

# COLLEGE STORIES

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September 2010–April 2011

English 493

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One of Jacob Ross' favorite songs, "Your Mind on You, Your Rock Will Follow" from L.A. Boyz. It darted through his mind two or three times as Valerie Carter turned around and pressed her backside to him. Unfortunately, Jacob was not Steve Martin and Valerie was not Victoria Beckham.

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"It's alright, alright, just dance!" sang Lady Gaga from seemingly every corner of the dark Caracombs dance floor. Jacob had hoped that these hours spent dancing in front of his mirror to Sade's notes would finally give him wit. The slurry of pulp and cheap vodka, even cheaper beer, and mud made the wood boards simultaneously slick and tacky.

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Shuffling his feet in the direction of the bobbing mass of people, Jacob felt like a spaceship locked on by the beam of Valerie's warm hand. He was in a galaxy far, far away, drunk either on brute urgency of the moment or maybe both. Unfortunately, he was not Han Solo either.

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Nonetheless he gave it a go, kind of swaying back and forth to whatever general beat he could find. Whether it was the music or the fact that Morgan had taken over, his mind was yielding to his body.

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Less than 26 hours earlier Jacob was attending the last "Comedy in Britain Drama" class of the term, the final formal English class of his college career. All that remained was to finish discussing Shakespeare's *All's Well That Ends Well*. Professor Packard's plan was for the class to debate whether or not the title ring true by play's end. She, like her students, seemed quiet and more focused than usual before class.

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## DOING IT RIGHT

One of Jacob Ross' favorite quotations was "Let your mind go and your body will follow," from *L.A. Story*. It darted through his mind two or three times as Valerie Carter turned around and pressed her backside to him. Unfortunately, Jacob was no Steve Martin and Valerie was no Victoria Tennant.

"It's alright, alright, just dance," urged Lady Gaga from seemingly every corner of the dark Catacombs dance floor. Jacob had hoped that those hours spent dancing in front of his mirror to Sinatra tunes would finally serve him well. The slurry of spilled cheap vodka, even cheaper beer, and mud made the wood boards simultaneously slick and tacky.

Shuffling his feet in the direction of the bobbing mass of people, Jacob felt like a spaceship locked on by the beam of Valerie's warm hand. He was in a galaxy far, far away, drunk either on brute urgency of desire or rum or maybe both. Unfortunately, he was no Han Solo either.

Nonetheless he gave it a go, kind of swaying back and forth to whatever general beat he could find. Whether he was in control or Captain Morgan had taken over, his mind was yielding to his body.

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Jacob tried to make conversation with Maddie Graves, the Lady Statemen's starting point guard. Everyone made the same smalltalk at this time of year: *how many papers and exams do you have? when are you planning to take this exam? What are*

you up to over Christmas Break? what classes are you taking next term? Jacob did not want to conform to the rest of his generation.

"Hello Maddie! How are you doing this afternoon?"

Maddie was staring ahead intently, presumably running offensive sets in her mind in preparation for that night's game. She looked dazed by Jacob's salutation. "Uhh. I'm good. You?" She turned her head halfway towards him after a second's pause and raised an eyebrow. She had a boyish hairdo and no trace of makeup.

Jacob replied, "I am doing splendidly, thanks. Just amazed that this term has flown by, you know?" in response to which Maddie shrugged her muscular shoulders. They stuck out more than most girls'.

"What classes are you going to be taking next term, Maddie?"

"Three Englishes and a history," she said, rolling her eyes and raising one side of her mouth. She started to turn her head back but Jacob did not give her the chance.

"Goodness; good luck with that. I will actually be done with my English major after this term, save for the second half of my Honors Thesis, which I do hope will allow me to pursue some other academic interests. A History course will almost definitely be one of them."

The room went suddenly silent. Jacob noted a few exasperated looks directed his way.

A pretty Alabamian named Clara May Wilson looked especially annoyed, but her high breeding seemed to dictate that she only let her face redden a very little bit, at most. "Oh my! What are you doing your Thesis on, Jacob?" She looked like a defense attorney whose client had just gotten away with murder.

"It is of the creative variety, actually," Jacob replied, grinning at an apparent opportunity for self-promotion. "I have been trying to revive the Beat poets a little bit in a 21<sup>st</sup> century setting. I am currently working on a poem modeled on Allen Ginsberg's 'Howl.'"

Professor Packard raised a thin hand and spoke: "Well, it looks like our Mr. Ross is going to have a lot of time to comment on the best minds of *your* generation...right?"

Only Jacob seemed to get the joke. Naturally. This hardened the faces of the rest of the students.

Professor Packard's face contorted into apparent frustration, as if she wished she had remained a silent observer of the pre-class banter. Apparently deciding to put an end to the pre-class chicanery, she said, "Speaking of great minds, I think it's time to get back around to Shakespeare and the second half of our final play. Agreed? Very good." She nudged her horn-rimmed glasses down her nose a smidge to give the impression of genuine interest.

The first sixty minutes of the ninety minute class went by as usual. Jacob excelled the group in both insight into the material and irritating delivery—an unstoppable intellectual force. He called the bed trick "*quite* scandalous" and declared Bertram to be "an outright cad." Jacob wanted to be the next Harold Bloom: a leading authority on Shakespeare, an institution. He thought of his domination of the class as a precursor to domination of the scholarly community.

When it finally came time to wrap the course up by talking about comedy in the abstract, Jacob once again had a doozy to share. He cleared his throat—a gesture that, Professor Packard had noticed, meant he was about to say something especially smarmy. "I know it's *my* favorite genre, both in Shakespeare and in general," Jacob began. "It's really the most, say, elastic for—for the reasons we've discussed throughout the term: you make an audience laugh and then make them wonder why we're laughing because the characters sure aren't. The inspiration of laughter amid suffering really seems to drive some of Shakespeare's plays, just as it drives, say, recent films like 'Wedding Crashers' and others of that ilk."

Much of the class chuckled. "Wedding Crashers" was *so* 2005. Jacob might have been able to separate himself from the "nerd herd" if he had mentioned "The Hangover" instead. Unfortunately, he was no Roger Ebert.

Valerie Carter was among those laughing. A blond, full-hipped St. Louisan, she and Jacob had spoken a few times at the odd party, but only to gab about the show "Breaking Bad," which both of them enjoyed. It was their "thing"—the glue that held their acquaintance together.

Jacob had thought increasingly often of Valerie over the course of Fall term. He felt in her presence the combination of promise and despair of being 15 years old, failing to find the courage to ask a girl he liked out on a date. She was a close talker and would put her hand on his shoulder to emphasize certain things she said. The gesture never failed to arouse him.

Jacob's ex-girlfriend, Lisa Howard, attended Furman University. She was boring and plain, but at least she put out when they would visit each other on long weekends and during summers. Lisa had done most of the initial courting, to Jacob's relief and good fortune, and they managed to stay together through Jacob's sophomore and junior years. She was a sucker for his Facebook "game," mistaking his barrages of big words for virility. But in August, the communication barrier of Facebook and AIM and texting and phone calls finally broke down and they split up. She was now dating a bisexual named Kody who wore pants that were at least two sizes too tight.

Jacob barely noticed that it was 2:20 pm. He rose from his desk, shook Professor Packard's hand, and thanked her for a memorable and engaging term. None of his classmates did this. Snickering followed him out of the building.

As Jacob straightened his Barbour coat and rearranged his scarf, one member of the glob of classmates ahead of him murmured something about Saturday evening's "Screw Your GPA" party. It was Jefferson College tradition—each year, one of the top fraternities took it upon themselves to throw a massive blowout at an off-campus

house: a literal and figurative pre-exam catharsis. Jacob had never gone to it—he had been 21 for four months and still had yet to purchase alcohol.

Three of Jacob's frat brothers were stretched out in the fraternity house basement, one to a couch, while a fourth sat on the edge of a round wooden table, the shabby centerpiece of the room into which brothers dating back a decade or more had carved their initials. By ironclad frat law, only a brother who had had sex with a girl on the table was eligible to leave his mark. Jacob had never been able to coax Lisa into such a deed during one of her visits, but his crooked "J.R." was etched into the table anyway. He thought of it as motivation for future conquests.

Jacob was greeted by three grunts of "Hey." The one who was silent, a lanky Floridian named Romney Blankenship, clutched a black xBox controller, playing the latest version of "Call of Duty." His soldier held an assault rifle with an attached grenade launcher. A hostile with a shotgun appeared from around a corner and blew Romney's man down.

"Whoa!" chirped George Haines, from the couch to Romney's left.

"Shit," groaned Robert Jeffries, on the right.

"Bad luck, old boy," said Jacob.

Haines could not resist: "Mm yes, quite right, quite right," he growled, doing a bad Churchill impression. Barker echoed Haines and Jacob glared at them.

Jacob slumped into the vacant couch, into which a Uranus of methane had probably been expelled over the years. After watching Romney kill and die some more in silence, Jacob asked, "Do any of you all happen to know Valerie Carter? She's a senior Delta Zeta from St. Louis."

"Kappa Sig groupie in general, but I don't think she does drugs or anything like that. Cute. Probably a seven. Kinda slutty maybe?" replied Haines, button-down sleeves rolled up *just so* over the cuff of a royal blue J. Crew v-neck sweater. All the

while Haines remained fixed on the screen. Romney's warrior, toting an M16 with a red dot scope, crouched behind a flaming oil barrel in the street.

"Is that a question or a statement?" Jacob challenged.

"Bad guy on your left, Rom. What? No...I dunno. I don't really know her too well. Just ask fuckin' Jeff Cronan; they're both Theatre minors."

No one else had anything insightful to say about Valerie and Jacob soon went up to his room on the third floor of the house. The stairs creaked as he climbed them.

After futzing around on the Internet for a couple of hours, Jacob descended those creaky steps again to the dining room in a post-masturbatory haze. Jeff Cronan, a wiry fellow senior who looked like Elvis Costello, was there, so Jacob sat across from him.

"Hey Jeff, what has been your experience with Valerie Carter? I asked George Haines earlier and he said you might be able to shed more light on her than he could."

Valerie Carter had, on two separate occasions, turned down the advances of a drunk Jeff Cronan in favor of a different guy. "Umm. She's pretty nice. A bit uptight I guess, but nice."

Back in his room, Jacob pulled his Shakespeare text out of his backpack and opened it to a random page. It bore a painted image of a young Queen Elizabeth I. The rendering had the cartoonish quality typical of the age. "Surely the Queen didn't find *this* depiction flattering!" he said aloud to no one.

The Queen looked like she had just said something very serious and final to the artist. That look vaguely reminded Jacob of a picture of Valerie Carter. He had to verify the similarity on Facebook.

He arrived at Valerie's profile and admired her profile picture. Someone had caught Valerie putting her long blond hair in a ponytail and Valerie seemed caught off-guard by the photographer's intrusion into her space. Nevertheless, she was utterly poised in spite of it—the habit of an actress. Her lips were pursed cutely.



To Jacob's delight and surprise, a little green circle appeared in the upper-right corner of her main profile, indicating that she too was logged into Facebook, available to be Instant-Messaged at any moment. Jacob's pulse quickened as he considered what portals of potential romantic advancement that green circle might open up. He had to act quickly in case she decided to sign off. But Jacob had no good pretense under which to address her, so he decided to wing it.

JACOB [6:37 pm] **Hey there Valerie**

The utter lack of creativity in his salutation disgusted him for a few seconds, but the little quote-bubble icon materialized to tell him she was typing a response. He stared at it like one would a digital clock that reads 12:59:59, waiting for all the numbers to change.

VALERIE [6:37 pm] **hey Jacob**

She had not ignored him, so he figured he'd cleared the first hurdle. Was there any hidden meaning in the second Y in "hey?" A typo? A casual informality? He was encouraged.

JACOB [6:38 pm] **How are you doing this evening?**

VALERIE [6:38 pm] **pretty good, how about you?**

At least she didn't totally adhere to the needless Internet abbreviations like "u" for "you," Jacob thought. He chalked up her misuse of a comma to haste.

JACOB [6:38 pm] **I'm well; can't complain...how are you?**

Noticing the redundancy, Jacob felt his ship—perhaps his courtship—taking on water before it had even left port. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes, waiting for the familiar *pop* that signaled a response. It came, and he braced for letdown.

VALERIE [6:40 pm] **haha good good, what's up?**

Either she was too kind to shove the redundancy back in his face or he had not scared her off after all. He could not help but feel as though there was a strike against him. He felt off his game tonight, scrambling to counter his opponent's opening gambit. Unfortunately, he was no Bobby Fischer.

JACOB [6:40 pm] **Not too much, I guess; I was just wondering when you plan on taking Professor Packard's exam.**

VALERIE [6:41 pm] umm, im not **100** per cent sure yet, what about you?

Jacob had peer-edited one of Valerie's papers in class before and she was always spot-on with apostrophes and the like. He was fascinated that she was so informal in online conversation. It seemed like an easy way to develop bad habits. Did this mean he seemed like a jackass by being so proper? Would she be annoyed if he matched her level of relaxedness from now on in the conversation, thinking him patronizing? Jacob decided to remain proper for the sake of consistency.

JACOB [6:41 pm] **I was thinking that I would probably take it tomorrow at 2 pm in order to get it out of the way. That would leave the remainder of the weekend to studying for my other two exams early next week.**

VALERIE [6:42 pm] ahh see im planning on kinda taking the weekend off

VALERIE [6:42 pm] **i def want to go to chi phi's screw your gpa party on saturday night, are you gonna go?**

The last thing Jacob wanted to do right before the beginning of exams was go out and risk compromising his exam-taking abilities. But perhaps he could make an exception, especially in the name of courtship. And besides, going to the party and going to the party and getting hammered were two different plans altogether. The second sentence of his response made him shake noticeably at its bravado as he typed it:

JACOB [6:42 pm] **I think I just might do so, Valerie. Perhaps I will see you there?**

VALERIE [6:43 pm] **ooo definitely! i will look for you Jacob!**

The "definitely" alone would have seemed automatic and formal. But the preceding onomatopoeia and exclamation point *had* to mean something more, hadn't they? He felt a bit stupid for missing it and assuming the worst instead. That she added some kind of I-will-hunt-you-down secondary statement particularly excited him. But he knew he needed to play it cool. Furthermore, he had studying to do.

JACOB [6:44 pm] **I look forward to it! Hopefully we'll hang out out there.**

JACOB [6:44 pm] **Anyhoo, I had better hit the books so I can show Professor Packard's exam who's boss tomorrow afternoon! I'll catch you later, Valerie.**

VALERIE [6:45 pm] **me too...later Jacob! good luck! :)**

The emoticon confirmed everything for Jacob. He exited Facebook, sprang up from his chair, and rifled through his clothes, in search of the ideal outfit for the party. Though it was 24 hours away, he wanted to be prepared. He did this in order to transfer his anxiety to the outfits so as to concentrate on short-term tasks. But even after he selected a blue button-down shirt and a navy sweater with khaki pants and hung them neatly on the back knob of his closet door, he continued to tremble at the prospect of seeing Valerie. This continued while he pored over the plays.

Saturday's English exam was a breeze for Jacob; he knew it would be. Feeling supremely satisfied with his efforts, he returned the sealed envelope containing a blue-book's worth of unadulterated brilliance back to the department secretary at 4:15 pm, a full 45 minutes before the exam period ended officially.

Jacob returned to the frat house and took his customary place in the basement, watching Romney mow insurgents down with a silenced AK-47. After a few minutes, Jacob pulled out his iPhone and scrolled through his Facebook friends' latest status updates. Valerie's read "screw your gpa tonight woohoo!!!"

His basement mates grew hungry and he joined them on a Burger King run that seemed to take ten times as long as usual. He took his shortest shower of the year to date and assembled his outfit, anointing his neck with what he hoped would be a deal-sealing spritz of Hermés *Eau D'Orange Verte*. He was ready—ready for a drink or two, ready for Valerie to sway into his arms, ready even to share his bed with another for the first time in far too long.

He set out for the ABC store just in time and made his first alcohol purchase: a fifth of Captain Morgan. On a stand near the register was an array of metal flasks. He selected one with an embossed Jefferson College 'J' on it and set off for the sober ride pickup point. The night was brisk; in the moonlight the bare branches of the trees looked like bones.

A light drizzle was beginning to fall as a black Volvo SUV carried Jacob and two sophomores up the gravel driveway of the Catacombs. Loud music shot out of every window and dozens of people were shouting and laughing inside. Miley Cyrus howled about how she only saw stilettos and how she never got the memo. Those lamentations cascaded down from the speakers that propped open the upstairs windows.

Hulking football players toted fresh red SOLO cups of Natural Light from the outdoor kegs in each hand and bolted them in short order. They spiked the cups to the ground and yelled about some SEC football team or another. *Moloch whose breast is a cannibal dynamo!* thought Jacob. Other partygoers made a beeline for the woods in search of a guarded tree or bush to piss on. Girls with one or both shoes missing walked very straight-legged and deliberately towards the keg, *looking for an angry fix*, thought Jacob.

Above the front door to the Catacombs was a sign made from the blank, light brown inner sides of cardboard beer cases and written in thick black Sharpie: "**NOTICE TO BROS AND HOES: Abandon all, ye who enter here.**" Jacob wondered if the sign's author meant to leave the word "hope" off of the quotation. Perhaps, he thought, the quote would be a good title for a poem.

The interior of the Catacombs was stark. Any decent furniture or electronic equipment of even modest value had undoubtedly been spirited to less dangerous regions of the house, and in their places slightly brighter patches of floor were visible under the haze of caked-on beer and dirt. Miley Cyrus was still singing about some party or another and in the main room inside the Catacombs, a couple dozen people were gyrating sloppily back and forth. Impromptu female back-up vocals rose during the refrain. Jacob was no college party expert, but he knew it was a Law of College that if you played the latest popular songs in a party's music rotation, girls would make wailing sing-alongs of them.

One such female scream rose up out of a corner of the dance floor room that Jacob had not yet surveyed a few seconds after he walked in. It was the unmistakable—even over the very loud music—cadence of Valerie Carter.

“JAAAAAAAAAKE! HEEEEYYYYY!!!” she trilled and waved to him. She was in rare form, clothing-wise: a black tank-top and snug, dark blue jeans. A red and white scarf was curled around her neck and a red Santa Claus hat clung to her head, the bottom of the rim just touching the tops of her ears. Her hair was in French-braided pigtails. ‘Twas the season, after all.

Jacob took a wide-eyed swig of rum from his flask and it burned his throat like hell. Captain Morgan was parrying with Shakespeare, and pulling the massive upset. Jacob knew he should have brought some Coca-Cola from the frat house to mix it with, or found some when he first arrived at the Catacombs. “Hey there Valerie!” he hollered. “Fancy seeing you here!”

“I knowwww!” She was tipsy, going on drunk. She scampered up to him, half jumped on him, and nearly toppled him. Jacob returned the gesture with one arm, taking care with the other not to drop his flask. Valerie’s fruit-scented shampoo was cut with the ambient haze of cigarette smoke in the room.

“Having fun tonight, Miss Carter?” he asked. He didn’t know why he addressed girls this way. Maybe he had a latent male student/female teacher fetish. Maybe he was a misogynist and didn’t know it. He swigged the rum again. It didn’t burn as much this time.

“Of course I am, Mister Ross!” Valerie shouted. “Whatcha got there?” She pawed at his wrist, bringing the flask closer to her. “Ooh, what’s inside *this* little guy?”

“Oh, it’s just a bit of rum. But I forgot to bring along a mixer. Rookie mistake, really.” Jacob shrugged his shoulders and grinned.

“Pshh, it’s all good. Rum is...is yum, I’d say. May I have a sip?”

“By all means. My rum is your rum.”

"Whoa whoa whoa, mister! I didn't say anything about your room!" She patted him on the top of the head and poked his chin, teetering a bit.

"Oh, gracious, I, uh, I said *rum*, not *room*. I—"

"I know, silly. Just teasing you. Hey I LOVE this song! Shall we dance?" It was some early Lady Gaga nonsense. Valerie's mouth was open in a clown's-mouth smile; her tongue traced the edges of her upper teeth. A haze of perspiration gave her eye makeup an extra level of sheen.

"I, well, I'm not really a—okay, yeah sure, why not?" Jacob put a bit more Captain in him. Valerie led him by the hand to the dance floor. With his free hand, Jacob traced the raised 'J' on the curved flask as he slid it into his pocket.

During the first couple songs, Jacob would glance over—hoping not to be creepy and voyeuristic about it—at other couples, to make sure he was doing it right. And for the most part, he was. The bump-and-grind style of dancing must have been genetically inscribed in his generation or something, because he took to it quite quickly, so quickly that he felt somewhat ashamed for the first 15 seconds or so.

After the Gaga double dose of "Just Dance" and "Alejandro" ended, Ke\$ha's latest toxically catchy hit "Your Love Is My Drug" blared. Valerie surprised Jacob again by turning around and pressing her body against his. She smelled like beer and cigarettes but Jacob could have sworn there was some perfume there too. *Really in the total animal soup of time*, he thought. This time Jacob did not flinch or pull his hands away; rather, he pulled her in and sorely wished he had a rose in his teeth. He cocked his head to the side all matador-like and chanted, "Olé, *ma chérie!*"

A sober Valerie would have turned tail for the nearest group of girls at this pathetic act. Instead, she whirled around and pressed her posterior to him. Jacob enjoyed this considerably, but his rising drunk emboldened him to surprise Valerie with his newfound suaveness. He took her hand and tried to initiate the standard swing-

dance twirl in the middle of Eminem's latest single. Unfortunately he was no Fred Astaire.

Nonetheless, Jacob was stupefied by the spontaneity of Valerie pressing her lips to his like the world was on fire. A separation from complete awareness was growing in him. He took this to be the essence of intoxication. He was immediately ridiculously happy that he had gargled Listerine before going out.

About five seconds into his first-ever DFM—"dance floor makeout"—Jacob was seized by the notion that kissing was a hilarious practice when you thought about it, so much so that he pulled back a bit. He was completely unable to do anything but grin at the absurdity of life at the moment. Valerie demanded to know what was so funny and Jacob roared, "O victory, forget your underwear, we're free!" and resumed kissing her.

This continued on and off for the remainder of Ke\$ha's original hit single "Tik Tok," and when some techno garbage came on, Valerie grabbed at Jacob's butt as they swayed. He took this as a sign to go for the soft side of the girl's neck with his lips. He took her subsequent shiver and ass-squeeze as a sign that this was a very good move. When the techno ended, Jacob announced to Valerie and about a dozen people in bleary earshot, "Let's get out of here, doll-face!"

"Ooh! Yes sir!" she shrieked, squeezing his hand. They both knew their destination.

Leading Valerie by the hand now, Jacob burst back past the crude sign of welcome and onto the front steps of the Catacombs. It was a good five degrees cooler than was when he arrived a bit less than an hour before. It was still drizzling but now the wooden front stoop of the house was very slippery, as Jacob noticed when he nearly swung himself and Valerie to the ground with a clumsy pirouette.

"Whoa, good save dude!" called a young man with no shirt and a cowboy hat.

Jacob boomed back, trying to sound like the Masked Avenger or some other great hero, "Many thanks, my good sir! Say, do you ah-happen to know where a gentleman and his ah-female friend might be able to get a ride back to town?"

"Why I sure do!" said the bare-chested suburban gaucho, holding up and jangling a set of keys. At this, a gaggle of others who were milling about the front yard took perked up like a pack of hounds. Clearly they were out for rides home as well. Scanning the crowd, the possibly inbred relative of John Wayne raised a fist into the air and bellowed, "To the Batmobile! Heeaghhhhh!"

Primed for such a cry, Jacob was first off the unofficial starting blocks, somewhat dragging Valerie behind him. They all made for the very same car that had brought them to the Catacombs, the black Volvo SUV. A preppy character in the grey-and-black North Face jacket that everyone at Jefferson seemed to wear took up the front seat, so Jacob heaved himself into one of the back seats and pulled Valerie onto his lap. A short, pretty little thing who must have been a freshman scrambled into the cramped center seat, while a lanky boy in skinny-jeans took the far side. As the engine revved, the trunk suddenly flew open and a short, long-haired lacrosse player threw himself into the vehicle. He scrambled to untangle his purple pinney as he assumed a more or less fetal position.

"Okay, *now* we're ready to rock and roll!" yelled the cowboy-Moloch. An image of Slim Pickens in the movie *Dr. Strangelove* flashed through Jacob's head and he chuckled, wanting very much to watch the movie after having sex with Valerie, or perhaps during.

The car thrust back and executed a rickety k-turn in the grass beside the driveway. In a minute, they were cruising along down a dark, damp Evergreen Hill Road in an earnest beeline for town under the starry dynamo of the Jeffersonian night. Slim turned on the iPod-radio apparatus and soon the car was blaring yet more Lady Gaga—this time her song "Poker Face."



About two miles out of the Catacombs, the riders came up behind a car doing about twenty-five in a thirty-five. The Volvo gaucho took a deep breath before hollering, "Fuck this shit, we're going around!"

The vehicle swerved into the opposite lane, over the double-yellow lines. As they passed the slower car, an old-looking Chevy, the driver shouted, "Hasta la vista, baby!" This kid was a walking cliché machine, Jacob determined.

Suddenly two very bright halogen headlights pricked through the darkness, cresting a hill that seemed further away than it really was. The icy haze must have foreshortened the view. The front of the oncoming car slid out of the mist and into view abruptly.

"Oh shit son!" howled the cowboy and he tried to jerk the wheel back to the right. Feeling the shifting momentum of the car, everyone gasped and began to reach in the darkness for their seatbelts.

The Volvo earned its high Safety Rating as it skidded back into its lane in front of the Chevy with a few inches to spare. "Boy, was *that* a close shave!" Jacob hollered. Major "King" Kong threw the wheel back to the left and the car straightened out a bit.

Jacob took this opportunity to squeeze Valerie closer to him. She thought in her haze that this was Jacob being protective of her but all Jacob wanted was to cop an unsolicited feel. Unfortunately, he was no Don Juan.

He would feel very embarrassed while cleaning Valerie's vomit off his pillow some 45 minutes later. Almost as embarrassed as he would feel when he realized that he had confused two passages on his Shakespeare exam, turning an A to a C. Unfortunately, Jacob Ross would be no Harold Bloom.

## THE REST AREA

"I can't believe you thought it'd be okay to mention that."

"Mention what?"

"That business about your mother hating Texans." ElizabethRae's accent is stronger than usual. The first semester of their senior year at Jefferson College is behind them. They are about to cross the Delaware Memorial Bridge, leaving around 120 miles of Turnpike ahead. Once the Garden State is behind them, it will be another two hours before they arrive safely in John's hometown of Waterbury, Connecticut. If they're lucky.

John glances at ElizabethRae in time to see her nostrils flare. "I was just making conversation with you, ElizabethRae. When my mom was in banking she'd travel there on business a couple times a year. She probably got called 'little lady' one too many times by guys in cowboy hats or something. It's no big deal. She'll like you."

"Oh yes, I'm *sure* you're right. It's not a big deal *at all*. I'm sure most Connecticut mothers just *lie* awake at night *dreaming* of their sons finding a yeehaw-Texan girlfriend." She juts her hand forward when she stresses certain words.

"She'll like you, ElizabethRae. For goodness sakes."

The New Jersey Turnpike is a fickle piece of road. In the past this leg of the journey home has taken John as little as two hours. But that was in the middle of the night. It is just after noon now; they won't be crossing the George Washington Bridge until near three-thirty.

A disembodied female voice breaks the silence: "Continue to follow the road for over one hundred miles."

The climate-control in John's blue BMW 328i is working correctly, blasting both its silent driver and incredulously silent passenger with 74-degree air. Still, the gray mid-November chill seems to creep into the car as well. John shivers imperceptibly

every few minutes. The familiar blue highway sign that reads "CLARA BARTON SERVICE AREA 5 MILES" looms and John smiles to himself. How ironic it is, John thinks whenever he passes the sign, that a nurse, teacher, and all-around humanitarian has a place named after her where thousands of people scarf down Burger King and swill Starbucks every day.

"I have to pee," John says hastily, as if the GPS' declaration has cleared a space for his own.

"Mm hmm," ElizabethRae murmurs back. She sets the latest issue of *Cosmopolitan* on her lap. On the front cover is a skinny, airbrushed blonde in a dark pumpkin-colored sari. The main headline reads, "THINGS WOMEN WISH MEN KNEW."

Clara Barton's vast parking lot is predictably crowded; it is the Saturday preceding Thanksgiving. Drab-looking Corollas, sinewy Porsche Cayennes, and weary hatchbacks rest side by side between the L-shaped white lines of the parking spaces. There is something very egalitarian about this scene, John believes: upper crust and working class folks, black, white, and brown standing cheek by jowl at food counters, convenience store registers, and urinals.

John finds a space a couple rows back and to the left, leaving about 60 yards of scattered patches of spilled soda, dropped cigarettes, and flattened French fries between car and main rest area entrance. He opens the car door and for a moment ElizabethRae doesn't budge. She just looks up at him under low eyebrows. Her iPhone goes *vmm* in her hand and her eyes bolt down to its glossy screen.

"Are you staying here?"

ElizabethRae unbuckles her seatbelt, sighed, and gets out of the car, returning the phone to her pocket. "I guess not."

They cross the parking lot together in silence towards the main building at Clara Barton Service Area. John finds the breeze especially cold and unforgiving, almost as if it wants them to walk huddled together for warmth. But John and

ElizabethRae just tuck their hands deeper into their jeans pockets and grip their sides with their elbows, striding in almost military unison towards the heavy steel-framed front doors.

The air inside the Clara Barton Service Area is heavy and vaguely stuffy. John wonders how many throats have inhaled and exhaled it. Haggard northbound travelers wander the interior aimlessly. They seem to be looking for reasons to linger another minute or two before venturing back out into a cold for which many of them look underdressed. It was probably warmer where they began their journeys. They weave around strangers in search of Red Bulls, lattés, cardboard cartons of French fries. Starbucks, the convenience store section, and the bathrooms, Burger King, TCBY frozen yogurt, and Sbarro form John's horizon.

At the wide wall between the entrances to the men's and women's rooms, half a dozen people stand with their heads askew, surveying a huge map of the Garden State. The large red dot with white type inside reading "YOU ARE HERE" looks like a pimple from afar. John makes a move forward to get a closer look but he feels a tug on his jacketed right arm.

ElizabethRae Hetherington's hazel eyes meet his. She might as well still be standing outside. He instinctively reaches in his pocket for his money clip and hands his girlfriend a ten.

"Grab me a medium hot chocolate while you're there, please. Whipped cream if it's an option." John walks off a few paces and stands in line outside the restroom. He turns around to look at her from a distance.

ElizabethRae wheels around to get in line behind a dark-haired young man wearing a New York Giants sweatshirt. A toothpick bobs up and down steadily between his lips. He seems about their age. Perhaps a couple years older. The toothpick is aimed directly at ElizabethRae's chin from the moment she catches his eye, homing in on her as she draws nearer, as if it is a compass and she is a mobile

Magnetic North. His head is turned almost completely back when she takes her place behind him, but he snaps back and faces forward once their eyes meet. ElizabethRae's mouth concaves slightly, then recoils into preoccupied neutrality. She pulls out the iPhone again and slides the bar to the right instinctively. As she steps into line, John watches her background, a Dallas Cowboys star, dissolve into the main phone menu.

John heads for the bathroom. He turns the corner in the entrance passage and the smell of urine and underutilized cleaning products assaults him. He has always hated using a urinal because the notion of inadvertently viewing a perfect stranger's junk or—even worse—having someone catch sight of his own disturbs him. A man's genitalia are his own. Each stall seems to claim a pair of sneakers and ruffled pants-legs around ankles. John makes for an open urinal towards the far wall in nervous haste. He does not wash his hands on the way out.

ElizabethRae is still in line at Starbucks when John reëmerges from the men's room. She is in front of the *barista*. The Giants fan appears to have just ordered his coffee. He seems straight out of central casting for "Jersey Shore." John can tell he's Italian: dark hair, stubble that must grow twice as fast as normal, and a broad, rounded nose. He wonders how often the guy works out.

John ambles up to the outside of the queue and waves to ElizabethRae, who does not notice him at first. The one in blue leans against the counter where customers add sugar, creamer, and those skinny brown stirrer-straws to their macchiatos and espressos. His toothpick-compass is fixed on ElizabethRae once again. After ordering and paying, she strides towards that counter, armed with a wry smile that seems a little bigger than the one she had given the blue clad fellow earlier. An obvious courtesy, John assures himself. Maybe ElizabethRae is more excited than usual about her forthcoming chai tea. It is cold outside, after all.

The son of Sicily murmurs something John cannot quite make out and ElizabethRae's smile sags. She takes a half step backwards, as if there is a puddle in

front of her and she has absentmindedly stepped in it. John takes a step closer to her but no more. How will Little Miss Spring, Texas handle her pretty little self in the face of the gruff flirtation of some random *guido*? John wonders.

ElizabethRae casts a grasping glance John's way. He holds his ground. She sniffs outward tersely in his direction, bobbing her head once at him before turning around to collect their steaming beverages from a lanky Filipino *baristo* with a pierced left eyebrow and a spike through an earlobe. John can tell she's not terribly amused. He meets her at the exit point of the line and extends his hands forward, beaming. ElizabethRae passes the tea and the hot chocolate off to him with a quick "Here," and heads for the ladies room.

"I'll warm up the car," says John. His girlfriend raises her right elbow in assent.

He cocks his head down. The hot chocolate smells nice. With neither plastic tops nor cardboard coffee sleeves, the cups are both scalding hot. She must have really had to go, John reasons as he heads back towards the fixins counter. As he squeezes back through the break in the retractable fencing that forms the Starbucks queue, John brushes shoulders with the Giants fan. The man-child glowers down at John: "Hey, watch it bro!"

"Oh, pardon me," says John, glancing up a couple inches. The back of his neck is hot.

Fixing an upturned tag in the back of his sweatshirt collar, the man-child replies, face softening, "Chick's a real piece, huh bud?" He tosses his head in the direction of ElizabethRae, who is just crossing the threshold of the ladies room.

"Yeah, definitely. Mine for now, luckily enough." As soon as John says this, he regrets it, thinking it may be grounds for the start of a fight he will surely lose. These guys will find any reason to take offense to something another guy says, John knows. 'Roid rage; stuff like that. "She's, uh, my girlfriend," he stammers.

The oaf smiles. He has a gap in his front teeth the width of mechanical pencil lead. "Fine young lady ya got there. Shit man, guess I was uh, creepin' on her a bit there. I wasn't doin' anything by it. Anyways, you and your girl take care, bro."

"Yeah, no problem," John said. He nods to the Giants fan, who turns and lumbers off towards Clara Barton's convenience store section. Setting the cups on the counter surface, John slaps on tops and sheaths them. As he turns for the door, his eyes linger on the "YOU ARE HERE" circle.

The outdoor air hits him from the shins up. It creeps up under the cuffs on his khakis. And even though it is only a quarter after one in the afternoon, the sky seems to have darkened in the last ten minutes. The temperature has to have dropped a few degrees.

Making sure there will be no cars bearing down on him, John half jogs back to the BMW, taking care not to spill any tea or hot chocolate. He puts Elizabeth's tea on the roof while he unlocks the driver-side door with the key, ignoring the fob, as always, for the satisfaction of putting key to keyhole. Even as the heat radiates steadily after ignition, John feels the shiver from the all-penetrating gray New Jersey cold.

After about 90 seconds, ElizabethRae comes into view, peering left and right, her hair dancing on the cold breeze under her purple wool cap. It is the first one she's ever owned, a recent gift from John. When she reaches the car, she pulls on the passenger side door handle twice. The car is still locked. She closes a fist and bangs on the window. John leans over and opens the door outward for her. She pushes it further ajar with her clenched fist and it knocks gently against the side of the red Honda Accord parked next to them.

"Jesus Christ! Be careful, ElizabethRae," says John.

"Name of the Lord *in vain*," she chides. She drops into the seat, notes John's hand clasping his hot chocolate, and asks "That my tea?"

"Oh. Shit! Goddammit!" John exclaims. The tea is still sitting on the roof of the car.

John eases his cup into the nearest cupholder, opens the door, and reaches for the chai. The blast of cold air rattles him. He hands the cup to his girlfriend. A trail of steam curls out of the small hole in the plastic top.

Holding her chai tea in her left hand, ElizabethRae takes out her iPhone once again. She scrolls and types with her right thumb. The phone buzzes and inspires the first trace of smile John had seen out of ElizabethRae in over an hour.

"Who's that on your little machine there?" John asks.

"Oh, no one. Just girl stuff."

John takes a sip of his drink, which nearly scalds him at first but resolves chalkily on his tongue. He remembers that he has never been a fan of Starbucks' hot chocolate. Nonetheless he appreciates the *barista's* liberal hand with the whipped cream spout.

The Sunoco station at Clara Barton Service Area stands between the Bimmer and the Turnpike onramp. John glances at the fuel gauge and sees the needle hovering around the one-third mark. Filling up here should get them home without any more stops.

The gas station attendant is an Indian who wears a white turban and thick black beard in which the first striations of gray are starting to appear. His heavy coat, too, seems no match for the New Jersey late-fall cold snap. He stands scrunched up from the shoulders as he stiffly removes John's gas cap and inserts the nozzle, ready to stream over \$40 worth of high-test into the tank. John thinks he looks as if someone has just congratulated him for 25 years of loyal wintertime gas pumping service: resigned, weary. He gazes past John and toward ElizabethRae and smiles—or at least appears to. His earlobes quiver.



John has always been transfixed by the dual sets of whirling digital numbers at gas pumps. The attendant swipes John's parents' credit card and hands it back. The screen resets to all zeros for a moment. Showtime, John thinks to himself. John sort of remembers when it used to be a pretty close race between the 'Total Sale' and 'Gallons' figures on the screen. Now, it isn't even close.

Three gallons, pushing \$10.00. John thinks he has heard ElizabethRae's voice. Two seconds later, he is sure he has heard her clear her throat in that inimitable Texas-aristocratic way.

Six gallons now. John leans his head back slightly but does not break eye contact with the whirling black figures on the orange background. "What's that?"

"I *said*, aren't you going to apologize?" She squeezes his shoulder.

"Apologize for what? For my mother's Texas bias? I'm sorry then. Forget I said anything." Ten gallons, approaching \$34.00 now. John's eyes are wider.

"Oh for heaven sakes. Are you *truly* that clueless, John?" The numbers race is nearly over.

*Bam.* Totals of 13.235 gallons and \$43.54. The attendant hands John the receipt. John places it in the miscellaneous holding compartment-cavity below the GPS console in front of him. He finally turns to ElizabethRae. "Suppose I am, ElizabethRae. What am I apologizing for?"

"Oh never mind." She sets her tea in a cupholder and pulls the *Cosmopolitan* back out. The top inch of a page tears as she opens it.

John eases the BMW back onto the Turnpike as the sky continues to dull. Once they are up to speed on the highway again, the disembodied female voice chants, "Continue to follow the road over 100 miles."

They breeze northward for about five miles but one of those inevitable traffic buildups materializes in front of them and they slow from 70 to 15 in the space of half a mile. John turns on the radio to listen to 1010 WINS' traffic report. The static from

the AM station is too heavy to make out much of what the radio news anchor is saying, but the words "jackknife," "northbound," and "Clara Barton" seemed to come together in a way that makes disquieting sense.

The traffic broadcast ends and the reader begins talking about the Giants' upcoming home game against the Cowboys, who are in the midst of their worst season in recent memory. Elizabeth reaches forward and presses the dial with finality, bringing silence to the car once again.

Luckily, traffic thins out soon and it seems like the accident is behind them. John accelerates to 75 miles per hour—ten over the speed limit.

ElizabethRae puts down her *Cosmopolitan*. John hears a couple pages rustle and steals a glance at the magazine. All he can make out in the half-second is a sub-heading that reads "When Love Hits The Skids."

John raises his hot chocolate to his mouth and sips. It is lukewarm.

In an even tone, ElizabethRae says, "My *hero*," and turns to John just long enough for him to notice her and return the glance. John's lips are closed, perfectly horizontal.

"Who?"

"Never mind. Just trying to make conversation." The iPhone goes *vmm* in ElizabethRae's hand.

"Who's that, Liz?" John asked, crookedly smiling. He knows she hates that abbreviation.

"Oh, no one."

John reaches for his no-longer-hot hot chocolate but his finger brushes the GPS console. A monotone voice springs out: "Continue to follow the road for seventy-six miles."

ElizabethRae adds, in perfect mimicry, "you jackass," and continues to tap at her phone, shaking her head at a message she has just received.

## SPECTATORS

The 14<sup>th</sup> hole at the Country Club of Wichita did not fit Jack Tennant's eye. It was a 455-yard brute of a par four that curled to the right around a bunker and a stand of trees and met its end beside a pond that guarded the right edge of the putting surface. Two shots in a row that called for a fade and Jack hit a draw naturally. He had already bogeyed the hole twice in the tournament.

"Got 278 over the bunker," said Skittles, knowing Jack could only comfortably carry the ball 270 yards.

"Three wood out left, Skit?" said Jack.

"If you're comfortable leaving about 200 in, sure. Wind's helping just a touch."

"Think we have enough to carry driver over it?" Jack flicked a bead of July sweat from an earlobe, hitched up a sleeve of his magenta FootJoy golf shirt, and knocked a few tees around in his pocket. His fingers found one of the longer ones.

"Only if you can do it with a normal swing. If you think you might overswing trying to kill it, I like three wood out left better."

"Yeah, three wood makes sense." Jack adjusted his wavy chestnut-colored hair under his visor.

He rooted in his pocket for one of the shorter tees, removed the headcover from his Titleist three wood, and tugged it from the bag. He wiped all excess moisture off the grip with his black Titleist towel.

Nearing the end of his year of mini-tour sponsorship with Titleist, Jack was left with only a few weeks left to prove their investment in him worthwhile. They had staked him \$15,000 worth of equipment and tournament entry fees the previous August and since then, he had amassed just over \$9,000 in winnings. After a seemingly endless parade of missed cuts and low finishes, he had finally started playing well in June, becoming comfortable in the rhythm and the grind of mini-tour life: the long drives

between tournaments, the chain-hotel rooms, the constant do-or-die atmosphere. A couple good finishes in the last two tournaments—a tie for eighth place at the Coors Classic in Steamboat Springs, Colorado, and his first career top-five finish at the Tyson Foods Challenge in Amarillo, Texas—had his confidence at an all-time high. Now he stood on the 14<sup>th</sup> tee with a two-shot lead over playing partner and mini-tour veteran Steve Scott and former NCAA Player of the Year Robert Wasden, who was sizing up his approach shot some 280 yards away, in the middle of the fairway.

During the wait on the tee box, Steve and the final-group rules official, a silver-bearded gentleman, were chuckling about a two-stroke penalty assessed to Pablo Lizarralde, a fiery Uruguayan a couple groups ahead. He had given the middle finger to a member of the gallery who had made a noise immediately before he had missed three-foot putt earlier in the round. Jack's own ability to focus—to tune out any outside noise or worry—had been especially strong in his recent run of good play. He had always admired and tried to imitate the steely eye and dogged competitiveness of four-time major champion Raymond Floyd, who had grown up near Jack's hometown of Fayetteville, North Carolina.

Someone in the sparse gallery laughed—almost a wheeze-guffaw—and Jack looked up. Only one person he had known made sounds like that.

"Jesus, Skit; you see who that is over there?"

Skittles moved his aviator sunglasses down his nose. "Oh god, is that—Hunsucker? I know you said he's from here, but why is that piece of shit at the goddamned Farm Bureau of Kansas Classic? Dude's probably never picked up a golf club in his life. He know you're playing here, you think?"

About thirty yards ahead and to the left, Chris Hunsucker was chattering with a minion unfamiliar to Jack and Skittles; probably one of his oafish hometown friends. Chris had been in the pledge class below Jack's at Jefferson College's chapter of Chi Phi. Chris' homophobic, sexist, racist, and generally coarse sense of humor did not

agree with Jack and during Chris' pledgeship, Jack had forced the goon to read Allen Ginsberg's poem "Sphincter" aloud at dinner one night in his tinny, nasal lisp. From then on, most brothers adopted Chris' pronunciation of the word "asshole," with particular emphasis on the ss sound. Relations between Chris and Jack deteriorated from there, to the point where neither would acknowledge the other on the rare occasions when they were in the same room.

Jack shrugged. Still waiting for the fairway to clear, he kneaded the back of his neck. He thrust the 3 wood back in his bag and wrenched off his driver headcover—a caricature figure in a tri-corner hat, a Jefferson Statesman. Driver it was.

"You like driver, then?" Skittles asked, head bent forward and eyebrows raised.

Jack smirked and did not say anything. He hung his head and twirled his driver idly while the burly Steve Scott teed up a ball. Jack heard the swoosh of Scott's practice swing and looked up at his elder and foe, who let fly a high right-handed fade—the perfect shot shape for the tee shot—that sailed left-to-right over the fairway bunker and bounded down the fairway to within 160 yards of the green.

"Nice shot, Steve," said Jack.

Steve nodded and returned beside his bag to confer with his own caddy. Now Jack, after a wait of 15 minutes, was due to hit. He made a move forward for the tee when Skittles placed a calm hand in his shoulder.

"You're not hitting driver just to stick it to Chris or something, are you?" Skittles asked, just above a whisper.

"Who?" Jack replied, smiling. He stepped forward and eased a long white peg into the right side of the tee box. As was his custom with every tee shot, he oriented his golf ball such that the script "Titleist" stamp faced out towards his target, which in this case was the nasty sentry bunker that he hoped to tame.

The breeze ruffled Jack's pants as he bent back up from the ball. He scrunched and un-scrunched his shoulders in order to relieve any tension that had built up during

the wait on the tee. In keeping with his strict, battle-tested pre-shot routine, he waggled the club and took two languid practice swings in order to ingrain a smooth tempo. He stepped back behind the ball in order to line up a final time before address.

One particularly inebriated Friday evening during Jack's junior year, the two foes found themselves in the fraternity house dining room, where some brothers and a few of their girlfriends and prospective evening conquests were shooting the breeze after a night's partying. Chris was dispensing a dab of hand sanitizer onto the dining room table and setting it on fire with his camouflage-colored Zippo lighter, as he was wont to do, when Jack spoke up about it. Words were exchanged. The altercation escalated to the point where Jack got in his rival's face, slobbering profanities in a hackneyed imitation of Chris' voice. Chris shoved Jack backwards over a chair, calling Jack's girlfriend a whale. The innocent Sara was in the room to hear this and while others tried to cajole her, Jack had to be held back by two of his brothers so as not to throttle Chris.

Feet aimed slightly left of the bunker and shoulders aimed directly over, Jack settled into textbook athletic posture over the ball. An instant before he hoped to take the club back, a puff of wind moved the hairs on his right ear, indicating a possible shift in direction. He backed off, bent down, tossed up a couple blades of grass. Their lazy flight toward the bunker confirmed the wind's direction, in spite of the phantom zephyr that had discomfited Jack.

More wheezing from Chris' direction. Trying to ignore it, Jack restarted his routine and addressed the ball anew. This time, there was no further pre-shot interruption. He made a decent pass at the ball but over-released the clubhead, sending the ball higher and further left than preferred. It settled just through the fairway in the first cut of rough, about 195 yards from the hole. Skittles said something along the lines of "Alright, not bad, smooth iron shot coming up."

The modest final-pairing crowd having resumed its stride and chatter, Jack glanced over in the direction of Chris and his fellow *homo neanderthalensis*. The two of them wore t-shirts and black gym shorts and looked like they had come from a pick-up basketball game. Chris' shirt was yellow and nondescript but the one his partner in buffoonery wore bore writing that was unintelligible from a distance.

They were well out of place among the clusters of sun-hardened 65-year old men and their tan, leathery-skinned wives, clad in golf attire—polo shirts, Bermuda shorts, wraparound sunglasses

Jack drifted towards the rope that separated players from spectators, perversely hoping to catch Chris' eye. He would never interact with anyone in the crowd, but then again there was rarely anyone of interest attending a mini-tour event—just, usually, the members of the courses they played and ambling, bucket hat-toting senior citizens of the game. Chris' presence fascinated Jack in that it annoyed him, and he wondered if his old brother-enemy would call him out.

The 250-yard walk along the rope yielded was uneventful, however, and Jack made his way back to the right and toward his ball. Skittles was waiting with Jack's bag beside it.

"Are we here to win a golf tournament or to give attention to an *assss-hole*?" Skittles lisped. Jack had told him the "Sphincter" story a dozen times or more during the eight months of their partnership.

Jack chuckled. "Yeah, yeah."

"Okay then. Got 180 front, 195 hole. Ridge just behind, 15 feet left of the hole is all we need. Solid five iron, right?"

Jack nodded, plucked out the club, and trained his eyes on the white-and-black checkered flag. It danced to the left, up, and down at the whim of the ambivalent breeze.

A rustle and a wheeze-guffaw from the left sent Jack out of focus again. He looked up and noticed Chris' dark, empty eyes and brown stubble, this time fixed in his direction like a fleshy weathervane. Now Jack could make out the friend's t-shirt. Against a white background, bold black letters spelled out "NO FAT CHICKS ALLOWED."

Jack looked down again, preparing to address the ball. Another wheeze-guffaw. He backed off, fuming at the distraction.

A little louder than necessary, to Skittles: "Some potato with eyes is making a little noise over here, so I'm gonna start my routine again."

A further wheeze-guffaw, this time in harmony with a snicker from the second spectator. Jack sniffed hard and turned back at Chris, winked at his sworn brother and enemy, then turned back to Skittles: "I wonder what that mouth-breather is up to now that he's graduated."

Skittles reddened and met his player head-on. He whispered, "Hey Jackie, it's time to focus on the game that's afoot, not on ancient history. You can try and shove the giant winner's check down his throat for all I care. All you're gonna do right now is hit the shots that will earn you that check. You will *not* let this jackass ruin the day, right?"

From Chris, in an affected impression of Jack's voice: "Hey, you heard of Columbia Law School, fag-tard?"

"Pursuing a janitorial career?" Jack shot back.

"Huh-huh. How about you hit it in the water, whale-fucker."

"Good to see your manners are still intact, Christopher. Been brushing up on your Ginsberg since I saw you last?" Jack stiffened and cleared his throat, about to start his pre-shot routine again.



Snickering. A little ways off, a sun-withered marshal whose sideline chair seemed to be swallowing him up grumbled, "Quiet, please." His wraparound sunglasses obscured an immense percentage of his face.

Jack grinned and shook his head, readdressed the ball, took a deep breath, swayed his hips, and swung. Hit crisply, the ball left the club on a frozen rope, but not quite 15 feet left of the hole. It made a beeline for the pin before starting to inch to the right in the air. It hung there a fraction of a second longer than Jack anticipated—just long enough for it to drift *just* far enough to bounce over the rock edge-wall and splash into the pond guarding the putting surface.

General *ohhs* and *awws* from the few dozen spectators, save for Chris and companion, who were doubled over, roaring.

Within five seconds of the splash, Jack found himself on the other side of the rope. Half a dozen septuagenarians moved faster than they could remember moving since the Reagan administration in order to get out of the way. The rules official leaned against a cottonwood tree, walkie-talkie perched under his chin, a voice on some other side murmuring words like "disqualified" and "suspension."

Bewildered spectators backed away, hands on sweaty foreheads, agape at the growling, writhing figure on the ground in gym shorts clutching his own forehead, the tournament leader standing over him, fists clenched, polo shirt half-untucked, wild-eyed. It was a triumph Jack neither expected nor, within five minutes, would desire.

As he tried to tuck his golf shirt back in, Jack heard the perfect contact of Steve Scott's iron shot, followed by very polite applause.

## A BLIZZARD

Thursday morning's exam had been a piece of cake. Expounding on the Old Testament was easy for Nathan Feinberg. After a few notebook pages' worth of commentary on suffering and divine love, he found himself strolling out of Burr Hall back to his dorm, where an empty suitcase awaited him. Once he opened the front door of Burr, he stopped abruptly and gazed out and upward. Snow was falling in clumps the size of cotton balls on the lawn before him. There was a silence so deep it was as if God had pressed the "MUTE" button. Nothing moved except the snow. *Oy vey—this nonsense*, he thought to himself. He had never seen anything heavier than a snow flurry.

Inhaling deeply, he donned his new wool cap—the first he had ever owned. He looked out across the broad, sloping lawn and felt like he was in a movie or some horrid, foreign country. He squinted and dug his chin into his chest as he strode out into the snow.

Not a dozen steps from Burr, Nathan stumbled on a slippery brick and his right leg flew out from under him. Flat on his back and clenching his teeth, he cursed the cold aloud. He clutched his right hip as he clambered to his feet. A cute enough girl—a 6.5 out of 10—coming toward him had seen. Her shoulders jerked forward as she struggled mightily not to double over from the sight of his folly. They passed each other silently but when she coughed behind him, Nathan was sure it was to contain laughter.

Back in his room in Skelton Hall, the local news confirmed his fears: "The valley braces for a potential record snow event as citizens are raiding local supermarkets for bread, milk, water, and firewood," chirped the anchor. Her voice had a lot of pep for someone whose pronouncements were currently pissing off hundreds and perhaps thousands of travelers. Flights were being delayed and cancelled left and right from all area airports. Nathan's flight was scheduled for 5:55 PM.

Nathan packed his suitcase deliberately and solemnly, as if he were heading for a few years in prison rather than a month back home. His ringtone, Led Zeppelin's "When the Levee Breaks," blared from his pocket and he plucked out his phone. The screen read in black letters, "**HOME.**" It was his mother. "Nathan, they've cancelled your flight to Atlanta. Your father and I are looking into getting one for you Saturday night. Pack anyway, though. If you can get to the airport this evening, go ahead and get a room in a hotel there." Her New York accent was comforting.

"You know it's already snowing here, don't you Ma?" he replied. His two-wheel drive Honda would be no match for the interstate.

"Well then get a ride with someone, I guess," she said curtly. She was an abrasive woman, but caring enough.

"Alright Ma; I'll call you later. Love you."

A little while passed and two faint knocks came at his door. He stuffed his toiletries case into his suitcase along with the latest copies of *GQ* and *Maxim*, whirled around, and opened the door. Virginia—'Ginny'—O'Halloran's black wool cap and winter coat contrasted with her milky skin and red hair. She was an 8 out of 10. The back of Nathan's neck went hot.

"Hey there, Nathan. I heard your flight was cancelled," she said. "Nikki Esposito is supposed to be heading back to Florida too, but her airline cancelled her flight."

Nathan gripped his chin with his thumb and index finger a little tighter. She always knew these kinds of things before he did. "Great. What are you up to?"

Ginny leaned against the side of the doorway and crossed her legs. Her lip appeared to quiver as if she were struggling not to smile. "Well, that's why I'm here. My mother and father are driving down to get me and they wanted to know if might want a shorter ride to the airport. You can stay the night at our house if you need to."

The O'Hallorans were a solid family and had seemed to like Nathan well enough when he and Ginny were together. Nathan took their willingness to put him up for a

night as an incredible stroke of luck, though he could not be sure if it was good or bad. He had sat with the O'Hallorans at the Parents Weekend football game that October and had chuckled at Mr. O'Halloran's jokes like a dutiful just-met boyfriend should. But Nathan broke up with Ginny less than two weeks later because he "didn't see the relationship going anywhere." This was code for "I want to be able to hook up with other girls if I want to. Perhaps 9s and 10s." Mr. and Mrs. O'Halloran, naturally, would have sided with their precious daughter, mother assuring Ginny of her superiority to Nathan and father brooding over Nathan's nerve for breaking Ginny's heart.

This invitation struck Nathan as either an olive branch or a chance for an inquisition. Or maybe revenge. *Can't be too sure about those Irish Catholics sometimes*, Nathan thought.

Ginny continued, "They'll be here in about an hour. Finish packing." "Sure thing."

He watched her trot back towards her end of the building, her boots squeaking down the cheap linoleum hallway. Six inches of snow were already on the ground with at least another foot on the way.

Nathan and Ginny met on the sidewalk between Skelton and the main road through campus just as Mr. and Mrs. O'Halloran were pulling up in their silver Chevy Suburban, hazard lights winking at a calm heartbeat's pace and growing duller as snow accumulated on them. Both parents stepped out of the SUV to hug their daughter and greet Nathan with cordial waves and the typical hi-how-are-you-how-are-your-parents-oh-that's-good-to-hear kind of smalltalk. Mrs. O'Halloran was elegantly pale, red-headed, and slim like her daughter, which made Nathan more self-conscious than usual of his doughy physique and fair skin. Mr. O'Halloran had played linebacker at Seton Hall and could probably crush Nathan if he felt the urge. He shook the hand of his daughter's ex-boyfriend with a vigor that Nathan had either forgotten or never experienced before.

After loading everyone's bags into the Suburban's cavernous trunk, the four of them set off with the snow coming down in white sheets. *Three Irish and a Jew;*

sounds like the beginning of a joke that doesn't end terribly well for the Jew, thought Nathan.

The landscape beyond the windows of the vehicle looked apocalyptic. Every mile or two, it seemed, there would be a car stopped on the shoulder with its flashers on. There were others at all sorts of angles that had glided clear off the highway and down onto snow-smothered median grass. Nathan felt fortunate to be part of a journey that would not end in cold inconvenience and a tow truck ride. He turned his seat-heater dial up and leaned his head against the window, trying to go to sleep for a couple minutes. He was unsuccessful and gave up after a few minutes, his neck sore.

Nathan looked to his right at Ginny, who was reading a Nicholas Sparks novel by the light of her cell phone. He smiled when he recognized it as the one he had given her for her birthday. Nathan also recalled the smile and generous kiss the gift had inspired. She read with the firm intent of someone watching television. She looked too engrossed in the activity to display any outward emotion.

"How is it?" Nathan asked after a few minutes' deliberation on whether or not to interrupt her. He heard the rustle of two jackets and knew that Mr. and Mrs. O'Halloran had just leaned their heads back in order to hear what was going on.

"Sappy," replied Ginny. For a moment she looked like she was going to keep reading, but she turned her head Nathan's way and smiled wryly. When they were dating, Ginny would take pleasure in making snide comments and replies to certain things Nathan said. But the Ginny O'Halloran trademark smile that often followed, like this one, had always reassured him that those quips were not bitchiness but rather her brand of humor. She had liked to test him, and he had liked to be tested.

Snowflakes continued to glide up over the windshield as if shunned by an imaginary force field protecting the Suburban.

After over an hour of silent travel, Mrs. O'Halloran, apparently finally deciding it was safe, put on the radio. It was the local NPR station. Esther Hwang reported on "a

blizzard sacking much of the Mid-Atlantic states tonight and into tomorrow, bringing with it winds of up to fifty miles per hour." The pre-recorded grinding sound of a snowplow further emphasized the grim obviousness of the situation and Mrs. O'Halloran changed the station to the local classic rock outfit.

The final ninety minutes of the ride passed with guest appearances by Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers, The Beatles, The Doors' "Love Her Madly," and the ubiquitous Journey hit, "Don't Stop Believin'."

They arrived at the O'Halloran residence amid the heaviest snow yet. Mrs. O'Halloran, whose poise the trip seemed to have weakened slightly, said a weary "Welcome to our house, Nathan" as they opened the door. Snow tumbled off their coats and boots and onto the bristly brown rug that covered the floor of their mudroom. Carelessly, Nathan planted his heel in a wet spot and winced when the sensation shot up his leg.

Sitting in a chair in the living room, reading the family Bible, was Mary Jane O'Halloran, whom Nathan feared above all the other O'Hallorans combined. He had never seen her smile. Though she and Ginny were quite similar in body type, Mary Jane had not been blessed with her younger sister's pretty face. She was plain. She wore her plainness like a matador's cape—proudly, defiantly. Probably a 4 out of 10—a real "butterface." Nathan could tell she loathed him, the Florida Yid who'd taken Ginny's virginity. Of course she knew that. Sisters tell each other everything.

What Mary Jane lacked in beauty she possessed in book-smarts. A senior at Harvard, she was the true scholar of the family. An evil genius, as far as Nathan was concerned. She had probably meant to be discovered reading the Bible, just to taunt him.

"Hello, Nathan," she said, sneering. She traced the edge of the tattered book with a finger with a calculated combination of idleness and flamboyance. He couldn't help but notice it.

"Hi Mary Jane," Nathan replied, all civility. "Home for the holidays from Cambridge?"

"I am indeed. I've been working on my Honors Thesis on a couple of Shakespeare's problem plays, *All's Well That Ends Well* and *Measure for Measure*. I am told that you are staying with us tonight."

If looks could kill, Nathan thought. All he could do was nod. Not ten minutes after they shook the snow from their shoes and set about warming up, the power went out. The wind had accelerated from a breeze to a gale. It had probably sent some frail pine tree across a telephone pole to the ground.

Everyone groaned. Mr. O'Halloran exhorted his wife and daughters to find candles and flashlights immediately. Dutifully, they scattered to different regions of the house, lighting the way with their cell phones.

Nathan was now alone in the darkness with Mr. O'Halloran. The silence was a burden too great to bear for very long. Nathan had a feeling that Mr. O'Halloran was staring straight at him, praying to Jesus for the destruction of the kike who had sullied his daughter.

"Thanks very much for letting me stay with you all tonight," Nathan said.

"You're a good kid, Nathan. We're happy to help out a friend of Ginny's at a time like this." In the pitch blackness of the living room, Mr. O'Halloran's voice sounded utterly disembodied. His tone was eerily even; he was probably formally trained in the art of intimidation.

"Thank you, Mr. O'Halloran."

"And of course, I know you will be nothing but a perfectly respectful guest in this house tonight." His voice was just above a whisper, but Nathan caught every blessed word.

Ginny "What do you—yes, sir," Nathan replied, feeling the chill from the storm starting to creep in under the door.

warm "Good, good. Girls, any luck with those candles?" Mr. O'Halloran boomed.

best "Yes, dear." Mrs. O'Halloran's voice was measured and immaculate again. She emerged holding a short, wide candle that had just been lit. Her daughters followed her, each with a hand closed around the stem of a red glass candlestick and the other steadying the white candle inside it. They flanked their mother like servants assisting an ancient queen during some ritual at which an animal would probably be sacrificed. They processed to different tables and placed the candles there, illuminating the room in the familiar, haunting amber color of firelight.

table From the table in front of the couch where he sat, Mr. O'Halloran produced a brand new deck of Bicycle cards. Peeling the plastic off, he declared, "Let's play a while, since there's nothing else to do," he said. The light made the stubble on his chin stand out.

card "I'm going to go read in bed," said Mary Jane gravely. She took one of the candles and slunk off, though not before giving Nathan the stink-eye. *Hateful shiksa*, thought Nathan.

smiling "Always studying, that one," murmured a grinning Mrs. O'Halloran after the corona from Mary Jane's candle had disappeared up and around the corner. "I do hope she finds some time to have fun up at Harvard."

proper "I'm sure she does, Mom," Ginny said airily.

sense The four of them played Hearts. Ginny partnered with Nathan against Mr. and Mrs. O'Halloran. Nathan was familiar with Mr. O'Halloran's competitive streak. He made passive-aggressive jibes when things were going well. "Played that jack of spades a bit early there, eh Nathan?" he chuckled after a decisive hand.

going When Ginny and Nathan successfully shot the moon a few hands later, Nathan beamed but resisted the urge to look Mr. O'Halloran in the eye. Instead he gazed at



Ginny, who squealed with delight and leaned across the table to muss Nathan's hair affectionately. It was the first unsolicited attention she had given him all evening. Back when they were together, she would often tousle his hair when she was pleased with him. Now he blushed, taken aback, ecstatic. Luckily it was too dim for anyone to see his face very clearly.

Mr. and Mrs. O'Halloran decided to call it an evening an hour later. Mrs. O'Halloran lit another candle and held it while she showed Nathan to the guest room—clear on the other side of the house—where the bed was made and ready for him. Thanking Mrs. O'Halloran, Nathan followed her back to the kitchen for a glass of water. Ginny was nursing a small glass of grape juice and nibbling at a ginger snap at the table. *Gourmet communion*, Nathan smiled to himself.

He sat down across from his ex-girlfriend. The candlelight shone upon her hair and gave her a half-halo. It reminded him of the third date they had been on, at the fancy restaurant a few blocks from campus. After seeing a movie, they returned to campus and made love, both for the first time, in his bed. They snuggled close, naked, until morning. Nathan smiled at the memory as he sipped his water and glanced at Ginny, then at the antique clock on the far wall, and back at Ginny. She seemed to be smiling too, eyebrows lowered slightly, tracing her finger clockwise around the edge of her glass.

Sitting in the dim O'Halloran kitchen, Nathan wondered why on earth he had broken up with Ginny. She had never been disloyal or particularly bitchy, shared his sense of humor, and was great in bed to boot. He had become accustomed to her and had grown stupidly jealous at the relative sexual freedom of many of his buddies, who shared stories of getting drunk at parties and hooking up with this girl on Friday, that girl on Saturday. He had made the rookie mistake of taking his woman for granted and going off in search of others. Restlessness over contentment. He hadn't even so much as kissed another girl since breaking up with Ginny even though he carried at

least two condoms in his wallet at all times. *What a putz*, he thought. In the orange glow of the candle between them, Nathan decided to set about getting Virginia O'Halloran back as soon as possible.

Mrs. O'Halloran cleared her throat delicately and announced that she was going to bed. Ginny dutifully followed her upstairs and both bade Nathan good night. After a minute or so, Nathan rose and placed his glass in the sink. He took the remaining candle from the table—the short one—and made his way back to the guest room as the wind reached a howling high point. He undressed to his boxers, blew out his candle, and settled into bed in the darkness while the wind tossed the snow-laden trees' limbs back and forth outside.

Nathan felt a kiss on the cheek and heard a whisper: "Nathan, I need you. I've wanted you all evening."

"Here? Now? In your parents' house? Are you crazy?" He was not completely awake or even completely sure he was awake at all.

"Do you want me or not?" she cooed, nibbling at his ear. This was a stroke of remarkable, almost unreasonably good luck. It seemed she wanted him back as much as he wanted her. He would not waste this opportunity. *You crazy, marvelous shiksa you!* he thought to himself.

"Come here," he replied, full of desire. Her hands moved over him and she slid into the bed, already naked, in the darkness. Ginny was crazy in a very, very good way. That side of her had been unleashed once they had had sex a few times. Nathan felt the familiar smooth skin of her lower back under his fingers. He could not resist her.

After they were finished, she left the bed sooner than usual. Ginny had always delighted in hours of post-coital cuddling but Nathan knew she would not want to risk falling asleep next to him and getting caught. She mussed his hair before he heard her slink out the door.

She was his again. Piece of cake.

The electricity returned and the snow tapered off by morning, leaving twenty-two inches over the area. As he awoke, dressed, and walked to the kitchen, Nathan spied Mr. and Mrs. O'Halloran zipping up their coats by the front door. NPR could be heard from the kitchen. Amid more snowplow sound effects Esther Hwang droned, "The Mid-Atlantic is digging out from an historic blizzard this morning as crews work to clear roads and airports deal with scores of delayed passengers." Nathan offered to help shovel the driveway and dressed quickly.

The three of them shoveled quietly, extricating the Suburban from the drifts. The tediousness of it made Nathan wonder how gravediggers tolerated their lot in life. A call to the airport confirmed that Nathan's newly booked flight, the 12:55 PM, would be departing on time.

When 11 o'clock rolled around, it was time to leave for the airport. Mr. O'Halloran offered to drive Nathan himself. Mrs. O'Halloran, Ginny and Mary Jane saw them off. Nathan hugged Mrs. O'Halloran and waved hastily, awkwardly to Mary Jane—that plain, hateful girl. As he embraced Ginny in turn, he whispered in her ear, "Last night was incredible. Thank you." She furrowed her brow. He shrugged it off.

As he climbed into the front seat of the Suburban, he looked in the side view mirror and saw Mary Jane beaming and biting her lip, her eyes wide. She waved excitedly, her smile broadening. This made her look not only plain but positively goofy, now a 3 out of 10. At best.

Mr. O'Halloran turned on the radio as the Suburban warmed up. "Only the Good Die Young" was playing on the classic rock station. Billy Joel sang, "Ah but they never told you the price that you pay/For things that you might have done..." and Nathan Feinberg went as white as the frozen drifts outside.

## THE JOCKEY AND THE INDIAN

"I dunno, brother," Monty Raswell said between mouthfuls of chili. "I mean, \$.47 a mile; man works his way *up* to a level like that and knows he's among the best on the road. You've paid your dues and they finally start coming back to you some."

"I know what you mean," said Dutch, wiping the same clean spot on the counter for the third time in an hour. "How is the Raswell clan these days?"

"They're doin' pretty good. Looky here."

Monty pulled out a tattered brown wallet. Strands of the stitching were starting to poke out along the edges. Covering up license and credit cards was a small, laminated photograph of a boy about Dutch's age and a younger girl, beaming on either side of their father. They were leaning against a picnic table with arms folded. Monty wore a plaid button-down shirt that looked bizarre on him, as if whenever he wore it he felt like he was someone completely different. Tonight, as always, he had on his road uniform: blue jeans, orange Tennessee t-shirt, black Jack Daniels cap.

Since Monty had been in a talkative mood—the rain, it seemed—Dutch asked about the shirt for the first time, with a small nod: "You a Volunteer?"

"Naw, but my kids will be."

Dutch took note of Monty's wistful, distant smile. Every driver who was also a father seemed to smile that way. Dutch wondered if his own father, gone ten years, had also smiled that way at servers in empty, random truck stops.

Monty started to tilt his coffee cup so that the edge of the liquid almost spilled over the side. "The wife and me, we were awful young when we had Darren—he's 16 now. Then Sadie, two years later. We were too young for it all, but you learn to manage. I never did go to college, but I'll be damned if they miss out somehow. They grow up so quick, Dutch, 'specially when you're mostly hearing them grow up over the dangd telephone." Monty smacked his lips and kept trying to edge his coffee closer to

the edge of the cup without spilling. "But I gotta do what I gotta do; economy ain't about to let a guy like me get a home-type job just like that. I keep driving, they keep eating. I see 'em whenever I can."

"I hear you there," said Dutch, pushing a long strand of hazelnut hair behind his ear. "I don't know what I'm going to do after this year. There's college and all, I guess, but I don't know if I shouldn't throw in with my Uncle Emmet's car repair shop or just go full-time here—"

"You are *going* to college, son," said Monty, looking up from his tilted coffee cup. A drop splashed on the counter and he mopped it up with a napkin, keeping eye contact with Dutch. "I woulda killed to go myself, but it wasn't in the cards for me, my mother raisin' us all on her own. I'm doin' okay now but I'm tellin' you, as one of your favorite customers: if you can go, you go. My kids *will* go. You *will* go. Got me, amigo?"

"I've gotcha, pardner," said Dutch.

They bumped fists. Dutch only wished it were as simple as that: a gentle understanding and a couple smirks at 2 a.m.

"Attaboy. I know you, dude. You're one of the good ones. You'll make it out."

"Let's hope so," replied Dutch, leaning back against the edge of the rapidly cooling grill-top. "I've got one more year of high school, so if I can stay on the Honor Roll, I should be able to get into University of Kentucky." Dutch put his hands on his bony hips and looked away across the room, over Monty's shoulder, toward the photograph on the opposite wall.

"Atta boy. Now, if you excuse me, it's bedtime for us college no-shows."

As if to strengthen his advice somewhat, Monty left Dutch a larger tip than usual. He hitched up his jeans and headed out the door briskly. Returning to the parking lot to catch some shut-eye in the cab of his semi, Dutch figured. Bound for who-knows-where.

A heavy silence settled over the café after Monty had left. With the main dining area to himself again, Dutch examined the spot of half-wiped-up coffee like some exotic predator sizing up its next kill. It was something he felt the need to size up, to know intimately before completely annihilating it.

Holding a damp paper towel like an eraser, Dutch wiped away the coffee spot with a swish of his right hand. It amused him, imagining the next customer sitting down in Monty's seat and placing an elbow in the exact spot where he'd spilled those rogue coffee drops, not knowing what had been there before.

All immediate chores taken care of, Dutch found himself staring idly across the place, reflecting. His hours gave him ample opportunity for it. But in a blink his vision re-sharpened and he fumbled in his server's apron for the standard-issue pen and order pad he never used. For taking orders, anyway.

Tearing off one of the sheets, Dutch turned it over and pressed it into the counter as if to flatten it further, absurdly. He drew a familiar descending line of spaced-out circles. Beside them he wrote out his three important life categories: "school/UK → B.A. Psychology," "job," "Nikki?"

Having made a quick, sharp check mark through the second and third circles, Dutch paused over the first. In the upper-right corner of the sheet, he calculated out his current GPA, determining that if he maintained or exceeded it in the coming year, he would stand a good chance at receiving a full scholarship—at least a lot more than half—and a place in UK's Honors College. With the numerous work-study opportunities he'd read about at UK's website, he would be able to make up the difference or even earn extra money without too much trouble. He would be the first in his family to attend college. His mother would be proud. Monty's vision would be fulfilled. Maybe he would finally get out.

Dutch drew the boldest check mark through the top circle.

The photograph on the opposite wall caught Dutch's gaze again. It was a diptych by local legend Willoughby Newton III. On the left was a jockey in aquamarine silks on a chestnut stallion. On the right sat a bare-chested Indian—an Apache—on a dapple-gray. No saddle; just man and beast.

Dutch always felt like the only boy in Kentucky who didn't know a thing about horses when he would look at the photograph. He did not even watch the Kentucky Derby each year. When he was six, he tumbled off a pony at the county fair. His father had had his back turned to Dutch at the moment and had no chance to leap forward to steady his son. His mother had had a julep too many that day and was sprawled across a nearby bench.

The horses in the photograph were in identical mid-stride, which often brought Dutch's attention to the difference in riders. The jockey embodied traditional power. Control. Skill. Determination. But without the horse, he would be just a short man in bright colors. The horse looked powerful and beautiful but constrained, utterly subject to its master.

The Apache and his horse both looked freer. There was a gentler relationship at work between rider and mount. Like the jockey, the former certainly had the upper hand. But it looked like he might get tossed to the ground at any moment. The horse, though smaller than the racer on the other side of the photograph, seemed sleek and confident both in its usefulness and wildness.

Dutch had often felt like the chestnut stallion, a pawn in the grasp of the jockey of life. But tonight, for the first time, he felt like the Apache, mind open to possibility. Monty's earnestness had made him confident in the idea of eventually taking that next step toward college.

Still leaning forward on the counter, Dutch felt his cell phone jolt and buzz in his pocket. He had the good sense to ignore it when customers were around but there was no harm in having a look at it now.

It was a text message from Nikki, who was usually in bed by this time of night. It read, starkly, "**hey.**"

Dutch studied the message as he had the coffee stain and ran a hand through the back of his hair. Haircut soon, he decided.

Gripping the phone with thumbs akimbo, he punched in his response: "**hey darlin whats up everything alright?**"

The bell on the front door tinkled and Monty ambled back in. "Couldn't sleep," he said. "How 'bout another cup of decaf and some scrambled eggs?"

"Sure thing, Monty." Dutch felt the phone buzz again and looked down at Nikki's latest message: "**im late...**"

Dutch laid his phone on the table and peered across the silent room. For the first time, he noticed a silvery glint in the eye of the chestnut stallion. Before turning around to reach for the coffee pot, he looked down at the check marks on his order slip deliberately, from the bottom up.



## THE OBSOLETE BRO

### The inebriational weekend travelogues of Sterling Morris Watson III—part 1: Heeeeeeeeere's Sterling September 13

Hello there sports fans! I'm starting up this here blog in order to document my life and times in my fourth and final (I hope!) year of college here at Jefferson College. Everything you read in this little corner of the Internet will be one-hundred-per-freaking-cent true. Names will be changed, of course, to protect the identities of those who deserve the protection as well as some who probably don't. What can I say; I'm a generous guy.

You may wonder why I'm starting up this here blog. I know most people claim to blog for themselves and don't mind if no one reads. They maintain their blogs as come-who-may online diaries. But I would be lying to you if I didn't admit I'm looking for some fame and maybe even some notoriety here. So to my Facebook friends, enemies, and acquaintances and anyone else who stumbles across this humble URL: you are welcome for what you're about to read.

Boy I'm getting old, let me tell you! My fourth and final (I hope!) Orientation Week's come and gone and as always, it was a doozy. The festivities began as they always do, at our off-campus house Matterhorn. The sight of a few hundred swaying bodies was a sight for sore eyes. Nubility abounded; so much fresh meat (all due respect of course)!

Not skipping a beat from last year, my main brosefs Butters and Winky and I were absolutely *running* shit last night at the pong table. The dance floor had to be topping out at about 105 degrees. Insanity. Pandemonium. Li'l Wayne.

About half past midnight: the boys and I win something like our tenth game in a row. Out of chivalry we retire as the winners we are and give up the table to some eager young Padawan Learners of the Sacred Pong. I head outside to the front porch

to take a leak. I have to lean against one of the columns just to be secure in my leakage. When I'm done, I zip up my fly and turn around and this bangin' freshman is staring at me. She's at least as drunk as I am, but no biggie—level playing field. It's like she materialized out of the crowd and stumbled (literally) upon me. Fate? Close enough for O-Week.

So this cute little frosh thang—we'll call her Rosebud—saunters over to me and starts chatting me up. She's about 5'5", light brown hair, built like Pallas Athena's hotter cousin. Girls here at Jefferson aren't generally so outgoing at parties (thank you Admissions Office!), but Rosebud was, in spades. She and I babble at each other about the summer, the school, etc., and it's all good. Deal sealed, dear readers. I'll spare the raunchier details—this time—but suffice it to say that it was a night of nostalgia in the freshman dorms for your boy Sterling.

Soberly, the morning after,

-S&M

**[COMMENTS]**

**Anonymous** wrote...

Nice blog Sterling! Looking forward to more great stories.

**Anonymous** wrote...

Lol niiece.

**Anonymous** wrote...

Love the "S&M" signoff, you sadomasochist you.

**From:** Dean, Mark

**To:** Strathairn, Patrick

**Subject:** swatson blog

**Monday, September 14, 11:13 am**

Hey pat—

have you seen Sterling's new blog? seems like hes trying to be like some new tucker max or Chelsea handler or some kind of shit. just thought id let u know since you're frat president and all. hopefully it wont get too out of hand.

Mark

**From:** Strathairn, Patrick  
**To:** Dean, Mark  
**Subject:** Re: swatson blog  
**Monday, September 14, 12:24 pm**

Mark,

Yes, I did see Sterling's new blog post, it came up on my Facebook newsfeed. All I can say is God help this Rosebud girl if she wants a bid from Phi Mu or Tri Delt down the road and any of the sisters read it and find out who she is. Sterling is fine for now, as long as he doesn't go too overboard or anything. He's not naming names or anything anyway, so everything's on the up and up. I'll talk to him if it gets out of hand.

Thanks for letting me know.

--Patrick

**IM Conversation between Sterling Watson and Robert Jeffries  
September 15, 11:38 pm**

**Robert:** sup SWat

**Sterling:** sup yourself B-Jeff?

**Sterling:** or should I say Butters?

**Robert:** haha not much

**Robert:** I like the blog post, now I know where you disappeared off to last night

**Robert:** you sly devil you!

**Sterling:** yeah well, you know how it is  
**Sterling:** well you used to anyway, before the ol' B&C  
**Robert:** hey now Karen isn't so bad; steady sex and the occasional sandwich  
and decent conversation for more than two years now  
**Robert:** I'll take it  
**Sterling:** hey man fair enough  
**Robert:** so I'm Butters and Cho is Winky I guess?  
**Sterling:** yessir, I assume you know why Cho is Winky?  
**Robert:** yes Sterling, I do  
**Robert:** because you're a racist son of a bitch  
**Sterling:** am not! The fact that you can blindfold that fucker with a shoelace is  
not my fault! Its biology, son!  
**Robert:** whatever you say, you WASPY asshole you

**The inebriational weekend travelogues of Sterling Morris Watson III—part 2: Jello  
Shots and Winky Lays Down the Law**  
**September 19**

There are no words to describe the delight that is a Signal Way party. But I'm  
gonna try anyway.

*I've got a lovely bunch of jello shots.*

*There they are a-standing in a row.*

*Red ones,*

*Blue ones,*

*Some the color of grass!*

*Give 'em a slurp,*

*Be careful—don't burp,*

*And get drunk off your ass!*

Sterling: Seriously though, that stuff was ridiculous. I usually leave jello shots to the  
ladies, but these looked too good to pass up. I lost count of my intake at nine or ten but  
managed not to black out this time. And boy was I glad I didn't! Rosebud was there.  
And further greatness followed, of course. I did learn through a concerned friend that  
ol' (well, 18 years young) Rosie kinda-sorta has a boyfriend back home. But you know

what they say: just because there's a goalie in the way doesn't mean you can't score! Speaking of which, can anybody say "hat trick"?

But enough about me. I mentioned my friends Butters and Winky last week, you recall. Now Butters is a committed man, bless his heart. His B&C is a nice lady of course, but that means nothing interesting happens to Butters anymore. He's too old for that. Winky, however, is swingin' single and unafraid to heavily mingle, especially for a man of his nationality. Anyway, Wink is riding the drunk bus back towards the frat house, holding his head up with an elbow, when some random lax bro yells from the back of the bus, "Fuck the Chinks!"

Now even though I aim to protect Winky's identity fully, I will tell you that he is NOT Chinese. Genetically predisposed to hating the Chinese, actually. Anyway, Winky goes from passed-the-hell-out to ninja warrior in about two seconds. Before I realize what the hell's going on, he's up in Bradford Winstonworth's grill, pontificating like there's no tomorrow.

"You can't even *count* to my GPA, mothafucka!" Wink bellows.

The chay-dog tries to get up but slumps back down and gives my brother-from-an-Asian-mother the feeblest attempt at a stare-down.

"Do you like sleeping with your twig at night? Hope you enjoy it 'cause you're on borrowed time, bitch. You better hope your kids are dead before my kids enslave your stupid offspring."

I was frozen in position, crammed against the window of the drunk-bus, Rosebud passed out on my lap. Winky is normally reserved—demure, even. Guess he needs to get drunk more in order to let his pent-up Asian aggression out in startling and hilarious ways. Bless his ricey heart.

Half-buzzed,

-S&M

From: Dean, Mark  
To: Strathairn, Patrick

**[COMMENTS]**

**Anonymous** wrote...

Dude, I'm a legend. Mao's got nothing on me.

-Winky

**Anonymous** wrote...

woww your soooooo cool dude. way to fool around with a girl who has a boyfriend. classy man.

-this blog sux

**S&M** wrote...

Thank you for your comment, "This blog sux." Your nuanced and well thought-out opinion is much appreciated. I hope you will continue to give your input as this blog goes forward.

Regards,

-Sterling

**Anonymous** wrote...

Ruh-roh! Hope the laxers don't come after y'all.

**The inebriational weekend travelogues of Sterling Morris Watson III—part 2a—**  
**Shittttttfacedd bolggingg frm my phone**  
**September 20**

ROOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOSEBUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUDDDD!!!!

Frickin' love this girl, yo. Ass for days.

From: Strathairn, Patrick

Boom.

To: Dean, Mark  
Re: swatson\_blog\_again

Sloshed,

-S&M

**[COMMENTS]**

**Anonymous** wrote...

wow. just wow.

**Anonymous** wrote...

Sweet fratty.

**From:** Dean, Mark  
**To:** Strathairn, Patrick  
**Subject:** swatson blog...again  
**Tuesday, September 22, 1:33 pm**

Pat-

yo dude i think someone needs to talk to Sterling about this blog shit. everyone basically knows that rosebud is that awful freshman girl franny gresh. i dont even know if he knows her last name for god sakes. cant you email him and tell him to cut it out? some of the sophomores took a couple freshmen out to dinner and they were asking if that s&m blog guy was in the fraternity. i told them i wasnt sure and i hadn't seen anything like that but there gonna find out its one of our guys. at least talk about it in exec committee before house meeting tonight?

M

**From:** Strathairn, Patrick  
**To:** Dean, Mark  
**Subject:** Re: swatson blog...again  
**Tuesday, September 22, 4:08 pm**

Hey Mark,

I looked at his most recent couple posts and I guess you're right. Someone ought to talk to him and just make sure he knows the boundaries. I'll talk to him tomorrow or something. I still don't think it's anything House

Meeting-worthy yet. I mean, his main boys Cho and Jeffries are both on the Rush Committee, so if they haven't said anything about it yet, I'm not going to worry too much. We'll keep monitoring the blog though, and make sure he doesn't really cross any major lines. I don't think he will, personally.

--Patrick

**From:** Dean, Mark  
**To:** Strathairn, Patrick  
**Subject:** swatson blog...again  
**Tuesday, September 22, 5:11 pm**

pat-

ok dude watever you say, i just dont want anything stupid to cause us to lose freshmen this year, thats all. u cant be too careful sometimes and if shit starts getting bad, the plugs getting pulled on it. just gotta make clear on that  
Mark

**IM Conversation between Sterling Watson and Frances Gresh  
September 23, 11:19 pm**

**Sterling:** hey Franny, thanks for the Facebook friend request

**Frances:** lol no problem Sterling

**Sterling:** I figure it only makes sense since, ya know, we've been sleeping together :P

**Frances:** haha

**Frances:** yeah about that actually...

**Sterling:** uh oh

**Sterling:** are you mad because I didn't go down on you last time?

**Sterling:** I know how much you enjoyed it the time before ;)

**Sterling:** Friday I guess



**Frances:** lol its not that at all

**Frances:** youre great

**Frances:** its just I feel bad about Danny and all

**Frances:** he and I talked a bit in the summer about the idea of seeing other people at college

**Frances:** but now its just idk

**Frances:** we can still be friends and all right?

**Sterling:** yeah

**Frances:** I like your blog, it's funny

**[Sterling Watson has left the chat]**

**From:** Strathairn, Patrick

**To:** Watson, Sterling

**Subject:** Blog

**Friday, September 25, 9:44 am**

Hey Sterling—

Hope your fall is going well so far. It's weird not having you living in the house this year; I'm sure Signal Way is treating you well. Sorry I missed the party there last weekend; it seemed like a good time from what you wrote on your blog. Speaking of which, I just wanted to give you a heads up that a couple people have expressed concerns to me about what you've written the past couple weeks. No one wants to curtail your free speech or anything like that, but those who are concerned are wondering how it makes the fraternity look for Rush and stuff like that. I think you're doing fine, for the record. Just letting you know; they were just random comments after House Meeting the other day. Hit me back if you have any concerns. Anyway, let's catch up sometime.

-Patrick

**The inebriational weekend travelogues of Sterling Morris Watson III—part 3—  
Haters Gon' Hate**  
**September 25**

So apparently not everyone is a fan of me writing about stuff that happens to me on a weekendly basis. I've been informed that the content of this here blog might just be a teensy bit too controversial for normal discourse.

For fuck sakes people, it's a fraternity. Chaos and debauchery are what our parents are paying a few thou per year to expose us to. God forbid someone with a brain (as well as a stomach and genitals) uses what he's got to provide some commentary for the benefit of society! The horror!

All I can say is, "Come and get me coppers!" Keep hatin' if you want. I'm going to keep writin'.

Sober, but not for long,

-S&M

**[COMMENTS]**

**Anonymous** wrote...

yea don't worry about those h8ers at all dude, just keep doin what your doing

**Anonymous** wrote...

Viva Los Travelogues!

**The inebriational weekend travelogues of Sterling Morris Watson III—part 4—The  
Irishman!**  
**September 26 (the wee hours)**

Ladies and Gentlemen: I give you The Irishman! Able to leap drunk freshmen in a single bound! Gaze on in awe whilst The Irishman! goes from calm, rather boring potato fan to unstoppable force of nature in an hour!

To think he'd never had a cup (or four) of Pink Panty Droppers before tonight. Would you just look at The Irishman! now!

Being a leader is hard. Being a virgin is harder. Now The Irishman! only has to worry about one of those things. Took him long enough. But it was a job that only The Punisher! could handle.

Who'd-a thunk it? The Punisher! and The Irishman!: a match made in frat heaven. And of course, the magic all began at Signal Way. You're welcome, you kinky lovebirds you! Let me tell you their story—Romeo and Juliet, this ain't:

The Irishman! is, as usual, playing his methodical, mediocre brand of beer pong. Taking on Natty like the Titanic took on water. The Punisher! is doing much the same. The Irishman! and The Punisher! are acquainted (she's a bit of a frat groupie, God-love-her), but not terribly well...yet.

This all changes when Butters (my man!) stomps into the room brandishing some wood (get your head out of the gutter!) and exclaims, "Anyone up for the Paddle Game?"

Now, for the uncool, the Paddle Game is possibly the least rewarding game ever invented. Player 1 bends over and receives one (1) shot to the behind from Player 2. Player 2 then bends over and receives one (1) shot to the behind from Player 1. Not much fun; more a painful test of virility than a contest of wits.

Anyway, after Butters polls the beer pong room, The Punisher! shrieks, "I'll play!" to the stunned amazement of all.

As you might expect, the room goes nearly silent. Everyone drops everything and stares at Butters, for whom being glazed-over would be an improvement. Winky (also my man!) breaks the silence. In the not-very-Zen growl of his new favorite drunk persona, Psycho-Asian, he declares, "To the basement!"

What follows is a rush to the basement by the dozen or so people within earshot. A circle forms around the two contestants, interested as hell to see Butters paddle a girl and to see Butters get paddled by a girl. (Sidenote: don't worry folks, The

Punisher! and Butters' B&C are best friends. There have actually been threesome speculations from time to time.)

Anyway, Butters, ever the chivalrous one, declares, "Ladies First!" in his best King Arthur impression. With ceremony and aplomb he hands the paddle to The Punisher! The Punisher! licks her lips as Butters bends forward. The Punisher! unleashes a Mark McGwire-on-full-steroids swing that elicits an animal howl from Butters. Everyone cringes and then goes into hysterics as Butters hops around, wounded.

Now it's The Punisher!'s turn. She takes her spot and begins to bend over when a voice rings out of the crowd. It's the drunk but still coherent cadence of The Irishman! He thrusts two other spectators aside, steps forward, puffs out his chest, and declares unequivocally, "This is no sport for a lady. / will receive the blow for you."

The Punisher! looks like she's going to argue at first, but relents. She too is shocked by this gesture by The Irishman! She lowers her shoulders and leans forward and kisses him on the cheek, pats his behind and takes her place in the peanut gallery.

Gradually the gravity of what he has done dawns on The Irishman! His face goes paler than usual, he shakes his head, and leans forward. Butters, still limping from the hurtin' The Punisher put on him, winds up and absolutely *annihilates* the ass of The Irishman! The kid's dead ancestors must've felt that one. The Irishman! takes it like a champ.

The Paddle Game is over. The Irishman makes for the stairs alone when The Punisher! takes his hand and leads him up.

The grunting behind the door to The Irishman!'s room was well documented an hour later. I hope she wasn't spanking him.

Giggilily,

-S&M

## [COMMENTS]

**Anonymous** wrote...  
EPIC!!!!

**Anonymous** wrote...  
Ironic that the one who calls himself S&M was on the sidelines for this. things that make you go "hmmmmm..."

### **IM Conversation between Mark Dean and Fielding Marlowe September 29, 9:54 pm**

**Mark:** dude what r we gunna do about sterling

**Fielding:** what do you mean?

**Mark:** that fuckin blog hes got

**Mark:** embarassing the frat

**Mark:** driving away frosh

**Fielding:** you really think so?

**Fielding:** I really don't think its that big of a deal

**Mark:** dude come on

**Mark:** no1 wants freshmen thinking were as gay as sterlings stupid blog posts make us look

**Mark:** we need to protect and preserve the frat

**Fielding:** I don't know Mark

**Mark:** what if he writes about

**Mark:** i dunno

**Mark:** pledgedship this winter

**Mark:** or just the fact that we serve alcohol to underage kids like all the time

**Mark:** shit like that

**Mark:** I mean everyone knows it happens but u dont want that on the internet

**Mark:** you never kno

**Fielding:** I guess

**Fielding:** still, I'm not 100% sure

**Fielding:** what do you propose?

**Mark:** i dunno, ur on frat exec comitty, you can have him brought in front of standards or something

**Mark:** talk to pat

**Mark:** or i guess "The Irishman!" or whatever the fuck sterling called him in the last blog

**Fielding:** haha that was pretty funny though

**Fielding:** bet Patrick wasn't too thrilled about it

**Fielding:** I'll talk to him about it

**Mark:** thats what everyone says

**Mark:** fuckin do something about it

**Fielding:** okay Mark, we can see about it

**Mark:** good

**Mark:** hey btw u have a brother whose a freshman rite?

**Fielding:** yes

**Fielding:** his name is Alan

**Mark:** nice i thot so

**Mark:** he was at signal way the other nite

**Mark:** he looks a lot like u dude

**Mark:** he was grinding up on some pretty hot piece on the dancefloor

**Mark:** musta been a 7 or 8 at least

**Mark:** i was pretty shitfaced tho lol

**Fielding:** weren't we all, Mark

**Fielding:** weren't we all

**From:** Strathairn, Patrick

**To:** ChiPhiEmail

**Subject:** Friendly reminder

**Wednesday, September 30, 8:13 am**

All-

Just wanted to stress to y'all one of the clauses in our

Constitution: *"Brothers shall not disseminate any information publicly that casts the Fraternity in a misleading light. This is considered a corruption of our core value of Honor. Penalties for breach of this are subject to the discretion of the chapter's Standards and Executive Committees and may include suspension or expulsion from the Brotherhood, or other lawful penalty."*

Just be smart about anything you post online like Facebook photos and statuses and other places on the internet.

Cheers.

-Patrick

**From:** Watson, Sterling  
**To:** Strathairn, Patrick  
**Subject:** Re: Friendly reminder  
**Wednesday, September 30, 4:33 pm**

Hey Pat,

What was up with that email this morning? I cannot help but feel like I'm being called out for my blog. Last I checked, that 1<sup>st</sup> Amendment thing still existed and a person could write about whatever he damn well felt like. Anyway, it's not like I'm blabbing all about how we buy pot for freshmen at rush events or anything like that. I'm not a total dumbass.

Who's complained to you about my blog anyway? You don't have to tell me, but I'd love it if someone would come straight to me about it rather than going behind my back to you or someone else. That doesn't strike me as being very brotherly. I wonder if it might someone who's still bitter about me hooking up with Marissa Mathers after he failed spectacularly in pursuing her last year. maybe someone whose name rhymes with "bean." I don't know; just a thought...

Peace,

Sterling

**From:** Dean, Mark  
**To:** ChiPhiEmail  
**Subject:** Re: Friendly reminder  
**Wednesday, September 30, 11:46 pm**

can i rite about the half a case of bud lite i just drunk?

lol

Sent from my Blackberry.

**From:** Jeffries, Robert  
**To:** ChiPhiEmail  
**Subject:** Re: Friendly reminder  
**Thursday, October 1, 12:39 am**

Sure Mark, go for it. I will be interested to find out what percentage of people can actually decipher the text of your posts. LOL. ;-)

Sent from my iPhone.

**IM Conversation between Robert Jeffries and Sterling Watson**

**October 1, 4:36 pm**

**Robert:** You like that little email snipe?

**Sterling:** of course I do, my negro!

**Sterling:** Dean is such a queer

**Sterling:** oh well...I guess brain cells don't come easy to everybody

**Robert:** or the ability to type coherent English, for that matter

**Sterling:** amen, brosef

**IM Conversation between Patrick Strathairn and Mark Dean**

**October 1, 8:44 pm**

**Patrick:** are you happy now, Mark?

**Mark:** about wat

**Patrick:** the email I sent

**Mark:** ohhh ya

**Mark:** yea thanks for sending it

**Mark:** we'll see if that faggot backs off



**The inebriational weekend travelogues of Sterling Morris Watson III—part 5—*Homo Neanderthalensis***  
**October 4**

Boy oh boy oh boy, are people odd or what? It has been quite a weekend in the life of Sterling.

I'll start with Friday night, naturally. You know how some people are like oil and water? Well this one kid and I, we're like water and sodium metal—bad things are probably going to happen when we're in the same room. Yes, we're in the same fraternity (I know I know, not everyone always gets along perfectly in fraternities: shocking!), but not the same realms of higher brain function—at least I certainly hope not.

To put it bluntly, he's a mouth-breather. Real hairy-knuckle type. His dad, granddad, and great-granddad all went here and were members of our humble fraternity. QED as to his acceptance to Jefferson.

Anyway, our boy H.N. is being his normal prehistorically uncool self, grunting and guffawing, when I notice him smacking people of all genders on the behind. A well-coordinated round of the Paddle Game is delightful, but H.N.'s comportment was just not civil. The looks he was getting were even more shocked and disgusted than what I'm sure he's used to.

I take umbrage vocally with H.N.'s behavior in the house I call home, Signal Way. To be fair, I was not what one might call sober at the time, but that did not make me wrong to loudly voice my concerns from a very close distance. I may or may not have made subtle allusion to a failed conquest of his and he may or may not have made only slightly less subtle reference to the false romantic involvement of my dear sister with a number of unsavory individuals. Luckily for him on this night, others were monitoring the exchange, otherwise the two years of competitive wrestling I did in high school might have come back to use. But there were a tense few seconds as the *gravitas* of some of my more potent jibes washed over his sadly vacant face.

Saturday night proved to be an experience as well. Our friend reappeared on the party scene, this time not in the friendly confines of Signal Way but in the more spare environs at Holly Woods, another off-campus house of ours. Winky and I were doing horrible, wonderful things to opposing beer pong teams all night and H.N. and one of his minions stepped up as our opponents. I was, once again, moved to pick on the richly deserving H.N., who in the aftermath of our Friday altercation took to spreading the vicious falsehood that I had slipped something into a drink of dear sweet Rosebud some weeks back. Scoundrel. Coward.

Winky and I are down to the final cup in the game and it's my turn to throw. I decide to look into the empty eyes of H.N. whilst I toss the ball. When it hits Natty and we are victorious again, a smile creeps across my face. I do not break eye contact with this product of a disturbingly gnarled family tree. He is, shall we say, miffed at the whole thing. More words pass back and forth between the two of us. Later he weaves between The Irishman! and The Punisher! while they awkwardly dance with some room for the Lord between them. He kinda-sorta tries to hit on Butters' girlfriend, who is none too pleased at the attention of our cognitively challenged "brother." Freshmen look on, puzzled.

Fun times in the frat, no?

Chuffed to be sentient,

-S&M

### [COMMENTS]

**Anonymous** wrote...  
lol ur a dead man.

**S&M** wrote..  
I don't think so, whoever you are. If I have somehow wronged you, perhaps we can sit down and work out our differences. In English, if that's alright with you. Not exactly sure in what tongue you wrote your initial comment. I'm sure I got the gist of it, though.

Regards; best of luck in your studies of our language.

-Sterling

**From:** Strathairn, Patrick  
**To:** Marlowe, Fielding; Ashworth, Peter; Carson, Frederick;  
Hotchkiss, Alfred; Cho, Heeseung  
**Subject:** Standards discussion/hearing  
**Tuesday, October 6, 9:11 am**

All—

It looks like we need to review Sterling Watson's conduct with respect to his blog and figure out what action to take. Let's meet tonight after dinner to talk about it.

—Patrick

**The inebriational weekend travelogues of Sterling Morris Watson III—part 6—Et tu, fraternity?  
October 10**

In one of my favorite movies, "Primary Colors," Kathy Bates' character Libby, holding in her hand a folder of politically damaging dirt against John Travolta's character, declares, "I will destroy this village in order to save it." I'm with you, homegirl.

I started this blog just about a month ago in order to engage in some kind of historical record from the point of view of a man on the inside of this ridiculous thing called "college." I wanted to track my socialization my senior year as both a revealing look into our culture of collective drunken debauchery and a cathartic, almost confessional personal endeavor. I am now moved, though, to let a few cats out of bags I had planned to keep sealed, because it's time.

On this past Tuesday night I was hauled before a jury of my peers in a room of our fraternity house. One of them, a 19-year old punk of a sophomore whom you might know as "H.N." from my previous post, sat in a chair sipping from a small bottle of Jack Daniels. My accuser. Around him were five other brothers of mine—our Standards Committee. I had always thought that Standards Committees checked up periodically to make sure that fraternity officers were doing their jobs correctly. Apparently that

isn't their only function. Turns out they take it upon themselves to seek out potential voices that are not in perfect harmony with the "Who, me?" façade that fraternities put up.

This Standards Committee advised me to cease blogging about my weekend adventures for the benefit of those outside and inside our organization. You can probably guess which finger I gave them.

Their reaction to this was to place me on heavy probation for the remainder of the term, citing me as a *rush liability*—basically a bad example for potential new members, someone who might drive people away. Never mind the steady increase in readership I've experienced over the past month. Never mind the people who mention my blog to me on campus and applaud the stories I've told. It doesn't matter—I'm a subversive, apparently. A social guerrilla (I thought I'd been just a social butterfly!)

Apparently it's also a bad thing to hook up with girls. The alleged bravado with which I congratulated myself for breaking the chains of celibacy that my brothers inexplicably seem to be ashamed of publicly shedding was also noted as detrimental to the Brotherhood. After hearing that nonsense, I had to ask them where I was. You know, in order to make sure that I had not joined a sorority by mistake three years ago.

In front of these clowns (save for Winky—you're my boy, Blue!) I felt like the title character from that old *Twilight Zone* episode called "The Obsolete Man." And like Burgess Meredith's character in the episode, if I am to go out, I wish to exit spectacularly. I am The Obsolete Bro.

Keep fratting hard, everyone.

-Sterling

**[COMMENTS]**

**Anonymous** wrote...

na na na na

na na na na

hey hey hey

goodbye

**Anonymous** wrote...

Don't worry Swat, Winky and I are coming with you! Vive la resistance!

-Butters

**IM Conversation between Alan Marlowe and Max Tallman**

**October 13, 8:22 pm**

**Alan:** did you hear about that guy Sterling Watson?

**Max:** no what happened to him?

**Max:** hes hilarious

**Alan:** my brother's in his frat and they had to kick him out because he wouldn't stop blogging about stuff

**Max:** wtf that's gay as shit

**Alan:** I know, super gay

**Alan:** two other guys left the frat too after it happened

**Alan:** Sterling's friends Robert and Henry

**Alan:** Fielding's pretty pissed about it

**Max:** shit thats intense

**Max:** guess theyre not too high on the frat power ranking anymore huh?

**Alan:** not really

**Alan:** i'd never tell Fielding, but those guys always seem a bit uptight about stuff

**Max:** guess so

**Max:** oh well, are you about ready to go out and get fucked up?

**Alan:** yessir, can't wait to see some more of Franny tonight

**Max:** haha i hear ya bro

**Alan:** see you in a few

**Max:** peace brah

## APPENDIX: THE PROCESS

Let me leave you with some remarks on how I came to put these stories together.

During Fall Term last year (Fall 2009), I took R.T. Smith's English 380 seminar on the work of Flannery O'Connor. I had read O'Connor's preeminent story, "A Good Man Is Hard To Find" during my junior year in high school and had recalled it when perusing the class list. I did not remember it because the story delighted me and I had read it over and over again since—in fact, I recall initially feeling put-off by the ending of the story and not liking it very much because of it. But like many things, that story gained in reflection to the point where I felt enthusiastic about taking the O'Connor seminar. I ended up thoroughly enjoying the class and, through studying almost every story O'Connor wrote (as well as her two novels), developed a great admiration for the form of the short story. Mr. Smith's expertise on O'Connor was essential and helped to place the stories into historical and literary context and direct our study of them.

One of the assignments in the class was to undertake some piece of creative writing based somehow on O'Connor. I elected to write a short play—more a "closet drama"—imagining O'Connor's judgment in the afterlife. It was not very well executed, but it was the first piece of creative writing I had done in college. The exercise was fun and I decided to sign up for Professor Gavalier's English 203 course for the Winter Term, where I was able to write three short stories and study the form more closely. One of the stories I wrote for Professor Gavalier, "A Blizzard," survived into this project in a heavily revised form.

After enjoying English 203 immensely and feeling a bit worn down by all the analytical and research papers I had been writing for classes for my English major, I decided to look into pursuing a creative Honors Thesis, rather than an analytical one or a research-based Capstone. I asked Mr. Smith to advise me, and he graciously agreed.

I began by assembling a very high stack of short story books that would expose me to a range of different authors and styles. I read dozens of stories by writers ranging in voice from Ernest Hemingway to James Thurber to O. Henry to Mark Twain to J.D. Salinger to David Foster Wallace. I subscribed to *The New Yorker* as well in order to browse their Fiction section weekly.

After about a month of reading and idea-collecting, I started to write. My earliest efforts were uninspiring and Mr. Smith gave me a push in a productive direction, assigning me the task of writing a story about some kind of golfer who encounters an off-putting presence of some kind during a tournament. This idea became "Spectators," the third story in the collection. I had aimed to write stories that would expose and meditate on aspects of my generation and even though I am a passionate golfer, the idea of writing a story involving golf had not occurred to me. "Spectators" turned out fairly well and once I had it drafted, I gained the confidence to come up with new story ideas on my own.

This confidence also helped me stretch my own boundaries and self-imposed limitations in the writing process. Perhaps out of comfort with reading Flannery O'Connor's stories, I had become exclusively fond of past-tense, third-person stories. All of O'Connor's fiction operates in that way. But while having trouble with the story that became "The Rest Area," I decided to look at the story in a new way by rewriting it into the present tense. The change, luckily, worked, and I was able to render the action and conflict of the story a little bit better.

Having worked on a present-tense story for the Thesis, I wondered if it might be nice to try something a little bit more experimental—a story told in a decidedly non-traditional narrative style. This idea became "The Obsolete Bro," which comprises blog posts, emails, and instant-message exchanges exclusively. By presenting the events of the story somewhat indirectly, I hoped to capture the often-indirect interactions in which many people in my generation engage. Because of avenues like Facebook and

text messaging, we do not deal face-to-face or voice-to-voice as much as previous generations, and so I wanted to see what rhetorical weight such a structure might carry. It was the story I enjoyed writing the most for that reason: wading a bit into the unknown and unconventional was great fun.

I must confess that my initial reasons for undertaking this project were not 100% pure. First off, I was tired of writing research papers and reading from a syllabus. Granted, I had enjoyed my English 203 class and was looking forward to trying my hand at more short stories. But I did not really expect that I would enjoy the process as much as I have. I spent many late evenings in a mostly-abandoned suite of offices in DuPont Hall, tapping at my keyboard furiously, trying to work out the next events of whatever story I was writing. Many times I had to have been the only person in the building for a few late hours. When I would walk out from a work session around 2 or 3 a.m. some nights, the morning's maintenance crew would be starting their rounds and I would nod as I passed them in the main open space in DuPont. I impressed myself with the hours I logged in there a few times.

I have rarely been able to focus my intellectual attention on a single task as well as I did when working on these stories. I have always enjoyed writing and have always been a competent writer, but I *loved* working on this Thesis. Now I plan on spending next year preparing to apply and applying to MFA programs in Creative Writing. I hope to continue to write and continue to improve upon the work I have done this year. The stories you have just read are among the most polished and cared-for work I have ever produced. I look forward to honing the craft further and producing even better material in the future.

I am grateful first and foremost to Mr. R.T. Smith, whose patience with me and whose guidance have been vital this year. I am also grateful to the people whom I asked to read my stories in various stages of disrepair. These readers' perspectives have been of great aid as well. To all—thank you.