

Writer's Statement for *Approximately Men*

Danny Jackson

Last year, in the spring of 2015, I wrote a novella for Courtney Morgan's Intermediate Fiction course. I don't think it was very good (it had weak characters, a poor structure, and a wavering voice) but it taught me a lot about long-form storytelling. When I embarked on this thesis project, I intended for it to be a collection of interconnected short stories, modeled somewhat after Junot Diaz's *Drown* or Denis Johnson's *Jesus' Son*. As I worked through the drafts of these stories, however, I began to recognize that they are not discrete short stories, nor are they short stories with interwoven threads. The independent voices that I'd been using to tell the stories were working to make them seem disparate, but their character arcs didn't complete within the confines of each short story and the stories themselves shared too much thematically for them to be justifiably independent. I recognized then that these short stories were coming together as a single narrative with a much larger story arc than I had anticipated. The sixty pages of this manuscript are the foundation for a novel-length story.

When I rewrote that novella, I focused on adapting the voice. I made it grander. I made it more universal. Instead of writing lines like, "He sat against the brick wall, shoved his hands into his jacket pockets, and watched the trains pass before him," I wrote, "Dead men cum in each other, to save the carpets. The San Francisco streets agree, in the 1980's. Dead men cum in tiny bags, to save each other. Now they never touch, maybe they never did; they convulse in their shrink-wrapped bodies next to each other, on top of each other, and forget that God thinks they are dead." I had worked hard to develop what I thought of as my own queer voice, so I tried to use this in my early drafts of the short stories, which contained language like, "Faggots hide like storybook thieves, under aspen trees and near

playgrounds wearing familiar faces,” and “That’s how it always starts: boys dress in the drag of men sometime between sunset and the bottom of a cheap liquor handle.” But these all-knowing, universalizing voices didn’t seem to fit with where the project was heading. I had characters filled with self-doubt, characters fraught with tension with the larger cultural narratives of their assigned identities; how could I take their experiences and extrapolate to the universal when universalized narratives cause their internal conflicts? So I cut back on the voice, calmed it, and tried to shape it more by the internal experiences of each character than by the judgment of the narrator.

I struggled most with voice throughout this entire project. I doubted my ability to write voice when I started, because I’d botched the voice in my novella so wonderfully, but I’d also spent a lot of time critically analyzing voice. I wrote an essay for my Advanced Fiction class last fall titled *What it Means to Tell Stories, To Speak Queer*, which on one hand addressed my own exploration of voice but also contributed to a term-long class conversation about whose voices should tell which stories. I cited *The Truth About Stories: A Native Narrative* and wondered if it was appropriate for me to appropriate the storytelling wisdom that Thomas King shares in this text, to appropriate even his most existential question as a foundational element of my writings: “Do the stories we tell reflect the world as it truly is, or did we simply start off with the wrong story?” (King 25). But then I went on to quote a queer writer, Paul Monette, who wrote into the “utter silence that surrounded being queer” in the late ‘70s and ‘80s, and to quote a queer poet, Ross Gay, who writes poems that heal the pains of marginalization and stigmatization, and then I quoted (straight) Annie Proulx and (straight) Sherman Alexie, both of whom wrote stories of sad, shameful, aggressive, lonely homosexual men. The voice of a piece shapes the impact of the

story (as Andrew says in *The Ones Who Are Mad to Talk, Too Mad to Live*, “I don’t think it’s a crime for us to take a shitty life and convince ourselves it’s amazing”) and I worried that I would unintentionally adapt a voice from the wrong source and churn out a story that isn’t honest to my own perception of the world but is rather more in tune with the ways others have told stories like mine. I first worried that I’d adapt a straight writer’s voice, but then came to fear even the influence of other queer writers...there’s dissonance between the lived queer experience and queer cultural narratives. Queer writings often want for contentment, for joy, for interpersonal connection, and there’s a strong inclination toward telling politically beneficial stories rather than personally honest. The voice in this text tries to reconcile the individual with the expectations of that individual, and tries to do its best to not intervene.

I used this project, *Approximately Men*, to interrogate character driven conflicts, to explore concepts of identity in the experiences of white queer males, and to improve my ability to craft long-form narratives. I also grew in my ability to recognize the appropriate medium for a particular story and to conduct rewrites on a single piece until it becomes cohesive and, ideally, complete.

Bibliography of Influential Works for *Approximately Men*
Danny Jackson

Written Works

Are You My Mother by Alison Bechdel
The Adventures of Kavalier and Clay by Michael Chabon
The Mysteries of Pittsburg by Michael Chabon
Drown by Junot Diaz
The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao by Junot Diaz
All American Poem by Matthew Dickman
This Side of Paradise by F. Scott Fitzgerald
Bringing the Shovel Down by Ross Gay
In Our Time by Ernest Hemingway
The Sun Also Rises by Ernest Hemingway
Desolation Angels by Jack Kerouac
On the Road by Jack Kerouac
The Truth About Stories: A Native Narrative by Thomas King
Into the Wild by Jon Krakauer
Angels in America by Tony Kushner
The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe by C.S. Lewis
Becoming a Man by Paul Monette
Zigzagger by Manuel Muñoz
Smoke, Lilies, and Jade by Richard Bruce Nugent
Hatchet by Gary Paulsen
Brokeback Mountain by Annie Proulx
The Song of the Dodo by David Quammen
Islands of Decolonial Love by Leanne Simpson
Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas by Hunter S. Thompson

Visual Works

Mysterious Skin directed by Gregg Araki
But I'm A Cheerleader directed by Jamie Babbit
Looking directed by Andrew Haigh
Weekend directed by Andrew Haigh
Test directed by Chris Mason Johnson
Blue Is the Warmest Colour directed by Abdellatif Kechiche
Getting Go, the Go Doc Project directed by Cory Krueckeberg
Brokeback Mountain directed by Ang Lee
Paris is Burning directed by Jennie Livingston
Shelter directed by Jonah Markowitz
Hedwig and the Angry Inch directed by John Cameron Mitchell
The Normal Heart directed by Ryan Murphy
Boys Don't Cry directed by Kimberly Peirce
Tongues Untied directed by Marlon Riggs
Hunted: The War Against Gays in Russia directed by Ben Steele
Dallas Buyers Club directed by Jean-Marc Vallée

Approximately Men
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The Wardrobe, sans Lion and Witch

Paradise on His Side

Beer and Loafing in the Desert

In from the Wild

The Ones Who Are Mad to Talk, Too Mad to Live

The Sun Rises, Sets

The Wardrobe, sans Lion and Witch

A couple stood with their bodies in the scripts of buddies and their minds a quarter mile behind them, left by the tender bank of a creek. They slipped the rough of their palms against the backs of each other's shirts like they didn't want to linger but still they parted. The sidewalk stretched between them and revealed cracks as obvious as the flaws in their plan: each man orbited like he didn't feel a pull toward the other man's center, like his breath didn't long to comb the forest of the other's stubble, like his skin didn't dry as he walked away. They would collide, soon enough, and be tossed into the promise of the American road, but as Nicholas headed toward a coffee shop he dragged the tension of his attraction to its limit. He ordered a cappuccino and sat at a table by the window with his hand on his phone like the promise of a text could appease the loneliness between his fingers.

"Hi," a man said as he pulled out the chair across from Nicholas. His black hair fell down his forehead and hid his eyebrows; his not-too-skinny blue jeans and his dirty white tennis shoes and plain red polo hid other parts of him. "Thanks for meeting me here."

He shuffled in his seat and stared out the window.

"You're much cuter in person," the man said. He kept looking out the window, then snapped his head toward Nicholas. "Shit, I mean, I liked your photos. You're cute there, too. I just mean...in person...fuck. You're cute and I'm new to this."

Nicholas sipped his coffee to hide his smile and, with a film of frothed milk on his lips, asked, "How has your day been?"

"Oh fine. I've just been working. My boss has me doing these ridiculous hours and the pay is really shitty. I'm supposed to be training this precocious asshole of a new hire, too, and am just really sick of it."

“That sucks.”

“And they’ve got him set up at a desk in my office, so I’m stuck with him all day.”

Nicholas spun his mug in slow circles and looked over the man’s shoulder. He watched the barista swing handles and cups around behind the bar and scanned the floral photographs along the walls. He’d had worse dates, he reminded himself, with less attractive men.

“What about you?” the man asked. “What’d you do today?”

“Had my last final this afternoon,” he replied. “I’m meeting up with some friends in a bit to celebrate.”

“Oh yeah? If you’re short on time, we could head out. Maybe go back to my place?”

“Sure,” Nicholas said, and drained the last of his coffee. He dropped the mug in the dish bucket by the door and led the man outside. The man’s daily frustrations gave Nicholas a sense of unease about the future, but he wanted to check out the body under that bulky polo shirt.

“What’s your favorite sort of music?”

“I don’t know. I don’t really have a favorite.” He walked next to Nicholas but didn’t look at him. His eyes flicked up the sidewalk and into the shops that they walked by, and his hands clenched inside his pockets. “I, umm, I like most music. Except rap. And country. I like everything else, though.”

Nicholas took out a cigarette and lit it. He looked at the nervous man next to him as he sucked the smoke in. He had nice ears and his smile could be cute, especially if he got out of those straight boy clothes. Nicholas clasped his hands behind his back, letting the smoke trail behind him into the clean, dusk air while they walked.

He felt the man tense up as a group of stumbling boys came down the sidewalk toward them, then clamored past them without incident, but the man's eyes flicked over his shoulder after them.

"I'm really into chillwave right now," Nicholas said to the tense man next to him. "You should check it out sometime."

The man led them into a parking garage and up a level, then down a line of empty parking spots before getting into a silver Highlander and waited while Nicholas climbed into the passenger seat. He hadn't looked at Nicholas since they left the café, but now turned to face him with his mouth propped open by the start of a question. Instead of asking it, though, he leaned hard into Nicholas' face and slipped his tongue into his mouth. He ran his hand across Nicholas' stomach and over the front of his jeans. Oh no, Nicholas thought. He's never learned to kiss.

"God I want you so bad." He pulled away from Nicholas and started the car. "Let's get back to my place."

"Hold up," Nicholas said. "I, umm...I'm not sure I have time for this anymore."

"We can just make it quick, then," the man said, and he slid his hand through the waistline of Nicholas' jeans. Nicholas groaned and the man sucked him off, masturbated, and fell silent as they wiped their stomachs with yellow Wendy's napkins from the man's glove compartment.

"I'll text you," the man said as Nicholas climbed out of the car. He closed the door and flicked a halfhearted wave through the window before walking out of the parking garage.

Nicholas texted, "are you still going out tonight," to his friend Heather, who responded with, "pregaming now, come over." He took a bus to her apartment, walked inside, and took two

shots with a group of women. He fixed his hair in the bathroom mirror, gave an opinion on a friend's shoes, and turned down a third shot. One of the girls sat down on the counter next to Nicholas and told him that he looked good tonight. "Not super gay, though," she said. "Like I wouldn't know just from looking at you." He smiled at her, then poured them each a shot and tossed it back. The group led him to a house party and each person disappeared into the crowd.

He slipped inside and scanned the room. The furniture had been pushed to the walls and a group danced together in the center, all women, swaying with just enough care to keep most of their drinks in their cups. Men crowded the walls, standing between couches and perched on the armrests, watching. Men stare, Nicholas thought. Men don't dance. Men experience music through the bodies of women. He edged around the room and filled an empty cup with vodka and diet coke. When he turned back to the dance floor, he checked out a man, and then saw that he was looking not at the women but at two men in the corner. The music emanated from their bodies and glided into each other's eyes; gay men can experience song as both dancers and watchers, Nicholas thought as he watched the hands of one man glide lightly up the back of the other's legs, Andrew's legs. He drained his cup and refilled it, then walked toward the man that had been watching the dancing couple.

Someone on the far side of the man said, "Sure are a lot of gays here."

Nicholas nodded, and the man said, "I don't mind. More women for us."

The first man said something crude about the sort of people that put dicks in their mouths, and a woman yelled as she pushed past them to get to the dance floor, "You all disgust me." The second man followed her, slinging apologies and lies, and the first man disappeared into the other room. Nicholas watched him go, then turned and walked out the front door.

He slipped through the crowd of smokers on the porch and sat on the edge of the curb where he lit a cigarette and drew solace in the haze around him. The smoke blurred the bodies behind him and dulled the sound of the party and invited the crisp night air to cool his skin.

Andrew stepped through the smoke and sat on the curb next to him. “Hey,” Nicholas said. They shared the cigarette, passing it back and forth without another word, and then Andrew went back inside to find the boy he’d been dancing with and Nicholas flicked his cigarette into the gutter before walking down the street with the weight of things he hadn’t brought to the party.

He walked a couple blocks away and onto a strip of bars, turned and kept going until he stood in front of a thin alleyway between two brick buildings. He lit another cigarette and pressed his back against the wall. People scurried around him from one bar to the next, and paid no mind to the man in the alley. Then, halfway through his cigarette, the sidewalk emptied. He dropped it, still lit, onto the ground and leapt up a ladder that hung down the building; he scurried up and then climbed through a window onto a floor emptied of people, of walls, of everything but dust and nails.

So he sat alone in the shell of an old office, in the promise of a future one, and stole time. The floor, jagged with wall frames and loose wires, drew shadows and cast the ghosts of future plans around Nicholas. Old plans, too, spoke from the holes in the ceiling where lights once gave this floor an illusion of timelessness. Florescent fixtures promised protection from the rise and fall of day, but even they had been torn out. The slots between worlds defy decay—the few months when an office had been gutted and had yet to be filled in, the unseen fingers slipping between those of a lover and then sliding back out, the cigarette break in the middle of a party—

these are eternal spaces, because those looking for cracks can always find them. Nicholas ran his palm across the floor and lifted a layer of drywall dust and thought of the boy that had shown him this place.

From his perch in the torn up space, the street and its people looked so complete. Women in dresses danced down the street as men in jeans and t-shirts gazed at their rippling hemlines—these couples held the spotlight, Nicholas thought, but he knew of other streets where people danced in different steps. How easy, he thought, to fall in love in the light.

He jumped when he heard a shoe scuffle behind him, and turned to see Andrew clambering in through the fire escape. He walked through the rusted yellow streetlight rectangles that the windows cast across the room and sat down next to Nicholas, their arms overlapping. Nicholas laid his head on Andrew's shoulder and closed his eyes, appreciating the smell of his clothes and the sound of his breath.

"Thought I might find you here," Andrew said, and then after a beat: "I'm sorry I stayed with him."

"You don't need to be." Nicholas ran his finger along the outer seam of Andrew's jeans.

"I know. But I am. I want to leave parties with you. I want to go to parties with you."

"We really don't have to talk about this, Andy."

"I like you," he said. "I like you and I'm not ready to be looked at with you."

Nicholas slid his hand down Andrew's thigh and held tight to his knee.

"I want to get out of here," Nicholas said.

"We could go back to my place," Andrew replied.

"No." Nicholas turned his head to look at Andrew. "I mean get out of this town, this nightlife, this hesitance toward each other."

“I’d like that,” Andrew said. “We could spend a night in Denver.”

“I want something bigger. I want to drive to the coast with you, and to make a real go at getting to know each other. Tomorrow afternoon. I want to take a risk on you.”

Andrew leaned away from Nicholas and set his hand on the floor between them.

“Really?” Andrew said. “You won’t change your mind in the morning?”

“No, I won’t. I’m sick of the pattern we’ve gotten into. It’s been, what, three months? And we still won’t kiss in public.”

“We could just date here, you know.” Andrew put his arm around Nicholas’ waist and leaned against him. “Ignore the comments and the stares.”

“Sure. We could. But why not try something different?”

“Ok. I’m in.”

They sat in the empty building until the bars closed and the streets cleared out. The beauty of these two, alone and wonderful, stayed stashed for the rest of the night like a painting in storage because the art of lovers loses just a bit of its sheen when it’s shared with the world.

Paradise on His Side

“Man, fuck Julie,” David told Ethan. He sat with his back to the bar, his elbows resting on the edge of it, and his eyes scanned the dim room while he talked. “How long were you going to waste on that ugly bitch anyway? You’re free, Ethan, just look around! Look at all the beautiful girls, just waiting for you to have sex with them.”

Ethan nodded and sipped his beer with one hand while he tugged the neckline of his t-shirt with the other. He felt cramped in the bar, felt cramped by David, but didn’t feel ready to leave. He looked down at the bar and pushed away one of the two empty shot glasses that David had bought him, and said, “I don’t really want to meet any girls right now.”

“Of course you do.” David swiveled on his stool to face Ethan and he placed his hand on Ethan’s back. “It’s the best way to get over her. Listen, you sleep with one of them tonight and I promise you’ll remember why you broke up with her. I’ve got to tell you, man, I’m proud of you. Finally I’ve got my bro on the single game with me. Oh, there they are”—he stood up and looked toward the door—“C’mon Ethan, game time.”

The girls stood in line just outside the bar, fidgeting, clutching their ID’s and glancing past the bouncer, who held his hand out toward them. One handed her ID over and a moment later Ethan saw the bouncer pocket it.

“Shit,” David said. She waved her hands at the bouncer, and then gestured past him at Ethan and David, and the bouncer followed her finger to the bar.

“Shit,” Ethan agreed. As the bouncer started walking toward them, he looked at David and saw a feeble boy with too much confidence and said, “I knew better than to go out with you, David.”

“What does that mean?” David turned away from the approaching bar staff to look at Ethan. “This isn’t my fault.”

“It never is,” Ethan said. David fucked things up every time: he ditched him at parties, he yelled at hosts, he got too drunk at concerts.

That was how he and Julie met, though. Drunk at a house party with David—well, across the room from David and the girl biting his neck—when Julie hopped up onto the counter next to him.

“That your friend?” she had said.

“Sure is,” he had said. “Do you know her?”

“Yeah, that’s Kelly. She was supposed to be my DD tonight, but I guess I’m walking back.” She’d poured a vodka and Sprite and handed it to Ethan.

“Pretty heavy pour there,” he had said.

“They water down their alcohol here. They empty half of each the handles into the punch, then refill.”

“What dicks.”

“I think I’ll forgive them,” she had said. “Since they’re giving us free booze, and they keep most of these inexperienced kids from getting alcohol poisoning.”

He wasn’t sure when they’d left the party, but he remembered sitting on the patio in the sobering night air with her, both of them drunk and sweaty and ignorant of anything outside of the present moment; he remembered her shifting her hips into the back corner of the chair and bending her knee to hold her leg against her chest as she lit a cigarette, the ashes tumbling down her jeans; he remembered looking at the dizzying stars through the drunk tree branches and he

remembered walking her home. They'd gone through a grove of trees on campus, and she'd leaned against a green ash tree. Their eyes had locked for a minute, speaking in the subtle dares that only the small muscles below their eyes could make. A light breeze tugged her hair from behind her ear and across her forehead, and then her fingers grasped the loopholes in Ethan's jeans and pulled him against her. He kissed her without brushing her hair out of the way and they both drew away to run their tongues on the backs of their hands like cats.

"Oh, fuck off," David said. "Let's just go."

He walked away from the bar, past the bouncer, and Ethan followed. The bouncer shouted something at him but it didn't register. The cool night air sobered Ethan and he felt shame for snapping at David.

"I just don't understand why your fakes worked, but mine didn't," one of the girls said. "I mean, we all got them from the same place."

"Who knows," David said. He slowed his pace so he walked between the girls and held his arm out to one, who took it. Ethan recognized her wavy brown hair: this was Kelly, the girl David had hooked up with. His anger came back as he realized these two were friends of Julie—the night was about David getting laid, not about Ethan. "It was probably for the best, though, Ethan was on his way to getting pretty drunk."

Ethan flipped him off while David and the girl on his arm laughed. He was being a dick, he knew, by not walking with the other girl, by not asking her name, but he just couldn't bring himself to be polite.

"What should we do now?" the unnamed girl asked.

"I could go for some fries," Kelly said. "There's a diner just around the corner."

When they got there, Ethan held the door open and the two girls stepped inside while David said, “You two go on in. We’re going to have a smoke first.”

“What’s wrong with you?” David said through the side of his mouth as he held the cigarette between his lips and flicked the lighter. “You’re spending the night with these beautiful girls. Annie’s into you, I can tell. You’re lucky your moodiness is coming off as mysteriousness, but if you keep it up much longer you’ll fuck up your opportunity with her.”

“I don’t want an opportunity with her.”

“Oh come on. You and Julie were barely in a relationship. You didn’t even fuck her.”

“What the hell, man. You don’t know that.”

“Everyone knows that,” David said. “You’ve got to start putting yourself out there, or people might assume you’re a fag.”

Ethan knew this game of boys turning sex into a competition, but he wasn’t about to play. David was a dick, but he was still his friend, and Ethan knew this was his way of helping him get over Julie. An ineffective, crude way, he thought, but still well intended.

“There’s nothing wrong with it,” David said. “I mean, I’ve always wanted a gay wingman. My brother’s got one, and he says it works perfectly. You’ve got a man that ladies trust and that will never sleep with your girl. Shit, I kind of hope you turn out to be gay.”

“Fuck off, David.” Ethan dropped his cigarette butt on the ground and rubbed it out with the sole of his shoe, then turned to go into the diner, but David pushed him against the wall.

“When you go in there, you’re making moves on Annie,” David said. “I’m not letting you wallow in self-pity all night, and I’m definitely not letting you blow my chances with Kelly, again, just because you can’t muster up the balls to get with a girl.”

He glanced up and down the street, then took a bag from his pocket, scooped a bump of coke out with his ring finger, and snorted it. He held it out to Ethan, who pushed it away and walked into the diner.

David had a tendency to lose it, he knew, when Kelly was involved. A month after that party, she'd slept with one of their friends; when David found out he spent the evening turning over trashcans and kicking the side of their dorm.

"Men don't do this to each other," David had yelled, just after snapping the first plank of a wooden bench with his heel. "He knew I was into her, and he still fucked her. I'll kill him."

In that moment, while he'd watched David pace the sidewalk and tear at the edges of his shirt, Ethan hadn't doubted David's capability for murder. The boy Kelly slept with lived, though. He and David saw him at a party a few weeks after, and David just slapped the guy on the back and shotgunned a beer, but made sure to make out with Kelly where the guy could see them.

In the lobby of the diner, Ethan felt disoriented. He wanted to ask for a table alone, on the far side of the room, far away from the girls, and he wanted to ask for a cup of shitty black coffee and text his friends from high school. Where were the college buddies he'd once been promised, what happened to guiltless frivolities? He wouldn't sleep with Annie, he knew, and didn't even want to try. He missed laying on his parents' driveway in the summer sun and dreaming about the perfect college life, and he missed feeling confident in his choices, and he missed being able to text Julie. He honestly didn't give a damn whether or not David got laid, and he didn't want to help him try, but neither did he particularly want to get his ass kicked by a coked out David. He turned and walked out of the diner, down the street and away from David, who called after him but didn't follow.

He turned the corner so that he was out of sight of the diner, sat down on the curb, and checked his phone. Julie deserved better than him, he thought. She deserved a chance at a real love with a real man. He responded to a message from a boy on Grindr with swooping brown hair and ordered a Lift.

The night he'd decided to break up with Julie, just like this one, had started with David in a bar and a bag of coke. David, Ethan, and Mark—had left the ladies on the balcony with the promise of bringing back drinks, but Mark led them to the bar and then kept walking, and though Ethan felt duped he didn't challenge it as they walked into the restroom and, after a moment's hesitation and a flick of Mark's fingers, huddled into a handicapped stall. Mark was a new addition to the crew, one that David had met in a class, and Ethan fostered a suspicion that he bought his friends with free drugs.

“What have you got?” Ethan asked as Mark pulled out a knife.

“Shh.” He dipped the tip of the knife into a wrinkled plastic bag with a pile of powder crammed into a corner, scooped out a hit, then snorted it.

The other two followed suit, and as they passed the bag around each hit blurred the space around Ethan. The stall began to feel less and less crowded until Mark was licking the lining of the empty bag and Ethan was only vaguely aware of the presence of the men next to him. Mark unlocked the stall door, David winked in the mirror at a man washing his hands, and the untouchable men left the bathroom and walked back past the bar. Ethan stopped the other two and reminded them that they'd left to get drinks.

“You two go on,” Mark had said. “Entertain the ladies while I get laid.”

While Ethan and David stood at the bar, waiting for their orders to be taken, a middle-aged man walked up next to them and shouted at the bartender for a whiskey sour. He was ignored, so he turned to Ethan like a father to his son at a ballgame.

“Man, what is with these chicks tonight. A bunch of prude bitches.”

“Sure,” Ethan said, and returned to the project of grinding his teeth and enjoying the rumbling sound and the muscular relief.

“Probably not to you two, though. I’d give my left nut to be in my twenties again. I can tell you, girls were falling naked all over me. Not now though. Enjoy yourselves while you can, because when you’re my age they just see a creep.”

“Four tequila shots, please,” Ethan said as he bounced the toes of his right foot against the baseboard of the bar.

“See? I was right; you two already have a couple pieces locked away. Probably a few more than two, if you’re anything like I was.

“Not really,” Ethan said. His high was wearing off fast, and if he didn’t get away from this man he’d be sober by the time they got their shots. He turned to David, saw that he’d struck up a conversation with a woman on his side opposite to Ethan, and turned back to the man. “I’m here with my girlfriend.”

“Yeah, and what’s your other girl up to tonight?” He laughed. “My old man gave me some of the best advice when I graduated college. He said, ‘Son, what’s the first thing you want to do after you cum? Sleep, that’s right, or eat. It’s true for women too. So why do we keep buying them dinner first?’ Then he gave me the best rule for dating that I’ve ever heard. If you feed them first, you’ll only have sex once that night. If you don’t, you’ll get laid both before and

after dinner. It's so simple, but brilliant. If you play it right, she'll even make the dinner. Hey, could I get that whiskey sour?"

The bartender dropped four shots in front of Ethan, and he tapped David's shoulder. "I'm heading back."

David nodded, said something to the girl that got lost under the rumble of the bar, and the two walked away; the man slid closer to the girl that David had just left behind and she turned away from him.

"She was cute," David said. "Got her number."

"I didn't get a chance to look at her. Too busy getting dating advice from that old guy."

"Anything useful?"

"Not in the slightest," Ethan said.

They met up with Kelly and Julie on the balcony and passed the shots around, clinked the glasses together, and tossed them back. Julie and Ethan turned toward each other and Ethan looked over her shoulder at the city in the night. The streets below ran thick with young people, all high on something, some high on each other, some just high on themselves. Julie followed Ethan's eyes over the edge of the balcony and into the world. She leaned against him and he saw the two of them, a beautiful woman and man, and felt powerful. He watched as she set her empty shot glass on a table next to them and he thought that they embodied success. His mind floated away from him, over the edge of the roof, and turned to see them holding hands and kissing with a background of chattering people still looking for love, and he felt like he'd made his father proud. He kissed her, and thought about how perfectly beautiful that kiss must have looked to all of the other drunk people that were not looking at them.

They left Kelly and David at the bar and were waiting on a bus to take them back to her dorm room. Julie bummed a smoke from a woman while they waited, and Ethan stood a few feet away from them, determined to keep his two day tobacco free streak. He eyed a group of men that stood to his left because one of them had looked over his shoulder at Ethan, then again, and broke away from the group. He stood next to Ethan, neither of them looking at the other.

“I know you,” the man said. “You’re heading home with that girl?”

“I don’t know you,” Ethan said, and stuffed his hands into the pockets of his jeans, his shoulders curling around his neck.

“Yeah you do,” the man smiled. “Maybe you’d recognize me if I showed you a photo of my dick. Your profile says that you’re a bottom, if I remember right.”

Ethan looked over at Julie and saw that she was still chatting with the other woman. The man stood on his toes and, with his breath against Ethan’s ear and his hand running across the crotch of Ethan’s jeans, whispered, “Come by my place later tonight. I’ll fuck your ass so well that you’ll forget all about your girlfriend.” Then he returned to his group, and Ethan went over to Julie just as their bus pulled up. He looked back at the man as they boarded and the man winked.

And then the night swept the couple away. They were alone, finally and again. They turned down plans and friends and chose to spend the next night together on a hand-me-down futon in a pile of blankets. They started fully clothed, but soon were both topless, and she lay with her head on his chest and her hand on a remote. They were watching a movie, almost finished, that Julie had picked because she’d seen it in theaters and was tired of Ethan never catching on when she quoted it. They’d been making out during one of her favorite lines, she’d

said, and she picked up the remote to rewind when Ethan said, “I think I’m breaking up with you.”

And Julie said a lot of things, but the one that most stuck with Ethan was:

“I don’t understand what you’re doing. I don’t understand you.”

To which he replied, “Me either. But I know I love you.”

“You don’t,” Julie said. “You’re lying to yourself and to me. People don’t leave the person that they love.”

And they were both right.

But he left, because he loved her in the way that he understood love and he didn’t love her in the way that she understood it, and neither one really knew what the word meant.

“So what, you’re just taking off?” Ethan dragged the dry air through the hose of the hookah and puffed a couple rings before exhaling entirely. “For how long?”

“Not sure,” Andrew said. He adjusted the coals and sat back against Nicholas’ chest, and then winked at Ethan. “At least long enough to find new friends.”

Nicholas had his phone out and a cigarette between his fingers, ignoring the hookah. He ignored Ethan, too, although Ethan didn’t mind too much. He liked having Andrew’s attention: he seemed sharp and intuitive, and like he saw Ethan as something other than a piece of ass. Ethan wasn’t even sure that Andrew was hitting on him; he thought maybe he just wanted a fresh face around.

“That’s so wild,” Ethan said. “That you’re just picking up and leaving in the middle of term like this.”

“It’s not the middle of our term,” Andrew said. “We’re on semesters, just finished up for the summer. This guy is graduating.”

“Ah,” Ethan turned his eyes down, but felt Andrew’s stay on him. He was intense, Ethan thought: those light green eyes and his long, dark eyelashes gave his slow, masculine smile a hint of femininity. Andrew pulled a flask out of his jacket pocket and took a swig, then offered it to Ethan who took half a mouthful and passed it back.

“So,” Andrew said. “You seem like a closet kid. Like you’re waiting for your girlfriend to walk in at any moment.”

“That’s not entirely true,” Ethan said. “We broke up last weekend.”

Nicholas snorted, and Andrew hushed him.

“Don’t worry, babe, we’ve both been there too. What pulled you apart, other than your general gayness?”

“That was mostly it,” Ethan smiled. “I did love her. I still do. But I just couldn’t stay with her, for her sake or mine.”

“Cheers to that.” Andrew took a swig from his flask. “A gay with a conscience. So what’s your life plan now, Ethan? Quit girls forever, move to a big city and join the ballet?”

“Don’t be an asshole, Andrew,” Nicholas muttered. “Just because that was your plan.”

I don’t really have a plan. Didn’t know I needed one.” Ethan took another pull from the hookah. “I don’t want to go back to the life I’ve been living, though. My friends are assholes.”

“What do you say, hon?” Andrew elbowed Nicholas. “Should we take in the lost kid for the night?”

“We’re not staying here,” Nicholas said. “We’ve barely even started driving; we’re just one town over.”

“Sure, alright.” Andrew kissed his cheek. “At some point, this trip is going to derail from your perfect plan.”

Nicholas rolled his eyes and turned back to his phone, and Andrew turned back to Ethan. “So Ethan, the newest gay on the scene, what’s your deal?”

“What do you mean?” Ethan asked.

“What’s your deal, your story, your motivation. What made you decide to meet up with a couple from Grindr tonight?”

Ethan took the hookah hose off the table and sucked in a lungful. He exhaled slowly and then said, “I’ve been having this dream lately. I want to say it’s every night, but I’m never quite sure with recurring dreams. Sometimes I think I’ve only had the dream once, but in the dream I dreamt that I’d had it before. Maybe it’s more of just a recurring trope in all of my dreams, because it isn’t exactly a full dream in itself.”

Ethan paused and scratched the back of his neck, unsure if he wanted to continue, but then began again.

“Anyway, I just keep stubbing my toe. I trip over a book that I left in the middle of my floor, or I kick a crack in the sidewalk while walking barefoot. It’s bearable, usually, but the other night, my dream self was sitting at a bar wearing steel toed boots when a group of men came in and ripped them off and stomped on my toes. They didn’t say anything, but I woke up thinking, ‘Yeah, I deserved that.’ It was only when the dream popped back into my mind in the middle of the afternoon that I realized: of course I didn’t deserve that. I don’t know why I met up with you guys, but I’m in a weird place.”

Ethan glanced over at Nicholas, who had put away his phone, and then at Andrew. The dream story was honest, but he also hoped it had convinced them, because he’d become attached

to the idea of taking off with these two and leaving his life behind for a bit. Even if they didn't take him along, he knew he'd find a way to get out of town. Andrew chewed on his lip, then said, "That's it. You've got to come with us."

"What?" Nicholas said.

"We aren't leaving this kid here," Andrew said. "You want him to battle his demons alone? To keep living with those fuck-boy friends? No, babe, we've got to be his gay heroes."

"You're kidding," Ethan said as he hid his smile. "I can't just leave. I've got finals coming up."

"And you'll fail them, whether you stay or leave. You aren't that bright, honey," Andrew said. "Look, we both know that it's really fucking hard to figure yourself out in the middle of a town that thinks you're someone you aren't. Isn't that right, Nick?"

"Oh, come on, he isn't our problem," Nicholas said.

"I'm in," Ethan said. "I've just got to grab some things from my dorm, alright?"

"Then it's decided," Andrew smiled. "Let's go check out your digs."

Beer and Loafing in the Desert

Andrew woke to a bleary sun and the static of a familiar rock song. The song he associated with the 1970s, because he associated it with Sunday mornings at his dad's house and he associated his dad with the 1970s even though he wasn't quite sure when his dad was born, but the sun he associated with a hangover. He tried to block both out, but the light burned through his eyelids so he uncovered his ears and draped his arm across his eyes.

"But that shouldn't matter," he heard the kid say. "If you find him attractive now."

"It does, though," Nicholas said.

"Ok, but what about with a guy your age. You find Andrew attractive, right? If you two met ten years ago, would you have thought he was attractive then? Or in ten years, will you find each other attractive still? But that shouldn't matter, because no one ever breaks up with someone because they think they might in the future be unattractive."

"That's still very different, though. I'm just trying to say that I think people are attracted to the signs of aging, more than the person, when they chase daddies and bears. If I were to sleep with someone now, who is forty years old, but I wouldn't hypothetically sleep with that person if we both were forty, or if we both were twenty-two, then why am I actually attracted to him?"

"You're twenty-two?"

"That's not the point." Nicholas was getting irritable, the way he tended to when he was losing an argument. Or maybe not when he was losing an argument, Andrew thought, so much as when the other party was losing interest in the argument. Andrew stretched his toes out and back, waking up his calf muscles, and felt a twist in his back that he didn't quite have the energy to deal with yet.

"Whatever, men in their late thirties are just hotter than boys my age."

“I’m not sure that’s true,” Nicholas said.

“Yo,” Andrew mumbled. “Can you kill the music?”

“Oh, hey babe,” Nicholas punched the radio with his thumb. “Welcome to Utah.”

“Utah?” Andrew propped himself up and laid his chin on the door while he waited for his eyes to adjust to the world outside his window. “What time is it?”

“Just after one,” Ethan said. “Nick drove straight through the night.”

The sun relented against his retinas, and it took him a moment to reconcile the view with reality—it seemed as though the foreground had been erased, like everything for miles had been piled up into a distant mountain range, leaving behind only the blank page of the land. He wiped the sleep from his eyes and then dropped his chin back onto the hard plastic of the door as he watched the world go by.

“What is this place?” he asked.

“The salt flats,” Nicholas said. “Between Salt Lake and Nevada.”

“Wait, so we passed Salt Lake City?” Andrew sat up and leaned between the two front seats. “No. Guys, we have to go back.”

“Not a chance,” Nicholas said. “We’re an hour past that.”

“I missed Park City! No, babe, we have to go back, please.” It was the only city worth seeing to the west of Colorado, Andrew knew, at least until you hit California. It might not be much to look at in the summer, but he’d be damned if he had to go home and tell his friends that he hadn’t even glimpsed the snowboarding town.

“Ok bitch, Park City was like three hours ago,” Ethan said.

Andrew pressed his palms into his eyes, and took a breath. “Ok,” he said. “Ok. Did you two eat yet?”

“No,” Nicholas said. “I’d be down to stop soon and stretch. We’ve got sandwiches in the trunk.”

He pulled off the road onto the white earth and Andrew climbed out of the car. He left the door open and stood a few feet away from it, barefoot with his arms crossed over his black t-shirt that he’d tucked into his black cotton sweatpants; the nylon pants had elastic that hugged his ankles and gave him a feeling of freedom, like he could start to run whenever he needed, like he could leave everything behind and sprint across this desolate land and wouldn’t have to worry about his pants flailing in the wind as dust kicked up by his shoes speckled his clothes.

“Here,” Nicholas handed him a sandwich. “It’s turkey.” Nicholas sat on the ground next to Andrew with his legs sprawled and stretched to grab his right foot.

“You really aren’t tired?” Andrew asked. “You know you didn’t have to drive all night.”

“I felt like I needed to get to the other side of the Rockies. Start the trip with too much land behind us to really look back.”

But the start is part of the journey, Andrew thought. That bit where you still recognize the world around you, and you drive by a familiar grocery store and through a familiar intersection and you really see how long it takes to get out of the land that makes you feel at home. And as you pass by all of it, you start to imagine that the buildings and the concrete miss you and are asking you to stay, but you reassure them that you’ll be back, that you’ll stay safe, even if you aren’t sure that you will be.

“That makes sense,” Andrew said.

“I just felt the need to be far away and I didn’t want to break with our home still on the horizon. You aren’t upset that I drove us out here, are you?”

“No.” Andrew sat down next to him and unwrapped his sandwich. “I’m just upset that I slept through it all.” He bit into it as he thought about the section of earth that he thought of as his home, and how his vacuumed apartment lived in the same world as this dirty, beautiful, flat land. He felt like he wanted to leave footprints across the vastness and see how far his legs could take him from the road, and he wanted to drive the car off the road, windows down and dust in his lungs, toward the shadow of the mountain. Too bad, he thought, that would probably ruin the ecosystem. He took another bite of his sandwich, and then stopped chewing with the bread still dry between his teeth. French bread, he noted.

Nicholas swiveled on his butt and laid his head on Andrew’s lap, and Andrew kissed him with the sandwich tucked into his cheeks. The boy that had bought him French bread laughed and closed his eyes, and Andrew slipped back to another summer, to another head in his lap.

“I was at the grocery store yesterday,” she had said under the shadow of the clouded sun and on the tender corner of the park bench, her legs twisted over the backrest and her hair tangling down the side of his thigh, behind the crook in his knee. “And I’d brought a list, which you know I almost never do. I’d planned recipes and checked the pantry, and even thought to pick up those cookies we’d had at Julian’s, you know? I’d finished checking out and I loaded up my car and was halfway home before I realized that I hadn’t bought any French bread. I hadn’t even thought to buy French bread. Not in the store, not when I was making my list, not when I walked by the bakery section, not at any point in even the last week had I thought that I might need to buy a loaf of French bread. God, I hate French bread; it’s so bland. You wouldn’t know that, because I’ve always had it, but I buy it because I know that you love it. Even when I don’t know if you’re coming over to my house, I buy it. I made my mom buy it when we were kids,

because you ate it every single time that I was over at your house. I remember jumping on your trampoline once when you climbed off and went inside and toasted a goddamn piece of French bread while I just sat there waiting for you to come back outside. So I forgot it. And I didn't turn around for it. Because, don't you see, I always bought it when I'd been thinking of you and if I didn't remember to buy it then I must not have been thinking of you, and then I started to realize that I really hadn't been thinking as much about you lately. Not just about what foods to buy for you, but also about how you're spending your days and what you're thinking about and whether or not you're happy. It's not that I don't care, because I do. I care so much about you, Andy. I want to know how you're spending your days and I want desperately for you to be happy, but I just don't think about it anymore. And, I think, that's because I don't still love you. No, I know it's because I don't still love you. At least not in the same way that I used to."

What a silly thing, he thought, to lose someone in this salted, empty world. He ran his fingers lightly through the sides of Nicholas' hair and looked down at the smooth, sleepy face and wondered what little reason would pull this one out of his life.

Ethan walked up next to him, blocking the sun, and Andrew tilted his head to see him zipping up his fly. "Hey guys," Ethan said. "What do you say we find a dinky motel somewhere around here to stay for the night? I know we could probably fly through a few more hours of driving, but we could also pick up a rack of beer and drink half naked in the sun."

Nicholas smiled and said, "I'm down if it means I can nap in a bed."

Andrew and Ethan sat on the concrete path with their backs against the brick outside wall of their motel room, occasionally tuning in to a snore or a shuffle from Nicholas inside, and sipped slightly chilled PBRs.

“What do you think about it?” Ethan asked.

“About what?” Andrew finished the last of his beer, reached inside the pack, and cracked open another one.

“Nick’s idea that we aren’t interested in older men. That we just like that they’re old, or something.”

“I don’t know, does it really matter?” Andrew said. “If you’re attracted to someone, you’re attracted to them. I don’t think it needs to be more complicated than that. Sometimes we look too hard for reasons behind the things that we do. If you want to spend an afternoon with a guy because you like the way the corners of his eyes wrinkle when he smiles, does it truly matter that he’s only got those wrinkles because he’s spent ten more years smiling than you have?”

“It feels kind of gross to sleep with someone that is only into my youthful visage, though,” Ethan said.

“Why? You are young. That’s part of your personhood.” The kid is naïve, Andrew thought. He’s waiting for someone to come to love his internal self, the person he imagines as his soul, but he hasn’t come to realize that we aren’t more than our bodies. “If you’re going to sleep with someone, whether they’re your age or not, they’re attracted to you at the age you’re at. You won’t do yourself any favors by thinking about the future.”

“What, you just don’t think at all about the future? I don’t believe you.”

“Of course I do, but I don’t plan for it,” Andrew said. “Why stress about where me and Nicholas will be in a year, for instance, when that could ruin what we have now?”

“So you don’t think you’ll be with him,” Ethan said.

“No, I just don’t know if I will be. And I don’t want to anticipate losing him, or keeping him, if it would change how we love each other now.”

So I love him now? Andrew thought. He felt bad bullshitting this kid. He couldn’t stop thinking about the future; it paralyzed him. But he also could see that Ethan wasn’t thinking of the future in a complex way, that Ethan still saw the future as a set of empty frames with a pile of photos just waiting for him to pick one to put in each frame. Andrew was determined to show Ethan that he held the camera.

“That’s absurd,” Ethan said. He leaned forward and stripped his shirt off, letting the sun hit his pale, skinny chest. “Do all gays think like that?”

“Like what?”

“I guess I’m just used to thinking about relationships as forever,” Ethan said. “Dating girls to see which one I’d like to marry, and evaluating each other with an eye on middle age.”

“I don’t know that all straights think that way, but I definitely think fewer gays do. Honestly, what’s the point? I don’t need to make a life with someone. I’m not trying to make babies with someone. There are so many options for a life path, why settle for the one that you’ve been told to seek?”

Ethan twirled his finger around the top of his beer can, then stood up and unbuttoned his pants. He kicked his shoes off and wiggled out of his skinny light-blue jeans and walked into the dusty parking lot, threw his arms up into the air, and twirled to look at Andrew.

“So this is it, then?” he said, smiling. “This is the radical gay life.” He stuck his fingers inside the waistband of his black underwear, winked at Andrew, and snapped the elastic. “There

is no future to worry about, no longevity for our love, just cute boys with sun-kissed asses and the rebellious thrill you get from biting them.”

“Pretty much,” Andrew said, and kicked off his shoes too, but left the rest of his clothes on. He dragged his toes across the sandy gravel on top of the concrete and lamented the loss of the calluses he’d grown up with.

“I don’t buy that,” Ethan said. He walked back to Andrew and sat cross-legged in front of him. “Maybe that’s how it used to be, when the world did its best to step between boys like us, but I have to think that we can love each other just as strongly as straight couples can.”

“Why does that mean we don’t love each other?” Andrew said and handed Ethan the beer he was reaching for. “Maybe it’s just a different way of loving; maybe it’s a stronger way of loving.”

“Maybe we’re just more jaded, because we all started out having loveless sex with women before we found our true calling.”

Andrew curled his fingers and pushed the tips of them into the gravel while Ethan sprawled out on the warm ground. He took a breath, and said, “That’s not true for me.”

“What’s not?”

“I’ve loved a woman.”

“So what, are you bi?”

“I like the identity ‘pan’ the most,” Andrew said.

“Did she know? That you like guys too?”

“You know, the interesting thing with hetero relationships is that they don’t dig into your sexual identity. The first questions a queer will ask are all like, ‘when did you come out’ and ‘how did you come out’ and ‘what do you identify as.’ I don’t know what we expect to learn

from this, because we all have basically the same story. Maybe we all just want to bond over our shared experiences, or maybe we're testing each other out to see how dedicated we are to the queer lifestyle, or maybe most of us don't have anything in common but our gayness, but for whatever reason we are all fascinated with just where on the Kinsey scale the other person lies. She knew, of course she knew, but she didn't focus on it that much. I remember she kept asking me if I was a virgin. I didn't give her a straight answer because I really didn't know. I'd never had sex, had only made out with Sarah Jones once in the carwash for the span of time it took to clean her Camry, but I still don't think I was a virgin."

A cloud passed, and goose bumps rose on Ethan's skin, but he didn't move. "That doesn't make sense," he said. "You either are or you aren't."

"Maybe," Andrew said. "But I spent hours on gay video chat rooms masturbating with older guys. I traded Skype names with one and for a couple months would jerk it to his furry, thin torso. Never saw his face. 'Jim, 24, Louisiana' was all I ever got. I asked him once if what we were doing counted as sex, and he said something like, 'it's whatever you want it to be, babe.' Which was cute, but pretty unhelpful."

"Wait." Ethan rolled onto his stomach. "How old were you? Isn't that illegal?"

"Yeah, I'm sure he could've gotten in some sort of trouble for it, but I was sixteen and horny. I figured it was safer than lurking outside a club to find a guy to fuck me for real. Which would have been more legal, by the way, because I was old enough to consent to sex but not to record my own body. I cut it off with him eventually when I started to feel guilty about the whole thing. My parents aren't very religious, but my mom sometimes would drag me to Catholic mass on a whim, so I was sitting in the pews one Sunday, paying attention to anything I could besides the priest, and caught myself staring at the crucified Christ. I don't know if you've been in a

Catholic Church, but they always have sculptures of Jesus on their crosses, and this one was hanging right in the center of the church, with the spotlights glinting off his dying abs. It was Palm Sunday, I remember, because I tried to hide my erection with the dried palm leaves that my mom had folded into a cross. The priest was telling the story of celebrating Christ's entrance into Jerusalem, and all I could think about was Christ entering me. I didn't talk to Jim again after that happened. Oh come on, it's not funny. I was horrified."

Ethan had dropped his forehead onto the sidewalk and was covering the back of his head with his hands while his body rocked with laughter. "You got a boner in church?" he said. "Oh no, Andy, you are going to hell."

"Anyway," Andrew said. "I told Hailey about the chat room guy when she asked if I was a virgin, and told her about wanting to distance myself from the gay stuff for a bit. She didn't ever doubt me or accuse me of being closeted when we started dating. She just accepted that men could be part of my life too, even if I didn't always want them to be."

Andrew paused and sipped his beer. The light scratching of a sandy wind on the metal motel roof filled the silence, and he started again.

"We used to go tag this drainage tunnel near our houses and kind of hang out in it, and she'd usually snag a bottle of something from her parents and the two of us would just sit and talk and make out. I don't even feel like we were tagging. We just needed a canvas, and always painted the same spot over and over. I remember we'd coated it with all white the time before, and this time I watched her use only a black can and a folder from my backpack as a straight edge and she turned the whole tunnel into this arching phoenix skeleton with these elaborate tail feathers and a comically oversized head. It should've given me an unsettling feeling, thinking about it now, but at the time I just felt awed and entranced. She pulled my shirt off and then

pushed me up against it, and my back smudged the thing but she never fixed it. I don't think we ever painted over it, either, just left this weird, fantastical beast of death and rebirth on our tunnel, bearing the scrapes and scars from our sex."

"You're joking," Ethan said. He'd stopped laughing and was now seated cross-legged with his head resting on his hands and his elbows on his knees. "No one loses their virginity like that. They do it in their childhood bedrooms while their parents are distracted by the TV, or in the back of someone's Jeep."

"Not if they lose it to Hailey."

"Want to know mine? I was at a friend's house party my junior year of high school, and this older guy, maybe thirty, messaged me on Grindr. His house was only a few blocks away, so I went over and let him fuck me and then walked back to the party feeling like I'd done it, crossed that first bridge, and could finally start having regular sex."

"And did you?" Andrew asked.

"Of course not. As soon as I walked back inside, suddenly surrounded by my friends, I know I couldn't do it. Couldn't come out to them. I could still feel his dick inside me, and I felt so dirty and shameful. Anyway, no one's really having regular sex, I don't think, they just go through lucky, horny phases."

Ethan shifted so that he was sitting next to Andrew with both of their backs against the brick wall of the motel, and laid his head on Andrew's shoulder, who sat thinking about peeling the paint of a different wall from the skin on his shoulders and missing the girl who put it there. He looked out at the sky above the rinky-dink parking lot as it turned redder and redder, and he thought that the desert really is quite astonishing in the evening.

In from the Wild

Nicholas woke to find Andrew asleep next to him, fully clothed and on top of the sheets; just past him Ethan lay asleep on the other bed. He checked his phone—a little after ten o'clock—and swung his legs off the bed. He went to the bathroom and washed his face, and then pulled a pair of pants out of his duffle bag. He thought about waking Andrew, but decided against it and walked outside.

The night summer air, on the desert border of Utah and Nevada, felt surprisingly brisk. He walked through the motel parking lot and down the street where, just a few blocks down, he crossed into Nevada and onto a strip of enormous casino hotels. What a kitschy welcome, he thought, as he looked up at the purple and blue neon signs. He went inside and walked past all the slot machines and settled into a seat at the bar. As he sipped his whiskey soda, a trio of men bustled up next to him.

“Ah, man, I’d give so much to be your age again and doing the things you’re doing,” Nicholas heard one say to another. He seemed to be in his mid-forties, definitely the oldest of the three, and Nicholas tried and failed to pin down the dynamic of the group. “I tell you, my buddies and I used to drive down the coast just wasted on acid or molly for days, cruising through bars for girls and not worrying about a damn thing. What you’re doing, so admirable.”

“Thanks,” said the other—this one was definitely the youngest. He seemed about the same age as Nicholas, but rocked the corn-fed body of a former high school football star.

“What’s he doing?” Nicholas interjected.

“I’m out here for school,” the guy said in a thick Australian accent. Maybe rugby, then, instead of football. “But I’ve got a few weeks between quarters and am travelling the states by myself. It’s been a blast; you should try it, travelling alone. I spent a night in San Francisco last

week, met up with this smokin' girl off Tinder, went back to her place and did shrooms in her living room. Wild time. Anyway, her roommate, this black lesbian chick, just started flipping out on me for no reason. Now, I didn't have a place to stay that night and this girl had promised me her couch, and I definitely don't have the money for a hotel in the city. Couldn't even afford an Airbnb, they're so expensive out there. And it's like two in the morning and this dyke is trying to kick me out on the street, like I had a chance at finding a room that late? I mean, come on. Not to mention I was still pretty high. So I tell her she's being a bitch, because she was. Then the girl that invited me over starts going off on me, like suddenly I'm all in the wrong. I saw right then that this couch was out of the question for me, definitely killed my chance at sharing her bed, and now I'm pleading with these girls to let me crash on their porch or their backyard, just anywhere other than spending the rest of the night huddled in a booth at some shitty Denny's, and they finally relent and let me crash in their tiny ass backyard, but locked all their doors and told me to slip out the gate in the morning. Took a shit in their flowerpot before I took off, though."

The other two were nodding and laughing, but Nicholas kept sipping his drink and trying to get a read on the group. They had to have met here, a trio of traveling men out on the town, but he couldn't figure out the third guy yet. The older one he'd pegged as a former druggie white hippie turned into a PR douchebag, or maybe even advertising. He was the previous generation's version of the techie, start-up, gentrifying force of computer coders, Nicholas thought, but the third guy evaded him. He was somewhere in his thirties, looked like he had a bit of money based on his slip, preppy tie, but didn't seem quite comfortable around the other two.

"Say," the older guy said to Nicholas. "I've been pitching this idea to these two, and am thinking you might add something to our little think tank. I'm Steve, by the way. So we've got these apps for finding new music, and new jobs, and even new girlfriends. But what's missing?"

What's the biggest pandemic in America right now? Depression. Depression in men, and no one is talking about it. Why would you be depressed, they all say, you've got it all, the whole world handed to you, but you guys know. You know the pressures and the stress we have to put up with. Well, maybe you two kids don't, but you will once you leave college. You'll wake up one day and realize that you don't have any friends of your own. That you just go out with your girlfriend and her friends, that all your guy friends are just the guys dating the friends of your girlfriend. That's what they won't ever tell you, you know, that this whole adult social sphere is based around women. So here's what I'm pitching: an app for guy friends. Think about it. You go to a concert, and you bring along your girlfriend, whatever, but do you meet people there? And why the hell not? You're in a room filled with people that are into the same things as you are, but there's this unspoken barrier to keep you from talking to this huge resource of potential friends. That's what this app will do: break down those barriers. You're in this concert, and you see someone hold up their phone and it's glowing with this blue symbol and you think, 'hey, that guy's in my tribe' because you've got the app and you've been matched with this blue symbol too, and so you go over to him and strike up a conversation with this brand new friend. What do you think? It's great, right?"

Nicholas chewed on his straw. "Do you think that people would hold up a beacon of light that says, 'I need friends' though? I don't feel like you've taken social stigma into account." He turned to the bartender and said, "Could I get a shot of vodka?"

"Hadn't thought of that," Steve said. "But that's a small thing. We've got this team, right here, me as the ideas guy, you two the young perspective, this guy on coding, we're set. This is how great things happen, right boys? A random meeting of great minds, great ideas. This is just too exciting for us to let this opportunity pass us by."

Nicholas tossed back the shot, then turned away from the trio.

“Where are you going?” Steve said.

“To find a dance floor,” he yelled back.

Around the corner, he spotted a line of people waiting to get through a velvet curtain, and he walked past the line to speak to the bouncer. “Is this a dance club?”

“Sure is,” the bouncer said without looking up from the ID he was checking.

“Wonderful.” Nicholas walked to the back of the line just as the thirty-something man turned the corner. He smiled at Nicholas, who returned a half nod before turning his back on the man.

“My name’s Brian,” he said over Nicholas’ shoulder. “Thanks for giving me a reason to bail on those two.”

“Oh yeah?” Nicholas turned to face him. “And what reason was that?”

“Well, to them, I’m going to find a girl on the dance floor.”

“But to you?”

“I’m going to find you, hopefully steal a dance,” Brian said, and Nicholas felt himself flush. He hadn’t expected that from the coder in a group of networking men on the edge of Nevada. The bouncer checked his ID and Nicholas walked into the club without Brian and found the bar, ordered a vodka soda.

The club, he thought, was exactly like every straight club he’d ever been to. Newly met couples grinded on elevated platforms, groups of women danced, groups of men stood and watched, and Brian walked through the velvet curtain. He looked a lot cuter without the other two around, Nicholas admitted to himself. He had tightly cut blond hair, spiked in the front, and a damn good jaw line. He was stocky, too, in a toned sort of way. Nicholas waved him over, and

Brian ordered a whiskey on the rocks while he leaned against the bar, their shoes wedged against each other and the outside of their legs pressed against each other.

“So,” Nicholas said. “You’re a coder?”

“No,” Brian laughed. “I told them I’ve watched a couple videos on coding and they were just too stoked on their idea to catch on that I couldn’t make them an app.”

“Gotcha. They seemed a bit overeager. Or at least the older dude did; Steve. How’d you all meet?”

“I caught a ride share out here with them. Thought it would be worth the saved money to split a hotel room with them, too, but am starting to regret that.”

The song switched, and Brian smiled to himself. He started bouncing in his knees, his hips running up and down Nicholas’ side, and he threw back the rest of his drink. “Come on, let’s go dance.”

Nicholas eyed him as he sucked the last of his drink through his straw, then set the glass on the bar and allowed himself to be led onto the dance floor. They settled into a space next to a group of women and Brian turned toward him, and then ran a finger along the hemline of Nicholas’ shirt. Nicholas fell against the man and lost himself in the music and in the wanting body of this stranger. He ran his palm against Brian’s stubbled chin and nuzzled his forehead against the nape in Brian’s neck.

He felt someone brushing against his back, and he pulled away from Brian to see a white girl twerking against him while her friends cheered. They saw him looking, and beckoned for him to come dance with them. He turned back to Brian, who was laughing with the girls, patted his chest and said, “I’ll be back in a moment.”

He found the restroom and stood at the sink with the water running. A man fixed his hair in the mirror next to him, and Nicholas took a look at the man through the corner of his eye before the man exited the restroom and left Nicholas with nothing to look at but himself in the mirror. He stared long at his reflection, wondering how this drunken boy, alone in a far away casino, could really be him. His bloodshot eyes and his excited hair didn't look like the boy he was used to seeing in mirrors, didn't seem like the kid he'd been, didn't seem like the man he was supposed to be. He wondered if he should go back out into the club and dance with a woman, not as her gay friend for the night but maybe as her lover. He could do it, he thought, be straight. These doubts didn't happen often for him, but he had worked to build up a resource of validation for when they did. The heterosexist world, he thought, wants you to doubt. It wants you to wonder if you can actually fall in love, if you should trust the boys in your hotel room, if you should trust yourself. But the queer world, that's true human freedom, it's a reality absent of stigmatized social boundaries. It sounds like a lot of bullshit. He knew there weren't easy ways to back out—who would believe him if he settled into a straight marriage and had kids?—but he thought he might be able to find a suburb in the middle of Nevada and forget who he'd been. Maybe even start a company with the Australian and the burnout hippie. Tackle this life with the blind confidence of an all-American man.

He splashed a handful of water onto his face and patted it dry with a rough paper towel, and then walked out of the restroom, through the club, across the dance floor to Brian and the dancing women.

“Let's go,” he shouted in Brian's ear. “Do you want to stay in my hotel room, or with those douchebags?”

Brian smiled and the two of them left the club while one of the dancing women cheered after them; they walked through the casino and down the street and out of Nevada.

Nicholas lit himself a cigarette on the edge of the motel parking lot and offered one to Brian, who took it. They sat on the curb and smoked, and Brian asked, “Am I right in guessing you aren’t here alone?”

“Yeah,” Nicholas said. He flicked the ash off his cigarette. “I’m on a trip with two other guys, one might be my boyfriend.”

“Gotcha.”

“You’re gay, right?” Nicholas took another drag. “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“Are you happy with your life?”

“My gay life,” Brian smirked. “Or just my life?”

“Ok,” Nicholas laughed. “Both. Your life, and your gay life.”

“I’m happy with both. I’m not really out, though, not in the way most other people are. My family doesn’t know and I don’t have many close friends to tell. It’s mostly a hookup lifestyle, or at least has been recently. You know, Steve wasn’t wrong when he said that men lose friends in their twenties. It maybe isn’t the biggest issue facing America today, but it’s real.”

“So how are you happy with that? I’m happy when I’m not thinking too much about it, but whenever I do I end up spiraling into this logical trap of thinking that at best a gay life is just masturbatory.”

“What life isn’t masturbatory?” Brian asked. “You think straight couples your age are doing anything more important than getting each other off? There isn’t a bigger purpose to their

lives. I think it's maybe foolish to try and live in the same boxes that they do, because then you're stuck comparing your life to theirs and you'll always feel subpar if you do that. But there are infinite paths that your life can take, and it's not worth spending time comparing them."

"When I was a kid," Nicholas said, rubbing his cigarette butt against the concrete. "I had this great backyard. We had the best trampoline in the neighborhood and all my friends would trek over to my backyard, and I was so damn proud that I had this space that was better than other people's spaces. That they envied me. Maybe it's childish, but I don't think many straight people are looking at our lives with envy."

"I think you underestimate people's sense of jealousy. I think everyone looks at everyone with some sort of envy. Steve might not be jealous of butt sex or of dick sucking, but I guarantee he's jealous of your youth. He's jealous of my financial success, although he doesn't know that I inherited most of it from my dad. People are going to be jealous of us for not having kids or for having kids or for being able to wear scarves without embarrassment."

"I think I'm just not prepared for adulthood, and definitely not for a gay adulthood," Nicholas said. "I think I've been trying to figure out how to become someone, to become a fully actualized human being, and I'm learning that you can't; it isn't possible. It sucks not being a kid anymore, because kids didn't have to try to get to know each other. They don't dig for some magical connection in their friends. I'm twenty-two years old and I'm just discovering that you can never really know your friends, or yourself. We all have worlds inside of us, but we only get glimpses of them as we absorb and react to the situations we find ourselves in. You know, I still don't know what my parents think of each other? They always present this consistently loving farce to me and my brother, like they think they'll fail as parents if we ever caught them criticizing each other. But they just end up not ever talking about each other. I feel like I'm still

some kid that's both smashing dolls and playing with them, starting clubs and abandoning them, eating too many Oreos with a friend I'll never see again because our mothers got into an argument about Sarah Palin, some wonderfully sweet and mercilessly cruel boy, or maybe girl, or somewhere in between, that's just pretending to be a man that knows how to love other people."

"You're overthinking it, babe," Brian said and kissed the side of Nicholas' head. "It doesn't matter how unprepared you are for life; you're going to live it anyway. Let's go meet the boyfriend."

He held his hands out to Nicholas and lifted him to his feet, and the two of them walked to the motel room. The lights were on behind the pale pink curtains, and they could hear music thumping through the thin door, and they opened the door to see Ethan head banging with half a bottle of tequila in his hand while Andrew, shirtless and sockless and laying flat on the bed with just a pair of skinny black jeans on, laughed and ran his hand through his hair.

"He's back!" Andrew shouted. "And oh, he's brought a boy, the dirty slut."

Nicholas lay down on the bed next to Andrew and kissed him. "This is Brian. Brian, Andrew and Ethan."

"Pleasure," Ethan said, holding his tequila-free hand out to Brian, who took it and smiled. His eyes lingered on Ethan for a moment, then he nodded at Andrew and flipped his attention right back to Ethan.

"Where'd you go?" Andrew asked.

"The casinos down the street. The both of you were passed out and I wanted to explore. How's your night been?"

“And that’s where you met this fellow?” He nodded at Brian, who was now sitting on the other bed while Ethan stood over him. “My night’s been pretty nice, just getting to know the kid. He’s a bit of a goof.”

Andrew rolled onto his side and propped himself up to look into Nicholas’ eyes. “I’d kind of rather be getting to know you, though.”

Nicholas smiled and kissed him. “That’s why we’re here, right? We’ve got to get our sleep schedules on track; I miss you.”

A sharp, nasal inhale came from behind Andrew, and they both looked over to see Ethan doing a line off Brian’s shirtless stomach. He ran his tongue over the last bit of powder, and then Brian took the bag, pulled Ethan’s shirt off, and pushed him onto his back.

“Crazy kids,” Andrew said as Brian snorted a line off Ethan. “Oh, to be young again.”

“Shut up,” Nicholas said, and kissed Andrew, who leaned into him with his chest and then straddled him. Soon they’d both lost their clothes, and Nicholas’ face was buried in Andrew’s groaning crotch while Andrew’s fingertips gripped Nicholas’ outstretched forearms. Nicholas took a breath and looked up at Andrew, who was looking to his left at the naked and fucking men on the other bed, and Nicholas lost his erection. But then Andrew looked at him and smiled, and pulled him into a kiss, and soon Nicholas was on his back while Andrew held both of their spit covered cocks in one hand, thrusting, thrusting, and then they both were on their backs gasping and holding hands and soon sleeping in the blanket of the other’s dried cum.

The Ones Who Are Mad to Talk, Too Mad to Live

Ethan tapped his thumbs on the steering wheel late the next morning as he sped through the flat nothingness of northern Nevada, his mind still kissing Brian goodbye in the parking lot while the other two slept. Once you pick a direction, stick with it, he reminded himself. It made no sense to jump back onto the eastward road, even with a plan to keep on to Kentucky with Brian—he knew he'd jump out of the car somewhere near his Colorado home if he chanced going back that way. No, it was best to let the man float out of his life.

Nicholas, sitting sprawled in the back seat with his forehead against the window, said, “Do you ever think about the type of people that look at this land and think only of the money they could make off of it?”

After the other two had fallen asleep, he and Brian sat outside the hotel room and smoked a pack of menthol Marlboro. He barely remembered what Brian had talked about—the whole time, his attention had been fixed on the man's jawline, his sharp nose. But he remembered him telling one story, a recent one, in which he'd woken up on a stranger's couch and made himself a cup of coffee and then drank it on the front porch while he ordered an Uber. Brian had trailed off, had never revealed the point, and stubbed his cigarette out on the sidewalk before kissing the nape of Ethan's neck. Now, Ethan rolled his window down just enough to slip out the tips of his fingers and melt off the air-conditioning and drag his mind back to the present.

“Really, though,” Nicholas continued. “If we were here as colonists two hundred years ago. Even one hundred. We wouldn't look at this land with reverence, or sorrow. I'm sitting here looking at this beautiful barren desert and I'm thinking that our earth is so surprising and vulnerable, but I could be looking at this as a wasteland, as a place with no forest to harvest, no

gold to mine, no oil, no touristy beaches. But that's the only reason why it's still beautiful, because no one could capitalize on it. The wasted areas are the only untouched ones."

Nicholas shuffled around in the backseat and Andrew tucked his book into the glove compartment. Ethan rubbed the back of his right hand against his left eye, but still neither engaged him. Ethan wanted to ask Andrew if he should've gone with Brian, what he thought of Brian, if he thought a chance meeting like this could ever turn into something more.

"Even now, though, the people driving through this road are thinking of completely different things," Nicholas said, more to himself than to the other two. "Like the truckers, who are just thinking of it as another day of driving down the same road. Then there are the party kids, just looking for a new place to drink. There's even the nature tourist, the type of traveler that only sees the land and the skies, that never looks to see the people in the cities or to see what they've built, only looking past them to find what insight the land might offer him. I bet some middle aged dudes are driving this road to go visit their secret second family on the far side of the desert and they think of this as a vast dry moat that keeps their wives apart from each other."

"I'm definitely a bit of a nature tourist," Ethan said. "I don't think as much about people in cities as I do about the lands they're living between. We're the polluters. It's nice to have a break to think only about the plants and rocks instead of the plastic products you've still yet to buy. I think we need more nature tourists."

"But nature isn't a theme park for people to visit and look at the attractions of the endangered Spotted Owl, or the preserved Redwood forest," Nicholas said. "We're not protecting these habitats for any reason other than the ways that we can capitalize on them. We're setting up glamor camping sites for people to go sit in these real life nature museums—the National Parks we pride ourselves so much on protecting—so that they can sit in their fancy ass

tents and not worry about bears or mountain lions because we've tamed the wild enough to make it safe, to have just enough danger to make it thrilling, like a fucking rollercoaster. They all want to feel like Jack Kerouac on top of Desolation Peak, but they aren't Kerouac. He couldn't live in this world full of commercialized adventures."

"I loved *On the Road*," Ethan said. Well, at least the first fifty pages of it and the SparkNotes of the rest. "There's something about the freedom to let go of the place you're living, and just go search for truth and happiness in parties with your friends all over the country...it's entrancing. It's an American Odyssey."

"That's exactly what it is," Nicholas said. "Maybe it was authentic in the fifties, but now we all go on these manufactured odysseys. We're living in the shadow of the Beats and we aren't having our own adventures but rather just trying to live out theirs. Most of the things that we do are for the sake of telling our friends about them later, like every bachelor party now is just guys doing stupid shit and making references to *The Hangover* so that they can go home and tell their buddies about the wild and crazy bachelor party they had. We're all trying to have lives that sound as exciting as the stories we consume, and all our crazy American adventures are founded in racism, misogyny, homophobia, settler colonialism, xenophobia—"

"Jesus Christ, babe," Andrew cut in. "That's so bleak. Ethan, listen to me, college is going to make you very jaded and cynical like Nicholas here. It's going to teach you to be very skeptical of every story that you come upon, but you're going to have to fight like hell to remember to find wonder in a story, too. Kerouac is hella problematic, yeah, but did he make you feel like you were part of a larger world, a larger community, and did you discover something about yourself somewhere in his pages?"

“I don’t know man,” Ethan said. “I feel like Nick is kind of right. What are we doing on this road, if not just imitating an adventure? I know I’m out here hoping for some excitement, hoping to run into a group of poets in San Francisco and take acid in a stranger’s basement. What’s wrong with wanting to be like the beats?”

“I just wonder what the point is,” Nicholas said. “What’s the real source of adventure in our American odyssey? I mean, the Gods thrust Ulysses out of his home; he didn’t choose it. Hell, even Harry Potter’s adventure was predestined. But what are the American literary adventurers up to? We’ve got Kerouac and Neal Cassidy getting their thrills speeding drunk through Berthoud Pass. We’ve got Hunter S. Thompson turning a journalism assignment into an adventure by just taking a bunch of drugs. We are living in a world in which adventures are chosen and sought by people that want to feel excitement, rather than journeys that push us unwittingly into a search for self. We just go for a regular old drive, taking trips that people make every day, but with a plastic bag of drugs in our pockets so that we can get a sense of rebellion and danger out of it. All because we’ve glorified the American men that tell stories of seeking out an adrenaline rush without a hint of purpose.”

His logic clicked with Ethan, who thought of his friends in high school climbing onto the roof of their school and smoking joints just for the sake of feeling dangerous. He thought of his friends in college, who mailed boxes of weed—thickly duct taped and put in a box of loose coffee grounds—to their friends in other states, not because they didn’t have weed where they lived but because weed smuggled from the state of Colorado burned with adventure.

“Can you really ask for more in life than a purposeless adrenaline rush?” Andrew said as he rolled his window down. He closed his eyes the wind teased out the tips of his dark hair. “I mean, look at this scrub covered flatland! Look at the grey-bottomed clouds that are drifting over

us, like a ceiling holding us tight to this earth. Smell the morning desert air, Nicky, smell the cold of the night leaving the rocks and listen to the birds scratching in the dirt. How does that not humble you?”

Nicholas put his hand on Andrew’s shoulder and kissed his neck. “I don’t know. I just don’t want to live my life in Disneyland thinking that I’m on a real pirate ship.”

Andrew turned to kiss him, and Ethan watched the road cut suddenly into a suburb. The shift disoriented him—they dirt they’d been surrounded by for hours now hid under grassy lawns, and shortly they were surrounded by restaurants and parking lots and then were stuck at a stoplight. Andrew’s point resonated with Ethan, too, but this neighborhood looked like a children’s cartoon, with evenly toned lawns and pastel, plastic houses.

“Can you pull over somewhere?” Andrew said to Ethan. “I’ve got to piss.”

“Sure,” Ethan said, and flicked his turning signal on. “We’re low on gas anyway.”

Nicholas stretched with his back against the car while Ethan dealt with the gas pump and Andrew went inside the convenience store.

“Think you’ll keep in touch with Brian?” Nicholas asked.

“Nope,” Ethan said. Maybe, he thought. “Think you will?”

“I didn’t get his number. Didn’t even get his last name.”

“He added me on Snapchat,” Ethan said. “Super weird. Who adds their hookups on Snapchat?”

“More people than you’d expect,” Nicholas said. “This guy I slept with like three years ago still sends me pretty regular dick pics.”

“Strange.” Ethan sat on the trunk of the car and lay against the rear window, letting the sun fall against his face. “To be completely honest, I’m not really sure how to date guys. This all feels surreal—I mean, I had a girlfriend last week, my friends were setting me up with girls, and that was, what, two days ago? This feels like one of those horror stories they used to warn children about in the fifties, how a pair of homosexuals will sweep you off into the desert and convert you to a life of sin. My mom would be so disappointed in my choices right now.”

“I wish I could say that those doubts go away,” Nicholas said. “I think they might’ve for Andrew. But I get them all the time. Sometimes I think about how easy it would be to just join the church, bullshit my way through the priesthood, sleep with men on the side. I could move into a neighborhood like this and find happiness in a slow, quiet community.”

“I don’t know that I could go as far as being a priest,” Ethan said. He jumped off the back of the car and took out the gas pump. He’d thought Nicholas seemed more on top his shit, but now he seemed hesitant. Brian hadn’t seemed much more confident—Ethan got the sense that he’d quit his job and was in search of a new life. Between Nicholas’ uncertainty and Brian’s premature midlife crisis, Ethan started to question if all adults were this lost or if it was just the gay ones. “I do want to be a good man, though. Like a cartoon lumberjack or firefighter, some scruffy and bulky man that does good work for his community. Not a lonely, aging gay man. This is fun while we’re young and cute, but everyone will think we’re creeps when we hit our late thirties, including other gay men.”

“Does being a good man have to be associated with masculinity, though?” Nicholas asked. “Isn’t it hard enough to get a job, to build a life, and to deal with all the other responsibilities of being a human today without also worrying about reaching this unobtainable

image of masculine perfection? ‘Bad men’ should be men that hurt other people, not men that fail to achieve manliness.”

Andrew walked out of the convenience store with an armful of chips that he dumped on the roof of the car.

“Let’s go,” he said. “I want to get out of this state before we make camp. I’m thinking we pitch a tent in a national forest somewhere in California, what do you say?”

Nicholas took the wheel this time, and Ethan hoped driving might distract him and keep him from giving too much life advice—it was starting to make him feel uneasy about the future. He wondered if, by the time he reached Brian’s age, he might at least have some sense of direction, although he kind of doubted it. When they’d fucked, something about Brian had felt different than the times he’d been with other guys. He had presence, Ethan guessed; he felt like he’d been looking at Ethan not just his body, like he wasn’t just getting off to the image of Ethan’s body laid out in front of him. He liked knowing Brian’s body absent of all social interaction, just his instincts and breath, but he wished he had some real memory of the man to hold onto. Pleasant sex memories, he thought, don’t seem to have a very long half-life.

He remembered being caught up in Julie’s body, just once, and feeling like she’d become his world. He wanted to text her now and let her know that it hadn’t been fake, no matter what else she might think, no matter what rumors she hears. He loved her as best he could, but he knew that she’d hear about him on the road with a couple of fags and think that he’d only used her to fit in, or to prove himself to the boys, or to make a fool out of her. As he lay in the back seat of the car, he closed his eyes and laid his arm over his face and simmered in a guilty conscience that he wasn’t sure he deserved.

Ethan flicked a lighter in the pouch of grass he'd shoved into his makeshift fire pit while the other two figured out the tent. It caught quicker than he'd expected, and he threw tiny pine tree sticks onto it like Andrew had instructed, building it up until he had a couple logs burning. He looked over at Nicholas and Andrew—still busy—and decided they wouldn't mind, so he took his shirt off, kicked his shoes and socks off, and then shuffled out of his pants and underwear. He sat naked in the warmth of the growing fire for a minute, and then grabbed a blanket from the trunk of the car and returned to his rock with it draped over his shoulders. He rolled a joint in the firelight as he listened to Nicholas yell something incoherent at Andrew. A moment later, Andrew rolled a rock up next to Ethan's and Ethan passed him the now burning joint.

“You know,” Andrew said before letting out a breath of smoke. “I really do like Kerouac. He spends pages just listing the things he sees, like rotting peanut butter and empty boxes of Tide detergent. I can't imagine those were fun bits to read at the time he wrote them, but they're so interesting now, a few generations later, thinking of what trash surrounded people so long ago. I want to live my life with his awareness. Nicholas might be right that we all just try to live out other people's great stories, but I can't bring myself to believe that's bad. Sometimes in order to have an exciting day, you just have to convince yourself to perceive it that way. I don't think it's a crime for us to take a shitty life and convince ourselves it's amazing.”

Ethan took the joint from Andrew's hand, and then slipped his free hand into Andrew's and sucked a mouthful of adventure into his lungs as he sat on a warm rock and felt the hairs on the insides of his thighs start to crisp and stopped thinking about his place in the world, letting just enough room into his mind for him to think instead about the things in life that exist only for

a moment but last so much longer before he let go of Andrew's hand and lay his own across his naked lap.

The Sun Rises, Sets

Dew sweat down the outside of the light blue tent as Andrew watched. He turned to take the pot of boiling water off the camp stove, turned off the fuel, and poured the water of the crystals of instant coffee in the bottom of his mug; he then walked barefoot through the cold, damp dirt to an outcropping just a few yards away from their tent where the trees parted and he could see the early light of a still sunless, foggy sky. He blew the steam from the top of his coffee and watched the oils swirl, then looked at his dirty toes and spread them out.

The muddy spots on the soft skin of his pampered feet made him feel like an old man. Or maybe like something not quite yet human, a primate seeing the hair on his toes and only briefly aware of his own existence. He felt like carbon and oxygen and nothing ethereal. He sipped his coffee and dug his big toes into the earth.

He'd woken up feeling trapped between the other two, his back to the ground and a hand on Nicholas' thigh, another on Ethan's forearm, and also felt a strong need to pee. While the water boiled, he had peed just downhill of the tent, but he had yet to relieve the feeling of being trapped. He sipped his coffee and wondered why he spent his daily life trying so hard to convince himself that he was anything but an animal with a need to get the soles of his feet dirty.

Someone rustled inside the tent while Andrew watched the tip of the sun burn through the edge of the horizon. He heard the tent flap unzip and heard someone stumble through the opening, and soon Ethan stood next to him. Andrew looked at his feet, also bare, up his naked legs to his dark red briefs and his light grey sweater. Ethan rubbed his palm against his right eye and Andrew smiled at his dirty blonde tousle of slept-on hair.

“Coffee?” Andrew held the mug out to Ethan, who stared blankly at it for a moment before taking it and dropping his eyelids in gratitude. Andrew scooted over on the rock and Ethan sat next to him and laid his head on Andrew’s shoulder.

“Good morning,” Ethan mumbled, and Andrew shushed him. They sat together waiting for the sun to climb over the earth as the misty air detached from the pine trees. When he reached the bottom of the mug, Ethan lifted his head from Andrew’s shoulder and said, “How’d you sleep?”

Andrew watched an airplane cut through the sky. He imagined himself as part of this too-big species, this infection on the planet’s surface, with its too-many structures and its ambitious vehicles. He wanted to feel guilty, he really did, but he couldn’t manage it. Maybe it was selfish, he thought, and maybe he should lament the loss of these forests and the end of winter and the death of the oceans, but here on the side of this mountain he just felt grateful for his own existence.

“Just fine,” he said to Ethan. “This is my favorite time of day. When the air still feels like night and the sky is soft and the sun isn’t too bright to stare at yet.”

Ethan’s eyes flicked around Andrew’s face and he bit his lip. Andrew pulled his gaze from the sunrise, looked at him and asked, “What?”

Ethan shook his head and smiled, and then kissed Andrew.

He knew he’d been waiting for this since they’d met Ethan, that he’d felt cold every time he sat next to this boy and couldn’t touch him, but he hadn’t expected to be uprooted by this kiss and tossed into the air, thrown down the mountainside, cut by thorns of longing and guilt; he pulled Ethan’s lower lip into his mouth like it could satisfy his parchedness, like it could erase the man waking up in the tent behind them.

They pulled apart and sat together, not speaking, while the air around them warmed by the brightening sun and while Nicholas shuffled out of the tent, took a groaning piss, made himself a cup of coffee. Andrew stood up and sat next to Nicholas near the pot of boiling water and Nicholas buried his face in Andrew's chest.

He ran his fingertips along Nicholas' new stubble and resented, for some reason, the physical contact. He wished the other two had slept through the morning, or had gone off on their own. He'd enjoyed mornings like this with company, with a crew of friends by a brisk Colorado lake, but today he just wanted solitude.

The lack of the company of his friends, he thought, might be the reason for his resentment. He'd left friends behind for this trip with Nicholas, and he guessed that right now they'd be sleeping off the alcohol from last night. He thought of waking up in Caitlin's living room last weekend as she raced around the kitchen. She was the only person he knew that didn't drag through a hangover morning.

When he'd go camping with his friends, everyone else would sleep through the morning (everyone else drank whiskey through the night) but Caitlin never drank when they slept outside. She'd told him the first time they'd gone camping together that she drank in the city to fall asleep, but out here she wanted to be awake as much as she could, to watch the earth exhale through the night. So he'd followed her lead, but he cared less about the earth than about Caitlin. He just wanted to watch her watching the world.

While he woke up next to that lake, rolled out of his hammock, and slammed his right heel onto a rock, Caitlin stood barefoot in the lake with the water up to her ankles. He walked out to her and they both stood, their hands intertwined, waiting for the sunrise. She'd reached for his hand in a way that wanted for something he wasn't sure he knew how to give; her fingers seemed

to ask his to keep her grounded to the shore. At the time, he thought he'd wanted to have sex with her, but now he knew that wasn't it. He wanted to feel what she felt as she looked across the water and he wanted to feel life through her body. They'd found in each other a person that listened to the same rhythms of the earth, of the body, and Andrew knew that meant they would not stay in each other's lives for long.

Every time they went camping, after a couple of pulls from the flask of whiskey, Kyle would play tragic and rumbling country songs on his guitar—songs Andrew knew Nicholas would scoff at. Andrew sat in the dirt, as close to the fire as he could, and Kyle would invariably work in a line about Andrew's shoelaces catching in the campfire. Caitlin and Kyle would sneak into their tent, later, while Andrew lingered by the fire alone, or with whomever else they'd dragged along. Once, he sat in a thick rainstorm while the fire dried the front of him and the rain ran down his back and he wondered what Caitlin had found in Kyle. She saw the mountains in him, he guessed, she saw the callouses on his nimble, guitar plucking fingers and mistook him for a heavyhearted traveler.

She'd told Andrew a few weeks ago, while she sat in the dirt massaging the arches in her feet and Andrew stood and tugged a rope through a belay device—Kyle, on the other end, scrambled forty feet above them on a cracked slab of granite—that she was leaving for Wyoming at the end of her lease. He'd seen the dust stirring beneath her for months, had known she'd take off soon, and was saved from wishing her well by a rock torn loose by Kyle's left hand.

“Fuck,” Kyle yelled as he lifted Andrew off the ground. Kyle wouldn't last long without Caitlin, he thought. He'd graduated the year before without a plan, defaulted into staying local, claiming he wanted to really give his relationship with Caitlin a shot, but since then they'd

neither sizzled nor fizzled out. Andrew wished he'd taken to the road with them instead, a final dusty trip across the country before their crew fell apart.

Nicholas stood up and stretched. "Want to help me pack up the tent?" he said.

Andrew walked over to the tent with him, bent down to pull out a steak, and then stopped himself. "No. Let's leave it."

"What do you mean?" Nicholas said.

"Come on. Get in the car." Andrew unzipped the tent and grabbed the keys from the top of Nicholas' backpack, then walked straight to the car and started it. Ethan followed and climbed into the backseat, smirking, and Nicholas stood with his arms crossed for a moment outside of the tent, and then went to the passenger seat.

"Highway's the other way," Nicholas said as Andrew drove the car further down the dirt forest service road.

"We aren't going to the highway," Andrew said. He pulled his phone out and skimmed the map app.

"Then what are we doing?" Ethan asked.

"Taking a day off from our scheduled plan," Andrew said. He wheeled the car around two huge divots in the road and gunned it up a small hill.

"This is a fucking sedan, Andy," Nicholas said. "You'll get us stuck out here."

"Then we'll be stuck," he replied. He flicked on the car stereo and fumbled with the case of a burned CD, and soon had John Gourley singing *Well we all get strange, and we know it, but we're cool with it* as he pressed further down the road into the forest. Nicholas rolled his window down and Andrew felt him stare at him out of the corner of his eye, so he turned the music up

and drove a bit faster. Then the road widened just a bit and he pulled off into a patch of tall grasses.

“We’re here,” he said, and opened his door.

“We’re where?” Nicholas said, but Ethan had already climbed out and followed Andrew through the grasses.

“Come on,” Andrew shouted back, and then trekked through the grass, hoping his phone hadn’t lied. He led the others toward a row of bushes, which he ducked his way through, and there it was: a small lake, half covered in lily pads and damn near untouched.

“Wow,” Ethan said.

“What’s on the other side?” Nicholas said from behind the bushes.

“We discovered a hidden lake,” Ethan yelled back.

Andrew kicked off his shoes and stripped off his shirt. He left his underwear on, wary of parasites, and waded into the water. The ground beneath his feet crawled with algae and soft mud, and he shivered. Ethan raced past him, entirely naked, and whooped as he dove into the water. He rose up and floated on his back, his hair flipped back from his forehead, and shouted at Andrew. This dumb kid, Andrew thought, sure knows how to get me out of my mind.

He stepped carefully through the water as it rose up over his kneecaps, but Ethan kept splashing in the deeper water and calling for him to join.

“Prude bitch, leave your underwear behind,” Ethan shouted as he slapped the surface of the lake and tossed droplets of water across Andrew’s face. Andrew smiled, balanced on one leg like a flamingo, and drew his other leg out of his briefs. He did the same on the other side, and turned to throw them back to shore. Then he saw Nicholas, arms crossed around his knees as he

sat alone in the grass, and beckoned for him to join, but Nicholas just glared at the airborne pair of underwear and raised his eyebrows at Andrew.

Andrew pursed his lips and blew a kiss to the boy on the shore, and then ran and tackled Ethan into the lake, his back twisting as they fell and bumping against the soft growth on the lake floor. He felt Ethan swirling above him as they brushed slippery skin in water that vibrated with the movement of their bodies.

Later, he lay on a towel in the flattened grass by the lake with a warm beer in his hand and a boy on either side of him and thought of the day he'd met Nicholas. They knew the dirt of forest service roads well; they'd first met up a mile down Forest Service Road 356 after a week of messaging on Grindr. Andrew had pulled up in his truck and trotted barefoot to a pine tree with rusted needles while Nicholas watched from the driver's seat of his car. He'd stuck his hand out when Nicholas walked toward him and said, "My name's Andy," and kissed him before he could respond. A routine, a show, a slutty bird with his chest puffed out. Two boys dragging boulders between their toes found a dry patch of earth on the side of a mountain, and saw the world from its peak.

They came back the next week, a few more times the week after. They fucked outside all summer and didn't bother to say goodbye when the aspens turned gold. Outdoor boys know that sports change with the seasons, and that teammates come and go, at least so Andrew thought.

Yet the next spring they found themselves warming a tent with their sweat in the middle of a Colorado afternoon thunderstorm. Something changed in their sex, this time. The summer had been selfish, two buddies trading favors, but the filtered light of the tent softened the brisk connection. Andrew grabbed at Nick's skin; Nick bit his inner thigh as one of them came. Water

dripped down the sides of the tent, the rainfly flapping in the wind, their naked bodies panting in the sweating tent.

Andrew turned onto his side and looked at Nicholas, trying to reconcile that man with the one he'd come to know. He slurped his beer loudly and gulped, then belched, but still Nicholas ignored him. He set the beer down and lay his hand on Nicholas' forearm.

"Hey," Andrew said. "Thanks for letting me divert the day."

Nicholas smiled and kissed Andrew's forehead. They lay in the sun by the lake for the rest of the afternoon, snacking on apples and grapes from the trunk of the car and tossing back beer after beer. When the sun started to set, Ethan suggested they head back to the campsite and start a fire before it got too dark to scavenge for dry wood. Andrew drove them back with the windows down, shirtless and with an open beer in hand, and proposed that they hike around a bit before settling down for the night.

There weren't any trails, so the three walked aimlessly through the brambles around their campsite. Nicholas and Ethan both tread with their eyes on the ground, but Andrew watched them wandering through the pine trees. He walked his own way for a bit, and then caught up to Nicholas. He slipped his hand into Nick's back pocket and kissed him on the cheek; soon Nick had him backed against a tree with his tongue pressed against Andrew's teeth. Andrew unzipped both of their pants and bent to kiss Nick's stomach, the trimmed hair around his belly button, the soft skin at the base of his penis.

"Are we ok?" Andrew asked Nicholas as they walked through the forest, their pants now closed and their palms pressed together. Nicholas inhaled deeply, and then Ethan called out both of their names. They rushed toward the sound of his voice—bears and snakes and hunters

flashing through Andrew's mind—and caught up to him standing in a charred clearing. The forest ended abruptly and the ground rose up in piles of ash, in charcoal towers reminiscent of tree stumps. The sun had set now, and the sky above them turned orange; Andrew felt like he'd stepped into a *Lion King* horror scene. This setting was too cartoonish, too nightmarish, for reality. Ethan kicked at the grey dirt and it rose up in clouds that refused to settle.

This was wildfire, Andrew knew, not controlled. This was destruction. He'd been promised a different world, he thought, one with wonder and serenity. This traumatic scar from their sick society, this horrible, awful place—we will set ourselves on fire, Andrew thought. He kicked at a black log that cracked; a dozen insects scurried out and Andrew recoiled.

“This is awful witch shit,” he said, and turned to walk back to the campsite. No one spoke as they stumbled down the mountain but Ethan lagged behind and when they reached the tent Nicholas turned to Andrew and said, “So are you two fucking now, or what?”

Andrew lit the fire before he responded, and when he spoke he tore into Nicholas. He called him desperate and lonely and jealous, and Nicholas barely said anything, just stared at Andrew as if waiting for him to tire himself out, and Ethan hid in the tent. Nicholas stood up when Andrew stopped yelling and said, in the flickering light of the fire, “Sleep in the car.” Then he climbed into the tent and zipped closed the flap.

Andrew didn't sleep, though. He watched the fire burn down and seethed, and then as the last glowing embers sputtered out he let go of the anger and let in the embarrassment. The sun rose slowly, and Andrew dozed with his back to a pine tree. Nicholas and Ethan got out of the tent and took it apart, rolled it up, packed it away while Andrew sat with his head buried in his arms.

“Nick,” he said when Nicholas walked over to him. “I'm so sorry.”

“Give me the keys,” Nicholas said. Andrew handed them over and followed him to the car, slid into the backseat, and started to cry as Nicholas drove them down the dirt road and back onto the highway.

“You have friends in the city that you can stay with, right?” Nicholas said as he accelerated up the on-ramp. “I think we should separate for a few days. Ethan, you can come with me or go with him or go your own way, I don’t care. Then we’ll meet up again Friday.”

“Nick, please don’t do this,” Andrew said. “I fucked up. I’m an asshole.”

He didn’t respond, but Andrew saw his face in the rearview mirror and knew he’d made up his mind. “Ok. Yeah, I have friends. I’ll give you space; do what you have to do.”

Andrew pressed his forehead against the window and watched the golden hills of northern California roll past, and he went back to the trees, to the abandoned building, to the spaces he and Nicholas had carved out in the world. He knew he’d ruined the trip, had invited someone else into the space Nicholas had set aside for just the two of them, had hurt a man he loved, but his body still didn’t feel regret. He curled against the door and bunched a sweatshirt beneath his head and pulled his headphones out of his pocket, and fell asleep listening to Dawn Golden.