

**Good Circuits**

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I guess it all began when I tried to bring my best friend Jack back to life. Reflecting now reveals that I went about it in all the wrong ways; I should have begun by writing rather than by running, but I choked on the crappy old "remember him in your heart" jag we're all force fed from Disney, so I tried to be just like him--an animated commemoration. Plus, I was brought up Catholic in Massachusetts, so resurrection was still a remotely viable option in my spiritual playbook. Stranger things can happen, but by the time I realized the impossibility of his real return--that I couldn't become him no matter how hard I tried--it was too late.

I tend to favor the most oblique approach to just about everything anyway--like when I began learning how to ride a bike. I remember Dad laughing at me and then Mom yelling at him as I ghost-biked across our cracking driveway and amongst the tall tangle of our backyard, my wide thighs alternating high, revolving an invisible, apparently wobbly, wheel. He never told me the old red bike reclining in the shed had training wheels he could put on, and, well, I needed to learn how to ride somehow, so I became adept at going through the motions.

Returning to the story, I regard the summer of 2002--the months after I graduated from college, on the day they buried

Jack--as the beginning. Recalling a conversation with Old Murray sums my state of mind at the time pretty nicely:

"What the hell are you doing to my God-damned dog?" the old man demanded, recovering his balance. His thin, white fingers clawed the window frame and the swollen knobs of his wrists clicked as he steadied himself and guided his face to the sill. Each eye sunk in and his skin wrapped tight across his cheeks, which, in his agitation, threatened to tear open. Remnant wisps of white hair slicked down his skull and clung to his rough, patchy face.

"Nothing. Sorry," I said, panting. I was jogging for the first time since failing gym class, and I had nearly stumbled over his golden retriever. The neighborhood kids feared Old Murray for years, and though I was twenty-one, I shivered slightly at his address. After all, I said, "I'm just out for some exercise."

"In this heat? You're crazy!" Old Murray said. "This is like fighting in the Pacific where a turd like you would've sunk in salt water." Just below Old Murray, and above the front door of his rotting ranch, hung an old scythe that held a rusty gleam. "Hand me that screen and get out of here, you idiot." Goldie panted and padded slowly around the back of the ranch.

Obeying, I quickly crunched through some of his dry flower garden and, closing my eyes, I lifted the screen to the low window. Old Murray took it, but with his free hand, he rattled the scythe hard against the house. My eyes popped open: Murray's mouth gaped, strands of spit clinging between gaps in his teeth. He leaned through the window from his waist, laughing wildly. I am still afraid of him, actually.

I could hear him in the distance as I rounded the last bend of my street, doing my (unimpressive) best Roadrunner impression. My house was finally in sight, and, breathless and exhausted, my teeth clicked and clattered as my jaw slackened. I struggled uphill and swallowed hard to keep the rising bile out of my mouth; visions of the morning funeral blurred my sight and superimposed themselves over my neighborhood. Mourners stood weeping on the Randall's patchy, yellowed lawn and moved onto ours. The priest, passing through our mailbox, crossed the hot road towards our house, taking no notice of me. With three yards left before my driveway, I dropped to a trot, then to a walk. The procession peered into our open garage, but I pushed past them to see. Jack wasn't there; it was only the shovels and rakes, moldy boxes of junk, and my old Transformers posters. So I fell onto the smooth, cool floor, put my face in my hands, and wondered how the hell I would do this again tomorrow. When

I opened my eyes everyone was gone. Then I threw up all over myself.

#

When I woke, the bed engulfed me, and I welcomed it. Sun streaked from the torn shade and carved orange lines across my eyes. I shut them tight, then tighter until the pressure sprinkled stars in the darkness. I rolled slowly over and pulled the musty covers above my head. My best friend, Jack, was buried the day before; this is all I could think about: after all of the hours, all of the late nights talking with me, after watching all of those fights he used to pick with professors and the other hapless drunks, all the time he spent sitting in the corner or walking alone in the woods that surrounded campus, after he proposed to Sadie, all the writing he did and the lectures he was invited to, I wondered what's left of his mind? Is he challenging angels right now or burning justly punished? Being dead lasts forever, so what the hell was the rush?

Memories cloyed my mind like birthday cake until Mom knocked twice. She pushed her head through the door; I just peaked, groaned, and dropped my arm across my forehead.

"It's late, Ben. What time are you supposed to meet that woman at the agency?"

"Nine, I think."

"It's quarter after eight. Do you want me to call and cancel for you?"

"No, no. I'm up."

Mom went downstairs, and I followed her before turning right to the bathroom. I went in and shut the door, avoiding the mirror. The same sunlight flooded the room and made the old linoleum glow. I moved toward the window, my feet sticking to the floor, and I pulled the shade, which broke again. I bent down and pain lanced up the back of my leg. Running, however short a distance, really hurt. Wincing, I grabbed the dusty roll, tossed it to the counter, and ran the shower cold. Catching a glimpse of my pale, freckled back in the mirror as I stripped and slid into the water, I remembered that I forgot to do laundry again, so I would have to wear the same clothes as yesterday--funeral attire: glum duds of black and gray.

I soaped my hands, ran them around my cheeks, back over the orange bristles of my scalp, and down over my shoulders. I pushed the bar into my cleavage--my chest, hairless and ample prevented me from going to the beach for fear of landing a butch

lesbo girlfriend--and then smoothed it over the tight pale skin of my belly. Water streamed down the back of my neck, pooled momentarily where my solar plexus might be, made gooseflesh, and fell far in front of my thighs. I looked down, soap stinging my eyes. It would be a long, long time before I could see my feet, let alone my dick.

Stepping out of the shower, I coughed and sputtered; the room was already thick with hot mist that swirled as cooler air found its way in from the open window. It fogged the mirror, but I didn't care because I wasn't going to bother shaving again this week just to meet some temp-agency lady. Toweling off, I roughly brushed my teeth, stepped into my tight, white underwear, and strode out of the bathroom. I nearly knocked Glen, my step-father, back down the stairs.

"Jesus, Bennie!" he yelled, grabbing hold of my glistening arm and steadying himself. "Not a worse way to start the day. Gettin' belly-bounced down a flight of stairs by a naked Chris Farley. Can't you watch where the hell you're going?"

"Sorry. What are you doing home anyway?" I asked, looking down past Glen then looking at the floor. Beige strands of shag carpet bunched and peeked between my long, crooked toes. The hallway became a tight, white dance studio as we tried not to touch. Glen's muddy boots smeared the stairs, leaving startled

tracks as he squeezed past. Framed like Iggy Pop until he turned profile and his own gut became a factor, he had to bend low and sidestep below me. Relieved, we shuffled into reversed positions.

"I let Rocco mow this morning. Thought I'd sleep in. Wasn't crazy about doing too much today either, you know," Glen said, looking up at me. He cuffed the sleeves of his blue work shirt, the cables beneath his dark forearms rolling and shifting. "You know I miss Jack too."

"I know. Everyone misses him." I said, backing slowly down the hall, toward my room.

"Have you talked with Sadie?" When he asked this, he raised his bushy eyebrows like he always does. I knew where this conversation was leading . . .

"Don't want to."

"Maybe you should before she leaves her aunt's house. Before she goes back home," Glen said, his voice lowering, his eyes widening.

"Don't want to."

"You're so full of sympathy, Benny. A regular fucking Dr. Phil." He stepped toward me as he said this, and I slipped further away. One pile of Mom's magazines, tucked into the

corner of the L-shaped hallway, toppled over as I passed.

Menicing cover shots of Osama Bin Ladden, Veggie Tales, Bennifer fanned across the floor.

"Sorry, but I can't talk with her right now . . . I just can't," I said, and I closed the door to my room. After getting dressed, I went downstairs. Glen was gone, and Mom had made breakfast--something she normally only did on holidays.

"Why did Glen go storming out of here this time?" she asked, placing her hands on her hips. I always snickered a little when she assumed this posture, especially when wearing her Garfield-print scrubs.

"After catching me topless, he undoubtedly went to work out all those wierd feelings while pruning the roses." I said, looking down at what spread the kitchenette. We had: pancakes spongy with half-melted pads of butter, scrambled eggs steaming on battered ceramic plates, sweaty glasses of pulpy orange juice, and bacon that smoked and squealed from the range. My mouth watered, and I slung my jacket over a chair. When she wants to, Mom can cook!

"Shut up, Benny," Mom said. "He's always fine after a day working outside. Now eat something before it gets cold. You have to leave in fifteen minutes if you want to get to the agency on time." She bent low, trying to lace her new white

Keds. Her behind pushed, then opened, the screen door to the back porch. A pack of Newport Lights slipped from her pocket, slapping softly on the floor. She reached for them, grunting, and, embarrassed, she stood straight again only to knock her coffee back into the sink. The mug dropped into a soaking pan, and I heard all the liquid drain out. She slipped the cigarettes back into her pocket, stretching one cartoon cat so he smiled obscenely across her breast. "Shut up. I heard you breaking things upstairs. God blessed us both with grace, you know."

I looked up and laughed, my mouth full and dripping. I remembered how Dad left his face a glistening mess when he ate; after all, why bother wiping when he wasn't finished eating? "I know. It isn't fair for you to have to flip from late to early shifts in the same week." I fought the urge to wipe with my sleeve but instead used an old napkin from my pocket since there were none at the table.

"I'm not that tired. After all, I had to rearrange my schedule because of the service," she said, pouring new coffee into her old pink travel mug. The cracked top leached steam that lifted into her face. Her short brown hair stuck to her pale forehead. "I need to get going though. Today's going to be another tough one for my Golden Girls! Hot! Hot! Hot!"

Though I doubt they'll feel like dancing. Good luck at your interview, by the way."

"It's not an interview. It's just some temp job," I said. My knife sliced through pancakes and scratched the plate. I got the chills.

"I know. But you need the money, right?" she said, her green eyes glinting, "Loan payments are due pretty soon . . ."

"It's true, I know. But it's not like I can find a real job."

"Don't say that. It's just going to take more time," she said while I sighed into my OJ. "So, good luck then, and don't forget to call Sadie."

"Ok, Mom. See you later," I said and swallowed some eggs down hard. They burned my throat, and I felt them slide into my stomach. As she walked out the door, I watched the stitching stretch and bunch where the flesh bulged beneath her pants. I didn't mention the slight tear I saw forming there but kept eating. I only saved her a few strips for in the fridge for a dinner BLT.

#

The brakes screeched like banshees as I pulled my '93 Corolla into a metered spot in the center of town. I knocked the tires into the curb, and the car jarred to a stop. As I pushed myself out, running late, the parking lady glared at me from across the street out of her good eye, so I hurriedly crammed some change in the meter. This interview should be short, I hoped. I felt like a marked man.

The state paid to brick up the old town buildings back in the day, as the owners wouldn't do it; their neglect became apparent as I tried to open the heavy front door. Its rot and gray paint flecked onto my sportscoat as I pulled it open. Gasping stale, moldy air, I stepped into the building and immediately felt sweat drip down my back. This is always the warning sign: without immediate AC, I'd soon burst out and become a sodden mess in this type of heat; wrap me in white polyester, and I could put the King to shame. The steps creaked as I slowly worked my way upstairs. Fleur-de-liaise sprouted across cracked and curling wallpaper. I laughed to myself; they were actually fuzzy--though I couldn't tell if it was from design or from age, and they reminded me of the brown stuff growing on some of the oldest residents at Mom's nursing home.

I rapped on the door, hoping to get this over with. As it opened, I saw the woman who called me, Miriam, and her sky-blue

eyes fixed on mine. She smiled, and her teeth, stained with tobacco and lipstick, matched her taupe pantsuit. She showed me into her small office, shook my hand, and invited me to sit down. I was a little worried that I might break her wicker guest chair, that I might not fit in it, or that when I stood to leave, it would be stuck to my butt. Taking too long to ponder my predicament, Miriam motioned to a beaten couch in the waiting area, and I hunkered down there instead.

"So, Benjamin--Or do you like to be called something else?--welcome to A Temp Solutions. Can you tell me a little about yourself?" She smiled as she asked this, and she brushed at the wilting poofs of her whitening hair.

"Benny's fine. Uh, I hunted for jobs before graduation, but with no luck. Now it's nearly July, and I'm still not having any luck." The couch sagged as I quietly sighed.

"That's a typical story right now, given the economy," Miriam replied, "but you didn't say much about you. What are some of your interests?"

"I don't see why that's relevant. I'm just looking for some temporary work."

"That's what I mean. Many companies are looking temp to perm right now. They don't have ways to easily add staff, so

this presents a loophole. They're also hiring independent contractors. So, we need to know the best place for you in case opportunity knocks!" she said, rapping on her desk. Prior to being startled, my eyes wandered across the windowless office as she spoke. The walls were mostly bare save one or two empty bulletin boards. A pack of Virginia Slims sat half open at the corner of her desk, and I wondered how many were in her top drawer. "Benjamin. Are you really interested in finding work with us today?" Miriam asked as I came to; her eyes spied mine and caught my attention. Their blue hue reminded me of Jack's.

"I am. Sorry. I'm just a little distracted." I mumbled, holding her gaze but looking away again.

"Well why don't we start with the tests. Would you please sit at the computer terminal over there?" I walked across the floor and crouched into the small work area. I deactivated the screensaver by moving the mouse, rendering what must have been the last flying toasters extinct. I saw a field of clouds tiled across the screen. I waited as the hard drive clicked and ground like a bad hip after I clicked the icon for the testing program. Looking over my shoulder when I heard her hoarse coughing, she caught my glance--again, wide, cool pools. I looked away. I disabled a few extraneous tray items that slowed the machine down. I took the test: I typed when it asked me to

type; I filled out forms when it asked me to fill out forms; I performed some basic bookkeeping tasks; I edited a writing sample; I took the personality test. But a few yes/no questions threw me:

"#6 You are more interested in a general idea than in the details of its realization.

#11 You often think about humankind and its destiny.

#23 You often contemplate about the complexity of life.

#24 After prolonged socializing you feel you need to get away and be alone.

#37 Often you prefer to read a book than go to a party.

#38 You enjoy being at the center of events in which other people are directly involved.

#44 It's essential for you to try things with your own hands.

#45 You think that almost everything can be analyzed.

#51 The process of searching for a solution is more important to you than the solution itself.

#55 A thirst for adventure is close to your heart.

#60 You often spend time thinking of how things could be improved."

Many of these items reminded me of how Jack thought, about how he acted. The answers printed to Miriam's desk, and she met me back on the couch.

"Well, Benjamin," she cleared her throat to continue. "Your test produced some interesting results." She looked up to me. Our eyes met and she smiled. "Your clerical skills are sound, and your computer skills are excellent. You write well, and, judging by your résumé, any employer would be glad to have you." The AC switched off and the dark room fluoresced. "And thank you for taking the optional Jung Typology Test. I know you probably took one in high school [I hadn't], but it's good to refresh. It reveals personality traits not found but in two to three percent of the population." She paused. "You're not much of a talker, but you have a bright, bright future."

"Thanks, Mrs. Williams." I said, with a huff. I didn't know that test was optional.

"Miriam's fine. And, hey, cheer up, Benny," she said, looking directly into my eyes. "I'm rarely wrong about these things."

"Thanks, Miriam."

"You're welcome. If you don't hear from me by the end of the day tomorrow, give me a call. I shouldn't have too much trouble finding work for you," she said.

"Thanks, Miriam," I said, again, rising and shaking her hand. It felt warmer than before. Avoiding her gaze, I turned to leave.

"Oh," she said, stopping me. "If they give you a hard time about parking, let them know you were with me. After all," she said winking, "the woman working the meters was hired from this office."

Thanking her yet again and closing the door, I began to crunch back down the stairs; I could hear Miriam cough wetly and answer the phone. I was glad to impress her; I could finally have some work so Mom and Glen would leave me be. But I answered all the questions as Jack would have.

#

Finishing my SuperSized shake and fries as I pulled into the driveway, I noticed no one was home. This was strange given the time of day; normally Glen and Mom met at home for lunch before going back to work for the afternoon. I always thought this old fashioned, but I usually ate with them when I came home

from school: I wasn't a latchkey kid, but they both worked late, so I most always ate dinner alone.

I burped thick liquid, tossed the trash into my backseat, and got out of the car. Heading up to my room, the smell of moldering laundry greeted me. The shades were still down, but the windows were partly open, letting in the heavy air. I breathed the room deeply, stripped down to my boxers, and dropped into my old office chair, cold duct tape sticking across my back. Computer parts littered my desk: power supplies, loose case screws, a ball of tangled IDE ribbons, and a fried hard drive--along with the stacks of Jack's journals. Just a few days before, his parents let me have them. They just gave them to me before driving away from the funeral home in their separate cars. They said they never read them and they never would.

Most of the time Jack wrote in cheap composition notebooks from the dollar store. I lifted the top one; it was older, and the hard, green-and-white-spangled cover opened easily. I re-read the first few entries by the hot light streaming from behind the shades--solar eclipses flaring and waning as a slight breeze began.

"10.17.00 The connection between physical health and happiness is indisputable. This sounds scientific, but it's not. Mens sana in corpore sano, they always say--I ran five miles today after class before spending my time with iron. It felt good, real good. My mind clear and dry like miles of desert. My legs loose and flowing like wind. My arms burned like bricks in an earthen kiln. It's all so natural, so real--like wrestling and track. All of the punishment and all of those workouts must have lead me somewhere. Now that I don't compete, I have time to think when I train. My mind wanders, open and free. I feel I'm onto something, so these days it's great to have more time to think.

But why can't I stop drinking? At the beginning of a party, it's like I get this little itch in my throat. I'll see people sipping beers and talking, just chill and it's still light out and I'm thinking 'where's the whiskey?' and I'll settle for Bud 'cause it's handy when I'm thirsty. And I push people. Let's play, I say! Then I'm the Asshole. Then we win Beirut. Then someone breaks out Maker's Mark. Then I never remember much . . ."

Goddamn, Jack. I leafed through the stale pages, unable to read further. He knew he was in trouble, but he never asked for help, and I wonder if Dad thought like that too. This was the closest thing to an admission he ever mentioned, so he must have been supremely hung-over when writing it. But he was onto something, though he had no idea of knowing what it was at the time. Actually, neither did I. But all of that East-meets-West-meets-the-MTV-generation stuff stewing in his wacky head meant something important, and now no one will know exactly what it all meant.

I looked up at my favorite Guinness poster, the fucking drunken puffin smiling down on me. I tore it down, laced my New Balance, and went outside.

#

I had to stop running just as I met the main road: I started way, way too fast. Kneeling over a storm grate, cars slowed to watch as I lost my lunch: pus-colored lumps gurgled in pools of hot malt, sizzling on asphalt before slipping beneath the street. I recovered quickly, wiped my mouth on my

arm, and looked down the road. The hill rolled upward and shimmered heat as it grew distant. I got up and started running again.

Thoughts pulsed through my mind, synchronized with the cadence of my heavy footfalls, and the blood rushed and pounded behind my ears. Sweat swept down my brow and stung my eyes. By the time I started the first hill, I felt like I was underwater. Waves of wet flesh on my stomach moved loosely under my shirt. My legs kept churning, but they moved more and more slowly. The road inclined, and I had no idea of how to run it. Given that my quads and calves cried as pain drove like spikes into muscle, I wanted to stop. Given the heat and humidity, I wished I had gills. Given what was on my mind, I prayed this exercise would kill me too.

Still, I crested the hill and plodded forward. I remembered watching Jack run effortless laps around campus. He circled again and again as Sadie and I watched Nickelodeon; we sometimes jeered him from the second-floor window, and we often teased him when he came back. Training for the Boston Marathon? Will you chase down the ice cream man for us? Is some Hitler hounding your half-Jewish ass? I won't forget the look she gave him when he finished, though, as he stepped through the front door of our townhouse, wearing only trim running shorts,

weathered sneakers and a sheen of sweat over his squared chest and his tight, flat stomach. I wished a girl would look at me like that.

After he got cleaned up (usually with Sadie) we'd make dinner, and we ate when Toad came back from work. He was our real roommate, Sadie our adopted one. (Or was it really me?) Toad just wanted to plow snow and cut lawns, but his mom insisted he get a degree before taking over his father's company. So, he studied business. I don't think it was such a bad idea, but he bitched about it constantly, at least until senior year when we all lived together, and Jack convinced him otherwise.

I remember the dinner we had when he finally started to convince me a little bit too. Sadie cooked that night, and several other kids were there as well; this always happened when she was in the kitchen. She was one of the only people on campus whose culinary skills surpassed nuking Easy Mac, and everyone craved a real meal once in awhile. But just as many came to listen to Jack.

That night, guests arrived early. They brought desserts and drinks, and Jack sipped boxed wine and greeted each as they came inside from the October evening. He spoke loudly, growing increasingly excited as people crowded our living room/dining

room/wet bar/library/coat closet/recycling center. (We made the most we could out of each dorm we shared over the four years together.) Gesturing with his chipped glass, practicing his class, he shuffled around the place like Hef. A smile graced the smooth angles of his face. He complimented his "sexy chef," and, brushing long raven locks behind her shoulders, said, "You're the best, Babe."

Sadie glanced over from the kitchen, her dark eyes sparkling. "Thanks, Dreamy," she said, sharing their pet names. I think these evenings somehow reminded her of home.

Usually Miles played our small room, his sound brassing up a bit as it ricocheted white concrete walls. Wes Montgomery might mellow us for a few tunes. Mostly, Coltrane crooned Naima in the background, his jazz growing wild and avant as Jack's favorite playlist coursed the evening. Tonight Barry White was on as a joke but maybe to induce a mood.

I helped Sadie set plates and carry courses while Jack chatted. It was the least I could do. She was a sloppy cook, and, by now, she could have used a change of clothes: marinara dotted her gray turtleneck, and she had spilled something on her jeans. She often exited art studios looking a similar mess.

"Benny, can you take this platter of chicken parm to our guests?" she asked, pointing to the lunch tray we smuggled from the cafeteria last year.

"Surely, madam." I replied, bending beside her to reach the counter. She smelled of garlic and clove cigarettes. I breathed deeply and lifted the tray. "How should I handle customer complaints tonight?"

"Tell them to get bent," Sadie said, smiling.

"Certainly," I said saluting and walked away.

Jack had plugged in the Christmas lights, which cast a ruddy glow over our most prized college kitsch: a collection of light-up beer steins, posters of SRV and Ozzy, prints of *Starry Night* and *Water Lilies*, a rare yellow road cone, and of course our "inflatable companion," Deloris. Fresh cut flowers spilled from her o-shaped mouth to mark the occasion, and she looked mildly surprised as always. For some reason, she always reminded me of Mr. Bill, perpetually stuck with an "Oh, no!" expression on her plastic face.

The music played and we gathered around the table. I set the food down on the center table leaf, which was the only truly sturdy part. Everyone was here: Sadie's friend Jen, Jen's friend Jen and her boyfriend Mike. Mike's roommate Mikey and his girl Jill. (Why did naming trends hit us so hard in the

80's? Were our expectant parents still flashing back to their college years, their creativity completely burned out from LSD-induced illusions? Or was our little White Catholic school just way to homogenized?) Sarah and Rick and Pete and Kiera were there, and of course Toad and I. Jack sat down at the head of the table and began his customary benediction:

"Dear G dash D, please help me to make this blessing as Catholic as possible, as it is the common denomination on this campus, and I believe my best friends skipped Mass to share this meal with me. Forgive them, for they know not what they do. And to make this easier on all of us, I will just call you Slim."

One of the Jens winced, a gold crucifix around her neck. "Ok, ok. Does 'Lord' work for you, Jen?" She nodded yes.

"Ok. So, Sli--I mean Lord--we are gathered here this evening to share in your bounty of Quality. We have fabulous food," he said, looking across the table and at Sadie, who blushed, "'fine wine,' and good company. Thank you. Now, please let us grow closer to you through this experience, as we--both you and us mortals--can only find happiness in Union."

"Amen," responded all of the guests--even Toad.

"PS. Please don't let Benny eat everything before we get a chance," Jack added.

"Amen," responded all of the guests with even greater conviction--even me.

We dined, and, after dinner, we enjoyed an unexpectedly decent port pilfered from the cellar of Mikey D.'s grandpa. Everyone except for me, anyhow. His Jen hadn't eaten much, so I was lagging a little behind the rest, as I completed her serving, and some of Sadie's, too. The other Mike, Mike Mann, who belonged to Jill, could really chow, but he stopped eating long before. Jack raised his plastic Red Sox cup and proposed a second, belated toast.

"To all of us and to all the unenlightened," Jack said, rising from his seat. "Ladies and Gentlemen, I'm inclined to speak a bit further tonight, if there are no objections," Crucifix Jen, now full and content, slouched into her camping chair and failed to protest. She would have mounted the only opposition, however faint. I stifled a belch as Jack began:

"Thoreau said 'I never met a man truly awake,' but I find this statement presumptuous and misplaced: Many of us, like Dean's List Duncan over there," he said, pointing at Jill, "can learn in our sleep." Everyone laughed.

"Hey," she protested, "I work, um, reasonably hard for my grades."

"Sure you do," said Jen the Unbeliever, "if you consider fucking around with Professor Smith hard work."

"C'mon," said Jill, "that was Sophomore year, and it didn't help my grade much anyway--couldn't even bump up to a B+." Mann gritted his teeth a bit; old jokes die hard, but this bit always got on his nerves. Everyone else laughed. "And what about that ice queen, Lafarge?" Jill retorted.

"She actually did boost my grade a bit," Jen the Unbeliever said with a sly smile, "I guess I'm just a better lay than you!"

"Are we done yet?" asked Mann, his barrel chest expanding. He'd lost some of his imposing nature since successive concussions forced him to drop football, and he got restless when the girls kept talking, talking, talking.

"Get a sense of humor, Big Mann," Jen the Unbeliever said, crossing her arms and imitating his frustration, "if you play your cards right, you and your girl could take me on and find out for yourselves."

"Like they'd go for a girl like you," Sadie said.

"Why don't you pull those piercings and shave once in awhile while you're at it?" Pete said. He was built like Jack, but he dressed a different part: bright polo shirts with the croc on them, busted flip-flops, and carefully-frayed Mavi's. They were wrestling co-captains back in high school. His

girlfriend, Kiera, smiled like someone slung a disco ball from the ceiling. That's about all she ever did.

"Blow me, Hollywood," Jen the Unbeliever said, "I think I might head over to the lab later and mix you a nice after-dinner drink. We'll call it the Cyanide Swinger!"

"Aptly named, considering the mixologist" Jack said, finishing his drink. She shot him a look, and he added "merely an observation . . ."

"Whatever. Besides, Toad sees way more action than I do." Jen the Unbeliever said, looking over to our stocky friend, waiting for someone to spike the ball she set.

"Yeah, from his right hand," Pete said and they high-fived.

"No, that's my mouse hand," croaked Toad. His fat face flattened characteristically as attention was aimed his way.

"Whacking to John Deer pics, no doubt," Hollywood Pete said. Delighted, Kiera lit the room again. I don't think she got the joke.

"I've been liking Kubota, actually" replied the other.

"Speaking of love and devotion," Mikey D. said, "I believe Brother Jack was about to speak." Crucifix Jen rolled her eyes to remind her boyfriend she still resented being dragged along to these things.

"True that. But I apologize for getting us off track," said Jack. "Anyhow, Mikey D., the Armenian Theologian himself, asked me to talk tonight."

"Please do so," not asking Jack to lay off the grandeur. "Please tell us a little about love. Um, 'Don't Make me Wait too Long.'" Bassy beats and vocals thumped in the background and we laughed, knowing what would follow.

"Well, 'Satin Soul,' 'I'm Qualified to Satisfy You,' so, as they say, we'll 'Let the Music Play,'" Jack quipped back. "Mikey and I were talking the other day, primarily about making a packie run, and naturally that spawned discussion about love, so away we went."

"And you mentioned art too," said Mikey D.

"Well, sort of. I'll get to that in a minute. We were discussing love, and how it's the foundation of Union." This last word, familiar with our group, caused ears to perk.

"Hence the Barry White?" asked Sadie.

"Yeah. Well, we didn't want to wait to postpone this discussion until Valentine's Day, so we needed to get in the right frame of mind. Now, like I was saying--"

"Wait a sec, Loverboy," interrupted Jen the Unbeliever, "you sex Sadie up to Barry White? How hokey is that?"

"It's better than the Lillith Fair music you use to lure freshmen into your lair," Sadie said in defense. Jack never really argued with anyone--in jest or in argument--unless they were engaged in a philosophical debate. Then the gloves would come off.

"It's all about demographics, I guess. I like cute girls, and you like guys who can grow 'fros."

Sadie laughed it off and motioned Jack to continue:

"I don't necessarily mean romantic love, though it's one of the easiest to start with," he explained. "See, Union can be achieved by loving anything greatly."

"Like exploring cells under a microscope?" Jen the Unbeliever asked, suddenly serious.

"Yes," replied Mikey D. "or by studying the Word." Crucifix Jen rolled her eyes.

"Or by finally learning to play Pathétique?" asked Rick, who, quiet until this point, decrescendo-ed his finger patterns along the tabletop. He played concerts in the chapel and throughout the city, and his girlfriend, Sarah, often accompanied his playing with some beautiful improvised vocals. They made a strange pair in that way.

"Absolutely, " Jack said. "The arts are a perfect way to actualize the self, to communicate your life with others, to

share in sacred experience." Sadie smiled at Jack, possibly contemplating him as a subject for her next portrait. Great, I thought, reminded yet again that I didn't have a creative bone in my body. Sadie could paint and cook, Jill liked to write, Rick and Sarah did their Schubert-meets-Sonny-and-Cher thing; hell, even Toad could strum a few bars from "Tears in Heaven".

"What about sports?" asked Hollywood. "What about my accounting classes; you said you hate that shit!" I guess I wasn't the only one with reservations.

"I do, but not the way you and Toad think. Mere pursuit of profit and mindless droning do not constitute a good life--they divorce you from yourself, they prohibit Union, but that's what modern economics favor in terms of mission statements and working conditions. C'mon, this isn't a preschool; you've read Marx." Jack said, his blue eyes brightening, adding, "No one says you have to buy into that bullshit. You can experience the divine through any activity. Just be good and excel. Don't work for pride or profit. You should strive for the divine in all your endeavors, actually. The way I see it, this is the true road of ethics." His blue eyes blazed now, and I looked away. I wondered if getting really good at Halo could crack the gates of heaven. That's about all I had gleaned from senior year so far.

"Or at least it's an ideal road," followed Mikey D. Who sank back from the edge of his seat and slid his arm around Crucifix Jen. She was finally smiling.

"Yeah, you know, we primarily discuss ideals. We're the campus weirdos in here," added Jack. "I'm not so sure anyone else cares about this stuff, but I think pursuing Union is the only way to be happy in this life and the only way to live well." We were all silent for a few moments, including Barry. He glanced at Kiera and me and then to the others. "Thank you for coming tonight. You know I live for these conversations. We won't have these opportunities much longer."

"Are we done being serious for right now?" asked Hollywood Pete. "Because I'd like to burn one for dessert!" Jen the Unbeliever, Rick, and Sarah all nodded enthusiastic approval.

"Ok," Jen the Unbeliever said, "but don't let Benny. Last time I thought he was so munchie he might take my arm off. When he smokes, he turns into a big, cannibalistic leprechaun or something."

"Actually I worked up my appetite keeping Toad away from Delores," I said through the laughter and the budding plumes of smoke.

As I neared the one-mile mark, I turned around breathless. I shook my head hard and began walking home. I decided to only run downhill tomorrow.

#

I sat with Mom and Glenn for a late dinner, but I wasn't hungry. I watched them eat: Mom had fried three steaks; Glen, upon hearing I wasn't eating, imitated a haughty face, bibbed his napkin, and wolfed down mine as well, washing it down with two tall glasses of milk. Mom finished hers and worked through broccoli smothered in orange cheese. The brown grease from the steak circled the green pile like polluted water around a volcanic jungle island.

We didn't really talk much, but they were glad about my visit with the temp agency. Both expressed regret again that neither could hire me for a paying position. I was just glad to avoid talking about Jack. Neither mentioned Sadie since the morning, and we sat and watched some new reality show I never planned on watching. The basic premise was to out-sing the other contestants while withstanding scorn and praise (but mostly scorn) from three has-been judges plucked from the music

business. Jack would not have approved. I never though it would have caught on.

When it grew dark, I grabbed a beer and hobbled upstairs. My PC's were finishing their virus scans, so I sat on the floor and tried to stretch. Each reach to my toes sent scorching pain up my legs, and each time I worked on stretching my groin, my knees bent involuntarily and rocked me back: I must have looked like a dog cleaning his ass on the carpet.

After a few minutes of this, I heard a door creak open--the default "buddy enter" sound issued from my computer speakers. I went to check on it; no one was on except Sadie. Before I could block her, she caught me:

Tangier381: hey. you been busy?

BigRed69: nope

Tangier381: haven't heard from you since the hospital.

not even @ the funeral . . .

BigRed69: not much to say 2 u

Tangier381: cmon. I need you

BigRed69: no you dont. u know how I feel

Tangier381: well you pretty much spelled it out in front of everyone at the hospital

BigRed69: so why do you keep trying? let go.  
disappear

I'm not sure why, but I waited a few moments for her to respond. I should have signed off. I should have blocked her. I looked over at Jack's journals.

Tangier381: did Jack's parents give you anything of his?

BigRed69: what do u mean

Tangier381: you know. something to keep for yourself. to remember him by . . .

BigRed69: no. why

Tangier381: just thought id ask

BigRed69: what else do u want

Tangier381: just to chat

BigRed69: i still hate you

Tangier381: nbd. didnt think youd listen to my side anyway

BigRed69: nope. cya

Tangier381: ttyl

BigRed69: hope not

With that, I logged out. No one else would IM me anyway. No one else seemed to even be online anymore and no one called. No one wanted to stick around. It was just Sadie and me.

My head hurt, so I checked the price on a new 60GB HDD; I checked the price for new LCD monitors; I checked the price for used LCD monitors, and thousand-dollar price tags still scrolled by.

Again, Jack's journals caught my eye as webpages loaded slowly over old copper phone lines. I spotted a newer black volume not seen before.

I looked for BB King tickets; I looked for Ben Folds tickets; I looked for what was left of the free online music, searching for Metallica bootlegs out of spite.

Sighing, remembering a Jack joke about the RIAA or the FCC, I leaned away from the bright glass screen, ran one last spyware scan, and picked the black notebook. I hadn't opened this one yet, and I didn't recall Jack ever writing in it. I leafed through the mostly blank pages:

After our last three years together, I still can't adequately express my love for you. You've taught me more than you'll ever know and more than I'll ever understand. I feel closer to you than anyone else--we

find what's divine every day together. We are so often one, and we move closer to Union.

But our easy time will soon transpire. You know this. Unanswerable questions need be answered: there is so much more in store. Or is there? Do we near an end?

Why must we continually question? What more can we know of love? We need to know.

Be with me. Let's find out together. Don't go to school out West. Let's stay here where we belong. I have never been happier in my life, so I know this is right. I love you.

And the entry read a lot like the crumpled letter they found in Jack's crumpled car the night he died. He had proposed to Sadie with that letter. She read it. She said no. She killed him.

#

It would have been nice if Benny and I could have brought Jack back, but we couldn't no matter how hard we tried. It's okay now. I loved him so much, but time conspired against us. They say youth is wasted on the young, but what would have Jack been like if he were old? What would he have accomplished? What would we have been like together? He was a shooting star, a dense fog, but metaphors won't do. He was a seeker, looking for Union, but he couldn't see the stones he stumbled over in the dark. Neither did I, at the time, though I tried to be a light.

There's a Polaroid of the three of us from graduation that I think my grandma took. Jack stood in between us, and he's wearing my big pink shades. The sun is just over his head, just clipped away by the white plastic border. The shot is framed low, and I'm guessing Grandma was struggling to keep her thumb out of the picture. The sky is a little too pale and the football field a little under verdant; the colors aren't at all accurate. My first impulse was to repaint the scene--to steal it back from the 70s. I thought I could make a nicer portrait if I finished the sun, if I shrunk it a bit and lowered it so it would naturally color everything. But I didn't. Benny still thinks it looks like Jack had a halo.

After loving him and after years of reading his journals, I still think he might deserve one.

#

The call came the next day after I tried running again. Miriam had an assignment for me: she asked if I could report to the Dennis Company mailroom on Thursday, and I said I could. My duties would include: ensuring the delivery of inter- and extra- office mail, helping to account for postal costs, and general clerical duties. Awesome. If everything fell into place, and Miriam assured me it would, I could apply for a full-time position within a month. Awesome. Her auspicious visions were becoming more concrete and she, at least, sounded relieved. After a particularly phlegmy coughing fit, she reminded me that I, indeed, had a bright future.

I'm not sure how she would characterize sorting, folding, stuffing, and stamping invoices, but that's all I did for the first week, at least. The big, automated mailing machine was down, and it would be some time before the repair people could be on site, my supervisor, Dave told me. He must have read by the look on my face that I hadn't been informed of this.

"I always bring someone in to handle the overload," he said, motioning to a small table surrounded by mounds of mailers. "I'm really glad you can be here."

"Thanks." I muttered to the small man who wrung his hands and practically tap-danced in front of me. His shaggy brown mop and wire-rimmed glasses, held together by some tape, showed me that even the top-tier jobs here didn't pay as well as promised: Dave apparently couldn't even afford to front a Beatles tribute act.

"So, listen, Billy?" he asked, his eyes darting from the other employees, to a mug on his desk with a picture of Jimmy Paige on it, and back to me.

"No, it's Benny." I replied as a thin, bald man with a long, brown ponytail pushed a mail cart past us, giving me the once over.

"Sorry, Benny. Listen. I can see this may not have been what you expected, and I'll throw you some new tasks soon, but this 'state-of-the-art' Pitney Bowes nearly took Bob's arm off last week and it hasn't worked the same since."

The man with the ponytail stopped his cart, turned about-face and glared at Dave. "It ate my sweater," he groaned, showing long, horse teeth.

"I got you a new one!" Dave called back.

"It's itchy," Bob said. He maneuvered his cart and walked away, bumping into a folding table. A smaller, pudgy guy chuckled under his breath. He sorted mail toward the back of the room.

Dave turned back to me. "You can never win, right? Oh well. Listen. If you can fold a few hundred of these invoices before 3:00, I'll let you out a little early with pay. Is that fair?" His desk phone began to ring, and he barely waited for my answer.

"That's cool," I said. "Thanks."

As I began sorting and folding and stuffing and sealing I inevitably started thinking as well. I thought of one of Jack's journal entries to pass the time:

"12.25.00 Meditation is the foundation of Union.

Without the ability to transcend conscious thought, we are trapped like rats within our tireless minds. I Just got back from midnight mass, and it was such an intense experience. I had no idea what to do. There was all this sitting and standing and singing. Sure, I've been to the obligatory services offered on campus, but this time I just sat in the back and took it all in.

And it didn't take much to *feel* right. It's like all of that purposeful motion and those earnest words and the organist and the dimmed lights and the cold seeping in a little through the gaps beneath the old, stained-glass windows . . . blended together to make the religious experience. Or was it there before the mass? I'm a little too tired to pursue a metaphysical chicken-and-egg line of reasoning right now--gotta resist that urge. That's Contemplative, which is another Rite of Union altogether. Still, I started trancing out on this 'Catholic Kensho' moment, and I believe I missed the Birth of Christ as a result. When I came to, I felt refreshed, awake, and so close to the God who dwelt there. I love ceremony, but why do people get caught up in the means when the end is all that matters?

I wonder if Benny and his folks saw me? I think I'll make them a Christmas present. Where can I buy fishing line at this time of year?"

And so, thinking of this and trying to clear my mind, I saw, but didn't see, the pudgy guy sneaking up on me. He took a circuitous route, weaving between a girl landed at a desk and another quiet guy with messy brown hair who just shook his head. All of this occurred in my peripheral vision; I looked up and the fleshy, bright-eyed face was right in front of me.

"Hi ya!" he said. "Watcha doin for Dave?"

"What's it look like I'm doing?" I said, glancing to the towering cliffs of paper and envelopes to my right. To my left, a small, neatly-stacked pile toppled onto the floor as the guy slapped his hands down on the table between us.

"I wanna flip this thing over, Man! I can't believe another newbie gets stuck with the shit job!" I could hear Dave groan, and he leaves the room. The girl peered deeper into her computer screen, suddenly very interested in her work.

"Sorry. I'm just here to temp for a little while."

"A big guy, potato-fed like you? Shouldn't you be out on a farm somewhere or something? Hey, I could help you!" The short guy slouched onto the table and began leafing through the invoices. "How do you fold these things, anyway?" he asked, lifting papers quizzically, and I answered because I think it the best option at the time: I wanted to minimize the destruction.

"Um . . . you make a crease just under the first block of text." I say. The guy leaned forward a bit, his graying nest of hair like a dark, scruffy aura. I could tell he was Jack Black before Jack Black was Jack Black.

"Shit. A college boy, eh? I never heard anyone say 'text' unless they went to college," he said smiling to reveal crooked, stained teeth. His burnt coffee and stale tobacco breath blew a few more envelopes from the now rickety table. "Is this your first job?"

"No. But its the first one that counts. I have to start paying off those loans soon," I said hoping he'd go away.

"Don't matter, Man. I have some advice for you: get the fuck out of here!" he said with an air of triumph, though it seemed he hadn't thought to follow his own advice. Dave then reentered the room, apparently quelling an oncoming tirade: The guy's blue eyes were wild.

"Hey, Belushi. Hey, Benny. Why don't you guys load the mail truck. You both look like you could use some fresh air," Dave said, slightly smiling. The girl peered from the corner of her monitor, her blond ponytail bobbing as she giggled. I suddenly realized I'd been set up.

"Benny," Dave said, "meet Ollie."

Ollie barked and offered me his paw, so I went with him to the loading dock. There we encountered sacks of sorted mail, piles of packages, and the opened steel bay. Hot air blew through to the front rooms, held back by a measly wobbling fan.

"Shit," said Ollie, "that asshole Steve musta forgot to close this when he brought the truck in this morning."

"Oh." I said.

"Whattya mean, oh?" asked Ollie, impersonating John Wayne, "goddam injuns coulda walked right in here to take the mail from the wagons!" He hitched up his ragged, baggy shorts by his imaginary belt buckle.

"Oh." I said.

"Not a man of many words, eh?" Ollie asked as he turned to face the impending labor, "that's fine, that's fine. I'll just bring the truck around and we'll get loaded." He frowned and began walking away.

"Make mine a Miller Lite," I said, knowing this would be a long internment if I didn't at least try to play along.

"Ah, that's better!" laughed Ollie as he ran and jumped off the ledge and into the rich afternoon light. He called from below, "'Great taste less filling!'" and ran over to the dirty mail truck--a blur of a blue summer uniform.

We worked for an hour, and I think I learned the life stories of everyone in the mailroom. The World According to Ollie: Bob had a ponytail because he was an exiled prince from the Orient and had a degree in philosophy. He was en route to his PhD until his wife left him because he was too exciting. Ollie and Steve both had performing arts degrees from the local state college. Ollie's recovery from a "drug problem" forced him to leave his mother's house, to leave legitimate theater, and to take up residence with Steve who wasn't retarded, just quiet, and who performed as a clown on the weekends. He seemed to like the job, and he was never home when a fella needed to get laid. Sweet. Christie had been stuck at clerk here for a few years. She was twenty-six and she would be the next Dave. It was a fucking travesty, but for some reason she didn't seem to mind it. She lived with her boyfriend who was a good roofer and a better drinker. Maybe she'd come to her senses and leave him for Ollie. Dave was divorced and was going through a midlife crisis since he turned his wife into a raving dyke. He wanted to quit the mailroom to become a full time musician. (He thinks he's Clapton. Yeah right). Maybe he could DJ bar mitzvahs or something. Joey was part of the National Guard and would probably leave for Afganistan soon. A shame because he was such a nice kid who didn't need to get his dick shot off

fighting in the damned sand. Plus he was really strong and wouldn't tell on Ollie when he needed an extra smoke break.

When we finished loading the truck, Ollie turned to me, finger extended. He smiled.

"Engage," he said, pressing the grimy green button to close the battered bay door. He screwed up his face and stared at me as it clattered and dropped. He must have noticed my own quizzical expression. "Ew. Did you think I was going to tell you to bend over? I'm not your fucking doctor. And besides, we didn't get that intimate, did we?" he added with a more quizzical look.

"No. We didn't." I said.

"Right-o!" Pete said, saluting, "No butt-stuff with the new guy." He winked. "And you don't know how many times I've been reminded of that," he added, heading to the outside service door. "Oh, wait," he said, stopping suddenly and nearly knocking me over as I followed him, "What's your deal, Kid?"

"I don't have one."

He must have seen me grimace. "Yes you do. Don't think I dish all the good dirt for free!" he said, wagging a finger and an awful Latina accent. "Fork some info over, Holmes, or I'll turn you in to Homeland Security. They'll think you're Al Queda for sure, you pasty son-of-a-bitch!"

"There's not much to tell," I said honestly.

"Yeah right! People's stories are the most important thing in life. Where you from?" he asked, serious now, drawing closer. His eyes crossed slightly.

"Here."

"What'd you major in?"

"Education."

"Are you a fag?"

"No."

"Me neither."

"Okay . . ."

"Do you like G.W.?"

"Not at all."

"Me neither."

"What . . . is the air-speed velocity of an unladen swallow?"

"African or European?"

"Huh? Damn, you got me. Glad to have you aboard, Kid."

#

Having passed all the tests, over the next few days I developed a routine: drag myself out of bed, shovel in stale

Cheerios and swallow warm OJ, prolong my drive to work as long as possible, drag myself through the front office into the mailroom, avoid Ollie, fold and stuff invoices into envelopes, stare at Christie, contemplate eating a bread and lettuce sub like Fat Jared used to but settle for a Whopper or two, give in and listen to Ollie rant and make fun of Steve the Clown while we work the mail truck, punch out, prolong my drive home as long as possible, check in, take a shit. (This was my first full-time job after all, and I needed relief.) Then I would lace up and hit the road.

This part of my day never went well. After the first two weeks, I could finish the one-mile suburban loop I'd established without puking. After the second two weeks, I could make it without stopping. What kept me going through the shin splints and the cotton mouth were my thoughts of Jack. Often I read from his journals just before I tried to run. Between these thoughts and those with which I occupied myself at the mailroom, I was engaged in a sort of moving meditation that lasted all day. Jack had a lot to say on the subject, as a matter of fact:

1.10.00 I'm assured, once again, that Meditation is the foundation of Union. I attended a few more services since Christmas, two at Benny's church and

one at my old synagogue. If there were a mosque around here I'd like to visit there, too. I think I need to prove a point if only to myself.

### Religion and Unionism

1. Unionism is compatible with all religions.
2. Religions are disciplines which help people to know Divinity, Quality, the Self, the Tao, Union, The Force . . . whatever.
3. There are good and bad aspects and practices in all religions.
4. Unionism can help decipher between good and bad practices. For example, we must remember that Union is, essentially intimate knowledge of the divine in all of its form and emptiness--what makes us truly happy and fulfilled.
5. Therefore, I need to include a run down of the pros and cons of the major world religions:
  - a) Buddhism helps one to know the self. I especially admire Zen or Mahayana practitioners because of the meditation they practice. Knowing the self is knowing the universe is knowing

Divinity. But Buddhism can encourage isolation and denial of physical reality.

b) Christianity is comprised of strong morality and beautiful sense of selflessness. It is a social religion that focuses on ethics. But Christianity is all too dogmatic, and despite this, or perhaps because of this, it is also too open to fundamentalist interpretation. Also, what's with all the priests these days?

c) Islam promotes discipline, tolerance, and devotion. It is so prayerful--a hallmark of Meditation. But is often too inflexible in its interpretations, and it's too apt to be theocratic. I agree that the state should be mindful of Divinity, but why die to prove it?

d) Judaism promotes Contemplation, Talmudic discussion, and good will. But it often dictates practitioners' social and family lives to such a great degree. Look at my pigheaded parents for an example. Hoy.

e) Hinduism is ancient, huge, and so spiritual. I can't say I understand all of the sects, but the principle that Atman is Brahman serves as

the foundation of Unionism as I see it. I don't agree with the dualistic sects, just as I can't reconcile this type of thinking in Western religions. If we are not God, then what are we? What's the point of participating in the universe at all? Are we merely children or slaves?

f) Taoism helps us to understand this pervasiveness of Divinity, and it is very close to the Metaphysics of Quality as explained by Pirsig. But Taoism may focus too much on the actions of the state and not enough on the individual, and it's so cryptic. How can we make such spirituality more accessible?

Know though that all the great faiths were born to aid in Meditation. So we can come to know the Divine within our selves and all around us. We do this by cultivating our intuition rather than our rationality. Prayer, chant, zazen, pilgrimage, fasting--all religious activity brings us out of our sense of self, away from quotidian realities, and into the light of God. Or does it simply help us remember that we are the light of God by healing all of those perceived

separations? Duality within ourselves leads to sin. Happiness is a measure of how close one is with the divine, and we all have unique needs and relationships. But when we are unhappy, a weakness or deficiency in one of the goods of our lives may be the cause. If we are sinful, we are simply turning away from what is good. But if it's so easy, why am I so self-destructive?

Speaking of rationality, this is all a somewhat well-earned break from studies. School. Study. Academics. Study is Contemplation of ideas, of the Other, of the wide world around us. It's what Aristotle had in mind when he began the Academy. He did get me thinking about the role of happiness in ethics though, and how we are happy when we're functioning well. He was good at dissecting and analyzing and exploring and ordering . . . to achieve some understanding. He was perhaps one of the world's most foremost Contemplators. And schools were built to honor him and his ways, as are our sciences. It's too bad their so often so soulless.

The great divide of Faith and Science. And it's sad they're both just roots supporting the same great tree. . . something like what Lennon said, right? What a great metaphysical body we're part of . . . so how can I pull out God's guts without killing him? How can I get people interested in helping me?

And so it goes. I thought about this entry deeply during this period; I was just beginning to unearth Jack's thinking, but I took my time, savoring each new idea--all these things he would carry on about at two in the morning on a Monday night when it was just the two of us in our bunks unable to sleep after a long weekend, but I never knew the basis or the foundation of his thinking. He was building a system of philosophy, a way of looking at the world that, even though he was so involved in it, he seldom shared beyond the most elementary levels. He doted on his ideas, sitting on them like a hen until they could hatch, though they never had the chance. He was obsessed, as I later found out, and achieving Union became a life-or-death struggle for Jack. At the time, though, I was simply in awe of his early writings. We were so young then to be dealing with ideas; I never thought they mattered.

Each night when I turned on my computer, the spell was broken, however. Sadie was stalking me. As soon as I logged in, she pounced, the creaking door followed by that damned ding sound.

Tangier381: hey

BigRed69: what

Tangier381: have you been reading the journals?

BigRed69: I don't know what ur talking about

Tangier381: yes you do

BigRed69: how do u know

Tangier381: Jack's parents told me

BigRed69: . . .

Tangier381: r u there?

BigRed69: yeah

Tangier381: how many notebooks do you have?

BigRed69: 6

Tangier381: me too. what do yours say?

BigRed69: lots of things. mostly aimless ramblings

Tangier381: no. there's more. You know I know that.

BigRed69: . . .

Tangier381: stop being a jerk and talk to me.

BigRed69: i dont know why I'm talking to you now

Tangier381: cuz u miss him. isn't that the only reason you haven't blocked me?

BigRed69: i just havnt figured out how to do it

Tangier381: bullshit. ur a computer wiz

BigRed69: so I haven't blocked you . . . yet

Tangier381: you won't.

BigRed69: watch me

and that was the last I talked with her for awhile.

#

So it went well into August. The summer stayed hot, lingering long, and I stayed inside the mailroom most of the time folding and sorting and stuffing and thinking. Ollie said I looked like I was in some sort of limbo--that I was starting to nod off like Bob. That is until Dave needed my help one morning.

Christie and Dave were the first ones in because they were always the first ones in. They took work so seriously, though their jobs seemed only slightly more rewarding than mine. I remembered hearing about Maslow's hierarchy of needs during one of my intro business classes and in a later education class I

took, but I still couldn't see how self-actualization could be gained by ensuring proper and timely delivery of mail; I surmised some people like to be busy. I just didn't like to be late to work, so I was in shortly after, a sausage-egg-and-cheese bagel from Dunkin Donuts in one hand, a large Gatorade and bag of chocolate donuts in the other. I walked toward the back of the room, arching around them as they shared a glare at a computer screen. I pulled out the seat I usually occupied for most of the day and accidentally dropped my breakfast on the floor but scooped it up well within the five second rule. As I quickly jammed my sandwich back into my mouth grease squirted on my shirt, but luckily neither of them noticed.

I started in on a stack of company newsletters when I caught a glimpse of that which they were staring. It was the Blue Screen of Death. They sat at Dave's desk, and Christie was tapping tentatively at the keyboard while Dave, practically in tears, slumped down into his squeaky swivel chair chanting, "Oh no, oh no, oh no . . . 'Computer is shutting down for my protection,' what does that mean? What do all the '0x0000008Es' mean? Shit!" Then the screen went black. Then it turned on again.

"Do you know anything about computers, Benny?" Dave asked, the same scene cycling before Christie and him. He looked desperate.

"A little." I said, as I got up, hitched up my pants, and walked over. They both looked up to me, wondering what I had in mind.

"Do you mind sliding over, Christie?" I asked.

"Not at all," she replied. She slid her chair back, almost wedging her slight frame into the bookshelf that formed a boundary between Dave's desk and her own. She obviously wanted to give me as much room to work as possible. I didn't think I smelled that badly.

As the blue screen came back on, I pulled the plug from the back of the CPU; I took a stray screwdriver from the top of the desk; I opened the case and looked inside--years of dust caked the components of the machine; I slipped my hand past a knotty hairball; I plucked out one of the RAM chips; Dave asked me if I knew what the hell I was doing; I plugged the computer back in; I turned it on again; it completed a memory check and booted normally, though a little more slowly, I presumed.

"Holy crap, Man! How'd you know how to do that?" Dave asked.

"Bravo. What did you do anyway?" asked Christie, wheeling closer.

"Well, what you have here is a stop error, or BSOD," I said, sounding like mouth-breathing geek, I presumed, as Christie registered a look that meant she would never fuck me, "and often it's caused by a sudden software or hardware issues. You can blow hours troubleshooting software, so I always check hardware first. I've seen RAM go before, and it's easy to pop out or replace, so I started there--"

"I think I'm having my own stop error, Benny. Forget it! Is there anything else we need to do?" Dave asked.

"You're probably going to want another RAM chip."

"Can you run out and get it for me, Benny?" Dave asked, "I won't know what the hell to look for." He shrugged and looked at Christie, who shrugged as well.

I went to the Circuit City down the road when it opened, and when I got back, everyone was staring at me. Steve, who waddled as if he perpetually wore clown shoes, came to shake my hand, Joey gave me the thumbs up from the back of the room, and Bob was sliding mail into outboxes. Christie was nowhere to be found. It looked like Ollie might blindside me, but I spotted him as he slinked along the outskirts. Dave was just hanging up the phone.

"Hey, Benny, I've got good news," he said, "I called the temp agency to commend you for your work."

"You didn't need to do that," I said, my face feeling hot.

"Yes I did. I got you your ticket out of here," Dave said, smiling. The others looked at each other and then to me expectantly.

"It was nothing, really." I hoisted the plastic bag and rattled the memory held inside. It crinkled the bag as I waved it in front of me.

"Well, it may mean nothing to you, but now I can download all of my tracking information from UPS today, so it means a hell of a lot to me," Dave said.

"Plus, you can finally . . . get the fuck out!" Ollie whispered at the top of his lungs, sliding next to me and standing on his tip toes to reach my ear. The whole room laughed. I felt myself flush.

"Yeah. The agency should be giving you a call tonight about a position with an IT company. I had no idea what to say, but I just recommended you," Dave said with a wink.

"You really shouldn't have," I said, meaning it. I never really worked on anyone's computers but my own. I walked toward Dave's workstation, hoping to busy myself with its repair.

"Maybe so," he said, "but the Maytag Man finally dropped by while you were gone and fixed the folding machine. It's been a miracle day in the technology department!"

"So today would have been my last day anyway," I concluded out loud as I started to squeeze beneath his desk to access the CPU.

"Yeah but--"

"Speaking of last days!" Christie said, flying in from the door. It was raining outside, and she wore a blue raincoat. She also had a cake. I felt like I would yak . . .

"It's time to see Joey off!" she shouted, walking over to my table and placing the cake on it. It was frosted in brown and khaki camo and everyone converged around Joey, who was now the one caught unawares. I had completely forgotten this was his last day before his unit would ship out. They took turns patting him on the back and wishing him luck. I looked over Ollie's shoulder to get a better look at the cake, which had one word written on it in black icing: "HERO".

Ollie turned to me, muttering under his breath, "I guess that's one way to jump ship." I just shrugged.

Dave said, "Give us a speech!"

"Yeah, you got any last words?" Ollie said. A resounding "shut up" was issued by the little party.

"Not really, Joey said. "I'm just glad I can do something for my country."

"How long has he rehearsed that?" Ollie asked, trying to get me to join in.

"What's your problem, Ollie?" Steve asked, as he overheard the last comment. He frowned, and I tried not to imagine him in a shaggy black wig and the classic hobo makeup.

"I don't have one except for you, so shut it, Bozo," Ollie replied, stepping away from the table.

"At least he's thinking of someone else and not his bad childhood," Steve said. He was small and round like Ollie but clean cut and a lot more pleasant. I think this argument carried over from home; I'd never seen Steve get cross at work before. He was always the most patient with Ollie, too.

"Are you implying something? Don't get all righteous on me because you're a part-time Oompaloompa!" Ollie pushed past me toward Steve, who backed away slightly.

"But I'm working for the kids," the other bleated meekly, "I'm sorry about your dad."

"That's nobody's business," Ollie said, getting in his face, "what's the matter with you?"

Steve backed away further and walked out. "You don't need to be so sarcastic all the time though. And I want the rent tomorrow!" Then he slammed the door and was gone.

"Lovers' spat," Ollie explained. He turned to me and continued: "yeah, my dad comes home from the Marines, knocks up a broad who was my mom, and makes us miserable until I walk." He looked back over his shoulder Joey: "So be a hero buddy, not another dick." Ollie then went out after Steve.

I looked to the others, who didn't seem too concerned. Apparently this was a more regular occurrence than I imagined. Christie began cutting the cake and Dave handed the first piece to the man of honor.

#

I prayed that night for the first time since Jack's funeral. I didn't really know what to say or to whom I should address my concerns, but I needed to literally speak my Meditation. Sitting against my headboard, I starting by wishing the Dennis Company mailroom well. I asked that Ollie and Steve might patch things up, and I regretted that no one tried to help settle their dispute. Ollie reminded me of some of the confrontations Jack used to get into: something simmering

beneath his skin--something that started in his mind or heart that seeped into his veins--would bother him for days on end. Then something (like our post-9/11 retaliatory attacks on Afghanistan) would set him off, and he'd make a Jeckll/Hyde transformation. It seemed that Ollie ran a little deeper than I credited him. Of course I prayed for Joey, too.

It may have been strange to pray for my coworkers, but it felt good--especially after reading the entries regarding Meditation. Even as I prayed the way I learned growing up Catholic, I felt close to what Jack continually called "The Divine" or the idea of "Quality" he learned about in *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. (I wish I read that book a lot sooner; I now understand how it sparked Jack's idealism.) I then tried to cross my legs, but they cramped, so I finished meditating with ten deep breaths from the edge of my bed.

I couldn't sleep after, as I felt calm and energized. For awhile I listened to the crickets and the whir of my PC fans. I remembered when I told Dad about my nightly prayers as a child, he just said, "Son, they'll keep your kettle cookin'." He never went to church with Mom and I; he said if he stepped foot in there he'd burn up into nothing. His preferred Sunday morning activity consisted of sleeping off hangovers. I spent most of

the night rolling around in my sweaty sheets, praying to feel something overdue and unnamable.

#

A few years later, I saw Bob at the post office. I was in town for the weekend, and I went to mail something as a favor to Glen. I greeted him, and he didn't recognize me at first. I knew he did graduate work in philosophy, and I never had a chance to talk with him about it at Dennis Co. I wanted to ask him a few things about Spinoza, but he just shook his head. His face had grown wan, and he had become completely bald except for his fraying ponytail. The same green sweater Dave gave him, now ratty, stretched around the horizon of his enlarged belly.

"How's the mailroom?" I asked, deciding to reboot the conversation.

"I'm on disability," he said, "I don't work there anymore."

"Oh. Did you guys ever hear from Joey?" I asked as he circled toward the exit.

"He's dead," Bob said, "he doesn't work there anymore either."

#

When I woke, my armpit was ringing. Had I made myself a somnambulant wake up call? Or did I fall asleep dialing 900 numbers again? Before I could find out, Dick was on the line.

"Hello. May I please speak with Mr. Gallagher?" a gruff, elderly voice asked me.

"This is he. Are you calling from A-Temp?"

"Indeed."

"Where's Miriam?"

"She's not here," Dick said, "she's in the hospital. Her emphysema's acting up again." I doubted he should be sharing this information over the phone with a stranger. "Are you close?"

"I just wanted to thank her for my job," I answered. The sun machine gunned through the tree in our front yard and into my room; I watched as a breeze made possible the orange and black patterns splattering across the back wall.

"I have a new one for you," said Dick. "This one is temp to perm. It's for a computer firm."

I swallowed hard. Sallie Mae would come knocking in a few short weeks, and I heard she broke legs. "Ok. I'll take it."

"I'm glad. I heard you will be good at it."

#

After Dick and I made the arrangements, I drove to the next town over to report to my new job. I parked in front of a gray-sided building set apart from a larger strip mall: a place where small businesses could lease cheap. Sandwiched between a shamrocked watering hole (O'Hara's) and a pretty-pink dance studio (The Golden Slipper) was Wally PC. I peered into the storefront: faded cardboard ads plastered the walls and windows; dated display model machines scrolled star fields across their screens; a banner draped over the service counter that read "Get Ready for Windows ME!". Otherwise, the place was pretty dark.

I knocked on the door. According to the posted hours, the store should be open, as it was after 10:00AM. I was getting the sense this shop didn't do a lot of retail business. No one answered, but I saw a light coming from some back room behind the counter. So, I tried the door, and it opened.

As I stepped inside, I heard a voice:

"The heat's finally breaking. It must be that wind. That Canadian air, Halleluiah, Halleluiah!" I walked closer. "Oh, don't mention it. I always have time to help!" The voice was a little shrill but strangely soothing--like a nurse who comforts a crying child after administering a shot. I could see a

silhouette through the light coming from the open door now. It appeared he was leaning back in a chair; it squeaked and then bolted upright to avoid falling over. "Yes, I can be there this Sunday too. Don't mention it!" he said, hanging up the phone.

He exited the room and switched on the main lights.

"Ah! Who are you?" he started. Seeing the man clearly now, he had a company T-shirt that matched the sign over the entryway, which was green with red lettering; he was about my height, but about one hundred pounds lighter. He smiled and his salt-and-pepper mustache stretched across his lip. "Oh, you must be Benny!" he said, extending a hand that I shook, "I'm Wally."

"Yeah. Are you guys open right now? Sorry I let myself in . . ."

"Yes, we're open. My pastor caught me before I could set up shop. He asked me to cover a few extra Bible classes this week."

"Oh. That's cool."

"Yeah, just something I like to do with my spare time. Jesus asks us to 'suffer the children, and forbid them not, to come unto me,'" Wally said, "plus, it's a good way to spend time with my kids."

I noticed the absence of a wedding ring just as he slipped his hands into his pockets.

"Hey, do you like baseball?"

"I watch it a bit. Mostly the Yankees," I joked.

"Oh. So you don't like my motif?" he asked, pointing at his T-shirt.

"I do, I do!" I said, smiling now at the shout out to the Red Sox and at the little Green Monster sitting by the cash register.

"Whew! I like your sense of humor! The Yankees! That's rich! I'll get you a T-shirt of your own, er, once I print some new ones in your size," he said, looking apprehensive.

"Um, thanks."

"I didn't just insult you, did I? I mean, all I have are larges and XLs . . ."

"No worries. Good sense of humor, remember?" I assured him. I don't think I ever heard an adult apologize to me before. It was odd.

"Ok. Good. You know, A-Temp highly recommended you, and you seem like a swell guy. I know this will work out great! Let me show you around," Wally said, turning toward the showroom. "I need to update this place a little--as you can see some of the PCs on the floor are obsolete; they can barely run 2000--but mostly we work with business customers on networking, software installs, and maintenance anyway. If you know anyone

who wants a PC for home though, I can give them a discount.  
Your parents?"

"They wouldn't know how to turn it on."

"Yeah, you'd be surprised by how many of my customers have the same problem," Wally said as he walked me around to workbenches in the back where they set up and repaired computers and where they held stock. The other room was his office, where he concluded the brief tour and where we sat down--he in a sweat-stained high-back and I in a WWE-issue metal fold out.

Then the back door opened and someone walked in. Wally left to intercept, and I sat looking around his office. It consisted of some fiberboard furniture, a buckled shelf holding battered books on HTML and C++, *Entrepreneurship for Dummies*, and a fresh copy of *Slander*; on his desk sat a dual display, a speakerphone, and a stack of pamphlets entitled, "Eternity: You Decide!" I studied one for a moment: on one side of the page there was a Walmart smiley face touting faith as the only means of salvation, on the other a cartoon devil grinned menacingly as he motioned toward background flames with his oversized pitchfork, leading a despondent shade to his final reward. My experience in the mailroom told me these were invoice stuffers.

As I finished reading, I thought Wally might be dealing with a misguided customer, but as I eavesdropped I could tell otherwise:

"Listen Ken, I understand that you have power problems at your parents' house. But can you please try to be a little more careful? Can you set an alarm on your Treo or something?"

"No. I tried that. It doesn't get loud enough, and I sleep through it. The little guy got me up today though," the voice sounded tired and impatient.

"Oh. How is Buster?"

"He's as cute as ever. He chewed up a pair of my mom's shoes yesterday and she hit him with a rolled up newspaper."

"That's no way to talk about your little brother . . . isn't he in high school?" Wally concluded as they both entered the office. "Ken, meet Benny. He's the new blood I found to help you out around here while I focus on cold calling for some business."

"Cool. Nice to meet you," he said, inserting a thin hand into my palm, "nice grip!" He flashed a quick smile, shook out his hand, and scratched the back of his blonde head.

"Thanks," I said.

"Hey, Wally," Ken said, turning to him and looking up, "I'm sorry I missed that first appointment, but I need to make it

over to Burton's today to remove a few viruses. I figured I'd get going," he said, his fingers brushing the brick of a cell phone holstered on his hip. It sagged his loosely fitting belt.

"Okay, I'll see you for a late lunch?"

"I should be back by then, but if not I'll stop in before the end of the day. You know how tough they can be over there," Ken said, smirking from the side of his mouth.

"It's like trying to get a word in on my ex-wife," Wally said, laughing to himself.

"I'll take your word for it," Ken said and he has left the building.

"Burton's? Isn't that the Subaru dealership with the live llama for a mascot?" I asked, sensing Ken and Wally might fit in at a place like that.

"No, you're thinking of the guy on the Auto Mile," Wally replied, "Burton just likes us because we're cheap."

"Right. Hey, Ken seems like a nice guy."

"Yeah. He's a little tough to keep track of sometimes--I think he's doing some moonlighting--but he's good and he's fast and he's super smart. I guess God just made him a free spirit," Wally said with a shrug. "With the introductions out of the way, I need to get some machines shipped out today; do you mind imaging them while I get on the phone?"

"Not at all," I said. More mindless work meant more time to think.

"Great. Let me know what you want for lunch. It's on me."

"Thanks," I said, going back into the workshop and feeling exponentially better about this particular job as the morning progressed.

#

That night, I unblocked Sadie. I had to tell someone about my new boss, as she would be the only one to appreciate my story. Changing my buddy settings, I sent a message.

BigRed69: hey how's it down in NYC? it seems like ur always online. Not having fun?

Tangier381: seems like YOU haven't been around for awhile. did u suddenly get a life?

BigRed69: no just a new job

Tangier381: THATS why you decided to talk to me again?

BigRed69: sort of . . .

Tangier381: but ur not teaching

BigRed69: u know I cant do that

Tangier381: you could have if you just got over yourself

BigRed69: hows that art career doing

Tangier381: i think someone else is getting blocked  
this time

BigRed69: im sorry. did u get anything into a gallery  
yet

Tangier381: not yet. still waitressing. probably be  
a lifer. so what did u need to tell me

BigRed69: I just got a job fixing computers

Tangier381: so

BigRed69: my boss is an evangelical Red Sox loving  
technologist

Tangier381: LOL Jack would trip on that.

BigRed69: i know!

Tangier381: i really miss him, Benny

BigRed69: me too

Tangier381: i miss you too Benny

BigRed69: . . .

Tangier381: hey. have you been reading the journals?

BigRed69: yeah

Tangier381: do you feel guilty about that?

BigRed69: not really. i want 2 know why he died. i  
think I NEED to know

Tangier381: i thought you already convicted me

BigRed69: . . .

I sat for awhile, unsure of what to say. The room shrunk and grew heavy. I swore a wet thud beat telltale behind the wall. I could have melted into the humidity if I wanted to, changing to vapor. But I stayed, waiting.

Tangier381: i didnt know what he was thinking. i didnt know what he planned to do. i didnt know what would happen. i couldnt read his mind. did you ever think how I felt?

BigRed69: i'm sorry . . . i was wrong. his writings run deep. there was more to it . . . there was something else . . . he was troubled beyond his usual drinking

Tangier381: i think i saw it too. after our last summer break. he was hiding something. something was on his mind, but then the year went by so quickly. then everything happened so fast

BigRed69: you mean . . .

Tangier381: we never talked about getting married, about what we would do after college. especially the way he thought about his parents divorce

BigRed69: i finally realize that now

Tangier381: its okay. hey. my roomie needs the computer, and i don't need more of her bitching. can we talk again? i want to ask you about what you've been reading. do you think we can solve this?

BigRed69: maybe. its like a murder case

Tangier381: yeah but its mysterious. i want to help. we can be Mulder and Scully.

BigRed69: id like that

Tangier381: thanks for talking with me Benny

#

Earlier that night, before I chatted Benny, I nearly packed up my things and came home. I just finished reading this portion of a longer essay written in one of Jack's journals, and it brought me to tears:

#### 7.1.00

How to pursue Union: No one unfortunately, seems to adequately explore the many modes of enlightened activity of which we humans are capable. Most ethicists and theologians try to trump one another

with grandiose answers to the question: "How, then, shall I live?" This is a mistake, and it forces people away from making their own spiritual quests; people are either too scared or too bewildered to set out on their own. So, how are we to know how to act? Humanists, in general, shun the rules and mandates constructed by many religions, and, consequently, do not usually establish guidelines for human behavior. In contrast, religions generally allow little deviation away from doctrine, so followers may miss out on all that life has to offer. The idea of Union furthers the good points of all traditions, and it validates the varieties of human spiritual experience while categorizing them in some of the following ways.

Meditation: The ways by which we know divinity through intuition and introspection. Examples include prayer, sitting and walking meditation, religious services, mysticism.

Contemplation: The ways by which we know divinity through rationality and the intellect. Examples include academic study and inquiry, intellectual

discourse, empirical understanding of physical reality.

Creation: The ways by which we know divinity through self-expression and craftsmanship. Examples include art in all its forms, physical expression of beauty and emotion as in dance, gymnastics, and martial arts, engineering and design, architecture and civic planning.

Relation: The ways by which we know divinity through one another. Examples include quality time spent with family, friends, and colleagues, romance, the art of teaching and instruction, experiencing the arts, volunteerism and philanthropy, social constructs and programs, positive and revelatory communication.

This list is merely a survey of the many ways to become enlightened and to know divinity. To find true happiness, we must pursue all four types of Union. If we lack one mode, we often feel its absence from our lives: we complain that "something's missing."

Intuition helps us to identify the weak points of our relationship with the divine; we learn to pursue happiness by *listening* to ourselves, our loved ones,

and the world around us. Our bodies, mind, and souls provide feedback as we grow in Union.

After nearly six months in the city, the only Creation I'd done was a study of a pigeon on my windowsill and a few blurry photographs of the skyline during a storm. Frustrated. The only Relation I'd enjoyed included customer complaints at Giacomo's: "I asked for veal parmigiana, so why's there fookin' eggplant in it?" and a few flash admonishments from my roommate, Ginnie, as she rushed downtown to her law classes at NYU: "Don't be late on the rent. Don't eat my smoked ghouda. Don't bring your fucked-up boyfriend up here." Right. How many times did I have to remind her that Sanchez spent most of his time dressed as a(n unconvincing) trannie? And I barely saw him anyway except at work where he cloistered in the kitchen washing dishes.

So I was feeling pretty lonesome and homesick. I was certainly feeling something missing from my life--especially Jack. After the conversation between Benny and me, I felt hope. Maybe we would finally find some answers.

The next day at Giocomo's, I remember sitting out back with two of the chefs during my break. I almost accepted busboy Rico's offer for a smoke--the day was going that badly--but I

couldn't start the habit again. Nicotine addiction has it's benefits--like how it masks the reek of garlic on my server's uniform--but after Jack's death I finally quit. I hadn't even had a drink since then either.

Everyone had been so adversarial with me that day. They treated me like dirt. One weekend dad dragged his squirming frog spawn to dinner and got mad at me when he couldn't get them to sit still. Another couple argued openly about who would pay the bill, and they were married! What is it about restaurants that brought out the worst in people?

I remembered that Jack was fond of the phrase, "sin is separation," which I think he lifted from Paul Tillich. I remember hearing it in a class we took together, "The Problem of God." I think the course materials were thinly veiled prosthelizations, but Jack didn't mind: he regarded the lecturer, Father Joe, quite highly--one of the few faculty members with whom he seldom disagreed. Whenever Father waxed tangentially philosophic, Jack was all ears. He covered pages and pages with his trademark scrawl during class, taking most things out of context. But he always did that: he was a selfish scholar. He passed everything he heard through a filter, and whenever I criticized any of his papers, he said he "had to make the information useful." This was a hit or miss tactic as far

as grades were concerned: sometimes he scored highly, sometimes he nearly had to retake the class. If his father didn't pressure him to graduate in four years, Jack would probably still be in school right now, offering unsolicited advice to the professors "most out of touch" with their students.

Like Benny, I spent the time after graduation studying Jack's writings. In my journals at least, he was mostly preoccupied by the makeup of the universe. He explained:

#### 8.11.01

Essentially, the metaphysics of Union works this way: all creation is divine. There is no separation between physical and spiritual reality; belief in this duality allows for delusion--the belief that I am not you, therefore I can hurt you and it won't affect me. All creation is one, and it is growing and evolving more complex and more beautiful as the universe expands.

There's this beautiful vow bodhisattvas make, and that is to liberate all sentient beings. Many believe that by meditating individually, everyone benefits collectively. I think this couldn't be truer. As you

grow more in tune with the river flowing beneath the rocks, others learn to hear it too. As you improve your Union with the divine, you become more divine, and the entire universe moves a micrometer closer to perfection.

I got to do a lot of people watching then, and not many of us ostensibly heed Jack's call to improve the universe. Like my patrons that evening, people seemed so separated from one another. All the unity preached after the Twin Towers fell faded the longer I lived in the city. Hawkers littered the streets selling toilet paper featuring mugshots of Osama Bin Laden and Saddam Hussein. Two cars crashed in front of my building, and a big guy screamed at some little old lady who hobbled from her Buick; his SUV flew a tattered American flag from newly dented rear end, and her car sported about a half dozen magnetic yellow ribbons. People still slept over storm grates to keep warm. My tips were undeniably miniscule despite impeccable service.

Sometimes ignoring reality, Jack formed most of his ideas intuitively. He did not footnote his journaling, and much of what he wrote seemed elementary, extraneous, even immature. But

he was sincere. You can learn a lot through simple observation. I wish I learned the value of this ability much sooner.

#

I got to Burton's myself not too long after starting my job at Wally PC. Later, we would call on a flag pole distributor who, needless to say, saw record sales that year, a fish hatchery, a lawyer's office, a bachelor pad up in Boston, and a Portuguese credit union in which the ladies who worked there spoke little English and got really frustrated by us.

But I seemed to spend the most time at Burton's Chevy. They were our biggest account, and they often needed daily attention. On my first trip, I went with Ken. We parked in a customer spot, skirted the showroom where two new 'Vettes glittered and a Hummer prepared to charge through some crisp cardboard wilderness. We went into the employee entrance.

A girl, probably barely out of high school, greeted us.

"Hey, Ken?" she said enthusiastically, barely able to see over her computer screen "how've you been?"

"Good, Kim, good," he said, leaning onto her desk, his voice becoming uncomfortably casual, "how about you?"

She adjusted the pink ribbon holding her hair back: "I'm good?"

"That's just great, sweetheart. Just great. Can you tell me if Mr. Burton is in?"

"I can, but I'll have to page him?" she said, smiling and reaching for the phone. Her skin had a sheen to it: I think there was glitter in her makeup. She called the back office and motioned us through.

"Does she always talk like that?" I asked.

"Not when it counts," Ken said.

I caught his drift as we walked ahead, passing the customer waiting room. An unwatched TV blared life lessons courtesy of Dr. Phil. Offices lined the narrow, wood-paneled hallway that came next, and this is where the sales force and credit agents resided. The hallway ended with Mr. Burton's office.

We entered and I quickly scanned the large room. It was much brighter than the other rooms, and it contained a conference table, a scalloped sofa, and a large oak desk and workstation. A few chew toys were piled in the corner. Framed degrees and industry awards reflected light brightening bland wallpaper.

A Scottish terrier was soon tearing into my shoe lace.

"Down, Spike, down!" Mr. Burton commanded. The little gray dog whimpered and skulked away.

"Hey, Ken, how are you this afternoon?" Mr. Burton asked, his deep voice more musical.

"I'm great. Just great," he said, "can I introduce you to the new guy?"

"By all means."

"Mr. Burton, this is Benny," Ken said, stepping aside as the man hopped up from his computer. We shook and looked eye to eye as his hand crushed mine. He stepped back and his chest flexed beneath his white shirt, his plaid tie straining against his neck.

"`It is not so much our friends' help that helps us, as the confidence of their help.' I'm glad you gentlemen are here; we're in good hands," Mr. Burton said.

"Epicurus?" I asked, remembering Jack asking me for a favor once.

"Very good!" Mr. Burton said, continuing, "Say, would you like to partake in photographs from my last sailing trip?" His dark tan accentuated his iron gray hair and granite jaw.

"I would. I would," Ken said.

"Excellent," he said, minimizing layers of spreadsheets and snoozing several blinking reminders. "Here we are traversing the northern Caribbean."

"Oh yeah. I was there a few years ago on my parents' boat," Ken mentioned, "it's so beautiful there. Is that part of Turks and Caicos?"

"It is indeed."

"We stopped there on our trip south."

"We did as well, though we stopped while traveling home. Take a look at my new vessel," Mr. Burton said, enlarging a thumbnail of himself, accompanied by his wife and two daughters, preparing to board the biggest boat moored in the shot.

I turned to the window to view the sea of cars spanning the lot. They shimmered like the surf in the cool glow of the afternoon. I wondered who would buy all of them.

"Benny?" I snapped to.

"Mr. Burton would like us to sit with him to discuss our tasks for the day," Ken said, "sorry, Mr. B., but he tends to daydream once in awhile.

"I hope it's not a visit from Queen Mab," Mr. Burton said.

"Sorry," I said, feeling heat in my cheeks.

We sat around the conference table in plush leather chairs and planned out a few proprietary software installs in the service garage.

"Those guys are great down there," Mr. Burton commented, "they're the Salt of the Earth, but their not for the faint of heart. Keep them happy though because they make me a lot of money."

Ken agreed to show me around a bit too, and we were off. My stomach knocked into the table as I stood to leave, and a pile of unopened mail spilled to the floor.

"It was nice to meet you, Benny." Mr. Burton shouted over Spike's agitated yapping as he wrestled a letter away from the dog, "and don't forget the work you have for me at home this weekend, Ken."

"I won't Mr. Burton, I won't. See you Saturday."

#

"This place is pretty big," I said as Ken and I walked through the building toward the garage.

"Yeah. It's the 'largest Chevy dealer in the area' according to the advertising. That reminds me, you should meet their marketing guy sometime. He's a trip."

"Burton seems alright," I stated.

"Yeah, he's alright. I wish I had his money though. Better yet, I'd really like to tap one of his daughters," Ken said, adding, "his wife's a cougar to boot," he said, opening a glass-paneled door.

The two service writers who stood behind the counter cheered as we entered.

"Kenny-boy! You're back!" said the guy on the left.

"Pissah! He's here to fix the wireless!" said the guy on the right.

"Yeah right!" the left guy said, sniping an elastic off of his partner's aviator glasses, "he came to get all this spyware shit offa my machine!"

The big, gray-bearded, wavy-haired one grabbed his smaller foe in a headlock in retaliation and pulled at his tightly curled hair with his free hand.

"Mothahfucka! Beanie, knock it off!"

"Maybe you shouldn't a shot me then, ya little prick," Beanie said, tightening his hold.

"Don't aih out your personal problems, buddy," the little guys grunted, his brown eyes bulging as the grip tightened.

Just then a customer entered, walking right past the two of us.

"Which one of you assholes is Craig?" the man asked. He wore a yellow "Dean's Landscaping" T-shirt and baggy jeans with green patches on the knees. His work boots clomped the cratered tile floor.

"He is!" both answered, pointing at one another as Beanie released his hold.

"Don't give me none'a this happy horse shit" the man said, "is my fuckin' truck ready or not?"

"Listen, if it was a caa, you'd be all set. But ahh diesel tech had to visit his baby daughtah in the hospital this mornin, so weah runnin' a little behind schedule," Craig said.

The man paused and put his hands on his hips. "So when can I get it? I'm loosin' money heah . . ."

"We'll call you in a couple ouahs," Beanie said, crossing his arms across his barrel chest. A black-inked skull smiled from beneath the sleeve of his Burton's T-shirt.

"Alright, alright. I've got shit to do anyway," the man said walking out.

"Goddamn," Craig said, cracking his fingers, then shadow boxing. "What a fuckin' loosah."

"I hope his pussy rots," Beanie concurred, "you'd better check on that truck though."

"Alright, alright. I'll go talk to Larry. He needs to talk to these guys anyway," he said.

"Wait a minute," Beanie said as Craig headed for the garage, "who's the new guy, Kenny-Boy?"

"This is Benny," Ken said.

"Hi."

"He's not retarded like the last guy, is he?" Craid asked.

"No, he's with it," Ken said, "not just summer help."

"Good," responded Craig, "as long as he doesn't try to convert me like ya boss, we'll be friends."

"That guy's like my goddamn mother sometimes," Beanie agreed.

"Nah, he's no Wally," Ken said.

"I'm glad he ain't," Craig said, "let's go."

#

We passed several raised lifts on the way to Larry's bay. Someone worked under each one of them completing oil changes, rotating tires, or digging through undercarriages. One mechanic was hoisting an engine out of big truck, and it scratched the lip of the front-end. He grunted, reached back, and slapped the

block with a wrench and sat down by his tool cart. His tantrum was lost in the din of the cavernous garage.

"Son-of-a-bitch!" he said, "that's what Larry gets when he's in a hurry!" He pulled a rag from his belt loop and started wiping the grease from his hands.

"You shoulda seen the douchebag looking for that truck. It serves him right!" Craig said.

"So I shouldn't botha with the touch-up paint?" Larry asked.

"You shouldn't botha puttin the engine back in," Craig responded, and they both laughed.

"I heard we need to fix the wireless," Ken said.

"Really? It's about time!" Larry said, rising to his feet.

"No. We actually need to upgrade your diagnostic software," Ken said with an anticipatory cringe.

"You're shittin' me," Larry said, "How am I supposed to download schematics if I can't stay on the frickin' Interweb? It drops me every two minutes. Doesn't Burton hire you guys to do anything useful?"

"The techs've been complainin' about this for weeks now, but Burton's connection is fine so he doesn't give a damn," Craig followed up.

"That's why I brought the new guy. He'll run the installs while I reset the access points," Ken said. "With all the metal in here it's a wonder you get any connection at all."

"Well, figure it out," Larry said and Craig agreed.

"Benny and I should have time today," Ken said, "and we'll bill you for every second of it."

"As long as it ain't on Larry's dime!" the man answered. He brushed some pumice onto his dark hands and brushed it off on his blue Dickies. Craig poked him in his hard beer-belly and ran off, Ken in tow. He walked over to a terminal and logged in. "Hey, Benny, nice to meetcha."

"Likewise," I answered.

"Let me show you how this program works. I don't know a thing about computers, so you'll have to beah with me," and he started clicking and typing and windows fluttered like snowflakes across the screen.

"You could have fooled me," I said.

"Well, computers are a lot different than caahs or trucks," Larry said. "I just know how to do my job and that's about it."

"How are they different?" I asked.

"Well, there's nothing to torque for stahtahs," Larry said. "If I'm loosening some carriage bolts, I can feel them turnin'."

On a computer, nothin's tangible. It's all a bunch of smoke 'n mirrahs."

We kept talking as I worked. I inserted the install CD; I disabled the peripheral device used to connect the computer to the ECM; I ran the install program; I inputted the new activation key; I hit a wall as the network hiccupped during software authentication; I went to a command prompt to check IP settings and to ping an access point; I saw that there weren't any available and Ken was probably on it.

"You're pretty good yourself," Larry said, "you've done this enough that you don't need to read anything on the screen."

"Well, yeah. I understand the concepts behind the work, so I can feel my way through it. The computer works as a series of ideas and sequences, and I need to get into the flow to see it work sometimes. It's a dynamic system."

"I guess you could say I'm concerned with what's static," Larry said. "I'm less concerned with what a caah does--it's only expected to do one thing--so I need to get all the pieces together so it runs.

We had to wait on Ken now, so I leaned on the red metal terminal. "The hardware in a PC stays put and doesn't need much maintenance. If any component fails, I just swap it out for a

new one. If I had to get into the mechanics or engineering of it, I'd be lost."

"I feel lost watching all those images whiz by. It's like The Matrix or somethin'" Larry said.

"So we both pretty much do the same thing, just different," I observed, "we both ensure the quality of action--one through what holds fast, one through what changes."

"Ha. All this talk makes us sound smaat like rocket surgeons," Larry said.

"Or like philosophers," I added.

"Don't say that," Larry said, "I've always hated that shit."

Just then, a triple beep rang out across the garage, and I jumped. "Benny Gallagher, this is God. Heed my commandments. The first is to log everyone out and back in again to reconnect to the network. If you refuse, I shall smite thee. The second is to go to D'Angelo's to fetch me a steak and cheese," Ken said, his voice raw and awesome as it issued from the intercom. It reminded me of dictates Dad roared when he decided there was work to be done around the house. Pointless, arbitrary assignments.

Larry just laughed: "You'd better get crackin', kid."

"I'd better."

"Hey, one other thing. Would you guys mind swingin' by my house after this job? My wife's computah is runnin' really slow, and it's on your way back to the office, I think."

"I'll have to check with Ken," I said, and later I was glad I failed to mention it.

#

Ken managed to go solo to most jobs after that first visit, wheedling Wally with fibs and flatteries to keep the schedule in his pocket. Wally wandered the shop when Ken left in the afternoons second guessing quantities of small inventory or sitting at his desk with a calculator and our timecards doing his best Ebenezer impression. I'm not sure if he aired his suspicions around Ken, but throughout October he was on watch and started sending me to Burton's alone.

I stood at the workbench building a new PC one morning while Wally installed a network card in another. He booted the machine and checked the news on the Internet. The Fox News website popped up, and he began summarizing some of the commentary.

"Thank God congress approved the Iraq Resolution. And they voted down those lily-livered amendments too!"

"Did you just say lily-livered?"

"I believe I did!" he said, and we both laughed.

"I think you're a little too into the news, Wally," I said, shaking my head.

"What can I say, I love punditry. And it's good to know there's someone looking out for me. What would happen if Iraq attacked us again?" Wally asked. Without waiting for my answer, he harrumphed and continued reading--sometimes to himself, sometimes aloud. He muttered something about smoking guns and flip-flopping liberals, and I turned back to my work.

#

I met with Mr. Burton the next day and found myself looking out the window again as he took a call. The golden afternoon showered the lot with early leaves falling from trees just off the property. A little patch of woods divided the dealership from the entrance to an industrial park that sprawled nearly a half mile behind.

"Hi, Benny. Sorry about that, but I had to talk to Detroit," Burton said, swiveling to face me in his chair.

"The entire city?"

"Flippant lately, eh? No, just some of those yes-men working for corporate. If GMC was really serious about moving metal, they'd stop nagging the franchisees. These calls are as tedious as ringing everyone in the yellow pages." He sighed as a new song came on Live 365, a website blocked on every other machine in the building. We listened for a minute as Billie Holiday crooned heartache in the background.

"I like this song."

"Me too."

"You know, I always wonder about musicians and their ilk. Do they always have to suffer for their art? Why do they all seem like characters from 'Sonny's Blues'?"

"I'm not sure," I responded, "maybe because art comes from intense human experience, and we tend to dwell on the negative. Art doesn't come much more negative than 'Strange Fruit'. But art doesn't need to be pain, though pain teaches you to feel. I know I think it's essential."

"You are an erudite young man, Benny. I should heed you but I won't. If what you say is true everyone could create art," Mr. Burton said, slouching back.

"Maybe everyone can?"

"I don't know, I never had any luck . . ." Mr. Burton interrupted himself: "You seem to enjoy philosophy, Benny."

"It's been growing on me," I said, realizing I only took one class and that I'd only just begun leafing through Jack's journals. I was starting to miss the evenings sitting in my room playing Max Payne or checking out the girl characters in Dead or Alive.

"Have you read anything by Steven Covey?"

"Not yet. I feel like I should have heard of him."

"Not unless you went to business school," Mr. Burton said, lifting the book from his desk, "there are a great many life lessons in here," he added.

"Interesting."

"Yes. He's really helped me to redefine my idea of success. There are many components beyond a steady wage and comfortable living space. And at this stage in my life, I'm starting to consider retirement--after my investments recover of course--but I have several things left to accomplish. I now have the luxury to realign my 'First Things First' and I want to reallocate my time and resources to become more philanthropic," he said straitening his back and his reading glasses.

"Is it really that complicated, though? Isn't it best to practice being happy?" I nearly laughed at myself when I finished the sentence. Absolute Jack--nothing I could claim.

"There's definitely more to it than that. Success is about being effective. It's about living the life you want. Franklin Covey puts out these neat organizers that help accomplish this," he said reaching into a desk drawer. "Here's a spare I can't use it because I've gone digital. Take it."

I received the planner, my fingers pressing into the soft pleather. I flipped through the pages of grids, graphs, and worksheets and said "Thanks."

"Don't mention it," Mr. Burton said, "you should peruse the book sometime." The phone rang again, and he added, "take care, and don't forget to swing by the accounting office. I can't have those machines going down: I think we're having good receivables today."

"I won't."

#

Later that evening, I felt light on my feet as I ran the streets. For nearly an hour I circled the neighborhoods of my new route, my breathing measured and easy. As the dark came, families sat for dinner or in front of the blue light of their TVs. I was just the occasional cause of dogs barking.

I hadn't cracked Jack's journals for a little while; instead, I was trying to feel a solution to the case. Logic wouldn't work because there was too much I didn't know. The paper reported that his .29 drove him into a pole. He was survived by two estranged parents, twelve tattered notebooks, and one polished marble slab. But what was really on his mind at the time? I'd started to realize it might not have been only Sadie's cold feet. Trying to track his thoughts impossible, I read and reread his random writings to little avail--my attempts at understanding like trying to count snowflakes in a blizzard. I was no method actor, but I hoped taking up his cross would lead me to answers.

Concluding my loop, I ended on a path through the forest behind my home. I stood listening to the cool breeze rustle trees and the quiet of the coming hibernation. I stood sniffing the sweet autumn rot--a solitary moment. Standing on one leg then the other, I balanced between recalling Wally's whispered prayers for Homeland Security and Red Sox Nation and mulling Burton's mastery over Excel and his silver BMW. Their shared conversations were strictly business, but they both confided in me. Interesting.

#

I had already started cleaning the turkey when my parents called to say they wouldn't make it for Thanksgiving. "No sense in driving down to eat a big meal if we'll just be barfing it up," my mother said.

"It's okay," I said.

"We feel really bad about it, Sadie; we're sorry," she said, her voice quiet and hoarse evidently from vomiting all night.

"Really Mom, I don't mind," I said, suddenly less disappointed about the news.

"Is Ginnie around?"

"Yeah. She and I will sick ourselves with all this food," I lied. She went out to Litchfield yesterday to meet her parents at their summer house. I knew she would enjoy herself because she took most of her books with her.

"Okay, Honey. I'm going to go back to bed," she croaked, "either that or back to the bathroom . . . once your father gets out of there."

"Jeez, Mom. Okay, I hope you both feel better."

"We will. It's just our bodies' natural way of taking care of themselves. Nothing we can't survive. Bye, Dear," she said,

intoning like a teacher--the job she will return to, sick or not, on Monday.

"Bye, Mom," I said and hung up the phone. I returned to the turkey with gusto, my hands feeling for the heart in the icy slime. I ripped it out, dropping it into a pile of thawing giblets.

Why didn't I say yes to Jack? At the very least it would have saved me today's anxious stomach ache: he could eat as much as Benny though only half the size. We could sit after our holiday dinner, a little bereaved and a little relieved that it was just the two of us. We could drink merlot and watch the Lion's offensive line and crack on the size of their asses, making sport of those fatter than we felt. Or we could try to pick the Westminster "worst" in show. Or we could rest our inherent sarcasm and just lie quietly in each others' arms until digestion got the better of one of us. It would be wonderful.

The sun was just hinting pink between the closest buildings on the horizon. Ginnie and I had a pretty nice view from our little (expensive) apartment, but I would have to leave soon if I wanted to see the Macy's parade.

#

I sat in the kitchen with Mom and Glen again for dessert. Dishes soaked in the sink and room smelled of gravy and detergent. A tall red candle we used for Thanksgiving and for Christmas stood lit as a centerpiece along with a half-empty gallon of milk. A sliver of homemade pumpkin pie flopped over on my plate collapsing under its own weight.

"That's all you'll take, Benny? Are you sure? It's your favorite!" Mom said.

"What's the matter with you, Kid?" Glen asked, "I ate more than you for my lunch yesterday, and all I had was a bologna sandwich."

"I packed you a pickle, too," Mom remarked, feigning insult.

"How thoughtless of me. Sorry, Mary," he said helping himself to a second piece of blueberry.

"Benny, we've been worried about you," Mom said, making her own slice alamode. "You're looking awful these days."

"Yeah. You're losing you're ass, and your face looks like you have cancer," Glen said talking with his mouth full.

"Glen!" Mom said taking the time to swallow her bite.

"Sorry, but it's true. Those fitness freaks all look like partied-out rock stars," Glen said, "I should know." This was true: while he never drank himself, he played drums for cover

bands throughout the Seventies. He always said wankers were the worst of all. That's why he quit and took the maintenance job at the country club. He's had that job since I was ten.

"Are you developing an eating disorder?" Mom asked frowning as she was nearly finished her plate. I took a bite of my pie and found it lacked the sweetness I remembered.

"Yeah, like those skinny-dyslexic Victoria's Secret girls! Are you going to start modeling underwear?" Glen asked, leaning forward from the opposite side of the table.

"It's anorexia, and I see a variant of it all the time at Rosewood. Some of my residents just stop eating. They stop taking care of themselves because they're depressed," Mom said.

"You guys haven't grilled me this hard since I needed to get a job. What gives?" I asked. The golden ring of my favorite Fellowship T-shirt ornamented my navel now instead of my left nipple. I punched two new holes in my belt as well. I hadn't actually stepped on our old scale since early summer, but I bet the springs wouldn't squeak so much.

"We're just looking out for you," Glen said.

"Well, thanks, but I'm fine. Honest." I said, getting up to leave.

"Alright then," Mom said as I began climbing the stairs, "just don't let yourself wither away."

#

I dropped into my chair and checked my AIM. What if my investigation headed south or petered out? How long could I get by without facts? Was it good to use intuition to profile Jack? As I wondered, Sadie chimed in:

Tangier381: did you see me on TV?

BigRed69: yeah. werent you the girl who lost her grip on the Snoopy and had to chase him down Broadway

Tangier381: very funny but if I were Lucy youd try to kick the football every time

BigRed69: good grief

Tangier381: Happy Thanksgiving?

BigRed69: why the question mark

Tangier381: the rents stayed home with the flu

BigRed69: you should have let us know. you could have come here

Tangier381: its okay. ill try to meet them next week

BigRed69: im sorry

Tangier381: its okay. good to talk to you now

BigRed69: you too

#

I grudgingly went to a Christmas party on Ken's behest. A day of downpours dampened my holiday spirit, and I almost stayed home, but I didn't want him to give me a hard time about it on Monday. When I arrived at his parent's house later that night, the good times were in full swing anyway. I rolled up to the palatial estate and found plenty of parking in the long driveway despite the crush of cars. Beats thumped the puddles left by the rain, and I wondered if they had a pet T-rex or if 50 Cent was in attendance.

This was the type of party I avoided in high school and that I really only enjoyed through participant observation in college. I sighed and I pushed through the double doors and into the mix. Bodies bounced around and grouped together; hands clutched red cups, plastic beer bottles, and full handles of booze. Yuletide décor adorned the expanse of the open parlor, and my wet shoes chirped on what seemed like parquet from Boston Garden. Someone dragged poor Rudolph into the house, maybe so he could join in, but now he lay by the hallway that lead to the kitchen. People stepped over him as they made laps to and from the tap. A pile of coats buried one of several couches; I

tossed mine on top, righted the reindeer, and went looking for Ken. Hopefully I could pay my respects and leave as soon as possible.

Ken grew up on the other side of town, but his parents sent him to a private school, so I wouldn't know any of his old friends or anyone else at the party for that matter. I spent a good half hour looking for the one familiar face before I decided to try the basement. The sound of thunder morphed to a jet engine's roar as I went down the stairs.

"And this is just like what Dave Matthews sounded like at Woodstock '99!" Ken was shouting to a small crowd, trying to orient them to his stereo system. The downstairs was finished like a primo studio apartment; a plasma TV and tower speakers dominated the longest wall, and a collection of plush recliners gathered round the viewing area. A bed rested on one side of the room and someone was mixing drinks from the full kitchen set up on the opposite. Ken must have planned on living here for awhile.

When he saw me he turned the music down, and his companions flocked to take shots. One girl stayed behind. She wore tight jeans, black heels, and a red silk tank top. A sprig of mistletoe was pinned to her breast.

"Kenny, I need to make a request," she said.

"What, you wanted to hear 'Purple Rain'?" he asked.

"No. You need to bring me to your parentsss' bedroom. Now," she slurred and then broke down giggling.

"Hey, Babe. Let me tell you what. Let me tell you what. I'll get myself another drink, and I'll meet you up there."

She leaned on him, tried to bat her eyelashes, and then licked his nose. She giggled again and leaned into me.

"You can come . . . come . . . too, if you want," she said.

"Uh, thanks," I said but she was already staggering upstairs.

I looked to Ken and he was grinning like he just won the science fair.

"Who's that?" I asked.

"She's just one of my brother's friends from school," he said.

"What college does he go to?"

"Oh. He's still a senior at the Bishop," he said, referring shorthand to his high school alma mater.

"Right." When I thought of it, the party demographic did seem younger than I expected. Something in my face must have given it away.

"Well, you know. I only went to Bridgewater State for three semesters, and a lot of my friends moved out of town since then."

"Oh yeah. Mine too," I said.

"So I needed new recruits who still know how to party!" Ken said, motioning me to where the others stood slamming drinks.

"Come on, time's wasting and we should get wasted."

I followed him to the action, and he twirled around for a quick introduction to an older crowd: "Everyone, this is Benny. Benny, these are my truest friends Grace, Juan, Smitty, Arnie, Kelly, Kaitlin," he slowed, ". . . Chet . . . and I think, I'm a little fuzzy right now, that's his sister Natalie," he said. Everyone clapped, and Natalie looked from Ken to me.

"For Benny!" Smitty cheered as they kicked back glasses of Cuervo, licked salt from the backs of their hands, and bit down on slices of lime.

"It's a fiesta in Decemba!" shouted Arnie after a sour grimace.

"*Para tu es una fiesta todos los dias, borracho,*" said Juan, slapping him on the back.

"Grace, what did he just say?" Arnie asked.

"He said he wants to make out with you," she replied. With that, Juan grabbed his friend's face and smacked his cheek.

"Ow! Why don't you learn to shave once in awhile, *puto*?"

"Stubble is what ladies like!" Arnie said, wiping away the kiss. He then tilted over to kiss Grace, but she pushed him away.

"Are you two ready for yours?" asked Kaitlin.

"It's alright, these are the big kids," Ken said cupping my ear in a lame attempt at a whisper, "I mostly confine the rugrats to the upstairs."

"I think I'll pass this round," I said despite their inebriated pleas. They didn't try too hard and soon lined up the glasses again. Ken drank with them, and then he pulled a bottle of champagne from the fridge.

"Well, ladies and gents, it's been swell, but I have something to do before the night is complete."

"Don't you mean someone?" Kelly corrected.

"I think you're right," Ken said, "I think you're right. He turned and winked at me, but before he could leave, there was a bang and a crash and a hush up above.

"Fuck me! I told Buster no Ultimate in the living room!" He tossed me the bottle and ran upstairs. I hefted it from hand to hand. At least it felt expensive.

The guests, unperturbed by the interruption, kept to themselves in the basement kitchen, so I went to checkout Ken's

system. The racked equipment had names I couldn't pronounce, and the huge flat panel seemed futureproof.

I flashed back to when I first met Jack. I was watching TV after unpacking all my stuff. Mom and Glen had just left and I was alone when he flew into the room like a pet parakeet looking for a way out of its captive house.

"Are you ready to go pimpin'?" he asked, winging one bag on his bed and circling the room again and again.

"Um, not really."

"Me neither," he said and jumped onto his bed by the window. "The mattress is good to go though," he said, bouncing like a kid trying to torment a babysitter.

"You're Jack Gold, right?" I asked. He jumped all the way across the room, bashing into me Macho-Man style as I rose to greet him.

"Woah!" He bounced off me and to the floor. I helped him up. "You're a big dude!" He looked down to the bruise coloring his knee. "Benjamin Gallagher, right?"

"That's me." I said, wondering what I got myself into.

By nine o'clock, Jack knew half the campus and secured us an endless stream of Keystone Lite. He crammed our room with both, and thus began our freshman year.

I barely saw Jack crack a book, but he had a 3.8 our first semester--way higher than I did. "I already took most of these classes last year," he said when I inquired into his success. I didn't believe him. I was easily distracted by the constant mixer in our dorm room, but I didn't mind studying in the library, so the crowds kept coming. Often when I came back at night, kids spilled out from our room and into the hallways. The RA's didn't even mind the keg we stashed in our closet.

The core contingency formed by October--the same gang we befriended through senior year--and sometimes stayed all night, sleeping on the floor. Everyone save Sadie though--she slept with Jack. They got together during that weird period that makes up the first month of college--that time warp that feels like ten years--when you break up with your girlfriend from home, when you order pizza every night at 2:00 AM just because you can, and when you decide that everything your parents say and do is totally and completely fucked.

Most of our early conversations centered on our home lives, but they soon branched out from there. I would return to the room after pouring over my notes, usually with a bag of fried food from the campus center in my hand. Jack, Sadie, Pete, Mike, Jen, Mikey, Jen, Rick, Sarah, and Toad would be hanging out with the lights off. Asshole was over, beer cans and

playing cards and dirty laundry littered the cold tile, and Mistress Cleo commercials looped on TV, ignored though offering to read our fortunes free (after a 5.99 connection fee); it was time to gnaw on the bones of knowledge our profs claimed only a small, liberal arts college could prepare for us. I didn't know of too many other places like this on campus.

"What are you thinking of?" someone asked, pulling me back to the present party.

"Oh, just spacing out," I said to Natalie. She placed a cocktail on the coffee table and took the recliner next to mine. She pulled her light brown hair behind her ears revealing jolly Santa earrings.

"Is this your first time?" she asked.

"Say what?"

"Your first visit to Ken's place?"

"Yeah."

"Mine too. I'm here because of my brother," she said. Her glasses reflected the lamplight behind me and sparkled faintly.

"I just work with him," I said.

"Cool. What do you guys do?"

"We fix computers."

She scrunched up her face and complained, "Mine is a complete mess. I get nothing but pop-ups and it barely runs!"

"Yeah. You're probably infected with a Trojan virus. Those can be a pain to get rid of," I mentioned, looking around the room.

"That sounds bad. Trojan, huh? Do I need a shot? Am I screwed?" she asked, moving closer. Her voice made catching a virus sound downright pleasurable.

"Well, uh, the name comes from the Trojan Horse myth." I couldn't help myself; I knew I blew it.

"Your so . . . clinical. I bet you're good at your job! I'd love for you to come to my apartment to take care of me. I'd repay you of course--make you dinner or something. Anything to be able to go online without ads telling me to secure my home and protect my kids with those spycam things! Everyone knows those are for perverts who like to spy on the babysitter going potty. Besides, I live with my cat in an apartment over in JP!"

A Maxim sat on the table that featured the original Pussy Cat Dolls on the cover, and they looked ready for action. Natalie ripped a piece from the back cover, wrote her number on it, and handed me the slip. Her hand rested in mine an instant longer than is customary. It was soft and warm and completely foreign but not unwelcome.

"Call me soon, and maybe I can get you to help me out," she said.

"Thanks. I will. I, I have to get going though," I said standing to attention.

"Or your stagecoach will turn into a pumpkin?" She beamed up at me, clearly amused.

"I'm visiting some relatives tomorrow. Gotta get up early," I stammered.

"Alright, Benny. I hope to see you soon!" she said. As she retrieved her drink from the coffee table, the pink tail of her thong peeked from between her sweater and her jeans.

The chaos upstairs barred me from passing easily. One boy was on his hands and knees puking like a dog. The foamy contents of his stomach reeked like a distillery, and I wished I had one of those "Caution: Wet Surface" signs to place by the expanding puddle. Someone was banging out chopsticks on a baby grand, and two pairs of underwear hung from the above chandelier. One kid laid flat on his back, begging for the ceiling to stop spinning. Two girls groped and Frenched each other for a band of boys brandishing their cell phones as video cameras. The ladies were presumably earning more beer.

When I found Ken in the dining room, it looked like he was arguing with an NFL quarterback.

"Buster what the fuck are we going to do now?" An entire china cabinet was shattered across the floor, and two woozy students tried to bandage their friend's bleeding head.

"I dunno," Buster said with a belch, "it's your problem, not mine."

"I don't think so, Dipshit, I said you could invite a few friends, not everyone you know."

"Well Fa-la-la-la-la to you too!" Buster said. Two more of his friends ran through the room flinging eggnog on everyone as they went. One milky salvo landed on the two brothers.

Ken wiped his face and spit and turned red. Buster fell over laughing and drooling all over himself. I thought it a good time to go. On the ride home, I made an early New Year's resolution not to drink again anytime soon.

#

I don't think either of us expected it. Ken once told me that Wally never lost a customer because he would always do whatever they asked of him. It stressed him out bending over backwards (and forwards) all the time, but Wally said it's what

kept us in business against the likes of Best Buy and Dell.  
Personalized service. Guaranteed.

He had even more patience for his employees, so I was shocked when I came in after the holidays and Wally told me Ken quit. I never really took advantage of Wally's mile-long fuse myself, but it seemed Ken had it down to an art. It would have taken a bunker buster bomb to roust him from the protection of Wally PC.

"Hey, Benny," Wally said as I punched in.

"Hey, Wally, why the long face? I thought you had big plans with Millie and James?" I asked about the ski trip he had planned for his kids during school break.

"That was fun. But I talked with Ken on the phone last night. He's done," Wally said as he dipped the ends of his mustache into his lower lip.

"Really, why?"

"He didn't really say. He said he had to 'pursue another opportunity'--something too good to pass up," Wally said running the hand over the bristles of his new crew cut.

"I wonder what it is?"

"I don't know, but I was a little worried that with the economy, I'd have to let one of you go. Between us, I'm glad he

made the decision for me," Wally said, wrapping his hands around my shoulders.

"Hey. You're getting pretty solid, Benny. Have you been working out or something?" he asked, switching subjects.

"A little," I replied. As winter set in, push-ups and sit-ups entered my training mix. I bought a jump rope to keep up with my cardio when the snow fell. Exercise was actually becoming fun.

"Well, that stuff's not for me," he said, looking down and proudly surveying his middle-age weight gain, "but keep it up!"

I didn't know how difficult that request would be until later in the month. The next day after I opened the store Wally came in wearing a white baseball cap that read "I'M HAPPY BECAUSE I'M GOING TO HEAVEN" in gold letters.

"Nice hat," I said.

"Thanks! I got it at a parish bazaar" he said as he hung it in his office with his coat.

"You look like the guy from the Enzyte commercial," I observed.

"I landed two new accounts yesterday, and it's finally going to get busy around here again!" Wally said. "The new year is looking up!"

Not two days later, both of our supposed new clients called in during lunch, saying someone outbid us. I heard Wally on the phone:

"Which company? You really can't divulge that information? Liberty Technology Solutions? I've never heard of them. I understand you're not accepting any more offers. Thank you for your time," Wally said as he hung up. He jabbed his fork into some leftover meatloaf.

"Wow. To have another company come and pull the rug out from under us. That takes a lot of nerve," Wally said to me. He reached for his keyboard and began Googling the name. "I wonder who these guys are . . . they're local, but the website is pretty generic. It doesn't reveal too much."

I put down my smoked turkey spinach wrap. "Isn't Ken's last name--"

"No way . . . 'Liberty'" said Wally, his hands leaving the keyboard to seize the arms of his chair. I thought he was having a heart attack.

It soon got very busy at work, but not because of new business. Wally scrambled to renew lagging accounts and he redoubled his search for new ones. When he wasn't on the road,

he called to collect the (meager) payments past due. I made all the service calls and spent most nights drooping bleary-eyed over my workbench. I had to forgo overtime pay, but I tried to help Wally at the increasing expense to my personal project.

#

I painted my first ever abstract piece and entitled it The Kiss. I had nestled into a winter routine in which I worked a double shift, came home and tried to sleep, woke from dreams of "where's my freeekin' linguine?" and "drop the 'crying jag' and get me my order!" I tried to paint when I couldn't sleep, which was often, but I scrapped most of my work.

"Would you shut up out there?" Ginnie grumbled from the confines of the master bedroom. I personally never found oil painting as noisy as say, playing the saxophone, but I guess I was rocking a nasty *impasto*. Maybe it was that frenzied brushing of bristles across canvas that kept at her like nails down a chalkboard.

"Sorry!" I called back from the living room, trying to paint louder. My desk lamp and the glow of the city provided the only light in the apartment.

No response. I don't know why Ginnie ever advertised for a roommate. Her parents paid for her rent and for school; I guess life's incomplete with only a cat to shout at. I couldn't afford to move out. Wiggles was just too fat to leave: he could barely haul his calico ass to the litter box these days. The same could be said for his mistress. She occupied herself with three things: eating, studying, and more eating. Was I jealous? Most people gain weight after they quit smoking, but I lost my appetite.

That night I abandoned the usual dark ground and began *alla prima*. Memories of New Year's Eve replayed in my mind. Sanchez and I roamed the outskirts of Times Square, trying to find an in. We failed at first, but from a few blocks away on West 44th, we could sort of see the stage which was dominated by boom cams and bright neon.

"We should have planned ahead," I said.

"What would the fun be in that?" Sanchez asked, pressing his cherry red lips together and pulling his feather boa tight around his neck for warmth. He slipped on a pair of plastic "2003" glasses and added, "Then we'd be like all these tourists."

I laughed as we tried to work our way closer to the Square. People darted left and right: a mother shushed her five-year-old

as daddy hoisted him to his shoulders, vendors paraded the streets, a pack of frat boys burped and leered at us. Barricades. We hopped them and slinked along the wall of one building all *Mission Impossible* until a cop gave us a fleeting "what are you girls doing?" glance. We froze, but Sanchez winked at him and blew a kiss. The cop smiled and waved us on like a love-struck splice of Osgood Fielding III and Barney Fife. We giggled and passed by, holding hands.

We stopped at the shore of the party, looking out, and Sanchez cheered. Across from the sea of bodies, a block-long Toys R' Us banner flashed like lighting below a giant woman in a long red jacket posing for Liz Claiborn. In an adjacent shot, she and her man prepared for the traditional new year kiss, her hand on his face, both beaming white teeth. They ignored the ball perched on high which glittered the crowd, totally enraptured, and we couldn't get any closer. I felt a little dizzy, and I squeezed Sanchez's hand.

I looked from the ad to my date. "Hey Sanchez," I said, "why don't we come back next year. I'm feeling cold and crushed."

"No way, Girlfriend! We've made it this far! I've been waiting for this since last year when I was too afraid to attend. Didn't they have snipers then?" he asked.

"But I thought you just came up with this idea a few hours ago?" I said, shouting over the expanding waves of sound; they rushed through the tunnel of buildings, getting louder.

"I did," he said, "when I realized there was someone I wanted to see!" He rubbed my un-gloved hand in his. Warm.

"Dick Clark?" I asked, looking up at him.

"No, not that old plastic bag," he said, "someone much sexier. But we'll wait here."

I wondered momentarily who that may be but was soon distracted. Two minutes to midnight. People pressed in to begin the countdown; they frantically waved long red balloons.

"Is this year sponsored by Oscar Meyer?" I asked.

"They look a little phallic, too" Sanchez replied, "I think they're making me hungry."

"At least you're not saying that about Elton John being here," I said.

"Lucky we missed him," Sanchez said, wiggling his eyebrows.

One minute to midnight. The ball began sliding down the tall needle. It began to drop and the crowd churned and roared so that I heard nothing but silence. I reached for Sanchez's hand, but he felt for the phone in his hip pocket; his jeans were so tight I could see it vibrating. He hopped up and down

and screamed something into the receiver, and he dove into the people, pulling a tall man to our safe island off to the side.

"This is Hank!" I thought I heard Sanchez say. The other waved. He looked like an Abercrombie model--lean and underdressed for a winter's night.

"Hi!" I mouthed, running my eyes from his frosted tips to his thick-soled shoes. His smooth, orange skin was a little out of season but nice against his puffy white vest.

Suddenly the rolling, crashing waves focused on simple math: "Five! Four! Three!"

I looked to Sanchez who held hands with Henry who drew him closer.

"Two! One! Happy New Year!"

The two tounded like it was their honeymoon. I folded my arms and watched.

"He owed me a kiss!" Sanchez said when they were done, and he planted one on my cheek, hugging me. "Happy New Year!"

As everything kept exploding, the three of us huddled under a sign that read "THE RIGHT RELATIONSHIP" and I had to ask, "I'm always going to be your fag hag?"

"I hope so," he replied as I wiped his lipstick from my face. His smile dimmed: "You don't look so good. Do you want to go now?"

I rested my palette on a sheet of Saran Wrap on the window sill, and I gazed into the painting. Two dark figures reached for each other. Red and yellow smeared together, approaching from opposite sides, forming a pink haze around them which rose and shifted gradient to black. I wiped my eyes and stepped back, pausing to watch our VCR blink 3:33 . . . 3:34 . . . 3:35. Ginnie would be up in two hours, and I really needed to go back to bed.

#

Snow avalanched my interior as I opened the door and reached for the scraper. Jabbing key into ignition the engine whirred and whined and kicked over, sputtering. Oil smoke belched from the tailpipe, blackening the unshoveled white behind the car; I gagged as the cloud stuck to me. I plowed about six inches of powder from my windshield with pink hands before hacking at the thick ice until my knuckles bled. I then sat in the frozen, crunchy sponge that was my front seat, jammed on the reverse, spun out of the drive, and was off. It was 5:30 and the sun still slumbered, but I needed to get to Wally's.

After checking in, we both left the office--Wally to try and win back one of our hijacked customers, and I went to Burton's. I spun out across the lot as I pulled in, and I rammed myself into an unplowed guest spot. I hoped I could get out after the job was done. I judo chopped my trunk to get at my cable and toolbox but without success. As I stepped back, preparing to dropkick my Carolla, Mr. Burton glided into the reserved spot to my right, nestling his clean, silver BMW into its home away from home.

"Good morning, Benny!" he said, stepping out and beaming at me.

"Good morning, Mr. Burton," I recited like I was in third grade.

"What brings you in today?" he asked, retrieving a briefcase from the back seat. He shut the door and stood still a moment before turning back to me.

"I'm set to take care of a few things and to install a new workstation for your marketing guy. What was his name again?" I asked.

"It's Bill," Burton replied, adding, "he may seem a bit frazzled, but don't make much of it. He's competent but a bit intense." The wind gusted sharply with his words, and he pulled his gray scarf a little tighter.

"That's alright," I said.

"Good," Burton said. "Then let's get inside! Aren't you freezing wearing just a sweater?"

"I'm not too bad," I said.

"Well, I'm ready to get warm," he said, and, before turning to the door, took one more look at his car: the cold sun deepened the sky's blue hue and gleamed along the long hood. His eye glimmered as if admiring a diamond ring.

I managed to pry open my trunk and hauled the spool and tools and CPU to the upper offices. I remembered moving in and out of dorms with Jack; we migrated from home to school with each passing season. I didn't quite bound upstairs like he did, but humping electronics got exponentially easier as I worked at my job and fitness.

The marketeer shared an office with two ladies in accounting. In the back sat septuagenarian Flo who whiled away making entries into a green-screen all day, and near the lone window sat the other, a shawled fifty-something who cradled a phone on her shoulder while gazing at pictures of her son at prom and in hockey pads.

I stood behind Bill for a moment, unsure if I should interrupt. His Viewsonic LCD dominated his desk, and it was strewn with windows and programs. He was editing an aerial of

the dealership, tweaking strings of HTML, sending an e-mail attachment, and viewing a webcast--all while on the phone. He sipped from a mug featuring the dealership logo and brimming with black coffee, and his fingers flitted repeatedly from a bowl of peanuts to his lips. I couldn't tell if he was on hold or on crack.

Peggy hung up her phone and swiveled to greet me.

"Hiya, Benny!" she said, her voice Lois Griffin's.

"Hi Peggy," I said, "I need to swap in Bill's new machine. Should I come back?" I glanced at his Outlook task list: "call copier repair, inventory cell phones, design new flyer, analyze market segmentation, meet with promotions rep, order supplies, call copier repair." All the items were highlighted red and overdue.

"Oh no," Peggy said, "he has time for you. Just give him a little nudge." Her phone rang, and she swiveled to face the corner of her desk and return, which faced both outer walls of the office. She brushed back her short hair, adjusted her glasses, and began speaking in hushed tones. I was alone.

Getting Bill's attention was like trying to jam a band saw by pinching it with my fingers. It went something like this:

"Bill?"

"I don't need this from you right now Harry can you print my expo signs or not . . . " He jerked his head from a notepad to his screen to his coffee, and back to his notes.

"Bill?"

"If I need to talk to George then fine I'll talk with him no I'm not mad I'm in a rush what do you mean it will all work out we have to have our parts booth set up for the show tomorrow night . . ." he leaned back in his chair a bit, and two of the casters raised off the wounded plastic pad protecting the blue-carpeted floor. He torqued his torso to zap closed some of the multiplying windows on his screen. He looked like Ender fighting the Hive.

"Bill?"

"George good I'm glad you're in today I need that sign by tomorrow you know yes tomorrow you've had the graphics for a week yes I know "Let Burton Give you a Hummer" ain't right you're looking at the mockup open the other .EPS file yeah that's the one no "Drive Home in Style" doesn't have the same ring to it but what the fuck wait a second I have another call . . . oh, hi Mr. Burton. Sure thing. I'm on the phone with him right now. I'll consider that, too. The other thing? Yes, I'm on it. Goodbye . . . all right George, I now need to get five more cars delivered to the show now do you have my back or what

thank you!" he said, hanging up the phone and noticing me for the first time.

"Bill?"

"Benny!" Bill said, whirling a 180 in his chair. The wheels came up again, but he was already standing as it flipped over and crashed to the floor. Neither Peggy nor Flo averted their work, as they were accustomed to Bill's banging and smashing. "What can I do you for?" he asked, his trim ribcage pumping like a bellows. He tugged at his open shirt collar and scratched at his three-day beard.

"Um, I'm here to swap out your machine," I said, "remember the upgrade?"

"Burton just asked me for a new parts line card for the show how am I supposed to create that if you're working on my computer am I going to lose all my work no wait it's on the server right cool but there aren't any other computers that can run my graphics software! the show! maybe I can make more calls first I need to get those cars loaded for the show but I need the card done to send to the printers--shit--I need to . . ."

"Don't forget the copiers, Billy!" Peggy chimed as she poked wistfully at her keyboard, opening a few forwarded e-mails.

"Right the copiers--shit--I need to call the repair shop. Can you do that for me, Peg?"

"Sorry, kiddo, I'm a little tied up right now," she said. The receiver was hidden in her mousy hair and several lights flashed on her phone console. She was twisting the cord and smiling. She looked away and whispered "how was your first day back in classes? Could you find them all alright?"

"Shit . . . her college kid. Fuck. Benny just do what you want I'll go mobile," Bill said as he sprinted away, fumbling for the cellphone on his hip holster.

"It's only going to take five minutes, Bill," I said to the cloud of dust gathering next to me--like trying to interview the Roadrunner. I glanced over to Flo; though a wall of stacked files ringed her desk, her thin fingers rested motionlessly on the keyboard like daddy longlegs. Her lips were loose; she was slightly snoring.

#

When I got home I ran. The wind sliced my face and hands, and I slipped on black ice not five feet from home. Frozen gravel imbedded in my palm, I clawed it out--everything was numb

anyway--the blood wetting my finger tips, I wiped it on my sweatpants.

I passed the houses on my street, and familiar faces faced each other across dinner tables, or they just stared down the fast-flickering glare from TVs and computer screens. I couldn't even run a seven-minute mile yet, but I still passed too quickly to make a good Peeping Tom. Though a cold, clear night, melancholy rose like a fog from the burbs and settled back down on itself: everyone seemed so tired and at home, and I wanted to know why and why I felt the same way they did and how that could even happen right now. Never was I so active in my life (I'd slothed through many a February night as my neighbors) and never did time pass so slowly.

I knew I needed to do something. Bill showed me that: he was the Ferrari from *Ferris Bueller*--an amazing machine stuck in whirring reverse. Even if I better resembled my rusted-out Toyota, I had the investigation, chatting Sadie, getting in shape, working for Wally--I was moving, but I felt stuck too. I drove my legs harder and the air burned my lungs.

I remembered how Jack talked about life and motion, paraphrasing Zen-like aphorisms to make his points. Often, when we walked to lunch or to class, he would spot someone caught in

a bustle or looking a little worse for wear, and, citing the specific mood or activity, he would state, off hand, "a tree must be flexible or it will snap in the winter wind," and "an ant is industrious but never feels despair." I think he made most of them up. He had so many quotes crammed in his notes though--his words to live by:

"The only people for me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn, burn, like fabulous yellow roman candles exploding like spiders across the stars and in the middle you see the blue centerlight pop and everybody goes "Awww!" - Jack Kerouac from *On the Road*

and this one:

"Il est l'heure de s'enivrer!  
Pour n'être pas les esclaves martyrisés du Temps,  
enivrez-vous;  
enivrez-vous sans cesse!  
De vin, de poésie ou de vertu, à votre guise."

- Charles Baudelaire de "Enivrez-Vous"

And I think he took these entries a little too literally. They exemplify Jack's moods and drinking; like Bill, he never stopped a moment. Meant to inspire a life of awe and action, I think quotes like these fueled an addiction. It's true, Jack seemed to love life: ever daring, he sought to rack up "adventure points" like a monk merit. Rock climbing, marathoning, torrents of talk, stacks of overdue library books, raving, naked madness--insanity--at parties, wilderness retreats for prayer and meditation, or simply sitting silently, cramped in his Rabbit. The sounds Sadie made when she was in his room . . .

Oh God, aren't we all addicted to something? It's the American way: the seven deadlies. I remember Dad's dark Sunday moods and how his flesh crushed his duct-taped Barcalounger. He wouldn't even lift a cheek to fart. Mom will take a carton of Newports to her grave. And I thought about what I actually ate today. The undue scrutiny I would pay certain websites tonight . . .

4.11.01

STARVATION  
ADDICTION

These two extremes plague humanity. To starve is to suffer paucity, to be addicted is to suffer abundance. Life cannot thrive when so weakened. Life cannot thrive when choking to death. Who can alleviate the suffering? Humanity. Each of us is responsible for regulating and moderating between the two in ourselves and others. I just wish I was better at moderation. Drinking is killing me, and nothing self destructive can lead to Union. If we're all divine, harming divinity's a crime.

Maybe society is to blame. America's just a group of people defending addictions. Look at how we're rushing to the Middle East to "bring the fight to the terrorists!" Rhetoric protecting oil. We refuse to grow and adapt; we need to maintain the status quo. No one will change ever. Not even on their deathbeds. It's more comfortable to suffer, and we'll be damned if we'll change our lives just because someone else is suffering too. No one in America loves life well enough.

We the People flaunt our suffering like rajas: look at Benny's belly, Kiera's parents' Platinum Card and her Mercedes full of shopping bags, my bloodshot

eyes. What passes for American lifestyle nowadays consists of rigid patterns of behavior repeated ad nauseum and without consequence. But can I puke and blackout every weekend before I succumb to the inevitable? Isn't that what college is all about? Or can I begin to change? Do they care for me or are they hypocrites?

Reading his glimmers of recognition killed me. I began running faster, the headlights passing less frequently. Rush hour was over, it was time to turn around--to head for home.

I remember the intervention we staged one night. It was shortly after spring break and shortly before that journal entry.

"I can't believe we're doing this now," I said to the roomful of our friends. We gathered, as usual, in the main room of our on-campus townhouse apartment.

"He said he didn't want me to buy him a graduation present. 'Not enough value is placed in the immaterial,' he says," Sadie replied. She sat on one side of the long table, I directly across.

"Do you ever get tired of his pontifications?" asked Jen the Unbeliever.

"Well, since he's a Jew, I find them rather charming," Sadie said, dropping her elbows onto the table.

"For someone so insightful, you'd think an intervention unnecessary," Jen the Unbeliever said. Her hair, hot pink and spikey, sometimes made her smile seem like a sneer.

"Don't be an asshole, Jen. Everyone needs help sometimes," Hollywood Pete said. He'd known Jack the longest, and he helped Sadie plan this meeting. He agreed that he'd never seen his friend like this before.

"Y'all quit fucking around. We need to take this seriously," Mikey D. said.

"That's hard to do when you just said y'all," Jen the Unbeliever said.

"Sorry, I picked it up from one of our Southern exchange students," Mikey D. said.

"My bad," Rick said, his apology drowned out by his drawl.

"All right. That's enough. I say we tell his parents," Crucifix Jen said. Mike Mann nodded in agreement, the collar of his T-shirt straining against his thick neck. He made his new girlfriend look so small. Mikey D., her ex, didn't seem to

notice. He had just finished his psych evaluations and was about to apply to the seminary.

"His mom will pull him out of school," Sarah said, her voice musical when merely speaking. She made it sound like a good idea.

"Not if his dad has anything to say about it. Isn't he paying alimony AND tuition?" asked Hollywood Pete.

"And how often does Jack speak with his dad?" Toad asked. He slouched, small and round, into the good part of our broken sofa, raising his hand lazily to get our attention. I hadn't even noticed him at first: I mostly watched Sadie, trying to discern her thoughts through her reactions to the discussion.

"Good point. I've barely heard him speak of him," I said. Sadie, who was the only one of us to have met the man, stayed silent.

"So his mom has all the say, and she will probably bring him home," Crucifix Jen said.

"Maybe that's the best thing for him?" Mike Mann asked.

"Time away from school would wreck him though. He's so happy here, so--as he would put it--actualized. I think that's what's driving his drinking," Sadie said, "I think he's scared about graduation. Plus leaving now would mess up his applications to grad school or his chances to find a job."

"Who cares!" Crucifix Jen asked, her voice turning up sharply at the end of her statement. "He can get his diploma in February. Grad school's not going anywhere, and he has his whole life to work. We need to get him help whatever way we can. Right now." I had never seen her take a stand before. She was a lot more confident now than when she was with Mikey-- more apt to think and speak for herself. Jack liked that about her, and they became better friends since the beginning of the year.

"But can't he heal himself? Aside from this week's bender, he's been really good lately!" Jen the Unbeliever said.

"If you consider face down in a bowl of Lucky Charms with an empty bottle of Captain in your hand 'good.' You should have seen him while you were all away for break . . ." Sadie said.

"So wifey's worried?"

"Shut up, Jen," Sadie exhaled quietly. She dropped her face in her hands. Jen slid into the vacant seat next to her, curled her arm over her shoulder, and offered her a cigarette. Sadie slumped into her sobbing but refused the smoke.

"The truth is, Jack won't take any help, and he won't go home. How many times must we go over this, people?" Hollywood Pete said, "We can't force him into change. All we can do is show him we care." Hollywood and Kiera had broken up too, and

Pete now looked like a gym teacher most of the time. He resumed training with Jack, who had missed too many sessions lately. That sounded the first alarm for him, though one of the last for Sadie and I.

"At least it's his senior year. He'll be home soon, for awhile at least, and into the real world. All of this will pass. There are kids who are way worse than Jack anyway," I said, trying to sound optimistic.

"But stepping through the looking glass, what will Jack become on the other side? You know how he views society--manic depressively. He'll either settle down and drink himself to death or he'll go all Chris MacCandless on us." Mikey D. said. Sadie turned into Jen's chest to stifle her crying. Her friend cradled her sighing, "shh, shh."

"I'm sorry, Hon. We'll help him. We can make it okay for the future," Crucifix Jen said.

"What will you say, Sadie? He might finally listen to you, or Benny," John said.

"Well, Benny can't offer the same incentives," Mikey D. said.

"Oh, come on," Crucifix Jen said, her face a little red.

"What? It's just simple economics, right Pete!" Mikey D. said, "You'll be in business soon. When people have the

opportunity to receive a reward, they act accordingly. Hence the idea of Heaven."

"You're going to make a great priest someday," Hollywood Pete replied.

He sounded like he would further his rebuke, but Jack walked into the room just then. We had caught him as he got back from class. His backpack, ripped since sophomore year, showed books bulging from within about to burst. He carried it nonchalantly over one shoulder despite its weight. With his free hand, he reached for the fro pick peeking from above his brow and slipped it into his back pocket.

"Is it my birthday?" he asked.

We tried. We clamored to provide warning and encouragement. Sadie reminded him that she loved him, reciting tenets of his own philosophy: separation from the divine breeds sin, and that without conscious effort people drift away from the Good and become unhappy. He said nothing. He smiled and went upstairs, slamming the door to his room. It was the worst surprise party ever.

The streetlights flattened into glimmering halos as I blinked back hard the tears from my eyes. I wasn't crying: I

was heading back into the wind. As I rounded the bend, Murray's lights went out. It was time to sprint for home.

When I opened the back door, Glen was watching TV in the den, and Mom had just come home from work. She was unpacking her things, an unlit cigarette hanging from her lips. When she saw my face her lips loosened and the butt fell to the floor. She didn't pick it up.

"Benny," was all she said.

"Yeah, Ma?" I asked, looking away. It sounded like Glen had hockey on, and I was suddenly so eager to see how the B's were doing.

"Oh, honey," she said, "You can't keep doing this alone."

"Doing what alone?" I asked, catching my breath. I began rubbing my hands together. They wouldn't warm up.

"I haven't seen that look on your face since Dad died, but you were only little then. I swore I'd never let you wear it again."

"It has nothing to do with--"

"Jack. You haven't been yourself since the summer, Benny," she said, straightening her posture and looking up at me.

"What do you mean?" I asked, stepping back. Hot snot started dripping down my upper lip. I was cornered, so I used

my sleeve to wipe it. Maybe I could get free if I grossed her out.

"All of your running. You're not eating anymore. I don't know because you're never home. How many hours have you worked this week?"

"Thirty, thirty-five?" I lied.

"Benny, it's Wednesday!" she said, jutting her face forward and opening her hands.

"So?" I asked, "It's okay."

"No it's not. You need to slow down!" she said, her voice growing louder. The audience was cheering loudly now, and I peered over Mom's left shoulder, trying to catch Glen's gaze. He was transfixed--at the edge of his seat.

"I'm fine, Mom," I said, crossing my arms, "I know my limits."

"You're not testing them now, even though you think you are. You're just running, Benny. You're running away from everything," she said. Her scowl melted into resignation. She stepped aside.

I said nothing. I smiled and went upstairs, slamming the door to my room. The game was loud now and the crowd was going wild.

#

I planned to call Sadie sometime that week, but I caught her on IM instead.

BigRed69: Happy Valentines Day?

Tangier381: it sucked. you?

BigRed69: sucked hardcore.

Tangier381: youre a week late anyway. thanks for checking up on me though.

BigRed69: what do you mean

Tangier381: well, im just glad youre concerned about my feelings around the romantic holidays . . .

BigRed69: no date?

Tangier381: if you count watching Casablanca and eating Ginnie's leftover Chinese takeout with Sanchez

BigRed69: i guess I wouldnt . . . whats with those two anyway

Tangier381: all Sanchez talks about is how much sex hes having with that guy Hank and all Ginnie talks about is her damn cat

BigRed69: they must be in love

Tangier381: i think so . . . for better or worse. how about you Benny?

BigRed69: how bout I what?

Tangier381: seeing anyone?

BigRed69: WTF. ur kidding right? preposterous!

Tangier381: no! whats so prepstr

Tangier381: so preposto . . .

Tangier381: d'oh. i cant believe u can actually spell prep . . . ARGH! . . . that word!! why the low self esteem?

BigRed69: i danced with my cousin at prom and Jen U kissed me once in the quad to make a girlfriend jealous . . . not exactly what id call hot action

Tangier381: LMAO!!! i forgot about that. well i never had much of a love life either

BigRed69: yeah right! you were practically married.

Tangier381: Jack was my only boyfriend . . .

BigRed69: im sorry

Tangier381: its okay I know you didnt mean it

BigRed69: yeah i did . . . wanted to drag you down to my level . . . j/k!

Tangier381: your level . . . why so deprecating all the time Benny?

BigRed69: deprecating? and you mock preposterous?

Tangier381: LOL. youre getting too good at IM. are you chatting around on me?

BigRed69: NEVER! ur the only person i talk 2

Tangier381: thats so sweet . . . we are so going steady.

BigRed69: :)

Tangier381: ;) ok. now lets get back on task here. why so hard on urself all the time?

BigRed69: jesus you sound like my mom

Tangier381: thats not something you want to say if you want to keep your gf you know . . .

BigRed69: my b

Tangier381: ill still be youre main squeeze if you answer my question

BigRed69: ur tough. i never said anything bad about myself in college

Tangier381: sweetie you never spoke in college

BigRed69: im not speaking now

Tangier381: touché . . .

BigRed69: u know without the accent mark touché would sound like douche

Tangier381: Captain Avoidance goes lowbrow! I just turned on spellchecker.

BigRed69: maybe I should just come visit you . . . you could make ur own assessment

Tangier381: hey . . . not a bad idea! what are you doing tomorrow

BigRed69: um . . . is it Saturday? i might need to work . . . got a few house calls to make . . . though i guess id rather not . . .

Tangier381: they can wait! i have a few douchebag regulars id rather not contend with either. lets blow them off. fuck all. come tomorrow! Waddyasay?

BigRed69: . . . OK!

Tangier381: Great! It's a date!

#

He called in and caught the 7:43 out of Stamford. I felt oddly nervous--a feeling to which I was unaccustomed. I got up early despite working late the night before, and I painted my nails. God, I even agonized over which sweater to wear: I felt like I was Jessica Wakefield! That is until Ginnie burst my girlie-girl bubble.

"Sandra! Get back here! I need to clean your ears!" she squealed. Bang and crash ensued. Standing in my underwear, I winced as the feline fugitive dashed through my door and across my outfits. The streak of orange smashed into the window and bounced to the floor. I could hear her mutter kitty curses from under my bed. I can't say that I blamed her.

Ginny stormed into my room seeking justice. "What did you do to my cat?" she asked, brandishing a wicked-looking Q-Tip. Green sleeves bunched over her stubby forearms, and blood trickled from a wound just above her right wrist. She wasn't wearing a bra (as usual) and her thick tits swayed to and fro as she peered around the room.

"What did you do to her?" I asked with a laugh, "try to make her reconsider *Roe vs. Wade*?"

"No," she said flatly, "I let my cat make up her own mind about the issues." Ginnie turned up her voice and her nose with her response.

I couldn't quite tell what to make of that. Just as I was about to see if she was for real, there was a knock at the door.

"Oh shit, I'm naked!" I snatched my (totally!) pink sweater from the floor, tried to shake out the dander, threw it on, and slid into a pair of jeans. I stumbled to answer, the butterflies in my stomach helping me to keep balance. I brushed

my hair out of my eyes, opened the door, and saw Benny again for the first time.

"It's your gentleman caller!" he said, extending a modest pot of geraniums to me, "a belated housewarming gift."

"If it isn't Jim O'Conner!" I said, accepting the plant. Hamming it up, I continued, "I've been waiting for you all my life!"

"The one and only. Glad to make your acquaintance," he said.

"The pleasure's all mine," I said. In the mirror by the entrance, I could see Ginnie and Sandra peering from the kitchen door behind me; they had made amends and both were suddenly very interested in my visitor.

He looked me up and down. "Um, do you always tuck your jeans into your socks?" he asked, smiling. Laugh lines highlighted his eyes when before he was nothing but cheeks.

I looked down and plucked them out. What an ass! My eyes trailed back up his body, and I felt my face flush. Wow! This was not the same boy I knew in college. He wore tastefully faded jeans when before he wore sweatpants. A fitted oxford shirt made a V-shape from his shoulders and tucked nicely into his tight waistline. Before, his white gut jutted from the over-stretched remnants of his favorite Test for Echo T-shirt.

His hair had grown into a smooth red wave that made his eyes all the bluer; before we left school he looked like he'd been mauled by a Flowbee.

I asked, "D--did you g--get a gift subscription to GQ or something?"

"No. Why?"

"Y--ou look great."

"Um . . . thanks?" he said turning red. He shrugged and backed out the door a step.

"Hey. Why don't you come in for a little while before we hit the town? I made a cake!" My observation threatened to scare away this strange, new creature, and I wanted to lure him back inside.

"Oh . . . can you just show me to the bathroom?" he asked, crossing the threshold.

An "Ah-hem!" issued from behind us, and we both turned to look. I forgot Ginnie was still home and that she would now like to make her presence known.

"Will you introduce me to your . . . friend?" she asked smiling at Benny. She stroked her cat and raised an eyebrow.

"Yeah. Ginnie, Benny, Benny Ginnie," I said fast, figuring he had to pee.

Ginnie stepped through to the living room and walked up to Benny. She was still smiling, and this was making me feel uneasy.

"Hi," Ginnie said. She looked up and batted her lashes-- from her an odd demure.

"Hi," Benny said, extending a big hand.

Ginnie dropped her eyes for a split second. Realizing she still had Sandra wrapped in her arms, she tossed the cat aside. It screeched and hissed and ran out of the room. Ginnie shook Benny's hand.

"It's very nice to meet you, Benny," she said and affected a slight curtsy. Her shoulder was covered in mange.

"You too," Benny said, and, recovering some of his mock suave, "if you'll excuse me." He passed her by and followed my finger through the kitchen to the bathroom.

"Where did you meet this one? He's the love child of Tom Brady and Carrot Top. And I love Carrot Top," Ginnie said, nibbling her lower lip.

"You. You just stay away from him," I said, "I haven't seen him in a long time, and I don't want you creeping him out." Even though Ginnie's taste in men was hideously warped, her reaction didn't seem completely out of whack. "And brush yourself off, will you? You look like Chewbacca."

"Oh, God! Really?" Ginnie proceeded to brush at arms and chest like she was on fire.

Benny returned to the room, shot her a strange glance, and stood by my side. I wrapped my arm in his. He was very warm.

"We're off to see the Wizard?" he asked.

"Yes. He lives behind the waterfall in the Trump Tower," I said.

"Trump has his own tower? With a waterfall? Does it have a mote and battlements as well?" he asked. I forgot he'd never seen the city before.

"Don't be such a rube, Dude," I said, "Did you ride in here with the Clampetts?" Ginnie scoffed and I pulled him tighter.

"Bye, Bye, Benny," she said, clasping her hands together.

"Good-bye, Ginnie," I cut in and we were out the door.

#

After two coffee shops, after walking block after block, after tearing up over the Towers, after completely losing track of the hours, after touring museums and after The Park, it got dark. I peered across the small table at Sadie. She looked so different than when I saw her last: with soft candle flickering on her face, her eyes reminded me of better times--bright and

alive. The light heightened her cheeks and pouted her lips: like a statue she centered the space, and she never needed makeup. She looked around, absently stroking some of her black hair. She didn't bother with the menu because this was her little restaurant; after all, how could we turn down a free meal?

"Sir, do you know what you'd like to order?" she asked when she noticed my staring.

"That sounded very . . . professional," I stated.

"And I'm off duty, too," she said.

"I guess you're just that good at your job!"

"Oh, please don't say that too loud. I'm banking on Old Giocomo firing me!"

"That's a poor choice of words," I said, "considering you're a starving artist."

"I can get another job," she said, "I have many talents."

"Like flipping cabbies the bird?"

"Hey, that jackass almost ran you over," she defended, "you were a deadman!"

"Yeah. I didn't realize I was such a lawless jaywalker," I said.

"I saved you from raw justice," she said, "that's the way it is on these mean streets." She leaned back in her chair and

crossed her arms. She glowered through the glow: "See how hard I am now?"

"You look like a pirate," I said.

"That might be me next job . . . round up them longshoremen and sail the seven seas. Either that or I'll hawk handbags on Canal Street," she said.

"You do make a good tour guide," I said, adding, "especially for someone from Western Massachusetts."

"Thanks. I've had a lot of time to explore," she said. She began rubbing her upper arms like she was cold despite the billowing heat from the kitchen.

"You don't walk around alone, do you?" I asked.

"Who would want to walk with me?" she asked.

"Ginnie? Sanchez?"

"She only showed me the campus, and he tried to out me at his favorite club. But they both have their own lives. They don't have too much time for me."

"And you haven't met anyone else?"

"Who is going to want to take me out?" she asked. She shot forward, "look into my eyes. I'm damaged goods."

She was right. Her deep brown eyes didn't reflect the light: they drew me in until I could see. Her irises read like

the broken poetry heartsick highschoolers only wish they could write.

"Hey, Sadie! Would you and this nice boy of yours like somethin'?" the bubbly blond asked, breaking my gaze.

"Two number twos and an order of bad breath," she said leaning back slowly. Then she looked my way, saying "Trust me," with a wink.

"With the special red?" Sammie asked.

"No," we replied together.

"Wow, okay," Sammie said. I'll be right back. Her ponytail bobbed over her black blouse as she walked into the kitchen. As the white double doors swung open, flames and shouting bellowed from the stove. I looked at Sadie and raised my eyebrows.

"You can't toast gnocci," she said.

"Can you burn it at the stake?"

"On what charge? Witchcraft?" she asked.

"Heresy."

"Huh. Why's that?"

"Because someone as talented as you shouldn't be carrying it over your shoulder for a living," I said. Blood rushed up from my gut and into my face. The skin on my forearms and neck tingled electric. Where did that come from?

"Where did you learn this wit?" she asked with a nervous laugh, "You've become quite debonair, you know? You're blossoming right before my eyes." She leaned forward and smiled. The restaurant grew darker as Sadie moved further into the foreground.

"I mean it, Sadie. Your work was always so beautiful. What was the one of flowers by the woods behind our dorm. The one you stood outside and painted once the weather got nice?" I asked, continuing unembarassed this time.

"Spring," she answered.

"Ok, so I'm pretty clueless. But, if we start hanging out more, would you teach me more about art?" I asked. The tingle spread back up my spine.

"I'd like that," she said, "though I'd doubt if you could tell dada from impressionism."

"I guess I'd need a lot of tutoring," I said.

"Guess so," she said.

"I do know about Creation, Dee" I said.

Silence.

"I'm sorry," I said, "I didn't know Jack was off limits."

"It's okay," she said.

"Well, he's generally the main topic of our conversations. I thought that was why we were really meeting this weekend."

"You really are clueless," she said.

"Why?"

"You didn't realize how you punctuated that sentence?"

"Didn't I use a period?" I asked.

"You called me 'Dee'."

Silence.

"I'm sorry. I didn't realize--" I had used Jack's nickname for her.

"It's okay. Really. It was a little weird and a little random, that's all."

"Chalk it up to temporary Tourett's?" I asked.

"This time," she agreed.

#

"I could really use a smoke," she said, damp and panting.

"Was it as good for you as it was for me?" I asked.

"Well, I never have **that** much fun running through the rain," she said.

"You told me cabs are for wimps," I said.

"I'm just too broke to go dutch, and I didn't want you to waste anymore of your money on me," she said as we sloshed

through the puddle by the door to her building, "at least the flood won't make it to the fifth floor."

"I don't know if I can make it to the fifth floor."

"Aren't I worth it?"

"Yes, you are," I said, opening the door. She smiled, ducked under my arm, and passed through.

The glass slammed behind them, closing out the pink, wet sky and the splashing traffic. Light flooded the staircase, illuminating the uncollected mail littering the entryway. Light reflected in the door and streamed up the stairs. There was now only one way to go--up--and it grew darker as we climbed. Apparently the super didn't like going upstairs either.

"Do you want a ride?" I asked, halting my two-by-two bounding to look down to Sadie and offering to carry her piggyback.

"You know, I walk these stairs every day," she said, trailing off, "you've just become Bruce Jenner or Sir Edmund Hillary or something over the last few months, and I can't keep up!"

"Sorry," I said, stopping at the top. I sniffed the moldy green carpet up which I trudged and absentmindedly picked at the chips of white paint on the wall by the door, flecks falling on the floor by his feet. The fluorescents buzzed and flickered

overhead, strobing the quiet night. Sadie looked like a worn out raver as she summited and reached into her pocket.

"You can't get in without me anyway. I'm the Keymaster," she said, extracting a large key. It gleamed dully in the half-light.

"I thought you were supposed to be the Gatekeeper," I said.

"Just don't start acting like Rick Moranis," she said and turned the lock: "shall we?"

We entered the apartment, scaring Sandra who skittered to her bed in Ginnie's study. Mother always slept with the door closed, and, as it was quite late, refuge for her kitty was neither offered nor expected.

I laughed, "Your roommate is something else."

"Yeah, she's a whole lotta something," Sadie said as she draped their soaked coats over the kitchen chairs, "I felt like I had to jailbreak you tonight."

"Why?"

"You didn't notice?"

"Notice what?"

"Cookie Monster's googly eyes were only on you. Usually she's giving head to law books or Judge Judy reruns."

"You're something else too, you know," I said, drawing closer.

"Don't make light, Bennie," she said, "You honestly didn't see the way those two cougars checked you out at the Vanguard?"

"I can't believe you got us in there!" I strained just above a whisper, "Jack would have been--"

"Ecstatic."

"Right!"

Sadie sat down at the table and put her head in her hands. Before I knew what was right, I slid next to her.

"I'm sorry," I said, "I'm really sorry . . ."

She looked up at me, tears smearing her already smudged mascara. A drop clung, quivered, and dropped from her nose.

"I spoke out of embarrassment. I'm not used to attention like that from them or . . ."

"Who?" she asked, taking a napkin from the table to wipe her face.

"You know," he said and blanched, "from anyone, really."

"That's not what you were going to say."

"Maybe not."

The kitty clock that hung above the sink pointed paws at the two and the six. Neither of us missed the time of Jack's death since that night. We listened to the white room until the ticking melted away.

"Are you tired?" I asked.

Sadie looked around the room for a minute. "I'm too tired to sleep."

"Me too. I haven't slept much since . . ."

"That wasn't torrets, Bennie," she said, "you can't harp on a subject and call it temporary."

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry!" I said. I looked away and then crossed his arms and then looked at my shoes. Silence ensued. The cat clicked each second more and more slowly. Its eyes darted back and forth, and, judging by its painted smirk, it was plotting against some unsuspecting mice.

"It's just that you're so much like him now," she said.

"No I'm not."

"You are. You are!" she said.

"No I'm not."

"You are. I've been making mental notes all evening. You're style, not your haircut, but your clothes. What you say and how silly you say it. 'When I make it, there's gonna be a new sheriff in town.' You wiped your mouth twice after each pause in your eating. The way you tapped your foot out of time with the music."

"All night?" I asked, my memory jogging back to Jack's arrhythmic idiosyncrasies.

"All night."

"So why didn't you call this off then? Why did you agree to meet with me, 'Good Ole Gallagher', in the first place?"

"Because I think I liked it," she said, her hands grasping at me from across the table.

#

Her lamp dimmed low, she left her clothes across the floor as she walked through the room to the bed. Like the light, she moved softly as she slid back the sheets and lay across the mattress. Expectant eyes met mine.

I saw her nude once about a year ago. She had stepped out of the shower and into Jack's room, her towel dropping a second too soon as she swung shut the door. Despite dreaming of what flesh I spied night by night I only watched her eyes. They were no longer black but blue.

She peered into me from across the room as I hurried to match her new outfit. Later, she remembered how my body changed, how my hair changed, my breath, his kiss. From someone new to someone else. Even when we woke, when the clouds dimmed the morning sun, she hadn't realized her mistake.

#

Tangier381: so you'll meet me at my parents house this weekend

BigRed69: yeah. time?

Tangier381: 10. it'll be like old times

BigRed69: Dude, I've never been to your house!

Tangier381: yeah yeah i mean itll be fun

BigRed69: Ok. I'm looking forward to it. See you then!

Tangier381: not as much me

#

I arrived after driving the winding roads that led to her home out west. I passed through towns I never heard of, and the sun splotched through patches of new foliage and onto the road. I left the radio off and coasted with the windows open over and down the hills and through woods and pastures. After a few hours of this, and after a few wrong turns and some backtracking, I found my way.

Sadie skipped out from her front door and met me at my car. Before I could say anything, she wrapped me tightly in her arms. Surprised, I took a moment before returning her embrace, noting her old scent of cloves and roses mingling with the pines that

towered above us. When we parted, she stepped back, framed by the dense grove that circled and secluded the cedar-shingled ranch.

"You started smoking again," I said.

"Oh, you know what they say, 'a few Djarums a day keeps the doctor away,'" she replied, smiling.

"What do your parents think?" I asked.

"Why don't you ask them? They're just inside, and they've missed you terribly," Sadie said.

"Even though they only met me once or twice?"

"Oh," she paused, pursing her lips, "Yeah. They're very easily attached. Let's go!" she said. She grabbed my hand and hustled toward the open front door, her light floral skirt billowing behind her. I'd never really seen her wear anything but jeans before.

We entered the house and her parents were sitting on green easy chairs in the den off to the right. Old tomes and family portraits filled the bookshelves that lined the walls, and a vase of daffodils sat in the center of the room on the coffee table. Both Mister and Mistress Tangier set down their reading.

"Benjamin, it's nice to see you again. You're looking quite well," Mr. Tangier said. He rose from his seat to shake my hand. He had the snowy beard and the smoldering pipe of a

college professor but the short, wiry build of a lifelong outdoorsman. Mrs. Tangier met me with a hug. She looked like a flattering, yet accurate, artist's rendition of what Sadie might look like in 35 years or so.

"Benny, wouldn't you know, I was just looking through Sadie's baby pictures, and would you believe she was quite the little nudist!"

Sadie feigned embarrassment, whining, "Mom," though it was a little too late for true modesty.

"Oh, I'm just kidding! I was really just perusing a few cookbooks, trying to decide what to make for us tonight. Any preferences?" she asked.

"Anything's fine," I said.

"I hear you've been following a strict diet, you know, like Jack used to," Mrs. Tangier said.

"I . . . uh . . . well, it's not exactly Kosher."

Mr. Tangier's stout laughter drew the attention away from the blush I felt warming my face. "Pam, it's a special occasion. Make us a sumptuous repast--not rabbit food!"

"A special occasion?" I asked.

"Yes!" Mr. Tangier boomed, his voice belaying his size.

"Sadie's coming back home to go to school."

"You are?" I asked.

"I'm going to Umass to become a teacher," she said, "cool, huh?"

I didn't answer.

"It sure is!" Mrs. Tangier said, "she'll be third generation."

"On both sides of the family," Mr. Tangier added.

"When did you decide this?" I asked.

"When I got tired of waiting tables. I thought I would be the portrait of the starving artist, but really Ginnie was eating all my food. Actually, I couldn't pay the rent, and she kicked me out."

"But what about your work? You always devoted so much time to it." I said.

"I'll still have time for it," she said, "and I can make a more sizable contribution to society."

"Hey," Mrs. Tangier said, "that's the first time you ever said something like that without a trace of sarcasm!"

"Well, Dad still consults with engineering firms even though he's now retired, and you still have your column even though you're still in a high school everyday."

"So. . ." Mrs. Tangier started.

"I see how it can work," Sadie finished.

"Benny," Mrs. Tangier said, turning to me, "you once planned to teach, right?"

"Um . . . yeah. Elementary ed."

"Now he's in computers, Mom," Sadie said.

"That's not a bad trade," said Mr. Tangier, "just so long as it enables you to get what you want out of life."

As I pondered that statement, Sadie suggested we tour the small house, and I was glad to follow her.

Dinner spread the table, and we ate fresh Italian bread along with trout cooked with tomatoes and capers. Lights were dimmed low to augment the waning April sunlight. Fresh air blew coolly through the small dining room, causing the candles to flicker. A second bottle of Cabernet made its way toward me, I took a deep breath, and I realized I had never enjoyed a meal like this at home. The TV wasn't even turned on for my dad to curse at.

"Benny, you're Catholic, right?" Bob asked.

"I was brought up that way."

"He still goes to church on the holidays," Sadie mentioned as she poured both of us some more wine.

"It keeps Mom happy," I said, raising my glass in salute.

"I see. And where does that leave your faith now?" Bob asked.

"Agnostic at best, humanist at worst," I replied.

"Why the negative connotations?" asked Bob.

"Jack was always so interested in talking about spirituality, philosophy" Pam said, "he was very wise for his years."

"Yeah. You could say that." I looked away after speaking.

"That boy could sit here all night describing the beauty of one of my CAD drawings--how it comprised a static form of quality--and how it would actually function after manufacture, a dynamic concept of lines and motion," Bob said and added with a laugh, "*Deus ex machina*." He then drained his glass and slouched in his chair.

Pam continued: "I remember one time, he was reading some dingy old poems I wrote in college--typical, adolescent, confessional--and he said I should self-publish. I thought he was nuts! 'Why would I do that?' I asked, 'No one will ever read them, and besides, I'd want to edit them so much it would be like writing them all over again.' And he said, 'Mom'--he always called me that--'You shouldn't think that way. The exercise of forming your expression is all that matters. It's important because it's holy.' And I never forgot those words.

He was sitting on the floor, leafing through my old notebooks, and he looked up at me with the most beautiful expression. I was speechless." She sat staring into the red in her glass. She swirled it around for a few moments and instead of drinking, then clasped her hands.

Sadie reached for my hand underneath the table. "Benny and I might take a ride after dinner. Maybe we'll walk around downtown for a little while," she said, breaking the silence.

"Go ahead. Have fun!" Pam said, sitting up straight.

"If you haven't explored yet, you should," Bob said, "this is nice college town."

"We'll clean up. You two have fun," Pam said, and she began collecting the dirty dishes.

#

Panting, the windows fogging fast, we parted for a mere instant, just long enough for me to ask her.

"What was that?"

"Nothing."

"Really, it was nothing."

"Because for a second there . . ."

"It was just my leg cramping up."

"Your leg? I'm the giant in the back of a Volkswagen."

"This IS an uncomfortable place. Just kiss me again."

I complied for a moment. But then I asked, "You called me Jack?"

"I . . . might have . . . I'm so sorry! I--"

I kissed her hard so she couldn't speak.

#

BigRed69: I just got home. What are you up to?

Tangier381: reading ur notebooks

BigRed69: MY notebooks?

Tangier381: i mean Jacks

BigRed69: No. They're my notebooks.

Tangier381: yes your notebooks.

#

It was dark when I got back to Wally's. It was Good Friday, and I just wrapped up a week of installs at Burton's. Needless to say, the phone was ringing as I stepped inside.

"Benny Benny Benny what the fuck did you do to me."

"Hi, Bill," I answered.

"Dude I can't access any of my files my profile won't even come up I need to run draft copies of our next ad for a

presentation Monday and now I'm beyond screwed!" he said, his voice a breathless crescendo.

"Listen, Bill. Slow down. You're saying you can't get onto your network drives?"

"Well I haven't checked yet but my background is missing so I figured my connection was dead again you know like last time. Shit I have some family thing I need to be at you've got to help me and my girlfriend all ready called twice and she's going to bitch me out some more--"

"Okay. Wait a second. You know we switched from roaming profiles to local profiles, right?" I asked and began pacing the darkened showroom.

"Say what?"

"Local profiles. Your desktop wallpaper, shortcuts, and settings are now stored on your client machine instead of on the network. Having everyone access the same resources was slowing down the server. Now you're independent. You're on your own," I said.

"You mean--"

"Open My Computer, and you should see all of your drive mappings are intact. You can get your files there." I felt like I could provide further instruction, but he was usually pretty good.

"But I'm missing my--"

"Doctored photo of Osama Bin Laden getting dialysis," I deadpanned.

"Hey. That was from Fox News!" Bill said, incredulous.

"I know. So you can always download it again."

"Will do will do I can't believe Burton never tells us about this shit what a pain in the ass I can't believe he just goes and does whatever he wants without consulting anyone and then we all have to play catch-up hey I can get my network files now thanks I should be able to run these off and get out of here then I need to drive to Worcester to pick up Mindy and I'll head back to my parents' house then maybe when they're asleep--"

"TMI, Bill. Have a good night," I said.

"Thanks man thanks! You too!"

I hung up the receiver and dropped onto the stool at my workbench. I could have gone to Sadie's for the holiday, but I thought it best to stay home with Mom and Glen. They were probably at church right now, and I preferred an empty office to an empty house that night. I remembered how Dad seldom made it to Mass, even on Easter. Mom and I usually went without him.

Cheerful patrons crossed the front door on their way to the pub. A couple milled about our storefront to smoke, and the guy gave up his coat to his date, who was dressed for summer

clubbing rather than for the near-freezing temperatures. She smiled and thanked him and offered him a drag. Who said chivalry is dead?

I stared into the corner as the streetlights played through the window. I was independent--on my own now. Idle time always played with my mind which wandered back to journals I had not lately read:

#### 4.5.02

Stress? I like stress. It offers positive opportunity to grow. Training, studying, finals, planning for after graduation. I think of tasks and pressure as missions to accomplish! Don't distress! After all, finding joy in activity is Union. Think of all those old men with gray temples and high blood pressure. Why can't action lead to satori? Why does it lead to death? And in our society, why is inaction praised so highly and preferred? People spend thousands to sit on a plane, to sit on some beach, to sit around at a restaurant, to sit around their hotel rooms. What a waste of life. What ever happened to guts? What ever happened to grace under pressure? What is "right action," as Suzuki Roshi said?

Why do we love junk food and junk culture? Ring Dings and Britney Spears and Jerry Springer? They don't demand too much of our experience--of our focus. This is because we work so much we're too tired and stressed to appreciate the good stuff. Got to find balance! Finding joy in stressful times, and in the quotidian, will teach me to find joy during big, complicated projects, in hard times, in tragedy. It will keep me seeking and whole.

A thought came to me in a dream about high school: remember how, at times, I was happier back then despite all the bullshit? Mom and Dad splitting, saving money for college, nearly failing calculus. I didn't really stress about it. I work much harder now, but I shouldn't work out of fear or anxiety. Negativity started bubbling up last summer. This is when I began to realize my own mortality, and fear of death and ego motivated me after that. Not Union so much. I think it's time to focus on the better way.

Calm art, controlled fire. I'm so much more effective when I relax. When I don't rely on the feeling of work, but instead when I use minimal effort to be efficient. It was always the same in wrestling. Don't get caught up in the "work" feeling. Instead, relax and be effective!

#### 5.10.02

The night workout was good, studying with Sadie was good, finals are good. I'm remembering to be eustressed, not distressed. A challenge of this nature is a call to be with God. Union through performance excellence. This should be the most important lesson here. I found this neat quote too: "Work is love made visible. And if you cannot work with love but only with distaste, it is better that you should leave your work and sit at the gate of the temple and take alms of those who work with joy. For if you break bread with indifference, you bake a bitter bread that feeds but half man's hunger. And if you grudge the crushing of the grapes, your grudge distills a poison in the wine. And if you sing though as angels, and love not singing, you muffle man's ears

to the voices of the day and the voices of the night."

-- Kahlil Gibran.

I can think of one more big project to work on--a work of love, for sure--one that will surely lead to Union.

I don't want to be alone. Not like Mom and not like Dad.

Remembering this entry, I knew what happened next--what he was driving at. I breathed in as deeply as I could and held in the air until my eyes watered. The air rushed out of my lungs in a gasp. I slowed several small breaths. Again. I breathed in, held it like a bong hit, and let it float away.

I made an extra thirty bucks by staying late. I could have been at church, I could have been with Sadie, or I could have been sitting quietly reading Jack's journals. I worked late nearly every night now. I felt like Bill. Was I helping Wally or fueling a new addiction? Something Mom said a few months ago reverberated, and I wished I was running. I wished I was reading journals and learning what happened to Jack. Was I trapped in a struggle for subsistence or was I fleeing? It was time to go home.

I didn't want to be Benny anymore.

#

BigRed69: Hey, Babe.

Tangier381: hi dreamy how are you

BigRed69: I'm better now that I can talk with you.

Tangier381: bad day?

BigRed69: It's just been too much lately. I'm either at the office or on site until I can't see straight anymore. I feel like the typical alienated worker. I miss my *Gattungswesen*.

Tangier381: well im glad u can chat with me cuz i missed you today. youre my nature

BigRed69: I miss you everyday.

Tangier381: are you free again this weekend

BigRed69: I might not make it out to you until 9 or 10 o'clock on Friday.

Tangier381: oh :( how about I meet you at the office save you the drive that's two extra hours we can see each other! :D

BigRed69: That sounds great. Wally has been bugging me to introduce you for awhile now.

Tangier381: all right ill b there

BigRed69: You might have to deal with the *O'Reilly Factor* for a few minutes.

Tangier381: i can handle it i like a difference of opinion i can talk to ppl

BigRed69: I've been finding it increasingly hard to swallow. Especially since Bush just landed on that aircraft carrier. Every second of coverage all damn day is shouting MISSION ACCOMPLISHED! What a con job.

Tangier381: like that little girl soldier and the falling Saddam statue

BigRed69: Exactly. Really, come on. Who buys that shit?

Tangier381: like pretty much everybody right now

BigRed69: Exactly.

#

While we were driving back, it got dark and cool outside. Suicidal neon burned and chased itself across the passenger window, extinguishing in the right blind-spot. Light pollution made the overcast swirl a feisty pink as we crested the hill and dropped down toward the red stoplights. Strip-mall brick and

glass finally blacked out in Sabbath deference and gained definition as he braked hard, jarring me forward.

"Dinner was dogshit," he said as he wrenched the wheel to the right. We were turning down a street I didn't know.

"You don't have to crash us to prove that point," I said, rubbing my neck.

"Sorry," was the brusque reply. Quickly trees grew replacing concrete, and dark foliage shrouded houses sprouting roadside.

"No. I should be the one who's sorry. I insisted on the 99. I guess it's really turned to suck since we first started eating there."

"That was a long time ago. Things change."

"I know."

We were on the back roads of his hometown; I'd been around awhile but I didn't recognize these streets. We turned hard again and an old farm opened up to our right. Glowing softly in the distance was Providence.

"Where are we going?"

"Home."

"This way?"

"This way," he said. I felt like we were going in a circle--back to where we started. The car slowed and drove past

a nook where the black gates stood. We stopped in front of them.

"We're here," he said. He looked at me, his bright eyes different and possessed. He reached for the door handle and began stepping out of the car.

"I'm coming with you," I said.

"Okay," he said and left the car. I slid out from the creaking frozen door, threw myself against it, forcing it shut, and followed him into the cemetery. He strode without pause across the wet grass, past the headstones, and I struggled to keep up.

"Isn't this the night," I called out, panting, "you wrote me the letter?"

"It is. One week before I gave it to you," he said, tossing his words back over his shoulder.

"One week before--"

"I came home," he said, stopping. He stood thinking, as peepers chirped around us. The sweet breeze blew and ebbed, the clouds above bunched and cuddled into gray matter. I followed his gaze downward; I knew what he was studying.

Joeseeph Yamin was inscribed on his headstone.

"This isn't your house," I said.

"It's where I live now."

"What about Mom and Glen?"

"They can't be here right now."

"What about Rachel and Jacob?"

"They'll be here soon enough."

"Jack?"

"Yes?"

"Do you know where you've brought me?"

"Yes."

We looked again at the headstone and its inscription. Joseph Yamin was etched into fresh rock: the newest plot in the yard, daffodils shivered in the dirt by our feet. I wrapped my arm into his, gently pulling him back.

"Why are we here?"

"You know why."

"I don't."

"You sent me here. You told me to go home."

"This isn't what I meant. You KNOW this!"

Silence.

"I've read everything you've written. I know what you were thinking. I know how you felt. I could have helped you. I would have gone to the meetings with you or to rehab. I had a list of councilors. It was just too much. Too much! I wasn't

ready to marry you until you were really ready to marry me. I wanted to. I should have--"

"There was no turning back," he said in resignation. "Your words, they broke me." He removed his arm from mine, no longer intertwined.

"No," I shook my head. A gust thrust between us and he moved further away.

"They did. But not like you think. You haven't read everything."

"What?"

"There's more," he said, his back turned from me toward the grave.

"But Benny and I--we saw the letter. The drafts and your doubts. It's not your fault. It was mine," I said, breathing deeply.

"It was my fault."

"How could it be your fault?" I asked, exhaling. His words were like a shot to the gut.

"I failed. I couldn't solve the mystery. The secret."

"We solved it for you. We know everything. We're working together now. To bring you back," I said, pleading. I stepped toward him, trying to embrace him.

"Give up. I'm a goner. You don't have the final piece. You don't know why I had to die. There's something else you need to learn."

"What is it?"

"You and Benny can do it, but you have to let me go." He pushed me away.

"How? We're so close! Won't you stay and tell us?" I grabbed at him

"I can't," he said and shook me off again.

"Why?"

He turned toward me and yelled in my face: "Because I don't know! I don't know!"

I dropped to my knees, crying hard, choking. Bile bubbled up on my lips and I choked it down. I year ago I knelt here and it was the last time I prayed.

"Swear you will let me rest," he said, resolute.

"No. Benny, where are you? I need you!" I looked around wildly--everywhere throughout the darkness except for where I could find him.

"Swear," he said, louder. Angry, he shouted, "You will find the Final Truth!" Two heavy strides and he stood above me. There was no moonlight.

"I can't do this alone!" I cried, "Benny!"

"Swear!" he screamed and staggered, falling. He caught himself on the headstone, fingers clawing the smooth marble. Leaning just over the edge, he sobbed and whispered through the tears, "I . . . I swear."

"I swear," I repeated after him.

And he collapsed, wrapping his arms around me.

#

#### 5.11.02

Why do we have to be good? Why must we be close to the divine if we're only meant to die? There are no real karmic laws; we can be relativists or saints or killers and it doesn't matter. Without Union, we might as well die off. Who the fuck cares? What else is there in this universe if we can't have each other? Meditate. Contemplate. Create. If you can't Relate you're alone in the dark. The puzzle won't fit so why not the bottle? Be drunk as Baudelaire. What's the alternative? [Whiskey and tears mar the ink here.] Why strive for life, grasping for distant, sullen gods? They're indifferent of our minds and the universe's ultimate design. If being good makes us

feel good, why not be bad? Can't we love what's wrong? What's evil? It's simple economics: hate devalues divine currency, and most people spend their cash so freely. If you can amass millions, what's compelling you to burn it up to serve the poor?

Ponder an alternate metaphysical reality: What if the divine comprised of malevolent forces? What if we derived the greatest pleasure and happiness by *destroying* rather than by *creating*? By *ignoring* our inner lives and by *conquering* external reality? By *warring* with one another and by *dominating* one another to ensure the supremacy of a singular group?

Darwinism may urge us to extend this dominance and conformity throughout reality. This seems to be our easiest and most natural path, and aren't we governed by natural laws? Isn't the universe bound to come apart anyway? Consider how human actions usually bring about extinction of species, the exhaustion of resources, and the destruction of previously established Quality. Is Quality arbitrary? What if existence needs to break down? Should I break down, too?

If we are to be happy(?), there is no hope. Rejection leads to enlightenment and enlightened rejection. This is the end of everything. I will fight no more forever.

#

I was running day after Sadie drove away. We decided not to see each other for awhile and I thought it ok. After that séance we needed to go our separate ways--independent studies. After all the late night rituals, we brought Jack back; after seeing him face to face, we learned our true charge.

It was much warmer today, but I wasn't yet sweating. I shortened my strides, shifting to low gear for the uphill. It was time to climb.

I planned a little of my own philosophizing. First, I was bugged by a computer problem: "603 The caller's buffer is too small." Needless to say, this time it was personal. That night, I was booted from my ISP, seemingly insulted, and I saw the sun up as I tried troubleshooting: I checked the modem properties to make sure that the port speed was not set too low; I opened up "Port Settings" and made sure that FIFO's were on

and not set too low; I tried playing around with the settings to eliminate the error; I tried uninstalling and reinstalling Dialup Networking and all its associated components; I tried uninstalling and reinstalling the modem; desperate, I even checked the FAQ's in the manual, learning "it is possible that the modem is not functioning. Refer to computer manufacturer." Thanks. Next step was to buy a new dial-up modem, I guess. If only Mom and Glen would spring for cable.

This got me thinking about device settings and network architecture. A buffer is a piece of software that temporarily stores data as it flows from input and output devices. An example is when you tell your computer to burn a CD: it stores information in memory and deletes it as it as it authors the disc. This frees system resources for other operations. For telecom, buffers usually compensate for the discrepancy between rates of data received and data processed. In other words, when your modem receives data it stores some of it in a buffer so it can continue to receive while your computer processes the initial information stored there. In theory this process speeds things up, but in practice, it's not always the case. I was reminded of when Mom would talk at Dad while he muttered, "yup" while surfing the snowy channels on our old going-black-and-white JVC.

The process by which God reveals information is similar. Jack, like all good prophets, listened closely to the divine all around him, looking for signs. He communicated them back to us, trying with all his might to keep up. But something held him back: some error in his programming--be it fear or addiction or his family or himself--caused his buffer to overrun. Too much, too fast. He malfunctioned, and he decided to refer to the manufacturer. We were as useful as a help file.

I stopped and leaned on the fence to catch my breath. "Too much, too fast," I panted as a car sped by behind me into the coming dusk. We lived near a quarry, and it was the only empty space around besides the road. I squeezed through an old hole, and the wire scratched my wrists and calves. I brushed the rust that flecked my shoulders to the ground and looked around: scrubby pines popped up among gray rocks; thin grasses sprouted from piles of earth and broken stones. My thinning soles slapped the gravel as I ran down the embankment. At the bottom of the small pit, unconcerned with working out, I crouched in the dust.

I agreed with all of Jack's writings, even his fears of universal self destruction. But there's the catch: the law of

entropy disallows this. As theoretical physicist Brian Green explains in *An Elegant Universe*, the universe is structured in such a way that it will burn off greater and greater amounts of energy to expand indefinitely. It's true that bodies of matter form and break down to release the energy. The universe is not prone toward self-destruction, however. This is because existing forms of matter--especially gaseous suns, rapidly spinning galaxies, and, of course, intelligent life--burn more energy while in existence than in nonexistence. Matter cannot be created or destroyed, but it does use energy as previous forms of matter break down: This energy never lies dormant; as it's released, it forms newer and grander systems that grow and change and become increasingly complex. The more complex a system is the more energy it needs to sustain itself. Therefore, the laws of entropy require the universe to evolve and to grow for eternity, as it is designed to expend exponentially more energy.

This was the bad code in Jack's logic. He was only a physics class away from understanding this. Simple stuff, really. The sun was no longer hot on the back of my neck as it dropped below the lip of the pit.

The theory coincides nicely with the theories of Static and Dynamic Quality Jack always wanted to discuss after he read Pirsig's *Lila*. I read this book one summer for Jack's sake, and I never understood it previously. But I saw a connection when he explains that energy, Tao, or Quality (to force synonymy) manifests in physical forms like Green says. These forms are known as Static Quality and can be physical or abstract constructs such as a building, a cell, or an ideology. These forms are invaluable, as they make up the composition of reality. They are not permanent though. The driving force of growth and change is known as Dynamic Quality, and it ensures that Static objects break up and evolve as they become obsolete. Often, the arts, revolutions, or even cosmic forces—anything with high energy output—force dynamic change. Without Dynamic Quality, the universe would not exist as we know it.

For example, without Static Quality, we would not have a constitution to uphold; without Dynamic Quality, we would never have made civil rights amendments.

I rose from the bottom of the pit. The season's first mosquitoes, born from the wastewater puddles on the other side, buzzed around my temples. I gently brushed them off. Finding a steep path, I thought about climbing out.

So, these like ideas explain fundamental existence in two different ways. While the physical and moral workings of reality may be set arbitrarily, the architect of the rules and laws that govern all creation ingrained them in our very nature. We derive pleasure from partaking in Quality, fulfillment from pursuing Union. When we become selfish or distracted, when we submit to the temptations of weakness and idleness, when we recklessly seek shallow, fleeting pleasures, we do wrong. Needless destruction of Static Quality is sinful, ignoring the promise of Dynamic Quality is also sinful.

I realized that the universe is composed of good circuits, but it bothered me that I don't know the programmer. I wanted to know why Jack was deleted. Self-deleted? Gnarled roots reached over the edge of the slope--a helping hand I took. Pulling myself out of the pit and brushing myself off, I jogged into the last of the sunset, following the glow back home.

#

I wouldn't lose Benny like I lost Jack. Out back, I built a shrine: a plastic table held his picture and two candles I

milled myself at Yankee. My easel and canvas stood before me, and my eyes selectively focused from my work to the meadow that stretched just beyond the inconsistently manicured patch of grass behind my parents' house.

I can't believe how hard I clung to Jack. I can't believe what I did to Benny. It wasn't fair, and I needed to set things right.

It had been a few weeks since I last saw him and his features were fuzzy and diffused among his many incarnations: he was the pale and pimpled dud he fancied himself in college, the fit and witty Irish boy just off the boat, the brooding and anxious lover--a real Mickey Rourke--I created over the last few months. What was he now? I wished I could talk with him.

Missing the real Benny, I lifted my brush to the canvas. The cool colors and downy details showed the Impressionism on my mind. A figure soon stood casually, looking over an iron bridge which seemed soft and floating. I kept the light high to chase away the remnants of dawn's shadows, though they lingered blue on the pond water. But there would be no black paint in this portrait.

He looked up to the sun, warming his face. He wore a light wool coat he didn't own and carried a book of poems under his arm he never read. He looked good though his belt and shoes

didn't match. Without my muse, I feared merely smearing on the pastels to replicate hackneyed Monet.

When I had finished the background, the foreground, and all the highlights, I stepped back. The sun lowered itself below the tree line to the left, and, on the opposite side, the pine needles glowed. Two turkey buzzards circled, and I watched while I worked the cramps from my hands; I had totally lost track of time--it felt like five minutes? Now was magic hour. Everything done excepting his face. His face. Benny's own face. I had to get that right. I knew I was painting him, and I couldn't place the face. I sketched over the fleshy peach that was his head: caterpillar eyebrows, a hawk nose not crooked, extra skin around the mouth, jowls, one snaggletooth canine. It wasn't right, and I needed to start over. Gum at the ready, I planed to erase his face. But I remembered a photo I saw long ago, and now Benny was a ginger-haired version of his father. God, how did this happen?

I stopped and turned inside to turn on the computer and to make a call. Crying, I realized I had finally learned something.

#

BigRed69: What now?

Tangier381: We need to talk. We need to meet.

BigRed69: I thought we decided that was a bad idea.

Tangier381: Well, now I feel like it's a good idea.

BigRed69: Why?

Tangier381: It's about your father.

BigRed69: So you're hunting a new ghost? What about the last one we tried to catch?

Tangier381: Didn't work because we crossed the streams. Now I have him. He's mine.

BigRed69: Why do you keep haunting me like this? Leave me alone!

Tangier381: Why? Because I love you, you idiot!

BigRed69: Don't say that. You love Jack.

Tangier381: I did. I do. But he's gone. We can't bring him back. We never could.

BigRed69: You're right . . . I thought I could change.

Tangier381: You did.

BigRed69: I thought I could change into him. That I could be him by having you.

Tangier381: You did. But it wouldn't work for long.

BigRed69: I know that now. Now I'm nobody.

Tangier381: Don't say that! Look at who you've become!

BigRed69: Right. A failure. I'm nobody. I have notebooks and memories.

Tangier381: You have a legacy. And you have yourself. That's what I needed to tell you. You're Benny!

BigRed69: You broke radio silence to tell me my name. That's not rally mayday.

Tangier381: This isn't the first time you tried to bring someone back. You've been in the resurrection business for a long time.

BigRed69: What the hell are you talking about? I'm not god.

Tangier381: Nope. But you were your father until about a year ago. Then you were Jack. Now you can finally be Benny.

BigRed69: Bullshit.

Tangier381: Nope. How do you think you lost the weight so fast? You have better genes and more motivation than he ever had.

BigRed69: He died when I was nine. How would you know?

Tangier381: Because now I know you. I spent days getting this right. Just listen.

BigRed69: You mean read?

Tangier381: Whatever. You couldn't follow through with teaching because of your dad. You were living like him. You sat and ate and were crude and you didn't like people. You met Jack and that started to change. You opened up and grew into yourself a little bit. Remember how much fun we had the last two years at college? It was the three of us. Jack and me and you. Your dad was out of the picture.

BigRed69: We were a trinity.

Tangier381: Yes. But you still weren't all there. You were trapped between two worlds. You were stranded, and we never saw it.

BigRed69: I never saw it either. I always just let stuff happen to me.

Tangier381: Except for teaching. Remember our surprise when you brought it up. That you wanted to be around kids?

BigRed69: I still don't know how the idea came up. It just popped into my head.

Tangier381: I think I know why.

BigRed69: Why?

Tangier381: Because you wanted to make up for those lost years. You wanted to be a father figure.

BigRed69: Something told me no. Not to do it.

Tangier381: It's called fear.

#

We talked all night, and we wrote together. Sadie had been adding to Jack's notes right along side me, though we hadn't reviewed each other's work. It was time to formalize his thought. It was time get it all together. After all, if we were going to live this philosophy, together, then we would need to really know it. We needed to break the echolalia.

The views propounded by Union may seem elementary. They are. Most of our most cherished endeavors and institutions conform to this thesis. However, as Paul Tillich once said, "sin is in separation." Often, our ken is too limited even when we work with best intentions. Philosophy and religion always encourage us to "listen" to the divine. In an age where social and technological advancement occurs too fast to track, our relationships with each other, with ourselves, and with our gods are outpaced. We, prodigal sons and daughters, all too often suffer in desperate isolation, instead of valuing the infinite interconnectedness that can make us truly happy. Our ignorance of the true workings of life, love, and morality may soon lead

to our downfall if we fail to realize kensho, Nirvana, and the promises of Eden.

#

Cars stuffed with bedding, dirty laundry, computer parts, and file boxes of important papers, Glen and I leaned hard into the doors to make sure nothing would fall out during the drive. It was like I was leaving for college for the first time again, and, in a sense, I guess I was. Sadie and Mom stood on the lawn enjoying the warm sun while we worked.

"We'd better not stand in the way of Man's Work," Sadie said.

"No way. Especially since their doing such a good job," Mom said.

"You know, putting the futon mattress in the back of my hatchback instead of strapping it to Benny's roof saved so much space," Sadie said.

"Yeah. That was such a great idea! Good thing they didn't follow our advice!" Mom chimed.

Glen bolted upright, responding to the needling. "It all fit, didn't it?"

"Yeah. It takes great strategy to safely place items so lovingly within each automobile," I said.

"You mean it takes a lot of muscle to cram a car full of your crap? I mean, do we really need three computer screens? Where are we going to find the room?" Sadie asked.

"Did you need to fill the entire bedroom closet full of summer clothes? It's going to be fall soon, you know," I said.

"Ah, love. They're like an old married couple already," Glen said, leaning against the hood of my Carolla. He chipped at the hood and picked the fading paint from his nails.

"It'll happen soon enough," Sadie said, looking at me with a wink.

"Let's get through our first semester of grad school first, okay?" I said, my face already red from the weekend we spent on the beach.

"Cosmo calls men like that commitophobes," Mom said.

"I'll just have to keep working on him," Sadie said. She hugged Mom, put on her shades, and strode over to her car with which she would help me move out for the last time.

"You've done a lot of good work already, Hon," Mom said, reaching into her jeans pocked for another piece of Nicorette.

"Hey, before you go, can you explain something to me?" asked Glen, turning to me. A batch of clouds drew across the sky, shading the sun.

"Yeah?"

"Last night, I heard something from your room that made me curious," he said.

"Um . . . it wasn't what you think," I said, opening the door to my car, preparing to get in. It was hot in there, and with the seat pushed all the way up, I couldn't wedge myself behind the wheel fast enough.

"You're right. I heard you two talking. Something about an onion and the face of the universe," he said.

"Union and the fate of the universe?"

"Yeah. What's that all about?"

"It's all good. Everything's going to be just fine."

"Yeah, but how do you know?" he asked, oddly concerned.

Sadie craned her neck out her window: "It's all a matter of faith." A cool breeze. Relief.

Glen wrapped his knuckles on the roof and smiled. He went back to stand with my mother. With that, we started our cars and waved goodbye. The afternoon sun struck out from the clouds lighting our way as we drove west.