

Fiction



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*never trust a writer that says it isn't about you
or one who pens the truth before he's had a few –
the one you want to read
knows that fact is fiction
and that fiction is always true.*

– from “never trust a writer that doesn't drink”

Titles

This Is How It Starts.....	1
My First Day of School	2
Sometimes Being Motherless Is Awesome.....	5
It's Safe to Make Fun of Necrophiliacs.....	7
The Tea Party	9
Don't Try to Kill Yourself Because It Might Not Work	11
My Last Day of School.....	12
Fear of Airplanes.....	13
The Sound in the Ceiling.....	22
The Southern Lights.....	25
Early Morning Commute.....	28
Sellout.....	30

This Is How It Starts

Let it be said up front that there are only two things in this world which drive a man to write: the hope of fucking someone you want, and the misery of fucking all the others. I know this because Henry McIntyre once told me so. And that makes it true.

It was a cold December evening at approximately seven o'clock and I was sitting in Bentley's trying to drink away my first broken heart, when a man in black slacks, a white shirt, and an unbuttoned overcoat strolled in as though he were arriving from somewhere other than the outside. He stood in the middle of the bar and looked around. Very quickly the place went silent, and I heard him speak for the first time:

*excuse me miss,
but can i have another?
because it's been seven lifetimes
since i last saw my lover,
and now i'm afraid
she's turned into her mother.*

The place erupted with laughter, and Mr. McIntyre threw his coat and hat on the rack in the far corner, before sitting down to once again drink for free.

"You've done it again Henry my boy, I don't know *how* you do it," said the bartender.

"I do it *well*," smiled Henry.

"Jesus if you aren't an arrogant bastard."

"I hate when people mistake my genius for arrogance," Henry winked, and I took notice.

I knew I had to talk to him at that point, but couldn't figure out how, so I just kept looking over, and finally he said in a loud boisterous voice,

"Young curious man, come sit and drink with me; let us talk boldly of your illusions, of all the things you think you'll be."

So I did, and I somewhat nervously spoke,

"I'm going to be a writer."

"The world has enough writers," he said.

"Yes, but I'm going to be original."

"Well, that's original," he smiled, "looks like you're off to a great start."

My First Day of School

The first time I saw a clitoris was the day before I started kindergarten. I was amazed and utterly convinced that I had made the discovery of a lifetime. I ran home immediately to tell my father all about it. When I arrived, he was sitting on the front porch, and I yelled with excitement

“Daddy, Daddy! You’re not going to believe it!”

He smiled, “What is it son?”

“Girls have penises too!”

He looked down at the ground somewhat perplexed and then back up,

“Ummm, no they don’t son.”

“Yes they do daddy, it’s just that theirs are a lot smaller than ours, so they’re harder to find, you have to really look for them.”

“Son, I have seen many women up close, but I have never seen one with a penis.”

“Really? So then I discovered something that you didn’t even know! That just shows how hard they are to find!”

He then asked me about how exactly I had made this “discovery”, so I explained that me and the girl across the street were playing doctor. As the doctor, it was my job to examine the patient, and since she was the patient, she had to lie naked on the bed and allow me to inspect her, and that was when I had seen her very tiny penis.

“So, is that all that happened?”

“Yes.”

“Well, what I mean is, didn’t she ask to see you?”

“That’s silly daddy, girls can’t be doctors.”

He laughed, shook his head and told me to go get ready for dinner.

The next morning, as my father was leaving for work, he kissed me on the forehead and told me “It’s your first day of school, so behave yourself,” and when my mother wasn’t looking, he leaned in and whispered “And you stay away from girls’ penises today, you hear me?” I nodded in agreement.

Later my mother drove me to school, and when I realized she wasn’t coming with me, I started to cry. I couldn’t understand why she wanted to leave me with people I didn’t know, or, more to the point, why she wanted to be away from me at all. I kept asking her over and over, “But mommy, don’t you love me anymore?” Eventually they got me to calm down and go in the school, but I felt a real sense of loss that day. We had spent every day of the summer together, and now she was abandoning me. It wasn’t just that she was leaving me, it was this feeling I had that it was too easy for her to leave. And by the end of the school year, I would find out that I was right, when my parents would announce their intent to divorce. But at that moment, all I could do was cry, never knowing if my fears were real or imagined. And I might have continued crying the entire day had she not walked in.

Tight polyester pants, nice round ass, long brown hair, tits like boom and a beautiful face. Miss Alana, my kindergarten teacher. I immediately raised my hand, "Are you our teacher?" "Yes I am," and I blurted out, "Well, you're very pretty." She smiled and said thank you. Now, though, I wonder why I was like that. It would be a few more years before I would have my first orgasm, but I instinctively knew this woman was gorgeous and that somehow her hourglass figure was a good thing. But I also knew Miss Alana had no interest in being my girlfriend, she was just giving off that "I'm not interested" vibe. Still though, you can't blame a kid for trying.

I might have lapsed into my second depressive episode that day had I never seen Anais. She too was beautiful. I remember the first thing I thought when I saw her, "I want her to be my girlfriend." So I walked up to her, introduced myself, found out her name and said "You're going to be my girlfriend from now on." And she said "Okay." And just like that, I was in love with the prettiest girl in kindergarten.

Later that afternoon, they showed us a filmstrip. I don't even remember what it was about. What I do remember is sitting in the dark next to Anais with my arm around her. I remember her asking me "Are you sure this is okay?" And I said "Of course it is, you're my girlfriend." I think we must have gotten away with it for a solid two minutes before the teacher told us not to sit so close together. My solution was to then put my arm on the ground behind Anais, but without touching her. Again, Miss Alana told me to sit upright. The more I think about it, the more I think that bitch was probably just jealous.

When the school day ended, I expected to see my mother waiting for me, but the teachers told me that I was supposed to ride the bus home. I didn't really like that, but then I boarded the bus and who do you think I saw sitting all by herself? Anais! I was happy again, and I quickly took the seat next to her. As we got close to my house, the bus stopped and she exited. I realized that she lived just down the street from me! So I called out to her, "Anais, I'm going to come to your house today," and she smiled and said okay.

I got off the bus, ran home, changed into my playclothes and headed straight for the front door when my mother asked where I was going.

"I have a date."

"A date with who?"

"Anais."

"Who is Anais?"

"She's my girlfriend mom, I met her today."

She laughed and told me to be home before dark. I ran to Anais' house, I couldn't wait to see her. Now there would be no one to get in our way. If I wanted to put my arm around her, I'd be able to. I might even be able to

kiss her! I knocked at the front door, a lady answered and said that Anais had left. I asked when she would be back and was told that she wouldn't be. They explained to me that Anais had been staying there for the summer and that now she was returning home. I asked if I would still see her at school and they said she would be going to a different school. I never saw her again. Much later, I wondered why she would go to one school for one day and then switch to a completely different school for the rest of the year. But then, would knowing why have really made any difference? I mean, how often, in the face of loss, does the question "Why?" have an answer that we can accept?

I wandered around for a while after that, skipping stones, playing with dogs in the neighborhood, just anything to take my mind off of things. But none of it worked. When I got home that evening, my father saw me and asked what was wrong. I told him that I was finished with girls and explained what happened. He looked at me and smiled warmly,

"Love is a pretty terrible thing, isn't it?"

"Yes it is Daddy, I hate it."

"Well, I'll tell you a secret kiddo, it's also a pretty wonderful thing."

"Daddy, that doesn't make any sense."

He smiled, "Hmmm, don't I know it."

On my first day of school, I learned that summer ends. I learned what it felt like to be abandoned, and how to cure that sense of loss with the rush of infatuation. I learned that the girl you love can disappear in the time it takes to change into your playclothes. Though I wasn't yet aware of it, I was well on my way to becoming a poet.

Sometimes Being Motherless Is Awesome

My uncle was good at art, riding bicycles, picking up women, and being nice to kids. But what he was really great at was drugs. I swear, he had to be the best junkie that ever lived. And don't ever believe anybody who tries to tell you that it isn't a skill. Hell, you spend all night getting wasted, but are always ready to go roofing at five the next morning in the hot ass Louisiana summer sun? Yeah, if you can pull that off, you're just cool. And if you can't, then maybe you're the fucking drug addict. No way man, drugging's a skill, like a strong will to live life completely. Sure, you pay for it in the end, but we all pay for something in the end.

I couldn't have been more than seven the first time I got drunk. It was a fucking blast. It started off as an accident and then turned into a thing on purpose. See, when I was a kid, my dad, my uncle and me used to go go-kart racing. These go-karts were fast, like eighty miles an hour fast, and people took the shit seriously. We would usually get to the track on Saturday, the day before a race, and then drive back home on Sunday night. Those drives were amazing, about three hours long in my dad's orange van, music blasting, and he and my uncle drinking like crazy. Sometimes one of them would ask me to hold their drink, or grab them another beer or something like that. Well, this one night, I think it was my uncle that asked me to hold his screwdriver – a fucking giant cup of half orange juice and half vodka. And I guess I was just curious, so I took a sip. And then it was just like “Damn, this is good.” By the time he asked for his drink back, I'd finished it, and he said to my dad “Oh shit old man, it looks like he drank my screwdriver.” After that, I'm singing every song that comes on at the top of my lungs, everybody's drunk, we're going down the interstate at almost ninety miles an hour. I think it was the first time in my life I ever remember feeling free.

And believe it or not, I handled that screwdriver. Then I convinced my uncle, who convinced my dad, to let me have a beer. And I drank that motherfucker too. By the time we got home that night, I was just super hyper, like really crazy, and the second I got out of the van, I climbed the fence along the side of the house, jumped up on the roof, and then started pissing on anything that was beneath me. My dad saw and kind of laughed and said to my uncle “Jesus, get the kid off the roof.” I'm telling you, people talk a lot about how much it sucks not having a mom, but do you really think any of that shit would have happened if I'd had one waiting for me back at home? Hell no. Sometimes being motherless is awesome.

But one of the craziest times with my uncle was this morning I heard a commotion outside. I look out the window and see my father and my uncle fighting with some other dudes in what was probably a road rage incident gone bad. They'd been out all night “carrying on” which was a synonym for “fucking and drinking”. A guy hits my dad and knocks him down. I panic, run to the bedroom, grab his twelve gauge, and break the one rule he always made me promise I wouldn't break: never open the door when you're home alone, not to go outside, not if someone knocks, never. Well, I run outside with the trigger cocked. My finger is shaking like a motherfucker, and I'm a little worried, you know, like, “Fuck I hope I don't accidentally pull this trigger.” Now, the way I

remember it, I yelled out “You leave my daddy alone!” But to hear my uncle tell it, he says that what I actually said was “I’ll shoot every damned one of you if you don’t get off my fucking property right now.” Well, if it’s all the same to you – and I’m guessing that it probably is – I say we go with my uncle’s version, because I sound a lot cooler in it.

Anyway, you talk about breaking up a fucking party, I never seen guys sober up so quick. My dad rushed me inside and told me to go hide in my room and not to make a sound. When the cops showed up, they said they got a report about a small child with a shotgun. At this point I was eavesdropping on the other side of the door. I’ll never forget what my father said to them: “Whoever told you that is mistaken, there are no children here.” Back then, I just thought it was some cool shit to say, you know, ’cause lying to the police was just really badass. But now, looking back on it, I realize he was right – there really were no children there. The other thing is, while all my friends were watching movies with cops and robbers and gunfights and shit like that, I was living the dream: a hard-drinking, gun-toting, seven-year-old with an attitude problem.

It's Safe to Make Fun of Necrophiliacs

There were so many dudes trying to do weird shit to me when I was a kid that you would've sworn I was a chick. Talk about fucking up your first orgasm – I'm eight years old sleeping over at my dad's girlfriends' house, when I wake up to her seventeen-year-old son sucking my dick. I thought I was dreaming and wasn't really sure what was going on. To some extent, that's probably an excuse just so you won't think I was a fag. Seconds later I come for the first time. It felt both good and disgusting all at once, sort of like jerking off at an autopsy. I've never done that by the way. And I'm not trying to insult necrophiliacs, though I do think they're fucking weird, but me, I'm not in to corpses and have a really weak stomach when it comes to blood and the like. And I'm not just saying that because it's safe to make fun of necrophiliacs, I'm speaking from experience. Well, sort of.

See, I told this girlfriend of mine once that I was curious to know what it would be like to have sex with a corpse, you know, because complete submission can be really cool. And I really meant it when I said it. Well, one day, in the middle of sex, with absolutely no warning, she randomly plays dead – head tilted to the side, eyes rolled back in the head, tongue hanging out of her mouth. I lost my erection in a New York second. And that line's funny too, because she was from Long Island. At that moment, I was positive that I had no interest in necrophilia, and that my fantasy was probably more along the lines of wanting one of those blow up sex dolls or something like that. Anyway, I'm off track.

So like I was saying, it seemed like there were tons of fucking weirdos coming at me when I was a kid, and in my mind, there was always a difference between the weirdos and the people that just do cruel shit to children. Like, take my mother, or my father's side piece – who also happened to be the sister of the dude that blew me that one time (nice family, huh?) – they were just cruel sick bastards, like the kind of people that torture small animals or something. But other people, like Harry, who lived down the street, he was just a fucked up guy. I remember when I was five, he was in my backyard, jerking off in front of me, crying that no one understood him and how difficult it made life. Man that shit was awkward. I was like, "Yeah, I can see that." But he didn't hurt me, he just kinda freaked me out, I guess you could call that my introduction to surrealism, because looking back on it, it was like some kind of weird ass performance art.

Or take Fat Pat from around the corner. Anytime I was over at that dude's house, he only wanted to talk about two things: dicks, and what it would be like to kill someone. And he would get this really sinister look in his eye when he talked about murder. Then one time he tells me this insane story about how Ronnie, the rich athletic handsome guy that lived in the big house on the corner, pulled a shotgun on Harry and said "Either my dick is going in your mouth or this bullet is going in your head." He told me Ronnie was a fag, he said lots of dudes were and didn't even know it, and then he said that I might be one too, and that there was only one way for me to really find out. I knew what he was getting at – by then, I was nine, and had known plenty of people a lot fucking stranger than Pat. But Pat had one thing that none of those other weirdos had.

He had this book called “Dirty Jokes” – just pages and pages of filthy fucking jokes, the kind that would get you suspended if you told them where a teacher could hear. And I really wanted that fucking book. So I told him, I’d agree to try his gay shit if he gave me that book. Well, Pat tossed me the book and went to take his pants down, and I bolted out of his room and house and took off down the street. A couple of seconds later he emerges, chasing after me, screaming, “You little son of a bitch!” And I remember running backwards, knowing he would never catch me, laughing the whole time, “Fat Pat’s a homo!” I mean, that’s why we called him “Fat Pat” – even though he was like seven years older than me, that dude couldn’t catch a fucking venereal disease.

The Tea Party

She lived in an efficiency – an apartment with one large room, a kitchen on the side and a bathroom. He and Renee went there to visit her every other weekend.

She had a bad habit of having flings with married men and then threatening to tell their wives unless they paid her rent. When they knocked at the door, she would tell him to take Renee outside to play until it was time to come home. Renee was too young to understand what was going on – at the time she was barely seven and he had just turned ten. He used to sit outside and imagine his mother fucking all these strange married men, it used to make him angry.

One Saturday a doctor came to the house. A very wealthy doctor on his lunch break. She didn't tell him to go outside and play that day. She just went in the bathroom with the doctor and took a shower. There he stood, maybe five feet from the door where some bastard was using his mother for a quick piece of ass.

Renee spoke, "Why is mommy in the bathroom with that man?"

"It's just the plumber Renee, he's here to fix the shower."

"Is that why the water's been running so long?"

"Yes."

"But if the water's running, then doesn't that mean the shower's okay?"

"Not always. Sometimes things run because they're broken."

When the radiologist and his whore emerged from the bathroom, the boy asked him a simple question:

"Do you enjoy fucking my mother?"

Surprised, he looked at her and said, "That's quite an interesting kid you have there," kissed her goodbye, and left.

She was angry, "Do you ask your father's girlfriends questions like that?"

"No, he doesn't bring them home and do what you do."

"Well, he has more money than I do, he can afford to go to hotels."

"No, he's just not a whore like you are."

She hit him in the face, "Don't you ever talk to me like that!"

He ran at her, crying, punching and screaming that she was a whore. She grabbed him by his hair and threw him to the ground, "You little bastard, you're just like your father." She hit him again and continued doing so while he was on the ground.

He kicked her in the chest and she fell back. He jumped on top of her and began punching her in the face repeatedly. She clawed him several times in the process. He was bleeding everywhere. He continued to punch her in a blind rage. She began crying and begging him to stop. "I fucking hate you," he screamed, and went to the kitchen to get a knife.

His arms, his neck, his face, they were all stinging and bleeding. His mouth was bleeding. His head was sore from where she'd pulled his hair out. His shirt was ripped to shreds.

He began walking toward her.

She started to get up and he kicked her in her side. She gasped. He grabbed her by the head, raised the knife, and then heard the sound of true terror:

“Noooooooo! Don't hurt mommy!”

Renee ran to her mother crying and wrapped her arms around her tightly. “Don't hurt mommy,” she said.

He threw the knife across the room and felt a deep rush of sadness, “I'm sorry Renee, I'm sorry I scared you.”

“It's okay, but now we should all have a tea party and make up.”

“Okay,” he said, “let's have a tea party.”

Fifteen years later, the day Renee died, his mother called to see if she had a life insurance policy, and to inquire about any potential beneficiaries. He said that he didn't know. It was the first time they'd spoken in ten years, and the last time in his life that he had any contact with her.

Don't Try to Kill Yourself Because It Might Not Work

I swear to god, the unluckiest guy I ever met in my life was this dude at the country club – we used to call it that because it was like being on fucking vacation. Think about it, I'm fourteen years old and I'm chain-smoking cigarettes scammed in the poker game the night before, making out with candy-stripers, staying up as late as I want, leaving the ward whenever I feel like it, and each night, ordering three meals for the next day off a menu that had really good food on it. It was way better than being at home. It seemed like their philosophy was, "These people are fucked up, if we give them total freedom, then they'll be happy." Whatever it was, it sure worked for me.

Anyway, the first time I met Slash – that's what I used to call him – he had a huge bandage on his neck and couldn't really talk. This motherfucker was legitimately suicidal. One night he drank a fifth of whiskey, picked up a large machete-like knife, and slit his own throat. Just like that. All I remember being able to think was how badass that was, and one day I just had to ask "How are you not dead?" He said he didn't know, that he literally had no idea how he wound up at the hospital. He showed me the stitches in his neck – man, that guy was *not* looking for attention like most of the other kids in there, he seriously wanted out. I used to really feel bad for him that it didn't work, he would just sort of shrug, like, "Yeah, it happens, I guess."

But just when I thought Slash's luck couldn't get much worse, what happens next sounds like some shit I made up. So he meets this girl at the country club, and they fall in love quick on account of their mutual interest in dying. They sing the right tune to the doctors, and before you know it, they both get a pass to go home one weekend. Then the two of them steal a car, run away, go to a hotel room and ingest a huge number of really strong drugs. It's a suicide pact. Except get this – she dies, he lives – holy shit! After that, I gave up on the idea of suicide – I mean, the way I saw it, if it didn't work out for someone as committed as Slash, what hope was there for the rest of us? I remember the day he told me that second story, I didn't know *what* to say to the poor bastard, so I just blurted out the first thing that came to mind, "Dude, if I had your luck, I'd fucking kill myself."

My Last Day of School

By the age of fifteen, I'd done two stints in "self-improvement facilities." One of them punished me for crimes I never committed, so best believe that when I manipulated my way out of there, that I was gonna commit every crime I'd been falsely convicted of.

I returned to school and I couldn't believe how they were expecting us to spend our time. Like, I remembering arguing with this science teacher once because she was trying to force me to take a test. I remember saying, "You can't make me." She said she could, and I think she actually believed that. Myself, I couldn't believe how idiotic she was. There was a rumor about her that she had been in Playboy once, I don't know if it was true or not, you know, kids have lots of rumors. Anyway, I explained that I didn't recognize her authority to judge my knowledge. I explained that her authority required my consent. But as hard as it is to believe, she genuinely seemed to disagree with that idea. I asked her if she intended to force me to write on the test. She said I had no choice because if I didn't, she would mark it with an "F". I just started laughing at her, and then I ate the exam, it was just like, "What are you going to mark again?" She turned white as a ghost for a second, and then got really angry, mostly because I outthought her. I was then sent to the principal's office, all because she had no ideas.

Another time I was in Spanish class. My teacher there used to pop pills all day long. I didn't like her and she didn't like me. She was an ugly woman, both inside and out. One time she grabbed me and I slammed her against the chalkboard. Another time, she called me a "sick little fuck", so I walked up to her desk, held a safety pin in front of her face, and said, "You wanna see something really sick?" – and then I shoved the safety pin through my ear. A little blood fell on to her lesson plan. She was horrified. It was great. On my way out the door, I flipped her off for good measure – you know, in case she wasn't clear on the message I was trying to convey.

I had a lot of moments like this. They eventually led me to a meeting with the principal. The door was closed and he told me I was a little bastard. I told him that I didn't want to go to school anymore. I explained that I never agreed to go, that I had been forced as a young kid, and that I didn't want it anymore. That this place was full of nothing but sheep, and that I wasn't a sheep. He told me it was good for me, he said that I needed it. I told him that I knew the truth, that this was all bullshit, and he became irate. He said, "You little son of a bitch, I'd like to knock your block off right now." I said, "I wish you would you faggot, because then I'd kick your ass and sue you for child abuse." I explained to him that he couldn't win. That I was more imaginative than his so-called teachers. That I would continue acting out until they expelled me. He finally conceded.

On my last day of school, I didn't learn a damned thing. I knew what I needed to know by then. The difference was, I finally had the guts to act on it, regardless of the consequences. Some days, it still bothers me that I wasted ten years working up the nerve to take control of my own life.

Fear of Airplanes

Of all the places in the world where women cross the mind of a young man, let's add to the list a coffee shop at Gatwick airport in London. Was there really anything better to do anyway? For that matter, is there ever anything better to do?

Most definitely. There were so few reasons to be concerned with women that he never understood why his right hand couldn't solve the problem once and for all. Perhaps he was left-handed. Even worse, ambidextrous. He had never met one who reminded him that people are suppose to marry and have families. It was ironic too, because this seemed to be the only thing they ever talked about.

Was this all life had to offer?

Often he'd heard from people, thankfully wiser than he, that the best way to live life was to do things that made you happy. From this he was sure that meaning could be derived. He had never realized until this very moment that he'd been wrong the whole time, so he ordered a cappuccino, had three cigarettes, and did his best to hide a very constant desire to stare between the legs of the woman in the tight white skirt seated at the table across the way. She was definitely not English.

"Flight such and such to nowhere is now boarding."

It seemed this was all they ever announced over the intercom in an airport. It also seemed that it was always women who did the announcing. How appropriate that it should be a woman's voice telling you where to go for your flight and when. He thought it was probably a job they only took until they got married. Marriage to these women would be a tiny airport where they could announce itineraries twenty-four hours a day.

He had always hated airplanes. The idea was simple too: what worthwhile human is ever able to tolerate putting their life in the hands of other people, especially people they have never even met? Of course, happiness had nothing to do with meaning, so getting on the plane today shouldn't be a problem. Even so, he was pretty pissed that he had to risk his life just to get home.

What reason was there to return?

There were places and things where he lived that reminded him of various important moments in his life. But then again, these moments were now gone! There really was no reason to go home, there was merely a reason to leave: London sucked. The people were not half as bright as their accents made them sound, they preferred soccer over football, and the Beatles had broken up nearly thirty years ago.

"Where are you off to?" It was the woman in the white skirt.

"What a good question," he thought.

"I'm going home today." This was a perfectly ambiguous response.

Naturally she followed with "And where is home?"

“Now that is a very good question,” he said.

“I’m sorry, I don’t catch your meaning.”

“Yes, but you have caught my eye, and that ought to be worth something.”

She followed with the inevitable blush. Again he was disappointed. But what did he expect? Did he actually think she would say “Home is a place where a man feels in control of the course his life takes.” Yeah, right. He turned around and started working on a second cup of coffee.

She persisted, “Are you from England?”

The easiest way in the world to reel a woman in is to simply act like you don’t give a fuck, it had always amazed him, and it was working again.

“Yes,” he said.

Because though he’d never lived there, and certainly never wanted to, he was actually half-english. The other reason was that no woman anywhere will talk to you if they think you live in a country far away, because marrying someone who lives in another country is a long shot. Besides, it was a stupid question, did she think he sounded English?

She smiled, “So what are you doing here?”

“I’m looking for gorgeous women I can take to bed.”

“Really!”

“Yes. Airports are the perfect place for this misunderstood art form. You pick one out, take her somewhere, fuck the hell out of her, and the beauty of it all, is that since you’re in an airport, she can’t complain when you tell her you have to leave.”

She laughed, “You must love flying then.”

“Actually, I detest it. But oddly enough, I have just discovered that there is reason to disregard this fear.”

She purred, “And what is this reason?”

“I have spent the better part of my life having fun twenty-four hours a day and recently have found that in all this fun there is no meaning.”

“Maybe you are not really having fun, then.”

“No. I spend large periods of time having fun, and every once in a while I find myself interrupted by feelings that my existence while pleasurable is also entirely meaningless.”

“But if you are really having fun at some point in time, how can feelings of a meaningless existence ever interrupt you?”

“Because I am also prone to bouts of seriousness. I do not make attempts to control the way I feel, I simply feel whatever comes over me at a given moment.”

“Have you ever loved anything?”

“I think so.”
“You think so? Don’t you know?”
“Not exactly, do you?”
“Well, yes, as a matter of fact, I do. I loved a man once.”
“Once? You loved him once? What does that mean?”
“We are no longer together.”
“So he didn’t love you.”
“No. Actually, I left him.”
“Then how can you say you loved him?”
“Because that is the way I feel.”
“Is that all there is to it? You feel something, so it exists? Is love really that shallow?”
“No, it’s not, because the feelings are strong.”
“So what if you wake up one day feeling that you don’t love someone anymore?”
“Then you should leave them. But this isn’t how it works. Your feelings don’t just disappear like that.”
“So they disappear gradually then.”
“Yes, they can, or they can disappear all at once. It is a question of how honest a person is with themselves.”
“Is there any scenario in which a person’s feelings do not ever disappear?”
“I don’t know. But there are definitely scenarios where people say their feelings have not disappeared, and others where they say they will never disappear.”

It had always amazed him what a talent women had for turning every conversation into a discussion on marriage and love.

“Excuse me, I have to take a piss,” he said.

He stood at the urinal and unzipped his fly. He thought of the woman in the white skirt. When he returned, she engaged him,

“Your problem is simple. You want to be an immortal, but you lack some of the self-discipline and all of the patience.”

Suddenly she actually had his attention.

“The solution is simple. You need something in your life to calm you down, so that you can learn patience, but something which will at the same time prevent you from being complacent. What you need is a woman.”

“I don’t believe that a woman can do this.”

“You don’t?”

“Well, what I mean is that any woman bright enough to realize I need this, and strong enough to actually do this, would never waste her time helping me. She would live her own life and ensure her own immortality.”

“She would if she were a man.”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying that if a woman loves you she will do this and anything else you desire.”

“Why?”

“Because that is what her feelings tell her to do.”

He had heard these kinds of things before. It always pissed him off because it was mostly bullshit. Still, he could at least respect this woman for a highly clever attempt at manipulation. She had brilliantly taken his most serious problem and directly related it to getting laid. Had he been a woman, he could have in good faith allowed himself to be taken advantage of.

She continued, “Women always try to get you to marry them, don’t they?”

“As a matter of fact they do.”

“That is not the kind of woman you need.”

He smiled, “Why do you say that?”

“While she will do anything you desire, you will end up complacent by marrying her. On the other hand, the women who neglect you, keep you from being complacent, but always end up hurting you. Is that about where you stand with them?”

“Actually, it is. Those are the two types of women that exist in the world and I hate them both equally.”

“So do I,” she smiled.

“Then you are either a liar or a man.”

“Is there a difference?” she smiled.

“So the love of your life cheated on you.”

“Yes. That’s why I left him.”

“That’s an interesting way of looking at things. You’re not very forgiving are you?”

“Not in this case. I was very good in bed, so I could only view his affair as a statement that he didn’t want to be with me anymore.”

“How do you know you were good in bed? Did you take some test in a magazine that told you so? Do you think that just because he came every time that you were good, or are you just arrogant?”

“No.”

“No to what?”

“No to all of them. Women’s magazines to me are written by women that have never been fucked once in their entire lives. It is the easiest thing in the world to make a man come, and I am not arrogant, I just know that I am a truly good fuck.”

“So in what cases would you allow the man you love to sleep with other women?”

“If I wanted to watch him, it would be okay, or if for some reason I were unable, it would be okay. Otherwise, I wouldn’t allow it.”

“You wouldn’t *allow* it? Kind of possessive aren’t you?”

“Yes. And how about you, when would you let the woman you love sleep with other men?”

“Never.”

“Never?”

“That’s right, never. There is absolutely no scenario in which I would allow this. If I ever found out that it happened, I think I would have to kill her.”

“My, and you think I’m possessive! And would you sleep with other women?”

“As long as it was okay with her, I probably would.”

“That doesn’t seem very fair.”

“So what? I don’t care if it’s fair, I only care about doing what I want with my life.”

“And what about her life?”

“I want it to be worthwhile, meaningful and at the same time something I can completely control if I feel like it.”

“That’s quite a double standard you have there.” They both laughed.

“Do you think you’ll ever find a woman like this?”

“Nope.”

The intercom interrupted his train of thought – déjà vu.

She looked at her watch,

“Well, it’s time that I head off now. I have enjoyed your honesty, it goes well with coffee you know.”

She smiled, and just like that she was gone. “Strange girl,” he thought.

Now he was really fucked. There was nothing to do.

An airport is one of those rare places on Earth without a soul. People pass through on their way from here to there, leaving absolutely no mark whatsoever. There are loads of shops full of overpriced crap and thieves waiting to sell it to you in a moment of need, too few places to smoke, and worst of all, the coffee truly sucks. Now he had nothing to do except think. He could think about where he’d been while abroad, he could worry about the flight home, or even worse, what he would do with his time once he got home. But he wasn’t doing that. All good men know what our young hero was doing.

He was back in the restroom thinking about the woman in the tight white skirt. She was uncomplicated, well-spoken, and best of all, she didn’t argue or create emotional scenes. She simply listened and responded in a reasonable manner and came with the added feature that nothing he said or did offended her. Aside from all this, she wasn’t one-dimensional. He was now sure that she was taken and had just been teasing him. Still, it had definitely been fun.

“I should have told her,” he thought.

So he began to wander in a truly symbolic fashion. He went to a pub and overtipped what seemed to be the one gorgeous English woman on earth, turned his remaining pounds into dollars, and asked a French woman where he could find his boarding gate. It was fun acting helpless with foreign women, they always seemed so concerned. He would definitely have to visit France one day.

On to the plane, everyone in a nearly drunken stupor.

“Maybe today is the day we are all going to get it,” he thought.

He placed his carry-on item in the compartment above his seat. Stewardesses were always such annoying bitches when it came to things like this. He went to sleep right away. When he awoke, only forty-five minutes had elapsed,

“Great, only six more hours to go,” he thought.

This pattern repeated itself two or three times. It was one of those rare forms of torture he could find no redeeming qualities in. There was nothing interesting in it, no originality at all. Finally, he awoke for what he knew was the last time. The sleeping phase of the flight was now over. He cleared his eyes but things did not look quite right,

“Wait a minute, what the hell?”

He looked at his watch and was now in a state of panic. It had finally happened. He ran to the information desk and struggled,

“I missed my flight; I fell asleep at the coffee shop! No one woke me up, you fucking English are too damned polite!”

He was of course directed to another desk where he had to wait in line for the mandatory forty-five minutes. This pattern repeated itself two or three times. Finally to the front of the line, where everyone’s death march ends when they meet the bitch at the counter. He got a new ticket, but would have to spend the night in horrible London. He asked a French woman where he could find a good drink, quickly cashed dollars into pounds and eventually found a pub that knew what a Tom Collins was, so he ordered one from a waitress named Nadya and tried to relax.

He wondered in a dime store fashion if dreams ever came true, because Nadya’s ass was the kind of thing a guy could dream about. He started ordering drinks just so he could eye her up and down; eventually he was drunk. The music was loud and it had recently turned dark outside.

“Nadya,” he called.

“Yes sir,” she said.

“Where is the bathroom? I have to piss.”

She laughed and told him to go upstairs and to the left. He walked upstairs and couldn't find it. He wandered to the bar and asked the bartender upstairs,

“Excuse me, where is the men's room?”

She joked, “Do you want the men's room or the little boy's room?”

“Sweetheart, make no mistake about it, you are looking at a man. I don't like tennis, cricket, tea, or any of that other shit. I like rock and roll, football and coffee you can start airplanes with.”

“That's funny, you look afraid of airplanes to me.”

“That's true, but I'm also afraid of women, and I start them up all the time!” He laughed.

She directed him to the men's room, and he unzipped his fly and began pissing. He thought aloud,

“Damn, some of the women here are pretty fucking clever, you know mate?”

The guy next to him agreed politely and left.

Something troubled him. “What the fuck does being a man have to do with being afraid of airplanes? That's not manly. Hell, that's not even funny.” He laughed again.

He left the men's room and went back to the bartender.

“What do you mean by saying that I'm afraid of airplanes? Do I look like the kind of guy that's afraid of airplanes?”

“As a matter of fact, you do.”

“Wait, let me get this straight, you work in this English pub, around clean cut 'men' who like tea, cricket and tennis, and yet I strike you as being the one afraid of airplanes? Need I remind you of what happened during World War II? And make no mistake about it sweetheart, the next time there's a crisis in the world, you can have faith that America will be there to preserve the tea-drinking habits of the sensitive English male. Your problem is that you've never had a good stiff dick.”

She stepped from behind the bar aggressively, “A good stiff *what?*”

He was drunk and extremely confused. The world seemed to be spinning, he felt sick. He hurried to the bathroom. Over his shoulder came a woman's voice, it sounded like the bitch from the bar. Everything went grey.

“Are you okay?”

“No, go away, I feel really fucking bad.”

“Here, let me help you, ” she wiped his forehead and face.

He looked around, "Does Rod Serling come out now?"
"No," she said, "Who's he?" She continued playing nurse.
"Who the hell are you and where the hell am I?"
"Shhh...calm down, you passed out, and I had to either throw you out of the pub, or take you home with me."
"So you fucking kidnap me? Are you out of your fucking mind?"
"I think so," she smiled.
"You think so? Don't you know?"
"Not exactly, do you?" she smirked.
He became insistent, "Well, yes, as a matter of fact, I do. I was actually crazy once."
"Once? You were crazy once? What does that mean?"

He paused for a moment and stared into space,

"Excuse me, I have to take a piss."

He returned to find the table on her balcony set, an early English breakfast? It was about three in the morning. It was quiet, the kind of place where a man could enjoy passing the time without interruption. There is nothing so beautiful as the middle of the night and the feeling that the rest of the hectic world is sleeping.

She brought him coffee and a danish.

"Did you put anything in this coffee?"
"Yes, milk and sugar."
"Yeah, milk and sugar, huh? How about arsenic, did you put any of that in it?"
"Silly, do you know how difficult it is to find arsenic at this time of night?"
"That's true."

He decided to drink the coffee. When he was finished he ate the danish.

"That's odd," she said, "you drink all of your coffee, and then eat the danish."
"Yes, and sometimes I eat an entire danish, and then drink a cup of coffee, so what?"
"Why?"
"Why? Jesus, isn't it obvious? For the same reason I don't watch football and fuck a woman at the same time: they don't have a damned thing to do with one another."
"So drinking and eating to you are separate events?"
"Yep. But do you know what seems slightly more relevant to me at the moment?"
"What's that?"
"It's how crazy the dame that kidnapped me is, and what my chances are of killing her before the poison she put in my food takes effect!"
"I'd say they're pretty good."

“Jesus woman. Does it even remotely mean anything to you that you have a complete fucking stranger in your home?”

“Yes, that’s why I made you breakfast! You don’t think I’d do that for just anyone do you?”

“Well, then, while we’re on the topic, what else do you intend to do for me?”

“What do you want me to do?”

“I’d like to hear some Otis Redding, I’d like a fresh cup of coffee, and while you’re at it, I’d like you to get on your knees and suck my dick, please.” She laughed and walked inside.

She moved like a sixteen year old schoolgirl with a hallway pass; he hoped she wasn’t, because the idea of breaking American laws on foreign soil troubled him. At the same time, he had newfound respect for his status as an ambassador: it was his duty to represent his country. His eyes swelled with patriotism, “I want to serve my country to the best of my ability,” he laughed.

He leaned back into his chair, gazed upward for a moment, and winked at the heavens. They were the ones who had done this. It was some kind of night. A gentle breeze circled the balcony, carrying with it a shot of magic. He lit a cigarette, Otis began to sing, and with his first drag, came the pull of adrenaline riding in on the night air.

It causes the blood to rush, the heart to race, and in its aftermath, leaves the world dressed in starlight; an instance of pure, unadulterated life; a moment when one finds they must believe in fairy tales and second chances: they are the elements of hope, and without them, one carries inside no sense of destiny.

And just like that, because of a breeze on an English balcony, because of people who sang the way Mr. Redding did; because of the sound of her voice and her form in the twilight, his fear of airplanes had returned.

She brought him his coffee, “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to interrupt your train of thought,” she said.

“Huh? Oh, um, I mean, yes...I was just off thinking for a minute.”

She followed on cue, “What were you thinking about?”

This time he would tell her.

The Sound in the Ceiling

At first it started off as a quiet scratching. Actually, that's not quite true. It started off as a thing that woke him up in the middle of the night – it sounded like a person moving around in the ceiling, maybe someone in the attic. Only the next morning did he realize that it would have had to have been a person in his attic at *three-thirty in the morning*, so though seemingly loud to the half-awake ear, it had to be the sound of some rodent or something he imagined. He said nothing about it to his wife at breakfast, but later she brought it up. “Was it a rat? A bird? A squirrel?” No one knew, how could they?

The next few days passed, there was no sound in the ceiling, all was calm and good. One morning it happened again, this time near first light, and looking out of his bedroom window onto the roof, he saw a squirrel fleeing, and that settled it – it must be a squirrel. He thought for a moment about calling maintenance to take care of it, but then realized that it was only one squirrel, and if the animal just made noise every once in a while, what harm could it really cause?

A few days later he woke to loud scratching, running, bumping in the ceiling. It sounded like there could have been as many as a hundred squirrels – all above his bed, playing, fighting, mating, attempting to bury things. The sound was unbearable and continued into the daytime, even into the afternoon, where he could see a line of squirrels, one after the other, each taking turns to enter the space above his ceiling. Finally, he called maintenance. Two holes were found in the roof where the squirrels were entering. They were immediately patched, mothballs were scattered about the attic, and just like that the problem disappeared.

The first day of fall was close. The air felt as though long-held dreams were about to vanish. There was a sense that peace and resignation were near. The radio was on quietly as usual, the streetcar passed every so often, interrupted by occasional large vehicles passing close enough to make the building shake, sometimes sirens from ambulances or police cars, or people screaming intoxicated and laughing, but with the kind of volume that only internal hostility dying to come out can muster – like people who whistle to fake being happy when they're really pissed off, or women who walk down hallways heavy-footed – almost stomping like horses – because they're angry they never found the right person. But none of this was his fault, so why the need to blame him by making all that damned noise? And that's when it hit him: the arrival of fall, with its cooler temperatures, might cause the squirrels to aggressively pursue a return to the ceiling.

He could hear the clock ticking, but couldn't decide whether that meant the clock was too loud or that he was listening too intently. The volume of the ticking was the same level as the radio, but that didn't mean anything, because maybe the radio was loud or maybe it wasn't. Across the hall he could hear that couple – loud and hence un-in-love – coming in from another night out of wasting time. *Stomp stomp stomp* went that cow of a so-called woman, and *bang bang bang* went that loser of a drunk fiancé who was never going to marry that pig, even if he *was* undesirable to every woman on earth. None of this really mattered except that he'd had two cups of coffee shortly before bed. His

heart was beating too fast. There was anxiety in the air. The kind of panic one feels when they worry they might start to care again, to yearn for dreams whose death they have accepted.

And then it happened. A light scratching, just once. Was it the building settling? But then it happened again. It couldn't be a squirrel, it wasn't loud enough. And the ticking of the clock was louder than this occasional light trickling of a tick tick tick. "It could be nothing. Or it could be something. Right?" He wasn't completely sure. He got scared. The anxiety returned, the stuff that no amount of wine could erase. He covered his ears with the blanket and rocked back and forth in an attempt to make the sound disappear. Then he stopped to think about how terrible that was, so he pulled the sheets away to listen, but the trouble was that he was too scared to listen – "What if I hear something? What if the squirrels have returned? Or what if it's some type of new animal I don't know about, one likely to chew through the ceiling, fall through and land on me while I'm asleep? What if it bites me and gives me an illness that leads to slow death?"

He jumped out of bed, turned off the radio, and stood there listening intensely. His wife woke up and asked "What's wrong?" He jumped on the bed, covered her mouth, "Shhh...I'm listening. Have you heard anything tonight?" She indicated that she had not. "I'm sorry, I must have imagined it." He turned the radio back on and climbed back into bed. But this time he turned it just a little quieter, just in case the squirrels were on to him. He lay there listening and heard a distinct click – not a tick but a click! He followed the sound to its origin, into the living room, where it happened again. It was the thermostat. He returned to bed, relieved. And with each new sound, provided it was as loud as the ticking of his clock or quieter, he was able to invent explanations that would convince most people that the cause of the sound was not a squirrel or other animal.

The trouble though, especially with squirrels, was that they were smart. They knew how to scare people, they knew how to cause anxiety. They knew how to get into buildings, and how to stay there once they found their way in. You could never really keep them out forever, they would always find a way in. So many sounds, so many possibilities, how to separate the safe ones from the dangerous? It could take hours. "This is what heroin is for," he thought. "No one on heroin has ever been frightened of squirrels. No squirrel ever dared to stalk a dope fiend," he thought.

Heroin might well be a way of escaping sounds in the ceiling. People and their ceilings, really, that was the trouble with people. They denied the existence of the possible, always preoccupied with nonsense like "Well sure, that *could* happen, but most likely, it won't." Was it any wonder that their lives were mundane? They had no appreciation whatsoever for the emergence of patterns, for the connections between things that lay somewhere beneath the tidy surface.

The way that such patterns if detected early enough could be used to prevent terrible things from happening, or the way that connections between the seemingly unconnected could explain things that curious thinking people need to know about. There were no squirrels in their ceilings, that's for sure. No, their ceilings were of a different sort.

They had certain ideas, you see, about possible and impossible, likely and unlikely, about when to worry and when not to, about right and wrong, and all, seemingly, for no apparent reason. They could quickly tell you which types of sex and drugs ought to be permitted and which works of art should be banned. They could easily tell you the kind of thinking that was acceptable and the kind of speech that should be prohibited. But try asking one of these automatons about the difference between a click and a tick, or about how to distinguish a sink with a minor leak from one on the verge of exploding, and then brace yourself for an overwhelming wave of silence that drowns all hope for real human contact. Because they can't afford to think about these things. I mean, what would happen if some barely perceptible sound in the night, or some seemingly insignificant event in the day, was really the first in a series of accelerating developments that left the perceptible universe in pure chaos?

"These fucking squirrels are getting out of control," he thought.

The Southern Lights

All we were trying to do when the day first started was go to City Park and take a ride on the carousel there, just to spend a few minutes remembering what it was like before some storm strolled up and made us all homesick. And so there we were, walking past the museum, when wouldn't you know it, a second line had broken out. And me being somewhat corrupted by my experiences in the north, I immediately started wondering what the occasion was, "Why are they dancing and playing this beautiful music?"

And the longer I stood there, the less sense it made to ask all these needless questions – questions whose answers anyway are at best some random phrase in some random language. I saw other people carrying brass instruments come running from all directions to join in. They didn't know each other and they didn't need a city-issued permit to do so – because all are welcome in a second line. The best kind of party there is or ever was: celebration without cause, celebration for absolutely no reason at all. Just because it was a Saturday afternoon and their horns needed to be played, just because some mysterious joy inside them called "New Orleans" said it was time to dance.

And I wonder if you would believe me that, for a long moment, it crossed my mind to give up my high-paying job in the big city and just go back home. For all I know, it might still be crossing my mind. I could get a job sweeping streets and clearing away debris. Maybe I could set up a table in Jackson Square and write poems for people passing through. And I think I might just be on the verge of believing that their donations would be enough to keep my head above water until the flooding subsides. Until the Napoleon House stays open past midnight on the weekends again. Until the brass band at K-Paul's marches through the dining room to the accompaniment of pot-and-pan percussion that can only come from a New Orleans kitchen. Until the ghosts of the Ninth Ward feel safe enough to stop roaming the earth, and just come home.

When the second line had finished passing by, we made our way past the sculpture garden and over to the entrance gate of the amusement park. I looked and saw the train I used to ride with my father and remembered the first time I experienced the romance of wandering. I saw the place where my mother used to buy me cotton candy and considered it plausible that I had always believed in the importance of indulgence. I saw the ferris wheel that from an early age had done its best to convey a simple truth about this life, and wondered why it had taken me so long to hear what it had to say.

But all the sentimentality in the world couldn't change the fact that the rides at City Park were only open to private parties until April. And even after we managed to sneak in to one of these alleged "private parties", it was clear that on this day we simply did not belong there. Maybe the problem was just that – that these parties were private. I mean, no second line is private, neither is Mardi Gras for that matter. Few meaningful celebrations in New Orleans are ever private affairs when it really comes down to it. So armed with a renewed interest in fully experiencing the ups and downs that a ticket on Stella's ferris wheel can provide; armed with the desire to wander like a bluesman running from a crazy mistress that just tried to poison him; and above all else, armed

with the genuine intent to indulge, we boarded the streetcar headed for Canal Street.

And indulge we did: before dinner at Le Pavillon, during dinner at Broussard's, and afterward, following a course that, like most, became successively more uncertain as time went on. But as is often the case, one remembers where it started: our wandering began on Royal Street. On past the lanterns and the lovesick, and the galleries that showcase artists the world will never hear of, we were window shopping – looking for the sense that the evening would never end, that undeniable something floating in the night air that leaves one with the feeling that anything is possible, the one we used to just call New Orleans. And more than any of this, we were window shopping for forgiveness, for never having realized how lucky we were to be part of moments and places, now gone, that were so clearly among the most important we would ever experience or see.

Our window shopping was interrupted by one of the most beautiful sounds on Earth: the human voice. Two of them in fact, being played to the beat of hands clapping and the rhythm of passers-by dropping change into a plastic container that always sang “Thank you” in perfect four-four time. I listened to them for a little while, and as I listened, I watched. There were three of them: a mother, a father, and a toddler. They had that look of desperation in their eyes that all great musicians have at one point or another. It's true that they were, literally, singing for their supper. But it is equally true that even with a million dollars, these particular souls would still be out there singing. I dropped five dollars in the bucket – partly because I wanted to help them, but mostly because I wanted to help myself. I was hoping that they would see that I was one of them. I guess I got lucky. Because instead of letting me walk by after my donation, they asked me to stay and join in. And then I belonged somewhere. They gave me a long list of music to choose from. The first one that came up was one of my all-time favorites: an Otis Redding tune, how about that?

And so there we were, singing at the corner of Royal and St. Louis. Each one of us was homesick, despite the fact that each one of us was also at home. Now, I don't know if ten minutes of singing on the street with some fellow musicians can kill three years of melancholy, or if it can make a starving family not worry about having nowhere to sleep at night. But I do know that it can't make things any worse. And for what it's worth, I know that during those ten minutes none of us cared about anything except singing.

I walked away that night knowing full well that my jam session on the corner would be the highlight of my trip. I no longer had any expectations, I was no longer wishing for a rush of adrenaline or some moment where I felt alive. And I suppose it is fair to say that there are times where giving up one's expectations leaves one with a greater sense of freedom than previously, in part since they are open to any new possibility.

We made our way to Chartres and then on to Jackson Square. We had indulged in all of the things that matter: we had shared music with complete strangers and watched them become our friends; we had fine cuisine and even finer wine; and we still carried the memory of the southern lights passing through the great oaks in City Park.

It is safe to say that we were intoxicated.

Early Morning Commute

I was waiting for the metro the other morning, thinking like I always do that drinking less would be a good idea. It's always like that in the morning, it's the evening that changes your mind. Train approaching. I'm thinking over and over, "Yellow, c'mon yellow," since I'm too far from the crappy neon-esque sign to see which it is. No luck. It's blue. That's okay. Ten minutes later and another roll of the dice – I'm calm because I know it's yellow this time. Except it's not. Fuck, another blue train, and I start to think about cigarettes. People say they're bad for you, but are they as bad as this?

Meanwhile, there's a jackass a few feet from me talking too loud. "She's been hurt so many times, I don't want to scare her by telling her how I feel, do you think I would if I just delicately approached the matter?" I'm thinking, exactly, delicately. He's complete west coast tofu-eating sandal-wearing androgyny – and no joking about this – he's wearing a black beret. Yep, nothing scares a woman like a man in a beret. I'm dying to tell him what an asshole he is – saved by the yellow line. Thank god.

Except now things get worse. He's in front of me, careful to let any woman, child or female impersonator cut in front of him. By the time I'm on the train, he's in front of me with five open seats in front of him, trying to decide which one to take, like choosing a seat on the metro is some misunderstood metaphor for life – or maybe he's just stupid. The idiot's indecision leaves me next to the queen of cosmetics. You know the one, she's wearing hand cream, body cream, face cream, hairspray and the kind of perfume that you will still be able to smell long after she's six feet under. And to make matters worse, she's got the Purell out now because she accidentally grabbed hold of one of those slimy crap silver poles on the way in. Her husband, meanwhile, who was clever enough not to sit next to her, has this "take me now" look on his face that's offering to sell her to the first person that hands him a twenty-dollar bill. Funny too, because that's about the time she starts talking about some new shoes on sale that she just has to have. At that point, I close my eyes and try to escape, comforted only by the fact that it can always be worse – knowing in fact that in twelve short minutes it's *going* to be worse, because I'm en route to Anacostia metro station.

Exit the green line. No reason to hurry this morning, the A4 is at least twenty minutes away. Plus, you might slip on someone's saliva, fall down and cut yourself on an aids-infected escalator step. Bus stop time. Woman next to me: "How long have you been waiting for the next bus?" Me: "My entire life." "What?" "I said five minutes." I thought she was completely normal until she stood up, walked to the next bus stop asking the same question, and then returned. She looked at me, down at the ground, and then announced, "Excuse me, I have to take this." Placing her pinky to her lips and her thumb to her ear, it turns out that her hand also doubled as a phone, and she was able to take the call. The phone lady explained that being called at the bus stop scared her, that she already had enough "gaps" and probably wouldn't be there for at least an hour. I desperately wanted to know what gaps were and was about to ask when the short man strolled up.

Dressed in camouflage pants and an “I Love Jesus” tank top, I later learned that he was very serious about finishing his karate training. You see, he was born in a church, knew right from wrong and would not stand to live with people that could not remember to flush toilets. He started off by wishing everyone a happy new year. One imaginatively-challenged person at the bus stop charged that it was the ninth of January, too late for happy new years, at which point the short man showed us his cell phone: a picture of an empty – but clean – cat bowl. I then objected on the grounds that dogs were nicer than cats; he agreed, but noted that cats were cleaner. I considered his point as we boarded the bus.

He sat in front of me, headphones on, using his cell phone to publicly broadcast a radio show about the word of god. At times, the broadcast was interrupted when he would hold the cell phone to his ear and explain that he first learned karate in church. A prostitute watching all this became annoyed, turned to me and said, “I am not that kind of whore, I will not be subjected to this,” and then got off – forgive the pun – two stops early. Eventually, the short man began explaining to people that he had lost his destiny, and at a red light demanded to be let off the bus. Under the threat of schizophrenic martial arts, the bus driver agreed and we all watched as the short man walked across the street and climbed into a nearby dumpster – presumably, looking for his destiny.

As we anxiously waited for the light to turn green, the phone lady started laughing, whispering that she knew where his destiny was, that she was keeping it “right in here” – pointing to an old shopping bag. Then she took out her phone and made a call: “When you stop calling me at the bus stop, I’ll give you back your destiny, ahahahaha...!” and promptly hung up. As the bus started to pull away, the short man emerged from the dumpster in a fit of rage, chased the bus for a block and a half, with the phone lady yelling obscenities at him the entire time. He eventually lost to exhaustion.

As my stop approached and the bus began to slow, I leaned over to the phone lady with a malicious glare that startled her, “I’m the one that’s been calling you at the bus stop, and if you don’t give me his destiny, I will never stop.” Trembling with fear, she reached into her bag and handed me something. “That’s one more gap for you,” I told her. She looked worried.

For the first time ever, I exited the bus with the complete respect of every psychopath within a ten mile radius of Anacostia. I am now the sole owner of the most powerful weapon in the St. Elizabeth arsenal, and undisputed ruler of the schizophrenic underworld.

The next time I see the short man, that’s his fucking ass.

Sellout

So I was walking down Decatur Street in New Orleans one night when I passed some gutter punks sitting on the side. On the surface, gutter punks are scary people – they sleep on the street, eat out of garbage cans, are filthy and sometimes have stray animals as pets. They look like they have nothing to lose – the exact kind of person you would never want to piss off. But on this particular occasion, one of them was playing guitar and singing, and I couldn't help slow my pace so I could sneak a listen. The kid was good. His voice had that sound that mine used to get when I spent too much time out in the elements, smoking cigarettes, with nothing around my neck. He was playing from that place that I first discovered whilst living in an English village called Hailey.

The thing of it was, I couldn't take the sounds and sights of Oxford anymore, I had to get away, to where it was quiet, so I find this really small flat in the middle of an even smaller village called Hailey. All my days there were the same: wake up, and then its nonstop coffee, cigarettes, guitar, words, and theorems, sleeping and eating only when absolutely necessary. One afternoon I get the random impulse to travel to the closest nearby town, get drunk, and then play guitar for strangers passing by in the hopes that they will give me money, not really because I needed it, but more like because I wanted to know what they thought it was worth.

So I walk into this pub and start getting hammered when the bartender asks me “So can you play that thing?” And me being drunk, I'm like, “Better than anyone that ever walked into *this* place.” And he got a kick out of my American arrogance, and said he'd turn the microphone on and let me play. He said, “If you can drive people to drink, I'll cover your tab.” I just started laughing and was like, “I can get 'em to drink.” When the night was over, he not only covered my tab, he gave me a few pounds extra and then asked me if I might want to play there once or twice a week.

So there I am waiting for the bus, hoarse, pretty drunk, but feeling alive, when this chick asks me if I really plan to wait there until morning, and I'm like, “What?” She explains that the last bus to and from Hailey is around six in the evening and that the next one isn't until morning! Then I read the schedule I should have read earlier, and yeah, she was right. At that point, I just start walking back – and yes, with a guitar on my back, like the biggest fucking cliché you ever heard of.

At one point, the road got narrow and had these blind corners, and some drunk dude almost hit me. Or maybe I almost ran into his car, I don't know, but I was like fuck it, I'm taking a break, and I wander into this field. It's dark, but I'm still pretty drunk, so I'm not worried about animals and shit, and I just keep walking until I catch this clear shot of the moon. It's full that night and the sky is clear, the field is literally illuminated with moonlight. I see this tree up ahead and decide to go sit beneath it. And then it occurs to me, what does it matter if I make it home? Was there anything or anyone waiting there for me? What does “home” even mean? And then I look across the field, and through swatches of moonlight being caused by trees, I see these shadows moving to

and fro – there are fucking rabbits everywhere! Some are eating, some are just hanging out, some are up on their hind legs looking around – it was like, “What the fuck are you looking at rabbit?” But you could tell they felt safe from the outside world. And it was a beautiful thing to see. I enjoyed it so much that I wound up passing out, right there under that tree. So I guess I must have felt safe too.

The next morning, I woke to the sound of a passing bus, and took that as my cue to head on home. But after finishing my first cup of coffee, I just thought fuck this place and decided to go looking for Minster Lovell – it was this village near Hailey that the lady I rented from told me about when I first moved there. All I knew when I left was, go down the road that leads to your flat and turn right. Before too long, I was literally in the middle of nowhere, and I came to an intersection. There were four directions possible: I go could go back, take a left, a right, or I could go forward. There was a sign telling you where all four directions led, but the arrow that was marked Hailey pointed forward, so I knew the sign was positioned incorrectly. I decided to go forward.

Now I’m walking this road for a while, and I’m starting to think, “Man, where the fuck am I?” But as things like this usually work out, right about the time I’m ready to quit, I get a sign, and long story short, it’s Minster Lovell. It’s just like the lady said it was, and I see this small body of water, a pond, maybe a fountain? I can’t be sure anymore, but what I remember was seeing the minnows. They were everywhere. And then I smiled about the wife that had left me only months earlier, and thought to myself, “She might have New York, but I know where they keep the minnows.”

My walk back from Minster Lovell was peaceful until it was interrupted by what sounded like Eddie playing his aluminum tray at Pat O’Briens. I turn around and look to see rain mixed with hail approaching. Instinctively, I run at first, but then I stop – did I really think I could outrun the rain? It catches me pretty quickly, the hail stung a little, and then I just started to weep. How did I go from having the dream job, the dream wife, and, in short, the dream life, to living in a small flat with no central air and heat, no working shower, and crying on an English road during a rainstorm in the middle of nowhere in just a few months?

And then the hail subsided but the rain continued. It was probably the cleanest I had been in months. I took my shirt off, it felt good. And when the rain stopped, it was near sunset, rare sunlight made an appearance, and what do you think I see all over the fields that lined the way home? You guessed it – fucking rabbits! I went back to the flat at the Old Carpenter’s Arms that evening and wrote to the beautiful Sarah all about my experiences that day. I wish I still had that letter, I remember it being heartfelt, the kind of thing I could never write now.

So there I am on Decatur Street, and I know the music's good, and I'm haunted by the idea that this is my only chance in life to hear it. And I have this nagging desire to go over and listen, but I don't want to get my brains beat in, so I stop at a nearby bar to down a few drinks fast, and maybe work up the nerve to go tell this guy, "Hey kid – you're good." Because I know how important it is for a young person to hear that, and I don't want him to lose it the way that I did – I mean, what would my life have turned out like if just one person had told me when I was young that I was good at something?

And then as the alcohol kicks in, I remember years of being physically abused by people that were supposed to love me, and I look over at these gutter punks and have a calming thought: "I think I can take two of 'em out before the cops get here." So I finally get the nerve to approach them, I say, "Excuse me, I'm not trying to be weird, but I heard you play a great song earlier, it had a line in it that went 'where nobody knows my name', and I wonder if you would let me record you playing it so that I can have it to listen to. I would hate it if tonight was the only time in my life that I could hear it."

And instead of beating my ass, or raping the girl I was with, they were actually very nice – even surprised that I wanted to record them – and Joey, the kid that sang and played guitar, along with one of his sidekicks, were even happy to do the song again. I suppose it is often that way with people. It's just too easy to think one's appearance is indicative of their character. I mean, I look at them and see thugs; they look at me and never imagine a guy that admires them for the free and fearless manner in which they live.

When they were finished playing the song, I tipped them twenty bucks and gave Joey my email address, saying that he should write me if he ever had any more recordings he wanted to sell or any desire to record any more music. Then we talked a little while about music, I told him how in the days before I became afraid of life, I used to be a lot like him. Before I left, he instinctively went to shake my hand, but then stopped because his hand was filthy and mine was "clean". I smiled uncomfortably, disappointed in myself for noticing, and shook his hand anyway. Two blocks later, when I was sure the gutter punks could no longer see us, I asked the girl I was with for some hand sanitizer, which she was about to offer anyway. How perfectly insincere.

Later that night, when I was really drunk, I sat up listening to that recording for about three hours, just playing it over and over. At the end of the song, Joey's background vocalist, a young lady who was very sick with something that sounded very serious, sings about how they escaped this place they called "Florida" and how they were never going back.

Imagine that for a minute.

They were somewhere they didn't like, so they just said fuck it and left. No worrying about the consequences. No giving thirty days notice, arranging to move, or finding a new job. They just left. And now in some new town, with nowhere to sleep and no clear way to eat, what now? Same answer – fuck it. They sleep on the street and play music for people walking by. I mean, if you think about it, it's perfectly rational, because the chances are good that eventually some sellout will hear them, remember what it was like to be alive, and tip them a few bucks for the memory.