved him, maybe he'd of been alright.' But then I thought of it again later, and you know, Michael loved him. If anything is love, it's what Michael gave to him. I don't know if it was romantic. If he was...well, you know. But Michael was always with him. Always defending him. Followed him everywhere. So in that way maybe Michael's death was his fault. Because John didn't love him back the way he needed. But I don't know. I have a hard time believing it was John's fault. I always liked John.

Interview with Bill Lowell: July 1st, 2015

Bill Lowell asked me to come out to his trailer for our meeting. It was a clear and sunny day, and we sat across from each other at a picnic table in an open field nearby, a cooler of beer and sandwiches at Mr. Lowell's side, which he kindly shared with me. In physical appearance, Bill is as his brother described him in the Third Interlude. In temperament, he is significantly less volatile than Burgess seemed to think him, and was a gracious and obliging interviewee.

July 1st, 2015

Nick Notou: To start, could you give me a general impression of your relationship with John both when he was a boy and when he was a man?

Bill Lowell: Sure. When he was little he was kind of like a little alien. A funny little alien, for sure. But pretty d___ strange. He'd follow people around a lot, and not say anything. And sometimes he'd just ask a never-ending amount of questions. As he aged a bit he spent more and more time with his money, and with Michael, and then with jobs later, and stuff like that. We weren't real close. Not when he was little. Not when he came back to the area. You can see some of what I think of myself in that chapter he wrote, that Third Interlude, whatever the h___ that means. Point is, I could've been a better brother. But he wasn't always easy to get along with. Older he got the more he worried me. It's like you looked at him and you could just see the wheels turning. Non-stop. Just constantly thinking and planning. It's hard to interact or get close with someone like that. Like he was processing you instead of talking to ya. Could give you the creeps. But I guess he changed a lot as he got older. What with his whole thing, that switch in persons. Or, I don't know what to call it. Anyway, seems like a lot of people knew a different

person that I did. And then, with that whole giving to the parks thing he did, when he was doing those little interviews with you, it didn't sound like him at all.

NN: Yeah, my impression was that he was very exuberant, very personable. Seemed like he loved helping people out and being active.

BL: Yeah, no. That wasn't what I knew at all. Being active, sure, but not the rest. I didn't go to the little charity things he did either, but I heard something similar about those. That he was very different than he used to be. I think he stopped all the charity stuff when Nora moved in. Can't remember. As far as whatever he did in Louisville, I wasn't really in contact with him during that time. Actually, during that whole time when he says he was a prostitute in Louisville, I didn't talk to him at all. Ten years and I didn't see him or hear from him. My mom would fill me in occasionally, but if what he wrote was true, then my mom was just passing on lies.

NN: So, you knew nothing of his legal or illegal businesses?

BL: Nada. We heard things occasionally, but I had no idea. When he showed up back in Burlington with all that money, he never said a word about how he came by it.

NN: So, you mentioned your mother a moment ago, which brings me to another question I wanted to ask. How was his relationship with your parents?

BL: He and my dad, they didn't really get along. I think, like me, he just didn't get him. My dad could be a pretty rough guy sometimes, and he didn't know what to do with John. He wanted sons who played sports, who wouldn't run away from a fight, who...I don't know, who weren't like John. It's nothing against what he was. It's just that my dad didn't know how to handle him, what he liked, how to talk to him. He expected something very different. But looking at it another way, I didn't much get along with my dad either. After my restaurant went under, when I moved back in with them, Jenny with me, and Nora still real little, I don't think he

thought much of me. He told me once that what makes a man is being able to care for your family. Told me that right after we moved in. We didn't talk much after that. These days, he doesn't talk much to anyone. Doctors say he's pretty far along with Alzheimer's, and he's got some kind of bone disease too. My mom won't be able to care for him much longer. Really, I think he missed my oldest brother. That was a blow neither my mom nor my dad really got over. Henry was a real star when it came to sports. He dated all the prettiest girls. He was fun to be around. A well-liked guy. I was only sixteen when he died, but we hung around each other quite a bit. John was so much younger, and such an odd little dude, he just wasn't on my radar in the same way.

NN: How about your relationship with John when your family moved back to your childhood home?

BL: I didn't trust him. I saw him around Nora, and it worried me. He was gone most of time, and I didn't trust that either. Seems like I was right not to. Jenny though, she didn't think the same way of him. She always thought better of John than I did. She's smarter than me. Maybe she was right in her own way. I'd like it to be known that I never treated her like I should have. You know now that I had an affair. Seems like the whole world knows now that I'm an alcoholic and cheater, or they'll all know soon enough when the rest of this comes out. I think, for a long time, I did blame John for things that were my own fault. But I look over those calls and I think, Jesus, I sure am a piece of shit.

NN: Well, alright, to swing back a little. You described his relationship with your father. How was his relationship with your mother?

BL: When it came to those two, they always seemed real close. She grasped onto something in John the rest of us couldn't see. Like a mother does, I guess. When he was little

they were together almost constantly. She was always asking if he wanted something. Making his favorite meals. Or he was cleaning with her, or they were going out and doing whatever they did. And the dolling, I guess she called it. I didn't really see any of that. But it makes sense kind of. And then with my dad's reaction. I read through John's explanation of it, and that seems right enough. I'm sure it was another thing that just confused the hell out of Dad. Made him think he couldn't ever know John. Mom was the only one that kept in contact with him through the years, like I said before. But then, when all that came out about the murders, I guess she couldn't stand it.

NN: Was it you or Nora that told her?

BL: It was me.

NN: Could you explain a bit of your reaction to learning about the murders and the prostitution?

BL: Well, from a guy that I thought couldn't surprise me anymore, it was...some kind of surprise. I never thought of John as violent. A little manipulative, sure. Weird, hell yes. But violent, not really. When he was bullied when he was little, he never lifted a finger. He'd just say 'okay' to whatever they yelled at him and keep on his way. But then, he didn't have a reason to react violently to the bullies I guess.

NN: Why do you say that?

BL: Cause there wasn't anything to gain from it when I think back to it. They never pushed it real far that I could tell. They didn't beat up on him or anything. So you gotta ask yourself what being violent with them woulda changed. Probably would've just made it worse. I assume John thought the same. So then, when Nora told me about these murders. And she told

me about all the prostituting and...it just, I don't know. It blew my mind. I can understand it a little now, but why the hell did he ever become a prostitute in the first place?

NN: Do you think you made the right choice? Having Nora come back and live with you?

BL: Maybe. Maybe not.

NN: Why do you say that?

BL: I think it was the right thing to do, and I'm sure I'd do it again. But, I do wonder if Nora being gone drove him to what he did. But how do you leave your girl with a murderer, even if it is your brother?

NN: So you think he committed suicide?

BL: Is there another theory?

NN: Nothing that has much weight to it.

BL: Right. Well, I understand why you might question it. He's not really the kind of person you think would commit suicide. But he didn't have anybody in his life either. And maybe he was more attached to Nora than he knew. I like to think, looking at what he wrote, that the whole thing with the guilty conscience was his way of trying to be like everybody else. And maybe he did feel things, even if he didn't know it. Not like everybody else, that's for sure. But still.

NN: That hints at something else I wanted to ask. Do you ever feel scared of John?

BL: Did I ever feel scared, that's hard to say. I never felt threatened by him, like physically, if that's what you mean. Even after hearing about what he did. I didn't think he'd lash out at me or anything. But, he did scare me sometimes, in like how smart he was. He seemed stupid sometimes, but then all the sudden he'd just let everything out, like he knew exactly what

was going to happen before it happened. A little freaky. I didn't like it. You just, you just couldn't tell what he wanted. What he was after.

NN: So, why send Nora to live with him in the first place? Why not just ask him for the money?

BL: I didn't want to be the one asking, not exactly. I was trying to do the right thing for Nora. It wasn't about me. And I thought, I don't know, maybe he'd be able to give her some attention and care that we couldn't.

NN: It's just, you don't seem like you trusted him, or liked him. And yet, your daughter was living with him for three years.

BL: Well, when you put it that way, it does seem pretty hard to comprehend. But, Nick, maybe it's something only deadbeats like myself can understand. Sure, there were a lot of things I worried about when it came to John. But, for whatever reason, I thought he'd take care of Nora. At least since she was grown, and he wouldn't have to do the kinds of things you gotta do when they real little. And really, he did care for her. Better than I could. I gotta give him that. And I thought, and it's gone this way, I thought maybe he'd give her a future. It was hard seeing much beyond the present for all of us for sometime. And say what you will about John, he did make something of himself. He knew his way around the world. Didn't seem like it, but maybe that was part of the reason he was so good at it. He could be an asshole, but he was a successful one.

NN: It's something you mentioned earlier, but we haven't gotten into it yet. What do you think now that you know he played a part in the failure of your restaurant?

BL: Doesn't surprise me. Still, it was my own fault too. I wasn't a very good manager. Spent too much time spending the money I hadn't made yet.

NN: So, it's something that came up with Mrs. Deveau. Did you attend Michael McLaughlin's funeral? And in general, what was your impression of Michael, and his relationship with John?

BL: Far as the funeral goes, I wasn't there. Jenny went. She liked Michael. I was never much for him. I did hear some strange things about it. But I'd gotten used to hearing strange things with anything connected to John. And the whole way that went down with his death, it raised a whole lot of questions that wouldn't be answered until pretty recently. But as far as Michael and John, there were suspicions, if you know what I mean. But I never thought of it that way. I could hardly imagine John having sex with anybody. They were definitely close though. Or, Michael was to John. Hard to understand. Michael was kind of a spaz when he was little. Annoying if you ask me, though a lot of people liked him. But he was a normal kid. Compared to John at least. I'd say all of Nora's questions about why Michael liked him were pretty to the point, but I don't have a better answer than anybody else.

NN: Okay, well, to end this, I think readers of this text would like to know how things worked out for you and Nora. How would you describe your relationship as it stands?

BL: Not great. I'm not happy to say it, but I fell off the wagon, and I'm not exactly rolling in the big bucks. Jenny and I just got divorced awhile back. And Nora's not real happy with me right now. Can't blame her. Cause no matter why I sent her to live with John, whether it was the right thing to do, I shouldn't of had to do it in the first place. I've never claimed to be perfect.

Interview with Jennifer Lowell: July 6th, 2015

Jennifer Lowell met me at her mother's house, located just north of Lexington, Kentucky, about a forty-five minute drive from John Lowell's mansion. We sat down in a small dining room, a china cabinet dominating the space behind her. Her hair is her most defining feature, set up and full of streaks of platinum blond and light gray. She has a round face, big blue eyes, and a kind smile, and at the age of forty-two is "as fit as [she's] ever been."

Nick Notou: To start, can you let me know how you personally felt about John? What kind of relationship did you have with him?

Jennifer Lowell: You know, we lived with him for about a year when Nora was real little. Right after Bill lost us all our money on that restaurant. I told him it was a terrible idea. But that's one way he's always been like his brother. Gets an idea in his head, and you can't stop him. Though I feel a little sorry now, knowing it was kind of John's fault too. But John, when we lived with him, he wasn't hardly there. I guess, with what I know now, that he was out selling drugs most of time. He was odd, as most people will probably tell ya. When he was home he was usually in his room. Sometimes with Michael. I liked Michael. He was good with Nora, liked playing with her. Actually babysat her a couple times. You could tell he was a kid person, that he was interested in her. As soon as he saw her, he'd light up, do funny voices. Stuff like that. John, on the other hand, it wasn't that he was bad with Nora, he just didn't seem to notice her a lot of time. I tried to get him to play with her a bit more. Thought it might be good for him. He asks me this one time after she tripped, 'How do you make her stop crying?' I laughed, and then he laughed, and so I thought it was a joke, but then he asks again, 'So, you don't, I suppose? It's

okay if she cries?' And I said, 'Kids just cry sometimes. A lot sometimes.' I was holding her and telling her it's alright. And he says, 'Okay,' and then leaves the room. That oughta tell you how John was most of the time. Kinda clueless and robotic. You could talk to him if you wanted and he'd talk back, but then other times he was so full of questions it'd wear you out. He didn't do that so much when he came back years later. Maybe he'd learned so much, there weren't so many questions to ask. Still, there was sometimes during that year when we'd talk and it was nice. I remember there was a night when Bill was out late, came back drunk and stumbled into bed. And here I was--it just all came crashing down on me--here I was caring for this little girl and for a drunk husband, and living with his parents. And I just lost it, was crying my eyes out in the living room with everyone asleep in the house. And John comes in a little after this and he sees me, and asks why I'm crying, and I tell him I just can't help it. And he asks if there's anything he can do. He asks would it help if he gave me a hug. And I smiled, and he smiled back, and I said it wouldn't hurt. And he held me for a long time while I cried until I told him it was okay for him to let go. And then he asked if there was anything else he could do. He said he was making a cup of tea, would I like one? And I say okay, and he made one for both of us. And it was nice. He did try, I don't care what Bill says about him. He could be sweet, you just had to kinda give him directions on it. Dealing with people didn't come natural to John.

NN: Concerning Michael, as you briefly mentioned him a moment ago. There's a story I'm trying to follow up on, and Bill told me you were at the funeral. Is that correct? And if so, could you talk a bit about it?

JL: I did go. Partially because I really liked Michael and because he'd been sweet to me and Nora during a very hard time in our lives. And partially I went for John, though when I heard more of what happened with Michael...well, that I'd say is about the hardest thing I heard with

John. If there's anything he deserves blame for, it's for hurting that boy, leading him places he shouldna been. Still, Michael could make his own choices, I guess. Maybe it ain't my place to say nothing about that. As far as the funeral, it was pretty depressing. As funerals usually are. Though this was a little different. Michael being so well-liked and so young. There was a big thing with Finn. He always hated John as far as I can tell, and seeing this book I get to understanding that a bit better. But at your own brother's funeral? Doing a thing like he did? I swear, I would've killed him if he was my son. And his mother wasn't happy. What happened is Finn cursed and called out John when he wasn't supposed to do nothing but read a Bible verse. Ashes to ashes. That was the verse. And to follow that with so much hate, and from the pulpit where everyone can hear and see. I don't know what the hell is wrong with him. But after he yelled at John from up there, everybody turned to look at John. And he was crying. Only time I ever saw it. And it was like, well, like something broke inside of me. To see that from him. When he writes about it in that first chapter, he makes it seem all fake. But, I don't know if you can fake a thing like that. I'm not sure I believe it.

NN: Considering all of this, how you seem to have liked John, but with everything that happened. How did you feel when you found about the calls? And how did you feel when you found out about everything else he'd done over the years? Did you regret sending Nora to live with him?

JL: That's a mouthful to talk about. As far as the calls go, I get it. I get why he did it. Nora asked him to. As much as John could be manipulative, as much as those calls really hurt me, it is something to think he did it for Nora. Now, he made a deal with her too. But I think he woulda done it anyway. It's just like that night when he was really there for me. If you asked him, he'd do stuff for ya. He didn't care to help out when he knew what to do. He wasn't all bad.

And no, I don't regret allowing Nora to go live with him. It was Bill's idea, actually. But yeah, it gives you pause to think you sent your little girl to live with a murderer. Though reading over what you gave me, it seems to me he treated Nora good. And that was always my impression when she was there. He gave her the things she needed. He spent time with her. It seems to me he was as good of a guardian as he was capable of being. And now that he's left everything to her, I just feel grateful. What he did, what it says he did during that time in Louisville, it's bad, sure. But I'm not so horrified by it as everybody else seems to be. He killed two men that deserved to die if ya ask me. Now, when I first heard about it, Bill didn't really give me the whole story. He calls and he asks me, 'Did you know John was a pimp? Did you know he was a murderer?' And I ask, 'Is this some kind of stupid joke?' He says, 'That's what he told Nora. When he was in Louisville all those years.' And so I was just as horrified as Bill was at first. And maybe Bill didn't know the whole story then. It's hard to say. But now that I look it over, it seems to me he was better to the girls than those he killed. Seems he wasn't so bad is what I'm saying. Running a business somebody else woulda run anyway, cept he ran it without all the hate someone in that line woulda usually done. I think about John doing that. Think about being one of those girls. I think he woulda made me feel safe. If John was on your side, you weren't in such a bad place.

NN: As a follow-up to that, did you have any idea of his legal businesses when he was in Louisville? Clearly you didn't know about what he writes in the manuscript.

JL: Not really, no. I had heard something about the laundry mats, but I don't think he ever even told his mom what he was up to. As far as I could tell, when he checked in with her he'd just say things were going well, that him and Michael were working on something. Real vague. We didn't know what he was doing.

NN: So, when John came back to the area after spending some time in France seemingly, though I can't find anything to substantiate his time in France. But after he came back to Burlington, how was his interaction with the family then? It seems he at least came to some family gatherings. How was that? Was it very different than before?

JL: Well, it was the first time he'd seen Nora in about ten to eleven years. She'd just turned fourteen, and she'd move in with him a year later. He didn't have the mansion built yet, and so he rented a house. Nice place from the outside, but I never went in. Bill didn't really want to reach out to him. For a long time, I stood by Bill in how he thought of his brother. It wasn't how I thought exactly, but he was my husband and I wanted to support him in the ways I could. Was a Thanksgiving when we first saw John. Didn't know he was gonna be there, but his mom had invited him. I was glad to see him. Holidays with the Lowells weren't always a real blast. It was nice to have someone else there to talk to. Bill shook his hand and said hi, but not hardly another word. Henry, his dad, asked him about his job, and John said he'd been doing sales of some kind, but I can't remember what. I can say for certain he didn't say he sold drugs and his body. Not sure how that woulda went over. Diane, you could tell she was overjoyed to have him there. I haven't always gotten along with my former mother-in-law, but I always appreciated that she tried to include John as much as she could. But what stood out the most was how much he and Nora talked. There were long bouts of time when he was just sitting in a corner chair by himself, the rest of us getting drinks or talking about who knows what. And I look over at one point and Nora and him are just chatting away. She's asking questions and he's firing out answers. And that's how they always were at the few holidays, the only time we saw John. I think her uncle really fascinated her. He was so different than anything she'd ever known, and he'd answer any question you'd ask him. He'd gone from being a question machine to an answer

machine. Not that he didn't still ask his fair share of questions. But you see Nora's curiosity already coming out in that first part, the Prelude. She was always different than the rest of us. Not quite like John, of course. Different in her own way. Ambitious. Smart. Good at school when neither me nor her father were worth a damn at it. She acts like she's all put out when she shows up to his place in that writing, and I'm sure she missed living with the two of us, but I don't think that gives the right picture. John opened up the world for her. And I'm so proud of what she is and what she'll become. She's going to Harvard in the fall, you know? Planning to double major in philosophy and psychology.

NN: I'd heard that.

JL: Yeah. And that's just it. Whatever John was, how can I hold much against him when I see what he's done for her? She's gonna really be something. I couldn't be prouder.

NN: That hits on a question I asked your ex-husband. I think readers of this book would be interested to know a little about your relationship with Nora now. Have things changed much?

JL: (Laughs) I can say it's weird seeing her live up in the mansion all by herself. Lord of the manor, and she's only eighteen. (Laughs) As far as our relationship goes, we're closer than we've been in a long time. After what happened with the calls, she didn't much want to talk to me. I guess she was mad it didn't work. Mad I still didn't take her back, I guess. She kept saying she wanted to come home, but I was living down here, her school was up there, and I didn't think her father could handle her, and he admitted as much. She didn't want to stay with her grandparents, and I can't blame her on that. But she wouldn't talk to me hardly but to say she wanted to come home. After John died, though, she reached out. She was heartbroken. Felt bad she wasn't there for him. I remember, the day she found him, she called me and I couldn't hardly understand her for the crying. I drove up as soon as I could. And God, it breaks my heart

thinking back on it. I hadn't seen her that upset in a long time. Not sad like that. She cried all night long, and I just held her. It was a couple weeks before she could hear anything about John without breaking into tears. It was real tough on her. And I was glad I could be there for her. I'm looking into getting a job at a hair salon back up there again. She says I don't need to work, that she'll give me the money I need, but I'm not the kind of person that can sit around on my hands all day. Soon as a job comes through I'm moving up there into that house with her, though she'll be gone soon enough for college. But I'll look after the place for her, and be there when she comes home over breaks. And she says she'll come home whenever she can. And I'm gonna fly out there to help her move in too. Just blows my mind thinking of what she's been able to accomplish.

NN: To end, I wonder if you feel like John Lowell was the kind of person to commit suicide? It seems to conflict pretty heavily with his personality and his general approach to life, at least as how his pseudonym Burgess relays it. What do you think?

JL: You're right in that John seemed like about the last person in the world that'd ever do such a thing. It never seemed that sadness really touched him. He may have been a bit obsessive, but it wasn't over guilt and all that. Though, reading through this, I have to wonder. But with what happened, I've thought a lot about this, and in a way I can make sense of it. John, you know, he liked to be in control. Or maybe it's more accurate to say he really hated to be out of control. Seeing what I did in that last part. The idea that he was losing his grip on reality. That he wasn't in control of his own mind. I can see that being something that would work harder on him than anything else might. Maybe he really was ready to hand it all over to Nora. Maybe he thought that was the best way to use what he had left. I couldn't tell ya. Because maybe too, John

was a much sadder person than he let on. I don't know. Comes down to it, John was a good man in his own way. Better than his brother ever was. You ask me, I married the wrong Lowell.

Second Interview with Nora Lowell: July 16th, 2015

Nick Notou: To start, I wanted to ask a couple questions in relation to some other interviews I've done since last meeting with you. You've had time to review them?

Nora Lowell: Yeah.

NN: It seems that those who weren't scared of John often felt sorry for him. Considering the things he didn't or couldn't understand, did you pity your uncle? Or feel sorry for him?

NL: No. A little when I first moved in maybe. But after I spent so much time with him, it goes back to something I think I brought up in the last interview. He didn't feel social pain. So the reason that people feel sorry for him is the same reason they shouldn't. He didn't care about the things other people cared about.

NN: Well, it's something I thought I'd save for our last interview, but seems pretty apt in relation to what you just said. Do you think John had a guilty conscience when it came to Michael or the other things he'd done?

NL: No. He didn't. But there are some things to consider if you're going to believe that. The big thing is, why did he think about Michael so often? Why were his memories of Michael so clear and vivid? There's a couple reasons, I think, and it's stuff we talked about sometimes. To me, what makes the most sense is that Michael was the person who knew him best. More than with anyone else, except maybe me, but I'm not sure. But more than anyone else, Michael understood how John thought, and as much as John could take care of himself, I think he relied on Michael. Michael was to him what I was to him when writing this. He told him when people would think certain things, and how certain things would make people feel. In that way, Michael's reactions to things became a part of his thought process. It became a kind of baseline

for when he interacted with people. Do a thing. Say a thing. What would Michael say? How would Michael describe people's feelings in relation to this thing? In that way, it makes sense that he thought about Michael so much. But Uncle John could never be completely convinced of that. He worried, in the way that he could worry about things, that maybe there was a conclusion he was ignoring. That, in other words, he was lying to himself. And that's the second reason he thought of Michael so much I think, because he kept thinking he might be wrong, and so he'd think of Michael even more. Because he wanted to get to the answer quicker, we skipped ahead in the chapters, like I told you in one of our first meetings about publishing this. Your note was pretty spot on. It was a logical problem that he couldn't solve because it involved ideas of emotion. And even though I think he saw pretty clearly at the very beginning that he wouldn't be able to solve it, he also believed that knowledge should always be open to change. He adjusted what he knew based on new experiences. And he kept open the possibility that in writing this manuscript new evidence might come out to prove him wrong. And that gets to why his memories of Michael were clearer too. These were memories whose clarity determined whether he could figure out how people felt or thought. Michael wasn't the complete opposite of John, but he was a near-opposite when it came to emotion. Hearing so much about him, I think Michael felt things really strongly, and John relied on that. As much as we talked about Michael, what doesn't come up as much as it should is how funny, how personable, how sweet he could be. But also how sad. Even never meeting Michael, I felt like I knew him almost better than anyone. I wanted Uncle John to have a guilty conscience about it, but he didn't. He wasn't capable of it. And in the end, I can't really be mad at him for that.

NN: So, talking to your parents, I wanted to ask if you regret telling your father about the murders and the prostitution? Also, what was your motive in doing so?

NL: The reason I told him was what John thought. It makes me feel a little better in that I think Uncle John was probably proud of me for the way I did it, that I knew what would make my dad take me back. I liked living with Uncle John, but I missed living with my parents. I don't know why. It was never as great as I thought it was. I guess it's something all kids who come from broken homes want. I hate that phrase, broken homes. But it is what it is. Being there for awhile, I remembered all the bad stuff about living with him. He'd already started drinking again. A month or two before I moved back in. And he can be mean when he's drunk. Not abusive. Just mean. And he's not reliable at all. He canceled things we were supposed to do together all the time. I thought maybe I'd be able to convince my parents to get back together, but after I was there for a week or two, I saw how stupid that was. I'd been trying to get back there so long, I'd forgotten all the bad stuff. My mom's better without him.

NN: So, do you regret telling your father about the murders?

NL: Yeah, I do. Mainly because he's a fucking loser. And he's always been a loser. Wanting his attention, and wanting him back in my life. That's the biggest mistake I've ever made. I'm ashamed when I think about it. It was so juvenile, but it's like I couldn't help it. It's one of those times where I wished I could be like Uncle John, not feel so much about it. As things are now, I hope I never see him again.

NN: Well, I get a sense then of something I was going to ask next. Just in general what your relationship is like with your parents now.

NL: Yeah, I'm not talking to my dad. I told him if he wants to go back to treatment I'll pay for it, but he said he won't take any money from me. But he doesn't have to worry about that. I wouldn't give him shit for anything else. With my mom, things are really good. She's a good

person, and she tries her best. And, unlike my dad, she doesn't just hate Uncle John without even thinking about why.

NN: Your mother brought up something I wasn't aware of before. She said that you talked with your uncle quite a bit at family gatherings before you moved in with him. I wasn't aware you had much of a relationship before then.

NL: Yeah. I wouldn't say we really had a relationship. But he was a lot more fun to talk to than anyone else there. I'd only seen him like three times before I moved in with him, and he'd tell you about anything. I remember I asked him like why people went to war, and I asked him about sex, and drugs, and just anything I could think of that most adults wouldn't talk to me about. And he answered it all. And it was funny, and it was interesting. People get the impression sometimes that because he could manipulate people that he was really secretive or something. Truth is, if he didn't have a reason to hold back then he wouldn't.

NN: Referring back again to telling your father about the murders and the fall-out that created, you ask John in the writing if he was mad at you. But from all you've told me, it seems odd that you would think that at that late point in your relationship.

NL: I think I knew he wasn't mad. But maybe I wanted him to be. I questioned my decision pretty quickly, and I think that was just me being scared I'd made the wrong one. And turns out I was right about being wrong.

NN: So, something I'm curious about, because information on it is so scant, is if you ever met any of John's prostitution associates, or those he worked with when he was dealing drugs. Were there ever strange people at the house? Or, did he ever go out to meet someone you didn't know?

NL: Mostly, no. Uncle John stayed at home like 99% of the time. When he went out it was usually because I wanted to. We'd go shopping or something. And I should say that Uncle John had pretty great taste in clothes. I asked him if he'd pick out something for me once, just kind of as a joke. And he pointed out this dress. And I wasn't sure it would match my figure at all. Or that it would look right on me. I tried it on and it fit perfectly. He had a good sense of proportion. A good eye for certain aesthetic standards, if he knew generally what you were going for. After that, I asked his advice all the time. I got into my own thing after awhile, but once he knew what I liked then he adjusted his advice to fit it. It gave me a sense of how good he probably looked when he was Minnie. Or, when she was Minnie. But, I'm sorry, what was the question?

NN: If you ever had any visitors that were maybe connected to his past life. Or if he went to meet anyone.

NL: Right. There was one time. It might have been Tapanga, actually, but we weren't to that part in the manuscript yet, so I didn't know enough to ask. A pretty, older black woman. But like a really big lady. Not fat. Just tall and kind of broad. If she was identified as male at birth I couldn't tell. Deep voice, but nothing that odd. It might have been her. I answered the door, and she asked where John was, and I lead her up to his office. He asked if I could shut the door, so I did. About a half an hour later she came out with a bag she didn't have when she went in. Left. I never saw her again. Other than that, I can't think of single person who came that wasn't family or someone I invited.

NN: The charity work that John did that I covered, did he not do anything with that while you were living with him?

NL: Not in person. Not that I know of. He'd get letters sometimes. He was still giving money. I mainly know that because they've been asking me to match his previous donations. And I have, for now. I'm going to look through some other charities. See if the money won't be better off used for something else.

NN: That relates a little bit to my final question for today. Did you think John was going to make you his heir before he did? And why do you think he left you everything, instead of giving some to other relatives, or even to the charities he'd donated to?

NL: I didn't know he was going to leave me anything, but I didn't know he'd die so soon either. One thing I knew was that he'd take care of me. That he'd give me anything I needed as far as money was concerned. I didn't have a reason to think about inheritance or anything. As far as why he gave it all to me instead of splitting it up, I think it's because he thought I'd know what he would do. If I think of it as he would, he probably assumed that the adjustments I'd make as far as when circumstances changed, would better suit what he wanted than if he just relied on the circumstances when he died.

NN: I'm sorry. Could you explain that in different words?

NL: Sure. I'll slow it down. If he made a will that gave what he wanted to everyone and everything when he died, it would be based strictly on the circumstances at the time. Except he understood things always keep changing. So this way he could rely on me, who knew him better than anyone else, to make adjustments with his money depending on the changes. But even if I don't think of it that way, he didn't have a reason to give his money to anyone else. I don't think anyone cared about him much except for Grandma. And for sure, no one else really knew him.

Interview with Finn McLaughlin: July 23rd, 2015

Finn McLaughlin inherited about one hundred thousand from his brother Michael upon his death. The rest of Michael's estate went to John, and my research, along with Nora's granted access to John's legal files, indicates their wills at the time listed each other as heirs. Finn used his inheritance to help purchase a home and twenty acres of land on the outskirts of Boone County, about a fifteen minute drive from Lowell's mansion. His closest neighbor is a five minute drive away and Finn assures me he doesn't miss being around people at all, and that he gets plenty of interaction when he works construction. Finn is a tall and angular man with a short temper, a crooked smile and wary eyes. We sat down on his lovely wrap-around porch for the interview.

Nick Notou: John Burgess, or Lowell, frequently implies in the manuscript that you were seeking revenge for several years because of his blackmailing. Is this true?

Finn McLaughlin: First of all, John was an asshole. From the time I first knew him to the time of his death. He looked at everything as a competition, and he won most every competition he entered. And yeah, it's true. As far as what happened with Mrs. Deveau, I've been living that down most of my life in one way or another. There's some things that never go away. John approached me like he wrote he did. He made me drive him and he made me work for him. When he got a car, I stopped driving him places. When he graduated high school, he told me I could stop dealing if I wanted, and I did. Somebody directs your life like that for a few years though, it's hard not to take it personal. At the time I was too scared of the consequences of more people figuring out what had happened to really stand up to him. If I could go back I'd of just

told him to go ahead and tell people. Everyone figured it out eventually anyway. I guess maybe Joseph told them. I'm not sure.

NN: So, this Alex, the dealer, he was real? You met him and dealt with him?

FM: His name wasn't Alex, but yeah he was real.

NN: What was his name?

FM: Can't remember.

NN: Right, well, just to confirm some other incidents described in the manuscript. Was the chapter describing his last party accurate, where he claims you yelled out his name in connection with the drugs that were distributed?

FM: Accurate as far as I remember, yeah. I'd come down to Louisville sometimes and stay at their apartment. Sometimes I'd show up without asking first if I was bored or angry, and Michael always let me stay. I knew, like I always knew, that John was up to something, and it was probably illegal. So sometimes I'd follow them around without them knowing. There was nothing that made me happier than thinking about him behind bars. At that point, I'd stopped caring about John telling people what I'd done. Weirdly enough, I don't think John was the one who ended up making it common knowledge. I guess Michael probably kept him from doing it, but it didn't matter. I wanted to see John burn. I'd ask Michael all the time what they were doing, but he'd only own up to his own part in things. Even though he told that asshole about me, he never would tell me anything bad about John. So I started following them some nights. Like I said. I'd seen them at all these different parties. I wasn't even sure they knew the people at the parties, but they were out all the time at different places. Michael was always hopped up on something, and I saw him giving out joints sometimes. Usually, they weren't so loud about it as they were at the party John describes. I was looking for a way to get John caught without hurting

Michael. Which, since they were pretty much always together, was hard to do. Turned out, impossible. I can't believe he never got caught for something.

NN: What was your relationship with Michael like at that time?

FM: I was always on pretty good terms with Michael. At least, when he was around. There was a long time when I hardly saw him. Like I said, around the time of the party, I'd spend nights with them here and there, at their apartment in Old Louisville. I could tell John didn't like it, as much as you could tell anything with that robot. But that's one of the reasons I did it. It became harder to have a relationship of any kind with Michael the more he got into drugs. I don't know when exactly he graduated from weed to whatever else he ended up taking. But he'd get used to something and up the dose, or start taking something else. Seemed like he was running from something, but he never came out and said what it was.

NN: This brings me to another thing I wanted you to give your side on. Would you say that your younger brother was in fact your sister?

FM: The fuck that's supposed to mean?

NN: Well, I assumed you read the manuscript in its entirety when I sent it over. But there's a lot of speculation in the book about whether Michael was a transwoman.

FM: That's not--I don't even know what that is.

NN: Well, so being trans--

FM: Don't fucking explain some bull--

NN: I'm sorry. I didn't mean to offend you.

FM: It's not--Alright. I guess you're just doing your job. But no. Michael was a man. He had a dick and all.

NN: Okay.

FM: And yeah, there were some odd things about Michael. But most everything you can trace back to that manipulative asshole John. I'm not--I didn't read the whole manuscript. But I saw some of that with Michael trying on dresses in the first chapter. And that shit was all John. I mean, there was some weird stuff when he was little. I do remember him telling my mom that he wished he was a girl, but he wasn't a girl. He was just confused for awhile. A lot of kids--you can't just do whatever a kid tells you to do. Some kids say they're from outer space. Or, you know, whatever. But being around John, that's when he started to think stuff like that. He didn't get that from his family. We were good Catholics, and we know what's a man and what's a woman. And I don't even know why you brought that up.

NN: You said Michael was running away from--

FM: That's not what I meant. You're putting words in my mouth.

NN: Okay, well, getting back to confirming some of the incidents in the book. Did you ever witness John during the times when he claimed to be a prostitute?

FM: You're not going to say she? When she was a prostitute? I thought that was your whole thing. That like you just magically are something you're not.

NN: I really was not trying to make any sort of definitive statement or conclusion. Would you like to stop the interview?

FM: No--I guess...You're right. I just lost my temper. I just hear some of that stuff, and it makes me so angry at John. I wish he hadn't of committed suicide so I could've killed him.

NN: You think he committed suicide?

FM: I don't think someone else hung him, no. And he had plenty to repent for. Seems like it finally caught up with him.

NN: Okay...so, did you witness John when he claimed to be prostituting? Or did you have any contact with Michael during that time that gave you a sense of what was occurring?

FM: There was one time I thought maybe I saw John. One time over all those years. Ten years, I think. I'd met Michael at this diner. And this was in, oh, maybe 2004 or 2005. I hadn't seen Michael in a little over a year. But I came down to Louisville to hang with some high school buddies who'd just moved down there, and I was able to get in touch with Michael. And we met up. He looked like shit, though he acted the same as always. Kind of hyper, funny. An energetic guy. Really, what most surprises me about Michael's death is that it didn't happen several years sooner. Can't believe he didn't die of an overdose. All the same, though his looks gave away the drug use, he didn't seem that doped up. We had a good conversation. I tried to ask him what he'd been up to, but he wouldn't really say. He did mention working at an arcade sometimes. I know now that John owned a bunch, so that was probably something to do with it. We talked about my parents, and I tried to get him to call them up, but he didn't like my dad, and he'd had some argument with my mom. Not sure what about. And they just didn't really talk anymore. We said goodbye, and I was supposed to be meeting up with my friends at this local brewery, but I decided maybe I'd just track Michael a bit and see if I couldn't figure out what was really going on. I followed him to this real shit part of town. Half the windows boarded up. Stuff like that. I'd never been down there before. I see him park on this corner, and I park back down the street and run up so I can see where he's heading. He walks up to what can only be a group of prostitutes. Four or five of them. And he's talking to them all and he's laughing that laugh of his. He had a real distinctive laugh. Very loud, almost clown-like, but really likable. And they're smiling and laughing too. I just thought he might be into some really kinky shit, you know? I didn't think about it as a job or anything. A bunch of prostitutes showed up to his funeral and I still didn't

know what to think. And what reason would I have for thinking he was involved like he was? Anyway, that night they're all talking and I don't know what to think, and then I see this woman coming up to them. And she's beautiful. But I'm not--I don't want you to think--I'm not gay or anything.

NN: I...I didn't think you were. I also don't--

FM: The only reason I say that is because I think, now that I look back at it. I think it might have been John.

NN: I see.

FM: Yeah. It was pretty weird. Anyway, I maybe met up with Michael a couple more times over the next few years. But I didn't see John. Not for sure.

NN: When was the last time you saw Michael alive?

FM: Last time I heard from him was a phone call. I think it was 2008.

NN: Do you remember what you talked about?

FM: Nothing really. Just shooting the shit. Michael didn't talk about very serious stuff most of the time. Just funny things. He was fun to talk to. He was a little more serious when he was young. But once he got to college, he never really mentioned much. About his feelings or whatever.

NN: Did you ever interact with John once he moved back to Burlington?

FM: Well, after Michael's funeral, I almost killed him.

NN: I've heard a lot about Michael's funeral. Could you tell me about that?

FM: My family, we didn't even hear about anything that happened until Michael was already dead. John called to tell us. And I flipped. I--I couldn't think straight. He had the body shipped up and by the time of the funeral I'd calmed down a little, but not all the way. If you've

heard about it, you've probably heard what I said. Called him a motherfucker in front of everyone. And then that manipulative asshole starts crying. Unbelievable. If it wasn't for my mom pulling me down and back to the pew, I'd have probably killed him there in front of everyone. As it was, I tried to calm down and everything. And we went to the cemetery, saw him buried, and I went back to this apartment I was living in at the time. Round about an hour or so after I got home somebody rings my doorbell. I get up to answer it and it's John. I shit you not. I restrain myself from immediately punching him in the face, and he's looking at me with those dead fish eyes of his, and he says, 'I'm sorry for your loss.' So that was it. I lose it for real. I just start swinging at him. And I get a few good hits in before he's able to get back at me. Coward kneed me in the balls and then ran off.

NN: And after that, did you have any more contact with him?

FM: Once he moved back for good, built the mansion and stuff, I'd send him some things I probably shouldn't have. Threatening letters. Things like that. I'd call him sometimes and not say a word. I wasn't planning on doing anything, not really. I just wanted to scare him. But I'm not sure you could scare John. I mean, I like to think I pushed him to commit suicide. But I'm probably thinking too highly of myself.

Third Interview with Nora Lowell: August 1st, 2015

Nick Notou: To wrap things up, I have some questions I've saved for our last interview, as well as some follow-ups from a more recent interview.

Nora Lowell: You mean the one with Finn you sent over?

NN: Yes, it was interesting.

NL: Yeah, big surprise Michael never came out, huh?

NN: He did seem pretty hostile to the idea.

NL: That's because he thinks it would make him look bad. Like less of a man. John had people like him pegged. He's clearly an idiot.

NN: Well, regardless. I was wondering if you had anything to say in regards to receiving threatening phone calls and letters from Finn McLaughlin, something Finn admitted and which John brings up in the last interlude.

NL: There were a couple times I answered the phone and someone would hang up immediately. I couldn't say if it was Finn. As far as the letters, I remember a few coming to the house that didn't have any return address. But John never said anything about it or showed them to me or anything.

NN: Do you think it's possible that Finn was involved with John's death?

NL: (Laughs) Are you kidding me? If that guy was involved there would've been blood everywhere. No way he could put together something like this.

NN: Okay, so before I get into some of my other questions, I wanted to ask one that's a bit more personal than the others I've prepared. Do you think John loved you? And did you love John?

NL: I loved Uncle John, yes. The other way around? I don't know. Honestly, probably not. Not being capable of pain, emotional pain, kind of precludes being capable of something like love. At least, that's how I understand it. If love is somehow this well of emotion connected to another person, then the pain we experience emotionally is kind of the other end of that. I don't think Uncle John felt anything on that spectrum. I wanted him too. Don't get me wrong. And I hope that he could. I hope that I was someone he really cared about. And in his way, I knew he did. But it's not worth worrying about. My feelings for John are very real though. No one ever spent that much time with me. No one was ever that patient in teaching me things. And no one was ever that generous. He let me feel like I could be something. When I first came to live with him I thought I was going to be hopping from place to place my whole life. I didn't think about my future much. I got good grades. I was good at some things. But it didn't seem like that stuff mattered. It didn't feel like that would be enough to actually get anywhere in life. I don't know if that's true, but I do know that if John hadn't convinced me that I could do a lot of things if I wanted, then I probably wouldn't have even applied to colleges. I needed someone who believed in me, as cheesy as that sounds.

NN: I don't think it sounds cheesy. I think it sounds sincere. So, from here, I'd like to move to some issues concerning John's final days and the last interlude and the abrupt ending of it. First, can you tell me why you went to John's house the day you discovered his body?

NL: It was his birthday. I figured I'd spend the day with him. I knew no one else would go over to see him. After the family found out about the murders, no one wanted to have anything to do with him. Even Grandma. I know she regrets what she said to him now, but she didn't know what was going to happen. My dad never wanted to see him anyway. My mom, she might have went with me, but she was still living down near Lexington with my other grandma.

So that just left me. Knowing John, I knew he wouldn't care if no one visited him for his birthday, not in the way most people think about it. But I cared. And I felt pretty awful for what happened. I was also thinking I might move back in with him, at least until college. I've thought of why he decided to do it then, kill himself then. I like to think it's because he knew I'd come and see him. That he predicted I'd visit him on his birthday. In a weird way, that makes me feel good.

NN: From what you've just said you seem to be implying that John did commit suicide and wasn't in any way forced into it. Concerning the last interlude, did John ever show signs of mental instability to you? What do you make of the meeting with Michael and Finn? Certainly, Finn in no way substantiated that meeting occurred.

NL: I don't know about the part with Finn. Maybe it did happen. Maybe it didn't. At least he's smart enough to not to confirm it if he was there. If that's the case, he's a lot smarter than he seems. Was John mentally unstable? No. Not that I could ever tell. But I do think that if he suspected he was losing his mind, he might commit suicide. It wouldn't be because he was scared. He wouldn't be afraid of that as other people might be. But all the sudden, what he based all of his interactions on, would be unreliable. The patterns he'd spent so much time learning would suddenly be useless. And certainly life would've ceased to be easy for him. Existing would itself become difficult, and it was a difficulty he spent his life trying to overcome. Would he be despairing? No. But I can see how he could rationalize doing it. That he had accomplished perhaps all he wanted to accomplish. And maybe all he would be capable of accomplishing. It's the only way I can make sense of it. And Uncle John wasn't really scared of death. He was scared of pain, of physical death. But he didn't fear the afterlife. We talked about it sometimes. Some of the time he pretended to believe in God. If that was the case, he thought he'd go to heaven.

Because he'd repent and mean it as much as he could. Other times he speculated that death was just oblivion, and there was no reason to fear oblivion because you wouldn't know you didn't exist. Because knowing that is impossible.

NN: Why do you think the last chapter is incomplete? If he planned to commit suicide, why wouldn't he first finish it?

NL: That's harder to answer. Uncle John was definitely someone who wanted to finish everything he started. I guess it's possible that he was set on committing suicide on his birthday so that I'd find him, and he didn't have time to complete the manuscript before then. In that way, maybe he thought one thing was more important to complete than the other. But the book is being completed now. Not that he'd know that. But it's something we're doing. So weirdly, it's working out in the end.

NN: I'm glad you brought up the book as in general something to be published. Do you think John would have published the book at some point? Understandably, he questions more and more whether he could possibly elude all of the legal ramifications. Do you think he could have found some way around it?

NL: Well, no, he wouldn't have published it when he was alive. Not like it is. I don't think it has much to do with the legal stuff though. His money, or my money, is clean as far as the IRS is concerned. You can trace some of the drug sales, sure, but even that is really slight, and mostly hear-say. There's no way to prove most of the illegal stuff ever happened, and as far as the murders there are some people that might match what he described, but there's no evidence he was there, and those cases were abandoned forever ago. On paper, he's just another smart, rich white guy taking advantage of a system he understands.

NN: I'm confused. You say he wouldn't have published it in its current form if alive, but you just gave me a series of reasons why he should have.

NL: That's not what I'm saying, because the reason he wouldn't have published when he was alive has nothing to do with the legal stuff. Not as I understand it. I know that's what he wrote in the last couple chapters. But I think that was just his way of pretending like he cared. It makes it seem like he really did do that stuff, even if it can't be verified. Cause look, the book opens by saying it's based on a true story. But if people looked into his past and couldn't find any evidence of it, then why would they buy the book? They'd feel ripped off. Reviewers would scare them away before it was even released.

NN: So you're saying it wouldn't have been a good seller because people couldn't verify it? But, simultaneously, if people could verify it, then your uncle would have been in a lot of trouble. So you're saying he's lying in the last couple chapters so that what can't be verified seems to be verified through his concern about legal ramifications. But if he published it, wouldn't that invalidate the effectiveness of that strategy? It seems like quite the conundrum. And one that Burgess, at least, would have foreseen.

NL: I'm only saying what I think Uncle John would say. Yeah, there were reasons why he needed to be concerned about legal stuff, but he knew he'd covered his tracks. He was too smart to leave any real evidence. And you're right, if he published it then it would have invalidated his concerns about getting caught in the last couple chapters, cause it would imply he didn't really care, and so it would make everything seem fake again.

NN: You seem to have thought this through quite a bit.

NL: How could I not? We talked about it all the time. And it seemed like I should complete it for him if I could. He left me everything. Gave me everything. He was scary if you

weren't someone he wanted to protect, but he was great to me. I'm leaving for Harvard in two weeks. I have more money than I'll ever need. I don't have to rely on anyone but myself. Yeah, I've said some things about Uncle John that seem bad, but not anything he wouldn't have said about himself. I didn't want to do the book and these interviews so everyone would think he was a monster. This is the best way people can understand him. And it's a way the book can be completed.

NN: So, to return to what we were discussing, why did he say he might publish the book in the opening if he had no intention to?

NL: That's not what I said, Nick. I said he wouldn't have published all of the stuff that's included in it while he was still alive. He might have come up with a way to market it with more time. Maybe find a way to validate some stuff without any legal ramifications. But as it is, no.

NN: I'm confused. He wouldn't have published all of the stuff included when he was alive? So when would he have published it?

NL: (Laughs) Now, obviously.

NN: I'm not sure I'm following.

NL: What do people like to read about?

NN: I'm sorry. Why do I feel like you're stringing me along here?

NL: My bad. I wasn't meaning to. Uncle John gave me an appreciation for logical puzzles. And I like to think he'd be proud of me for what I've done, especially after all the tabloid coverage.

NN: Could you explain that further?

NL: For six months people are speculating if I or someone else forced him into a suicide. Because it's weird, it's a mysterious death. And then others are asking, did he have reason to

commit suicide? With the chapters that were leaked people are like, would someone who thinks like this even be able to commit suicide? What's wrong with him? I can't believe this wealthy, upstanding man did all these things. He actually says some really important stuff about performance and blah, blah, blah. All of that because of a little suspense, because of how easily people get into something that confuses or scares them, or validates how they think about rich people, or has a little mystery. I couldn't have planned it better.

NN: Well, yes, it is the interest around your uncle and what occurred that got me to pursue this project.

NL: Exactly. Who doesn't love a murder mystery?

NN: I see. Are you saying that you believe John Lowell committed suicide so that his book would sell? I find that hard to believe. In fact, it reminds me of a moment in the book where he critiques an idiom you use, that you would die to do something. As he writes, dying for anything doesn't make sense because you wouldn't be around to collect on it.

NL: You're right. And I'm not saying he committed suicide so the book could sell. Though it's possible, if he thought that was the only way he could complete the book. I don't know, I tend to lean more towards the theory that he was losing his mind and that this would somehow be better. And maybe his reasoning skills were effected. But it is now the perfect conditions for publication. And Uncle John would appreciate that. I think he'd be proud of me, of how I've put all this together. Because if he was going to commit suicide to sell the book he did it pretty perfectly. He's going to meet the goal of making money on it. Besides giving me knowledge and money, he's projected himself into the world in a new way. And we're finishing the book for him. So three goals. And two of the original three. Pretty good.

NN: Well, clearly someone moved the ladder he climbed to get up to the chandelier, or whatever other device. So, even if it did make sense for him to commit suicide, somebody helped him. Or helped themselves. And, excuse me if this seems insulting, but if I follow your line of reasoning, then you're really the only person with a motive to do so.

NL: I don't even know why people care about that. So someone moved a fucking ladder? Who cares? It makes the death a little mysterious because it seems like someone was involved, but otherwise it's pretty mundane. Obviously the police didn't think that made it a murder.

NN: Okay, I'm sorry. I'm having a hard time following. In your understanding, doesn't the missing ladder heighten the mystery?

NL: Yeah. It heightens the idea of a mystery. But otherwise, it's just...the mystery of who moved the ladder. Sometimes people are so bored they'll grasp at about anything to entertain themselves.

NN: Okay...so...you found the body. You inherited everything he has. You'll make half of the proceeds from this book. You're the only person with motive in this scenario to move the ladder, if there was a ladder. I don't mean to overstep, as I'm doing this with your permission, but I feel like I wouldn't be doing my job if I didn't put it this way.

NL: What do you mean--if there was a ladder? Of course there was a ladder. How else did he get up there? And look Nick, I don't really care what you say in the book as long as it's entertaining. I have really good lawyers. Another thing Uncle John gave me.

NN: Well then...did you move the ladder?

NL: Of course not. I would never say that.

NN: Okay...well...I'm not sure there's anything else to ask then.

NL: You're right. That's a perfect place to end.

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