

## “Trustafarian”

A story about a guy moving to Toronto from Victoria because of a breakup

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## “Trustafarian”

part 1: flash of youth, shoot out of darkness

January 7, 2016 4:47pm

*Twenty-four years old with a bad heart and hemorrhoids, what the fuck is that?* Dan walked through the slurry of mush and dirt on College street, mentally bullying himself and distracted by his ass itch as he navigated Toronto for the first time.

He was harshing on himself partly out of habit and partly to intentionally bring himself down from the optimistic mood he was feeling. He found being cheerful almost acutely embarrassing. It'd been a long time since he'd felt optimistic and it reminded him of being younger, which felt like being unwise; he had negative judgments about people who seemed optimistic because of this, or at least felt embarrassed on their behalf. Dan had spent years avoiding anything that caused the shooting burn of shame, but there were a lot of factors congealing to make him feel, unavoidably, good: it was impossible to feel lost because the city was laid out on a perfect grid, inspiring a feeling of sureness—unlike his home town; the scale and metropolitan aura of the buildings were creating that big leagues feel that Van had, or that cities in the states had; the innately-perceived local eye contact and personal bubble rules were more comfortable than in Vic; it was January and all afternoon the sun had been shining a golden, buttercup yellow like it only did during the summer at home. He came to a crosswalk puddle and watched his feet as he skirted it. His shoes would have been the same color brown as the puddle, but they were splashed and umbraed with drying road salt. The Onterrible winter drawbacks he'd been warned about on the coast, weren't bothering him—it all seemed exaggerated, or years outdated. He walked past a kid doing a work-protest performance piece, playing an old SNES on a TV run from an extension cord that disappeared down the closest alley. “FUCK” and the sound of Mario's death bounced off the stone wall

behind the scene and circled Dan's earbowl as he walked past. The kid was stretched out long as possible, recumbent on stained cardboard in front of a branch of the Toronto Public Library, which was covered in graffiti about the new Mayor of Ford Nation. There was a long stretch of two rows of info flyers on the building, the same flyer over and over one right above the other, about libraries closing outside the downtown core. "INVISIBLE 2 U / THE WAR ON THE POOR / OUT OF SIGHT OUT OF TIME" read the flyer. There were other pieces of paper glued to everything campus-related Dan walked past, mostly in French and therefore Greek to him. The pastings and graffiti were covered in student strike phrases, he guessed. "SOLIDARITE" in all caps signed the info flyer, along with a little stenciled figure raising a fist. Dan thought he recognized the figure as an edit from a photo of someone's back in front of a line of riot cops, circulating on the blogosphere sometime in the late oughts or preteens. Sol-i-dar-it  was firehosed huge across the front of the building he passed after crossing to the north side of the street in front of a campus Starbucks. *Does being here feel more like being in the real world, or more like being on TV? Maybe they're the same thing. Like being on The Real World, if it had a cast of one.* Dan had never watched The Real World, but he'd seen the episode of Mission Hill about it. He'd always thought, vaguely, that he'd move to Vancouver at some point, since it was more of a city, had more of everything. That had been the plan—to take the electro duo over to the mainland after gaining some momentum branching out from the hometown scene. But the duo had broken up, along with the whole live-in partner aspect. *I have an ex.* He thought. *An Ex.* "Ass Like That" rewritten repeated itself in Dan's mind's ear: *ex like that...ex like that.* It was the first basically-cheerful thought he'd had about the break-up since he'd thought *fuck it* just prior to his bender, overdose, and subsequent hospitalization and diagnosis of structural heart damage including edema and mild fibrosis. The heart damage had been there before the overdose. Long-term cokeheadedness has that tendency.

Dan had been walking for half an hour with his hands out of his pockets, and they were getting stiff. He'd stolen some gloves from a store at Pearson near

the “maple leaf lounge” (he would have thought an airport would have better camera coverage but sometimes luck worked in an ungloved traveller’s favour, apparently), but then forgotten them in the cab he’d taken from the airport to his hostel in Cabbagetown, which was actually-factually named The Internet Didn’t Lie This Place Is The Cheapest; the sign above the door just said ~TIDL. The almost-pain in his hands was actually enjoyable, because the rest of him was warm; meanwhile, he’d been warned that he’d freeze to the bone, *and cry, and* permanently damage his delicate fleshy-parts if he didn’t bring, and at all times wear, nine sweaters and three pairs of gloves. He was sure he’d forgotten his gloves in the cab, although they could have slipped away anywhere. He could have left them on his soiled-ish bunk mattress at ~TIDL, which he pronounced in his head as tiddle, shortened from *Tilde Tiddle the Tilda Swinton of Hiltons*, which’d been his first thought seeing the sign when he climbed out of the cab either with gloves clutched in hand or unintentionally adding to the deeply insulting tip he’d had to leave despite the cruddy-douche feeling it gave him. If he’d been more superstitious his first move in the city wouldn’t have been to tip low, but the ride had cost him literally half the money he had left. Period. Dan had prepaid a week at the hostel, expected to steal all his food, and had \$60 now left in his bank account. The joint account, still there in the online banking summary, continued to sit at null.

He was sure about the gloves being in the cab because he’d been tense about the ride; he’d immediately gotten the sense that in Toronto, it wasn’t expected or even desirable for a passenger to ride up front and make conversation. In fact he’d eventually decided to make conversation by asking about that, and gotten a short lecture from the driver about how stressful it was to wonder whether a passenger might try to hold him up. The rant had gotten pointedly anti-black, and—wondering if it was relate-to-whitey boilerplate, wondering if it was inappropriate (for a white guy) to question his driver’s viewpoints or inappropriate (for a white guy) not to—Dan felt weird and ashamed to shrug, but had shrugged anyway because it wasn’t his cab and he hadn’t emigrated from anywhere to drive it. In Victoria it was bus drivers who ranted—but

there was no population of low-income black people to rant about, so the hot topics were “those homeless” and “those natives.” Cab drivers kept things polite, and Dan had mostly cabbied over the past six years, because anywhere he went wasn’t going to run more than \$10 and he was freaked out by all the decommissioned British double-deckers passed off as utiliquaint public transit. Plus his ex wouldn’t bus, because it was embarrassing to be dressed up on the bus, and she was usually dressed up. In the years they’d lived together—in all the time they’d known one another, really—the only times she wasn’t misdressed for the bus were when they were walking to Avalon or Floyd’s or Mo:le for mimosas on a weekend morning and she was in hung-over Olsen twin mode, nailing the hung-over Olsen twin look.

Outside the context of that first nervous cab ride and its hardplace-meets-awk white-guilt meridian, Dan appreciated the ruling on sitting in the front; he didn’t know how much he’d eventually be cabbieing or how long he was staying, actually, but one of the things he disliked about getting around Vic had been the cabbieing manners. His ex always took the back because she usually wanted to text (pre-event) or drunk-text (post-event) and seemed to find cab drivers as invisible as any service worker she *wasn’t* in an enclosed space with for twenty minutes. The drivers weren’t invisible to Dan, he didn’t even find them boring—actually, he felt engaged and pleased when the driver wanted to talk a lot and was friendly. It was always nice to feel like he wasn’t just some ghoul trapped in a mid-80s movie about rich teens in L.A., and could actually have normal-feeling interactions without fucking it up. The anxiety arose when the driver didn’t turn the music up or talk without prompting; because of these instances, cabbieing had become a Russian Roulette of having-to-make-conversation. Dan wasn’t good at generating conversation unless there was music—if it was sports on the radio, he was dead in the water. It’d been sixth grade since he’d followed any NHL, CFL, or baseball enough to talk about it; right around that time he’d realized all he needed to do was watch Comedy Central cartoon reruns to build a conversation with other kids. But well-timed Simpsons-references didn’t seem to appeal to four out of five cab drivers and that made Dan feel

profoundly inane. He pictured himself hailing a cab here, and sliding into the back with a simple location instruction. Beyond being straight-up tranquil, the moment he conjured oozed a sense of glamour; for some reason he'd pictured himself in a ritzy outfit he didn't own, hailing the cab early-a.m. in front of fancy stores and hotels. He didn't know what the city looked like at night and hadn't been anywhere in town that had fancy stores or hotels, yet. He was picturing a composite city block, pulled mainly from movies.

*Glamorous*, he scoffed at his own thoughts. He'd never soberly gotten into a cab with grace or confidence. He'd probably never gotten into a cab with grace or confidence at all.

Dan's attention snapped back to the present in which, contrasting the late-night cab fantasy, he was walking down the street in the sun. He felt happy. *Fuck you, little asshole*, Dan thought to his roid, which itched up at him. He was sweating in his overcoat. Dan didn't wear underwear (for reasons he couldn't name to himself; possibly just because it'd annoyed his ex) and hadn't washed his pants in years even though he always wore the same pair of pants. It probably didn't help the roid itch, but they were habits—*his* habits—and he'd be damned if his strained butthole was going to rule him. *I could live here*, he thought. "Island in the sun" by Weezer popped into his head and he thought *fuck the island in the rain*. Moving here seemed intensely positive, and even felt doable. In this moment, he felt more charged with energy than he had basically as far back as he could remember. Maybe since forever.

He hadn't expected his breakup to go like this, he'd expected to feel lost and depressed pretty much indefinitely—he didn't have any job skills or degrees and he'd been living off his ex's allowance since eleventh grade, when he'd moved into the apartment her separated parents jointly paid for. *I've been living as a complete parasite for six years*. He noted this to himself for the umpteenth time and as usual, knowingly neglected the fact that by that precise logic, he'd always lived as a parasite. He neglected this fact simply because it hadn't always felt that way; he'd had to mow the lawn for his parents, was most of why. He pictured that deep-sea fish from Blue Planet,

watched over and over in school; the little angler male attached to its mate like an eerie wart. *Of course I thought I'd feel like shit til death when she, when we split.* That expectation had gotten him a hospital stay and a lot of pity-talks. Half-humming Weezer still but fucking up the lyrics (“...we’ll be smiling and having fun”), he stopped for a light at a huge intersection spiderwebbed with streetcar tracks. There was a two story Rexall on the opposite corner, more futuristic looking than any drugstore at home. Parading southward down the street next to it were a handful of bars and clubs, one of which Dan recognized from facebook as a cornerstone part of his now-Torontonian old friend’s social life: 460 Reborn, tucked under the giant unlit neon palmtree sign of its neighbour, referred to as “the infamous elmo” in discussion about where to meet and nearby landmarks. Where to meet was a coffee place two doors down from the 460.

part 2: the persistence of memory  
still January 7, 2016

The name over the door of the place at 460 Spadina was Let’s Be Frank. It was a hotdog and beer bar that had for years been a punk bar frequented by the Toronto antifa scene. Various fundraisers had been held there, as well as post-demo shows of legend. Now a small contingent used it for meetings in tribute, Dan had gathered as much from his friend’s attended events on facebook—he’d done some light curiosity diving after they’d reconnected, and failed to recognize any of the names when it came to live music. The hotdog place was 460 reborn. Dan wondered how frank people could really be there, but the distinctions between above-board organizing and say, Project Mayhem, were sort of roughly apparent to him. Besides, how had Fight Club ended up with members if recruitment was against the rules? *You do not talk about Fight Club.* It was probably a show-not-tell thing, he realized. An open-secret. To speak of mortally necessary change that corporations marshal governments as their hitmen to prevent.



The friend was Jean-Paul Debureau. Jean-Paul had been instrumental in his life, Dan felt. Disconnected entirely from his former social life, he'd had a lot of time with his thoughts these past months. Combing his mind had turned up a regret: he and his best friend from before his relationship had started, had ghosted one another except for facebook. Jean-Paul had never unfriended him though, over the years, and he had never liked Dan's ex to begin with. Dan had realized that he grieved for the loss of that friendship. He hadn't noticed this feeling until nothing else was resonating.

Jean-Paul had seemed like *something* when they'd met. He'd enrolled at Dan's highschool in grade ten and was gone before grade twelve, moving along with his Mom's job. A stranger comes to town—proof that the world is bigger, and newness is out there. Being friends with Jean-Paul those two years had felt like being invited to sit up front for the zeitgeist, and maybe that weird resonant feeling had never gone away.

The coffee place was a boardgame café with big picture windows showcasing the cute college kids at the blond wood tables. Jean-Paul came out, waving a mug at him and lighting a cigarette that was already in his mouth. An annoyed employee came out before words could be exchanged.

“You can't take the mug outside.” She waved away the hanging cloud of his cigarette smoke and scowled.

Jean-Paul held it out to her and said “my mistake, my mistake. Would you? I haven't seen that daywalking ginger over there since highschool so I just ran outside.” She took the mug.

“Cute. Have a good reunion.” Jean-Paul smiled genuinely at her, and she stopped looking put-upon and smiled back before letting the door shut between them.

“We should.” Jean-Paul smoked and stared at Dan, unrushed. His fair hair looked bleached out, treated so it was a sandy-grey shade of white, except for his eyebrows, which were dark like they'd always been.

“Still pencil your eyebrows, huh?” Dan made his delivery as relaxed as possible so the intended joke scanned. The intended familiarity.

“Still a Queer Eye introduction segment on the straight guy who needs a makeover?” Jean-Paul’s love of a good retort lived on. “Let’s go to my friend’s coffee place in the market.”

They walked the short walk to Kensington exchanging their news. Jean-Paul knew about the breakup because it had made the music blogosphere, which was recirculating one of his and his ex’s only real tracks along with tidbits of a piece that had run on Slackjaw, which was huge. Jean-Paul suggested what Dan had also guessed, that his ex had met the writer somewhere (a party) and slept with him, and he’d decided the setting-out-alone angle was good copy. It had been a hatchet job, by the numbers; Dan was the drug-abusing albatross around her neck, a highschool relationship past expiration that felt more like being trapped, a controlling partner who moved in with her and insisted they share credit as producers, and that he share her credit card. Dan’s behavior in public and basic lack of friends who weren’t primarily associating themselves with her and not him, hadn’t done anything to undermine the article in the minds of any Vicites who knew him casually. They’d all ghosted.

“Listen, I don’t like to call someone a cunt unless I mean it in a good way, but that’s just really fucking cunt.” Jean-Paul saying this made Dan feel much better than any of the few warm words he’d gotten in...how long. He searched his memory and didn’t find contenders.

“They called me a trustafarian scam artist! They said I made her buy everything! SHE asked ME to move in with HER.”

“I remember. I never liked her. So pretentious, walking around highschool name dropping her journalist mom, mixing cocktails in the hallway. What a —whatever.” Dan was surprised by the fact that Jean-Paul remembered her eleventh grade affectation of storing a vintage tumbler with a bottle of spiked grenadine on the top shelf of her locker, along with a set of martini glasses. She’d stop by her locker with juice for a sip with friends during or between classes. The point wasn’t to be drunk at school, because she never ran out of grenadine—the point was to drink and be known to be drinking at school and have all the teachers believe it was virgin cocktails and a cute gimmick, just

because she told them that was the case when they asked. They never asked to sample the drinks, but they eventually told her she couldn't have mixology paraphernalia at school regardless. The point at the beginning had been to display the tasteful vintage cocktail set to more people than would have seen them if she'd left them in her apartment, and having succeed at that, she complied immediately with the censure of the "rebelliousness" of it.

"And how's she going to have a music career, we sucked! She never did any actual mixing or composition work at all, it was 99% wardrobe and networking and laptop DJing. And I picked the playlists!" *Some of them. A minority of them. The good ones.* "I'm the one who did all the music work," slowing down tracks she told him to sample from so she could sing the lyrics she wrote over them live. "How's she going to do it all herself."

"You know how. She's not going to do it herself, she'll do more cockllaborations" 

They were standing outside a place with the words "JUST DRINK THE COFFEE" etched into the door and crossed out. Under that there was a progression of reductions of the phrase, from "just drink coffee" to "drink coffee" to "coffee." Only "drink coffee" wasn't struck through, which was the only indication that this was the name of the place. It seemed like they were both stalled, neither wanting to take the conversation inside. The market smelled like weed, people were smoking in the park and outside the headshop around the corner.

"Do you want another coffee? You didn't finish the other one."

"Nah. Where are you staying in town? How long are you here?"

Awkward questions. "...I'm not sure. I like it here and I don't want to be in B.C. right now. I don't think people are going to know who I am out here even with the story thing. I wear sunglasses a lot in public."

"Right, right. Let me know how that goes, Clark Kent it up."

"God's favourite DJ?"

"No, the guy people can't tell is the other dude they all know when he puts on glasses. But where are you staying? Are you subletting?"

“...I probably should, but I guess I’d need a job first. I’m at a place I found on air bnb, it’s fifteen dollars a day for a bed in a big dorm room kind of thing. It’s um, affordable. For a bit.”

“Try going on welfare if you’ve got less than a grand in the bank and you’re moving here. I can walk you through stuff but you’ll only get about three hundred a month unless you can show them you’re renting somewhere. I can write you a letter saying you’re subletting at my address, we do it all the time. Actually, I mean, if you want, you can crash at my place...there’s a spare room right now.”

part 3: dans le maison

February 12, 2016

Dan was lying on a mattress, staring at a ceiling. It wasn’t really his mattress, and it wasn’t really his ceiling. He’d spent four months before the holidays resting in beds, staring at ceilings. This was the worst bed, dirtier than the hostel and uncomfortable. Dan was beginning to think it was just a boxspring. It hadn’t even occurred to him someone might put a sheet on a boxspring. Apparently it was from the side of the road, and ‘probably’ didn’t have bedbugs because it’d been sunblasted on the balcony last summer before getting dumped in the guest room—and apparently most people were immune to bedbugs anyway. Dan’d never seen a bedbug. Jean-Paul had told him to pray, not haul in remotely suspect mattresses, and get some diatomaceous earth. That last part sounded like hippie pseudo-science but Dan hadn’t asked his phone to check. Jean-Paul’s shtick seemed more post-apunkalyptic than airy-fairy but it was Dan’s general impression that the two crossed paths with regularity, and he felt content to remain skeptical of any fringy-seeming scene. It’d instantly become clear, when he saw the house, that this was a fringy scene. It might be a scene people disappeared into, never to be heard from again.

He didn’t have sheets of his own yet but there was a space heater in the room

and the blankets and stuff the room had come with didn't smell violently gross. The ceiling was clean, but unnerving—it was weirdly low, and composed of a series of corrugated plastic squares taped together and held into a non-flat something (insulation, maybe) with screws. It was a really large room though, and had huge south-facing windows, overlooking Dundas West. The surrounding neighbourhood was full of yellowy buildings covered in a dusty film, which extended across the roads as well, particularly at the corner with the sey and the deeply retro burger place. Toronto seemed to have a weird time-warp quality that most of Victoria didn't have—Vic was so small and new building was so restricted that most of town had already been revamped since any-given-era. This whole strip the house was on was all weird in the same way—it all looked like place-setting shots from a late 70's movie about near-urban New York or Chicago. Further down the road was gentrified, it had some kind of cutesy neighbourhood name like everywhere else he'd been in Toronto. Dundas went on forever, they were actually somewhere north of Bloor and High Park. It took about an hour to walk into the core of downtown and Dundas was similarly commercial (and peculiar) all the way—more so at their end and then again where the road dipped down and ran parallel with Queen West. It took 15 minutes to walk south to Bloor from the house and from there Dan had found his way onto the subway each time without paying, so it took about half an hour to get to anywhere in town, for free. Toronto somehow felt smaller than Victoria, because it was more accessible, but also endless, because it was massive. A metropolis.

Dan's loaner room didn't have any lights, but there was a desk lamp on the floor next to the bed, leading from the single outlet. Dan originally plugged his laptop into this outlet, but he hadn't opened it since arriving. Heat was more important than being well-positioned to stop avoiding email; even though he'd now been asked several times how he'd 'brought the West Coast Winter' with him, it didn't feel much like one in this room. His things were in and mostly around his suitcase, which was open on the floor in front of the door. He hadn't used the door at all, because there was a bunch of sticker graffiti (*hi my name is ABSRD, Hello I'm ZEROone, hi my name is...*) around

the edge that would be ruined if he opened it, and he'd been asked to use the ladder leading from his room through a raw hole in the ceiling, which meant that if he wanted to stand on the landing outside his door, he had to climb the ladder, double back above his room through the common room, take some excessively DIY stairs down, and skirt a bunch of stored junk down a narrow hall over to the east-facing door. His room was on the second floor, the Northerly half of which, outside his room, was obviously the household's random-drawer. There was a suspension machine, a spearfishing gun was hanging on the wall, and looming at the top of a pile of dusty boxes at the back was a collection of fake tropical tree branches. There was a cue-ball embedded in the wall, with a large pentagram drawn around it. There was one tiny dusty window and the light that came into the room had a sickly apricot tint. That part of the house felt forgotten, or haunted.

It'd made perfect sense to Dan after being shown above the first floor, that Jean-Paul's apartment was on the first floor. Facing the street and leading from a separate entrance was a pottery studio that apparently got rented out by the hour from the owner of that unit. There was a kiln room on the other side of the wall from Jean-Paul's "bachelor suite"—the week Dan had moved in, he hadn't needed a heater. Pre-valentine's rush. It was a weird proposition, this heap of a house with a commercially-zoned front-end condo thing stuck to it. Jean-Paul had told him over coffee, behind the kiln room, that his friend was in charge of the building except the pottery place, which was owned by someone other than the owner of the rest of it. The owner of the part they lived in tenuously knew their resident "building manager," Bruce, and more importantly, she was happier the freakier the residential portion became, because she wanted to buy out the tiny front part, reno, and sell the whole place. Of course, no one living there wanted to scare away the pottery place, really, and it seemed a non-interference policy was in effect between the pottery people and the weirdos scuttling around, coming and going through the other door. Everyone in the residential portion seemed to be on different schedules, which made meetings in the kitchen unusual, at least as per Dan's nearly continuous observation since landing on the shittiest

bed. He'd been timing his excursions to the world outside his room so well that he'd avoided running into anyone so far.

But since just before six that morning Dan had been hearing people or a person on the floor above his room. The sound wasn't directly over his bed, because directly over his bed was a steep segment of scuffed half-pipe covered in junk. It was back by this room's door, where the kitchen was on the next floor. *Who is it?* Jean-Paul introduced him to three of his friends the day he'd brought over his stuff, but only two were residents. One was Bruce, and one was "Mouse," who appeared to be a teen runaway. Bruce had told him the house name was Maison Rokkoku, which maybe was an in-joke he was supposed to care about being invited in-on but didn't. It sounded like a euphemism for "crack den." The non-resident was Andre, some sort of 12-months-of-fairys-calendar-shirt-gothabilly/soft-grunge goddess who appeared to be dating Bruce, who didn't appear to deserve such an SG caliber babe. Apparently there were other permanent roommates, but so far they hadn't made themselves visible between absences from the house. Dan was invisible himself, and he almost never left.

*Who seems like a morning person?* The cellphone—still, still, still in airplane mode—said 7:05. Bruce was nice enough, Dan supposed, but as a massive chronic he was an unlikely candidate for early riser. He was barely a candidate for easy rider. *Possibly pretty Andre, making breakfast for herself, or a work lunch.* She was a barista some days and a bike courier others, she was hardly ever over and Dan wasn't even sure she was Bruce's girlfriend, except that she'd acted like she was when they met, like she existed in a universe that could be seen from his but didn't occupy the same material plane, and everyone in that universe had decided it was impolite to stare. He hadn't interacted with her much when they met, but she was his bet out of the faces he knew to pin to the sounds of life upstairs. The little one, Mouse, seemed like someone who might have an erratic sleep schedule, so he couldn't be ruled out, but he hadn't made much of an impression. Andre, however, he could picture easily, making some offensively fair-trade, super-foody, sprout-milk-based sorta-soylent before taking off on the obnoxiously

pastel vintage racing bike she always locked out front. Apparently she had an entirely different bike locked downtown for couriering, the ugly bike was just her “look” bike. Dan had worked this out from seeing her with a regular looking bike and hearing half a conversation about how cheesed she was to be on delivery by the park when she had to go all the way to the dispatch office near the river on the other side of town right after that to get her paycheque. She just seemed like the kind of person who was up cruelly early. Between 4:30 in the morning and about noon, the house could usually be relied on to display no sign that anyone but Dan lived there. If it had been somewhere he wanted to live, at least that would have been something. This break in routine felt like a further loss. His feeling that it was Andre complicated the tension.

part 4: it's been two weeks since it's been two weeks  
February 12, 2016 7:15am

Dan had been feeling like he'd leave soon for several weeks. In fact he'd thought less about leaving since the floor had stopped radiating heat a few days ago. Everything had been glazed and taken home and the place was closed again until the next pre-holiday bloom of bookings, Dan guessed. His window only opened enough to empty the big gulp cup he was using as a bedpan, into the eavestrough, and if there were summer holidays he couldn't think of that involved hand-crafted mugs and such, he'd actually have to ....address the total inadequacy of this room as a place to do anything aside from feel vaguely glad he'd never done drugs in a room like this. And listen to the occasional conversation from the ladder, and check for Whatever Made The Noise Outside (usually kids in big groups getting pizza at lunch, walking as far as possible from their school before turning around and walking back the same way after getting non-schoolfood. Hearing voices outside his window on weekdays like clockwork, Dan would wish them banished to the noisy place, the trainyard; he wasn't sure why they didn't walk along beside the train tracks, which were right there and seemed like a more exciting way



to go the same route. He had an exceptional room for the purpose of getting such bad sleep that he was constantly trying to catch up by spending more time in it.

He'd come over with his stuff before seeing the place, a couple days after coffee-but-not had turned into drinking-a-lot on a Kensington bar crawl courtesy of Jean-Paul, that involved going to two bars (the one next to his favourite and his favourite, where they stopped). Dan hadn't gotten really drunk, and that felt like "having fun in moderation" which seemed healthy, or something. He'd stayed at the house even after seeing it because Jean-Paul seemed to want him to—had invited him to—and it was free. And he had no money. Or plans. Or people in his life who were concerned specifically about him, as a person, and his general wellbeing; his immediate family was sort of frazzled and disappointed and focused on his older sisters because that was always the m. o. That'd been the m. o. since he'd moved out in high school to live with his girlfriend, anyway. Before that they'd just been frazzled.

Dan felt frazzled now, but couldn't acknowledge to himself that he had any degree of control over his own comfort re his bed or fixing the window because it would mean acknowledging that the house was a source of discomfort he might try to control, and he wanted to feel like a guest—or, actually, he felt like a ghost and wanted to feel nothing at all—but he was stuck in a weird room getting increasingly hair-trigger about Noises At The Wrong Time, almost like someone who really lived there. By contrast, Jean-Paul was clearly entirely comfortable with the surroundings; Dan noticed during the first visit that nothing about the way he moved around or the way his eyes fell on things indicated that there was anything unusual about the environment. It wasn't the lifestyle Dan would have pictured for Jean-Paul—except for the kitchen, which had polished concrete counters, chef's knives stuck to a wall-mounted magnet bar, two brushed steel mini-fridges, and a fancy deep sink. That was it, that was the stuff that "fit" Jean-Paul. Maybe the hanging plants and window herb garden, all vined with irrigation tubing that hooked up to the sink, were also something he'd have expected. As it

was the kitchen's garden annoyed him, because the main tube had to be disconnected to use the water if it was on the end of the faucet, which was the case usually. Dan still hadn't figured out the sink, but he'd only tried the tap twice and didn't feel like asking. He went to the tim's down the street once a day to fill up a water bottle, take a shit, and have a sink bath. He tried to avoid the bathroom at the house because he didn't want to be caught using water and then be roped into owing for the bill; there were notes on the fridges about utility bills dating back twelve months. The residents kept putting just enough on each utility to keep them on, from what the notes said. People had left and whoever came later didn't want to split their unpaid portions, so those portions had continued to float along, slowly snowballing, with each service. Some of the bills were addressed to names Dan didn't recognize as anyone living in the house. He liked the kitchen, and snooping around in it. The limited vertical space was used up by hanging utensils and cookery stuff. The prep island had shelves full of zines about cooking and food, a range that started at "oogle beer reviews" (light) and ended at "reincarnationist anti-cannibalism: a plea for pure freeganism" (ugh). The way it was all grabbable like in a ship's galley appealed to him, in spite of the ugh-ness of some of the snoopables. Even the plates had holes with strings through them for hanging from the wall next to the mugs.

The bathroom was the only closed space in that room, the cubicle creating a wall to the south of the kitchen. The bathroom was between the kitchen and stairs down to the landing outside Dan's room, which were steep and not well-supported, in the same way the staircase on the floor below was steep and not well supported. If every cop in town had some kind of mobility issue, the place was a fortress. Otherwise it had more of a defenseless, leaking-water-balloon kind of a vibe: one application of pressure and it'd collapse entirely.

The upstairs was dark basically all the time, its Southern windows were painted black and the only natural light came from the East-facing windows by the sink. Light came from a networked collection of dim lamps, probably found on the street (each spraypainted entirely one color), and strings of

LEDs; all this ran to one outlet which connected to a treemote that hung from a leash attached to the half-pipe. It wasn't clear to Dan, still, what the point of making the place look as sketchy as possible was, painting the windows etc. He pictured the green plants and the pale green-blue light filtering through them above the sink, the visualization equivalent of a rainforest sounds mix—which his mind supplied to the image, along with the faint fear that he was hearing water running upstairs for real and the sink was just *on*. Flooding, even. The place was stressing Dan out to be in, which was somehow more annoying because it was free.

While there'd been pride in Jean-Paul's tour of the kitchen, and his apartment on the ground floor (which was tasteful and clean and had tasteful, clean sandstone-color walls), the industrial-bohemian set-dressing didn't extend to this guest room: this room was an ode to a bad homage to a shitty tribute to GG Allin. The fact that he couldn't use his door, which would have made his life almost convenient in spite of everything else, was eight million times worse because of the reason. Someone-or-other would be back, some distant day, and this was their room and bla-bla-bla. The stickers. There were names and acronyms that didn't mean anything to Dan and there was nothing else to provide context—it was like the door into someone's head, but he didn't know the someone and they were in a coma. He wished he could just sleep on the couch in Jean-Paul's place, but Jean-Paul's door was always locked and he never seemed to be home. Dan'd given up trying two and a half weeks back.

The prolonged tension of being unable to get comfortable on the mattress stretched to the exact point of *enough* and Dan rolled out of bed. He was sleeping in clothes, which'd started years ago with passing out in, or on, or out of bed fully dressed—it made life a lot simpler so that was that. With the heat from the pottery place earlier in the month he'd been sweating in his sleep and his roid had kept him fitfully murderous for several days. It was during that phase that he'd started to consider using his phone or his laptop to find a public pool to shower at. He'd need to ask Jean-Paul (or someone) for

the wi-fi password again, first. Ironically, he didn't want to use the tim's internet because he felt weird about basically bathing there. The sweating issue had died down but he wasn't financially able to keep buying coffee just to rinse off each day in order to avoid fully sleepless nights. Finally, actually hoping to see someone, anxious still that it was almost-certainly just Andre, Andre alone, Dan climbed the ladder through his ceiling, wondering what his hair looked like. He wondered, but didn't care if it was that bad, because whoever was upstairs wouldn't care, might not even notice.

Bruce was upstairs, doing dishes with his oatmeal-coloured thermal shirt's long sleeves rolled up. He wasn't wearing pants, but the shirt hung low enough to cover anything shorts would. Somehow the effect wasn't the same at all. He had on gym socks and fuzzy slippers, and when he turned around Dan saw he was keeping his floppy, silly, chocolate-milk-coloured hair out of his face with an alic band, like the one one of his sisters'd had in the shared bathroom in high school, but never wore. Dan remembered the feeling of squeezing the teeth in both palms, and Bruce said "hey," cheerfully and squeezed the handle of the spray hose attached to the faucet, shooting a jet of hot water at the plate in his other hand. Dan watched the green dish as the lather cleared and a brown and orange geometric orchard scene appeared.

part 5: the frat of nimh


February 12, 2016

There were two usual atmospheres in the kitchen and whichever it would have otherwise been, had been smothered completely by an insistently nurturing feeling. Dan wasn't sure whether some unconscious quality of Bruce's was cuing it, or whether Bruce was one of those people who knew how to make people feel that way with body language, and did it on purpose like a school counselor. It was a comforting kind of feeling that never made Dan feel comfortable, because it felt like being manipulated. Bruce did kind of come off like someone who did a lot of conflict mediation in a

professional setting and had training, in a barely-perceptible way. One of the few life-skills he'd noticed himself develop living with his ex, was detecting usury and attempts to conceal it. He'd never really figured out how to avoid it, but it seemed to him that, at least, he could sense it well enough to name it. But Bruce, if he was putting on airs, didn't have the *air* of a person who ever put on airs, possibly because he was too-high too-obviously too-constantly to appear to have that level of presence of mind. It was Bruce's permafried vibe, over any other factor, that blunted the edge Dan would otherwise have stayed on having sensed the invisible threads of emotional control lassoing him toward some outside agenda. It took him a few seconds to process the uncomfortable feeling he paradoxically got from the oddly comforting bubble he'd entered, and his eyes remained locked on the scene on the plate Bruce held. The plate moved: slid into slot, racked to dry. He'd come upstairs anticipating Andre. He'd done it because it was so early and because his bed was an actual piece of garbage and because he didn't know why he lived here and he didn't know what to do about ...anything, or who to ask. Andre was kind of terrifying but somehow that reminded him of teachers, or something. Teachers liked it when you had questions. He'd never been one to ask, but it felt better to ask someone else who didn't really live there. Now his sense of urgency this morning confused him—particularly in light of its rapid diffusion, which left him alone with his inertia to fend against an unexpected audience.

“Hey,” he finally said back. “Want help?” He'd caught himself about to comment *that's ugly*, and the thought of the words settled quietly into the back of his mind. All the dishes were ugly, it was the one way they matched. He assumed help wasn't necessary, picturing himself domestically standing next to Bruce drying dishes with displeasure. By the time highschool had finished, his ex had exhausted her short fuse of craving to cook and clean up together, and instead of getting a dishwasher (which was the next step Dan had imagined in playing house) switched to if-you-call-and-pick-up-the-take-out-I'll-pay, which had seamlessly turned into neither of them eating unless/until they went out—that era overlapped precisely with the coke years

(which weren't any step Dan had imagined). He hadn't helped with dishes in years but it was something he at least knew how to do.

“Nahh, noo. If they're out later maybe put 'em back-away.” Bruce was dancing gently, swaying to some weird ska-sounding sea shanty music he had playing low. Except for the recorded phantoms harmonizing across the dark, they were alone in the big space. In the presence of another person the size of the place and lack of light were somehow unusually pronounced. Partly, he recognized, it was the sound system, which, if he'd heard it from his room at all, hadn't made the same impression it did upstairs. The way the speakers were placed, it seemed like there was an array of them networked through the ceiling from one end of the room to the other, and there were a lot of them, but most of them hissed or quirked, nearing exhaustion. He was sort of impressed nonetheless, moreso by the effect of them all than by the surprise of there being a sound system. Organic and slightly eerie, the distortion added a dimension to the texture of the audio bouncing around the room—the philosophical opposite of home stereo situations Dan had encountered previously. The lines of the room draughted  the music curling its way through it weren't familiar, and now that he had come upstairs to stare accusingly at whoever was up, Dan wasn't sure he could manage being in this yawning cavern acting like a human being at eight a.m. as though he hadn't just exited his personal room in hell. Bruce put another rinsed dish in the metal dishrack and turned around, wiping his hands and forearms on the barcloth over his shoulder. “I haven't seen you much! How are you? Been chillin' in JP's place a lot I guess!”

“Not...” Dan wasn't sure he wanted to talk about it but began to answer right away, before his brain caught up. He didn't get much said, when he thought about what he was saying. Once he heard himself start he realized he'd rather stop. “Not a lot actually. Jean-Paul,” he paused, wrinkled his mouth. He'd caught himself in something embarrassing, having really only said the name to say the name: some infantile urge to reclaim his friend from nicknaming interlopers. “Isn't home much,” he added, finally. What could it matter that “JP” sounded wrong in his ear? They were almost not passable as

friends these days anyway. Dan supposed they hadn't been friends since highschool—and really, he'd idolized Jean-Paul too much then for it to have felt like friendship, in retrospect. What had changed? Nothing. Except this time Jean-Paul had disappeared even faster, verging on immediately.

“Yeah I dunno, I'm sorry. He like, I dunno he's depressed or something,” Bruce was looking over Dan's head and sucked in his top lip thoughtfully and visibly swiped his tongue over it quickly, back and forth. “Something,” he added again, sounding sure. He was *really* stoned, conspicuous to Dan from his glassy eyes and unhurried, contentless speech. His thousand yard stare over Dan's head frosted the popart: High As Fuck. What'd possessed this weed wraith to do dishes—which would've seemed strange at any time—at the crack of dawn?

“Not something you need to apologize about,” said Dan, veering them away from the sensitive-feeling topic of Jean-Paul's depression-or-something. He tried anyway to picture himself being pleasant company without Jean-Paul picking up all the slack—if he found socializing as draining as Dan did, even though he seemed much better at doing it, it was obvious why he was hiding. *Fuck it*, he thought, reminding himself that he didn't care about the issue of whether he and Jean-Paul were still friends. *What were we gonna do anyway, play Magic The Gathering?* That was what they'd done in highschool. Jean-Paul had transferred in, started a band, gained popularity quickly and easily, won a battle of the bands, gotten bored of being in the band, and posted photocopies around the school recruiting anyone with a deck to play in the library at lunch. If it'd been anyone else Dan would have ignored it, no one needed “lunchtime library Magic group loser” under their file photo. But playing a fantasy card game everyone else had discretely forgotten about after middle-school somehow didn't make Jean-Paul seem like a loser. It was probably because he was attractive, and all his clothes were from Montreal, and he had impossible social credit from forming an instantly popular band and getting tired of it first. By contrast but probably just as relevant was his attitude of being completely above considering whether something was cool or not, rendering everything he did unimpeachably and perpetually cool in a

way that seemed poised to collapse but never did. Whereas, for Dan and everyone else he knew, whether something was cool or not—and therefore acceptable and unremarkable to peers—was the central (or sole) issue to be considering, and had life-or-death gravity. Any of them would have been peacocking, in Jean-Paul's place, and actually been poised to collapse, impeached and rendered perpetually uncool, after the inevitable social stock-crash resulted. But Jean-Paul had mastered the complete carelessness of a gradeschool nomad, and the cards just didn't look the same in his hands as they did in anyone else's. The whole concept of a reputation was irrelevant to him and it made him ironically untouchable, which he made no show of knowing but almost certainly did. Most of the group Jean-Paul pulled together stopped bringing their decks to school after he moved, including Dan, whose now-ex thought the game was a tedious and more-than-mildly shameful way to pass time, though she'd admired Jean-Paul without personally knowing him, all the same. Dan'd agreed with her about Magic, in fact. He'd only picked it up again to become friends with Jean-Paul. *Fuck it*, he thought again, *Jean-Paul can be depressed. I don't feel like doing anything anyway*. It was a relief, suddenly. He thought about the times he'd seen Jean-Paul since arriving, those already-fading memories of the encounters last month, when they'd first met up and when Dan had moved in. Jean-Paul had seemed calm, not overly poised but poised, and not unhappy. Maybe he'd expected something else from Dan as a house-mate, when he'd invited him to stay. But, he hadn't asked for Dan's company and Dan hadn't found him in the building, didn't have phone service to text with anymore, and still didn't know the wife, which left him effectively cut off from communicating with Jean-Paul unless it took place on a note slid under his door, which felt desperate, and juvenile. Dan hadn't tried leaving notes. Bruce was looking at him, still dancing a bit, moving his hands vaguely through the air in t'ai chi type trails. "How's settling in otherwise?" he asked. Dan didn't know how to respond so he shrugged. "Did you...did anyone tell you, like, stuff about the place like where to find our horde of t. p. 'n whatever other bullshit?"



“Well. I know where to find ...whatever other bullshit,” Dan glanced at the half-pipe, dimly picturing the bullseye around the poolball stuck in the wall downstairs. Bruce laughed happily and Dan chuckled back, because it felt awkward not to.

“Tee-bee-eff” Bruce over-enunciated, “the living room izzn’t usually trashed,” ‘Kay, thought Dan, disregarding that. It hadn’t changed all month and seemed less trashed than anywhere else above ground level. “But yeah the perverse cellar ain’t Tetris.”

“The...”

“Shoot!” exclaimed Bruce softly, clapping his hand across the low-lying albeit still-ridiculous pompadour made by the alic band. “Shoot,” he said again. “You didn’t get a tour at all, did you? Oh-my-woww that’s weeeird, that must feel *soo weeeird*.”

“Uh, it’s fine,” but Dan realized he was hearing himself lie. “Jean-Paul showed me around his place and the second floor and up here, except—” *wifi*, he suddenly remembered to ask.

“Well you haven’t seen *my* room, have you?”

“No, but—” Dan really didn’t care, but didn’t have available for muster whatever amount of gumption would’ve been necessary to actually derail the conversation, either.

“And you haven’t seen Mouse’s room, or Pete’s, or—” Peter was a name on some of the bills Dan had browsed.

“I haven’t even met Pete. There are three full bedrooms back there?” He peered past the kitchen at the patchwork wall between them and these vestibules.

“Sure, I mean, picture what’s below us, your room is like, what’s out here, and the perverse cellar is, well, you’ve been in there, its basically... that

space divided by three is right above that, and those are our rooms. I seriously— Like— You’ve been here like, over a month now, it’s just—” he ran out of disbelief, then, and stopped making wafting hand gestures before concluding “*bruh*” very seriously and with a subtle accented flourish Dan couldn’t place.

“It’s really fine,” was less of a lie this time, because he was more addressing not-knowing-the-floorplan and less not-knowing-anything-he-needed-to. He was pretty sure he didn’t need to know all the wacky names for all the wacky rooms.

He opened his mouth to ask about the wifi, but Bruce made a motion with his hands like he was sweeping Dan closer and said “no-no-no, it’s kiiinda fuck’t and we’re gonna shower you with knowing, now.”

He’d never, in fact, been accommodated without some underlying motivation ultimately becoming clear, and it made him suspicious of anyone who seemed to be trying unusually hard to accommodate him, doubly so if there was no reason immediately obvious. Bruce was trying so hard to give him information that he couldn’t clarify which information he wanted, which irritated Dan to the point of distracting him from finding it questionable that Bruce was suddenly invested in his existence.

Bruce began to march his pale, unhairly legs toward him and he froze.

"Aren't you cold," he asked, to suggest Bruce put on pants. Bruce stared at him blankly for a second, and then at his own legs, and back.

"Are you?"

Dan was wearing the increasingly-musty clothes he always wore, which were just barely enough in the ambient climate of the third floor, which seemed at least to be very seriously under-insulated. He could have done with

something like a thick sweater, but he said “I’m warm enough,” anyway.

“Meee too,” said Bruce, “prob’ly in the herbal equivalent of a beer jacket after that wake-n-bake... I knew that frankenberry kush’d be like this. But I mean, you’re up too, you know what I’m going through. Like, you know when you just want to go back to sleep, so you smoke some weed, but its just one of those days where it doesn’t work and then you’re hyper-awake *and* blazed? And you’re like, guess you win again, world. I’m gonna go do the dishes.” His slow lulling delivery made it all the more annoying that Dan knew exactly what Bruce was going through because Bruce had inflicted it on him by waking him up, too.

“I don’t,” smoke weed, he started to say, but decided not to bother. That was a boring conversational rabbit hole to dump oneself down with a stoner. And Bruce seemed exactly like every evangelical stoner Dan had ever met. “Have dishes,” he finished.

“What? Use the Maison dishes, just wash them after. Now that they’re not piled up in my room it might, like, be easier.” Dan again chuckled along to match Bruce. “So you got told what-about-what when you moved in? Anything? Nada? I remember I told you the housename...”

“...Jean-Paul asked me not to open the door to my room...” but that was it. “Well! That was nice of him,” Bruce smiled. “But that’s just an instruction, that’s not like, *the story*.”

“I guess.”

“Ohh-kaay,” Bruce moved his head around, like he was looking for where to start—except that he kept his gaze on Dan. “Corral” he added for no reason. He began to shepherd Dan across the room, to the other end of the diy wall next to them. There was a gap where the plywood met, perpendicular to it, a waist-height brick ledge that stuck out of the western wall. “Mind the gap,” Bruce said, nodding toward it.

Dan took it as a cue to climb through, and found himself faced with three doors on the other side, in a meter-wide space between them and the wall. The ceiling was much higher here than it was on the other side, and every surface in the mainly-vertical space that could hold a hook, was covered by something hanging on one. Dan's glance around registered a narrow, gutted dirtbike, bicycle parts, computer stuff, nondescript electrical whatnot, and lots of tools of all kinds. There were carpenters lights with no bulbs and some lit coils of decoratively twinkling outdoor lights—there was actually one glowing white-LED deer close to the ceiling suspended by tape and some corroded-looking bungee cords. In his mind's eye Dan saw a string of animated rats dragging all this stuff into a huge shrub. *Where are the novelty lights in this rosebush? Where're the pink plastic flamingos?*

“The drunk plastic cactus lights are in my room, innn case you were wondering,” Bruce laughed, climbing through the gap gracefully, a clear pro. Dan remembered weird little nooks like this, from houseparties he'd washed up at a few times on the island. All these things came into focus for Dan abruptly, while he stood there: the wall was a retaining wall, to hold trashed people back from the true doors of residence; the bathroom was centralized but discrete, the only enclosed part of the event space—easy to find but hard to hole up in; his room could be safely secured with a board over the hole in the floor, assuming no one wandered down and decided to open the actual door in spite of the clearly-sacrosanct wards slapped along all the junctures of the door and its frame. He should have realized, he guessed, from the dilapidated half-pipe: at some point this place had regularly hosted most of an entire scene, much like the artfully ruinous, installation piece-filled labyrinths he'd found himself in before, drifting past socializers on stairs or in corners as he made his appearance (usually limited to finding a beer, wondering where his ex had gone after they'd shared a wide top-up line in the bathroom on arrival, and wondering when she'd text him to call them a cab). He'd stopped going out to those parties with the understanding that if they were on the flyer it was different. But they rarely had house show sets regardless of

how hard his ex nominally worked to network in the microscenes that spawned the shows; the fact was she just loved being at those kinds of parties, those kinds of places. ‘Maison Rokkoku’ seemed...just as corny as those places had? No, it didn’t—it didn’t really seem as staged, despite the fact that those places had pretty clearly been trying to stage something exactly like it. Here, the accumulation didn’t seem as intentional or as pointless. There was a vague feeling like this might be a space where everything had high utility value or was poised to have. At least there was that. There was, though, his simultaneous and conflicting sense that amotivation was keeping a lot of unused junk floating in orbit around some do-nothings.

Still half thinking about the past, Dan—who had managed to go several days without torturing himself over some new revelation excavated from memories of his failed relationship—realized with a now-familiar sinking feeling that his ex, in all her apparently-fruitless networking, probably hadn’t done any networking. Or, at least, she probably hadn’t ever brought up their duo being booked for a show. The lack of traction hadn’t stuck out to him at the time; it wasn’t her style to push for anything from people she admired, because it made her feel like a try-hard—someone who couldn’t do something effortlessly, or couldn’t make it appear effortless. Something to do with having famed professionals for parents, or divorced parents, or both: she had this weird control issue where she felt like no one could really claim anything they had to work to achieve, it had to be all-without-ever-even-trying—as though effort was a kind of lie about one’s underlying level of quality—so naturally no one was supposed to see her putting work in to promote them. In her mind, it was common sense that if they deserved it, if they were any good at all, it would be obvious to people and everything would just happen for them because it was predetermined, set in irreversibly forward motion by the stardom radiating from them, or something: promoters would call them, useful people would appear and attach themselves to them and help advance them because they were the winning horses anyway. And if that stuff wasn’t

happening? And people could see that it wasn't happening? By making it obvious that it didn't come easily—that it took work—they might as well actually shoot themselves in the foot, was how she'd looked at it. Dan had known intimately that that was how her mind worked, of course, so it'd been easy to fail to grasp the more-likely shape of the matter at the time, and take it at face value that she went to parties alone pretty frequently “to network” without ever ending up with anything to show for it. Maybe what she had to show for it was a breakup and a very supportive piece of “journalism” on a very widely-read entertainment news site. In retrospect it was telling to Dan that she hadn't really complained when he stopped going along with her, though at the time he was just relieved that she felt familiar enough with the faces to need no backup. She was almost cripplingly intimidated by any group of people she didn't know well, but impossible to intimidate once she knew them. Getting her from that point A to that point B had been the largest part of Dan's purpose in her life, which'd been clear to him the whole time. He'd failed to consider that at some point he'd be a point A and someone else would be the point B, taking over such tasks as deflecting her anxieties and calling cabs for her. It was an unfortunately cold comfort that he'd never liked those tasks. “Nice stuff,” Dan remarked, cued by Bruce's expectant smiling face when he looked over at him still perched on the ledge. “Why'd you name the place? I knew people whose parents did that—like *Seabarf* and *Thistlefuck* or whatever.” Classy getaway names for pacrim mcmansions people didn't use as getaways, per se. Bruce laughed gratifyingly at his mocking scorn, which was good, because it meant he didn't think Dan was “too negative” or had “bad vibes” because of his sense of humor.

“I dunno, punx points? It was Toi's idea.” Bruce spoke unusually slowly most of the time, but the spacey tone was there even when he picked up pace. He also seemed to switch gears a lot, from alien to eight-year-old.

“I haven't met. Toy,” Dan said.

“Oh—Toi's gone, I'll fill you in on people-stuff after... but it's Toi's mom technically-ally who owns the whole building except the pottery place—JP

told you about the deal with the—“ Dan nodded and Bruce gleefully added, "it drives her nuts, she can't get them out and she hates waiting. She says if it takes too many more years the bubble could burst before she can cash this one out. But the valuation on it's gone up like, soooooo much since Toi got her to shell out for it—the Junction's changing pretty fast now. Bougier every day, but that's good news to Mama. She's like, this power-bitch real-estater? Wants to demo and sell the lot to some condo company or somethin'. She owns and rents the two buildings next door, too. I kinda think she's the face of some kind of investment consortium? But I dunno really, and Toi doesn't like talking about family shit. Once a year she's in town and she brings us stuff from distant lands and takes me and Toi for dinner somewhere fancy. So we trash the place and she encourages behavior that generates noise complaints, and that's the deal.” Dan nodded.

"And you used to have shows here,” a questioning statement.

“Yyyyyup,” he said it like he was zipping something up, maybe the word itself. “This is where me, Pete, and Mouse are.” Dan nodded again, observing the door of each room Bruce indicated. Bruce's was on the far left, closest to the gap and where Bruce was sitting. In the middle was a larger door than the other two, painted with a black gummy substance that was full of embedded marbles, small toys, trash, and notes calling the unmet Pete various names and describing what people had done without him on such and such a date, including a profusion of event tickets pinned to the door. There was one note that just said “brown bastard” in block print with the post script “whoever left this one fucking fight me” in a different hand and ink below it, and below that, three additional lines on three strips of masking tape reading “I will slaughter your family”, “and clone them and curbstomp”, “your mewling infant forebearers”—Dan didn't intend to probe.

“Pete's probably up, I think he has class today,” Bruce raised his voice slightly and spoke toward the rotted mass of the door.

“What do you want?” came the response from inside the room. The voice had a rubbery, twangy quality Dan recognized instantly—the guy sounded like Drake.

“Pete!” Bruce sounded so happy. “Come meet Dan!”

The door swung inward very suddenly and forcefully and a harassed-looking Pete appeared before them, his expression intense and impatient before a patently false-looking smoothness passed over it like a mask meant to be seen going on. His eyes fell across Dan’s face with a bland look of dislike, as though he were looking at a new townhouse development going in to a vacant meadow and it both disinterested and displeased him. “I *said* I don’t want to live with more white people,” Pete glared at Bruce unheatedly.

Bruce waved his hands in circles a couple times and in a heartfelt tone said “I know, I know, you don’t have to talk to him, but he’s been staying here since like, the start of last month and it kiiinda felt like it was getting weird.”

Pete sighed deeply, shutting the door in their faces before his eyes finished their roll. After a beat Dan looked at Bruce, and Bruce shrugged, unfazed.

“Is he always—” Dan wasn’t sure how to wrap that up.

“Don’t take it personally, obviously. You probably wont even run into him, we all come and go from the fire escape at the back anyway.” A back way in explained a lot about Dan’s experience of total isolation in a house that had more people living in it than he’d even seen.

“Has he been... avoiding me?”

“What? I don’t think he remembered you were here, he’s usually only here if



he didn't sleep somewhere closer to U of T. It's his goal to have a girlfriend in Kensington and hang out at Chimneyfish all day." That was the second bar they'd gone to when he'd been in the market with Jean-Paul; it was a patio-bar and under the name the sign said *smoke like a \_\_\_\_\_ while you drink like a \_\_\_\_\_*. "He used to date a girl in the Annex with parents in Thornhill so he could score Jewish solidarity approval without of the usual rigmarole of trying to date a white girl. The parents were more upset about the breakup than she was, they still send us greeting cards in December." Bruce had opened the door to the room on the left and ushered Dan inside.

Dan sat on the long narrow lounge along the brick western wall. It was the only real furniture aside from a small armchair tightly taking up the rest of the narrow space between the interior dividing wall and the foot of the lounge, in front of the North-facing window at the back of the room. The window was narrow but tall, and looked like the only way out to the fire escape. Bruce leapt into the armchair and settled with his legs crooked to either side of his arms stabilizing him in the middle—Dan was happy to note that he was wearing underwear, realizing the impression that he hadn't been was what had made him seem uncomfortably naked. Over their heads a large cloth hammock was tethered in place like a loft bed, its weight supported slightly down the middle by columns of milk crates stacked and zip-tied so they made shelves. The shelves were full of clothes and cables and other miscellany. Dan saw a lone longboard wheel. There were two shelves mounted on the wall behind Bruce, both loaded with bongos and pipes and similar implements of massive distraction. It felt like they'd come in here because it was awkward to carry on in the hall, the way he'd been gently rushed behind a door implied that it was so they might gossip more politely. "I thought he... doesn't like white people." Bruce stared at him so he said "Pete," to clarify in case Bruce had lost track.

Bruce's expression weirdly didn't change but he blinked and said "yeah, as a group."

Dan decided that he got the gimmick. “So there are exceptions.”

“To like, every rule,” Bruce was very animated and gestural, Dan noticed more acutely than before. He had punctuated the sentence with a wave that meant that what he was saying was self-evident and bobbed his head along with the words, which he did a lot—basically whenever it didn’t seem like he was drifting off to the astral plane, too hazy to be toony. Too alien to be eight. There was a sudden loud blast of music from the next room, and the sound of someone doing whatever was noisy but plausibly undirected. *Oh*, thought Dan, *he’s passive aggressive. And the walls are garbage*. It was comfortingly familiar, somehow. His ex had done the same thing in the spare bedroom they had used as a closet and “studio”. The song changed abruptly, for good measure—a comment in itself—and Dan caught the lyrics to No New Friends, reminding him of earlier when he’d thought that Pete’s voice sounded like Drake’s.

“I guess the conversation’s private now,” he tried to joke over the music. He was feeling defensive, for some reason anxious that, although he hadn’t personally done anything that scanned to him as deserving this kind of ambient animosity, Bruce would do the herd mentality thing and honor his established connection’s obvious display of finding Dan extremely intrusive. Hearing his own awkward attempt at a humorous tone, it sounded like a simper, like he needed to be reassured that he was in fact being picked on and hadn’t actually done anything wrong. It felt a lot by now like he, personally, was being made to feel like he, personally, had fucked up, but Bruce’d said not to take it personally. *If the roles were reversed*, he thought, *I’d wonder why I’m not rolling with this better instead of making it about sides when that just bites me in the ass as the entitled nobody*. He had been completely unprepared to suddenly feel at risk of being asked to leave, but now, suddenly feeling that risk, he realized first that it was actually a high priority reason for hiding and avoiding the tenants, and second, that he’d subconsciously feared

it would go exactly like this when he finally did talk to any of them. Belatedly it occurred to him also that this was part of why originally, when he'd thought it was Andre's noise that woke him up, he'd let his stress push him up his ladder; she didn't live there so why would she care one way or the other that he did? For that matter why did Pete—who never saw him and wasn't around much anyway—care? Aside from, apparently, the principle of it: he wasn't being listened to about who moved in. That clicked for Dan, actually. In strange tandem, the music next door looped back to the first track.

“Don't be so sure,” Bruce didn't sound like he was about to cast Dan out. He didn't even seem overly discouraged by the pointed soundtrack decisions still booming at them through the wall. Dan was sure that if Pete had done this before, he'd have heard it all the way from his room. It was probably true both that Pete was rarely there and that when he was, no one went out of their way to bake his noodle. Probably went out of their way not to. “He thinks it's funny that you have a hemorrhoid, at least,” Dan was aggravated to be told. He made an objecting noise, but didn't have words. Bruce looked at his face, away from the window, and laughed at whatever his expression was. “Oh, sorry. Jean-Paul told us you're an old man already with a bum ticker and a bum-”

“YES THANK YOU,” Dan said over top of whatever mortifying pun had been about to shoot into his brain from Bruce's inane mouth. “WHY—“ he took a breath and started again, modulating his volume. “Why, *how* does. When did...” in horror he wondered if this was gossip making its way from the inevitable source, his ex's inner circle of monied-hipster courtiers back on the west coast.

“Oh, don't you remember? You told him when you two were at the ‘fish that time. He didn't tell us to embarrass you,” he quickly added, “he was explaining how you're funny and he wants you to stay here. He's right—it's

too bad you don't remember the spiel about your butthole, he did like, a reenactment and it was really good." Dan had felt better when he realized he was the source of the gossip, but "better" quickly leveled out when he realized he'd gone all amateur hour the one time he'd been out with the one person whose good graces he indisputably should be concerned about staying in. If things soured and he wasn't able to rely on Jean-Paul when it really mattered, there was no one in Toronto for him to rely on at all. He had no idea how he'd move forward without some kind of social safety net here—he'd probably go back to B.C. and regroup under the obscure pall of his parents seeing him as a drain, a burden, but refusing to say so for long stretches because they didn't want to make things worse. That was how it'd been all fall. No one here had any familial obligation to him, and they seemed unlikely to find recent overdoses very alarming or deserving of special consideration.

"...great." It wasn't bad news, but it didn't thrill him.

"See Pete's doing this Marxist critique of the collapse of the Soviet Union and subsequent trends in Russian culture, for his thesis," Bruce was imagining, apparently, that Dan should know more about how everyone thought it was funny that he had yelled about his rhoid and who knew what else in public. Picturing himself drunk and Jean-Paul tolerantly amused was excruciating.

"Uh-huh," he said anyway.

"Marx had them." Dan knew who Karl Marx was in the most approximate of ways—he'd invented communism or something.

"Marx had what?" Talking to Bruce was intermittently disorienting, and it was in this moment particularly that Dan felt intentionally lead in a circle.

“HEMORRHOIDS!” Bruce yelled gleefully. There was a muffled laugh from the wall and somehow, although Dan felt his face warp into a frustrated knot, the atmosphere in the Maison eased, became less heavy.

“Oh.” Dan felt cranky and so, so tired, suddenly. Bruce’s room was cold with no insulation between the brick and the room, and heat probably escaping around the cruddy looking window frame. There was a space heater at the top of a tower of milk crates next to the hammock, facing into whatever nest Bruce pitched himself into to sleep in. He remembered that was probably where Andre stayed when she was over, that nest. Now he felt even crankier.

“Mouse hates Marx,” Bruce told him. Dan didn’t want to ask why. He wanted, so much, to be alone. Maybe alone in Bruce’s bed, rather than his own. That thought made the weary feeling worse, reminding him of his current routine.

“What’s the wifi,” he asked abruptly.

Without missing a beat Bruce singsonged “we-like-we-like-to-party” at him, and added “all one word lowercase.”

“Thanks.” Now he could find a mattress on kijiji or something. He could find a job. He could find somewhere else to live. He thought about how to extract himself from Bruce’s company now that he had relevant information to lead off from.

“You have to add the network manually,” Bruce’s tone stayed level, which made Dan look at him. He was staring at Dan levelly, too.

“What?”

“The network is invisible. Welikeweliketoparty’s the name, not the

password. There is no password.”

Dan couldn't go online to find out how to connect to an invisible wifi network, so he was probably going to have to get Bruce to show him. He could tell already that it was one of those painfully simple things that anyone who knew how to do already had decided was easy enough to figure out by rapid process of elimination, and would consider asking about it roughly equivalent to the “the files are inside the computer” gag. He gritted his teeth. “I might have to get you to show me how to find it,” wasn't a huge admission but it had taken effort and he felt like he was out, the tank was empty now.

”*Your phone doesn't have data?*“ Bruce goggled at him with a look of astonishment that actually kind of buoyed his spirits, it was so honestly exaggerated. ”*You've been offline all this time?*“ He said offline like it was some weird place. ”But you've been going to the library, right?”

It hadn't occurred to him but he tried to gloss over that with “no library card,” as though that explained why he hadn't being using the internet at the library, instead of raising the question of why he hadn't just gotten himself a library card.

“They don't card you when you go in, y'know. You can get a temporary login, or just bring your phone, there's no members-only policy on library wifi. So wait, does your phone not work at all? Like you have no service here?” Bruce sounded genuinely distressed about this new insight into Dan's day-to-day.

“I ran out of money. Besides, no one would be contacting me anyway.”

“Uhm, hellooooo, how would you know? I kinda think JP thinks you're snubbing him. I thought your phone worked! I'd have done something if I'd known, like I'd have stuck my head through your ceiling once in a while to

make sure you're OK or asked you if you wanted to get groceries or something, gawd almighty. What've you been doing with the time, just walking around getting to know the city? I mean, being broke but mobile is great if you want to tour every grocery store dumpster and church food bank in a two hour radius of the house but, I mean, I'd have been more helpful, if I'd known." That, at least, was a relief, in spite of his alarm against accommodation. Someone was concerned about his wellbeing instead of writing it off as his own problem—it made him feel funny, so he ignored how it made him feel, looking around for something to say. He didn't want to give away the fact that he'd barely left their block; despite how easy it was to get on the subway for free, he hadn't been able to come up with anywhere specific to take himself. He'd rode all the lines one day and decided he didn't even know why, because it was aimless, so he got off back where he started and retraced his way to the Maison without having really done anything. He'd never dumpster dived in his life and had been eating mainly stolen dollar store food, when he ate.

"Thanks," he said simply. He really meant it. "Let me... get back to you. About... all this. I think I should...take a nap, I think," he repeated himself. "I'm feeling—I got up too early."

"Take this! It's dangerous to go alone!" Bruce tossed him half a blunt from out of nowhere. Dan caught it without interest, realizing what it was before he did. He got up, carrying the gift with him despite no intention to actually smoke it.

He wanted to say something kind of catchy in parting, something that thanked Bruce for making him feel ...welcome. "Rokkoku on, Bruce" was all he managed, but he heard the happy laugh behind him as he closed the door.

part 6: if you are what you eat then i yam what i yam, said the magnet on the fridge

February 12, 2016 7:37pm

Tossing and turning miserably had become a gradient fact of trying to sleep on what was in fact just a boxspring; always the case, it gained intensity as the attempt to sleep went on, from a position change every hour to every half hour to every fifteen minutes and so on until the sore bones won out over the gnawing fatigue. Dan opened his eyes and stared at the weird plastic cardboard of the ceiling as the light changed outside again, fantasizing about how he might get a mattress by the next time he tried to sleep, since he seemed bound to get up and find Bruce. He couldn't cab with it if he found one for free, and unless it was close, he couldn't imagine trying to carry even a futon single very far. The problem with hitting an unintended breaking point of physical and emotional exhaustion is that it leaves you unable to push yourself on from that point. Throw in black ice and you might be looking at grave misfortune. He'd been running on fumes when he arrived and those'd been spent on the compounding issues of his irregular eating and mounting hellish relationship with the boxspring. It wasn't cheerful, the mental image of breaking a hip, shaking and groaning on the empty road like an eighty-year-old next to his now-doomed-to-mold fallen mattress.

He felt like he might start bawling like a kid and held it, the feeling swelling up into a hard tension in his face, splashing across it from the inside, hot, like a paintball. He opened and shut his mouth and a small frustrated sound came out. He held his breath until he couldn't and took a deep sigh. Today was the type of day that made him regret never installing any games or ebooks on his phone. He'd been killing time with himself for company and he couldn't hide by sleeping. It had become dark outside again, finally. He thought about the street below, the way the whole neighborhood had a different atmosphere at night with the pavement desolate and the sky inky and leaking



mysterious shadows all over what, in the daytime, was an area Dan would have characterized as “unintimidating” with a general design note of “fugly” with strong hints of “pugfugly.” Maybe he was seeing it through his ex’s eyes. He’d never really developed any sense of aesthetics before immersion in hers. He pictured the area, turning the stretch of Dundas to the end of their block either way from the house over in his mind like a snowglobe scene. It felt less judgmental, or more objective or something, to see it like a 3d puzzle. It was true that it had an old-school look, like first-wave sesame street reruns mixed with bad suburban sprawl. It wasn’t that there was no air of mystery during the day, because there was—they just weren’t particularly enticing mysteries. It was things like, how did a tv repair shop stay in business in the mid twenty-teens? How did windows turn that particular neglected yellow? Were there really enough Maltese people for it to be “little Malta”? Or to keep the Maltese bakery going? Where *was* Malta? Was a retro carwash a viable business *there*? Nighttime, by contrast, gave their neighborhood a kind of sophistication—or at least, what might pass for noir grit to a formerly-smalltime urbanite—that it almost-glaringly lacked in the light. He would have preferred to go out at night anyway because there was nearly no one around compared to the day, but it was much colder at night and Dan absolutely hadn’t come equipped with clothes to layer even one layer deeper, so he couldn’t layer-up and didn’t go exploring.

Right now was a shift he wasn’t usually in the tims for, he realized; he could go in and use the internet without feeling stared-at for always wearing the same clothes and using the bathroom for what seemed like a long time (and lately, without buying anything). Unlikely though it was that he was actually on the staff’s radar, he was relieved by the timing. It didn’t solve the problem of moving the hypothetical mattress, which was what he’d been thinking about when he’d initiated meltdown, but assigning himself a mission felt like traction. He could look up instructions for finding hidden networks, screenshot in case he forgot it as soon as he read it, and come back to the house—as an afterthought he decided to also figure out where the nearest library was, in case he couldn’t get online back at the house and didn’t find

Bruce again before the next day. Bruce had implied there was one nearby but they didn't necessarily share ideas of "nearness." Maybe he'd meant the solidarité branch back downtown. Dan felt like, if that was the one, he probably wouldn't want to go in. Anyone who hadn't adequately picketed whatever or whoever probably turned into a pile of leaflets at the threshold and blew away, or something, even out-of-towners who'd been absent, in another province, addresses many-days-of-highway-away. A local library was worth looking up, in any case; it skirted his tims-related anxiety, plus it was maybe a nicer place to be awake than his room. He was getting ahead of himself, imagining being better-rested and present in his own body enough to spend prolonged times in public. Already he felt a kind-of-reassuringly lively feeling infuse his collection of bones and he entertained a certainty that he'd sit up in twenty seconds. It struck him then how long he'd gone waiting for something to change, for a mattress to drop out of the sky.

"HiiiiiiIIIIiiii," said Bruce's upside-down head, dangling from the ceiling's dark, singular pore. His hair and the fucked up plastic cardboard squares of the ceiling were a few tones off one another but looked, by the understated glossiness of each, to be equally filmed in grease. He was still wearing the alice band.

Dan felt pinned under the pair of eyes now looking down at him, as though they were tiny vortexes he'd been sucked into and forced to watch himself through-him, staring back at him, from below. He looked like a tucked-in child waiting for the light to be turned out. Drawing a deep breath through his nose first, he said "hi," flatly.

Bruce's head cocked and his mouth rumped. "Um, Dan? Were you—did you know-tiss that's just the, ah boxspring?"

"I noticed." He was trying not to sound overtly hostile about it but he still felt like crying, which was vaguely mortifying and made him angry at Bruce

for intruding. No one stuck their head into his room—or at least, no one had. *It's not your room*, he told himself. Bruce was blinking at him.

“Did you...” a long squint, clearly mystified. “I can give you a hand moving one of the spare futon mats up from the cellar?”

Dan's eye twitched, a grimace that only made it halfway across his face. If he'd been a cartoon a vein would have visibly spread into the cornea and inflated his eye until it popped. "There's mattresses back there?" came out squeaky. He felt like screaming. He hated this place. *Worse than a rubix cube*, he silently exploded at Bruce, who smiled down on him sunnily.

"Abba-loot-sa-ly," twittered down from the room above, into which Bruce's head had retracted. It took Dan a second to realize that that meant absolutely. He was still rattled by the fact that the only things between him and sleep had been one wall and any shits given toward furnishing the room, by anyone, including himself. Maybe it was more about his personal momentum and wherewithal being overestimated than about no one else giving a shit. His exhaustion was arguing with a sudden rush of appreciation. For Bruce, or humanity in general, or life itself, Dan wasn't sure. He felt delirious and got up, climbing toward the dark upstairs.

He was brought up short by the sight of Mouse, sitting on a ramshackle sofa at the back of the halfpipe near the wall. He was reading and didn't look up, but his eyebrows quirked once in a "whattaboutit" way. Dan was unnerved, fixating momentarily on the thing Mouse was sitting on, puzzled about whether it had been there before. It looked like a damaged stage prop version of something, like a Trojan horse if it were a dove instead.

Dan hauled himself into the stairwell and followed Bruce to the ...perverse cellar. He would never not-eyeroll at that, and resolved with himself, seeing Bruce climbing over a pile of folding tables, to figure out exactly what was in

here and maybe avoid having to hear or say the words “perverse cellar” in conversation ever again. *That’d be nice*, he thought. *Good to have goals, hashtag*. It still amused him to add “hashtag” after a thought like a daytime tv host unclear on hashtagging procedure, even though it was one of his ex’s jokes.

Bruce was wearing pants, at last, Dan noticed; they were a confusing construction of their own, a khaki frankenstein of imported pockets and reinforcements that looked like a mutated home improvement-type tool belt growing wild, cut off just past the knee. Bruce hung down somewhere out of sight past the tables and made noise like he was expending effort at something.

“Do you need help?” It felt awkward standing around but Dan didn’t feel like jumping into the dim tangle of junk just to be proactive.

Bruce arched all the way back into view, triumphantly holding the end of a futon mat. It was gray and didn’t have mildew stains, and Dan felt a little posie of optimism bloom on his emotional landscape, against his will and better judgment. It was important to remember how sad this all was, he felt; how sad it was how obsessed with the bed issue he was. He couldn’t seem to consistently think about much else that was relevant in the present, besides the bed thing, but thinking about it had gotten him nowhere. Insomnia Solo, frozen in the carbonite of inertia. “There’s more,” Bruce told him. “Y’wanna prince-and-the-pea it? Stack the green up in a minute like heisting the mint, yyyup?” He did a scooping motion with his chin, emphasizing “yup.” Were those lyrics? Dan was really vague about rap. He had ok recollect of top 40 hip-hop hooks but that’d sounded like soundcloud, if that. Too obscure to ever recognize or try to.

“Maybe bring two,” he said, holding out his arms to indicate he was to be loaded down once Bruce had extracted the targets.

Bruce slid out of view again, having dragged the first mattress fully up onto the table tower already. Reappearing with a second, thinner, darker mattress, he made a stupid triumphant fanfare noise like “ba-BA-da-da-DA.”

“Thanks,” Dan said, absolutely meaning it. Bruce shoved himself and both mats across and down off the tables, which creaked. There was dust in the air and a mix of musty smells, as well. A very thin ribbon of fresh, cold air issued from the far wall, where, up above, windows would be in the three bedrooms. There were metal shelves there full of inscrutable dark shapes, and a dark blank space he realized must be a fire exit to a back stair. Probably the source of the draft.

“So JP, I guess, forgot there wasn’t a mattress in the room. But I’m surprised he didn’t tell you to help yourself to anything you need anywhere in the shared spaces—remember I asked if you knew where to find everything?” Bruce helped him centre the two mats across his offered back, after watching him quickly plan with himself how to lug them upstairs. No wonder he’d seemed skeptical of Dan knowing where everything he might need, was: there was a lot of everything to know the whereabouts of.


“I guess I wasn’t sure what that, ah, meant. I don’t ...pay rent. So I feel weird about snooping around ...for furniture or, eating out of the fridges. And it seems like there’s issues with ah, the utilities. So I don’t like using the water. So I haven’t really...” taken a shower, made a meal, gotten eight hours a night in forever, “needed to find anything. Except,” he indicated the mattresses he was snailshell-carrying on his back, by wobbling them.

Bruce made a grumbling noise. “No one ever eats the food. We don’t do servings in the park anymore and I still by habit dive more than we ever make it through. Andre doesn’t empty it out all the time now that it’s winter; you can dive downtown on your own time when the world’s your freezer slash competition deterrent...I get carried away-ay-ayyy...” he ended in a sing-song from behind Dan, who had turned and, looking like a turtle, started

to schlep.

Shortly they were up the stairs and at the hole in the third floor, and Mouse had disappeared again, it seemed. He and his book were gone, though the weird little settee remained. Dan rolled up the mats and shoved them through into the room below one at a time, the width of the larger one especially reminiscent, somehow, of using bread for a hotdog bun, Dan abstractly caught himself thinking. Bruce was looking at him expectantly when he straightened up, and he stared back.

“What?”

“Do you wanna have, like, a warm cider or some stew or like, I’ve got frozen snau-sages ould fry, they’re made with sooo much wheat gluten, I hope that’s ok—”

Dan felt a little pinned, realizing Bruce was acting like he’d figured out how completely incapable Dan was, how utterly he was failing at basic survival through a frankly humiliating combination of pure incompetence, and acute anxiety. He wanted to say no, it was fine, he didn’t need hot drinks or fried fake meats or looking after. Maybe days ago he would have said no, but days ago was the last time he’d ventured all the way to the dollar store for more of the canned chili that gave him the heartburn he’d been ignoring for weeks. He was so sick of boyardee beefaroni, though, and he forgot to steal tums every time he went out.

“Stew?” Dan startled himself by saying anything.

Bruce was bouncing up and down already, his face peeled in a grin that wrapped nine times around, eyes screwed mirthfully shut. “Oh boy, no one ever wants me to cook for them! You don’t know how happy you’ve made me!” He sang-spoke loudly into the air, suddenly shooting across the room and appearing at the sink, already tying on an apron pulled from a hook. Dan

felt extreme apprehension about whatever was about to happen in the kitchen.

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Two hours later they were still talking in the kitchen, ambient dub seeping out of the speaker array and steam still rising from the simmering pot on the stove. “An old eff en bee staple,” apparently, and Dan had appreciated it: three pounds of diced sweet potato and soy sauce in the water for broth. It was ridiculous, he thought, how good a two ingredient stew could be. How hearty and nourishing it tasted. Maybe it was true that food you didn’t have to make yourself always tasted better. He felt like he’d never enjoyed a restaurant meal like this. Hell, he’d never enjoyed a meal at home like this. It felt like he’d never really tasted anything before. He didn’t say anything about it, but Bruce seemed thrilled that he kept going for further cupfulls.

They had managed to gossip their way across the topic of what exactly Jean-Paul did all day that kept him away from his apartment (grindr meets), and onto what exactly had brought Jean-Paul into the Maisonosphere: a band he’d managed after his undergrad spent as a campus radio DJ in Montreal, broke up at a Not Dead Yet aftershow at the old 460. Toi had snatched “JP” out of the wreckage and brought him home like an abused puppy to recover. There was some kind of complicated history between the band members and Toichiro and Jean-Paul. Dan was vaguely aware of the band via photos Jean-Paul ended up tagged in on facebook, but the drama had occurred years ago and had been obscure to Dan up to now. Obscurity was the big benefit of being coolly uninvolved when involving one’s self in social networking online; something catastrophic might happen but it’d be shielded from scrutiny—catastrophe tourism—by your habitual clamed-uppedness. Of course it also meant anyone could say anything about you and have nothing really contradicting it, the slackjaw article exposing him as several things he wasn’t, was a case-in-point. Since Jean-Paul had never regrouped or moved up and out after moving into Maison Rokkoku, Dan could deduce that the band

breaking up had been a big deal. Or maybe whatever Jean-Paul had going with Toi was a big deal. Suddenly he saw a schematic of his situation that made weird yet perfect sense; was he placeholder for his friend's boyfriend? Or love-interest or whatever. And Jean-Paul didn't want to come by the room because of like, memories or something. The mattress being missing took on a new dimension for him. He'd sort of assumed it was a smell issue from whenever ago, like maybe a bong got spilt or someone'd flat out shit the bed for real, but he hadn't deeply pondered it before now.

Bruce had been chain smoking spliffs since he'd first put the stew on, and uncharacteristically, when he'd offered Dan a puff, Dan hadn't said pass. He realized idly that he was overreaching a bit with the theory about Toi, and didn't plan on asking to clear it up. Instead he asked about Mouse, who had slid around the divider wall to claim a thermos of stew and then vanished again without a word. Mouse had what seemed to be a permanently hot pink face, as though he had just finished yelling for an hour. His hair was a salt-and-pepper ashy brown, already greying and with white hairs in the mix.

“His dad's like, from the Soviet Union. Like the actual one, he grew up in Russia in the eighties, apparently. Sometime in the nineties he emigrated, either to the U. S. or here, and ended up here. Not clear whether he's legal or not. No mom in the picture, she took off and left Mouse for dead, basically. Saved herself. The dude is a violent alcoholic. Like never-not drunk, never-not throwing punches. He kept telling Mouse he had mob connections, like you know, The Russian Mob? Ye Olde Russo Mob..ington? Mouse still doesn't know if it's true. He didn't know what to do until he was fourteen and ended up with us—he emailed Toi about t. o. thrashcore and that was it, Toi moved him in.”

“Isn't that, um, illegal or whatever?”

“Thrashcore? Not yet, I don't think.”



“No, I meant, harboring a minor? Or whatever?” he said again pointlessly.

“Sure. I mean, we kept checking the Toronto P. D. website for him to show up on missing persons but he never did. Which, if you’re scared your Dad and his mob buddies are gonna hunt you to the ends of the earth, aka the other side of the six, is not actually the best sign. Eventually we decided to make sure the dude was just a lying psycho and not a “social club” psycho, so we did some investigating.”

That was kind of interesting. “Oh yeah?”

“Sure. I mean, it’s easy if you have friends who don’t have regular jobs. We knew where the dude lived, for starters, and that’s *all* you need. No one ever pays attention to street kids. Undercovers and private investigators do the same thing, its the ultimate invisibility cloak, in the right neighborhoods. Wont work in like, Forest Hills—their little rent-a-cop cars will just circle the block you’re innocently trying to get high on, over and over, so you can’t loiter for shit there. If they see you tagging or pawing through trash or something that’s it, you gotta book. Rent-a-cops are a crap-shoot. You don’t want the one Rambo. At least with regular cops you know to bet that they’re all fucking Rambo. But I’ve seen too many buds get beats underestimating the chutzpah of rent-a-cops. One dude got tied up and security guards hit him with shit, like, they whipped his legs. For fun. They didn’t even arrest him.”

“Security guards where?” A club?

“The arena.”

“Oh.”

“Hey, if you’re not in there making superstar money, at least you can beat the shit out of a poor kid without fear of repercussion, right?”

“Sure.” Dan felt queasy, the whole conversation was just *A Lot*. He didn’t doubt it, although it probably would have made him feel better to. Maybe later he’d decide it was all bullshit, and the queasy feeling would evaporate.

“Yeah well anyway, the dude didn’t even—he was just using Mouse for the services scratch. Mouse was born here, he has papers. I don’t know what weird shit his Dad would have to pull to be a legal guardian without being legally here, but it sounds like his Dad was pulling weird shit all the time? Like all this could be bullshit, y’know, like the dude could be a sadistic liar from Bulgaria, and Mouse wouldn’t know, would have had no way of knowing, ever, prettymuch. That’s how twisted and isolated his life with this guy was. Mouse doesn’t know up from down—like did this tick have a kid intending to use him that way, some kind of live-in torturtainment, no concern over the Mom staying in the picture? Is Mouse even his, like are those his real papers? We at least found out that the guy has super limited social contacts—he’s probably not mob, unless he’s a, like, two-time-a-year hitman or something. No home phone, no internet, never saw him with a burner phone and his payphone calls weren’t juicy. We think he makes all his money now reselling native smokes downtown, which doesn’t scan like a guy with secret hitman money, and the volume he moves isn’t bus-station-organized-crime-ring-warning-ad material. Mouse couldn’t decide how to handle it—if we even could get the dude deported or something just by creating a situation whereby he was under official scrutiny, there’s still that slight risk of him somehow placing whodunit and reaching out through a network of people, you know?”

“Yeah,” *Jesus Christ, is the house even secure.*

“And dealing with it ourselves has real risk, even with a guy like that who

cops wont dig too deep on. Mouse couldn't ever—like I said. It's been six years now. Seven? A long time.” That was a relief. The vague mention of dealing with it themselves wasn't. "Its a big city and we live far away from Evil Russian Dad. And Mouse is smart, he travels in a pack. That's sort of how punk or whatever-else works, at best. Your life sucks and if you find that music or whatever that you feel kindred to then you can find those people who also feel that way and form a squad. For some people it's TV I guess,” Dan remembered his own reliance on Simpsons quotes. "Did you ever watch Law & Order?”

“No,” that seemed almost like a non-sequitur since Dan was pretty sure Bruce wasn't the courtroom procedural type.

“Oh man, I did. That show was huge in my family, and my family's huge. Like I have six sisters and four brothers. We all, like them and me and our folks, watched Law & Order while we ate dinner every night, for years. Practically my whole life before I moved out here.”

“From where?” Bruce didn't have the Scarborough accent but no one else Dan had heard in Toronto did either, besides Pete.

“Maaaaanitooooooba,” Bruce rolled his head backward and forward on his neck. “Mouse's nickname is from a Law & Order episode. About a kid whose shitty Russian dad abuses him.”

“Oh.” Made sense. So Mouse wasn't a teen runaway, anymore. He was twenty, or near to it. The grey hair and stunted stature made sense. Dan had known some short guys with eastern european roots but Mouse barely scrapped five feet. It reminded him of Pete's thesis topic, which reminded him that he still had a puzzled suspicion about Pete. “I don't want to be rude or, or racist or anything,” Dan winced at his own start, “but I still wanted to ask about, why does Pete go out of his way to date white girls if he doesn't

like white people as a group, like if he doesn't want..." another white roommate, why specifically date white girls either. Unless it's about hoop-jumping. Making people dance. Petty puppeteering. Basic usury.

Bruce eyebrows quirked back and forth in amusement, and Dan realized he'd changed topics abruptly, and was outwardly-obviously slightly high off one hit off Bruce's spliff, although he didn't feel it. "He doesn't go out of his way to date white girls, that's the whole thing. He wants to date a white girl he doesn't have to go out of his way for, if he's dating one."

"Yeah but, what's the point? Why not just make things, I dunno, easier on yourself?"

"Because its cute and it pisses off racists, obviously. You can be a little dense, Dan." Bruce smiled at him. "You're a good guy, I hope you realize that."

"Oh." Dan realized it made every bit of sense. There was a romantic element to it that he supposed was what Bruce meant by cute. A Romeo-and-Juliet thing. "Isn't that, like, more trouble than it's really worth?"

"I'm not sure you or I could put a price on what cuteness or pissing off racists are worth for Pete. Its been worth the occasional breakup, worth streetside escalation from cut-eye to words being exchanged, worth feeling like, mortally threatened for, I dunno, bursts of time. Like I said, the last girl's parents still want him to know they remember him coming to their place one time at Hanukkah. Once or twice some skins shouted shit at him and made like they'd crowd him but there were only a couple of them and Pete's ex was, um, anyway, they're both actually good at fighting." *Pete's ex was what?* An Israeli assassin? Dan couldn't remember the name of the martial art they kept bringing up on *How I Met Your Mother*, and it itched at his brain along with the memory of Thanksgiving-marathoning shows he didn't even like, from the purgatorial sectional that dominated his ex's mom's

condo. He'd never encountered conflict in his own relationship that didn't come from its participants. "He hides it under a layer of Patty King and peanutbutter ramen but he's I dunno, like, slightly jacked. He can bench like, what I think is a crazy amount, he totally ripped me and Jean-Paul up at the Y last time."

"...you guys... are gym-rats." Dan tried to picture it and realized it was easier than he'd first estimated; Bruce's muscles, out of view, were not beefy by any means, but he was fight club-ready compared to Dan. Clearly less-Brad-Pitt-more-Ed-Norton, he looked healthy, but like a healthy guy who wasn't shoveling whey powder into himself; that was what muscle guys ruined drinks with, right? Dan thought of the amazon bulk order plastic tubs of sawdust on his parent's kitchen counter, lined up and ready to combat heart disease and other ailments middleaged people combat in their kitchens with tubs of sawdust. Dan thought of the stupid scoop in each container, that just-so scoop for that tub of dust. He thought of his mother telling him to look after himself, like it was as simple as making smoothies and she was ashamed that he didn't know that and wasn't doing it. Like if he would just make smoothies full of supplement powder he wouldn't be an embarrassment. She was sick of him looking so sick, she said in the past, standing there in the kitchen in his memory. Back in the fall. And just that summer, he'd been in the same routine of a relationship—living in the same apartment he'd been living in—for nearly a decade. Dan reeled into the present, away from the inward reverie he'd sunk sideward into. It occurred to him suddenly that, although when he looked at Bruce he saw a slightly unhealthy-looking specimen, a faint echo of some rerun p.s.a. about the dangers of drugs...in reality, Bruce was really obviously in much better health than he was, on every level. Dan was the p.s.a. guy, he just didn't see himself as the guy central casting called when they needed someone who looked like they were supposed to be partying with Scooby Doo. He was projecting, and as quickly as he realized it he decided not to think about it. It was just habitual insecurity, maybe, if he didn't confirm his self-doubt by really dwelling on it.

“Do I look like a gym rat? Am I ...a Chad?” Bruce was modest too, which was the worst. Just a great, honest, modest, upbeat ...lowlife weirdo. Dan couldn't wad together any loathing for him because of it—actually, he realized he was glad for Bruce that he looked moderately “well,” which was uplifting because it surprised him and made him feel big, or at least, not petty. *I used to kind of like feeling petty*, he realized. Petty was something to feel, anyway, which was better than feeling nothing, or worse, angsting. Maybe he'd gotten in the habit of seeing people as a distraction from his inner world—a sideshow of figures to mock, or scorn so he implicitly felt better about himself by comparison. He felt like he'd picked it up from his ex, mainly, but it was the overall tenor of most of the social scenes he'd brushed with through his late teens to now. It was a habit of perspective at-odds with distracting one's self from one's self with ...friends. He decided to make a joke and put one hand over his eye like he was taking an eye test, looking to see if Bruce was a Chad. Bruce laughed and sort of waved his laugh aside to allow himself to continue, saying “Pete was just showing us how to do shit a few times because it's good to know how to lift properly and all that. Gotta stay aheadda the law, y'know.” He made a gesture with his hands like he was jogging. Jog-jog went the loosely balled fists, and Dan traced their circuit in the air with his eye, realizing he'd left his hand over the other one longer than necessary because it felt good. He dropped his hand compulsively quickly and was equally frustrated with himself for that awkward gesture, although Bruce didn't appear to notice. He was sort of talking into the air. “He goes to the gym about once a week, on campus. We don't, we live further from a cheap gym, and it's really confusing to get welfare to cover it. But Jean-Paul and I both have like, weights and shit here, and there's always y'know, the-world-is-your-gym. Obviously none of us are in great shape, neither are you. You're looking borderline skeletor, no-offense-no-offense-no-offense.” Did it work when you said it three times fast? Dan had never tried. He was offended, after checking with himself, so, no, it didn't work. So he looked more like a guy in a CK ad than a supplement ad, so what. “I don't want to

tell you how to live your life but, malnutrition and inactivity aren't doing your heart any favors. If you want to wake up dead of a massive heart attack before your mid-thirties that's, y'know, what you want. But if you don't want..."

"I get it." It reminded him of Mouse, who, when you looked at him, looked both younger than he was and older. "So, Mouse and Pete hang out, and Pete's thesis is about..."

"Yes!" Cheered Bruce. "You got it. Pete and Mouse have known each other a long time."

"But, you said Mouse hates Marx and it's... Marxist?" He suddenly wasn't quite sure he wasn't making some error of grammatical logic.

"Well yeah, Pete would tell you the actual name, I just tried to sum it up, but basically although they agree about how the Soviet Union sucked and post-Soviet Russia sucks, Pete thinks its because they weren't good Marxists and Mouse thinks its all Marx's fault for being vague and half-baked when he said communism was whatever happened after the workers seized the means of production."

"Oh." Dan thought he probably agreed with Mouse, and in the most abstract way it crossed his mind that he might like to investigate more deeply and confirm it. He wasn't terribly interested, he realized when he considered reading some relevant wiki entries. He'd learn more by being around the group, or he wouldn't. Information was easier to remember and synthesize into the general architecture of his understanding of the world when it wasn't words on a screen or presented in a repetitive, hypnotic environment. He had hated school and still felt like climbing out of his skin in any school-like atmosphere; he wasn't the "get high and watch old Bill Nye" type. He wasn't sure Bill Nye had ever explained Marx but he couldn't rule it out, either.

History was science, right?

A small camera on a stick stuck through the floor, pointed at them. The beams there were exposed but it hadn't occurred to him that there was a hole all the way through to the floor they were on. "Marx was a bad Marxist," the cartoon-bright-and-wonky voice carried distinctly through the floor, and the camera bobbed back out of view, probably held like a boom-mic and not automated. A supercut of movies pulled from Dan's memory appeared in his thoughts like jetsam tossed up on a beach by the surf: The Goonies and The Sandlot and Short Circuit. Contraptions, was the theme; gadgets.

He waited until it seemed like Pete would have left if he wasn't just sitting below them listening. "What was that about?"

Pete appeared at the stairs right then and waved the camera at them on its stick. "Got a commish off the cryptid bounty forum, for footage of mysterious cave-blind savages," he grinned and seemed to be in a good mood, so Dan felt unoffended. "Its for a squatcher who specializes in lazy white apes, I don't expect you to comprehend the subtle finesse required by the market I'm after, here. This shit has to be blurry just-so." Dan assumed Pete was doing something else with the camera. School stuff maybe.

"The stew's good," he tried, testing the waters. Telling someone food was available to be eaten had to be the most neutral conversational move one could make, in most circumstances.

Pete swung past the stove and turned his nose up immediately, exclaiming "ugh" in Dan and Bruce's direction before departing the same way Mouse had, through the gap.

"Like I said before-or-or, no one lets me cook for them anymore-or-or," whined Bruce. "They're tired of my faithful repertoire of incredibly simple



one-pot meals. But do they ever bring in anything exciting to make? *Nooooo*. Do they ever cook enough for everyone? *Nooooo*.” Bruce finished rolling another spliff and set it on his lip, pouting. Harrumphing exaggeratedly, he sparked it.

“Mouse let you cook for him today,” Dan reminded him.

“No, Mouse *had some* of what I made, he didn’t let me cook for him.” Dan squinted at him and he continued, “if I’d asked him if I should make it—like if I’d said, *should I make this for you, will you have some*—he’d have said *no*.” He waved his hand. “Its not the same. He didn’t even want that thermos of it, he was just hungry.”

“It was really good stew,” Dan reassured him.

“I think so too.” Bruce made a living-with-it face and Dan smirked back, relaxed and warm.

part 7: hip to the javabean  
February 13, 2016 3:00 pm

Before parting ways, Bruce had invited Dan to head downtown for coffee the next afternoon, when Andre was on shift at the place he’d stood in the doorway of in Kensington, back at the start of the year. Now that roughly 20 hours had passed, Dan questioned his own judgment in saying yes. Must’ve been a stupefying effect of not being hungry. Nonetheless he found himself on the ladder, climbing up.

Once his line of sight cleared the floor he looked quickly at the settee in case Mouse was haunting the halfpipe again, but there was no one.

“HAY!” yelled the kitchen. It was Bruce, and at the view of him bustling

around, Dan felt suddenly tired, and so close to the room he could disappear into for real rest, finally.

“Hey,” he tried to sound friendly anyway, instead of worn out.

“I was going through the bills here, it looks bad but I think we’re all caught up actually. These are all old, from when there was more people here and shit was getting kind of sour and Pete was the name on the bills so he was getting severe about the whole thing. We just never took the warnings off the fridge after the skids scarpered. Jean-Paul paid the whole thing and we’ve been good since then.” Dan nodded and climbed fully out of the floor, already overfamiliar with the bills and avoidant of the news about them. “It’s just that, you were saying you didn’t want to use utilities and stuff.”

“Oh,” he wandered up to the counter and took one of the spindly barstools. The same one he’d sat on for soup. He wanted to apologize for snooping, but didn’t.

Bruce stopped bustling—he was rearranging dried goods, trying to accommodate something he’d found, presumably—and caught Dan’s line of sight. Dan felt like he was being measured and dropped his eyes. “I was thinking, since you want to go in on your portion of the bills,” Dan looked up at him, sudden-onset deer in the headlights panic hitting. “That you could just do thirty dollars of music production for me every month, for my show. Or, that is, like,” he looked at the ceiling, and then at his hands, working his fingers like a fleshy abacus. “Uh,” his fingers flexed, dialing the air for the needed data. “half-of...is...you have to do ...like... an hour a week at old minimum wage.”

“Show?” Dan was ahead of him on the math, and so immediately, eminently relieved by the figure put on whatever-the-bills-were-per-month divided-by-plus-one, that he was nearly caught up to being distressed about his acute non-competency, either musically or at producing, former “career” as a “DJ” notwithstanding.

“Yeah, you know, Thuh Dope Show,” Bruce effused at him like he obviously already knew. Dan stared at him pointedly to let him know that no, he didn’t obviously-already-know. He waited until Bruce noticed his pointed stare,

and Bruce's fish-face sort of made up for something. "Oh," Bruce blinkingly, mouth-agogingly finalized. "You didn't know I had a show."

Somehow too-familiar with this particular moment from the holding-a-beer-for-an-appropriate-amount-of-time-someplace days, Dan guessed "youtube? ...twitch?"

"Nawww! Noooo, it's like, a podcast? It started as a podcast. It's on a bunch of— Andre crossposts. And sometimes we do—there's like a rolling-frequency-pirate-fm that covers part of the city, once every two weeks, we do a thing with a genie and a bike cart and i-can't-believe-you-didn't-know-this! Jean-Paul— well whatever. The podcast is how I met Toi, and—I mean, I was doing it from before I moved out here, there's like, hundreds and hundreds of episodes."

"Oh." Dan wasn't prepared to be impressed at all. It seemed to him that what Bruce was saying was, he actually, factually, truthfully had a dumb hipster funemployment "career" to promote, coupled with a level of individual motivation and talent insufficient to do his own audio work. "Listen, I'm not a professional...anything. I don't know what you need doing but—" Bruce was handwaving him.

"Dude, dude, listen. Just listen to a couple shows, I'll send you links, whatever you make will be fine, I have total confidence. I just want some weird shit that sounds kind of like music people have made me before. Or not! Seriously, whatever you think is like, on point. Whatever seems like, yeah, this is the music for this show, y'know?"

"And it's called... Thuh Dope Show?" Stoner talk radio—he could probably cough out something kind of psy-whatever-y enough to fit, actually. Five minutes of repetitive freestyle with a synthy chime and if it sounded bad, make it five times slower and trim for time. Somehow Bruce's blind sunny optimism made him want to see if anything-goes was really what he wanted. Which was a ridiculous impulse in light of the part where he was looking seriously at paying his "bills" in anything-goes.

"Yeahyeahyeah, it's like... a philosophy variety-show? Someone called it the electric psychonaut swinger's club? I don't really get it, it's not a very sexy

show... but I guess people kind of use the facebook page as a d&d hub.”

“Like...the rpg?”

Bruce laughed “Dating and drugs. Helps keep the bunz group a bit less hectic I like to think. There’s a reliable listenership and we do a meet-up at High Park every year on May fourth...it’s like a little community contingent thing. The same thing kind of happens at the Bellwoods punk picnic but the faces are different, mostly. Actually it happens at pride and May Day and—” “You don’t meet on fourtwenny?” Bruce shrugged, now watering some of the vertical garden, shuffling leaves aside for the baster he was using to add water from one of the two filter-topped pitchers—the one that lived near the plants, on the counter. “You ever do livecasts with like, guests or whatever?” Did he do mail segments? Dan was actually interested now; Bruce had something going on beyond megastoner-dumpster-diver-and-welfare-recipient. But maybe that was all he talked about on his show, too.

Bruce seemed infused with more enthusiasm, and began to bounce slightly in place in front of the sink. “Oh-man, I loove plans to use the space!” Dan didn’t think he’d said anything like that. “It’s been a suuuuper long time since we did anything like that. Toi and Andre used to get into these—well nevermind. That all was when Toi was still here, it’s been so long since Andre was producing me without a regular co-host now... Y’know none of us really make music or play anything or anything, if you wanted to DJ sets like, I could structure a show around—”

Dan cut him off, because the whole thing was sounding dangerously proactive and over-ambitious suddenly. “Jean-Paul was in a band, in highschool. And didn’t he put together playlists for a radioshow in college? Didn’t he host it? I mean,” Dan was just catching up with himself. “Does he not help with your show?” Bruce hadn’t mentioned anything about him but it seemed strange, now that he recognized it.

“Ohhh...JP’s been totally opted out on that, or like, music-anything, producing-anything, stuff-he’s-running-from-anything, since he moved in. I bet if you got him involved—and, oh! If you wanted to do some kind of like, grey album type fusion with some grindcore guys, Mouse might be able to

talk to a couple friends...Toi used to be really, rrrreally into this like, Japanese-influenced thrash micro-scene based out of the annex? There's this hardcore venue that's usually a sushi place. Melt Banana played there! We hosted a couple shows, locals only, but then someone fell into your room and broke her shoulder or something, and Toi kinda left before we got around to feeling dumb enough to do it again. There's insurance but Toi says mommy-fiercest would kick us out before the settlement cleared if it got to that. But I'd love to help if you wanna get something like, more in your own wheelhouse going at some point, like apart from my thing. I'd pound the pavement, put up fliers, whatever. I could put the word out on the podcast... if you wanted an island of misfit music type event, no doubt we could get some noise artists to uncave themselves," he concluded, laughing.

So Jean-Paul found Bruce overwhelming too. Or maybe he really did just avoid anything like what he'd already done. That didn't necessarily seem to Dan like Jean-Paul was running away. Weren't you allowed to just move on—weren't you supposed to? Like there was an expectation in place that everyone always failed—you were supposed to move on, but people rarely seemed to. Dan wasn't so good at it, so far. But Jean-Paul was. He'd been so decisive when he'd broken up his band, though in retrospect it had absolutely been a silly Bauhaus-clone with literary pretensions and therefore noticeably worse lyrics, and if Jean-Paul had never lost interest in batcave revival he'd have been one of those guys that everyone who stopped maturing in their twenties felt superior to for the rest of their lives because he'd started a band when they were kids and stuck with it. But at the time, from the perspective of someone a year younger who wasn't in a band but had seen lots of shows and movies about highschool bands and felt that Quothnevermore did an unembarrassing job of embodying the cool parts, they had kind of been the living end.

Dan took that thought as a segue point and reoriented himself to exit the conversation somehow while being minimally committal obviously enough. He felt slightly adrift, like he'd been issued a challenge to stage a show that night in one or all of three genres he knew nothing about in a city he'd been

in for...well, maybe a while now. Maybe it was strange how much of a stranger he still was. Bruce was doing him a big favor, or trying to. "I don't think I knew you had a podcast," he said. Everyone in Victoria had a podcast. No one ever went outside. Dan didn't go outside either, and he'd never had a podcast. Who was going to listen to some asshole DJ's podcast? "Haaa," said Bruce "yeah man, it's Andre's baby now, I just host. Well, and all the hardware's mine. See I'm from like, in-the-middle-of-Mani-frickn-toba, right? All my siblings and me grew up playing around on our folk's radio transmitter, and being captain millennial or whatever, when I was in grade nine I started doing digital recordings of me messing with the local airwaves. I skated a lot, smoked my Dad's weed, and listened to NOFX. That's what the show was about. Toi messaged me a couple years into me archiving it on my Myspace." Dan snickered. Myspace kids. "It used to be called The-PurpPower-Hour, and when I moved out here we started it off as just like, a standard stoner shit-shooter, me and Toi. Toi's Sativa Cyborg and I used to go by Buddie, but we kept fucking up and using my name. After Toi left to go take care of dying divorced Dad in Japan, Andre and I decided to rename the online show but the episode we broadcast on fm is still secretly the PPH like, in memoriam. Or, the name's like, on ice, but—hey shit, you get high right? You should be on the show this week!"

Dan existed in a living moment of Oh For Fucks Sake Please before muttering out a "maybe." Weed wasn't going to kill him—one doctor had said he could have a compassion club voucher or whatever filled out, even. But Dan didn't want to get high for five high dweebs to download and giggle to on the bus. Then he wondered "what would we talk about," out-loud. "Oh, well, you do make music right? Like, you were DJing in BC, is what JP said. So maybe you could like, talk craft. I love people talking about stuff they're moved to do, y'know? Plus if you're, y'know, really into getting events going on here, it's like I said—good way to get the word out." Dan felt his face looking gray. "Mostly me and whoever's guesting get reallllllly high and talk about, you-know, all-of-it: life, the universe, everything—the holy shebang."

Dan looked toward the hole in the floor across the room. “Speaking of... really high. I’m gonna hit the bong and take a nap, I think,” he said. “I’m feeling—I got up too early.”

Bruce nodded sympathetically and said “I’ll try not to forget to finish catching you up later, D, next time I see you,” and turned to one of the fridges. Dan fled down to the pit. His room had different air than the main floor, reminding him vividly of the daycamp hall’s basement he’d hung out in the summer before highschool. He stretched out on his not-horribly-stained gratis mattress stacklet and felt smug about not owning a bong.

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About four hours into what felt like his deepest sleep in many weeks, there was stomping and an unfamiliar buzz of familiar voices. Andre, and Jean-Paul. He noticed the buzz before realizing what had ended his nap; the culprit’s inanely excited expression greeted him from the ceiling, Bruce’s disembodied head again appearing above him.

“Hey,” he said to the head.

Dan was all the way up the ladder when he realized Bruce must have seen that he didn’t have a bong, but somehow he didn’t feel caught out. Probably because “leaving to hit the bong” felt like something Bruce would take as a general, if not literal, status summary. The bong didn’t need to be a bong. It didn’t need to be anything. He could have said he needed a kitkat bar and it would have meant the same; a break. He felt like another break, seeing Jean-Paul and Andre pleasantly chatting in the kitchen, drinking chai. He could sense their underlying not-quite-distance not-quite-friendship from the way they talked and the duration and frequency of their eye contact, and it reminded him of being out with people in his ex’s circle. He blamed Andre, immediately, because Jean-Paul had never left him with an impression of resembling anyone he’d met in that scene, in any way, let alone their petty socialista poses of “modest glamor” and so on. She laughed at something Jean-Paul said under his breath and Dan felt a gauze of negativity wrap around him.

“What’s funny?” He had meant that to sound some other way. Less like

asking if they were laughing at him, for starters.

They both looked at him exactly like he had asked if they were laughing at him, which was embarrassing and embittering. It'd just compound things to bail after that; he was locked in to being human until someone else called off the visit, to show he hadn't thought they were laughing at him and wasn't intimidated anyway.

"Someone who hates being laughed at," said Jean-Paul, and Dan stalled, not fully in the kitchen and not really anywhere else. But Jean-Paul glanced significantly at the divider wall obscuring the back bedrooms, and Dan felt himself flop out of defense mode instantly.

He wanted to clarify whether they were talking about Mouse or Pete, but took the cue not to. He caught Andre's stare from behind the mug she held up to her face, feeling the heat with her hand wrapped in a curlicue around it, elbow supported from below by her other hand. "The new man in the house appears," she said quietly. It reminded him of meeting Pete, although he'd already met Andre, and he frowned but immediately thought better of frowning and felt his mouth summersault through an attempt at an abashed or apologetic look.

"Yeah," he said. He sort of tried to shrug towards his room, the words it would take to explain all that lost sleep, muffled into nothing by the same phenomenon. "The newest new guy."

"That makes you third generation," she sounded smug which was annoying, but Dan assumed it was a joke. "Jean-Paul and I're second."

Jean-Paul scoffed then and Dan was relieved to see him roll his eyes as he informed her "you're making us sound like a coven of vampmasq larpers," adding "please don't," when she looked at him. "You don't even live here, ancient one."

"You don't need to be so ...pointed," she laughed, but Dan felt like there was real reproach there. This was exhausting.

"Am I first?!" Bruce had run up the halfpipe and been sitting at the end nearest the kitchen, mucking around with something metal. Now he hopped off, landing with a neat thump, calling Dan's focus away from kitchen. In



fact Dan had been waiting for something to draw attention and give him some privacy with his desire to be elsewhere. Anywhere, but mainly, asleep. Bruce was compressing a vaporizer bag, Dan realized; he folded the cellophaney material over three times and passed Dan to rinse the mouthpiece attached to the bag, which he left drying in the dishrack next to the previous day's dishes. Dan glanced at Andre again. She was wearing a stringy pile of unfinished cotton over a black athletic bra, her lipstick matched the bra, her mascara and eyebrows matched the pile. The black short-shorts, holey thermals and combat boots were more de rigueur. Expected. The black jelly choker was a bona-fide neoclassic cliché. What he actually liked, the thing that still stood out to him about her, was her hair, the two-tiered black-and-platinum flat-ironed-and-feathered thing, pure scenekid circa forever-ago, it reminded him of girls he'd stared at in malls in middleschool, wondering if highschool would be full of living bratz dolls. All together she looked overdone and too stand-outish, he felt. Like someone trying really hard to be fashionable, and succeeding, but the effect being moot in light of the obvious effort in the attempt. Jean-Paul just looked ... stylish, somehow endlessly tasteful. That was the issue, in fact. Andre's outfit had a kind of midway-ride operator vibe that made him think less of her for putting it together, especially in the winter. Like it was one step off wearing hotpants and one of those airbrushed t-shirts with the bottom torn into fringe and knotted with dayglo beads. Hooters, if Tim Burton ran the franchise. Jean-Paul only ever wore very simple, fitted, neutral-dark clothing. In the winter, he wore more.

"Yes!" she sounded cheerful and fresh, and Dan smiled because of it, although it was directed at Bruce.

"Oh hey! Dan! Well, what's the news from planet Dan?" Bruce had forgotten he was the one who'd made Dan get up, apparently.

"Uh, ground control finally got in touch and said I might want to head to coffee with ...everyone."

Bruce did a spit-take with the chai he'd just swigged. "Ground control!" He was screaming laughing. The other three stared at him.

Finally Jean-Paul said, “oh, a pun,” and that was that.

“Actually, also... I need to find out how to work this sink.” Dan initiated a new topic, weirdly embarrassed to have punned accidentally but unsure if it was because puns were embarrassing or not noticing was. Was it a floor pun?

“I didn’t show you how to work the sink,” Bruce sounded puzzled but it wasn’t clear whether he was asking or telling. Dan decided to answer it as a question because that was all that made sense conversationally.

“Yeah, but I think I...well, I’m not actually over the whole what’s-up-with-these-taps part, yet. So yeah. I, y’know.”

“So you never even showed him how to work the sink,” there was that reproachful tone again, but Dan couldn’t tell whether it was directed at Bruce or Jean-Paul. “What’ve you been doing all this time? I feel like I haven’t seen you since we met,” Andre asked him, almost certainly aware that they hadn’t seen each other at all since then even though she’d been around and he’d been around.

“I’ve been around. Meeting ...people.”

“Well you still kinda have to meet me,” Andre sounded a little coy, possibly, and Dan leaned against the counter, maintaining eye contact, arms crossed next to the gently steaming pot of tea.

“I’m...pretty slow to meet people,” he said.

“Well, we’ve got time—are you comin’ back down to the market with us? You’ll get to meet my roommate Andreah, too. Meeting overload!” Andre waved half-jazzed jazz-hands at him and he smiled. If Andre had elected to work there, probably the place was high in anti-frills snob appeal—the name suggested as much. Would it be half full or half empty?

“I’ll try to contain my crippling hatred of fabulous baristas.” Andre seemed moved neither by the joke as a piece of humor or as a nearly-deflated-of-flirtatiousness piece of flirtation, so he decided to keep quiet and hope someone took over the conversation.

“We should dive on the way, s’why I came up here, it helps when we’ve got extra hands,” Andre said, mainly addressing Bruce.

“Yeah, totally—oh, we should do the food talk with Dan while I roll some on-the-roads,” introduced Bruce. He bounded off to the halfpipe and back, holding a rather large bag of weed, pulling papers out of a pocket on his utility pants. He began to minister to the weed, grinding it in a handmill and rolling as he talked: “I eat what I’ve grown or what someone’s thrown,” he said.

“Ah, I only eat what I steal,” Dan told them. It was more or less true, although since arriving he’d sprung for tims several times, and the odd item from convenience stores, which unlike big chain dollar stores never struck him as safe targets for pocketing. They didn’t have no-chase policies, for starters.

“Shoplifters of the world unite and take over,” laughed Jean-Paul, and Dan echoed the laugh appreciatively. The baseline from *Girlfriend in a Coma* played in his head, though, and continued in a loop.

“I try to only buy and eat local artisanal foods when I can,” supplied Andre. She sounded sort of judgmental.

“I count as a local artisan,” Bruce chirped.

“I try not to poach too much from B,” she was quick to add, and there was that tone again, was it supposed to warn him not to eat the stored food? “But, I don’t have the garden space to do the heavily seasonal thing yet, like he does.” The windowsill basil? Some garden. “I go to a friend’s place for fresh greenhouse stuff right now, whatever I don’t get from B’s dives or the market on bin night. I mean there’s the whole issue of how they’re fueling the power for their greenhouses through the winter months—enbridge—but the reduced cost to the environment in terms of shipping fuel is, in almost every case, significantly in favor of local high yield-oriented organic producers.” Dan felt exhausted. Fucking food Olympics, Jesus. It was so suburban.

“So you guys are vegetarian, or...?” he asked.

Bruce looked contemplative and said “functionally, I’m like, mostly vegan. I don’t really subscribe to the vegan ideal though, I find it’s sort of...

restrictive, spiritually? Not very Buddhist of me,” he concluded in a weirdly dreamy tone, not sounding like he was finished his thought. Dan caught his

mental eyeroll and felt that Bruce's stance, while not much of a stance per se, could've been anticipated.

"I'm not vegan," said Andre firmly, and Dan felt, for the first time strongly, like there was something to attach to about this girl. "Not all the time. You just try to pry my fucking cheese away—"

"Not from my cold, dead hands!" she and Bruce chorused, and Dan recognized it immediately as Charlton Heston in *Bowling for Columbine*, he'd watched it in grade eleven history. He and Jean-Paul both laughed. "So people throw food at you often?" he asked. Jean-Paul laughed again, harder, which was gratifying.

"What?" Bruce sparked one of the four joints he'd rolled and looked confused, combing his hand through his hair and scratching at the back of his scalp. Dan remembered the color of the malted chocolate frozen dessert singles that'd been sold at his middle school cafeteria, the ones with those small, flat wooden spoons.

Andre rolled her eyes and said "your rhyme, babe—he just meant he, and I and most of the Maisoneers, eat freegan for as much of what we eat as possible, if that wasn't clear. It's exercise, it's fun, it's impossible to afford to eat otherwise. And it keeps the landfills that much less overflowing!"

"It's a health-risk," Jean-Paul said primly.

"Don't you work two jobs," followed up Dan.

Andre's eyes narrowed at them, the first time she'd seemed angry at Dan directly. "And?" She sounded hostile.

Another joint rolled out of Bruce's fingers and he waved at them. "Two jobs two days a week each. Couriers don't make minimum hourly wage sometimes, people don't tip much for coffee. Andre makes about three hundred a week max, and their rent on that place is eleven hundred a month. So halve that, then add bills, student loan debt, necessary medications and other healthcare expenses, and what're you left with. Zip. JP...tends to stock the necessarily purchased here, along with all the gourmand-gourmet items that live downstairs. Our very own tofurky-and-veganaise-vegan."

"Ah," said Dan, because it seemed like a casual enough thing to say. What

did one say to that? He wasn't disgusted by their habits, particularly, and he wasn't interested, either, because he'd more or less been aware of all of this, or else found the details unimportant to know. He felt, now that they'd had this talk, sort of counter-intuitively like it was really pretentious of them.

"Anyone else a non-mivore?" he asked, wondering who else was home right then. Andre smiled at his play-on-words and he felt a bit of reinvestment in the conversation take root.

"Yes," Jean-Paul redirected, "these days I'm all about making empty consumer choices with a tastily intangible glaze of ethical pandering, as noted," he sounded amused and not at all peeved. The humorous vegan.

"Whereas...Pete," he stopped, with a pucker of distaste on his small mouth. Bruce breathed out a wad of smoke, dropped another fresh road joint to the counter, and said "—is a bustin' ol carnagevore. He'd probably gobble you up, if you had a cute lil tail," he said to Dan, and laughed.

"Yeah, I'd watch yourself around Pete, tail or not" Jean-Paul sounded irritated.

"Aw, dude, c'mon," Bruce, for the first time since Dan had met him, sounded hassled.

Looking nowhere in particular, Dan could see that Andre seemed low-key hostile. Directed elsewhere it was cuter than it was disagreeable. He thought he was starting to see how, to enjoy Andre's company, you had to think volatility was endearing. Or at least be like Bruce, and not notice it. She did a good job of playing it off like she had some kind of repose, but it was an underworked attempt at a front. Dan felt much less intimidated, having arrived at a perspective from which Andre was perfectly uncool. It made her much more relatable, but he also felt let down. She wasn't very mysterious, really, and mysteriousness had been her major feature in the underdeveloped mental image he'd worked up.

"You come on," she told Bruce, more neutral than Jean-Paul. "We should leave." And she began to leave. Guess I don't find out if or what Mouse eats when its not crewfeed time with Mama Bruce, thought Dan. *Steady diet of expired cup noodles*, he guessed. *Cup borscht?*

On the landing right above the stairs Bruce and Andre suited up in big coats and Dan passed them to grab his coat from the peg he'd left it on on the second floor, approximately parallel to his bed and far from the actual door. When they came down he saw that Andre had put on a pair of thick exterior pants, over her shorts. Toronto, he thought. Jean-Paul followed along after them, lighting a cigarette.

"Are you wearing an outside outfit?" He asked Andre, meaning to tease a bit about practicality. She opened her mouth to answer, looking fit to argue, but Bruce interrupted.

"We've definitely reached critical mass whiteness here, maties," his hands danced through the air, joint accompanying, spelling out the words distinctly in an unknown sign language. Jean-Paul and Andre both strafed their lines of sight ceilingward, which Dan caught out of the corner of his eye as he turned to watch Bruce shimie away from them, suggestive of departure.

Out on the street Jean-Paul noted "that girl threw him out," conversationally. It sounded like a statement, so at first Dan thought Jean-Paul was informing him; he tuned in to the conversation in case he was being prompted to engage, and realized the statement was a question, directed at Bruce.

"He's always around more after a break-up," Bruce spoke toward the cloud above them, as though he weren't gossiping, or even replying. Just out conversing with ghosts, apropos of nothing.

Dan was almost certain by now that Mouse was not the topic of interest today.

"And doesn't that frost the popart," Jean-Paul jabbed.

"Yeah," Andre picked it up, in a diffusingly comedic tone. "I mean he's sweet enough but when he's hidin' in his room all day, extra riled?" She blew a kiss wide, swinging her arm with a "MWAH." Dan smiled at that, finding it legitimately funny. He felt better about how Pete didn't like him.

"Guys," was all Bruce said. Jean-Paul and Andre both looked chastised, realizing they weren't being cute.

The four wandered down the street in a semi-awkward feeling silence until they reached where Andre's cruising bike was locked. There was a makeshift

trolley attached, the torso of a shopping cart on two bike wheels. She and Bruce and Jean-Paul looked sort of milky and weirdly unblemished in the light, bundled in their coats, their faces blooming from scarves and turned up collars. It reminded Dan of the vampire coven joke, in a way that was faintly unnerving. Bruce had unlocked a bike with a banana seat from the tiny alley on the building's east side, and now he tugged Dan's sleeve elbow with the hand he wasn't using to steer.

“You get to cart-ride!” he remarked. “Lucky!”

Andre frowned and Dan wondered if he had been volunteered to make her work too hard. But, she said “I guess that's fine—they'll have to walk once it's full.” Dan wasn't sure he wanted to travel any distance in the cart, and kept eying it. It looked like it had five times as much solder as necessary—which made it look, conversely, five times less safe than he'd like it to. It might not fall apart in traffic with him in it, unless there was five times as much solder everywhere but where it counted. Mainly the idea of hunkering down in the thing and being pulled along on display through downtown Toronto bothered him. But Andre was saying “well? Get thine ass in gear,” and Jean-Paul climbed right in, as Bruce hopped onto his own bike, laughing. There was a loud, weird sound, and Dan saw it was from Bruce's bike horn, which was a cartoonish blue plastic trumpet with a gobliny thing as the oddly grotesque air sack, hands encircling his green belly, pink mouth agape. A vulgar noise from a vulgar thing. Somehow it was the most perfect bike horn Dan could have imagined. He wanted to audio-sample this bike horn. So heralded, he hooked his legs into the cart and perched himself as casually as he could sitting up on one of the corners, holding tightly on either side even before they were moving.

Jean-Paul laughed and looked back and up at him, sort of kid-like expression in place. Nearly carefree. Happy. Dan smiled an almost real smile back, feeling carsick instantly from the motion of the cart and all the traffic on their left and being hungry and tired.

Where Dundas curved down to Bloor they stopped and circled around behind a big chain grocery and the pizza and donut places, going through a fleet of

green bins behind the store and finding a few items, things that didn't seem to be binned right, like sealed yogurts and trays of imported out-of-season blueberries still in cartons. Andre was excited about the blueberries, which looked utterly rank, because she claimed they'd make good jam anyway. Their stickers said they'd been expensive—it was the winter. So no one had bought them and they'd spoiled. Dan wondered if she actually made jam, or just compulsively grabbed anything she thought she had a way to save. What was her freezer like? Her fridge had to look like a landfill.

There wasn't much there, and the group followed Bloor after that, heading into the city part of the city through a sudden miniature sandstone canyon, complete with canyon bridges. Andre took the sidewalk here, asking Dan to push on a couple inclines. There weren't many people around, and they didn't trouble the pedestrians that were out before taking back to the street once it leveled, joining the unsettling traffic again. She and Jean-Paul pointed out a value village they said was good, and a few little eateries and bars, including what Andre claimed was the best pizza in town, Chito's, where you could ask for shawarma and garlic sauce on your slice, although Dan didn't feel like he'd be headed this way again any time soon. They regaled him briefly with third-hand scene drama about the "diy" punk bistro on the same block. East took them past a big park they said was good pool-hopping when it got hot, and then to a strip of neon signage; bar-restaurants and cyber cafes and karaoke lounges. Between a subway station and a corner green grocer, Bruce hopped off his bike and climbed immediately into the first in a succession of three dumpsters, naming good finds and tossing them out. Within about 10 minutes he'd cleared the first two bins and was onto the third, and Andre had told Dan approximately thirty tidbits about garbage selection, all in a crisp, schoolteacher kind of way, but somehow not the schoolteachery way he'd pictured before, when he'd daydreamed about her explaining things like where mattresses were and how the damn sink worked. It wasn't the way she usually spoke either, and he had the distinct impression that this snippier voice was how she really talked.

Clangs of rummaging came from the final tanklike bin, and Andre was



already sorting what they'd found. Jean-Paul had lit a smoke and was checking his phone, he and Dan both now out their ride.

“Leafy greens are a judgment thing, look for dark parts, slimy parts—kale’s pretty sturdy, especially if its boxed still or bagged,” Andre said, inspecting the seven clusters of kale from the first dumpster. Dan nodded, wondering how many of these tips he’d actually apply. He wasn’t overly tempted to start diving for his food but there was something sort of interesting or entertaining about the process they were engaged in. It seemed...

adventurous, treasure hunt. He was kind of charmed, and glad to be done with the cart, but his impression that they were being pretentious remained. It felt like an indie movie about crusties, and not actually like being crusty. In fact, aside from Bruce, who was currently swimming in garbage wearing clothes made from more garbage, it seemed like this dumpster diver squad was too busy trying to keep its clothes clean, to dive any dumpsters. In contrast to himself, now and still long-unshowered and in the same clothes as always, although he wasn’t jumping in any dumpsters tonight either, because he didn’t want to.

“Where else do you guys go?” he asked. “Is there a circuit? Or maybe, a map I could borrow at some point?”

“Go ask Alice,” Andre blew him off blandly, without looking at him. *Oh, you’re funny, oh, you’re so pop culture*, Dan mentally bit out. *Not actually interested in new club members huh. Just showing off how you know it all.* Dan felt annoyed, slightly disappointed. In Dan’s mind Victoria was crawling with faux-socially conscious hipsters who’d cut you down for nothing and had no time for anything less than themselves—they were as bad as the assholes who fueled their granolafied superiority complexes by shitting on them. Andre’s whole vibe looked like shtick from this angle and her friendliness probably had something to do with mid-level scenester elitist friend-seeking. She probably knew he’d been a DJ, and Bruce seemed to want him to get going in Toronto—he felt a tiny rev of paranoia, a learned dislike of status-seeking behavior, but there was something wrong about pinning those motives on Bruce. He was clearly just a guy who got off on

being helpful, and wanted to help everyone he met, everyone around him, just because they were there. Dan tried to consider the issue of Bruce knowingly manipulating him and found it absurd—but that didn't mean he wasn't being manipulated by Bruce anyway. He didn't want to investigate how he felt about that, right then.

“Yeah, I'll do that,” he said, regretting immediately how much sarcasm had leaked in when Andre's head whipped up. Her expression became contemptuous. Dan's regret dissolved straight away into a curdling feeling of loathing, and he sneered back at her, deciding she couldn't take what she dished. She shat on people with bitchy little quips and she couldn't take a drop of splashback. He wondered if he hated her.

“Yo yo yo dudes, there's fuckin' ten tons of bananas in here!” Bruce was obviously oblivious to the exchange, his hooting from inside the dumpster was joyous and the moment of mutual distaste trailed off. The feeling of loathing failed to dissolve, and Dan stayed next to the bikes, waiting as Andre accepted the large Dole logofied boxes Bruce was passing to her. There were three, and Dan could see through the breather holes in the cardboard that they were indeed full of greenish bananas. Bruce hopped out and carried over the box Andre had left.

“Rock-em-sock-em-SCORE-bots,” he effused at them. “Dude the best thing ever, they throw shit away because it's too new and they don't have room.” He was helping Andre to finish loading the cart, playing some pairs tetris.

“That's—”

“Fucking ridiculous, I know” Andre cut Dan off, as the four began to walk south, now, with Bruce and Andre rolling their bikes along. Dan had been about to say *cool*. “Y'know one third of the food produced in North America gets thrown OUT? One third! All those animals we massacred, just to go rancid on the shelf, just to be too much to finish at fucking— some fucking—“ she breathed "pizza nova. All the land we waste to grow shit we don't eat, all the fuel that's used, the habitat fucking ransacked. Makes me want to fucking die, I hope every fucker in charge chokes on the silver spoon they've had hanging out their lifesucking mouth since the moment they got spit into

the world,” she was basically screeching. Andre looked sort of pleased and pumped even though she sounded angry—maybe at Dan as well as the ills of global waste and economic inequality. Dan felt sick of her and bodily tired, weary. He wanted to be in bed but leaving now would just make things awkward the next time he encountered any of them, especially the next time he saw Andre and attempted to avoid her unnoticeably and undramatically. “Hey, D,” said Bruce, and Dan looked up after realizing he was being spoken to. “Dude, you should eat a banana, you look like, y’know. Ill ‘round the gills.” Dan looked back at the bananas under the other produce.

“They’re...it’d be a pain to get one out,” he declined. Bruce paused a moment, reached back and withdrew one easily, handing it to Dan with an innocent smile.

“Dexterous paws,” Bruce said. This seemed to remind him that he was missing an appendage and he withdrew a joint from his puke colored funfur parqua’s pocket, lighting it with a lighter that lit up in rotating red, blue and green LED. Dan felt himself glower slightly but began to open the banana, which was hard and verymuch partially yellow. In fact not very yellow, barely yellow.

“You’re doing it wrong,” said Andre. “Open from the part that isn’t a handle.”

“He’s doing it however he thinks is best,” said Bruce, breathing out smoke in what sounded a bit like a sigh. Dan wondered how safe wandering around Toronto openly smoking a joint was—he had this vague impression from tv news that the police around here enjoyed “having reason” to fuck with people. It was on Bruce, anyway. The buildings here looked different—there was a different vibe—than around their area up in the Junction. Here it felt more urban, more like parts of Vancouver he’d passed through for events—more energetic but more familiar, too, so somehow calm, in contrast to the underlying frenetic weirdness of living near the traintracks in a quieter, mildly seedier part of town. Probably it was different here in the summer, he thought. Busier.

They walked a few blocks south from the station and veered into a little

neighborhood of tangled duplex townhouses and trees and graffiti. There were a few trash sculptures in one of the tiny front yards, overgrown and forlorn-looking. Andre and Bruce locked their bikes inside the gate of one of the houses and loaded the goods inside. Jean-Paul had been quiet since the dumpsters, still swiping at his phone with one thumb out-of-glove.

“Did we walk into Kensington from the other side last time?” Dan asked, to say something. He was used to people checking their phones during lulls but he didn’t want to feel like he was boring Jean-Paul. In spite of his misgivings about the field trip, and the company, it hadn’t been boring, and he supposed that meant neither were they.

Jean-Paul’s eyes glanced at him and back at the screen and back again, as he tucked the phone into his coat and his thumb into his glove. “That’s right.” He manifested from the coat, and lit, another cigarette. “Sorry, I’m being ghosty. It’s been a long day, I ran into Andre and Bruce outside the Maison and they convinced me to stick around but I’m just crashing slowly. I’m sorry,” he said again.

“Were you at work?” Dan realized he didn’t know what Jean-Paul did, but apparently he had income beyond welfare. Or maybe he was the one living off a trust fund. That’d be ironic, or something.

“Yeah,” Jean-Paul blew smoke in his face. “Work. Crazy huh.”

Andre and Bruce trooped back out to them then, interrupting anything he’d have said.

“Coffee!” Andre did the jazz-hand jiggle again.

They walked through the small park and at the fountain Bruce ran into someone he knew, a person whose outfit contained a pinwheel toy that spun in the wind. “I’ll catch up,” Bruce waved them off, turning his tone private-conversational and continuing unheard by Dan, who followed along after the others.

There was something about Kensington that bothered Dan; walking through late in the evening, from the west, it didn’t feel like the same place he’d first visited. Tonight’s market had an air of postcard readiness, an instabait quality to how artful the neighborhood was. The place was a kind of open air

"installation" of a bohemian urban environment, but beyond how perfectly vibrant it all was, there was a self-consciousness to it that flipped the effect from cultural to commercial. Branding. It wasn't to make the place more recognizable to the people who lived there, Dan felt, but to people like him, who were on the outside. Little Malta, little hippiey. Again he wondered how many people it took with the same heritage in a neighborhood, to make it worth naming. Or themeifying. Had anyone he'd seen walking, grown up hanging out a window above one of the green grocers, maybe smoking and looking across town at the giant spire? When they had, if they had, was it before the spire lit up at night like a venue? Was it before the graffiti on the bricks below them looked like it knew it'd be displayed to the world in a global gallery by the next day? He pictured it and it felt very comfortable, in that other Toronto, anonymous and vast. Far away and all right.

The three filed in to "drink coffee," and it surprised Dan by being exactly like he'd expected. It was small, well lit, and everything coordinated to the blond wood floor and copper fixtures. At the counter was a girl with long dark hair in many, many braids, minus her spiked bangs. She had on little oval sunglasses like she was blind, and a mesh-heavy all black outfit. Updated throwback goth, he liked it better than Andre's style instantly, although next to Andrea he liked Andre's own look a bit better too. The suicide girl barista roommates, they could have a cam show and never worry about dumpster diving again, he thought. Andrea was slightly shorter than Andre, very curvy but small-chested, and had from any distance an air of indifference. Andre went over and began talking to her from across the counter, and by comparison looked shapelessly masculine and pallid, muscled from cycling and hauling parcels around. Minimally luscious. Some customers on laptops glanced at the two leaning closer to talk shop. It was very warm, the heat was up way too high, unless you had a secondary, airier outfit to change into on under your winter clothes. Jean-Paul dipped into a hallway, presumably toward the bathrooms but he didn't explain, and Dan hung back. He felt vaguely that by taking a table he was keeping space for Bruce, who showed up after a few minutes, smelling like weed and some

kind of industrial product. He walked in staring at the drink board above the counter and didn't stop until he was a few feet from it.

“Seasonal shit, man...I miss ecksmass. I guess I could...why don't these people do like, matcha mint or whatever for saint shamrockle's day?” He was talking too loud.

“Because we don't do that shit. We barely missed voting down the gingerbread latte when Roscoe motioned it. Standards.” Andreah had a great voice now that he heard it, throaty and low. Dan recognized the contrast with Andre's, which was a shampoo commercial voice. Like it was nice, for a voice, but in a way he felt lacked character.

“Hi,” he said to Andreah, leaving the table and moving within friendly distance. Andre didn't slide over at all at the counter to suggest he was invited to include himself, and he noticed. She wasn't sure about introducing them after all. She'd been bringing it up about meeting Andreah to cover for that, and probably Bruce had had to bat his eyes at her to get her to agree to do Dan the favor of socializing with him. He was annoyed at her all over again. No wonder she'd been so rude. And now she might hold his impatience with her rudeness against him and cockblock him with her roommate.

Andreah raised her eyebrows at him and said “hi,” back, distracting his inner seethe. He couldn't see her eyes through her glasses at all and suddenly realized it was very odd for someone at work in a customer service job to be wearing them. He'd never seen anyone doing it in real life, in fact—but if he'd been told to draw a dictionary definition insert of a blind person he'd have drawn little blackout specs on them. Dan wondered if Andreah was actually blind and how that would work—possibly this wasn't such a hard set-up to memorize, for a person who couldn't see. Maybe she was only mostly blind. He glanced at the things around till, looking for little braille labels, but everything essential to the job seemed like it might have an ‘always’ place, or was identifiable by shape. He couldn't see the till buttons. “This is Dan,” supplied Andre, simply. Bruce continued to stare up at the menu, apparently immobilized by the need to have his friend-discount coffee

marketed to him by the tim's team.

"Ahh," said Andreah, who then stuck her hand out, continuing to lean. Dan shook it, feeling her collection of silver rings against his glove-sweaty hand. She had a couple indistinct tattoos on her arms, under the mesh, and he noticed clearly that one on her collarbone, peaking over the low neck of her tube top, was a scene, an illustration from a book that'd been read on reading rainbow or in elementary school or something, about a plains girl and horses. "I really like your tattoo," he said. "Is it. Do you have First Nations heritage?"

There was a sort of pause, a muffling sensation like Andre had sucked in a breath and sucked all the air out of the space around herself with it. Andreah seemed to size him up, but he wasn't sure. "I'm double-Indian," she said. Dan had barely started to parse this when she explained "both kinds, red and brown."

Dan said "Ahh," and half-laughed but wasn't sure exactly how enthusiastic to sound because of Andre's weird vibe. She seemed poised to go off. "I don't know much about the First Nations out here," Andreah smiled, which was encouraging—he'd heard people try to avoid saying 'First Nations' and it came off to Dan as inane and disrespectful, which was a handy thing to have noticed, suddenly. "...I don't really know anything about the people on the coast, either, I just...you get interested when you grow up around... Nearby." He realized he might sound sort of foul but continued, "maybe you'll tell me about ...yourself, sometime. Help satisfy my curiosity." Since I apparently know nothing remotely relevant, despite being so culturally inquisitive and interested and all. But he felt he'd sounded like he knew how to flirt, and that was impressive in itself, because he didn't really have any experience at it.

"'Satisfy your curiosity'" Andre quoted him snidely. "Howbout cure your cluelessness. Living, oppressed cultures aren't fucking museum exhibits for your entertainment." Dan felt his face blanch. This was the coldest cockblock imaginable. He hated Andre. Andreah seemed a bit withdrawn but her posture remained friendly and engaged. Maybe she's upset at Andre,

thought Dan. Bruce had been, earlier—maybe everyone just like, had to learn to live with this shit to be friends with her. What was the point? Being around someone pretty and thin, he thought. *Pretty, thin girls never learn niceness, it's a confirmed trend.* Andreah's figure reminded him of his ex when they'd first started dating. Now his ex looked like she was really into coke and everyone told her how much better she looked, and she just got harsher and harsher.

"I did an anthropology degree. Was really interested in migrations. Of people, of ideas," Andreah told him. Dan nodded, engaged. He felt wildly thankful toward her for glossing over Andre's teardown.

"That's really cool," he said, more or less meaning it. Andre made a little noise in her throat, it might have been a signal of impatience. Dan remembered that he'd interrupted them, but was then annoyed, because he'd been asked to come here to meet this person, basically, and his 'roommates' had failed to introduce him or facilitate their meeting beyond physically corralling them. Jean-Paul was still absent, and Dan had started to wonder if he was on a grindr-related errand, feeling the time stretch. He glanced at Andre but she was taking off her coat and lifting the section of counter that flipped up to admit staff. "Did you go to U of T, like Pete?"

The little black ovals turned to him, and he felt looked-through. "Ryerson," was all the answer he got. He wasn't sure what more he expected. He didn't know the school, probably it was where Andre had gone as well then, to be having loan debt. *Like Camosun or something, a college,* he thought.

"You two should order," Andre said as she sidled up beside Andreah, tweaking the other's hips in either hand like a greeting. She'd taken off her outside pants. Dan looked up at the menu for a second before looking back at them. He was disoriented and thought about porn, suddenly. They definitely didn't need dayjobs.

"Do your best," he said simply, managing to sound like a badass to himself for a moment before realizing badass was probably out of place and the idiom he'd been thinking of was actually "do your worst." He felt socially ruined, again, this time under his own steam. Bruce was fidgeting a few feet



away, reading and thinking and chewing his cheeks and muttering.

“FFFFffffff,” he sucked his teeth as he bit his lower lip. “Guuuys, hellllp,” he said. His eyes were starry and he somehow looked like he was hatching from his coat, new to the world and in awe.

“Make the muppet a drink,” boomed from the hallway Jean-Paul had disappeared into, emerging from which was a guy who looked exactly like the brawny paper towel mascot but decisively hipsterfied, super Italian, and perceptibly gayer. Not implicitly gay, visibly gay. Earrings-that-somehow-implied-a-suspension-fetish gay. He was wearing a toque despite the heat of the place, and the corners of his black mustache were ever so slightly tweaked, like he waxed and curled them just the tiniest little bit. Dan liked him immediately, reminded of Santa and lumberjacks and the barfly guy on kids in the hall, all of which felt sort of nostalgic and cheerful. He took up the whole doorway, and when he cleared it Jean-Paul followed him out.

“Yo! Thin white fruit,” Andreah called to Jean-Paul. “You want?” She waved an oversized mug at him.

“Iiiiiiii want,” whined Bruce.

“London fog, almond milk” Jean-Paul put in, sitting at the table Dan had left, loosening his scarf and looking sleepy. Roscoe slid in behind the counter and started rummaging below the bar, tending to something, and Dan sat down opposite Jean-Paul, who smiled at him.

Andre and Andreah both went to work, laughing at Bruce who mournfully scanned the menu from his post, still, apparently wishing himself able to make a choice that had already been made for him. They’d served two customers in total the entire time the group had been there. Dan wasn’t sure if Andre was helping off the clock or had left for several hours during a shift to go fool around.

Roscoe stood back up, towering over both of them. He was holding a lighting array like a waiter with a plate, as though it wasn’t unweildy; it was a long strip set with small floodlights. “Sorry I stalled on this thing, people,” he said, climbing nimbly onto the counter and flipping a screwdriver out of a back pocket to one-handedly fix a bunch of brackets on the array to the

ceiling. "I didn't mount the screws, ok, but it's solid beam, just run out from under it if it makes a creaky noise."

"Thank you Roscoe," chorused Andre and Andrea. Roscoe regrouped and took out his phone, fiddling with it until the lights went on and then dimmed. He grinned and hit the switch on the wall, killing the harsher lights the counter had been living under.

"Roscoe is like the perfect scene dad; he's the dad every scene wants but no scene has," Jean-Paul confided.

"Ears aflame," Roscoe had scooted out from the counter again to look at the lights from the other side, and now he reached over and mussed Jean-Paul's hair. Jean-Paul accepted this with grace, and tossed his messed up hair after. Dan half expected his own headpat but was relieved to not get one. Roscoe wasn't his scene dad, because this wasn't his scene. That, he knew.

"There you go baby," Andre cooed at Bruce. Dan watched her run her hand up and down his arm, stroking the funfur but also Bruce, like she was charging him up. "You ok?"

Bruce slurped his drink, developing a foamstache. When he sighed joyfully, coming up for air, he sounded weirdly like a chorus of weeping angels. Roscoe handed Jean-Paul and Dan their drinks and wandered off to the back again without a word, and Dan was half expecting him to come back to make some other adjustment or fluff some more hair. The loss of Roscoe's presence was palpable even to Dan, the guy was a real mitochondrion. Dan wanted to make some kind of constant-effect healing spell card joke to Jean-Paul, but decided to save it for some other time instead of maybe seeming like he was gushing. He didn't want to gush, particularly.

He'd been made a matcha latte, it seemed non-dairy, too. He stopped drinking it as casually as he could. "Thanks," he called to the baristas. "I like ...your foam art. And the drink is great, but, it's hot."

"Whattawhattawhatta was your foam!" Bruce slammed onto a seat and walked it to their table, crowding them. "I gotta four leaf cloverrrr!"

"Um, a feather, I think," Dan said. "Or a leaf."

"Leaf," said Andre, wandering up behind Bruce and putting her hands across

the top of his head. He rolled his face back a bit to look up at her and smiled. Dan felt sort of sour and cranky, and excused himself for a leak. The bathroom was tiny and single occupant, covered floor to ceiling in tags and back-and-forth exchanges or pithy phrases. He looked weird in the light, startled by seeing a clear reflection of himself now that his timeless stint had stretched a week. He didn't look as bad as he felt, he thought, but he didn't look well. Some girls liked sallow-looking skinny guys with chips on their shoulders. His ex had. He fixed his hair, trying to make it look very slightly mod. That was his comfortzone cool, that specific note of retro. Two drops of mod and ten gallons of girlfriend-buys-my-clothes-and-she-likes-indie-guys.

Licking his lips and finding them chapped, he walked the hall back, noticing for a second time the knobless door that he assumed must lead to somewhere that included Roscoe's office and a supply room. So what happened when there was no one inside to open it, he wondered, deciding that there was a back way in and during business there was always someone there to open it. It seemed really impractical. The door swung open and Roscoe was there, doorlike. "You want a tour of the vaporlounge?" There must be a door-cam, Dan thought.

"That's what's back there?" He sounded mildly suspicious, and felt rude.

The phrase backroom blowjob was bouncing around in his head.

Roscoe's friendly expression didn't change and he leaned back, revealing, indeed, a hazy room of booths around appliances that had hoses with fancy art-glass mouth pieces and domed parts, looking ready for the caterpillar to sip from, breathe out the answers. It even had its own coffee bar, and indeed, there were two other doors, one at the back. "Welcome to Higher Grounds," he said, sounding proud. Suddenly Dan understood his own ground control pun, and laughed compulsively at the memory of Bruce losing it.

"Good pun," he said, explaining his laugh by misrepresentation.

"Got another lounge in back of my other location, called that one Never Bean Higher. It has its own super teeny-tiny espresso machine at every table. That one's much busier."

Dan laughed again, sincerely. "That's even better, never bean higher. But I don't really ...get high, anymore. But thanks. And thank you... for the, the latte." He suddenly wasn't sure if his free coffee was supposed to be a secret or not. This was the boss, technically, and this vaporlounge was currently empty—whether the other one existed or was a joke, he wasn't sure. Maybe he'd just gotten the girls in trouble for giving away drinks.

"You're alright," Roscoe-the-scene-dad told him. "Ask Andreah out." And then the door shut.

"Oh," Dan said, wondering if he was on a little screen somewhere, grainy, standing in the hallway, staring at the door. Maybe the screen was above the door inside. He spun a right angle and left the hallway, b-lining for the counter like he was under orders when he saw the other three at the table with his orphaned mug.

Andreah was steam cleaning utensils behind the counter, which Dan clapped his hands onto. "One drink per day per charity case," she told him over her shoulder. Dan nervous-laughed and didn't say anything, waiting until she turned and focused on him.

"Doyouwanttogoona datesometime," shat itself out of his mouth in a burst once he had her attention. He groaned. It felt like people were watching. Andreah smiled archly, looking pleased, at least. "I don't date your kind, but some dick on Valentine's sounds ...festive. Come down here tomorrow and meet me at close. We'll get take-out. Eat out and eat in, all in one living room."

Dan had forgotten it was the fourteenth the next day, and he wasn't sure what she meant by his kind, assuming at first she meant white people and then deciding she probably only had relationships with women. Maybe she meant DJs. "You're not worried about what people will say?" He tried flirting. "Who's gonna pick on a blind girl," she flipped her glasses down and looked directly at him. She winked. He still wasn't sure whether she could see.

part 8: come, come, come, get the hell inside

February 13, 2016 10:38 pm

Walking home past Andre's with Bruce skipping along ahead of them, Dan felt an eyeroll pass through the trio he formed a third of, like a stadium wave, unseen. The sense of camaraderie, imagined or not, was a surprise, an almost unfamiliar feeling, but warm. "Let's go to Andy Poolhall!" Bruce trilled over his shoulder. *How very*, Dan thought wryly to himself, immediately annoyed because it was from his ex's second favorite movie after Mean Girls, even though she told people her favorite movie was some Lars Von Trier type bullshit.

"Totally," Jean-Paul made as if to dash away at a right angle from them, up the side street. He didn't dash away, and dropped the pose smoothly as he walked to keep pace with Dan and Andre, who laughed. Dan liked her laugh, it had a rumble. She reminded him of Darlene on Rosanne, suddenly. She seemed a lot more human when she wasn't a half-heard voice eavesdropped-on from his room, or ranting angrily about whatever. He liked her again, and remembered earlier, in the kitchen, noticing she was somehow different from the person he'd developed a mental sketch of. He was noticing again that she not only looked different than he remembered—fairly significantly in fact—but that the character traits he'd have associated with her now weren't the same as those he'd arrived at before. Maybe he'd heard Pete's ex, or someone else, some of those times.

"Not if it was the last poolhall on earth," she said snidely, and he changed his mind again. *What a ray of sunshine*, he thought. Jean-Paul laughed—to be polite, Dan assumed, because she'd laughed at his joke.

"You used to make that same joke," he said to Jean-Paul. "Or the opposite. Like the librarian would say to leave and you'd say totally and not move or look up." He'd done it all the time, actually. Eventually the librarians stopped bothering—Dan had always felt like no one else could possibly have gotten the passes Jean-Paul had gotten from teachers, who always smiled

when they sighed and rolled their eyes after his empty commitments to comply. No one ever reprimanded him.

It took them over an hour to walk back, after seeing Andre to her door only for her to run inside and back out, grabbing courier stuff for the next morning, including her other bike. She explained to Dan that they could start from anywhere, dispatch would have her on deliveries around St. Clair before bringing her down to Bloor and then her own neighborhood, so long as the day didn't get crazy. She seemed like she was half trying to sell Dan on getting a bike and becoming a courier, and that was vaguely amusing to him for some reason, so he let her talk herself out. Then she and Bruce made plans to make a bunch of gluten-free pasta before the next day, and do a food not bombs serving at the dry fountain, for Valentine's dinner when her shift was done, and invited Jean-Paul, who said he had work but might stop by. Mostly they complained about how cold it was and how warm this winter had been versus the last two, and talked about how still and quiet it was in town in the winter, what a frozen ghost Gotham set it became, how enchanted it was. At a certain point they took a staircase in a concrete wall and were suddenly in a futurecity place, overgrown and art covered, walking alongside a glass divider between them and a subway line.

"Welcome to Noronto, 2097," Andre said, catching him appreciating the atmosphere. "You should see it in the summer."

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February 14, 2016 6:39 am

Dan woke up early the next day, and felt so wide awake that he heaved himself out of bed, pacing once around his room to feel how much his feet still hurt before climbing quietly upstairs. No lights were on and it was barely light outside, and the upstairs was almost black. He wondered if Andre had gone to work yet, and saw, when he opened the door to the stairs, that her coat was still there. He left the building slowly, making minimal noise on the noisy, awful stairs as he went, and wished he'd worn a scarf when he stepped outside. It was still dim out, and the streets looked cleaner than they had yesterday afternoon. He walked himself to the tims, thought

about having a cheese scone he couldn't afford as he waited for coffee with money Jean-Paul had loaned him the night before, when it came up that Dan had no money. He was apprised of how to find the provincial employment agency online, and for the first time it was mentioned that he might qualify for disability if he could get a doctor to say he had a condition that prevented him from working, like if, say, he had heart damage and it might just fail because of almost anything.

When he'd ordered (sans breadpuck) he sat down, but staring out the window of a crowded tim's at the barely-day felt suddenly awful, and he didn't want to go online to maybe get bad news about whether he qualified for welfare yet, so he didn't. People pulled in and out of the parking lot like they were pissed off, skirting each other and the dumpster, while onlookers—lined up for the bus or standing between their own cars, doubledoubles in hand—stared without shaking their heads, but seeming to. Knowing it didn't bring anything they wanted to the situation of irate drivers, knowing they had those mornings too. The neighbourhood felt sad and kind of pissy, this time of day, this time of year, he decided. He tried again his snowglobe trick, seeing his tiny self inside the tiny tims, rotating with the rest of the block. He felt better.

He left, and wasn't sure where to go. The coffee's inoffensiveness reminded him, then, of yesterday's fieldtrip, and he thought about the fact that Andre had stayed over, and about his short chat with Andraah, before deciding he could probably kill enough of the early morning by getting some kind of groceries at the no frills he'd seen off on his way to steal elsewhere. He needed to take a shower—and he could now, he felt, without worrying that someone would barge in and kick him out of the house—but he wanted to wait for Andre to leave first. His peace of mind felt ways about taking this at-long-last shower, being entirely undressed for the first time in a while, with Andre there, while he was trying to get ready for a date. The city looked a little murky and a little blue-tinted as he walked along, and it was mind-losingly cold, almost as bad as the previous night. This was the eastern weather he'd been warned about, it just wasn't around much. The coat

wasn't really cutting it and Dan started to jog slightly to keep warm, winding himself after a few meters but continuing anyway, annoyed at himself.

No frills opened at seven, which was minutes away when Dan arrived. He decided to add a pre-date nap to his schedule, and for the first time wondered what the hell he was doing. It's not a date, he reminded himself. There was nothing to bend himself out of shape about. All he had to do was have sex. He obviously wasn't even called on to be especially good.

Which Dan wasn't overly stressed about. He hadn't had sex in longer than he hadn't been in a relationship, but he'd managed to convince his ex, who didn't particularly like sex, to fool around at least once a week, for most of their relationship. He felt like he wasn't going to embarrass himself, having had sex hundreds of times in his life and spent hundreds of hours on top of that watching a wide assortment of porn, just to be up to speed. He thought maybe he'd surprise her by being better than she expected, and that was a boost.

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February 14, 2016 10:28 pm

He could see Andreah already, moving around behind the counter with a tall, thin guy, who left with his coat on eventually, and didn't return. Dan waited around outside, trying to be inconspicuous in case she actually could see.

When she opened the door after flipping the sign, he unleaned from the building and said "hey." She turned her head to him.

"Dan," she identified. "Back for more and right on time. I kind of expected you to show up earlier and keep me chatted-up while I was closing. But it's nice to see you," her smile arched that same way again.

He didn't think at all and said "Bar first?"

"Okay," she said. "Bar first. You buying?" She was locking the outside gate across the door. Her outside outfit was cute, Dan thought. It reminded him of Winona Ryder's funeral look in the I-love-my-dead-gay-son scene. But witchier.

"...Liquor store first?" he tried again, feeling grateful. He found the idea of company outside the house compelling, although he hadn't consciously



thought about it until now. Probably it had begun to occur to him yesterday, when he'd met Andreah, who seemed fun to talk to, and spent time with his housemates, who, as a group, were not. In fact, talking to them was the least fun thing about them. Otherwise they were fine.

“Did you want to get food here first or take-out after all, closer to where we're going?” She asked back. He thought about cutting his losses and saving whatever conversational energies he had for later, but there was something very appealing about Andreah's company. Maybe he could hold up his part of a conversation before the conversation they'd presumably have once they were inside again and warming up.

“Sure. Here's fine, if there's somewhere...super cheap. Maybe if I'd shown up earlier, you could've made me the thing Bruce had yesterday, he really thought it was liquid orgasm in a cup.” Andreah laughed. It was a positive sign when someone you were trying to flirt with laughed after you said ‘orgasm’—maybe an obvious test but it hadn't backfired, and she hadn't promptly informed him that he and Bruce had had the same damn drink. “Yeah, B's quite a take-delighter—and a delight.” A quick defense of a friend, just in case. Dan liked that. Loyalty. It felt like a rare find. They were still just standing in the grimy little doorway, their breaths puffing in front of them. He wished someone were loyal to him like that, even just one person.

“No doubt.” He smiled. Bruce was...sweet. He was a sweet guy. Dan got that. He couldn't say he liked Bruce best per se, but of the Maisoneers Dan had any read on, he was by far the easiest to be around. Bruce made himself easy to be around. That seemed to be his whole personality, which was nice for him, but nice enough for Dan, too, that he didn't begrudge the easygoing social savance Bruce seemed to run on. A sort of hurt thought about Jean-Paul's absenteeism began to surface, but Dan mentally whisked it away by thinking about how well his present conversation was going.

He followed Andreah inside the churro place and stood at the pickup counter with her, realizing she had meant getting take-out in the market, not stopping to have dinner. But she'd said the alternative was getting take-out closer to

where they were going, and she lived like a block away. She moved around, doing practiced-looking gestures as she ordered, to emphasize them, and he appreciated how functional her movements were. She was kind of pantomiming what she wanted in case she couldn't be heard. He still hadn't asked if she was blind for real, and decided it would almost definitely become obvious at some point so he might as well just wait.

Someone came in behind them, and knew Andreah. It was a tall figure in a white Frankie Says Relax tank and tattered jeans, which spilled artfully up out of ancient-looking white Nike hightops. JUST DON'T had been written on both sides of each shoe in black. Their hair was dyed and streaked in shades of red, and the person scoped Dan out without seeming hostile or dismissive. Dan was at least confident that he'd successfully made himself difficult to pin down by outfit—the west coastiness of his clothes was becoming obvious to him by now, and it probably aided the pigeonhole-deflecting effect he was going for. People his age here seemed to look like magazine ads nine times out of ten, it was staggering. This one: adbusters. It gave Dan a slightly better sense of why his ex had felt like Victoria was stifling—family trips from before the divorce meant she'd developed a basis for comparison that he'd never understood as keenly, before living here. A perspective that made their hometown feel like nowhere. Even the construction workers he'd seen at a crosswalk on the grand cart adventure yesterday, had been as styled in their boots and dusty jeans, and as attractive, as any model—yet there they were, totally unafraid to look like Zoolander down the mine. Andre wasn't so overdone, the more time he spent outside the house; Victoria was fashion-shy. Adbusters was just on break from somewhere around the corner, it turned out, which explained running in without a coat on. Adbusters ordered things that were already made and split quickly, Dan didn't get a name.

“He seems nice,” he said politely, to make it clear he wasn't silently being jealous over nothing.

“They are, they work at one of those vintage places. They have a great boss, too, she knows Roscoe.”

“Cool, cool,” he said, rolling with the pronoun switch casually, by not commenting. He’d heard of theys. He’d heard it used in conversation, to refer to a they. Multiple times even. This they had seemed like they’d started off being called he, so Dan didn’t think it was particularly messed up to have assumed. He didn’t know them, after all. It didn’t seem like Andreah was outraged, so he didn’t add anything, like a follow-up with the right pronoun. That just seemed so transparent or something. So eager to please.

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Walking quickly with their steaming food, Andreah stopped in the park to hand one of the foil packages to a woolen figure in a small group, someone who looked like they themselves had been knitted. The figure harumphed at her and she smiled, and it sort of seemed like she probably wasn’t blind. Dan remembered then that earlier Andre and Bruce had been here, at the fountain, serving food to whoever showed up. They’d been gone by dark, and he’d shown up after, taken the streetcar down Spadina because that was a station he knew.

They walked westward now, toward Andreah and Andre’s place. “This isn’t where I want to... netflix and chill,” she sort of eyerolled with her voice and Dan took it to mean she was using the instantly-overused phrase ironically. “But let’s eat this while its really hot and fresh and warm up, before we take the plunge.” Dan laughed at her seeming innuendo, mildly thrilled to be flirted with. Maybe Andreah had been flirting with him the whole time and he’d been missing it.

“Where are we going,” he finally asked. “You keep building up this mystery place we’re ...plunging toward.”

Andreah laughed like heh heh heh heh and told him “I’m catsitting for a frrrriend,” and by the way she flourished friend, he could tell they were on a mission to have sex somewhere a frienemy of hers wouldn’t want them to. He’d just shown up at the right time to be the accomplice, and, he thought belatedly, Roscoe had prompted him knowingly. Dan was a little disappointed but once again glad that there was no pressure to perform well or, probably, to text her tomorrow if he didn’t feel like it.

“That makes two of us I guess,” he hoped the joke scanned, and when Andreah laughed and did a kind of gratuitous pussy-eating tongue waggle, he figured it had, and laughed along, again gratified to be flirted with.

They bustled along, partial cold immunity gone from being inside again too long at the churro place. In moments they were at Andreah’s door, scuffing their feet on the mat inside the covered front stoop. Andreah tried the secondary door and found it unlocked. “Guess who’s braiding eachother’s hair upstairs.“

”...Guess they came back here after that, uh, FNB serving?“ he’d volleyed the comment with a sibling guess, but he wasn’t sure he’d guessed right. Maybe she had more roommates, he couldn’t really be sure. Bruce had said they split the rent two ways, but Dan knew very well that didn’t mean only two of them lived there.

“I don’t know what to do, now. We could sneak in and eat and leave, or we could just go now and reheat the shit there. That actually makes more sense, it’ll fuck up her microwave.” Dan assumed this referred to the microwave at the place they were going, and not to avoiding fucking up Andre’s microwave.

Dan didn’t really want to risk running into Andre and Bruce, but he wasn’t sure why Andreah was avoiding them. Maybe everyone could tell how he felt. Maybe he hadn’t been being very friendly even though he’d tried. He wanted to surreptitiously assess that and thought of things to ask, quickly, instead of thinking about whether to go inside or not. “Are you avoiding them or something?“ Not super subtle.

“I don’t want to deal with Andre today. She’s mad I’m not spending it with her.” That was a bit of a curveball, but a relief because it had nothing to do with him. Ish.

“Uh. Am I... the other man? Is Andre going to, uh.” Now that what she’d said was sinking in he really wondered about the wisdom of involving himself in whatever this drama was. He realized he’d been picking up on something yesterday, it hadn’t been his over-active girl-on-girl goggles. They were still standing inside the porch area, their food was almost cold.

“She’s going to get over it, because she and I aren’t together and she knows that. I don’t owe her—whatever. Don’t really need to talk about this here.” Like him, Andre wasn’t dateable for some reason. He would’ve thought that’d sit better with him but instead he felt himself identifying with Andre, uncomfortably enough. “So, maybe she just, y’know, decided to distract herself by doing normal stuff she’d normally do and hanging out at home?” It obviously complicated things that they shared a place. Were or weren’t Andre and Bruce dating, then? His whole diagram of the assumed relationship/s between them had oscillated wildly.

“So, because everything is so normal, suddenly she’s doing a serving? In the park. Today. After how long of a hiatus? I’m not supposed to find that passive-aggressive?”

“Aren’t we ...supposed to be... not here anyway? Aren’t we sort of...” off to go do something passive-aggressive?

Andreah tossed her braids with an air of indulgent royalty and waved a hand at him like he should know better, even though it was literally true that they had planned to be elsewhere and Andre certainly knew that. “Let’s go to the liquor store on the way,” she deflected. “You’re supposed to be a good thief, mind if I use your pockets?”

“Lead on,” he said, and held open the flimsy outside door for her. Their breaths were thickly visible in the air when they exited, twice the size they’d been just a moment before and contrasting more brilliantly against the dark sky. “Where the hell are we going exactly, by the way,” he tried to sound so casual it was funny, like he had barely bothered asking, although he’d already asked her where they were going once, and she’d been extremely uninformative.

“Just over to Queen and Ossington area,” unfortunately meant nothing to Dan.

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Along the way Andreah pointed out seemingly everything they passed and explained its significance to him. One place was where a friend worked and you could get free t-shirts or banners printed there, one place had amazingly

cheap beer, so on.

They were apparently narrowing in on their destination, walking through thicker and thicker groups of pedestrians, seeing hipper and hipper signage and sandwich board specials as they went. Turning north up Ossington, more of the same. Every other place they saw was some sort of direly indie boutique or pub.

“It’s got amazing portuguese style wings, they’re super gamey tasting,” she told him, nodding to the one spot that looked marginally grimy. *Yayyyy*, Dan thought, slightly irritated. He made a noise like he was glad about the wings. Did everyone in Toronto have to do this? He felt like he couldn’t have done impromptu tour-guiding in Victoria if he’d been paid to with a gun to his head. “And how do you like living in le maze-house with the great white vegan?” Andreah sounded cheerful and interested, which was very inviting of conversation. Dan wasn’t exactly sure what to say, though, because he was living in a place he didn’t have any particular love for, with people (importantly, friends of his present company) with whom he didn’t have any particular connection. That sounded like a recipe for unsympathetic whining. He assumed she was asking about Jean-Paul, specifically, because Jean-Paul was who, nominally, he was closest to. He was apparently also the most capital-V-vegan.

“It’s...interesting,” he said. That was what you were supposed to say when someone asked if you liked the wacky world their friend had submersed you in, right? It was politely deferential to sound kind of skeptical and daunted, right?

She laughed. “I’m sure. Andre’s gotten the impression that you’re not a good fit.”

*Well well.* “Mm,” he said.

“Don’t worry about Andre,” Andreah reassured him. “She’s...judgmental.”

“Mm,” he said again, looking at nothing, wishing to be inside. There was a pause and he added “I had gotten that impression.”

“I remember Nuit Blanche last year—or, in 2014 actually. Anyway, we were all on mushrooms—not much, maybe a couple grams each—but there

weren't as many installations close together as we'd assumed so we kept walking and walking..."

"Like us," he jokeplained.

"Don't worry, we're almost there," she reached over with the hand she wasn't holding their cold food in, and dipped into his pocket to squeeze his hand. It was adorable. Dan had noticed she storytold at a slower pace, and that was nice too, good to listen to, like a tonic for his sour mood. "Anyway at one point we ran into this couple fighting and Andre started going full out on the guy, telling him off. But when we got the story from the lady it was really clear that this was an wrong-missed-connection-craigslist-ad-but-let's-try-it-anyway date and she'd started microaggressing non-stop on the dude when she found out he was Latino, and then wouldn't leave him alone after he tried to end the date and leave. So we found them yelling at each other and Andre, of course, all see-something-say-something, assumes he has to be this awful person because he's yelling at a woman—I mean, she was on shrooms, but she's always like that. She gets...mixed up easily. She's been through some shit, doesn't have the best people-sense. Spends too much time on facebook getting upset about all the bad news."

Dan tried to digest that. He had mixed feelings about the story, feeling both like he'd have made the mistake that Andre made without getting involved in the fight at all, and like she'd made a similar mistake about him somehow. Did she ever read Slackjaw to get upset? Probably she wrote off every guy who wasn't captain-vegan-peace-keeper-man. He wondered again about whether she and Bruce were dating. They were obviously perfect for eachother. Or at least, he couldn't picture who else would want to be with Andre. Andreah didn't. "I only read music blogs." He hadn't in months, but it wasn't like he spent time on facebook instead.

"Ok, but you have been on facebook?" Dan nodded. "This year?" He nodded. "Well, hey, you're up to date enough so's you can tell your grandkids you've seen every page in the slacktivist handbook, 'specially if you've got American friends."

"Slacktivist?" It was a great word but Dan hadn't heard it before. He liked

the dismissive tone Andreah used, it sounded like she might gear up into sarcasm if he prodded. She sort of looked at him askance.

“People who post petitions to facebook all day without ever having been to a rally or done any direct action, those people. Andre’s,” she laughed “become the one of the wretched god-queens of Toronto slacktivism, just because she actually gets off her ass once in a while and does something. She posts these big tirades about food security and what’s being thrown into Toronto’s dumpsters and how good her vegan banana granola muffins are, and her oh-my-god-there’s-so-much-suchandsuch-out-back-of-bulkbarn-at-soandsostreet statuses get reposted by slackier slacktivists. When she was using they/them pronouns everyone switched and when she went back to she/her everyone switched back, except B somehow gets it wrong still.” The more staccato pace she went at to gossip instead of reminisce was bothering Dan, but there was no way to say anything about it. It wasn’t her fault, it just reminded him of people he didn’t like, people his ex liked; he couldn’t figure Andreah out, she was more of a tangle of personality than he’d thought. He remembered that Andre was her roommate and realized then that that situation obviously wasn’t just the luck of the draw. The sarcasm hadn’t really made an appearance. “She grew up relatively impoverished, she does the food-access direct action servings thing, she dropped out of a social work degree, she cites dudes living on the street as friends when she sits down to write a treatise about poverty and ethically compulsory compassion—most sign-this circulators are yuppies, you know, just not 'bout that life—oh, fuck me,” she broke flow, catching Dan’s attention. He’d juuuust started to drift, bored of talking about Andre even though the information was sort of catching him by surprise. He hadn’t really thought about Andre’s childhood but if he had, he’d have assumed it was normal, like his.

“Sorry?”

“Oh—I’m trying to catch myself using A-A-V-E in tacky ways. Gets stuck in my head listening to white hipsters try it all day and when I say it and it sounds the same as them to me, I hate it. Like I’m some burbsy kid from Vaughn who thinks they’re cute. Speeeaking of which, heere we are.” They



were facing a basement apartment they'd followed some alleyways to from the commercial strip. A door festooned in herbs and ribbons greeted them under a black wrought iron light shade full of dead moths. The iron had been worked into a collection of weird-looking skulls. It looked kind of like one of those inflatable ball things people bounced down hills in, zorbing, Dan recalled.

Trooping down the stairs and inside once Andreah had scooped the key out of somewhere and let them in, Dan wondered what A-A-V-E was, but figured he got the gist of Andreah's concern. Taking off his shoes, unable to feel his toes or face yet but glad it was at least warm in the miniscule suite, he thought about his ex's friends pseudo-ironic hodgepodge of slang and how it all sounded false, and nodded—white kids from the burbs did tend to think they were very cute. “Yeah, I—yeah,” he said. “That’s a good rule of thumb, avoiding sounding like you’re.” He wasn’t sure how to verbalize what might or might not be covered by suburban kids claiming slang in a way that cheapened it that might also apply to Andreah, so he stopped at ‘you’re’ and had a moment of panic remembering the rule of thumb scene in Boondock Saints—did people get upset in real life when you said rule of thumb? “An asshole,” Andreah finished for him. He laughed. She looked damp, out of her outside clothes, and he suddenly remembered they were supposed to have sex here, that that was the game-plan.

He tried to look smooth, draping his coat on the back of the cathair-coated black armchair next to him, just inside the door. “Yeah, I’m not a fan of sounding like an asshole.”

“I’m glad—” Stepping over her pile of discarded layers she started toward the kitchen, which was ten feet away on the other side of the living room. “Try to make it a little more obvious that you don’t want to sound like an asshole around Andre, if you’re staying at the Maison,” she sounded ominous, unwrapping the food and sticking it in the microwave uncovered as planned. He and Andre had different definitions of asshole, was an immediate stumbling block easily identifiable to Dan, who found Andre highly assholish, herself. He followed Andreah into the kitchen, looking for

cups or mugs to drink out of. The rum was still in his coat lining, probably ice cold.

“Jesus, she doesn’t even live there.” Dan’s brain stalled. What kind of social power could Andre wield against him if it wasn’t even her space? This reminded him of his ex dealing with people-she-could-not-piss-off, which had always seemed maximally exhausting and made her look small. “I’ve barely talked to her.”

“I’m asking you because I’m her friend. She wouldn’t go over there for a while, after Sakamoto left for Japan. Her entire—oh, there’s ah-hah, a collection of modified crystal skull vodka bottles in this one.” Andreah indicated a cupboard with her chin, hands busy combing the fridge.

“Who’s— Isn’t it... Toi... who’s in Japan?” There were indeed four of the signature bottles on the top shelf of that cupboard, all limited edition aurora finish. *Wasn’t this shit expensive?* They didn’t look practical to drink out of, either, though the edges were smooth where the bottlenecks had been edited off. They were like goth tiki glasses but he wasn’t sure whether he thought they were more or less tasteful than actual tiki tack. He dipped back to his coat for the pair of mickys she’d slid him at what she called ‘the ellsy’; she hadn’t turned on the microwave and seemed to be waiting on drinks.

“Yeah that’s a given name, Toichiro. Sakamoto’s the surname. It’s sort of an ironic in-joke thing, we’re good friends from wayyy back. Toi is B’s nickname for the devilish one.”

“Who the— Who IS Toi. Bruce is always talking about Toi. I feel like we have a ghost living with us.” Andreah was pouring them largish mix drinks with whatever she found in the fridge. The fridge was a weird place, full of weird things Dan didn’t recognize, like funny-looking roots and greens that looked like poisonous plants. There was also a large tub of becel and two things of ballpark mustard. Looking around, every possible surface, walls and cave-low ceiling included, was covered by lengths of dark material, the central design aesthetic seeming to be zodiac signs and astrological tables. Dan was getting suspicious that they were at one of those tarot card girl’s houses. But not the kind of tarot card girls his ex had had as brief

acquaintances, the next level tarot card girl. Maybe even the level after that. The borg queen of tarot card girls. She had mustard in her fridge. How did Andreah know this person? And where was the damn cat, anyway, Dan wondered.

“One more among the many, eh.” Was that a burn? “Toichiro is, you know, one of those really endearingly annoying scene queen punk princess types. Ze knows everything about every band in every genre you don’t know enough about, blah blah blah. Hir hair is legendary on its own, ze does this charged up homage to Heavy Metal Magazine girls, which Andre used to bite off hir. Shameless. And, you know, the mom, the house. Don’t get me going about hir wardrobe. Do not. The bitch is improper. Please understand I’m being sarcastic but not really when I say, ze’s so awful but ze’s to-die.” She smiled, looking almost wistful. Dan understood they were talking about someone like Roscoe, someone whose absence was so sorely missed that it left some people stunned, injured. Sort of lost. Mostly Dan was thinking of Bruce; it was hard to pin down the parameters of the loss this “community” experienced without this person around. Andreah continued the premature eulogy, “Toronto born and raised, queen of the damned in the land of the lost.” She sounded so comedically solemn, and added, more seriously, “Aaliyah r.i.p.”

“Is, how many nicknames does, do...”

“Oh, new pronouns? Sakamoto uses ze and hir, instead of whatever else. Ze’s mainly female-presenting or whatever, I don’t know what today’s hot take enby linguistic shift was, I was at work.” The drinks weren’t terrible. They were sort of keeping pace with one another, guzzle for guzzle. Dan swallowed this information about the person whose room he’d taken, along with the end of cocktail one.

“Feel thawed out again yet?” He tried sounding kind of seductive, unsure of how to proceed but hoping that initiating counted for... a lot.

Andreah slid his skull cup out of his hand and said “well here’s the scheme. The teasin’ of the season. See that thing on the wall there?” She indicated with her chin again.

“Yyyeah,” it was a hoola-hoop, by the looks of it, trimmed in pastel ribbon. In the center, held in place by more ribbon crisscrossing from the hoop in taut, v-shaped lines, was an uneven piece of printed cotton with one of those airbrushed scenes on it, of a horse heading up a cliff under a moonlit sky. It was about t-shirt size and looked like it had indeed been a t-shirt at some point. There was a collection of feathers trailing off the bottom of the whole thing, also tied in ribbon. All in between the lines holding the printed scene in place, smaller strings and ribbons held a collection of little bones, including several bird skulls.

“Worst thing you’ve ever seen, by the way? Same ballpark?” He thought of the mustard in the fridge again. Actually the wall-thing reminded him of Andre’s outfit the previous day, but he didn’t say that.

“Maybe something worse on CSI,” he joked.

“Oh you watched CSI? Good, well, you know when they flash back to some couple slam-fucking their way around a room that the team later finds all messed up and blue-light smeary?” He nodded. Obviously.

“That’s what happens to that thing. It should be pretty easy, ok? No stress. Then afterward let’s eat the enchiladas. ‘Nother cocktail, or shots?”

Dan thought quickly and decided against shots. He was running on empty.

“Cocktail twin.”

She laughed, which meant his silly band name pun might have made sense to her. *Not just mesh and sunglasses, trill goth.* It was definitely time to mash faces together and see how it went. He started to say letmekissyou, and did a swift turn into “can I kiss you,” at the last second.

Andreah smiled and took off her sunglasses, finally, which was appropriate, Dan supposed, but it startled him anyway. He realized she might wear them because they hid the fact that she didn’t sleep or wear makeup. Hey, he thought, if you wear sunglasses at night and at work and everywhere else, fuck it. Probably saved getting-ready time. His ex had taken hours every day for every change she deemed necessary for whatever reason, he’d always shuddered to think what she might have been like preparing to go to an actual job, five days a week.

With the assumption Andreah'd taken her shades off so he could in fact mash his face to hers with ease, he dipped his neck and braced one hand on the kitchen counter behind him, and leaned the distance to her face. Andreah made an impatient sound right during his last tiny dramatic pause—which his ex had always seemed to like—and leapfrogged the final countdown, pressing her much nicer, more kissable lips to his in a kind of aggressively wrestly way until, surprising him with an unexpectedly early parting of her mouth, she managed to get her tongue in action too. Dan felt his braced elbow quaver and broke the kiss with a gasp, thirsty for air.

“Wow,” she told him, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. “Shy, much?”

Without thinking about it he volleyed with “over-eager, much?” snidely, which made him feel like a nine year old as soon as he said it. But instead of starting to argue, or just yell at him, Andreah chuckled and her eyes crinkled mirthfully and she kissed him again.

She was shorter than he was by several inches, and her lower centre of gravity allowed her to effectively herd Dan where she wanted by crowding him; once she'd figured out exactly how much tongue to use before she made him antsy, his buzz reminded him it existed in a very warming, brain-doing-spirographs way, and Andreah crowded him along the kitchen counter towards the corner, then right angles along the wall, to where the pastel dealie was.

He came up for air again, looking around at where they were. Smiling widely up at him was Andreah's excellent, gorgeous face, when he looked back down. Her bangs were slicked to her forehead, still damp. “You're so pointy,” she didn't exactly sound like she was complimenting him but she didn't seem to be complaining either. They were pressed up against one another still, after all. Not bothering with subtlety he opted to grind against her lightly, so she could tell he had a boner by now, and wasn't all skeleton. He'd been told by a doctor that he might have to take boner pills, because of vasoconstriction or... vassomething, he remembered; he'd had some good luck after all, given everything.

So then there was a feverish blur of stumbling around the apartment from vertical to horizontal and back again, crashing into their target several times, until it fell down and half the bones were crunched under heel, all while mouths and hands and full attentions were honestly otherwise engaged. And then it had ended up as a kind of wad-spit bullseye for Andreah. They finally heaped themselves onto the couch, which had ended up with most of their clothing on it, now covered in the still invisible cat's very visible fur. Dan laughed, "we sort of missed the couch, huh?" It was the only place he'd have said would really work to fuck on, in the room, if he'd been asked on arrival. They'd kind of fucked on it. They'd definitely fucked against it, and using it to brace against.

"I'll tell her I was scared of staining it."

"That seems... somehow ironic," he said, pronouncing ironic like eye-ron-ek and making a face at himself for being so drunk on just half a mickey of rum. "Ironic," he tried again, still sounded weird, "that...you...yeah." It was definitely ironic.

"That we were trying so hard not to fuck up the furniture that we let the food explode," which hadn't happened yet, and Dan suddenly felt hungry, very very hungry. Post-coital I-gotta-have-a-sandwich hungry. "And right when you came we staggered over the thing on the floor. Which we had knocked down earlier, while making out, after drinking."

"Does she, this cat...haver," he paused, trying to figure out what he was talking about. "She knows that you don'tsn't... like that thing though, doesn't she," he had no idea where the question had come from. He heard himself speak, but wasn't fully sure what the words referred to.

"Sure, but I'll be telling the absolute truth." She got up, stretching and rolling her neck. "If she even brings it up, as in, IF, if I have to explain it, I just need to be able to not lie about how it happened. Like I need to be able to truthfully say that I brought a surprise date here, who happens to be white even but isn't Andre, and we happened to get carried away and happened to wreck that ...thing, she has, a little tiny bit."

"I am prepared to...attestify, to getting carried away." He wasn't sure he'd

ever had better head, and he'd definitely never tasted ...anyone but his ex. Andreah tasted like coffee, which should have been unsurprising but had been a surreal realization anyway, in the moment. She seemed pleased now, and it'd seemed like she'd been having fun, so Dan felt satisfied and suddenly totally unstressed, completely relieved, and contented in a smooth burst that had stretched on for a while, and continued. "So Andre knows her too." Figured.

"There's really only so many like, serious witches in town. We're all bound to cross paths at some point."

"And you're not...setting yourself up? Wont...do witches not gossip?"

She tossed her hair, stepping in to her long outer coat, which was flocked wool or something and looked more like a house coat now than it had outside, or when she was dressed. It reminded him of something, some sexy mastermind lady in a movie he'd seen on tv as a kid or because his sisters had rented it or something on a night their parents were out. "Sure, who doesn't. Nuns gossip." She spun the dial on the microwave and it pinged as the display started down from 3:00.

"Do they?"

Andreah found her sunglasses and put them back on before looking at him askance. "What do you do with a problem like Maria," she asked him. He didn't get it. "Nothing? The hills are alive?" He squinted at her. "With ...The Sound Of Music?" Now he remembered that scene in Moulin Rouge—he'd never seen the actual singing nun movie. Juile Andrews, that was who. His ex liked The Sound of Music, and ...that Anne Hathaway movie franchise she was in. Dan really didn't like Anne Hathaway movies, and had realized already that he'd never have to watch one again, although the rerealization was a delight. A few months back it'd felt like the saddest, sourest grapes. "Just realized what your name reminds me of," he said, surprised at his own epiphany. "Reboot. There was a character on Reboot with your name." She was staring at him. "Did you ever watch that, when you were a kid?" He was suddenly feeling dorky and exposed, wanting to make it clear that he'd been in elementary school. His older sisters had made fun of him for liking it

so much at the time, but in retrospect, that was because they were assholes and not any real invalidation of the show, which Dan still remembered as being cool.

"Are you kidding? That was the main way I made friends growing up. Everyone loved Reboot. You know it was made here, right? Like...YTV was based out of Toronto, I know a guy who's a voice actor now, and like, voice actors used to come to our schools and shit, everyone has a story about meeting a PJ—"

"Ohhhh my goddddd, the PJs." He hazily marionetted himself off the couch and over to the kitchen table, which had ended up holding his pants for him. These he smelled after picking up, by habit, before remembering that wasn't something you did in front of people, although his ex had had a firm cut-off point with how his pants could smell and had always been telling him to smell-test his pants so he did it now, apparently, compulsively, along with comparing her-to-her on dates. Or dates that weren't dates. He glanced at Andreah but she now was watching the food spatter the inside of the microwave with the rapturous expression of a kid on July 1st, eyes pinned on the fireworks.

"I swear that's 90% of where Bruce gets it," Andreah laughed at the microwave. It was true, Bruce absolutely acted like a PJ. Maybe that was how you got along with however-many brother and sisters. Dan sat on one of the extremely narrow, flimsy, yet weirdly formal and exaggeratedly-highbacked chairs squared up under the little dining surface.

"Isn't Reboot 90% of where you got your hair," he teased her, realizing now that it kind of looked like a real life version of that character's low-poly hairstyle.

"Listen, I take the hair politics on Reboot seriously. VERY seriously." She didn't sound like she was kidding and Dan felt himself back away slightly, leaning back against the arching plane of linking ivy curlicues behind him. He was learning over and over to be skeptical of where people's emotions went when they got wound up about politics of any kind; Andre started off complaining about billionaires and seemed to end up taking stabs at him, the



person she least liked in front of her.

“...wwwwhy?” There just didn’t seem to be a polite way to ignore or redirect the can of worms vibrating on the table.


“Its all racially coded. Like they have racialized hair. There’s almost no white people on that show.”

He laughed, “are you making a people of colour joke? About Reboot?”

“No, I’m completely serious, listen to what I’m saying and think about that show.”

“Well, there was their like, Asian sensei guy. The Miyagi.” The microwave dinged a treble chime. It reminded him of ding-fries-are-done-ding-fries-are-done, and he remembered Bruce complaining about wanting a gingerbread latte the previous night. He felt drunk, but alert. He seemed somehow much less alert than Andreah, and for the first time wondered if it was more than coffee, but realized she hadn’t tasted like coke at all and felt immediately reassured, but couldn’t place why at first. It was because it wasn’t like any of the last several hundred times he’d exchanged any fluids with someone, he belatedly noted. He was glad he’d been too distracted at the time to analyze it, now that he was analyzing it.

“Phong. Phong is so coded he’s a stereotype, is that what it takes for you to notice? Bob has dreadlocks for fuck’s sake.”

“...we’re getting a little heated here...” Dan was realizing that Andreah was much more talkative outside of work, or once she was relaxed, or something. He didn’t really think it was relaxing when people opened up, although most everyone else seemed to think it was better the more you knew about people. She seemed taken aback but not angry at him for telling her she was emoting wrong; that was a huge no-no with his ex. “Oh, sorry,” she sounded cere and it was a relief from the sudden discomfort of expecting a reprimand, the tension was suddenly gone again. People were never sensitive to him like that and he’d gotten the impression that it made everyone angry when he needed accommodating, as though it had been unanimously decided that he, specifically, didn’t deserve it for some reason. Even his immediate family had always had that attitude, sidelining him constantly to focus on his sisters.

“You’ve got a ...energy level comfort cap.” It’d seemed like she was going to say something else, and Dan felt like he was now being analyzed. “Little on edge? I wont bite. I was hoping you did.” That made him feel a bit better.

“My jaw works, I have teeth.” Even to himself he sounded a shade sullen. He felt very naked, suddenly, and tried not to huddle into himself like he was uncomfortable, which would make it worse. He was still shirtless and the apartment was almost too cold for it.

“Good. And anyway there’s that one guy, the surfer. I’ll accept that he’s coded as white. I think he’s Australian or something.” She paused to gauge whether she had pushed too much by rebooting Reboot, but she was speaking in a more easy-listening way and Dan made a little motion like to nudge her on, it was fine. “And, importantly, he’s from somewhere else other than there, he’s an outsider. In fact, he’s an explorer, like, he represents the white myth of discovery, as opposed to the historical reality of colonization.” Dan was kind of warming up to the topic, now that she’d modulated her voice to a slightly pampering delivery, both slower and lower. Plus he thought she might kind of be talking about him, at the same time, and she was saying nice things.

”...Hexadecimal was white too.“

“That’s a mask, I think even the villains are—”

“Well, we can debate blue Fraser, but I mean when Hex turns human, or... sprite or whatever, like at the very end of the series,” maybe that was a nerd-out too far. He really had watched the show, it was only that he’d been a kid and not handed a frame of reference to understand it the way she did. She was right, of course it had been made in Toronto. It was probably even consciously supposed to be the ultimate in accessible tv for Canadian kids, who, if you lived in Toronto, were some ultra-multicultural kids. Anyone could identify with it, because to white kids it was just another show and to everyone else it was the only show they were on.

She looked kind of emotional. “Blue Fraser,” she gasped, and he realized she’d been convulsively laughing and containing it to a sort of silent howl.

When was the last time someone had laughed so hard at a silly off the cuff comment he'd made? She didn't even seem drunk. He felt elated, suddenly, and wanted to get away from anything resembling a serious topic before the mood turned again. "Let's drink the other mickey. Still mixables, right?" That was what you did when you were being as petty as possible while catsitting, Dan had come to realize. Drink the organic coconut water and the agave syrup and the pure fruit juices not from concentrate. And have sex some more, hopefully, maybe. The night was still ...nighttime, and he thought that after eating and drinking and netflixing for a while, he could probably do another round, even if he didn't nut again, he'd feel like he hadn't squandered the night being too much of a pushover. A literal pushover. He resolved with himself to eat, drink, be merry, and find out what the bedroom was like within the next two hours.

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February 15, 2016 12:49 am

"Don't brace like that, slide your hands around palm-up behind me and use my shoulders, brace on your forearms" she breathed, sounding placid. "And slide one knee up behind, under mine, like, here," a hand slid from behind his neck to urge one thigh into position.

"Could you stop giving... directions?" She hadn't talked so much earlier, and it had felt a lot more spontaneous and natural. "It's really... distracting and I kind of feel like I'm in school or something? Could we not just... Am I that BAD?"

"You're fine, for someone with your uh... racial and gender handicaps." He remained motionless, frozen in naked statuary. "You're better than average even! You're not," she paused and made her voice even easier to listen to, "doing a bad job. I'm just communicating with you about what I like. You've dated, I mean, it's not like you only ever have sex with people who are paid to focus entirely on your experience, right?" The tiny note of suspicion he listened for wasn't there. She didn't think he'd only ever had sex with girls he'd paid. It was a rhetorical question. And she didn't seem to know anything about his relationship, which was a bonus because it meant

Andre didn't know about the article to hold it against him, either.

"I've ...I was in a relationship for uh, eight years. We had sex. She never like, stopped in the middle to tell me what to do?" He was starting to feel awkward about the distanced tangle they were in, like they were trying to sexydance at a middleschool formal and there was a two foot rule. He guessed that was the point of the direction she'd given him, it was just that his ex had felt the opposite, that closer together felt claustrophobic. He should have just done what Andraeh said, he realized. He was the one who'd broken flow, really, but it'd felt like the opposite. He didn't like feeling like he was taking orders, it just didn't say hotness to him to be treated like an employee or a cadet or something. Which was ironic because apparently if she wasn't giving orders, she'd feel like ...an employee. Or something.

"Eight YEARS?" She saw him wince and dropped her voice again, adding "neither of you ever had a leg cramp, in all that time, to yell about and break the silence?" It sounded a little too much like she was laughing at him.

"We didn't have sex in silence," he sounded defensive, and rolled with it, moving away into a sitting position, looking at nothing. "When she liked something she'd moan so I'd know she liked it." That was normal. That was how normal people had sex, he was sure. Except now he didn't feel so sure, now he felt fucking terrible.

"Okay, good, but you didn't have conversations about what you both like, things you're, you were, wanting to do? That kind of talk?"

"Uh, it wasn't some... 50 Shades of Kink situation, we were just a normal couple having..." normal boring sex, he didn't say. But it was true they'd never sort of magically gotten around to doing most of the things he'd watched porn of.

Andraeh stared at him, her eyes too hard to read. "Would you let me eat your ass out? Right now?"

"What? No!" Dan didn't feel particularly in-gear for any type of action at the moment, but as soon as he said no, he realized he might have tossed back a liferope on their evening. What else were they going to do, now, really?

"That's fine, that's cool, we'll just watch some T.V. This bitch has netflix."

That had, of course, been mentioned already, but the rhyme was nice, Dan felt. Andreah reached for her clothes, seeming completely undisturbed by how things had gone, her speech still flowing a comforting way. Dan felt like he was on the edge of emotional collapse. He was seriously concerned for a second that he might cry.

“I– you’re just giving up?”

“Oh, sorry, were you playing hard to get?” It seemed like she was teasing him a tiny bit but she still sounded kind. “I asked for consent and you said no, so...”

“Yeah, you caught me completely off-guard.” He sounded defensive again, hurt. Probably the issue was, actually, that she had caught him completely on-guard. “And, I just. I’ve never...done that. No one’s ever... done that. For me.” He had this vague idea that it was a dom/sub thing, guys in hardcore were always saying for the girl to lick their ass, or a few guys at a gangbang would get bored and go in for a wash. Dan had no idea why Andreah would want to. “If I’d asked my ex about ...that, she’d have freaked out at me about watching too much porn.”

Andreah laughed. “I don’t watch porn. I’m more into quality erotica?” She said this with a funny voice, vaguely like the Simpsons’ comic book guy.

That connoisseur voice. Dan laughed back, still feeling a bit fall-aparty.

“Should... I wash first?” He’d showered back at the Maison after groceries and Andre’s eight a.m. start had passed, but probably there were protocols or something about freshening up before someone’s tongue was dancing around your butthole. He was trying to forge ahead now that he’d signed himself up, so he couldn’t overthink it, but the overthink felt underway all the same.

She looked surprised, which was kind of gratifying although it wasn’t how he’d envisioned being surprising, when he’d thought about it that morning.

“You’re serious, you’re down to have your ass ate?” He didn’t want to go back out into the night, he knew. Transit wasn’t running anymore, a cab was several meals out of his tiny bankroll, and as far as he could tell it was the coldest night of the year so far, maybe second to the previous night. And he didn’t want things to be awkward if he stuck around here, with him feeling

wound up and prudish, too-soberly watching netflix at his sort-of-friend's sort-of-frienemy's house. He nodded slightly over-emphatically. "That's so Dan Savage of you."

"...who?" He'd thought at first she was coining him a nickname.

"Oh, that's weirdly cute, do you really not know?"

"I don't know a lot of things, who is he. They. Whatever."

"Oh he's some asshole," she rolled over to him and kissed his shoulder.

"Uh." He wasn't entirely sure she hadn't meant him after all, but she'd reminded him of something else. "I. So. Question." He thought of how to put it. "Hemorrhoids. You...should know? I have...them. One."

"Just one?" She smiled, and he was struck by how blasé she was, no matter what.

"Isn't one enough," sounded glum, and not sexy. Maybe she liked that about him. Dan couldn't actually figure out what she liked about him. It couldn't just be his convenience, that much was obvious by now. Part of it was how Andre had written him off, and Andreah had some sort of issue with how judgy Andre was. Part of it was, Andre not being involved in this whole thing probably helped somehow from the social collateral angle of fucking with someone's shit. Part of it was also that Andre was apparently too clingy. That much had gelled by now. None of that was particularly personal, although, Andreah did laugh at his jokes. He remembered Pete's reaction to the issue of his asshole. He didn't feel flattered by the idea of being an unwitting jester, but he also realized it softened him somehow, that he was funny, not just on purpose but as a person. But, Andreah did seem to talk with him more than she talked at him. More like Bruce, or Jean-Paul, who didn't treat him like he was a joke. "You don't mind?"

"You should see some of the blow-outs I've seen," another shoulder kiss.

"One word. Anemone." Dan laughed, and felt better, but off-balance. He decided again to roll with it.

“So, what’d you think?”

“I think there’s such a thing as... too much intimacy? I feel weird. Like right now.” He’d never had his ass eaten, and he’d definitely never had his prostate milked which was what had ended up happening after she’d said “fingers?” and he’d been confused—because she was jerking him off slowly too—and said “yeah”, and he did earnestly still feel very weird, tingly but not tingly, almost indescribably strange. Like he’d been entirely rebuilt with atom-sized bees and the bees were more content than his regular old atoms but it felt... paradoxically alienating and comforting to be inside this unfamiliar swarm.

“Too much intimacy,” she quoted. “What’s the point of sex then?”

“...orgasms? Reproduction?” Duh.

“You can orgasm alone. And you don’t need to have sex to get jizz to an egg.” She reached over the side and fished her underwear and shirts from the floor, sawing the tubetop and overshirt down over her head together, holding the neck wide for her glasses and hair to pass through untangled. She’d gotten dressed earlier, while they were briefly marathoning *Always Sunny* and she had been apparently unaware of Dan’s scheduled tour of the bedroom. The bed, really, which he felt they’d toured respectably, now that it hadn’t entirely been all twister-the-game kinds of awkward. “How big is your family?”

It was kind of a jarring question but he could vaguely see what she might be getting at. “My parents, me, two sisters, both older.”

“Now me, I would say, that what you just did, what you shared with me about yourself, was much more intimate than me knowing how your ass tastes.”

She sort of smackpopped like she was sucking the flavour of his ass off her lips to taste it again, and it made him aware of the general moist, faintly lingering sex-smell atmosphere of the bed and his underlying drug-sweat-like oozy feeling of being in a gross skinsuit. “There are only a few major flavour-groups of ass, you know. I mean, to my uh, palate, anyway. But your personal history isn’t ...you don’t have a lot of braille, y’know. You’ve got A

braille. An braille. Which is kind of too bad, about how I can't find it all out from your butt like going through a corporate paper dumpster. Sibling order, and role assignment...is informative to me..." there was that stare, and he buzzed again, which was unsettling. That hadn't been what he'd thought she was getting at. He thought she'd been about to accuse him of having an intimacy problem.

"You could ask."

"I did." She had. "...you know, the net surfer, he's kind of like the silver surfer, do you know Marvel at all?" This again. Dan shook his head no, hoping this would be a brief discussion of superheros. "They come from somewhere unknowably sinister, and they're really likable, but that's what makes it really hurt when Galactus or a virus or whatever show up. When the other, eviler shoe falls out of the sky after them, like... Margaret Mead studying Jewish New Yorkers and inventing that Jewish mother stereotype, or all those C.I.A. spies saying they were doing ethnographic surveys. Like that. The C.I.A. here would be... What was that one girl's name? Remember? The Reboot movie?"

Dan was stumped, briefly. He remembered her. She was actually who he pictured living in this apartment. "Don't you know? I thought this was her place." Andreah laughed again, loud and for real. But she didn't cough up the name. "So you watched a lot of TV as a kid. And you ...collect comics?" "I barely was into silver surfer, I had like one actual silver surfer comic, I was more into X-men, the stuff that had like, Cable and nineties-hair Storm. Really into Halle Berry as a kid because some kid had an X-2 theater release birthday in middle school." They were the same age, he realized. He'd been trying to figure out if she was older and seemed younger sometimes or younger and seemed older sometimes.

"Like one of the Famous Players party room deals?"

"Uh, no, we were one of those big cliques of too-grown-for-life type kids who are still painfully suburban so, we didn't do that. Though it was at a Famous Players. But anyway, no, actually, I didn't watch that much tv, wasn't allowed, don't get me started. Mostly it's that I like shitty throwback



CGI, like everyone our age, ever.” Dan assumed she was one of those kids who cried at Toy Story on snow days, but tried to act like it was nothing. He’d always been more into Shrek as a kid.

“So what about you, what’s your butt’s untold story.” She laughed and he was glad, because he’d thought it was kind of corny once he’d said it.

“You could ask it, you might’ve picked up the ...lingo.” She did that tongue waggle again, and this time it was a lot different, although it looked identical. He wasn’t really in the mood anymore, feeling profoundly and resoundingly spent, but his bees hummed their somewhat uncomfortable response anyway. “Be serious, just tell me.”

“My Dad’s an engineer, he works for enbridge, don’t get me started, and my mom is a lawyer, she does legal consulting, mainly for the Liberals, don’t get me started.”

“Like Jean-Paul’s mom.”

She looked set-off for some reason, and almost snapped when she said “what?”

“...Legal consulting...Jean-Paul’s mom does that too.” Andreah’s face changed again just as quickly as it had, clearing completely.

“Oh.” She looked like she was going to say more but stopped and sort of flexed her mouth, deciding otherwise. “I didn’t know that,” she finally concluded. In the sudden absence of her anger, Dan didn’t want to risk provoking it again and decided to find a new topic.

Once again he noticed Andreah’s tattoo through the mesh of her shirt, which was full of various-sized cosmetic holes that made it look cobwebby. She remarked before he could, meaning he’d been obviously staring, “you don’t know how relieved I was when you weren’t ...really fucked up about my tattoo when you brought it up. A lot of guys assume I’m full native then act like it’s a pass to say really, really disgusting shit, mostly white dudes, no offense.” He wasn’t sure why he would be offended by a statement about a group of a-lot-of-guys when he’d been told already he was an exception.

"Like it’s even people who’re Maison-approved. Some fucking clown’s always wanting to tell me, if I love riding horses, big dicks, etcetera.

Repetitively foul shit. The s-slur comes up like it's nothing, like they—fuck it.” Dan wasn't sure what the s-slur was, was it slut?

“Fuck,” Dan was glad he hadn't tried to flirt with her about the tattoo very aggressively. He felt slightly too-full and slightly less drunk than before, but drunk in a worse way, like maybe-hungover-in-the-morning drunk. “I'm, that sucks, sorry.” That sounded right. Andreah seemed to be swaying slightly too, possibly, and she looked sort of like a sexy cheshire cat medusa creature, so he kissed her. She made a little appreciative noise but broke the kiss with a smile.

“And then, white girls always run up talking ‘bout how that book *meant something to them.*” She concluded in a squeaky falsetto. “You know what it's like being a seven year old like me in a white schoolroom? That book... was proof that all that whiteness I didn't have wasn't missing. And white people always wanna tell me that book's theirs anyway. That I'm theirs anyway.” She spat into the carpet, sort of carelessly, seeming bored of their stay in the apartment.

“Yeah, Fuck” Dan said it with some feeling, understanding. “That's fucked up that people want to stake some kind of... precedence? Over actual... you know, First Nations mythology.”

“What? That book was by some white British guy with a boner for plains people. It's actually really essentializing benevolent-racism shit, and not emblematic of anything from my culture. I wish all the time I'd gotten some of my cousin's art there instead. That's teenage decision-making for you,” and she sighed, but sounded happy, leaning into him on the spattered duvet. There was a pause in which Dan digested this. “Why do you wear shirts like that, then? If people give you shit and it's not a tattoo you like?” It was the winter, even.

Andreah stared at him through her shades. She stared for almost a minute and Dan got kind of uncomfortable, but she broke the silence and said “because fuck those people.” He nodded because he didn't disagree. He could have worn a hat, or dyed his hair all the time when he was younger, to avoid ginger grieving...but he hadn't wanted to wear a hat just because

people were fuckwits, and anyone who made an issue of his coloring had grown out of it sometime in highschool. What if they'd just gotten worse, he wondered.

“So Andre must have her work cut out fer her.” This seemed sort of out of the blue, when Dan heard himself say it. “No wonder she got tense when we were introduced—she decided before that somehow that I was a guy who'd say fucked up shit to you.” He recalled that weird scene by the dumpster and vaguely sensed that it must have started before that but felt like he couldn't place it. And by not totally mangling the encounter with Andrea he'd rebuilt something between himself and Andre, that had been obvious. Something different and more complicated than what'd tentatively been there, something that involved Andre inviting herself to spend more time with Bruce, suddenly.

"Well yeah, I mean...look I don't really want to get into this...middle-sibling note-carrier bullshit zone, but, she told me—" Andrea paused to light one of the roaches from the little nightstand dish next to the head of the mattress set. Dan suspected the note passing zone was actually entertainment or something, since he couldn't really see her motivation otherwise for being forthcoming about what was presumably a private conversation she'd had with her roommate-she-wasn't-dating. “That on the walk you were fucked up about Alice.” It felt like she'd doused him in cold water. He suspected she was An Only Child.

“I was fucked up about who? How could I. We weren't talking about anyone, she just kept—talking...” That weird moment, it suddenly dawned on him. In between her endless info-spewing, when he'd tried to act info-interested, she'd told him to ask Alice, and he'd assumed it was a kiss-off. “Oh my god.”

"So you know who I'm talking about.”

“NO. I have no— I didn't think Alice was real. I thought it was a turn of phrase or something! It IS a turn of phrase, it's some old, some old hippie meme. Why would she say 'go ask Alice'? That's fucking confusing!”

“YOU LIVE AT THE MAISON, DUDE.” Andrea pinched out the last trace

of roach for emphasis and concluded “FUCK.”

He wanted to tell her not to yell at him, but realized it hadn’t been a real yell, really. Just loud affect. Instead he said “this is a weird deja vu of the whole ...Toi ...Sakamoto...issue. Who. Is. Alice.”

She waved her hand like the roach had burnt her and the smoke trailed in the air, still, the cascading flumes of strings of copper wire set with tiny gold and lilac-white lights twinkled, and Dan felt simultaneously like kissing her again and going to sleep. “Uh, hello, bony blond raver lady? No tits? Lives in your roof garden?”

Dan felt his lips purse. “Yes of course, the roof garden.” He sounded exactly like Jean-Paul for a second.

“I’m surprised she wasn’t sleeping inside when you kids got back last night, actually. You’ve never— You’re serious that you didn’t know.”

“I still don’t know how to work the kitchen sink,” he still sounded cheesed but now it was starting to sound cheesier to him, and he wanted to lift the mood again. “Sorry to sound like a square, baby, but I don’t know much.”

Post-ironic Austin Powers impressions were in this year, hopefully. Bruce had made a reference the other day, he remembered, and she liked Bruce.

“Sit there and look pretty, then,” she tousled his hair, and the gesture reminded him of Roscoe, “...baby.” He felt sort of flattered in spite of himself. She didn’t sound sarcastic and they had just had sex, plus she’d...he cut himself off, on the precipice of thinking, and possibly overthinking, their more recent venture. Whether he was someone she wanted to consider seeing more-than-casually or not, she thought he was attractive. Physically, just not otherwise, apparently. Or maybe he’d changed her mind by now, unexpectedly. Did he want to change her mind, really-really, he subsequently wondered.

“Thanks. Doubt that’ll work with Andre,” he heard himself sound kind of whiny, but thought maybe the Andre situation was salvageable after all. Now that Andrea had clarified things for him he felt more optimistic about avoiding sounding like an asshole. He could just apologize and explain, when he saw her. It wasn’t his fault, he’d misread the comment. And she’d

clearly already decided there'd been a miscommunication—or, if she hadn't decided it, she'd realized there was room for it. It was possible.

“Listen, unlike this bitch who's shitty bed we just sullied,” she said sullied in a kind of hackneyed Royal accent, “Andre's always got my back. That one doesn't need to be fucked up to go from zero to crazy, she'll lunge and go hard, any time, and I'd do the same for her, so can it. She's good people.”

Andrea spoke very, very warmly, and Dan felt like he was getting a bit more of the picture. The mini love-fest Andrea had just inserted into the space between them appeared in Dan's topdown mind's-eye view of their dim sprawl, as a fizzing ball of awkward light about a foot in diameter, hovering. It was sort of weird for Dan, to detect a certain gushiness in Andrea's voice despite her earlier seeming, or maybe trying to seem, more or less unimpressed by Andre's ‘judgmental’ approach and suspiciously timed food serving. Dan had never thrown down for anyone, he thought, excepting himself, with words, when pushed, by his ex. No one could describe him as a rider. He thought of changing the topic back to Alice, but didn't get very far—there was a sense of pressure not to change the topic so blatantly.

“I...get that. I get that Andre's good people.” He looked for something to add, coming up with “so, she hooked up with Bruce through dumpster diving?” But she hadn't, he remembered then—Bruce said he'd met her hanging out in their living room.

“She met Bruce through me, sort of,” she paused. “B and I worked at a headshop together a long time ago.”

“How long ago?” He pictured them as highschool kids, reading their phones and chewing gum surrounded by bongs.

“Wasn't sooo long after they founded the Maison—he and Sakamoto both worked there when I started.” She said Sakamoto sort of weirdly this time, it was either distaste or over-inflection. She talked differently now that she was drunk, but she seemed to have a lot of different ways of talking anyway. Dan noticed she was much, much less drunk-seeming than he was drunk-feeling. She seemed almost entirely alert, still, while at this point it was impossible to keep up any pretense that he was still fresh. Again he wanted to sleep, but it

felt like that would ruin something, so he tried to power through.

“Why’d you work at a headshop?” The lights twinkled. The room was basically empty except for light material trailing from the ceiling in a kind of false-fourpost situation, and piles, streamers and pinned swirls of the little LEDs. The tiny space had an unearthly glow around the edges and in the corners away from the lights, like a Vancouver 7-11 bathroom you weren’t supposed to be able to do heroin in, and approximately the same size. This was a pretty slapdash basement rental conversion, in final summation. The house had been kitted out with an approximation of a second unit about a hundred years after its build date, and this room was some kind of old root cellar with redone walls and new ventilation.

“Oh, it was a kind of hippie place, they had a lot of essentials at a time when Toronto was short on non-Wiccan-infested magic shops. Not that that’s changed.”

“Wiccan-infested. Magic shops. *Essentials.*” He could not believe it. It was so ridiculous, it was so 13-year-old-awkward-girl.

“Yeah, they’re pests, but they never really closed in on our store, not the right aura of spookery, I guess. The owner asked me to manage the place but I just wanted to work there—it ended up being a really, ah-hah, team-based environment while it lasted, because she hired me and never hired an actual manager, but then she was an absentee owner type.” She noticed that Dan was laughing. “What?”

“I...think it’s cute that there are Wiccans,” he said. Was it 1996? Were people seriously still goth in Toronto? This was the gothest date of Dan’s basically gothless life. She had goth beef with other, different kinds of goths, even.

“I don’t. They aren’t cute.”

“Gotcha, Wiccans bad. So, headshop, friends with the ...dynamic duo, or whatever.” He hiccup-burped into the back of his hand and swiped the bed with it semi-unconsciously, “Andre shows up in the kitchen when?”

Andrea looked at him like oh-you-know-that-part-I-see, and told him “it was after the Viral V-Vival I-I-I-I-V.”

“...the.” He waited.

“It was a show. B noticed there were a lot of local bands suddenly with ... alliterative names.”

“Oh.” She’d made it sound really epic or something.

“There’s a recording, actually, they did that one live.”

“Like, on the internet, or the radio?”

“Both, but the radio relay thing was pretty attenuated, Andre and I were kind of doing really hazy D.I.Y. with that and like, going live, from a phone.

Actually let me get my phone, I know where the show is in the archive.”

When she moved to get up he pulled her arm, bringing her back close to him, surprising himself at his own sense of familiarity with her but then slightly uncomfortable with wanting to stay close. He kissed her shoulder and thought of some reason to have pulled her back, something to say to kind of camouflage the reasonlessness of it.

“So, why aren’t you spending today with Andre,” he asked her, breathing into her neck. “Really.”

She kissed him, sweetly on his forehead, not the friendly, hyper style of kiss from earlier. “I don’t want her to think she’s so important, like she’s so much better than every other white person, because she’s not. She’s marginally above average at best and at worst she’s just another white person. Andre’s half the rent, and my ally. And when I want to, and she wants to, we fuck. That’s it.”

Wishing he could cum again if they got going a third time, and thinking of their names, Andre and Andreah, he said “Ahh.” He was caught in a couple’s argument. He collapsed fully ragdoll onto the mattress. “Why do I think she’d say the same kind of thing about Bruce and guys.” Apparently, that was how Andre was when you were friends. She wasn’t your girlfriend but she acted like she was and it kind of made it true the longer things went like that. That was even worse than a girlfriend.

“Has she been complaining to you about the whole issue with Pete?” Left-field surprise.

“There’s an issue with Pete?” He fit it together, his mind clicking unbidden

through projector slide-like memories of Bruce excusing or trying to soften the impression Pete made. “She thinks—she’s not into bro-code I guess.” There was an audio memory of Bruce, telling him she wouldn’t come over after Toi was gone.

“Good guess. I’m getting my phone, I’ll be back.”

Andreah did a side-stop at the bathroom, which reminded him his own body existed and required attention occasionally. He met her at the door and swapped places with her. When he came back, ready to sit without squirming around wanting to take a leak now that he’d noticed needing to, Andreah had already found the episode and, as he landed back next to her on the lilac coloured bedcover, she dramatically hit play like she was using a t.v. remote. There was a pause after the dub-mottled burbling of bongs died down, and Bruce said, in a weird, kind of unearthly voice that didn’t sound like him at all, “hiii every-little-one out there in listen-land. Today, as always, our episode is: what is reality? Welcome to The-PurpPower-Hour’s four hundred and eighth episode, and welcome to twenty minutes past four-pee-em, my Eastern Standard Tribe. Mouse, dear one—prompt us purpled-people in, if you’d be so swellity-swell.”

“Is it a fetus trying to see itself in the wombdark?” Mouse sounded like he had his arms crossed, his gruff and accented voice slicing the podcast air. An audible bong-rip followed.

“That seriously called for Bad Cauldron,” sighed Bruce.

Dan looked sidelong at Andreah, hoping to see her make a face that meant lol-right-oh-bruce, but she supplied “it’s a green Sherlock bubbler with this beautiful blue glaze oozing over the sides, and screaming heads embedded in the glass like they’re straining against the surface. I got it for him. I love that thing—its sister is mine, she’s fuchsia and her name is Rad Cauldron.”

Dan bobbed his head, because it seemed polite. Andreah was resting her left leg over his right, and she wobbled his left foot with hers in a friendly way.

“What’s your favourite piece ever, like what was its name, what was it like?”

She motioned for quiet immediately after asking, because Bruce was talking.

“I do definitely sense we’re all reflections of reality and reality is an



unfurling system that looks at itself,” there was a pause. “Furling and unfurling,” he added.

Andreah made a noise of appreciation, a low “mmm,” and Dan looked at her, slightly disoriented by the conversation of the podcast. “They’d been drilling down on this idea about the fetus and the womb for a while, like blind-brain cosmological set-up,” she said. “But Bruce was on the whole ‘frequency’ track at this point I think. He was always obsessed about radios,” Dan didn’t find this helpful. “This was back in twenny-twelve.“ Wasn’t this supposed to be some live concert they were listening to? The viral whatever-and-ever? “So in the ongoing observation of reality’s self,” said Mouse, “what you’re talking about is a simultaneous total grasp and loss of grasp, if I understand. As if you were to...when you tighten your grip on sticky putty and what you’re holding squeezes out but its still in your hand.”

“Well,” there was a pause. “When you tell a long joke, it flows organically. You have a sense of the punchline because you’ve told the joke before or you had an idea of it when you started talking, but all the parts that make it up are shifting and...if you’re a good teller, the details all build on the humour, like each part is there for a reason even if its just trimming or misdirection or whatever. So you find yourself midway through the joke and you look back at the parts that have happened and you know what’s coming up but right in the middle you get kind of lost because you’re not actually sure which details were important or how things are going to go this time.”

“That was a stupid explanation, talk plainly,” said Mouse, and Dan agreed. Bruce laughed.

“I’m talking about that time I observed the vibrations as a long joke,” Bruce responded. Andreah looked at Dan and he wasn’t sure what she was checking for. “Right? Each person in the room was a detail in the joke and I felt reality wrinkle, like a joke teller who’s been adrift in the telling getting back on track. All the vibrations were really clear, and it seemed like each element of reality, each detail of the joke, was recognizing the wrinkle on a different timeline, like each part knows itself at a different point, or, at one point, but not all the same one, and that was my moment—I wasn’t sure at

first, like I thought it was some sort of hiccup where we were all recognizing the joke go off the rails as a weird test of the system, like the teller winking and everyone winking back?”

“I did not,” said Mouse, “experience a moment of being a winking part of the cosmic joke at the point in time to which you are referring.”

“That’s what you say now,” said Bruce. “But that’d be a weird joke if, instead of working in concert, all the elements just sat up and said the punchline themselves as they were introduced. But I super-experienced the moment where I could see every part knowing the punchline from their own moments, other moments—there was an unfurling. The system was checking itself, checking the frequencies, and all the frequencies answered back. I was actually worried it meant reality as I perceive it was dematerializing, but there was a snap-back.”

“A furling.”

“Right, yeah. So I feel like, unless everyone is keeping ultra down-low about experiencing the same moment, I felt a test that happens at some point and every other aspect of reality experiences it at some other point; it’s simultaneous but not in time. We all wink at each other during the test to make sure things are working but the test happens somewhere before the punchline, or it is the punchline, and at the moment we’re all different details of the joke.”

“So the fetus...”

“Figures it out. But I have no idea what it knows,” Bruce concluded.

“So your experience was one of being aware not of the nature of reality, but of reality checking the consistency of it’s own story, it’s joke.”

“I’d say so, yeah. Mostly what was useful about that experience was what I always go off about, the frequencies. ‘Cause that’s waaaay more consistent. The test was...I dunno, that was a weird one! I find the frequencies so consistent, and the whole cosmic joke thing really bugged me out. Observing the system test itself was weird, man. Totally freaking weird. I dunno how reassuring it was—like a wink is fucking reassuring and being winked at by everyone from different points in time was, I dunno, it was nice, but I felt

alone...like on the brink of a distant future eradication.”

“A pre-echo of the birth?”

“Yeah, haunting like that...” Bruce sounded different than usual still, brightness hadn’t left his voice but he somehow sounded desolate. “I think most times, I’m winking as hard as I can...and that was an eyes wide open moment, when I was winked at.”

“You are too willing to be comfortable and sure,” said Mouse. “When your eyes are shut like a mirthful monk perhaps you become weaker against the moments in which you sense how incidental you are.” There was a hard but not unkind edge to Mouse’s voice, as generally seemed to be the case—it stood out strongly that time. Dan found himself appreciating Mouse’s contributions to the podcast, as a counterdose to Bruce’s ridiculousness and rambling. It was certainly listenable, even fascinating. Riveting, somehow. “Perhaps,” echoed Bruce. “Perhaps perhaps,” he said again, and there was the sound of Bad Cauldron. “Bubble bubble smoke and trouble,” he singsonged after a minute, his weird other-voice a pleasing hum to listen to, a self-harmonizing bassy monotone. “I think that’s enough talk-talk today, this isn’t that show, tonight-tonight. Tonight-tonight the answer to ‘what is reality’ is, hardcore.”

“Fine,” said Mouse. There was a longer pause and over the quiet dub, still playing, the whir of some small appliance could be heard, followed by several beeps. Dan recognized that this signaled the set-up of Bruce’s vaporizer.

“Were you going to call the bands to see how close they are? The audio-crew’s gotta be sitting out there just cursing us, man.” Dan realized this meant the girls, waiting on a call that had live music, so they could patch it in to a radio transmitter they’d had to haul somewhere with a generator, in the bike cart.

“First, I have a joke for you. It is on-topic.” Bruce made a little noise, probably surprised—Dan was.

“Please!” said Bruce. He sounded pleased.

“The past, the present, and the future walked into a bar. It was tense.” Bruce

cracked up, as did Andreah there next to him, to a slightly lesser extent. Dan had to chuckle too. Mouse telling jokes was funny. After Bruce was sufficiently degiddied, and Mouse was presumably making calls, there was an abrupt recommencing of chatter, this time in Bruce's actual voice.

“Now, the magic mail-dimebag has offered up something of some importance for us. Next show, ep' four oh nine, will fall on Towel Day. But not just any old ordinary Towel Day, loving listeners. For those unaware, as was yours truly, this May twenty-fifth is oh-five-twenty-five-oh-twelve,” there was a pause as an inaudible grumble interrupted. “Ah, Mouse points out that I don't need to say ‘Oh twelve’ and I say oh-well,” he laughed. “Anyway, add those numbers up and you get the answer to the ultimate question, the meaning of life, the universe and everything. Next week is *the* Towel Day. We'll get it together for that holy of holy-holly-days, blaze assured,” Bruce concluded, smile clear in his voice. The podcast was infused with, once more, the burbling of pipe water and a pleased-sounding sigh of exhalation. Dan didn't know why Bruce didn't stick with one apparatus but then, of course he didn't. Andreah started to skip around, looking for something particular, her phone intermittently blaring badly recorded yet very energetic sounding rock-and-or-roll.

“Nine times out of ten that year, the mailbag stuff was just something Sakamoto had told him,” supplied Andreah. Dan felt the information pass over him, wondered if they called one another on Skype ever, thought about Bruce staying in touch with his friend—the two of them talking to one another excitedly through a little window on a screen. Something about the image of Bruce in his room gabbling with Toichiro online seemed both sad and comforting. Probably that was exactly how it was.

“So every week, every episode I mean, is like this?”

“What do you mean? Usually its not Mouse doing the prompting or talking so much, but Sakamoto was out being a roadie for the V bands, zi doesn't get on-air til later, this episode. There's some banter segments with the band, zi's really, really good at that. I'm looking for—”

“But. The show. It's about the ...nature of reality? Like ...It's just Bruce

talking about the same five acid trips over and over again? For years?” Andreah snorted and said “this show is a hell of a lot more vital than anything else Maison Navelgaze puts into the world.” Dan thought she sounded annoyed but wasn’t sure why. He chose not to press the issue although he found himself deeply curious about what an intelligent, adjusted person saw in what seemed like boilerplate psychedelic pseudo-philosophy. He reminded himself that she was also, apparently, into magic—the practice, rather than the cardgame—and had a silly fancy glass pipe with its own silly name, to match her silly friend’s silly pipe with its silly name. Everyone needed hobbies, he guessed.

“So...” he had so many questions, he realized. It was hard to pick where to start. “Why ...does he do that. With his voice.” It was hard to nail down the nature of the radioguy voice Bruce had used half the time.

“What, the jive-bunny jazz-kitty ASMR voice?”

“Yeahhh... it’s like some weird. What. Hypnosis tapes. I found a bunch of them at an estate sale I was at one time, they sound like that.”

“So do some cartoons.” She shrugged slightly and spat lightly into the air again, off to the side, where it hit the wall. Then she dropped her phone, looking frustrated with her search for whatever it was that had happened that episode that was so particularly great. “Like, did you ever. You haven’t seen any Daria, have you?”

He remembered it vaguely, some ugly cell animated MTV import from deeply recessed childhood memories. “Maybe. Not that I remember.”

“I bingewatched it with Andre a couple years ago, she was making fun of some squad she knew at a demo and kept doing voices from Daria, there’s this clique called the fashion club. And there’s a guy in a band with that same voice as Bruce does, basically. I think it’s tranquil.”

“I’m not disputing that. It’s totally tranquilizing.” He was sort of proud of his play off her weird use of the word tranquil, which he wasn’t sure he’d ever heard anyone use in conversation before in his life. “It’s also totally not how Bruce talks, I mean, he doesn’t even do the whole show in the voice. It’s like he’s hosting ...himself, as a guest. It’s completely jarring, on top of

the, the content. Which is.“ Who was that conservative radio guy, he’d seen clips of Colbert making fun of him on Youtube. He couldn’t remember. “It’s like, if Fox News was the news from inside some weird stoner’s head.”

“It’s fully crackpot conjecture,” Andreah confirmed. Conjecture sounded too kind, like there was a chance Bruce was right, when of course, his musings or trip reports or whatever were just chemically-fueled fantasy. Fantasy that didn’t even hold up entirely as a coherent string of words.

“And it sounds like children’s programming on top of that. Like... Mr. Dress-up just showed up and lead us around his psycho memory palace and it was full of, of PCP flashbacks in clown costumes. But the whole time he has this... underlying urgency like he’s on a mission from god to convey this information.”

“Uh huh. It’s nice. In a way, isn’t it? You know the phrase infectious enthusiasm? Who doesn’t want to catch enthusiasm. We all need it. Bruce really wants the answers. Y’know, THE answers. Searching for them—seeking, thinking—makes him happy, and listening to his version of In Search Of makes other people happy.”

“Sure, right. Noble or whatever.” He supposed. She seemed to think so. Dan couldn’t believe the sheer volume of the guy’s—the group’s, including Toi and Andre and whoever’s—output. There were more than hundreds of shows, there were over two thousand, he saw, scrolling through the list on her phone. There were years where he’d done five or six a week. Toi being gone was obviously a huge issue, if it was a once a week thing now. “So, is the show, from Bruce’s point of view, is the point just cheering people up or what?”

“Oh, no, I--. Bruce is absolutely doing his best to convey ...the signal the universe is sending him, I’ll put it his way. Sakamoto and Andre are happy to help because they think it’s fun.”

“Right.” That was definitely how it seemed, about Bruce. Doing his best to get something across. “So, I mean, they aren’t stupid. If he’s really trying to ...spread the word or whatever, shouldn’t he... play ball? Isn’t the show preaching to the choir, if anything? Am I mixing metaphors? But what I mean is, why do...” the voice, the any of it. “All that stuff that eats away

your credibility?“

She laughed and spun around in place, now talking with her legs in the air up against the wall, feet waving down at him. “Because he’s just incredible, I guess.” She rotated upright again and Dan was impressed by how mobile and, well, fun, she was. His ex hadn’t been very fun, it turned out. He hadn’t known. “People love that voice you think’s creepy. If you listen to the show, I mean, he reads emails from people about how he helps them sleep. In the voice, he reads them.“

Great, thought Dan, the electric adult-baby easy-listening cult. With Bruce as their freaky minister. But an image of bitter little Edward Norton standing over a photocopier in Fight Club surfaced, and his face looked a lot like Mouse’s patina of hollow-eyed hostility, and he realized insomnia was probably a bigger issue in a bigger city. He’d always had it, though the coke hadn’t helped, but before that he’d always seemed to be in the raccoon-eyed minority, and not deserve a lot of sympathy for it. It was probably how he’d withstood the boxspring for so long—his main issue wasn’t that it had kept him from sleeping as long as usual, it was that it had made him sore. He didn’t suspect that listening to Bruce’s show would have ever helped, before or during the boxspring era, and he didn’t intend to test it now; if it had gotten him an audience, though counter-intuitive to Dan that this might be the case, he applauded Bruce for it.

He had a weird thought then, about what he’s said earlier, when they’d met up, so long ago now, it felt like. “You didn’t make me and Bruce the same drink, right?”

“What? No, B’s was just like, syrup. Like mostly syrup. You didn’t seem like ...Mr. Sweet.”

“I like sweet...”

She stared at him so he knew she had meant something else, and said “sweet it is then.” Somehow, there was a lot in that. He felt inexplicably morose suddenly, and then his exhaustion pasted him hard as a snowball to the head, in follow-up.

“Sleep it is now,” and he promptly passed out, tasting his own mouth and

finding it sour, distantly, as his brain spiralled down the tunnel away from the bright weird world of awake.

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part 9: and she said, whatabout, breakfast at sneaky dee's  
February 15, 2016 7:50 am

The next morning Andreah bustled them out of the apartment as soon as Dan was out of the shower, almost. He stumbled going up the steps when the light of day hit him, deciding to himself that he wasn't hungover because of holdover buzz. He was relieved the deepfreeze snap had passed and it was almost back above zero, although his wet hair cold-dried into a crispy mop. The dry icy air was clearing up his kind-of-queasy kind-of-musty somehow-unshowered feeling, and he suddenly felt alert, which was immediately followed by uncertainty. Had their night gone well? He remembered it, and he couldn't tell.

"So, you're not blind," he half-asked.

"Nope. Just photosensitive migraine shit."

"Did you know I thought you were?" He wondered if he'd been weird about it, over-accomodating or doting seeming or something.

"People always do," she looked smug. "White people have always been really sensitive about my eye movements. Teachers were always on me about rolling my eyes, and I swear to god I'm not stupid enough to pull faces as much as they accused me of, so finally when I had a plausible reason, I started hiding my eyes and carrying a doctor's note about my migrains, and it definitely changed things." She spat on the ground, and it steamed where it settled among the road salt.

They wandered through a parkette and the street this put them on spit them up onto College again. Andreah told him that hip-hop karaoke at the revival was good, and he tried to picture himself involved in some kind of venue



event, again, but couldn't. He felt like asking Andreah if she wanted to spend the day with him, but settled for asking if she wanted to get breakfast before they split, because asking felt like asking if they might be kind-of-dating-kind-of-friends now, or if she wasn't interested in spending any more time together. He felt sort of uncomfortable with the idea of a repeat of the previous night, now that he was another day older. But, he knew he still liked her more than most of his housemates, and he knew that when she felt like it, she was easier to get along with. She seemed to be good at figuring out how to be, very quickly. It was nice, reassuring—took the pressure off where people usually didn't, or tried to put on more. It seemed like Andreah saw and accounted for, accommodated, even found cute, the personality deficits he associated with himself, and that seemed to be how relationships that weren't just about convenience and proximity worked, you both pitched in or whatever and together made a team that made life easier for each of you. Dating, Dan felt, was about testing to see if the team was good enough to last—this felt like a better team than the one he'd been in with his ex, for certain. Palpably better, in fact, but that was supposed to be how things always were at the start, before you knew each other. He thought seeing more of her would be fun at least, until it wasn't. That was what dating was really supposed to be anyway, in your twenties, wasn't it? A bunch of awkward experiments with team building? That was how all the sitcoms had made it seem. Actually sitcoms made your thirties and forties kind of look like that, too. He thought of the hours of his life he'd never get back because his ex had made him see the Sex and the City movies in theatre, and then he got sidetracked and mulled the previous night over and over while they walked up to the place Andreah said had a breakfast plate with unlimited coffee for under five dollars. She was chatting enthusiastically to him about Scott Pilgrim, and he'd never seen the movie or read the comics so he was sort of vague on what it was about, but apparently it was about Toronto and that made it very interesting, though not to Dan. The ambiance of the place she brought him to seemed kind of cheesy, but the food was good and everyone in the restaurant—every last person, staff or patron—was dressed better than he

was, so he and the ambiance called it a draw. Apparently this place was also a venue.

They were just on round two of coffee and mostly cleared plates, with Andreah paying most of her attention to a free newspaper she'd picked up at the door, when he brought up the issue of seeing each other again, soon, in a similar, more acknowledgedly-datelike, way. Andreah tried dismissing the topic but Dan decided it was time to show some spine, because maybe that was all it needed.

"You think I'm funny, though. We get along."

"...Dan." She smoothed the creased corners of her mouth with one hand, thumb and index finger arched, wiping away invisible detritus before the hand closed and went to support her head, her cheek leaning into it. "Part of what...makes your jokes work is, they're a surprise. I mean, from my point of view, it's so unexpected for you to...even approach ...relateability. No offense."

"None...taken?"

She rubbed her face with her hand, scrubbing phantom sleepcrust, sunglasses momentarily skew-whiff. "I should just have told you I'm waiting for Halle Berry to come to TIFF and see me on my bike at a light and take me away in her limo to live a life of sapphic luxury."

Dan tried to process this, guessing about what sapphic meant. "So, you're just ...not that into white people?" That seemed to be what it was. She found white people smothering. In fact she'd been trying to tell him all last night, why she couldn't date him, hadn't she? He felt dense.

"I'm not, that's true. I can kind of imagine...nevermind, I mean, it's just that that's obviously not the relevant point. I keep Andre around, after all." She smiled to herself, and Dan was struck with a bitter desire to see them fight, to see Andre angry at being kept around. "But I mean it, I'm holding out for ... someone better than you. Sorry?"

"But." He felt really rug-pulled-out and kind of looked around. The place was mostly empty in the murky back, where they'd sat. "Couldn't. Does that mean you don't want to hang out at all anymore?" Dreading to check with

himself, Dan did and found that yes, his feelings were hurt. She didn't really like him.

"Anymore. You mean, again? Yeah, we could. If I'm ever lonely, maybe I'll text you and tell you to come over and watch *Always Sunny in Incheon* with me. Or *Reboot*." She smiled at him, still resting on her hand and looking serene, but there was strictness undergirding her tone, a laying-down-the-law sound.

"And if you're ever lonely you can come down to the cafe."

This was definitely a rejection. He felt cheated suddenly, like she'd intentionally set him up, knowing...knowing— "This isn't the best time for me emotionally. I don't really leave the house." Did that say enough? His voice sounded weird, so maybe that said enough. She looked really unhappy suddenly, and dropped her hand down to her coffee cup, holding it without picking it up.

"I'm really—I'm actually—sorry, I thought...I didn't think it was going to be an issue," she ended up sounding slightly pleading, and she did look truly remorseful, even sorry. Upset. He had upset her. He felt really small and petty then, looking at himself guiltily someone who had been clear that they weren't on a date and wouldn't date. What did she owe him, really. Did she owe him this explanation? And did he, he asked himself, really think she owed him...an apology? Was it her fault she was nicer than his ex? Maybe everyone was—how would he know?

He sighed, angry now at himself and frustrated in general but abruptly, not at her. "Don't be sorry, it's not an issue. I'm being a fuckwit." He looked at his hands, let out a lungfull of air he hadn't noticed himself take in or hold.

"Things kind of did get...more romantic than I'd have...assumed," she admitted. "But the. It's not the same, the feeling's not ...there."

"Felt a lot like the feeling was there to me," he tried to sound conversational, like they were just two chums analyzing their unrelated love lives. But then he realized that what he'd said was true, and very important. Had it ever—ever—felt like that with his ex. Like he was made of bees she controlled. Now his bees felt asleep, but they didn't really feel like his old atoms, did they. The old atoms hadn't, in the light of day, revealed they were just

wearing weird extra-vibratey striped funfur onesies with zipper backs, easy to step out of.

“When was the last time you’d had sex or got drunk?”

“That’s a very practical question,” he tried to sound as matter-of-fact as she had, and she laughed, seeming to scan his face for something.

“I am sorry,” she reemphasized. “People can only be as gentle with you as you let them know to be.” Which sounded like good advice because of the way she’d phrased it, but when he thought about it actually the opposite seemed more realistic, that people were harder on you the more you asked for or needed or seemed to want ...gentleness. Like what she’d said was technically true, but what was more true was, people could only resent you as much as they had reason to, so don’t give reasons.

He looked for some other topic, something that wasn’t...this. “So what’s the issue with Pete.” If she glanced around he didn’t see through the shades.

“I guess I did mention that.” There was a shape there next to the table suddenly, but neither of them wanted a refill. Dan waited on Andreah to continue, suddenly fatigued and desolate feeling and transported somehow through that feeling to his future self feeling that way, back in bed at the Maison. He felt like he must look tired, and that made him feel newly jaded, but that felt surprisingly like belonging here. Feeling jaded in Victoria definitely didn’t feel like belonging. Andreah seemed to decide on what to say, and Dan discerned from her word-picking that she didn’t want any drama coming back on her from what she was about to tell him. “Okay, let’s say, if your activist scene happens to include white girls, they’re all eventually going to band together to call him an abuser after he’s dated his way down the line. And he’s going to say they’re all fetishizing tokenizing racists with a white supremacist sort of... sleeper-agent agenda they’re carrying out, to undermine the rev, or whatever. Like anyone making an issue of something he’s done is attacking more than just him, is how he presents it. So, have fun with that.”

“You don’t think he could be, uh. Like maybe everyone IS racist.” Pete being an asshole didn’t mean he was a monster, it just meant it was easy to make

him look like one. Really easy.

“That’s very progressive of you,” there was a bitter, bitter edge to her sarcasm. It unpleasantly reminded him, in a way that was a weird relief anyway, of his ex. “Maybe he’s a serial rapist. Maybe he serially dates racists so he can be the reason they’re ejected from what they want access to. Maybe both. What a charmer, like...can you not see how it might be that no one finds exactly what’s up with him as relevant as the chaos that follows him? It’s not that no one will work with him, it’s just that the more this happens the more ...he specifically has no one to work with except ... whoever can stand the bullshit. I can’t. Lots of people can’t.” If she knew how many thousands (40!) of people had read that Dan was a messy loser, and worse, willfully predatory to fragile, artistic women. A fragile, artistic woman. Maybe actually Andreah did know about the Slackjaw hackjob, and this was partly about that too, or even entirely. Maybe it made him a liability, his bad press. Not worth it. It was true, he was no Halle Berry. Halle Berry didn’t have ex-girlfriends smearing her for the good press they’d get.

“You just don’t like him.”

She made an annoyed face and sighed deeply. "Okay, that’s enough, time for me to go. Don’t text me, I’ll text you.“ The words "or not” hung in the air between them, alongside the sense that Andreah was being mindful of his feelings and not saying it, because he “wasn’t doing so well, emotionally” and she was, whether she wanted to be or not, too nice to be that tiny bit more ruthless. She slid her big coat on and snapped the lapels at him, frowning but not heatedly, and when she started to stand he put a hand out, holding her arm.

“I’m sorry,” *for everything, again*, “don’t go yet.”

“What else is there? I’m not not-busy you know. I have work later, and stuff to do before then. Like showering.” She drew his attention to the hand on her sleeve and he let go, feeling guilty that he’d showered instead of her when he didn’t even have anywhere to be today. She stayed standing, looking down at him where he’d stopped her.

“So, I wont see you at the Maison, ever.” He stared at his hand, now holding

the other, struggling to figure out his own reason for wanting to keep talking, so that maybe he could just say that. "Because of gossip about Pete."

"No," She grabbed her coffee cup and slammed whatever was left, immediately repeating the gesture with the glass of water she'd left til now.

"Because of Pete. I've met him, I've never liked him, and I'll remind you, I grew up here—I know people who've known him since highschool." She turned to go and Dan jumped to follow, yanking his coat off the booth seat as he went. "You wont see me at the Maison before Sakamoto's back."

"When's that?" It hadn't occurred to him, everyone acted like Toichiro was dead, like there was no return date to look forward to. Now that he realized that wasn't the case he was panicked about his living situation, again. Why hadn't anyone said when the room was unvacated?

"Could be never."

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Walking in the direction she'd pointed him to get to Dundas (after laughing to let him know that wasn't the best route back to the junction and he should know that), Dan's mind was drawn back to the realization that jadedness felt right here, acceptable. Counter-intuitively, in light of how not-brunch had gone, he felt embraced as he walked, as if his attitude appealed on some cellular level to Toronto itself. Why, though. Maybe on the island, jadedness didn't belong because everyone had decided the most workable thing was for no one to know whether you really liked them or being there or whatever, or not, and it was polite to act like you did even if it was a lie. No one here seemed interested in lying to get along, as far as he'd met anyone. Being crusty wasn't a bad attitude if it was an honest attitude, because it let people decide where they stood with you, or whether they stood with you. And there was enough room to not. Bruce surfaced in his memory, telling him it was a big city and it'd been years since they'd dealt with Mouse's dad. The opposite of his post-breakup social life in Vic. Ruminating on the subject of breakups again, he realized knowing-people-who-went-to-highschool-with-Pete was in fact, a second admission that she was letting gossip make up her mind. He made a resolution to make up his own mind, if it became relevant.

He couldn't see how it would, and keeping an open mind about Pete seemed like the only reasonable solution for getting along with him anyway. Bruce liked him, but obviously Bruce liked everyone. He wanted to ask Jean-Paul, he realized. As soon as he had the idea he played it out in his head and realized he didn't know how to bring it up without sounding like he was just gossiping. Maybe if he just asked Jean-Paul's opinion of Pete in general, he'd get a different perspective on "the issue with Pete." He flashed back to Jean-Paul saying something catty sounding, in the kitchen that time, only two days ago but already the wording was hazy. He'd been more focused on Andre, and he remembered that she seemed to be leaning on Jean-Paul socially somehow, the way she leaned on Bruce. Dan realized she didn't act that way outside the Maison, in fact when he thought about it he thought she'd've been angry that he preferred the timid version who wanted to avoid confrontation. The idea of overlapping domains was on his mind, of how Toichiro being gone meant the valence was different somehow, in a space that had been maybe more a part of Andre's domain, at least in her mind, than someone who lived there but was unpopular with the wrong people. He stopped to get his bearings at an intersection, noticing it was the only place he'd been downtown, or anywhere in Toronto, where people who seemed probably homeless or just generally down and out were gathered in anything like the numbers he was used to. It wasn't just the tims on the corner, those were everywhere. Maybe it was because it was winter and there was a shelter nearby or something, but then he'd have expected way more people. Maybe it was the hospital, which seemed like maybe the same hospital on the other side of Kensington from Spadina, nearer to where to turn south for Andreah and Andre's microneighborhood. He realized he was at Dundas, and craned around trying to get his bearings, eyes landing on the giant tower in the near-distance and clearly seeing it for the compass point it was for the first time on his walk toward it. Psychogeography confirmed, Dan noted there was a library here, and maybe that was why people were around. This library was covered in anti-cutbacks graffiti too. He'd hung a sharp right between the tims on his side and a mcdonalds on the other corner

and now that he was definitely marching toward the Maison, he wondered how long it would take. He was hoping his head would get too cold for his brain to bother him, if he walked back. Plus apparently it was very important to always know where you were and where everything was, here, where you were allowed to be new as long as you didn't bother anyone with it. Credibility seemed to have a direct relationship with how new you actually were, regardless.

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After several blocks punctuated with somersaulting gradients of grime, it was sandwiched between a moderate-sized kind-of-unusual-looking church on his right and a moderate-sized kind-of-usual-looking church to the south that he ran into Jean-Paul, who saw him first and stopped in the sidewalk until Dan had him in focus.

“You're here to pay your respects to Sammy Yatim,” was mock-taken-for-granted.

Asking who that was, was too obvious. Jean-Paul knew he didn't know, or could have guessed and probably did. “Why else would I be here.”

Innocently enough Jean-Paul rolled his eyes to the sky and asked “because you hooked up on Valentine's and had breakfast, probably at Sneaks because it's close to the market and Dre's a nerd of habit, and now you're heading back to the junction to walk off your hangover. Because you got rum drunk at that goblin's cavern.”

“Well that all sounds really predictable, no, I don't think I did that, go back to the first one. In fact, what are YOU doing here,” he volleyed.

Jean-Paul's expression flattened in a shifty way and he looked mildly found-out, which was interesting-and-a-half but didn't really tell Dan anything. It was the morning after Valentine's, probably lots of people were making shifty faces. “I? Am on my way to ...the Loblaws,” he emphasized the word like it was some demonic proclamation, and did spooky fingers. It was cold and Dan was feeling it in the standstill.

“Good stealing?” He hadn't been in a Loblaws yet.

Jean-Paul smiled widely again, but the shifty look remained like a veneer,



pushing his demeanor into a grifter-who's-a-cartoon-fox-like-he's-shady-but-not-that-shady type zone. "The best," he said, holding open his light grey very-expensive-looking winter peacoat for a glance at the deep pockets sewn in. "But I'm buying," he buttoned back up just as fast.

Dan let himself be shepherded across the street and back toward town, distracted by murals and signage. "Isn't that Drake's logo," he asked on the way past an innocuous boutique he hadn't noticed from across the street. Mainly the stores around it seemed to sell geometric metal pendants, tiny succulent plants, or coldbrew.

"That's the OVO store," the amused reply, like it was obvious.

Oh, he said to himself, very obvious.

"We should've just turned south where I ran into you and cut through the park."

"Probably," was a fair enough answer when Dan hadn't seen a park there and didn't know where they were going.

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He gave Jean-Paul the rundown of his whatever-it-was with Andreeah, they talked about the drink coffee cafe, and chimneyfish, and Jean-Paul brought up how the elmo palm tree was down for refurbishment or something, and how weird it was to not see it there, and told him a couple stories about bringing bands who were touring and staying at the Maison to the 460 when it was Mona's or chimneyfish for pre-parties and after-after-parties. They talked briefly about the relative scene fame of the household and, though not by anything that was said, Dan got the impression that Jean-Paul was throwing a little attitude at Andre for having too much efame, which cheered Dan up a bit; not because he questioned his own assessment, but because he had been vaguely worried that a bad dynamic with her might impact, or be impacting, his general quality of life. He wondered why he cared about that, and if he cared about Jean-Paul's esteem. He found himself questioning how Jean-Paul's comradely dynamic with Andre affected his opinion of Jean-Paul. What was his assessment of his old friend now, he asked himself. Getting to know people was such sweet sorrow, that was how the phrase went, right?

At the Queen West Loblaws, which was somehow ridiculous in its chic-gone-gargantuan concrete/wood/rebar flair, surrounded by bobo-gone-feral bars and vintage places, he pushed the funny snub-nose cart along and Jean-Paul took them on a weird circuit, guided by a many-itemed list handwritten small on a receipt-sized strip of paper. There were weird ornate pears to get, and several kinds of seitan whatsit, flax seed oil, hemp seed oil, avocado oil, slivered almonds, Honduran purple yams, three kinds of pickled radishes, dried and fresh berries, so on and so forth. Dan pulled a can of soup from a Campbell's dispenser as they passed and stuck it in the cart: started and finished shopping in a gesture.

As they wandered Jean-Paul made less conversation, spending a great deal of time stopping to read labels on things or drop tidbits about which companies did this or that speakably unpleasant thing with your money. But, the easygoingness of the conversation didn't wane, and Dan let his mental focus drift inward, puzzled about this grocery trip and their reunion meeting, which had been a little over a month ago. Only a month or so. When he looked at it like that, it seemed like a normal pace for a friendship—Jean-Paul did live detached from the main Maison milieu, it wasn't specifically him. Probably had outside friends to keep up with, books he'd wanted to find the time to read and was now reading, that kind of thing. Dan pictured him in his oddly loft-like ground floor unit, with its diffused natural light from its relatively luxurious complement of frosted windows, or windows with a diffuser sheet. In his mental image, hazy on the details of the place now, Jean-Paul was reading a very big book, lounging on the faux-suede architectural armchair under the arched brushed steel reading lamp, coffee in a little black cup on a black plate on the black side table next to the chair, possibly none of which, except for the chair, were actually things Jean-Paul owned.

Wondering what he wanted out of this grocery trip, this friendship, and why he had agreed to move in, Dan was uncomfortably feeling like it had all been path of least resistance desperation. He wandered along in tow, leaning over the cart's bar, steering with his forearms. *Would I feel any pressure to suggest quality time if I didn't feel like I have a lot of empty time? What am I*

*doing here, nothing, so when am I leaving?...Am I...* Back in the sunshine of his memory of a month-and-more ago, he told himself he could live here. He backed out of the thought. Affirming to himself that his done-here date was indefinite(ly far away) felt like admitting something. He wasn't sure what and didn't feel like interrogating. He wheeled his thoughts away sharper than he was handling the cart, out there in the lighting-engineered world of the grocery store, out there on the other side, where his body lived. Jean-Paul added some pure yellow grapefruit juice to the cart and folded his list into a tiny origami of something, which he left on a shelf as they walked past, in a forest of salad dressing. "We're good," he said, meaning they were done. Dan hauled himself upright and into the present.

"Go team grocery," he said, amusing Jean-Paul.

"Yes truly, excellent work by all. With our powers combined, we are functioning shoppers. I notice you seem like you're going to only get this... soup," lifting the can to display it with his other hand tucked under his elbow, he looked like the Grinch holding the last can of Who-hash. His fingers were long, and the can was cradled at the tips, on stilts.

"This place has really high ceilings," Dan said simply. In a place like this, it was hard to tell the scope of the fisheyes, or whether, since it was so up-to-date, there were cameras built into hidden places. Jean-Paul clearly got the gist. "Plus it's like, a buck." It was, like, a buck—tomato was still the cheapest and on sale it cost roughly the same as it had when Dan had first paid attention to food prices.

"I said I was buying," which was true, and Dan hadn't forgotten. "You should dress better and worry more about your handwork, get used to cameras, they're everywhere. This isn't Victoria, Toto."

"Good advice for you, fancyfance," which was kind of fancy-fancy and kind of fancy-pants and had been what he meant to say, but when he heard it he winced because it sounded off. Jean-Paul didn't seem fazed by the mashup so he tried to shrug it off. "I'll stick to not having an eye in the sky on me. Besides, according to Bruce and Andre, I should just eat more garbage."

"Food from the garbage," Jean-Paul started to ring things through at a self-

checkout. "You should eat more, yes. Andreah said you're a lightweight in every possible way."

"She texted you? You two text?"

"It was her status this morning on facebook. You're an unnamed cast member in a big flaily apology improv session in the comments, too." Ouch. But that had been the gig, he supposed. He'd sort of imagined it happening at a very serious employee review type meeting over, well, coffee. At her job, even, he hadn't pictured a new set for it.

"Don't scan that," Dan caught him, dislodged from the cyberscene he was secondhand reliving by Jean-Paul going to pay for his soup.

"I'm paying for it either way, aren't I. And you probably went Dutch at breakfast. So don't double dip, dork."

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So they paid (Jean-Paul paid) and headed north via a weird streetcar-bus combo that skipped the subway entirely, with Jean-Paul pointing out places, telling stories about this or that night at this or that place with so and so. One story was from before Jean-Paul lived in Toronto, about how Toichiro and Bruce had been kicked out of Lee's Palace right before Wire on Bruce's birthday, for using a portable vape in the staff bathroom with a stranger who disappeared before they got caught, so they'd gone around the back and parkoured up to the roof or something, but then they'd seen a ghost and been too high to get down, so after the concert ended they just slept under an air duct, on the roof, on the tarpaper, freaking out about the ghost because they were so fucked up from the sherm or whatever it'd been. Jean-Paul seemed to find the scenario amusingly ridiculous and sort of entertainingly stupid, and Dan agreed, he supposed. It wasn't a situation he'd be in or had been in and he was glad. Apparently the two'd decided the stairwell was too exposed, hadn't realized which bathroom they were in, wasted something like \$40 a piece because of the tickets, taken days to come down from whatever they were on—they'd left the roof finally, around dawn, and run into some people allnight-tripping in Christie Pits, whatever that was, and both ended up with pneumonia after rolling around high on the permafrost with strangers

hyped about springtime sunrise—Toichiro had lost the vaporizer and neither of them had cared about how intensely sick they wound up for weeks, which had caused them both to get fired from their headshop jobs, finally. The end. Jean-Paul made Toichiro sound like a handful, they probably didn't get along as well as Jean-Paul got along with Bruce or Andre.

At the Maison Dan looked at Jean-Paul's stuff while Jean-Paul faffed around in the kitchen, putting the keep-refrigerateds in the refrigerator. He had less workspace here than there was upstairs, and only a hotplate and blender, no stove. Not a home baker, evidently. He had a couple very scuffed up stained-white wood shelving units full of books and neatly placed odds-and-ends, and a lot of old small rugs across the floor, which was half old laminate and half exceedingly cheap carpet-remnant-world type carpeting. In one corner of the sitting area there was a small, gnarled driftwood tree stump that looked like it had come from Tofino, or some other beach upisland.

“Finished, for the time being,” was announced. Dan turned from the bookshelf where he'd been reading through what seemed to be a ‘books about rock history’ section, and was about to ask for a cup of almond milk so he could go upstairs and have dinner, wondering if almond milk would ruin the soup. “I'm meeting Bruce and Mouse at The Android's Dungeon in twenty minutes, for dinner, if you want to eat free again and save your soup for a snowy day? C'mon, while the weather's still good. Tomorrow it'll be cold again.”

“I...” *shouldn't let you keep spending money on me. Should try to integrate.* “Sure, I'll, I don't have anything else to change into.” He remembered you-should-dress-better.

“What? You look fine.” This actually surprised Dan, because he was wearing a pair of thinning, ratty reddish corduroys he'd had for years and now wore every day (and night), and an itchy sweater, which was approximately oatmealpuke-coloured and had a line of teal and purple boats sailing across the chest, which he'd also had for years and now wore every day (and night). He'd taken his camelhair toggle-buttoned winter coat (which he used as a duvet some nights) and scarf off at the door, and thought

now about the big hole by the right pocket of his coat (which opened into the lining and sometimes sequestered stolen goods for him), and the loose threads ruining the scarf. He was wearing some probably-dead gentleman's formerly-high-gloss brown Italian leather wingtips, which his ex had etsyed for him in order to "artfully class up the whole look, like it's all intentional because you're so stylish." He wondered what she'd done with all the shoes she'd gotten him that he'd left behind. The indie dodger. Jean-Paul thought he looked fine. Just not to shoplift Loblaws.

"Is this place a dive?" Jean-Paul just smiled and started bustling him out the door, suiting up in a different, longer coat as they left. He looked like Cinderella's coachmaster attending a funeral.

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part 10: just push play

February 15, 2016 7:50 pm

They walked the junction strip, valence shifting from their mostly-decades-past timecapsule through to an encroachment of suburbanite-friendly "furnishings" stores, cafes and restaurants, and over at the other end was a splash of downtown with angry slogans on the plank panels up around a future condo highrise, where there was also a boutique looking dispensary. The road bisecting Dundas here was wide and flanked on either side of the intersection by a cheque cashing place in a heritage building and a crummy-looking sub shop that boasted 30 years spent on the other corner.

Everywhere else was a pub, gastropub, deli you could drink in, or sake/sushi bar. The most ridiculous of these as far as Dan could see, was a glowing beacon of nerdy dreckitude with a giant fishtank window, under a sign Dan realized said the same name Jean-Paul had said, just as Jean-Paul deftly turned to avoid some other pedestrians and placed himself next to the door,

which he then held open for Dan. Still the impression of the coachman. Presumably it was intentional.

He glanced at the perfectly-put-together-punk bar staff and the making-an-effort young professional nerd patrons and the open-concept-dynamic videogame-couchpit, hedged by cabinet-like themed booth tables full of people and pitchers and nacho plates and noise, and felt, fortunately, sheltered by Jean-Paul's presentability, and company. Bruce and Mouse were already seated in one of the ostentatiously completeist booths, in either corner, facing them. Bruce waved excitedly—he was also Not Appropriately Attired, and looked more or less like he'd just stumbled out of a stoner pride parade for a minute to say hi. It would have been embarrassing, Dan guessed, for him to be that out of place, someplace else. Here it didn't really matter because yeah, it didn't fit but eh, that didn't stand out. Although Dan had only ever seen Chuck E Cheeses in ads it reminded him of one, and he wondered why he felt stared-at as they waded into it; it seemed like they had opted to sit in the chuck-e-cheesiest both, too, which was unsurprising. The little Russian roommate was also out of place somehow, dressed like if a guy in a Jimmy Stewart movie was dressed like he wasn't there to impress anyone, in shirtsleeves and nondescript slacks. Which was probably how he always dressed unless he happened to have hardcore regalia for scene occasions. Passing the other booths Dan thought Bruce must have chosen, because the gore booth seemed more like Mouse's cup, being starkly brutal. "I thought you only ate things you grew or that someone threw," he said to Bruce as he slid into the space diagonally across from him. Bruce looked glassy-eyed in the low amber light of the booth, and he was smiling widely. "This place is new," as if that explained everything, probably because it rhymed. "Yeahhh... I s'pose one can always be more precise, or less," he went on, sawing his pint mug back and forth between his hands, his eyes on the beer swirling between them. "That was kinda a big ol' duvet of a statement, wasn't it. Y'know, a statement-statement. I'm super glad to be caught out! Really, I'm kinda against...statement-statements..." He seemed hyper, in a baked, liling way, and sounded almost delirious. "There's like, if I

knew what was closer to heaven than this shit, I dunno. I'd live there," he giggled. "Oh wait, ha-ha-ha." He smelled strongly like heavy, skunky weed and another smell, like daffodils; Dan was catching it as it mixed with the various beer-and-bar-food-and-boardgames odours of the place.

"Well...party on, Garth," he said. A hoot of laughter shot out of Bruce, and some other patrons glanced at their table from the bar. Across from him Jean-Paul was studying the short drink list, still, and beside him, Mouse was lounging, relaxed, glowering in the general direction of everything.

"Party ON, Wayne," Bruce called back.

"I want to eat. I am tired of chatting," said Mouse, who hadn't chatted at all since Dan and Jean-Paul's arrival. The radioshow or podcast or whatever it was came to mind suddenly, and Dan was glad he'd heard some of it that Mouse had featured in, before seeing him again. It helped to frame him as human now that Dan had sort-of-observed him in some kind of social context in which he wasn't completely withdrawn.

Bruce bounced to his feet easily, almost clumsy, and waved at the bar, leaning out of the booth over Jean-Paul. One of the bartenders came over, looking amused and unannoyed.

After Jean-Paul had ordered his wine "and some crudites," Bruce announced that he'd been greenlit to order for Pete in case Pete hadn't shown up by the time they were all there. Mouse remarked that Pete was smart and had probably just taken an opportunity to have take-out picked up and brought back for him.

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Once the food arrived, the group ate in near silence, at varying speeds—Bruce wolfed down his "spicy spacewich" and soup, and made various mewling noises throughout, while Mouse and Dan set more consistent, workmanlike paces on their consistent, workmanlike turkey burgers. Jean-Paul began with his wine, operating on his plate sedately after two glasses ordered and finished back to back. Dan felt the silence begin to press after most of his plate was cleared, and felt like taking a break before attempting another beer. He'd eaten more real food in the past 24 hours than he had



since staying at his parents place, and it was making his mouth hurt, like it wasn't used to the abrasion of stuff that didn't come from a can. He ran his tongue around his sore gums, wondered what to bring up by way of conversation, and observed Mouse observing him in his peripheral, then realized that anyone openly staring at him would see his eye rotated to the corner. Dan wiped his mouth with his napkin, maintaining the weird peripheral eye contact. The little Russian watched him impassively, leaning back from his empty plate, half up against the wall. It was humid in the restaurant, and he could see Mouse's dark grey hair sticking to the light sweat on his forehead, which was brightly flushed.

"I'm...wondering about your nickname," he said it casually, attempting to sound somewhat respectful at the same time.

"Why? I think it is self-evident."

Dan felt abashed but ploughed on. "Well, I suppose... that's why I'm wondering. It seems," he searched for a word other than belittling but had difficulty.

"One does not choose their own pet-name. You should ask Bruce." Dan looked across the table at Bruce, who was in some sort of sexual-looking trance, still eating; his eyes were rolled far back and he was smiling, his cheeks puffed up like a chipmunk as he motored up and down with his lower jaw. It annoyed Dan to watch, suddenly, and he looked away quickly. He found the use of the word 'pet' odd but considered it an artefact of bilingualism or whatever. Bruce loudly finished a huge mouthfull and made a noise that was slightly more of a sigh than a moan but was somewhat too obscene either way.

"Duuuude, fuuuuck. God, oh my God," Bruce noted. Dan looked at him expectantly but instead of addressing the nickname issue Bruce called to the bar again, using the name he'd learned from their server earlier, and ordered a nacho plate and more drinks, "silly ones with, with funny hats and fruit and those embalmed cherries and straws, please." Dan wondered who was paying for it, suddenly feeling like Bruce wasn't.

"Um. Mouse's...name," he questioned after the order was taken.

“What, it’s Sasha,” said Bruce. He looked at Dan cluelessly. Dan filed that away, assuming he’d forget but thinking that it suited the little guy, who rolled his eyes without looking at anyone at the table in particular. He was still lounging, arms crossed.

“He wants to hear about why you call me Mouse,” he supplied to Bruce, although it wasn’t true, because Dan already knew what the story behind it was, and had actually wanted to know what Mouse actually thought about the name itself. Bruce took on an even more inane energy, probably due to his drink order arriving rather than the subject, although Dan recognized him revving into story-mode as he passed out the other two silly drinks he’d ordered, one to each of them except Jean-Paul, who was still working wordlessly on drinking an entire bottle of wine glass by glass by himself very quickly without appearing to drink it very quickly, which seemed to be a lot of fun for him.

Bruce slurped his drink, reached a point where he could empty the rest into his mouth and did, and then explained that “it was a totally perfect fit—didn’t you see that ep of Law ‘n Order?” Dan hadn’t, and was annoyed that Bruce didn’t remember telling him already, but shook his head no without interrupting. “Jesus, what did other families do together, god! My family, we’d always all watch el-oh together every weeknight—all nine kids piled in’ta the den arguin’ ‘bout ethical grey areas an’ relativity an’ shit. Plus, like, we had this sliding scale of Tangness game we’d play with Jerry Orbach season-to-season, ep-to-ep, right? Okay so, the rule is—”

“Tell him about the name,” said Jean-Paul, neutrally. He sipped his wine.

“Hooo, right, right. So there’s this ep with this dude who’s like this overbearing Russian Dad and he has this kid who’s like, totally conflicted about their relationship, and the Dad calls the kid ‘Mouse’ ‘cause he’s a dick about how the kid’s small an’ shy or whatever. The kid totally offed him, and McCoy was like—”

“Isn’t that a...kind of fucked up reminder? I mean, Jesus, didn’t...you,” he addressed Mouse directly to avoid choosing between the name he’d just

learned and the name he was questioning the application of, “didn’t you live on the street for two years or something to avoid living with your father?”

“And?” asked Mouse.

“That seems like, why would you want to be called this name that suggests all that shit?”

“I find it very suitable,” said Mouse. “Should I not? The details of my personal history and the character Bruce identified are coincidental. I have known people, even strangers, to call Bruce, for instance, Spicoli. He makes no bones,” Dan noticed the use of the idiomatic phrase particularly “about what it is that he, himself, is. I had a bad relationship with my father. I am Russian. I am small. If people notice something about me without knowing me, it is that I am small. If they hear me being called Mouse, they assume it is because I am small—maybe also because I am prematurely greyhaired. If someone called me Mouse in the wrong way, I would be offended...but I would be offended by being called anything, if it was the wrong way. I maybe have had to fight some podcast listeners.” He tried to picture Bruce’s podcast having listeners worth fighting, unsuccessfully. It occurred to him that Mouse might be telling him to stop being so familiar.

“‘Had to,’” echoed Bruce cheerfully, inflected with slight admonishment and air-quoting. He was giving Mouse an eye, if not the eye, with his head forward in a tilt.

“I have taught some unconsidered lessons in respect. I don’t make it my habit,” Mouse got up, which seemed like a conclusion, and after Dan stood so he could get out, went to the bathroom.

“You don’t make it your habit to talk to anyone, either, before your fists start the conversation first! You gotta relax,” shouted Bruce, drawing attention again. Dan looked at Jean-Paul, who was just finishing his wine.

“The story of Mouse’s nickname,” Jean-Paul concluded. He wiped his mouth with a napkin and folded his hands over his stomach, looking over at Dan. He waited.

“Was that awkward?”

“I didn’t think so,” said Jean-Paul.

“So, Mouse...” the name-use felt charged, now, “has a short...shortish fuse.”

“Mouse has a serious anger management problem. He needs counselling.”

“Is he...what should I watch out for? Can I avoid...” a broken nose.

“I don’t know. I don’t think I’ve ever done anything to make him angry. I’m a polite person.”

“But you’ve seen him angry,” Dan was aware of the length of time Mouse had been gone and shoulder-checked just as he returned.

“Don’t be a dick,” said Jean-Paul simply. “He seems to get mad at dickishness.” Mouse didn’t seem perturbed by this commentary on him, but didn’t add anything, instead starting at last on the creation Bruce had ordered him.

*Who can tell when they’re being a dick, though?* Dan asked himself. His ex had always told him when she thought so. *Who can reliably tell what’s dickish to this guy, if he’s got unknown boundaries in unknown places.* He noticed he felt done with dinner, on the verge of less than comfortable. His socially adrift feeling was catching up to him, or his awareness of its presence suddenly increased. He wanted to be alone with himself—away from his own wondering about his roommate’s dimensions and the uncurling anxiety about safely interacting.

“I’ll...do my best,” he said to the table at large.

There was no comment on this because someone passing the entrance to their booth said something about something and it was like the hair stood up all over Jean-Paul and Mouse. Even Bruce seemed to emit a frisson of hostility, suddenly.

Mouse told Jean-Paul that “people should mind their manners,” loudly, and Jean-Paul agreed, loudly, sounding bored.

Dan was wondering how to beat a speedy path out the door without seeming like he was intentionally bailing just when that’d be really unhelpful, when Pete appeared from behind him, standing next to the booth. Without a word he reached over to Bruce’s nacho plate remnants and scooped up a loose sample. Chewing, he noted “no,” at the mouthful, Dan guessed, before swallowing and adding “the guac at La Rev is better, we’re going next door.”

“That’s fine,” Mouse told him, looking, for the first time, happy. “Done anyway, getting loud in here, you know?”

“Really.” Pete looked unimpressed. “Who.” Just then whoever had said something about something came back from the bathroom, and while Dan didn’t see whatever Mouse did that cued Pete, he did see Bruce’s face as he braced for impact. Pete took a step backward at just-the-moment, and whoever it was who’d said something about something stumbled hard sideways but didn’t fall, and reoriented glaring at Pete’s back. Whoever it was didn’t say anything, and went back to whatever group was waiting. “Was that all,” Pete asked over his shoulder.

“That’s allllllll, folks,” Bruce chirped without waiting, jumping up and making ushering motions at the three of them in the booth. They piled out, first from the booth and then the bar, after Jean-Paul left a stack of bills at the table, which looked like probably one more twenty than necessary.

Outside Dan expected to disappear again, down the stairs to the bar with the good guac, but they didn’t, instead standing around at the fishtank window, making it clear that whoever it was who’d said something about something wasn’t prepared to come out. Jean-Paul pulled out a cigarette pack and lit up, breathing plumes up into the night air. It was only about nine p.m. Dan was surprised that Bruce wasn’t working on a joint since they were outside, but Bruce seemed to be upset about the idea of fighting. Dan wasn’t keen, either, but wasn’t wildly concerned once a group of people didn’t follow them out. “Cowards,” Mouse remarked at them placidly, through the glass, ignored.

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Pete was really fun, it turned out, after Dan had watched him hold court for a while. And his taste in bars was more in line with Dan’s own; La Rev was much darker, but warm and decoratively sedate, with much more seating and much less business. And they did have good guac—the best guacamole Dan had ever had, which didn’t surprise him because the place wasn’t a Taco Time Cantina and it seemed like they made it fresh by hand or something. He hadn’t tried any of Bruce’s nachos earlier, and his basis for comparison stopped at “narrow.”

“So, aside from DJ, what’ve you done, what jobs have you had.” This was the first time Pete had said anything directly to him since they’d changed venues.

It wasn’t a surprising question, Pete was trying to contextualize him, and putting him on the spot, too. Glad he had what he assumed would be an acceptable answer, he said simply, “fast food.” Pete was a socialist or whatever, right? Minimum wage had to have some shine of honour to it that lapdog didn’t.

“And thief,” added Jean-Paul casually, maybe running a bit of interference for him. A good friend, Dan felt. Deft, and merciful. The best. Pete spread a kind of assessing look between the two of them, calmly telegraphing that something was being measured. He looked a bit disgruntled, like it was supposed to have been a one-on-one interview.

“Cool,” he said without sounding like he thought anything was cool at all. He waved at the bar and a second pitcher showed up. Dan and Bruce had helped with the first, mainly to be polite on Dan’s part, and it seemed like the second was for Pete and Mouse to work on by themselves. “So you’re going to do audio stuff for the shit show.” Bruce giggled beerily at that, apparently not too precious to hear a shot fired at his deranged brainchild.

“Yeah,” hearing himself, Dan sounded leery back, and realized it was the sound of insecurity. Pete knew he’d been out with Andreah, or maybe Pete just felt like everyone in town hated him. Dan suddenly felt extremely sympathetic, and realized he was drunk again, at the same time.

“What do you use, like what programs, what’s your gear.” His stress surged back, he hated being grilled about technical shit.

Sounding abashed he said “ableton, like the whole universe. But the good computer was my ex’s, everything was hers. I’ve used everything, in highschool. Garageband and FL, all that. MIDI keyboards,”

“Do you have one, *did* you have one of those pad things? Beatpads?” Dan realized then that Pete didn’t DJ or at least didn’t know enough to keep the hot seat hot. Talking to serious techspeheads was the worst. He wanted to say, you might as well ask if I have a bop-it. But that was what he’d say to

cut someone down for trying to cut him down, and that wasn't what he was trying to do here, he knew.

"No, we used synth keyboards. I never got good with a korg."

"So, what're you going to make for the show?" What was this, independent employee review? When would it end.

"I have to listen to more of it," was a good excuse, when he heard himself say it. It was true.

"I want him to do things like, you know how I'm always saying there should be a good version of good vibrations?"

"Right, the chorusless version," Mouse had been drinking mostly, ploughing through the pitcher with Pete. He put his glass down and added "why don't you do it yourself?"

"Oh, I know lots of other things, and I knew I'd meet someone someday who would know how to do that, so I didn't learn that. Obviouslyyyyy. Besides," Bruce wheedled, sounding pleased with himself and seeming to annoy Mouse, "I can't handle using audio software, those programs are so... dry." Dan didn't find them particularly dry, in fact they were like a kind of game, very visual—he was surprised Bruce didn't like them.

"Right, everything should look like candycrush," Pete scoffed. "He says the same thing about video editing. I've told them a million times they should do a youtube series. But spaceboy wont do the editing or find someone, and I'm too busy." And too not interested in working with others, Dan figured. Spaceboy was the perfect nickname for Bruce, Dan belatedly applauded to himself.

"What kind of video editing do you do?" That was the wrong question, Pete's glance at him was a glare.

"Pete makes concert videos and does independent protest coverage," Jean-Paul fielded, smoothing something over when he added "and he's good."

"Yeah, I can't afford him," Bruce was fussing in his seat and seemed bored of being inside. He looked like he needed a walk.

"Good thing you can afford this guy," Pete didn't really sound like he thought it was a good thing. "What've you been doing since you got here. Have you

put together some kind of breakup lashback collection or what.” He knew. Something, or all of it. Maybe Bruce had told him something to get him to agree to show up, or at some other point to get some kind of sympathy bond going. Then he remembered about Jean-Paul telling them about his roid. And whatever else about him. Like about his ex.

“I haven’t done any music since leaving— since getting here. Her computers, her gear, like I said. My laptop is from years ago, I don’t even know what runs on it.”

“So you’ve been...” He sounded suspicious.

“...exploring the neighbourhood, I guess.” That was the most doing-stuff-like thing he’d done, and he’d put it generously.

“Oh yeah? So you’re into urban exploration.”

“I guess?”

“You do parkour at all?”

“...no.” Who actually did parkour, come on, how was that not a low blow.

“So have you been up to the old incinerator up above St. Clair? It’s fucking insane, we should do a show there. Bring the generator, do some flyers so there’s enough crowd to mosh. I know this political rap crew, they really want to be on a line-up with these guys Mouse knows.” Which did sound like an amazing show, even if Dan had no idea what the old incinerator was.

“I haven’t been there, but yeah, maybe in the summer or something, right?”

He could help carry stuff, it wasn’t like he was being told to DJ, or MC it.

Pete looked disappointed and poured out more of the pitcher, telling him

“everyone says that. Shutting off all winter is waste.”

“Ease off,” Mouse took his refilled beer, glaring. Pete shrugged.

“You should go to the old kodak factory too, its up that way, and see if that big place by the chocolate bar factory by Lansdowne is open anywhere, or— how far east have you been? Have you been to, where’ve you been?”

Now that he was talking about something that apparently interested him a great deal, Pete was really firing up. Dan was glad, suddenly talking to him was fun, like listening to him without being grilled. “I, not. Listen, I’ve been to none of these places. I’ve been as far as, you know where the, the bridge



thing is, where the, uh, the trains? Pass over the road, the one that crosses Dundas right before where we are?”

“Keele,” Pete looked amused, at least.

“Yeah, so, that overgrown lot there, with the billboard. I’ve walked down the alley that runs around there, behind Dundas back up to the house. Like, from the dollar store to the house, and the sidestreets. I’ve been pretty much nowhere.”

“That’s pitiful. But whatever, honestly that’s just how everyone is in the winter, I don’t know what else I expected.”

Bruce had been kind of wheeling around in his seat in fits, waiting for whatever his turn looked like. This, apparently. “GUYS. You know how the oogles took the map?”

Pete grumbled and Mouse continued to look annoyed. Jean-Paul had had the appearance of wishing to be elsewhere since finishing his wine one bar ago, but he said “sure,” prompting.

“Let’s make Dan a map! A big map! A new map for the house!”

“You can,” Pete stood up to leave. “We all done here?”

Jean-Paul paid again and they trooped out into the night, Bruce still spazzing in anticipation, obviously supercharged by friend-time and too many “paper hat” drinks and beers.

“Let’s go on an adventure!”

“You can,” Mouse echoed Pete, close to his side while the other three waited on Jean-Paul finding his pack of smokes in his coat and Bruce sparking a short blunt he’d pulled out of somewhere. “I am going back.”

“Same, I’m busy,” Pete sniffed once and turned to go, the eye still on them travelled over them, making brief contact with Dan’s line of sight. “But have fun.” And the two of them walked away across Keele, heading toward the house. Mouse sort of nodded goodbye, with a glance at Dan specifically, it seemed like—the sliver of eye-contact was burned into his memory instantly, and for some reason played on repeat.

There was a weird feeling, it seemed to Dan, like he was sleepwalking and conversely brought to a focus by the parting, like he’d been challenged to

prove something, and asked to do a favor, at the same time. Was he going to Brucey-sit or not? "Where are we going," he asked the ridiculous muppet, who was flopping his arms around dejectedly at them. "Pete mentioned doing a show somewhere near here, in some building?"

Bruce looked alert. "Yeah yeah yeah, let's go!"

"No," Jean-Paul groaned and swiped at his face with his gloved palmheel.

"That's too far, it's cold. When it's warmer. You two can go location finding. Tonight he should stay warm. We should *all* stay warm."

"Well, the condo with the good dumpsters isn't far..." Bruce looked scared he was about to shed party members, sounded plaintive.

Dan realized that Jean-Paul was trying to corral Bruce back toward home, and decided to support the effort even though he had just decided to stick with Bruce while he ran around outside. "Is it really worth going up to some dumpsters?"

"Uh, Yes. This would be like, the best night. No one else is out."

"No, but, will there be anything? Do they throw away that much packaged food?" He and his ex had never really kept food for it to go bad.

Bruce stared at him. "Well, no, that's stores and stuff. No, these guys throw away furniture and all sorts of other stuff. Stuff you couldn't imagine. How do you think we end up with so much stuff? So much stuffuffuf..." he shimmied in time to his own words. "Where do you think your mattresses came from for us to know they were just from a move? Rich people don't take anything with them. They know they can just buy it over again."

Dan thought of how he'd left all the clothes behind, left everything, and felt kind of guilty. "Yeah, I'll uh, I'm in. I can help carry, in case you find more futons or whatever." Bruce nodded giddily, hopping around them.

"Fine," Jean-Paul's breath appeared in front of him and Dan felt appreciative of the cold more acutely than he had ever in his life, in that second. "We're stopping somewhere warm on the way back," Jean-Paul informed them. "I'm still feeling generous." Dan decided he was drunk and not buzzed and felt like being drunk had never made so much sense as it did on a night like this. This face-biting, mind-distilling freeze that kept him from feeling sleepy but

not distant or warm. Beer-jacketed. He licked his lips and they felt dry, chapped but at a remove. Almost another mouth. Someone else. They were walking up Keele already, the three of them, under the incandescent seeming streetlights and moving among flurries of light movielike flakes that skated around the street in tight syncopated formations. Trees swayed in their squares of sidewalk and across the street above a parking lot a weird whirligig was making noise, spinning. It reminded Dan vaguely of the thing the person Bruce had spoken to in Kensington had had in their hair. Up near the train tracks there was a staircase and a stunted the-ad-said-fairytale-like kind of arbor garden under the looming grandeur of an ugly highrise, and it was there that Bruce wanted to swim through the leavings.

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“Not far at all,” he commented to Jean-Paul. Jean-Paul didn’t reply but didn’t look annoyed. Dan took his expression to be one of inebriated amiability. “We should walk back along the tracks, the fence is open right over there,” he gestured with his chin, hands in his pockets. Their breaths hung around like ghosts, or chalk dust. Inverted shadows. Dan felt like he didn’t usually appreciate beauty, and in noticing himself enjoying it he felt caught up by the unusual zest of the evening.

“Weren’t we going to see if there was somewhere open for a drink before heading back?” That seemed strangely boring.

There was banging in the dumpster beside them. They were in a small bay of six or so metal bins full of truly weird detritus. Most of it really was household useable objects, but nothing they needed or wanted was immediately visible; it was mostly clean empty containers and old tupperware, luggage, small kid stuff, and lighting fixtures. Anything beyond that needed mining. There were also bags of diapers. Bags and bags of used diapers to wade through. Jean-Paul was smoking and Dan was helping by watching. For security.

“Didn’t you drink a whole bottle of wine already?” Jean-Paul looked at him, and pursed his mouth.

“What can I say. I’m a bottle-and-a-half-before-midnight kind of guy. You obviously didn’t go to college in Montreal.”

“Obviously not.” He wasn’t sure what that was supposed to mean but it came out sounding judgemental and he guessed that was all he really meant by it once he heard himself.

“I’ve been scaling back since my halcyon youth, you know. For my health.” Jean-Paul paused, “It used to be two and a half.” He laugh and, at whatever face Dan had made, laughed again and explained “It’s just, *I don’t know*, what you *do* in the winter. And the summer. And the spring. And fall. But mostly the winter...and the summer. But for sure the winter.” He laughed again at himself and at Dan. “Oh don’t be a hypocrite.” *That’s just it, I’m not*, Dan thought, knowing well enough to know it was alarming.

Not wanting to get into an argument he said “you never told me much about Montreal.”

“What about it. The winter here’s nothing. The summer here’s better. People are meaner there. Lots of churches and bars. Lots of parties.”

That wasn’t what he’d meant. “I was asking about you at McGill, like what you took, or,” when you moved here because of that band, he didn’t say. That band that broke up. “Your radio show.”

Jean-Paul looked taken aback and mildly offended anyway. “How’d you find out about that, I didn’t put anything on my own facebook.” His eyes narrowed at a noise from behind him, in a dumpster. “Bruce. That gossipy bitch.”

Dan realized he’d given it all away already.

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The trio started the walk back from what Bruce told them would be labelled Le Bougebinery on the house map. Bruce had found some old national geographics he seemed to find valuable, and two carousels of unmarked cds that apparently wanted checking, but otherwise they were emptyhanded, which pleased Jean-Paul, who expressed that it would have been more of a bother than an errand if they’d all had to carry furniture back, because he still wanted to stop in somewhere.

Dan was sort of floating in and out of the conversation, stressed about something but unable to name what it was. It was mixed up with drinking and Jean-Paul and feeling weird that he wasn't supposed to know things. Wasn't supposed to have been told. And wasn't supposed to bring up the drinking. Or the things he wasn't supposed to know. He felt like he really needed to see his mission to keep Bruce company tonight through, no matter what. "I'm still not carrying anything. And I can, I mean. Do you want to go... find... uh... groceries? Dumpster diving downtown?" The subway was running still, they could go check and come back up, just like that.

Bruce sniffed his runny nose and looked surprised, clarifying "that's Tuesdays, so you can help me tomorrow if you want. Make super cereal sure that I put the garbage collection zones and nights on the map when I make it, pleeeeee." He seemed to peer at Dan before deciding "Y'know back at the bougebins..."

"No," Jean-Paul said around his cigarette. "A quick drink and then back." He looked at Bruce, who had stopped. Jean-Paul sighed at him, crossing his arms and waiting.

"It's not even late. You're soooooo oooooooold."

Dan laughed at the two of them and Jean-Paul visibly relented, adding "fine," because he'd help with whatever it was Bruce had decided to get help with after all.

Bruce smiled beatifically at them both. "I love you guys," he told them, sounding tearful and overcome.

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part 11: superbug

March 2, 2016 2:33pm

Dan hadn't felt so removed from caring about what the ceiling looked like since he'd moved in; for the past week he had been getting steadily sicker until three days ago when it had gotten so bad that he thought he'd stopped sleeping all together. He wasn't sure. It didn't seem very important whether he'd gotten in an hour during the pitch of his feverish, agonized "bedrest" a day or two ago.

It had started after the big night out, when he'd been out late in the cold, too drunk to notice how much energy he was expending or how numb his face felt. They'd had more than one last drink to fortify them for the few blocks back carrying a large armoire Bruce said he could trade online via some gta thing called bunz. Dan'd come home and passed out cold, cold, under his blanket still wearing his coat. The next day he'd noticed that telltale flutter in his throat that meant he was about to get hit with some kind of sinus thing, and promptly forgot to steal himself some zinc spray when he went out to get his can of heartburn slurry for the day. It had snowballed in a linear fashion from there over the course of the next week, until reaching what Dan had expected to be its peak, based on experience, around day eight. This had turned out to be a plateau from which the peak wasn't visible; he developed muscle fatigue and back pains, his temperature jumped and stayed up, and his mucus went from yellow to green when he'd anticipated a milky phase like it would have been if it were going to be gone in a day or two. The mucus started increasing in quantity to what he found to be a pretty alarming extent, and he spent four days coughing more and more until his sides and abs hurt every time, which for two days was every time he needed to breathe. That was when green stuff had started to come out of his tear ducts in gobby strands, which he'd stared at in the upstairs bathroom mirror incredulously before having a hot shower that hadn't made him feel better. This marked the start of his multiday odyssey of sleeplessness, during which he coughed his putrid exorcist-barf style phlegm into the cans from food he'd gotten when he wasn't too sick to go out. He hadn't eaten since his phlegm had gone green, he'd just stayed in bed feeling like hell.

Except he was starting to feel less like hell, weirdly. Weird as in, he couldn't tell if he was getting better, or having some kind of out-of-body experience for the first time. When he had overdosed it had just been black between going from the condo where he was sleeping in his ex's spare room while she let him figure out alternatives, over to the coke guy's place, meeting his carpet, and then waking up in the hospital. This wasn't even remotely similar to that experience; his brain felt like it had been carbonated, gently, and he seemed to be floating in himself and out of himself, overlapping with his body in a gauzy sheet that was wafting around. His thoughts spiralled around topics with intermittent intensity, distracting him from his unbroken view of the weird sticky ceiling "tiles." He kept thinking about how there was something doing all this to him, some germs or whatever. Little tiny things inside him, making him their house, a factory for ooze. Like him inside the room. Nesting dolls of invisible guests. No one had been around upstairs or down, as far as Dan had heard in his stupor, for days. Bruce had heard him coughing at the start of the bad climb away from known territory and stuck his head in to say "hang in there" or "keep on truckin" or something, Dan'd forgotten already. At the time it had annoyed him, and for several days afterward it annoyed him a little bit more each time he remembered in between hacking out foul lungbutter. Now, though, feeling airy in the brain enough for it to be relieving, he was amused by the idea of Bruce's head descending from the ceiling like a migratory light fixture. After many hours of his thoughts looping back continuously to something that hadn't happened in nearly a week, Dan had finally decided it meant that he might be missing company. But he didn't feel pressured to do anything about it. It felt like he could decompose there forever under his spread-out coat and the blanket, feeling their weight so distantly it was like they were on a parallel plane, some other dimension. It was comfortable. Even his incessant thoughts felt comfortable. He started to sigh, feeling licks of sleep flicking at his brain, but his breath caught and he coughed the sleep away again. A day ago that sort of thing had still been torture; sleep had narrowly evaded him, teased him without showing up to help. He felt like he'd been dumped by r.e.m. and

was just now learning to be his own person without it, a freer person. A person with a really fizzy noggin. A giggle started when he thought about the fizz, but he didn't hear the end of it because he had finally lost his tenuous grasp on consciousness.

Less than ten minutes later, coughing woke him up again from a dream about somewhere he'd never been, some place that looked like a forest in a videogame. He'd been walking down a trail, watching his feet, looking for snakes or something, and when he'd glanced up Bruce had been there ahead of him, walking. *Going to the orchard*, a voice said in Dan's ear, and then he heard coughing and belatedly realized it was himself. Somewhere else. Sometime that was some other time.

*Some other time, some other time*, bounced back and forth inside his skull. His eyes bounced back and forth in one corner of the room, where the window met the interior wall. There was a cobweb there, that had been there when Toichiro had, it occurred to Dan. *Some other time, some other time*. A memory of Toichiro's voice surfaced and entered the spirographic eddies of his thoughtspirals, little clips from that podcast of the live show with the bands. He thought about Bruce saying everyone was invincible or something. It felt truer today, and he thought maybe it would have felt true that first day in town, if he'd been listening to the podcast walking westward on College. Walking to meet Jean-Paul by that bar under the palm tree sign, where bands used to play. Toichiro had moved Jean-Paul in because of band stuff. Jean-Paul had moved Dan in to Toichiro's room, and Pete hadn't had veto. *A Toi house*, he thought. He pictured them all in their little rooms, like the Maison was cross-sectioned. When he tried to picture Mouse's room he got distracted thinking about some old kid's book he'd read or seen animated or something, where some mice and dolls fight for custody of a tiny mansion in a playroom. The mice had shown up looking like regular mice and then put on clothes for some reason—*feeling bougie, maybe*. Bruce's voice, his mind had inflected it. Probably because he'd never spent any time around anyone who'd called things bougie, before. Coughing again, he spit into his nearest-to-hand can and checked the colour—it wasn't getting lighter but the



amount was going down a lot and his nasal congestion wasn't a sledgehammering presence today, finally. That was how this had started, wasn't it, running around getting unnecessary crap at the bougebins. Brucey-sitting. *For Toi*, he guessed. It was what Toi would have done, Mouse and Pete had said to do it. And give them a break, probably. Keeping Bruce running until his other half or whatever got back. And if Dan did that, he'd be doing his part. He'd be holding up his end. His thoughts felt fast and right, in a way they never did. Coke had done that for his ex, according to her, but it never had for him. Mostly coke had just made him feel like the human equivalent of the sensation of grating teeth, plus kind of clammy all over, and sometimes horny in an uncomfortable, robotic way. He thought about himself back in the past, miserably doing rails off the stupid "coffee table" his ex had picked out so painstakingly for the place. That had been doing his part, there, somehow. Again the idea of a parasite came back, the anglerfishes stuck together at the bottom of the sea, the image interlacing tightly with his still-circling thoughtspiral about the germs in him and him being in the room and the room being in the house, and how this was the room of the person who kept Bruce going. Helped Bruce do... whatever it was people liked Bruce so much for doing. *Being Bruce*, his brain said. He saw clearly in a flash what he had appreciated superficially before; Bruce had cut it out for him by saying he needed audio work and even offering to pay him by covering bills. He'd specified about the internet bill, but it seemed like that was kind of a catch-all for whatever Dan was making use of. Bruce had been pretty clear about the whole "mi Maison es su Maison" thing when he'd been pushing food on Dan back in February. Watching Bruce do dishes came back to him, a dreamy diorama of the dim kitchen with that spidery cursive of music winding all through it. His mental editing program kicked in and started chopping up the memory of the sound, splicing in intervals of truncated ascending symphonic riffs and offkilter drumbeat progressions with an unusual timesignature. In his mind's ear it was the kind of project his ex had always told him was "just coke production," which meant, it only sounded good to him and that was only because he was too

high to factor in everyday self-doubt; except that that wasn't how coke worked for him, she just didn't like his taste and he hadn't bothered fighting over it because he didn't care as much as she did about their music. His ex had developed the idea that tastefulness was everything and editing was the path to tasteful, and she was the editor. Somehow it had ruined making music for him completely, but he'd kept doing it. He'd never really seen himself in a media making career, or any other career. What had started off as an incidental, hobbyist level of interest and mild enthusiasm had fizzled out to a doorknob's level of interest and zero enthusiasm. But the rolls of beats playing in his head were coaxing his enthusiasm to fizzle back on. His feet had been dancing around somewhere at the other end of his body for a while now, since he'd snapped-to again, and he finally understood that this meant he should stand up and get his tank empty. He wished his lungs were empty, in tandem feeling almost religiously thankful that he seemed to be through the worst of it. More stray ideas about his body hosting things leisurely barndanced around his head together, and he let them for a few minutes before swaying up onto his feet and straightening his legs brittlely.

It wasn't until he was standing that he made the call to use the bathroom upstairs instead of doing the pissbottle-to-eavestrough pipeline again. There was an alienesque formation of opaque ureal film looking evil at the bottom of his empty sportsdrink, disturbing it seemed unwise. Dan left it for later, and wondered if he'd finally remember to try to get the echinacea/zinc spritz whenever he went out for his next jug of its-got-electrolytes. His clothes smelled, now that he wasn't cocooned. For the first time he realized he could probably borrow clean clothes from Jean-Paul, or Bruce. Or from whatever-ghosts-of-miscreants-past who had imparted things to wear on future tenants, probably in a pile somewhere in the mountainous junk towers he and the staircase shared the second floor with.

Impressed with himself for being able to move around mostly like normal despite his harrowing bout of possession (ongoing), he started to haul himself up the ladder rung by rung, with extreme effort. He was exhausted and extremely dehydrated, but the buoyant sensation of mania suppressed

everything else going on in his body, and, before he knew it but, paradoxically, after what seemed like a very long struggle, he heaved himself onto the greyed floorboards and panted a minute, feeling the cool press of the silky old wood against his forehead. If someone had come along and seen him, he wouldn't have cared. *This must be what being born feels like*, he laughed at himself silently and then giggled faintly out loud, feeling silly in competing ways. He was a truly ridiculous figure, when looking at himself like this, prone and small, curled inward almost fetal—but it felt sublime somehow, to just bow for a second and rest. A feeling of serenity settled over him as he breathed there against the floor, and he sighed blissfully; it was like heaven. Awash in gratitude toward the relief—of that gentle feeling, of the pure soothedness—he felt himself almost fall asleep on his knees. Forcing the sensation back with a pang of anguished regret, though, he made himself stand up again. Bambi on ice, the image appeared. He might have to consider how and where his mobility was going to fail him on this errand, gelled for him fully. He'd half had the thought a few times but been distracted by all the other thoughts about less immediate things.

Gingerly drifting over to the bathroom, he grabbed a glass from the kitchen and brought it in with him, filling it from the tap with one hand while he hauled the waist of his cords low enough to flop his dick toward the toilet. He stabilized with the row of knuckles on the hand holding his pants, and tried not to pass out peeing, asking himself why he had opted to fill the glass at the same time, as his other hand turned the tap off. He didn't need to bother unzipping to put himself back together, either; he'd lost the pounds that made the pants fit. That was alarming, considering he'd needed to gain weight *before* losing more, and didn't really know how he'd attack the deficit he was operating with currently. He didn't think he could make it down the street, he didn't have cash, he didn't have credit, he couldn't order food, he didn't know how to cook. If he found a potato in the kitchen he wasn't sure he could make it not raw. *Boil them mash them stick them in a you*, his brain said helpfully. How did you boil things, it had been a long time since grade eight home ec. Forget mashing them, that was how people who couldn't

cook in romcoms got puree on everything. Dan turned the hot tap on full as he took a sip of the cold water he'd poured himself, waiting for the flow to heat up so he could steam out his congestion for a few minutes. The water in his mouth suddenly struck him as very foreign and bad tasting, thin somehow. Unwaterlike. A semiliquid that tasted fartlike and metallic. He spat it into the sink, feeling appalled at himself and a little alarmed by not understanding what had just happened. *Maybe it's the water*, he tried, *maybe it's different today*. But no, that didn't feel true and he wasn't convinced. Did that mean it wasn't true? He wasn't convinced of that, either. He suddenly felt like someone else, someone Dan didn't know, like he'd switched places with someone—or, someone had switched places with him, but he-the-someone-not-he-himself remembered being Dan right up until that moment. He just didn't feel anything like the person he remembered feeling like all the time before that. Unnerved, he looked at his reflection. His reflection looked unnerved too. The dark deep hollows under mirror Dan's eyes pulled his notice and with a nice burst of reassured feeling he told himself it was just some weird symptom of not sleeping. *Of course, of course, course of course of*, singsonged in his brain. He'd stayed awake two days and nights in a row a few times but not three and not while he'd been in terrible health with zero body fat and a monster flu eating him alive and churning out sludge like some Rumpelstiltskin. Of course he was having a heebiejeebie time, that was normal given the situation. He breathed in the steam, holding his hands in the running water and pressing them to the bowl of the sink alternately, waiting for it to be too hot. He pressed his hot wet hands to his dry lips, and they rasped at the pink-flushed pillowy countertexture like straw. He splashed hot water on his face over and over for a while, feeling almost hypnotized by the repetition and the heat. A tiny easing of pressure in his upper cheeks and around his eyes finally graced him and he sighed again, this time feeling a little bit on the edge of hysteria. What was his life, what was he going to do? Why was he here, when would he be somewhere else and how. Why had it all gone like this, why hadn't he ever had a dream to follow anywhere. Anywhere like, a place that he understood and felt at home in, instead of a

place that was a puzzle he didn't even like solving. Or a bunch of puzzles that fit together like the 3d Eiffel tower his mom had made them all do a section of one Christmas. His mom who he hadn't emailed like he said he would, for months. His mom who was probably very upset that he hadn't called to say he was alive still, and doing okay. His mom who would want to know, why had it all gone like this, why hadn't he ever had a dream to follow anywhere—she *had* told him to have dreams and to follow them, so, what was the issue? Why was he like this, what was his life, what was he going to do, why was he here, when, what, who, how, what, how, why, when. When, why, when, why... These horrible, stressful, existential thoughts fit their way unceremoniously into what had for most of the day been a mainly upbeat delusional haze. Dan realized that he was parched and drank some warm water out of his hands, but the suspicious taste was still there, faintly, and his throat clenched like he might babybarf because of it. There had to be some filtered water in the fridge, he knew no one else drank it from the tap. Maybe being sick had made him super sensitive to tastes. That was a thing that happened, he seemed to remember from somewhere. An episode of friends or something, like the jellyfish thing. Chandler and Monica. Him and his ex, but nice to each other. Why hadn't he and his ex ever felt like being nice to each other was something he wondered off and on. What had been stopping them from just...having a life together? Like a couple does, like couples are supposed to.

Dan coughed out some goo and watched it circle the sink, finally turning off the tap. There was a lot of steam in the room and it followed him out, embracing him in a gust before the vacuum of cold air hit, making him cough again, feebly. He ached, it was starting to be oppressive. He had as long again up here as he'd spent already, he estimated, but without the steamroom treatment that timeline could in practice be optimism making a fool of him. Lurching a bit as he went, Dan surveyed the kitchen starting with everything he could see and ending with the fridges. There were canned tomatoes; a maybe that didn't seem like much of a maybe. There were carrots, onions, some green stuff he didn't know, and celery. None of it seemed to say eat

me. Bags of lentils he noticed were somewhere in the zone of daunting, looming over him watching, from their shelves. With a familiar crunchajunch sound he popped the first minifridge's door and was greeted with an almost radiantly beaming jug of orange juice, nearly full, like some amber-golden holy relic that had been labelled BRUBRUH in sharpie.

Awaiting a very tired and unwell boy to revitalize.

Momentarily debating going to Bruce's room to see if he was home to be asked for juice, Dan realized he didn't smell weed. Bruce wasn't in.

Amused by the detectivework he'd surprised himself with, he grabbed the jug and then surprised himself with dismay, feeling his arm sag unexpectedly. His other hand was there quicker than he had time to think, supporting the bottom of the jug. Hugging it to his chest to pop to cap off, he felt himself on a precipice, the anticipation pressing in on his delirium. Finally slurping from the bottle, feeling like the wine god in that one part of fantasia, Dan felt sustained. The acidity was welcome, scouring a rotted feeling partway out of his mouth. When he paused to breathe he found himself chewing little hangnail skins of pulp stuck in his teeth. Good, pulp was good. He hoped Bruce wouldn't miss the juice and slugged back more until it was half gone. It tasted really alive, somehow, or vibrant, like a herd of beautiful wild sunbeams running free across the plains. Dan felt like he'd just rebooted. He thought about whatsapping Andreah about it because she might think it was funny.

Not wanting to finish the whole thing and worried it would make him sick if he did, he returned the jug and shut the fridge with a thump. Things around it and on it jingled. Wishing there were at least bananas on the counter, he tried the other fridge. There was a bushel of apples in a bag at the bottom.

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Many hours later, how many he wasn't sure, maybe a whole day, Dan woke up in the dark next to the apple he hadn't eaten yet. He shoved his hand at it forcefully and got disoriented by the motion, then found that he had been eating the apple for several mouthfuls while thinking about how hard it had been to coordinate picking it up. He dropped it again, thoughts deconstructed

themselves into building blocks of imperceivable meaning, and neatly put themselves away somewhere.

Something was wrong, he realized. His fever had given him brain damage or something. He flexed his hand around the afterimpression of the dropped apple, gauging his motor control, trying to think about what having it or not having it meant.

He felt queasy suddenly and decided to curl up into a ball. He fell asleep again, and dreamed.

He didn't dream about a forest this time, or anyone he knew. He was dreaming about a place full of rocks, where everyone was sick and no one seemed to know why or what to do, besides throw rocks.

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The next time he found himself awake, it was light outside, and he felt strange, but less strange, and sick, but less sick. He had been sweating, and he had to make pisshaste getting to the rank "bedpan" he hadn't dealt with yet. Emptying it out the window after a discombobulatingly excellent fillup, he noticed how the edge of cold in the air was different. Lessened maybe, or he was just reacting to a humidity change. He swayed on his feet, half to feel it and half because he hadn't eaten in days.

It reminded him that Bruce might be home, and he made himself make the journey again to check. He could ask about clothes and maybe beg for some soup or something to be made. *Please sir*, he thought, breaching into the living room. Someone was over in the kitchen, smoking a joint and reading a subway paper at the sink, for some reason, facing away from Dan toward the window with the herbs.

"Bruce!" He heard himself shout and then had a bizarre feeling like the phantom limb version of embarrassment, at how he sounded like a kid calling his friend.

"Heya hiya howya been," Bruce hollered back, louder and childishier. "Did you see, I had a big jug of special-special potion in the fridge, but it's not there now."

Dan sat on the floor, feeling funny. “I don’t know, I saw it but I didn’t take— what was in it?”

“Ohh, just some peyote and some other benign goodies, it’s my special brew! The Bru-brew, bruh! Why?”

Dan stared at him agog. His mouth flapped and words came out: “because I drank a bunch of it. I don’t know where it went though, I left it in there.”

Bruce made an agog face back, walking into the living room. He at least had the decency to not look amused. “How much of it did you drink?” He sounded a little serious and it was unnerving.

“Uh, like a third of it. A third of what was there, maybe a bit more, why, is that bad? Is that a lot?”

“Ohh jeezy-kableezy, You dosed yourself, or, I dosed you by not labelling it good, I’m really sorry dude, I just didn’t want it to go fermented and then I was over at my buddinskis’s place for a few days longer than I thought, and! Well! I made it so strong, I shouldn’t’ve left it unlabeled but I was going right back for it. I forgot it was there! I was gonna go right back for it!” Suspicious clarity smeared its way into Dan’s brain like someone was pouring a warm marmalade of ideas into his ear: *Bruce is over-acting, to avoid culpability. Because he not only should have known, he had known. He intended it.* As quickly as Dan’d had the thoughts—so, not very—they oozed away, didn’t make sense.

“What exactly was it? Exactly.” He didn’t know why he felt like he needed to know. What difference did it make? Was he going to be able to form an eta for coming down off what he was high on? He remembered his dream and shuddered. He’d stay awake until he was sober again, he decided.

“Well, a pinch of Alice’s powdered peyote, and about a gram of powdered



golden mammoths—obvi, that's why I was using citrus as a potentiator," he was starting to finger-count.

"No, stop, what the fuck are gold mammoths." He was high on shit he'd never even heard of. Fantastic. He felt frustrated, cranky, and it was like an old friend he felt weird about. He tried to crank down.

"Oh, it's a kind of psilocybin." Dan stared at him, and breathed out through his nose. When he raised his eyebrows like *dude what*, Bruce said "zooms!" Dan made a frustrated keep-it-coming gesture. "*Magic mushrooms*, dude!" Of course. Dan felt toyed with, why hadn't Bruce just said.

"Ok, there's magic mushrooms, peyote. Doing great here." Actually it explained a lot. Bruce was a lunatic, if he was running around high on this goop.

"Well, uh. Y'know there's barely anything else, it was just everything I had only a tiny-tiny bit of. There's no way most of it is even having an effect on you, especially now that it's been a while. You slept most of it off anyway, right? Maybe it helped! You seem kinda perky!" He seesawed like he was hoolahooping, looking sure it had helped.

"What else was in it," Dan sounded really fed-up suddenly, that probably wasn't the way to get an answer. He heard himself sounding like he had sounded, and grimaced. He tried to be less balloon-headed but it was hard, because he was still high in a hard-to-shake, balloon-headed way.

Bruce made an uncomfortable sound and chewed at his cheek. "Don't get mad! It was an accident!" The little nibbling sounds persisted and Dan saw his jaw muscles working, worrying.

"I'm not mad," he didn't sound mad, and he wasn't. The irritation wafted in

and out and had vanished again. Everything was so roily, he felt sort of held and moved through by waves of something, like many sets of magnets were being forced wrongwaytogether all around him. But it was soothing, too, even though it made him kind of seasick; he felt like his head was made of air and his body was a big melting statue all around the air.

“Well...I had these old botanical salad caps? Called sleepwalker? Left over from back when Andraeh and Toi and I all worked together, so... there’s four of those, it’s just herbs, it was probably all at the bottom anyway, right? Like, you didn’t shake the jug or anything before you poured a couple glasses, I’m gonna guess.” Dan didn’t correct him to tell him he hadn’t used a glass. “And uh. There’s some, uh, a pinch of mdma. Well, its not mdma, its mostly ketamine. Actually its another phenethylamine. But there’s barely any! It’s like, nothing. I don’t even know if it holds up in oj. You should be totally fine, I mean, you’re not freaking out or anything, right?”

Dan wasn’t sure, so Bruce hustled him into the hammock in his room so he could drink tea under a duvet and watch nature shows, which Bruce said was the thing to do. Bruce sat in his chair, smoking and chattering. After a while he started talking about his show, and muted the nature show to play some episodes that had little segment buffer clips and ending music that Toi had done years ago.

“I was thinking of stuff like this nature show would be really good going into the spring, you know, mellow but dancey? Autotuned or something, like when pbs did that song series?” Dan didn’t know, but he could basically hear it already. That tripped him out and he got stuck on the idea of maybe he knew everything right now. He tried to think of things he hadn’t known before, like how to fix a red-ringed xbox. He couldn’t tell if he knew, when he wondered about it. It was a bunch of parts, right? He pictured what he thought the inside of an xbox would look like. Bruce was still talking, saying “I really like this part about the garden and I was thinking it might be

possible to work in the themesong from this old gardening show I like? But less this-is-pbs, you know? More like psytrance, or, or,”

“Witchhouse, but uptempo,” Dan finished. He’d figured that out yesterday. “Yeah, I know, I got it.” That didn’t sound right, so he said “I got you,” too. This was when Mouse appeared at the window looking owlsh, and yelled “BRUCE” at them through it.

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part 12: delivering the wingier wing

March 4, 2016 8:56 pm

The tomato/lentil curry stew thing Bruce made was really hitting the spot. The green stuff was knotweed from someoneother’s window microgreen grow. It went on top with some recently expired plain yogourt Bruce assured him wouldn’t make him sick with some new thing. Dan had seen the container in the second fridge the other day or whenever it had been, and overlooked it after assuming off the bat that, like at his parent’s place, there would be a few mouthfuls of some mouldy leftovers inside. If he’d known it was yogourt he still wouldn’t have gone for it. One it was from the trash, two it was unflavoured, three he didn’t eat yogourt. Wasn’t that for lady tennis players or whatever? But it was good with this. He’d slowly eaten a bowl sitting at the kitchen island while Bruce ran around Painting The Living Room Ready. Or red-y, Dan wasn’t sure what the pun was there; either way it involved rummaging around in the tin box-shed thing built off the back of the skate ramp, and pulling out a big tie-dyed sheet. This was followed by a red loveseat that looked like it was just the big square cushions off some larger piece of furniture structured together with single wall sections of milk crates and pallet slats. The sheet went up on the wall by hooking the beam it was all wrapped around and stuck to at one end, onto a latch thing that was on a rope with a pulley dial doohickey up by the ceiling on the wall. Then he

pulled out a projector from somewhere inside the halfpipe/shack storehouse of wonders. And lo and behold, appeared the laptop from behind its slider cubby-door in the wall.

It played movies for them all from the projector sitting on a pulled-up barstool, because Mouse had finally reappeared from his little room behind when the food smell got to him. He'd been talking to himself and banging things and listening to some kind of soviet ska since finishing his half-Russian (for all Dan knew) rant about Bruce's improper labelling on the way in. Dan had been feeling exceptionally magnanimous since eating Bruce's food again and drinking some filtered water from the pitcher that had been filled, but he'd stayed out of it entirely when Mouse sniped about it again before eating, which seemed fair. At this point, from his point of view, it was really a nonissue and he was happy to not get upset about it by proxy. Turned out he'd just been clowning himself by drinking the water from the sink for hands, which (of course) didn't have a filter on the tap-end, because (of course) it was for hands, and steaming, and whatever. Bruce said they filtered it again through biochar or some crackpot sounding thing, Dan had been only halfway paying attention to the human attention-craving hummingbird Bruce had become with two somewhat willing, somewhat captive "out-of-actionses" to fuss over, and was more interested in how movies looked on the resplendently ridiculous backdrop of the tyedye. It was like a sunflower field if you looked at the patterns long enough, but all lucky charms colours and every-petal-a-rainbow type sunflower field. For some reason Bruce had decided to show them lawnmower man and was gabbing incessantly about it. The laptop's audio naturally went through all the various speakers around the place and with the sound too low to really hear over Bruce even though it was everywhere, the effect was a kind of entertainingly lyrical din. A din to which Dan managed to eat more soup, at an increasing rate until he'd blown through several tentatively self-portioned half-bowls. He suspected Bruce being perched on the top of the halfpipe he liked and blowing bags of volcano vape everywhere, was "somehow" giving him an appetite.

Sometime after dark Jean-Paul had shown up, and Dan thought *it was because Bruce texted about the predicament of the two lost little lambs. Or, whatever-Mouse-is. A snarling little lamb on a snarled little settee that looks like a llama, honestly. Despite all his rage he was just a guy too high to reasonably leave le Mais-on for the moment on his le Mouse-own. The maze...* he squinted through the haze the room had taken on, watching Jean-Paul's expression.

Dan was feeling a lot better than Mouse seemed to be, and he was glad to see Jean-Paul, who seemed nonplussed by the whole situation.

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*Mechanical separation*, he thought. Mechanically separated was the only phrase he remembered now from the zine he'd pondered briefly in the kitchen, thinking instead mainly of the pictures. Dan asked himself why, what it was about the phrase. *Jean-Paul is explaining about his job:* Dan tried to focus. It was riveting really, but he was really unclear on why his friend of lo these ten years had chosen tonight to explain that he ran around having sex for money. And that it ran in the family, so to speak, which explained everything about the weird moment he'd had with Andreah last month and maybe something about why she hadn't tried to get in touch at all. But that wasn't the case, he realized, running it by himself a few times; she had played it off really cool, she must have understood that Jean-Paul used to say whatever, to his *old* friends. People he was scared wouldn't "get it" or whatever. Dan wasn't sure he got it. Andreah hadn't been sure he'd get it, or wasn't sure she was supposed to tell him. Since *he didn't* know. Apparently it wasn't worth bringing up unless he was all juiced up on The Brew. Maybe he'd seemed relaxed or something. He had felt pretty relaxed, now that he was feeling much less high and much more level. Mouse still seemed agitated as all get-out but hadn't left, or seemed interested in anything that was going on aside from the movie playing directly over his head and occasionally begrudgingly responding to something Bruce was on about in the background, over all their heads. Jean-Paul had perched himself on the halfpipe itself, in a square he cleared in the rummage against the short pallet

wood leg of the second segment of strawberry red “couch” that Dan had been lounging on fully extended for some time before Jean-Paul had arrived. He had been feeling like a big happy cat, all snug in its basket or whatever. The couch was holding together pretty well, like two big armless Adirondack chairs conjoined, it didn’t shift and it sandwiched Dan pleasantly in the middle. He still felt snug, but now it was sort of like, he couldn’t get away if he wanted to. He went about not feeling like he’d rather not bail.

“So, I mean, how do you...Did your mom give you like, a welcome basket of ...rubber gloves and condoms when you were legal or something?”

“What?” He sounded quite scandalized, but amused. Dan guessed this was going better than he’d anticipated.

“I was picturing some like, eyes wide shut scenario,” he’d never seen it, didn’t know how the sexmask club recruited, “or something. With y’know, welcome baskets and... business cards. With italic font...fancy...in cursive...” he waved his hands vaguely, splashing it out in lights: “club ... somethingorother.”


“The Moulin Rouge,” Jean-Paul laughed at him. “Alice linked me up, actually. I mean obviously I always knew, about my mom, like she never hid it from me, but I understood to repeat whatever job she said she had, when it came up. I’d never really thought about following in Ma’mere’s footsteps but I’d never thought up any other backup plan for the band manager thing falling through. That was sort of step one in a whole...career I had planned out. Apparently I’m bad with setbacks.” Maybe Jean-Paul had secretly been waiting to retire since before even starting. Dan had always wanted to retire, himself. Maybe he’d dropped out of retirement. For the first time. He was technically a freelancer. He was freelancing. If he factored in the cost of his room and board, if it had been in a rentable place of equivalent amenities, he was doing really well. Astronomically well, even. It wasn’t a penthouse

downtown or anything but he'd really only been in town three months. Or two months, that always confused him. He counted forward from January on his fingers, and was surprised to find that it had only been two months.

“So, how'd it, how'd you end up asking Alice...about it,” he frowned at his accidental echo. *Go ask Alice*, he heard Andre tell him in the past, again, still there, next to the dumpster Bruce was in. The bike was there.

“She parties around town, there's places where you meet clients pretty easily, which is to say, where you make friends who look like bankers even naked and they give you various drugs people don't really do anywhere else, and later you hit them up for rent when they,” he made a noise like was considering how “iffy” to be about it, “require further service. Female-identifying people get in free so Alice is all over it, I'm not really one for the sex bar scene. I go to my bar, where I know people, with people I know, and I don't take dates there. Anyway Alice and I have a similar enough client base, or, there's enough overlap where she was able to set me up with a few guys who weren't looking for what she's offering now. So there's a nice wingman thing in it for my friend, too; she gets to say there's a brand they can switch to, they in turn might forward whoever, to her.”

Well, that seemed to explain that. Dan wasn't sure where to go from there. Was he supposed to check that Jean-Paul was okay or something? He seemed fine. No more not fine than anyone else he knew. Generally pretty poised and in control. It seemed pretty condescending to get all weird, so he tried “Okay. Well, cool? Are you ...all good?”

Jean-Paul laughed and looked at him sidelong. Dan realized there were easy entendres there and he felt his face groan. Graciously Jean-Paul overlooked the joketake d said “overall it's, ah, quite a fulfilling occupation, actually. I encounter some very,” Dan saw his mouth shimmy as he pursed his lips in a sort of fond way “interesting older gentlemen. All groovy, ground control,” he said.

Bruce screeched “good morning starshine the earth says hellooooo,” over at them, obviously and obnoxiously eavesdropping.

With a wave of his hand, Jean-Paul ignored Bruce and continued, “it’s excellent work, honestly” sounding extremely honest. Dan wasn’t sure whether to believe him, and chose to reserve judgment. He had found the word “overall” dubious. He supposed Jean-Paul’s clients never yelled at him in bars. If anything—Dan cut the power to that thought, blinked and decided the movie was interesting again, because it was a different movie, a movie so interesting he had no idea what he’d been about to think, even, or why that would’ve mattered. *Jason was in space in this one, huh?*

“Pete says he’ll be here in a couple hours if we order a sumptuous Chinese meal in the meantime.” Bruce continued to pester-yell, sounding very happy. “I have a twenty I found on the ground! All freaky and new! I think the machine 3d prints them from plastic bag pellets! Don’t quote me! I can get more out if you all are gonna stay away-ay-ayyychk?”

Staying awake for Pete sounded like kind of a-hurdle-too-many for him, but he didn’t want to run away just when Jean-Paul had come out to him or whatever about his line of work. Seemed like that might come off as overly mindboggled about it, which would probably mean he wasn’t really that cool with it, in the light of day. This all swam into his mind as he stared at the projected square on the wall and at everyone, the others. Mouse and Bruce and Jean-Paul, all together in his line of vision, their heads looking sort of cherubic in his fading potion-paisleyed view. He felt a sort of conduit of sympathy between them run in a circuit, then, and breathed out so he didn’t startle, feeling like he might. He had a funny sense of the others as ectoplasms or something, like visible souls. The scene seemed like an apparition of a stage play, with four ghostly players, watching an even ghostlier play as it played out on its own borax box. The space ship or whatever it was, satellite or something, in the movie, reminded him of their house, all compartments of a unit. He was trying not to pry into the others in some way, by focusing away from them. It immediately seemed overly intimate to investigate them too intently. Instead he thought back to the



question he'd been asked, so long ago it felt like but it couldn't have been, Bruce had just asked and was distracted again. They were on the same setting now, it seemed. The same frequency. It came back to him, hadn't Bruce said something about that on an episode of the podcast? He had intuited what Jean-Paul would think if he bailed, because Jean-Paul was thinking it. And Jean-Paul had realized he'd realized because Dan been thinking it. And the others knew too, or it felt like—it had felt like they had. He felt like the best option was to be circumspect about his drug-fuelled revelations, but, not wanting to bet on being wrong, he finally announced that he couldn't pitch but had been planning on eating more of what Bruce had made anyway.

"It is very homey," Jean-Paul commented his way, watching the movie. He had brought his knee up in front of him one at a time, alternating after a while, since sitting, and was now on the left one, hands clasped in front of it. "Did you just call my cooking **HOMELY**," Bruce wailed in feigned anguish. He was rolling around on the strip of halfpipe next to Mouse's perch, between two pile-esque rows of whateverthehell (looked like big sheets of fabric, paint rollers, chairs of various folding types, just a bunch of random shit like you'd see in the back of a school multipurpose room or a scout hall, which was probably exactly the type of place it had all come from originally), holding his balloonbag of vapor like an otter with a clam.

"Like home cooking," Dan clarified redundantly, to contribute some chatter for its own sake. For the sake of homeyness, and homieness, he figured. It kind of felt like Bruce figuring it. He was probably spending enough time around him for it to be catching, he smirked to himself. Thinking of things catching brought him back to the almost electric jolt he'd felt earlier, when he'd had that sensation like they were all conducting something back and forth and it was an impressionistic soup of stuff, and he'd thought about how Jean-Paul was doing, or how he'd feel if Dan left, which brought him back to a half-had idea from before Bruce had distracted him, and he said "I can trade you spots so you're not on the floor, or move my feet or something," to Jean-Paul.

Jean-Paul opened his mouth, seeming to reply, but sounding a lot like Bruce cutting him off. “Don’t bother I was gonna-unna go get Pete and me and him some padding. I’ll get you another bowl too so you can stay a warm little patty all sandwichy and full of spices.”

“Are you calling me ginger,” Dan wasn’t heard, or if he was he wasn’t answered. Bruce had bounced his way over the lip of the curved ramp and down the other side, and now he was in the kitchen, bustling. “Thanks,” he told Bruce with feeling, receiving more delicious mush on what he took to be a b-line to the second floor for supplies. Supplies. He’d been thinking about asking about something from in there, but he couldn’t remember what it had been. Somehow, though, it reminded him to ask Jean-Paul for clothes, since he did remember wanting to ask about clothes. He tried to think of what the other thing had been, and amended to ponder it in a shower, after asking.

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He wasn’t sure whether Jean-Paul would still be upstairs with them when he got out of the shower, and thought that if he wasn’t, if he’d gone back to his own floor, Dan’d do the same, except that his floor was right below where this impromptu slumber party was taking place. Bruce pretty much had him corralled either way, he realized, sudsing his scalp with someone’s old Lush product. It looked filmed in dust enough to belong to no one who was there to care. When he came back out, towelling his hair with a hand-towel while he held a larger towel around his waist with another hand, he spotted the new additions to the landscape he’d been wanting; a change of clothes was on the back edge of the red couch thing. But he also felt himself deflate slightly at Jean-Paul’s absence from the scene. Cast adrift, slightly, he tried not to scurry his way over despite feeling the wintery chill of the evening, wondering where Bruce was as well. Mouse was still posted up on the settee, looking angry and watching the movie. The cloth of the towel felt surreal somehow, like if he’d been higher he’d have taken on its properties and melted. He wanted to have on things that didn’t need holding.

“Uh, did you want more,” he asked Mouse when he came back clothed.

“While I’m standing,” he added. It wasn’t his plan to get back up. In fact, he

planned to eat another half bowl himself and pass out in the chair thing, so he wouldn't seem avoidant like it felt going down to his room now would be. He wasn't sure about being high around Pete, it seemed like it might quickly max out his always taxed ability to tolerate white people. Passing out seemed prudent, and so it was his plan. Otherwise who knew what would happen, maybe Pete would convince him somehow to run out into the night to host some kind of live event only to chide him for never learning to use a turntable.

Looking churlish at best Mouse said "no." Dan decided Mouse was also reaching max on an always taxed ability of some sort, or, whatever was going on it looked like getting into it would hurt. Like it would result in a fist to his face or something. Mouse seemed to find him as fun as he found Mouse. Not very. But he liked Mouse, also. He didn't want to be annoying, but he couldn't become unannoying by going away, because he'd be conspicuous somehow as the hole in the floor, he still felt like. It was at this juncture that Jean-Paul came back, followed by Bruce, both of them lugging spare futon-type things. One seemed to be foams in a duvet cover and the other looked circular but otherwise futonlike. The circle was slotted into a cleared space on the halfpipe next to Mouse, between which and Dan a square longboard had been laid across two milkcrates of some cymbal stand stuff and pedals and random guitar strings and piles of melted wax. The foams in a duvet went up on top of the halfpipe next to the silver vape, that ziggurat of canna-conveyance.

"Can I get that—" Jean-Paul started to say to Bruce.

"I'm on it," was already being shouted back from behind the divider wall. Bruce was making noise like he was going through the stuff on the back of the divider. He came back in short order, waving a smushy, folded stack of melted-looking clear green plastic. Bouncing up onto the back of the halfpipe from the back end, he appeared like a gargoyle, curling his legs and feet under himself neatly. Dan was impressed by his dexterity and recalled the other day, when he'd turned out to not be two-litre-jug-hoisting strong, lately. He made a raincheck-resolution to make a resolution with himself

when the weather changed for real, to get back to normal as soon as humanly possible. He felt vague about what he had intended to do in the intervening time that wasn't getting back to normal, and it seemed like the answer was, because he had some music to backlog for Bruce first. While the backlogging was good. Before whatever seismic shift in reality that everyone seemed to wait all winter for, occurred. He remembered Andre telling him he should see it in the summer. The pace would change after the lousy smarch weather stopped, he understood, but he wasn't sure how that new pace looked or what it would mean for him. But it sounded like a lot of distractions. Dan was distracted just now in fact, by Bruce using an attachment to make the volcano inflate the smushy pile, which was an armchair, in fact. He tossed it over Dan in an arc, eventually, and he watched it sail sort of like a forlorn beachball at a very empty, dark rave, over to "JP!" who Bruce reminded "head's up," after the fact.

Jean-Paul toed wider the space he was using for seating and dropped the chair into it. It seemed really incongruous to Dan that he'd be using a chair that seemed both conspicuously fragile and attention-grabbingly lacking in taste. In his mind Jean-Paul would leave a room before sitting on a piece of furniture like that—something so contrary to his essence—like tackiness was contagious. That was the same note of surprise he always hit with Jean-Paul, now. Here. *Maybe it'll stop being surprising sometime*, he tried to log in his mind, so it'd stick. Jean-Paul made kind of a production out of seeming more fastidious and fancyminded, than he actually was. Dan had no idea why really, it was the opposite of what everyone tried to do in his experience, except for his ex and her family, but that was because she was like that. Bougie. He thought everyone hated that. Everyone who wasn't like that, anyway. He'd always found it sort of annoying about his ex, himself—and at times acutely mortifying, depending how annoying someone she wasn't paying attention to found her as they provided some service to her. She was really transactional about everything, he recalled. It seemed like a counter-intuitive affectation to give people the impression that people like his ex were more similar to yourself than they were, particularly in the context at hand, in

which Jean-Paul existed as a part of some broadly inclusive “anti-authoritarian” community. Then again, Dan realitychecked himself and noted that for months, he’d been wearing clothes his ex had picked out. And they made him look kind of, if not fancy then different, in a not-homeless way. He had no idea if he looked bougie or not. He knew they wore clean clothes all the time. His ex almost never took laundry out to get it done, she usually just bought another store-washed vintage thing and threw it on one of the piles when she was done. Probably bougie people threw away clothes that needed mending, he realized. Besides, “fitting in” didn’t really seem to be the point of being an anti-authoritarian, so dressing to fit in seemed kind of counter-intuitive, itself. Which meant anyone judging him based on his group sameness score probably fit in less than he did, in the relevant way, so he could forget about what his clothes said and speak for himself. His current wardrobe said, Jean-Paul repainted his place beige at some point, or did something else that got some of his ninja-monochrome clothes smeared in paint. There was a terrycloth hotel robe as well, for extra wrapping. He felt very snug and dry, and the increasingly gentle, circular ribboning of his psychedelic musings was diffusing some edge of tension that apparently had been propping up his eyelids. He felt himself drifting in and out of a hazy sleep, half an ear open to the room as Bruce’s chatter bubbled into it like a pump-looped fountain in a midrange sushi restaurant bathroom. Bruce was intermittently reading through a paper menu he had from some place off St. Clair a few blocks over, and bickering affectionately with Mouse, who sounded impatient about delivery arriving, now, as opposed to ambiently murderous to have found himself on a surprise detour into his brain’s own toon town. Mouse insisted the food was better from the Vietnamese places at the Runnymede intersection and Bruce insisted Pete hadn’t said a sumptuous Vietnamese meal so they had to order from yum-yums or wherever. So on and so forth. Apparently there was a congee place way further north up Keele that would deliver via some thirdparty courier app, but it was vetoed for hassle despite the nearby place not having congee. Whatever that was. This all reminded him an awful lot of making similar

calls with his ex. He tried not to let the remindedness roll in like a fog and contaminate the evening for him. This wasn't like then. This was an actual gathering of friends being friendly. Which was fun, not fatiguing. Dan was fatigued, but not emotionally. Which was a weightlessness he'd been waiting for possibly forever, but at least since before his relationship had started to hit turbulence. Maybe it was the same feeling as Magic card gatherings in highschool. Sort of closeby, like different tints of the same hue.

By the time Bruce's chunky old flip-phone was letting them know food was outside by blasting a midi of reggaestep at them indiscriminately, Dan had managed to get all the way over to the other side of the waking divide, and he felt himself swimming back up to the other world ponderously, unsure of the way and feeling like it was easy to get lost somehow. To cul-de-sac in a somnambulistic sub-realm somewhere before where eyes open.

The food-smell did the whole job of getting him online again, and he sat up, watching Bruce spread out the array of vessels. There wasn't enough space on the longboard and he ended up decamping three items to his perch on the halfpipe. It was precisely at the most convenient time for a buffet haul, and Pete chose it as the time to show up, appearing from the direction of the bedrooms, where he might or might not have been sitting around alone waiting to eat. Dan assumed he'd texted Bruce his part of the order. It looked like more than twenty dollars worth of food and it looked like it was supposed to feed more than just Mouse and Bruce and Pete. This was confirmed for him by Jean-Paul rotating several little cartons toward himself to check the sigil expressing their contents on each, before snagging what seemed to be his own individual order of deep fried tofu in chili sauce. Dan guessed that was his version of junkfood. The rest of the spread was closer to his own, minus what was later revealed to be a container of green beans in sauce, which everyone seemed to treat as what Jean-Paul called a crudité. Dan still wasn't entirely sure what that was, but it seemed to be small portions of healthy stuff you could eat as finger food. Maybe cooked didn't count, maybe that was how tapas was different. His ex liked tapas. That was right up her alley; small portions, fancy name. Bougie. She'd have been hard

pressed to pick something out of tonight's line-up, although, she'd have been the only one. There were two kinds of glistening barbecued meats to tantalize the appetite, as well as pineapple fried rice, two orders of fries and three boxes of chicken wings in varying preparations. Bruce had also ordered a bunch of cans of soda even though there was soda down the block for less, and there was water to drink in the Maison. *Really going all out hosting the big ball*, he thought at Bruce. Just as he thought it, Bruce's head rotated unerringly toward him and he found himself being beamed at, maximum beam.

"Mange, mange!" Bruce shouted over from his spot, making a rotating eat-eat gesture with his hand in front of his mouth as he did. It reminded him of Andrea ordering take-out on that snowy night in Kensington, and a ghostly gust of cold air made him shiver. He should really do some reaching out textwise before Andrea decided to forget his name when she saw him again. It seemed like only a week ago that they'd had breakfast, less than, even. But no, here it was, days into March. Soon a month would've passed since they'd talked. That seemed both wrong in the sense that it was rude or kind of cold or whatever, and in the sense that she was the only person he knew who didn't live in the same building as him but might be willing to let him stay in hers for whatever arising reasons might be forthcoming but premonitions of which were unforthcoming to Dan in the moment of consideration. He wasn't sure she was a great escape route but escape routes were the kind of thing you wanted to keep track of, he'd learned that the hard way from his breakup; turned out he'd never even thought about it before needing to, and that Jean-Paul had been his only escape route. He'd been lucky, so lucky, in all this, he re-affirmed to himself. He'd felt a lot less lucky about it since moving in here, but that wasn't *really* on the people or the place, since they all seemed to click together tidy-as-all-get-out. Figuratively tidy. Feeling dejected and out of sorts all the time because he found the environment stressful was a stupid way to interface with free housing that had come along when he needed it, Dan made another point of it to himself while he ate his way through a chickenwing. It was sublimely

greasy in the most fantastically covert way, the savoury tide of runny melted fat being held around the muscles and bones by a faintly fryer-popped mantle of crisp fried skin that was seasoned delectably with something very salty and faintly sweet, salt and MSG and some kind of spice; he vectored in on it out of appreciation, feeling high on chicken. He was pretty sure there weren't wings like this for delivery in Vic. The closest thing he could think of was the little deep fried wings at kfc, which came frozen and preseasoned unlike all the other bone-in chicken, and dropped in the fry oil station baskets in the prep area, away from the piece production kitchen. The wings were pointedly small and yet, pointedly expensive, so no one who didn't eat them for free ever got them, but they were leagues ahead of anything else on the menu in terms of their desirability to Dan and their actual nutritive food-value by weight. And the wings from this place a few blocks away were at least twice as good as those wings, if not three times. And it wasn't just because they were three times larger for the same price, or that he was embedded currently in the process of wasting away from not eating enough. They were actually just, better. *Freshness*, he found the attribution. *They sell these things all night every night, that's why it's perfect.*

Pete had been making quick work on his own wingfeast, piling up bones on a container lid as he went, looking pleased. "I know, right," he said to Dan cordially over the longboard table, as if he'd heard the whole thing, that whole line of thought about the wings. It felt comfortably and uncomfortably like he had. Pete had that way about him, Dan realized. He assumed it was a skill Pete had developed on purpose to keep people on edge, seeming confidently aware of what you were thinking. His older-older sister did it too, she was usually bluffing. Dan knew how to bluff along, he could play it by ear.

"Not the worst wings I ever had," he agreed back.

"'Not the worst'," Pete quoted him, laughing. This made him feel really sharp and conversationally functional for a second before he realized that was stupid and told himself to get a grip and learn to not-care-one-way-or-the-other better. He'd been working on not-caring-one-way-or-the-other for a



long time. It should have been paying off, by now. “That’s so, uh, wasp-y, why can’t you guys ever just like things. Openly. Honestly. Directly. This is why you don’t get chicks—if that’s like, something you wonder about.”

“Yeah well, let me know when you figure out how to keep them,” Dan started, and stopped, noticing Pete was not a person with a face like he was having some fun banter with a friend. Mouse, however, suddenly exploded with barks of laughter, spraying micromorsels of sumptuous Chinese meal into the air around him for a few seconds, mercifully derailing whatever horrifying social snafu had been about to go off in place of a spit take with a laugh track.

“I believe you have just gotten served,” Mouse chortled at Pete, clearly annoying him. Bruce seemed to be chiming in with some giggles about it as well. Dan didn’t turn his head to look at Jean-Paul’s read, but interpreted the dense silence near his feet to mean a tongue was being bitten over there, or his friend was just apprehensive about the sudden decline in ambient camaraderie.

“*You* can make volleyball analogies when you’ve finished highschool equivalency. Or started it,” Pete grouched at the small crumple of person just over his left shoulder, sounding like he was trying to land a hit on a sore spot. “*You are a cunt,*” Mouse announced back, still sounding amused with himself and the situation. Bruce made hooting noises at them and chanted that they should fight. Dan couldn’t tell if it was serious or not, the goading.

“Takes one to get some,” Pete primly deflected. “Eat some fries, you look thin.” He handed a box of no-longer-steamyfresh fries over. Mouse had only eaten meat so far, picking at each different kind in turn.

“Disgusting,” Mouse told him, eating fries anyway. Dan wasn’t sure he meant the fries. It hadn’t occurred to him before now to wonder about who Mouse thought about dating, if anyone. Now that it had, he assumed it was a short and fraught list, if it existed at all.

*So this is it*, the thought gelled, *this is a night in at Maison Rokkoku*. He watched the currently-playing movie for a second, trying to get his bearings in the image as it traversed another image, the sunflowers. He couldn’t make

sense of what the action on screen was. A fight or something, or some kind of choreographed routine. *Oh, it's sports*; he finally hit on the swing of things and magic-eye style it all settled into coherence. They were watching some old football team underdog, come-from-behind, island of misfit toys-type romper room feelgood fan favourite or whathaveyou.

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part 13: life is skittles and life is beer

March 21, 2016 5:57 pm

The third month, light out later and later: this was the point in every year when Dan began to feel time slipping away. It was always sun-up when he woke up now, and what he'd failed to accomplish in the winter because there was a whole year ahead, echoed. Not that he'd had much to fail to do, for years. This time was different, though. He was supposed to be freelancing or, he was an in-house DJ or something. He'd spent the past two weeks waking up, telling himself to open his laptop, which was still in his one piece of luggage, the old suitcase sitting in the corner. Instead of getting the laptop out he'd try to psyche himself up, wondering why he felt like he needed psyching up, by going on the house wifi on his still-planless cell and surfing music journalism videos and streaming playlists of music that seemed like it would work for Bruce's show, which he also listened to for hours at a time. Bruce's show often made him fall asleep though, and then eventually also woke him up with some loud sudden burst of noisier content. He still found the popular appeal of Bruce's show somewhat elusive, although it was charming. That was it, he supposed. Other people were just more charmed by it.

Today was the day, however. Another daylight spent avoiding, and now it was getting sunsetty. Dan noticed his heartrate spike as soon as he tried to focus on getting up to open the suitcase, and took a slow breath in, holding it and letting it out slowly. Repeating this a few times until it felt kind of pacifying, he found his pulse normalizing. It was weird how hard the task was turning out to be. He didn't want to see the laptop, that was unmissable,

but the why of it didn't appear. Closing his eyes and inhaling again, he muddled onto his knees and pushed himself toward the shape on the floor he'd been hiding from.

April, just around the corner, would feel deep into the year, mostly too late to avert the feeling of helpless entropy before May, which was the beginning of summer, summer being a blur in which nothing really got done, in Dan's experience. The remaining four months of fall and winter, starting in September, were generally a grim exercise in self-motivation and frenetic micro-scheduling, with any renewed productivity dropping off as the winter holiday season's smothering influence took hold. If Dan didn't produce something *he* found inspiring by the end of the month, he worried the year would take on a flavour of desperation, one long chain of lost hours and empty-headedness. Like so many of the previous years—the whole first half of the decade. Knowing that it was no longer even mid-March, he felt a steadily growing pressure to act; and now he was in action. The suitcase was unzipping, and he was watching his hand pull the zipper along. The tangle of laptop charger in the interior mesh pocket confronted him first, along with an ipod cable, optical mouse, and a couple usb drives of unfinished music and archives of beats and sounds he'd clipped. His laptop, desolate in its padded laptop bag, rested along at the bottom of the main compartment. Dan had no idea why this moment had been pushing him away for so many weeks now, seeing the inside of the suitcase felt fine. Good, even. He had expected to be hit with a wave of double-dense avoidance as soon as he'd gotten past the first hurdle, but no wave had hit.

His laptop in his lap and charging from the nearest outlet, Dan considered whether this was really the best work environment briefly before deciding he was inventing distractions for himself by worrying about where he'd be more productive before he even got unproductive. The laptop booted up with a soft whirring, like a tiny shopvac turned quickly on and off, following which there was a beep. The screen flickered on and the background was, still, black with the stylized interlocking head-phoned happyfaces that had been the professional logo of him and his ex. Two faces in eggshell white with a

lightbloom effect to make them look glowy. One had long hair, bangs swept over the forehead, face blank except for a greater-than symbol and a zero, a winking face. The other was entirely blank except for its headphones and rotated D mouth, the grin. Their name, Winks And Grins, arched to compliment the figure eight of the image. Dan felt numb taking in the sight, which was a pleasurable relief; he'd been bracing to feel the same mildly sickening mix of hostility, misery, and several other more vague things that he'd felt the several times he'd used his computer to check facebook back at the hostel. But it was gone, evaporated in the elapsed time, he guessed. Enough had happened between then and now that that made some sense. This idea cheered him up a bit; it was probably the case that he'd get over all his lingering agrieved feelings about the breakup and eventually stop having negativity-filled headspace about it. About her, his ex, Wishelle. Wishelle-like-Michelle-but-never-call-her-either-one, because she hated how they sounded; everyone she liked called her Wink. Dan wished he'd never met her, but he had no idea what he'd have used the time for otherwise. At least he'd walked out of it knowing how to put together something with a beat that people could dance to.

He'd been waiting to stop caring before changing the startup screen, so that he wouldn't be changing it because he cared. Staring at the logo in neon violet now, on the desktop screen, Dan wondered what to do now exactly—checking his email would feel like doing “something,” but it wasn't something he wanted to do. It was probably notifications of old cell phone bills, and a string of falsely upbeat update emails from his parents, who historically had both liked to email from work and talk about what they'd been up to and offer support while transparently refusing to pry. They always cc'd one another with these emails, and he wondered about the meaning of the whole process for them. Did they still face-to-face tell one another how their day was, how the remodelling was going, what was happening with friends and in the neighbourhood, and if not, did they just sit around doing crosswords and sudoku together, take the dog to the park in silence? Maybe they filled the silence talking about Dan, and Wishelle—the gaping holes in

their emails—but what did they say? In Dan’s mind, whenever he came up they just looked at one another in sad bewilderment because they had nothing to say and didn’t know what to think.

Thinking about the ccing hauntingly reminded him of how he’d texted his sisters from the hospital asking them to keep it quiet from their parents, and gotten replies from neither of them (they’d texted one another first, no “oh poor you” even) before getting a reply fifteen minutes later by email, from their mother. It’d been a surprisingly long and emotional email almost like it had been partly prewritten, and it hadn’t mentioned his dad at all. He remembered the notification sound—not the one for texts, which he’d been listening for from the phone on the sterile-esque bedside traytable—back there in the long-ago feeling previous year. The email that said that he should spend the holidays at home. The way he hadn’t for a couple years. He thought about that “holiday,” about the barely-repressed-seeming rage roiling around his dad until Dan’d made plans to leave right after new year. His dad thought he’d wasted his life. *At least I graduated highschool after moving out, right?*

His sisters had apologized when they’d all-three been at their parent’s house on Christmas; they’d been “too busy working” to go to emergency for him or have him couchsurf at all, “and besides,” he’d been scolded when he’d tried to get an apology, their mother would have been heartbroken when she found out later that she had found-out-later. So then it had been his fault they’d ignored him and done the total opposite of what he’d asked for. It had been *him* being selfish. Of course! From the hospital! *They could’ve just said no*, he griped freshly to himself as he relived his last weeks in Vic. Maybe he’d have called his ex, if his sisters had just said no. Maybe he’d be back at her apartment, right now; maybe it was still *their* apartment over there in maybeland. *What a gross thought*. He shook it away. Siblings were supposed to care, or something. Fathers and sons were supposed to have some kind of bond, or maybe that was only in movies; his dad didn’t get along with *his* dad, either. His dad’s dad thought his dad was a soft, lazy, impractical know-nothing, too, comparing against himself. A brat, was how

his dad's dad saw his dad, and his dad saw him the same way. Dan guessed his dad kind of believed it about himself, and somehow enjoyed believing it more about Dan. That was how he came across, it wasn't like they talked about it at all. *Maybe it's because you never played catch with me after I was done mowing the lawn for you*, he thought. *Maybe that's why I'm a fuck-up who doesn't have a bank job you two can tell people about when they ask.* Dan had an unusual feeling of epiphany as he unseeingly beheld the interlocking faces on the screen, and opened the browser to look for digital vestiges of the band Jean-Paul had managed. The band was called Dead Cow Couch, and he found a write-up on an english Montreal scene blog that described them as “an oldschool sounding metal ensemble who've finally tailored their vibe into a bass-centric semi-stripped-down stoner-doom/deathpunk fusion that licks mainstream rock sensibilities just close enough, while promoting militant veganism.” Dan thought the slight country influence was too much too-little; he had always aimed at the full positronic thunder of a Geffenesque-wall-of-sound-but-club. Closer to Walter Murphy's Beethoven nightcored than Bobby McGraw, unlike these vegan band-boys. There was an old interview up on another site. Looking around like this felt creepy somehow, and he told himself to stop investigating after he read it.

The interview was the train-wreck he'd expected; horribly enough, there'd been an embedded video of the band playing somewhere dim and cathedralesque-in-a-dungenous-way, in the depths of a place called Saint Henri. A recollection of Jean-Paul back at chimneyfish informed him something about how the band and he had operated at this time, back in 2012, although Jean-Paul's description of himself—adrift at the end of a set—was inflated; in the video, just visible as an unnaturally-blond smudge, he moved up from the revelmass as the band began their surly amble off-set, going to collect something for them from the gear, Dan took it as. The camera swung to follow the band, all five in different colours of ultra-fitted pants by some growing-in-popularity ethical brand one of his ex's friends liked to talk about. Their uniformly unwashed-looking hair hung long and lank around their

arched, hostile shoulders—all of them. Their black muscle tees had those characteristic metal band-logos in monochrome—all of them, except one, who was wearing something made out of hefty-bag by the looks of it. It came off as pretty contrived, from Dan's point of view. He got that there was an ethos behind it, and that it was a look bands had sometimes, even. It kind of reminded him of early White Stripes iconography, in a way. Less wholesome, but reminiscent. The sound too, in that twangy, sonically-vacuous way he didn't like about either band. The lyrics he'd been able to make out were muffled bickering with the world about intent and purity of deed and the use of Gibson Guitar products or something. Dan felt like he was missing something, several somethings. Such as, who gave one hot mother's fuck about this gaggle of pompous bonebags, and why was this band breaking up some sort of traumatic career-ender for someone as in-place in life as Jean-Paul had always seemed. What was important about any of this to Jean-Paul—why leave an interesting line of work just as it's heating up, why have such a stake in one band, *that* band especially, or why even have a pet project at all let alone the first band he managed for. How did one arrive at such a choice, or circumstance, anyway, and what about these pricks was at all fascinating other than apparently sharing with Jean-Paul a love for good, hard mope-rock. And not eating anything. The questions kept re-framing themselves in Dan's mind, and he watched the video over, noting details this time like the singer/bass player midset absently touching his overly long bangs, as he shouted lyrics or whatever, seemingly at the drummer who seemed to be covering some neglected bassfill, but who could tell, Dan had no idea how they were supposed to sound and it wasn't like the soundscape had noticeably weakened. Other details that his eye caught were a spectacularly dreamlike, evocative mural on the soaring-tall black expanse he assumed was a wall, and, the overt randomness of the spikes on the shoulders of the one wearing a green plastic bomber jacket barechested instead of a message t-shirt. Another bassist. A possibly useless one. It looked, for all the world, like maybe the band had been an incestuous carnival of bullshit both personally and philosophically. Dan snapped his

laptop shut promptly at the conclusion of this replay, annoyed, and moved it to the side. He fell back to the mattress and felt his heart beating, harder than usual, a disconcerting rhythm. He felt his old concerns about the thing fire up and tried to smother it before it compounded the issue. He trusted it to be fine, since it hadn't given out while he was convalescing. *Stupid little fucks*, he thought out at the bonebags, wherever they were just then.

In the now dusty orange-tinted dark of the room, the laptop seemed to take up a lot of space. Or have a lot of presence, to an extent appliances tended not to, in Dan's mind. Ignoring the sleek magnetism of the thing like a reverse space:2001 intro, he focused on staying still and slipping into a paralyzed half-sleep, a state in which he drifted for some time before feeling itchy, like he hadn't really done anything—like he'd done less than nothing, like he was now at a negative sum of daily achievement. Suddenly agonized, he snapped forward at the waist like a dracula that had got staked by surprise. Yanking the laptop back into place and crossing his unlimber legs, he got to work doing what he'd been outlined on.

He had to throw on a lot of fades to hide the audacity.exe comfortably to his ear, but he knew he didn't need to worry about it, Bruce's show was so upfront, assertively d.i.y. it really didn't matter *what* the sound quality was, or even what he actually made. But it seemed kind of, pointed or something, to just ignore all the wishlist hints handed to him. Besides, it was a good starting point, which he supposed was the point. All it was meant to be, he figured, but still. He wasn't particularly task-motivated but he was highly task-oriented anyway. The thing he'd been asked to play off was nice, actually—some old pbs show called The Victory Garden, it sounded like chamber music or something that needed a room full of ferns for the right acoustics. He chopped it up and waved it out, then went in for the nature show sample screws. After a while he noticed that he had five whole minutes, and only four hours had seeped past unnoticed. He was famished, as well. Time to exist, upstairs at least.

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Having been hightailed to a copse of fruit-and-veg stands and half-left menu item-spawning various eateries somewhere on Bloor, westward from the Maison, detouring for a box of hangers Andre had craigslisted that was on a road Dan hadn't been on with some name like a poodle would have that he immediately forgot, he and Bruce and the bikes they'd road down on were now walking back up to Dundas. Dan discovered that they were next to the no frills he went to when Bruce said "dude that mural, next to the milkstore with my name, that mural, should be a sound. Like, a whole super-complexicated sound that lasts a while."

"You," his breathing was irregular, he'd been out-of-shape-exercising for almost an hour, it seemed like. "Mean, like it needs a score. What the hell is a milkstore," he heard himself rhyme and felt like it was something of Bruce's that was catching.

Crossing the empty intersection Bruce bobbed his silly head, laughing, and his shag of bedhead flounced around the led blinker on a thick elastic band that he was wearing like a bandana now that it was off. "Sorry, convenience. Cornerstore. Bodega. I dunno, what do they say in beeeeezy, buuuuuuddy?" "I have no idea." He really didn't. He and his ex called places by their name, like Wong Bros, or the macs. Bruce was on a tip about using some kind of soundwave-from-image interpretation script that sounded like something Dan's laptop wouldn't have a shot at.

The two biked back on the flat, clear strip back to Maison Rokkoku, passing only the night bus and a few people clustered smoking outside restaurants. There was a relieved atmosphere in the neighborhood, like a held breath had collectively been let out by the people or the buildings or just the place in general. There was a newness to the sidewalks even. Maybe there'd been a street sweep by one of the funny little city golfcart dealies he'd seen out the window, hosing up detritus with a mammoth trunk of accordion-pvc that siphoned along sidecar style. All the shopfronts seemed to be full of easter themed pastel reminders of the season. Rabbits here, eggs and baskets there. Seemed like not very many days ago it had all been shamrocks when he'd been out to scamshop.

Dan offered to help carry the unbinned produce upstairs, but Bruce said “nahh, we’ll lock the cart and ‘Dre’s bike to the garden rack with Nannerama-ghost-dong, and when she comes over she can load up with what she wants and we’ll take the rest up ‘steada carrying the whole shebang now. Grab anything you wanna eat right now, I’ve got the other right-nows.”

“That’s...that sounds, uh. Don’t think anyone’ll take what we leave out?”

“From the *backyard*? Here?” He made it sound unheard-of. “If they do, they probably need it as much or way more than we do,” said Bruce, unlocking the door next to the pottery place’s door. There was someone inside the pottery place, working clay into a soup-mug shape on a spinner, wearing a look of grim concentration. Pretty, pale light spilled across the street and made all the urban grime look extra urban and grimy. Dan wished the trees had leaves, and that it wasn’t still so cold every day. It seemed colder now than January had, but that was probably attributable to how the temperature seemed have dropped back to freezing now that it was officially spring, even though they’d had some spooky-hot days earlier in the month. Dan didn’t remember a twenty degree day in March in Victoria. He’d gone out and wished he had money for a patio beer at the wing place, it was so nice out. Instead he’d gone to the no frills and pocketed a cream cheese to make the bagels in “the big bag of tim’s latenight bin bonanza baked stales” that had dominated the kitchen that week, more appealing.

“Yeah, guess so.” There was a pause as they climbed stairs, but at the second floor he asked “is that seriously your bike’s name, or do you make that stuff up on the fly?” There was a peel of laughter from Bruce, ahead of him but obscured by a big duffleshaped backpack with too many flappy dangling straps for Dan’s enjoyment.

“On the Marty McFly? Dude,” he laughed some more, delirious as usual, “that shit is one hundo-ever totally lock-downedly In Stone.” He hand-framed the words in-stone, and started upstairs.

“I only ever make names up when I’m naming things.”

Obviously. They'd hit the messhall and Bruce was in weedbound missile-mode, just as obviously. "But did you maybe *just* name that bike?" He was teasing, mostly.

"Maybe I'm *always* naming that bike, maaaaaaaaaaaaan," this was delivered with a comedic mystical tone, which is to say it was a slight exaggeration of how he said nearly everything. He was already in place triumphantly spooning preground weed from a container printed like a geode into the chamber on his volcano. Dan laughed. "Hey J.P.'s making us midnight dinner tonight, you should stick around." Bruce was taking off his coat, the cellophany bag of weed vape ballooning next to him promisingly on the halfpipe ledge. Dan had already flung his own coat onto its second floor hook, and he noticed Bruce didn't fish through his coat pockets for the half joint he'd saved when they'd started north again. Probably his clothes were full of free-floating extra on-the-roads.

"Yeah, I'll stick. I'm in." That was in half an hour. "What's for dinner?" Asking seemed sort of moot but he wanted to know what to anticipate, if Bruce had the inside scoop on that part. Dan's "right-nows" were two apples he needed to wash and a couple trays of shrinkwrapped sliced melon that still looked doable. Bruce inhaling a partially eaten burrito at a corner on Bloor unfortunately hadn't thrilled his vague, queasy, underfed feeling. Fresh dinner, care of a clean kitchen, sounded ...necessary.

"Jean-Paul-Pasta," came the answer as Bruce sort of cha-cha'd along, full balloon-bag in hand, skating on sockfeet into the kitchen, where he began to put dishes away in between hauls of cloud. At the end of the hall, light could be seen filtering into the gap, around the barrier. Dan decided it was Mouse, since it was almost never Pete home without music on. "Chef boy-are-weee-lucky," an added mumble, mostly talking to himself, it seemed. Either way, he sounded sincere and pleased. Dan didn't feel like follow-up was necessary and sort of wished there was time to disappear into his room and nap for several hours before waking up and listening foggily for the sounds of people being sociable upstairs. That was ideal. He decided to approximate it by sandwiching himself into the red couch formation and

dozing off. About fifteen or twenty minutes later Jean-Paul and Andre showed up together, coming from the café and sounding a little standoffish with one another maybe, Dan wasn't sure.

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Andre and Bruce were a real pair, once the two of them got going, it turned out. They were very talkatively talking at Jean-Paul and with one another as Dan climbed the ladder with his laptop because he didn't want to bother with a thumbdrive for the upstairs laptop and Bruce had insisted he play them the track he'd made earlier; it'd seemed more embarrassing to keep saying no. He swung himself onto the floor and stood up. The non-couple looked over at him, in harmony. It was sickening, he wished they'd get a room if they were going to be synchronizing like that, like some sort of coupley foreplay. It gave him heebie-jeebies and cheesed him off, and, just for texture apparently, it kind of warmed his heart. That was jealousy, he supposed. He thought faintly about Andreah and trying to make her laugh or something with an i.m. sometime, but knew that would be ignoring the part where she'd been very clear about not pursuing that exact, specific thing with her. They were sitting around the kitchen island, watching Jean-Paul make pasta on a very long, pressed-bamboo board. Jean-Paul was moving around the workspace with precision, and the conversation lulled as Dan watched him. "No lie," Andre was yattering cheerfully, looking better-rested than usual, despite the time and her work schedule. "You guys are never moving out of here, I got a card reading about it even. Like I said I would," she private-messaged Bruce out loud, hipchecking him on his barstool from hers, even though they were snug enough together that it barely wobbled him, was absorbed. *How playful*, Dan sniped at them silently, ignored. He caught himself sounding like his ex had about other couples and told himself to stop. They weren't even a couple, he also reminded himself. That wasn't "how it was." Because she wanted that to be how it was with Andreah and Andreah was...hard to get. Dan was pretty sure sidepiecing Bruce wasn't helping Andre's bid at all. In fact it had almost certainly helped his, at least, it was why they were on friendly terms at all, really. He assumed they still were,

she seemed pretty relaxed about things like that but who knew. People fluctuated. Some times more so than others. Some people more so than others. But, it was a thing and he knew that. Andre was all over the goddamn place, as far as he could tell. Mouse was another intermittently-tempestuous teapot. His ex, to a less outwardly indicated extent, unless you synched to the pokerface in that way where it was like a magic-eye picture with a real expression happening underneath. It took a while.

“She says she would never sell, she loves running the pottery studio.”

Finally Jean-Paul cut in on the chitting and chatting and said “If the owner of a small business that doesn’t do very much business at all, *in the GTA, streetlevel on Dundas West, Bruce*, says they *love their job*, its because its a front and they’re using it to launder money from their criminal enterprise. Or enterprises.” He paused, pouring himself a tall glass of wine from the box on the counter.

“You can’t know for sure without—by just *assuming*.” Andre sounded annoyed, and Dan understood it to be about Jean-Paul’s sort of lofty affectation, which personally amused Dan as it always had. If someone was annoyed by such a transparent characterization designed to entertain, it really just made the bit funnier to him. As he assumed it did to Jean-Paul, who was rolling his eyes at Andre from behind the wineglass, albeit as gentle a roll as seemed possible for him.

“It’s kind of like Roscoe’s sidehustle that’s his main hustle, with the weed.” He rejoindered, sidestepping her point in a way that seemed to co-authorize his original comment anyway. “You guys don’t move enough volume to have the benefits you do as baristas, but who’s clocking that? Cash into the till, tips, hey, it’s streaming in from somewhere and it becomes taxable so the whole aspect of where all the somes its streaming from, are? Not so relevant. Ditto with boutique owners I’ve known, home salons are good for that, oh, income artists of course, but moreso. I’ve thought of that, batted it around; what you do is...ok, say you’re a painter and you date ...people, who want to pay for things or buy you stuff and you say, wait until I have a gallery show

and buy my most expensive painting from me. You see how that's legal and taxable income but what were they *really* paying for? Now say you never really were friends with these people and you never told them about the gallery show and they paid you hundreds of dollars for sex per session and you've wadded up a few thousand over the course of a couple months, and you want to launder that money so you can put it in the bank and pay rent and bills like a regular jobbie, and not get audited someday. And say you don't feel like even having a gallery show and fake-selling your work for the clout or respectability or whathaveyou. Say you don't even paint. You could still say all that was true, for tax purposes. But for tax purposes its better to have the right paper trail and the more you lie the less paperwork there is to trail. So you'd have to actually be selling something you could call art, somewhere, for your patrons' "donations" to be simple taxable income. But now, what if you own... studio space, and were the only oversight? Say you rent out studio space for hundreds of dollars, you have tiny classes sometimes, you make sure the kiln doesn't explode or, I don't know, people aren't using lead-based glazes. So who's watching to see if the books' intake matches the volume of clientele? Only your neighbors. And now lets say your neighbors don't care what you do so long as you look away when they need you to, too? I'm not sure what the word for the exact mirrormeanning of gentrification is. Degentrification maybe? That's not active enough. Antigentrification? Whatever." Jean-Paul sighed, seeming tired of talking. "Reclamation!" Bruce hooted, hammering the polished concrete with both fists.

Dan felt like having a glass of wine himself but held off, feeling a premonition of having a bad time if he did. He settled for rolling his eyes to himself about the idea of somehow stopping the Ford Nation revivalism from scrubbing the city out of the city sooner or later.

"So this area hasn't been... gentrified, yet," he decided to contribute. *Time to stop sourpussing, any day now*, he re-reminded.

“Depends on what you mean by this area. This block hasn’t. The neighbourhood has.”

“You mean The junction.”

“Yes of course. What am I going to call it?”

“...its called Little Malta on the map.”

“That’s tourist flair,” Andre sniffed, sounding like maybe she was talking out of her ass. Dan didn’t bring it up, and Jean-Paul checked his simmering sauce, also saying nothing.

“I think the bike shop guy is like, actually Maltese? I think he told me that,” Bruce sounded dreamy, talking from his cradled fingers, tented over the counter. Jean-Paul rewashed his hands and got back to work rolling out sheets of pasta.

It was obvious that there was a dance going on in Jean-Paul’s head, a series of moves to flow through to make pasta happen—Dan recognized it from working fast food, actually. The summer after highschool ended Dan had had a sort of American Beauty workcrisis moment, and gotten the job at KFC, which he said was because of the high starting pay even though he’d moved in with his rich girlfriend and lived in her paid-for apartment. It was about independence, in retrospect, but after a few months he’d gotten sick of it and quit, mostly because of his ex hounding him to. She’d been a snob about every part of it, mortified that their (her) friends might see him—but no one she cared about went into KFC while he worked there. He assumed they’d be worried someone would see them. The best part of the job had been hotboxing the walk-in freezer after close and eating two-bite brownies and leftover extra-crispy and gravy with his motley co-workers, but the best work-doing part of the job had been *packing*—watching orders appear in green text on the little black screen and ploughing into the dance of boxing and bucketing each new order with maximum efficiency so no one got testy. Dan spent that summer rejecting any position of responsibility higher than

none, so by union rules he'd had to work whatever position was left after in-charges and supervisors took their pick, leaving him on till mostly; people hated working till. But, Dan had found that there was amusement to be had even there, in optimizing the order shorthand, dancing along the map of buttons. He'd quit after one too many staff members went on worker's comp to taunt their manager (whose yuppie-aspiring obsession with promotion to district-overseeing manager had them all cleaning an hour longer each night than their last manager, often shortpaid for it until they complained to have it added on to the next cheque) with the fact that he couldn't fire them. The guy used it as an excuse to cut payroll hours and overload the remaining skeleton staff, reducing operating costs—he hardly paid himself at all, according to him, and for sure had slept there overnight a lot to avoid his family. These were all personal details that came out in the weird group therapy sessions he hosted afterhours in the walk-in with weed he'd buy everyone. Saying no hadn't been much of an option given the vibe of transparent neediness the guy seemed to trade on with his staff, and Dan hadn't really cared one way or the other, because he was just going home to the condo for a shower and to pass out for the night either way. The main pain of working there had been how the guy's big plan was to seem so capable that he'd be allowed to bite that level-up carrot the current district-overseeing manager was dangling. When the current guy called to say he'd be coming by, their manager would run around outside trimming shrubs, and order a cook to bag the branches as he went. That kind of stunty shit. There'd been a girl working there named Khrystal, who had had the same birthday as Dan; she'd take breaks to fuck dudes she met working counter, who assumed she was older than she was because of the frumpy uniforms and the fact that she was there during school hours (which their manager didn't fuss about because she said she did some kind of flexschool thing at one of the schools you went to when you were on probation). She'd been sixteen, with cute snaggle-teeth. Dan had always liked her little not-too-snaggly snaggle-teeth. He pictured her smug snaggle-tooth grin, and the way she'd worn her visor upside down and to the side. She'd talk each shift about



some coke-dealing 30-something guy she was dating to get into clubs, stories like how his friend had hit on her and she'd savvily shown respect to him while also deflecting so her date didn't get mad. Dan couldn't tell if it was bullshit or not, she'd done a good job of sounding knowing, but then, Dan wouldn't know. He'd kind of been under the general impression that a lot of kids who'd had things a little rougher were good at further roughening their image up in a legit-sounding way. It was something he placed as a trait of Andre's as well. He wondered if she'd ever worked fast food, and remembered how she and Andreah had had their own little behind the counter ballet duet that time when he'd been trying to figure out if Andreah could see at all.

"I don't suppose that 'trustafarian scammer' is taxable," said Jean-Paul. He hadn't looked at anything other than what he was doing since starting again, flicking back over to check the stove. He talked with his eyes on the still-acidic-smelling sauce he had going.

Dan groaned loudly, to be conversational. "Trustafarian scammer," he quoted. "I'm not—I don't have ginger dreads, I don't have a trust fund, and, I mean the scam her writer friend accused me of I wasn't even pulling, and I'm not really a scammer aside from that—I mean it's not much of a scam, shoplifting. I don't even rack stuff into a bag."

"That's journalism for you. Get into freeganism before, at all?" his light tone of voice seemed overtly casual to Dan's ear like Jean-Paul was changing the topic *too* on-purpose, but he ignored it because he wanted the topic changed. "Mm...not uh, systematically." Bruce and Andre both seemed to register suddenly, like they were watching him answer. They *knew* he hadn't been running around dumpster diving before living here, what was the interrogation-light for?

Dan felt peeved and more than slightly trapped, not just because Jean-Paul had referenced that thing on Slackjaw about his ex, talking about their breakup and how she was doing a solo single release party a few months, on some asshole's private studio label. Not just that, or how he didn't really want the others to know anything about it that they didn't, when they

presumably knew nothing about it. But because although he'd heard 'freegan' used before he suddenly wasn't sure he'd intuited the actual definitional meaning; was it a more extensive dogma than eating whatever was free? It sort of seemed to be, around here, if this whole thing was freeganism. He looked askance at Bruce, who had begun eating from a very dented can of peaches, unable to wait, and Andre, who was alternately playing with Bruce's hair and watching Jean-Paul cook. Bruce looked back at him, his mouth wide around a peach half that he'd barely lifted out of the syrup. He somehow inhaled the whole half like a snake eating an egg, and Dan was sort of impressed even though it was silly and had looked silly. "Most ethical diet," Bruce opined. "'Cept mayyyyyybeeeeeeee like, those fruitarians or whatever, the ones who only eat stuff plants shed on their own. That's prob'ly the *most* ethical, I dunno."

"Not that you believe there's a... *hierarchy* of ethicality," said Andre, and although the comment sounded teasing and wasn't directed at Dan, he was struck by a strong sense of dislike, because what was conveyed by the inflection was that Andre, the overinflated worldsaver, *did* think there was some 'hierarchy' in place—an ethics Olympics even—and probably had bullshit ideas about who fell where on the podium, including present company and absent company alike. He noticed that, if Mouse had been or was home, he wasn't appearing.

"But you're alright with not keeping meat or dairy or whatever up here?" Jean-Paul asked, finally looking over at Dan, who felt like he'd been somehow reported as agreeing to that when he hadn't. He wondered who the policy was in service of—*Andre* he thought, although she ate dairy. "It does bug me to go to cook somewhere without knowing what everything's touched, so thank you" added Jean-Paul. "And...well, I doubt he'd care, but Peter observes a vegan diet outside tablescooring and dives, and it might...be better for him, too, this way." Dan felt unsettled—sort of judged and sheepish together. He slicked his hair with a clammy palm and stood up. Bathroom escape pod countdown.

“Yeah, no problem,” he sounded sincere, at least. He leaned backward and, balancing, poured himself a glass of filtered water from the chilled carafe he found in the fridge. He settled back in at the counter, hunkering down to not say much and not get drunk on autopilot. After a few minutes lead-time, he went to the bathroom. The sight of his hair, post-clammy palm attack, would’ve knocked some sober into him if he’d had a glass, but taken the last bit of it out of him if he’d already had three.

Dinner was stupendous, once presented and consumed; perfectly smooth and a pleasant density, the bowties he’d turned out like an assembly station worker, were ideal boats for the sauce, which carried more than its own weight in the dish, both bright and rich in final flavor. Dan’s family’s overreliance on Ragu with extra garlic powder had done him wrong.

Apparently it was all about dumpstering the right kind of canned tomatoes, growing your own fresh herbs, rooftop heirloom garlic fresh peeled, and really fancy past-sell-by oils from the curb—a dark organic olive oil and sundried tomato infused sunflower. All the other stuff like sautéing a bunch of pearl onions along with the regular diced kind, adding capers, etc., that was all just whatever. Dan was impressed by it all the same.

He’d seen the rooftop garden a tiny bit from the backyard when he and Bruce had locked the bikes up to the cement-anchored bent rebar bike rack. He’d never been in the backyard before, and it didn’t look like much at the moment. Some empty planter boxes made of palletwood, trellises with old dead scragglies twisting in the breeze, piles of old yardwaste heaped up around some-still leafless shrubs and small trees that looked like they might grow fruit at some point. It all looked kind of bleak, and Bruce said he was waiting to make sure there wasn’t a last freeze before he started seeds germinating to plant once it was really warm out—he said “the two-four weekend” was the final planting deadline but he had no idea when that was. The appearance of the fire escape up to the roof didn’t thrill him, in retrospect, and he wondered if he’d ever see the greenhouse or grow shed or whatever was up there where Alice lived and grew garlic and peyote and whatever else. Fresh herbs.

“Where’s Alice?” It seemed like a pretty reasonable question, although he’d never met her. They lived together, apparently. In fact the red couch thing Bruce had pulled out was probably hers, in the sense that it had been in the shack thing on the backside of the halfpipe nearest the bedrooms, which he’d learned from Bruce was her subzero-night stopgap. He figured he’d been told in case he ran into someone he didn’t know upstairs one day, but no such sighting had occurred.

Andre smiled super-wide at him like he’d done something right, and for a second whatever moody cobwebs he’d had cleared and he felt a bit lit up. Then she slid her hand onto her cheek and leaned against the counter toward Bruce and said “remember Alice?” to him in a kind of private jokey way, all warm and meaningful and buzzy with sentiment.

“It’s a song about Alice,” was the reply, in the same tone. Dan focused on not heaving and tried to be objective; it was nice when nice friends had nice memes together and what a nice time. Good, he was sitting there, not heaving. Jean-Paul started clearing plates, although Bruce held onto his and asked about more before relinquishing the plate because the pasta was finito. “Folkies,” Jean-Paul sniffed at them with disdain. He dropped the curled sneer he was teasing them with and smiled affectionately. “You should put that on, maybe Dan can remix it for you. I like that part about avoiding the draft.”

“I LIKE THE PART ABOUT COULDN’T BE BEAT!” Bruce exploded like Roger Rabbit doing the two-bits callback going through a boozecan wall.

“THANK YOU FOR DINNER!” He continued to holler unnecessarily and with exuberance. Dan laughed, and saw the others were too.

“Yeah,” he postscripted. “Dinner was really good.”

Jean-Paul made a flattered face and raised his hand to his chest in a small bow of service. Then he ordered Bruce to do the dishes, and poured himself more wine. Then Jean-Paul and Andre made plans to wash the massive quantity of leftovers from the bikecart and take them to a ravine the next morning in case any encamped park-dwellers who were around (and anyone else who asked what the “free food” flag was about—it was about getting

people to come over and talk and try the freegan-vegan food) were into some warm fruit crumble care of food not bombs. Dan wondered what the point of doing PR for a movement or organization or whatever it was, was, if you were going out of your way to only start dialogue with nomadic backpackers and other homeless folks who probably didn't care about some hippie-dippy recycling-culture compulsion club given that it was maybe competing with them for the accessible free food the city had to offer. It struck him as kind of a backwards errand, and he couldn't figure out why Jean-Paul would agree. But he had. He even seemed to think it would be a good thing to do, like he was looking forward to it.

Bruce gathered up a bunch of worn plastic bowls and cutlery for them from somewhere deep in a cupboard next to the sink in case they went out before he was awake because he'd moved the serve gear since they'd used it and knew he hadn't told anyone, and it seemed like he and Andre might depart for his room any second. He excused himself for a pre-passout pit-stop, after which Dan thanked Jean-Paul for the meal a final time and went to bed. No one had brought up whether he'd want to go with them to the park in the morning and eat crumble in the smarch-cool air, standing around in a park. He had no idea if he was glad or annoyed. He didn't notice until he was down the ladder that he hadn't brought his laptop back down, or ended up playing the track like he'd been hassled to. He decided Jean-Paul had run some interference for him, maybe. It was another thing he wasn't sure whether or not was a let-down. He felt kind of let-down, but that could easily be overexposure to the happy non-couple.

Feeling emotional, but not very attuned to what the cause or exact feelings were, he listened until no one was moving around and Jean-Paul had gone downstairs again. Right about four minutes into silence he was out. Four hours later the sun was up.

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part 14: you meet girl, you move in, she go

March 22, 2016 1:17 pm

Just under four months: that was the safe decompression time in his mother's head? Four months and it was the incoming call alert he'd been dreading. He'd accidentally gone online on skype when he'd restarted his laptop and it had automatically detected the hidden wifi network before he could close the auto-starting messenger. "Why don't you ever call, I know your service provider does free long distance within Canada, now." *Looked that up did you?* "Well that's all right, you've probably been busy looking for a job out there—have you tried applying for a job at a bank? There are so many banks and you can really climb the corporate ladder starting in a bank. You know Sharon Mitchell?" Dan did, his parents drank wine every new year at Sharon Mitchell's house. They never saw her except at these parties. He and his sisters had had to go to their grandparents place for new year's, to be kept out of trouble (right until he'd moved out), because it wasn't really a everyone-bring-your-kids kind of soiree and Sharon Mitchell's kids didn't attend either. "Her daughter just graduated *highschool* and she's been promoted at her after-school teller job to a desk job talking people through their insurance. She could end up as a bank manager or...oh I don't know, it's just something to think about." *It's just something you think about.* "You know, I'm glad you're not...I'm glad you made this change in your life," *I didn't make this change.* "I know you're not planning on going back to school but you should really consider it, you could pay off a student loan in a few years. You're so smart, Daniel," *no, I'm not* "you could do anything you want," *as long as it's something-to-say at new year's, about your perfect year and perfect family and life and how well everything is going for everyone close to you because of your own phony perfection,* "and I just think you'd do better in the academic stream than you think." She was starting to slip, her Betty Crocker buoyancy was turning into irritation. He guessed he was making a sour face at her that translated despite the video quality. He was sitting in the empty kitchen, his laptop next to the bowl of crumble he'd found left for him on top

of it when he'd come upstairs a few minutes ago. He really wanted to eat it and wished he hadn't opened the laptop to watch youtube while he did.

"Look at your sisters, they've both been published, even though they're in the private sector now," *sure, published, whatever the hell that means*. Blog posts were a kind of publishing, who cared. "Don't get me wrong! I never wanted to be a trail-blazer either, I know exactly how you feel." *Fuck you*. "The pressure is—well. But I'm so worried about you," all in her glazed-ham blissed-out Martha-Stewart-doing-a-séance voice, the one she'd learned to say all her phoniest passive aggressive shit in, "you don't have any savings, Daniel, and you're getting on towards 30. It's time to grow up." *It's time to hang up*, he yelled silently at her and himself. But he laughed and told her he loved her and asked her not to worry so much and told her about how Jean-Paul was doing, although not much about *what* Jean-Paul was doing, because she thought the little rich boy she'd met ten years ago had been so refined and polite and upwardly-mobile and so obviously socially desirable for both her and her son—except that Jean-Paul's mother had never had the time (or interest, probably) in responding to his mother's "our sons are friends and I was thinking we might meet for coffee sometime and get to know one another" (because I hear you're a respected legal expert and that's so distinguished sounding and I don't have one of those for floating the canapé tray to at my occasional dinner parties yet) emails. It was a pleasure, in a way, that he and Jean-Paul were in exactly the same place these days, from her point of view. Neither of them worked at a bank, *quelle tragédie*. They both lived somewhere she would never get a slow, panning view of. His mother had never liked his ex's mother, either, for similar reasons.

After the call—during which he'd asserted that his cell contract didn't have a clause for "magically update to include new policies in new area codes," and no, this call *hadn't* been free because they were on a fixed-rate low-monthly-data plan with crazy overage and add-on fees (he lied), and could she please stick to emails—Dan returned to his bed and lay there feeling worse than he had in weeks, maybe a month. He'd been lying about the long-distance, actually—he'd looked into it online about a week prior and found out where

to change numbers and contracts with his provider after moving, which he hadn't done yet and didn't really want to at this point. What was the point of paying for it to have call-in or a data plan, he didn't want calls and he didn't need data. He had wifi. And he couldn't afford anything else really because he had no income, even though Torontonians seemed to get better plan options and prices than Islanders. More carriers meant more undercutting prices but it was also an exhausting amount of information with very minor differences to track before figuring out the least screwjoiest option. He'd given up; by the time he wanted or needed a more functional phone, all the plan details would be different again, half the companies would be rebranded. There was a lot about Toronto that made it seem like the future. Futuristic. He was glad he wasn't in the past, where it was time to be a banker. *Grow up and do what? Get what job?* He was still replaying the conversation with his mom, before complaining that he hadn't called, and before she'd started bringing up job-hunting more pointedly, she'd been saying "we'd pay for you to go to trade school while you're out there, there are so many options for you, Zoe's son is getting work using his *welding* certification out in *Alberta* right now," the way she talked drove him nuts, like she wanted particular words to stick in his head, like someone telling a kid how not to get lost. Dan remembered his mother's friend Zoe's son—he'd eaten twelve grams of mushrooms at a grade twelve grad pre-party the night he accidentally met his birth-dad at a rave in Nanaimo. Dan had been at the pre-party and heard about the rave later via facebook posts; his ex hadn't wanted to go, she'd said it sounded like it'd be a tent full of juggalos. Turned out it was true about the guy being Zoe's kid's birth-dad. Zoe was a yogamom who had remarried some insurance lawyer friend of Dan's dad when her kid was in diapers, and he hadn't been old enough to wonder whether the guy in the pictures was actually dead or just presumed dead, until he'd met him. So that guy was working on some rig in Alberta now, and Dan was supposed to follow his good example apparently, except that Dan knew via facebook what his mother apparently didn't know or didn't think was important, which was that Zoe's son hated it there and regretted the career path he was now committed



to by the mortgage he was paying off on his dream home in the Okanagan. He liked kiteboarding and scenery a lot. Wanted to retire and kiteboard and look at scenery. *Four months was the leeway*, Dan thought. *And here we are again in bullshitville*. Or at least, it had astral-projected its way east too vividly for him to not be transported fully in turn, back to bullshitville. He tried to clear his mind for a while until it occurred to him that a change of topic was better than pushing a topic away without a distraction from it. He started thinking about what he was *actually* going to do with the spring since he didn't intend on trying to spit-shine his way into a job he couldn't stand and wasn't qualified for.

The days were getting longer, but it didn't feel like spring to him. Earlier in the month it might as well have been summer already for a few days and now it was winter again—to be fair, the last couple years there'd been an end of March cold snap on the coast, too, with a day or so of snow. But when it snowed out west it was somehow warmer than during the usual winter rain, no matter how low the thermometer said. Here, though, it still felt like a sharp bite on the ass from an ice sculpture every snowy evening. That was why, presumably, Bruce wasn't sure it wouldn't snow again this year and hadn't started gardening; he'd said it always snowed on April Fools now, which he liked, for some inane reason. It didn't seem wildly funny to Dan for there to be snow on *any* day in April. Today it seemed possible there could be snow in a week; was all weird outside, murky and kind of opaque, unlike the past few days. Overall the weather this month had been a return to form for Toronto sunshine-wise, in Dan's eyes, and it had been seriously buoying his spirits. Although, he also suspected that the prematurely summery feeling that had made him mourn not having a patio beer, had contributed to his prematurely summerbreaky approach to working on music for Thuh Dope Show. Interrupted from his deeply concentrated considerations of the weather, he heard and felt a jumbling thumpriff begin as some someones came in the side entrance by Jean-Paul's place and started up the stairs. He planned to ignore it, whoever it was, and thought about the crumble he'd brought down to his room, now sitting on the bowed top of his

suitcase waiting for his appetite to not be ruined. His appetite felt unruined now, in fact.

He got a nasty shock when a curtain of braided hair attached to a pretty face appeared like the face in snow white’s step mom’s mirror in the portal above him. “Thinger Minge,” Andreah greeted him.

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He was still in bed hours later, thinking about how much he didn’t want to get up. Andreah had come over with Andre and stuck her head down into his room, and he’d been confronted with an outside eye on his sleeping situation—and his spending-all-day-in-an-ugly-pit-in-bed situation, which had been kind of awful for Dan. He was thankful it never happened ordinarily, but less thankful for that than he was for Andreah bothering at all. She and Andre were bringing back the bowls and cutlery from the park, where he guessed Andreah had met up with Andre and Jean-Paul and had crumble. He’d eaten his own ladling of it after she’d shot the shit with him a few minutes from his ceiling. She said he looked like a little doll in a shoebox. *She thinks I’m cute*, he heard claymated Rudolph nasally cheer in his head, as he lay there reconsidering her description. He got his phone out and opened facebook messenger, and looked her up using the name she’d told him, a TOS-violating pseudonym, of course. Her userimage was a black square, of course. He had no idea what to say. A witty, sexy, really fun type of thing to start a chat with, was not jumping into his noggin. He tried “you looked nice today” but deleted it after seeing it typed out.

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Andre came back the next day with a thick, queen-sized fleece blanket for him. There was a starry night scene of wolves on it—coming from Andreah it seemed different than it would have from someone else, like there was more to it than just circumstantial selection, because maybe wolves were a thing for her culturally or something. That seemed like kind of a woefully uninformed thought, and Dan figured he’d keep it to himself in case it was. He appreciated the gesture; the blanket was warm and kind of heavenly, and he wished he’d had it all along. He wished he’d had it when he was sick, or

one better, when he was passed out drunk with a low body temperature the night he'd gotten sick in the first place. He felt drowsier under the wolf blanket, like it had a magically charged force-field of cuddliness and security—a scaled-for-size baby-blanket was how it struck him, like he hadn't felt so truly swaddled by one textile since the crib. He wiggled slightly in the cocoon he'd made, enjoying having his feet bare and trying to wiggle out of the imaginary second-skin of resentment he'd felt crawling under his flesh ever since being skyped unawares the previous day. Things were good. Looking up and up, even. Here he was in this big room with this big blanket, not a care in the world. Holding on to that feeling of weightless satisfaction as uncrushingly as he could, he felt himself slowly doze off, and had a last conscious sense like it was going to be the most restful sleep he could remember.

He dreamed about Andreah, about the two of them hooking up again. It'd all been fun and fond, but then they were having a talk about how Dan wasn't sure exactly where Andreah saw things going, because her old answer wasn't appealing enough to be sure she'd meant it. And she was angry at him, she shoved him and he thought she might just vanish out of thin air, which made sense in the dream, although he thought he was awake. She told him again that she saw things going no deeper, barring some miraculous shift in his whole attitude towards sex and dating and life in general. She told him it was a problem that he and Andre didn't get along, which was so confusing and frustrating that he sort of halfway woke up, and feeling it happen, he swam back down into the dream to try to finish it, maybe go back to the sex part. Awake again, having jerked off to pleasant effect, he was actually concerned that if he saw Andreah more often, he'd feel like he was performing a relationship, for her, because that was how being around his ex all the time had felt. He found himself worrying for the first time that he was so habituated to resentfully caving to some projected pressure rather than acting on whim, that he'd feel that way in another relationship even when the reality was there was no pressure, no caving, no resentment. It sort of had a foresight kind of a feeling, or it was somehow linked in his mind to what

she'd been saying in the dream, about his attitude; he could envision that she would start to take on a skewed persona in his mind—more ordinary, less companionable, less fun, more annoying. Schoolmarmish, somehow. He'd realized several years ago that girls who wanted to be in relationships were people who didn't appear, to him, to have or feel the need for lives apart from managing their partners behaviour, and in that way dating them was an inescapable emotional burden, like having really nagging parents or some kind of nanny. Someone like Andreah, who didn't need his company, who had her own schedule, friends and life, basically unentangled with his life, seemed more like his ex's ideal self than her actual self—someone aloof until approached, un-needy of his time or attention. But willing to spend her time and attention on him, all the same, with the sole aim of improving his mood. That was desirable company. And it would stay that way the less of it he tried to monopolize. The less of it he successfully monopolized, anyway. The train of thought coupled with some noises above him brought him to thinking about Andre, who might have still been upstairs. He dug earbuds out of his suitcase and started an episode of Bruce's show playing on his phone, not really listening but wanting to block out the sort of aggravating vague sounds of people upstairs.

Andre seemed like neither type of girl, not giving *or* needing, just a person who didn't want to be around him and didn't seem to really like being around him, less than an emotional burden or bolster: a minor sink. He thought about the rest of the household; in highschool and now, Jean-Paul had been someone who didn't even slightly come across as *needing* him but was willing and pleased enough to be friends anyway. Dan had never really craved friendship until middle-school had burnt him out on his peer group, and his sister who was second oldest had been willing to attach him to the periphery of her social life because he was just starting highschool and she was finishing and it apparently made her more magnanimous than she'd been about being in the same elementary school; in hindsight he saw himself as an accessory. Little brother, tiny Tim. Charity. So, he'd wanted his own friend who didn't treat him like an afterthought, or a friend-circle nepotism case,

and Jean-Paul was a person who had wanted to be friends with just him, not the people his sister knew, although they all went to see his band play community centre showcases and basement gigs. Jean-Paul was a person whose company Dan had truly enjoyed, also, which he probably hadn't encountered before because he didn't remember a previous time of having that feeling. Jean-Paul was a person he'd been proud to be friends with, too; he'd actually felt *inspired by Jean-Paul as a person*, when they'd first met. He wasn't sure he felt as drawn to him now as then, or even as he had in January, but the feeling was still there, when he really thought about it. Why didn't he ever try to spend any time with his friend who he liked so much? But that question brought him back to what he'd been thinking about Andraeh; it was becoming obvious to Dan that being able to approach people according to his own schedule was important. People weren't appealing if they didn't appear to have an existence strictly independent of him, or if they seemed to need anything from him.

Bruce, he supposed, also fit the bill of friend-appeal. Bruce had a peculiar vibe all his own, in Dan's musings just then—he wasn't quite someone Dan went out of his way to spend time around or would specifically think to spend time around, but he'd found himself enjoying Bruce's company each time they saw one another. Bruce's relationship with Andre was still something of a mystery; he could easily picture them platonically spooning on nights Andre stayed over, or in a tangle of tantric debauchery halfway-on and halfway-off the couch he'd sat on the first time he'd seen the back rooms. That couch seemed suspiciously easy to clean, now that he thought about it. Probably a lot of their old furniture was salvaged because it wasn't textile, ergo easier to delouse, but was curbed because of some event that had wiped off the upholstery fine but also ruined the unit itself somehow.

Shaking out the flesh-flower image of Bruce and Andre tying in knots, he reminded himself that his grasp of the sexual identities at play was flimsy at best—he frequently failed to see anything straight about Bruce, but there wasn't anything particularly *gay* about him either. He mostly acted like a six year old. Mouse, he realized, wouldn't have caused him to think twice

except for his social group and his inherent out-of-step-with-everythingness. Pete was straight, or at least, dated girls, by popular report, and Mouse and Pete were tight, but what did that mean about Mouse, was that an indication he was or wasn't gay? He seemed to have a radar that let him avoid being around at the same time as Andre but if Dan had been in the same scene as her for years he might have moved in the same direction, on that front. He wondered if Jean-Paul's sexual identity and line of work were any evidence one way or the other about the house population as a whole; hadn't Alice come up in that context, when he was high on Bru-brew and Jean-Paul had told him about being an "independent male escort"—he couldn't really remember that part at the moment. That whole conversation hadn't processed entirely, he could feel himself sort of behold the memory of it as a whole and it was hazy, hard to make sense of. He decided to divert around it and get back to essentially kinsey-scoring everyone he knew in Toronto, since it was pretty diverting.

Andre, who he had a more confirmed read on than the others, wasn't an outlier to the not-straight trend, though Dan wasn't willing to bet that she'd ever actually dated another woman since apparently she and Andreah weren't dating like how she and Bruce weren't dating. He didn't think he knew any girls-who-liked-girls who actually had long-term committed relationships with each other. Maybe Andreah did, or had, but like she'd said, not with girls like Andre. *Too white-acting*. Even Andreah herself seemed to be too white-acting for Andreah. White-sounding, whatever. Maybe part of it was that she didn't like girly-girls; she'd been willing enough to get casual for a night with him. Maybe she liked being *the* girl but, with *a* girl. A mental image appeared, of Andre styled like one of the obvious butches he'd seen while walking through pride celebrations downtown one summer or the couple times Winks And Grins had showcased at Paparazzi. His ex had basically only gotten bookings for them by offering to take an hourly off the door cover. It didn't seem to get them more shows and it definitely had never made them money. She seemed to think it would grow them some hype but Dan suspected it did the opposite and made them seem unprofessional and

desperate, which, frankly, was close to being exactly what they were. Unprofessional for sure. Desperate for exposure, okay. She had been, at least. He hadn't really cared. They'd never had any income worth declaring from these shows, otherwise they might have wanted to figure out how to legitimize the revenue up, like Jean-Paul had been saying the other night. Seemed like "legal consulting" ran in the family as well, after all. He realized he was roaringly hungry, then. It occurred to him to message Andraeh or walk down to Higher Grounds in time for maybe a lunch break, but in the spirit of avoiding over-affiliation that might murky up their relationship waters too soon after the blanket—and the dream—he decided to head upstairs and eat something from the fridge. There'd been a recent gold medal dive, he knew, at a Portuguese bakery nearer to Andraeh and Andre's place. She had told him the other day when they'd chatted and when Andre had shown up with the blanket she'd said there was a box of custard tarts for them all. He thought about hanging around to eat upstairs, but the idea of the others and spending time with them was deflating, and he resolved to eat grab food and come right back, possibly to do some more music work. He pulled out the earbuds, cutting off Toichiro's fey-sounding line of banter mid-bant. There were definitely still people upstairs.

Dan climbed the ladder into the upstairs hearing a conversation as it came into view—Andre was hanging off Bruce seeming kind of zoned out and dead-eyed the way she'd been the last time he'd seen her but more upset, and Bruce was saying something about feminism, and Mouse was upset already but Bruce was keeping it chill, and he was asking "...so what if you get misconstrued, man, you've got feminist values, and one really positive feminist value is to align yourself with something after looking at yourself and looking at it and seeing how you need to side with the non-dominant force to help it survive, otherwise it might *not* survive and then your reality is a little dimmer!"

By the end he'd gotten an annoying edge to his voice and the whole scene was kind of fucking ugly in its makeup somehow, more singularly than usual

—and Dan said “Jesus fucking Christ” out loud, and Bruce looking over at him sticking halfway out of the hole in the floor and laughed and looked kind of sympathetic, which Dan guessed was because Bruce knew Mouse was at the breaking point for whatever deeply tormenting person code he had about people ‘misconstruing’ him, and was about to flip his shit. Mouse flailed in his direction and flipped the longboard they had used as a table, starting to scream something in Russian at him. It was actually terrifying, the little guy looked like his head was about to pop off. Dan slid back down through the hole and went to sleep with his earbuds in, hungry.

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part 15: guess who’s back


March 27, 2016 4:16pm

The next few days he listened carefully before leaving his room, wishing for the first time in a while that he could just leave from the second floor. He made music throughout the day whenever something inspired him to sample it, but everything he made sounded over-worked off of way too little, to his ear. He was starting to think about collapsing everything he’d made since the weird living room thing, into one cacophonous track and throw some 808s on top. It’d be a kind of mean fuck-you to Bruce and everyone in general, but Bruce would probably thank him all the same and then he’d feel bad.

Finally hungry and wanting to see if the bakery haul box was still turning out prizes (it had a lot of variety to unearth, in fact. Many delectable almondy and eggy things had delighted him by surprise each time he’d opened it. All slightly smashed together and getting staler, of course) he crept up in the late afternoon sunbeams cutting through the window into his cavernous pit of solitude. The beams were really warm, he felt the difference on his face instantly when he stepped through them for the first time that day on his way up the ladder.

The box was missing from the kitchen, and he mourned its parting, faintly. His coat was on the second floor, and he decided to take himself coatward



and from there, maybe to a can of tuna and some mayo from the dollar store. There was bread in the cupboard, Jean-Paul had made bread when he and Andre baked their big, dented, aluminum steam-pan of mixed-fruit crumble. The pan was still in the drying rack from whenever it had been washed in the recent days. While he walked he wondered if they'd met up with anyone besides Andreah, maybe they'd had a standing tea-party with a bunch of people they knew and whoever else joined in, somewhere he hadn't been to. Which could be just about anywhere in town. They'd said "the ravine," but he had no idea what that meant. Andreah had told him she'd been visiting someone named Whichwould Barns d was in the area of the serve. He didn't know what to take away from that. It sort of seemed like something she'd said because Andre was hovering around behind her, listening from the kitchen or somewhere.

When he came back from his mini-quest Bruce was sucking mist out of the big clear bag, through a black nozzle, sitting cross-legged on the foam at the distant end of the half-pipe, one foot dangling level with the roof of the metal shack. Dan noticed for the first time, his vape tower was a characteristically-robust shape that he recognized, a volcano. Dan wondered again about where money was coming from, or had come from. He'd seen volcanos in people's apartments, at parties, but never in use. No one at the parties he went to had demonstrated the patience to sit around a vaporizer, or the patience for weed. He'd heard the 'pothead/dealer roommate' brushoff a few times, when someone had queried the presence of the appliance. Usually the tone was, yeah-yeah-I-moved-in-with-my-stoner-friend-I'm-stuck-in-highschool-cut-another-line-who-cares.

"Nice vape," he said casually, entering the kitchen, can of minestrone (not tuna or mayo) hanging low in the lining of his coat. He set the can on the counter by the sink and turned on the stove before starting to look for a can opener or saucepan. After half a minute he turned off the burner, still going through drawers.

"Mt. Fuji," Bruce told him. *Right*. "Can opener is on top of the silver minifridge."

Dan felt like not saying anything but felt unfriendly and instead told Bruce thanks.

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Bruce sat on his foam getting baked while Dan cooked and ate, and they regaled each other briefly with reviews of the Portuguese bakery haul. Bruce asked if he wanted to get baked, but he declined. It reminded him of when he'd been high a few weeks back, feeling that Magic The Gathering circle feeling, though, and he wanted to do something that felt like communion since it seemed like that was what Bruce was offering. He realized he could finally get Bruce to listen to what he'd made of the Victory Garden music, and Bruce seemed gratifyingly excited once he'd heard it. He seemed to legitimately think it was interesting listening. "I love it, dude," he'd said. No one had ever praised him so succinctly or highly before, for anything. He sort of doubted Bruce's taste, despite being relieved to've satisfied it. Bruce told him that recently Toi had made some stuff too and they "should do a long distance collab maybe, at some point." He said he played co-op xbox with Toi "all the time, duh! That's like, where I always am all day, in the TV shrine," which was in the greenhouse, on the roof, because of course it was. He thought about nesting dolls again, that image from back at the start of the month when he'd been sick, reoccurring to him. *There was an old Alice who borrowed an xbox to put in a shrine, to hide in the greenhouse, on top of the Maison, in the junction, etc.* Dan was surprised to learn that Bruce hung out up there with Alice a lot, and the roof had been a good place to hide stuff from the oogles when they were on the way out, so that was where things like the 360 had gone, with its TV: next to her TV. And they just hadn't moved it back down because it hadn't been an issue all winter. Because of how warm and dry it had been it had appealed more to Bruce to leave it there "next to all the plants."

Dan put Bruce off dragging him up to the roof to see if Alice was in (and play some party game he'd never heard of that Bruce said was like being on PCP), by explaining honestly that he was scared of the ladder like the oogles had been. This was when Bruce let him in on a secret, and showed him; in the

ceiling in the alcove inside Bruce's bedroom's door there was a small slide door into the insulation-filled space between the roof and the garden, and the Maisonites had cleared a space and made a hole through to the roof. Alice's greenhouse-house itself sat within this indentation in the roof, surrounded by insulation. There was a cupboard door in the corner of it that abutted the opening above Bruce's door. Bruce explained that they'd roofed it last time with big corrugated awnings that collected runoff in rain barrels for the plants and Alice to filter directly for herself if she wanted. This was after they'd spent part of a summer day (a week) tarping and caulking it all off, and it had worked, because there'd never been any leaks. He seemed particularly proud of this project and Dan congratulated him on the lack of leaks, because it seemed appropriate to. He was kind of interested in seeing the greenhouse, after all that. It was never, ever on his mind because, while it was large enough to keep yet-another roommate in, and sturdy enough that it kept both her and the plants warm, the structure was, as he'd now been told, more sunken in to the roof behind the lip of the street-side façade than he might have anticipated if he *had* had the rooftop garden on his mind. But Bruce told him the view was amazing and the plants were "life giving" and that Alice was a real hoot to drink Four Lokos with all night and watch the sun up with, over a cigarette break on a lawnchair at the crown of Rokkoku. They didn't sell Four Loko in Victoria. Bruce made Alice sound like Dan might have made Bruce sound, if he'd been trying to tell someone about Bruce. He supposed someday he *would* be trying to tell someone about Bruce, and suspected they'd never really believe he wasn't exaggerating just a bit. Dan tried to picture it, the rooftop session with their secret gardener, in her secret garden, where she liked to play videogames all night with Bruce, and thought maybe it'd be tempting in the summer, when it was warmer. He didn't really want to go through the crawlspace hidden-door entrance, it seemed like a lot of scrambling just to get up to it. Safer than the fire escape, but not worth it just for an awkward hello and look-round. Bruce seemed slightly put out but accepted being declined cheerfully enough that Dan didn't feel bad, and went back to his own part of the house to decompress. He'd been half-afraid

Mouse was home and would appear any second while Bruce was showing him this new wormhole.

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The next day, he found himself feeling stupid and belatedly antisocial for being worried he'd see Mouse in the house, the previous day. He decided to go back to acting like he had before the outburst. It probably hadn't had anything to do with Mouse secretly wanting an excuse to yell at him, at all. In fact it was probably more like Mouse had wanted to yell at Andre for talking down to him through Bruce, but couldn't. That had been what it looked like, now that he'd finally turned it over in his head enough times like a snowglobe of a squabble.

He went and hung out in the kitchen for a while, eating a sandwich he made with some of the cupboard bread, which was nearly gone, and some colourful looking tapas-y stuff he found in containers in the fridge, unlabelled. He assumed they'd been binned near a deli or something. It was weird on the bread, but it was food and he was hungry. He kind of wanted Bruce to cook something so he could eat a heartier meal for the day; it was a stormy day and he wanted to stay inside, not go out for more soup. The weather had turned on a dime from yesterday, like some kind of omen or chastisement for his lack of adventurousness about the roof, or maybe about Brucey-sitting solo, intensively. He thought about how much work it had seemed like, just to dive one cartload of stuff with him on Bloor the week before. *High energy, high maintenance, low demands*, clicked. He hadn't really thought of it before but Bruce needed *endless* attention. And he knew how to get it, like it was his job, because it was. He even knew how to get people to want to give it to him: by being Bruce. Dan couldn't even resent him for it. He liked Bruce, too. Bruce was lovable, like it was his job. Dan couldn't remember how many siblings he'd said he had. A bunch. But he was good people. He gave maybe more than he got, at least, that was Dan's experience of him, for sure. And Toichiro seemed to think keeping Bruce happy was worthwhile, otherwise the Maison probably wouldn't have existed at all. They were all really lucky, how it all fit together for them, as a group. Everyone living at

the Maison seemed to be in a pretty good place, in the big life-is-a-ratrace-love-is-a-battlefield sense.

Wanting to do something that felt like it'd cancel out his hovering impression of being ungrateful, he went and knocked on Bruce's door, dat-dat-dat-datdat. "One minute," came the muffled reply. Dan worried for a second that that was the muffled reply of someone who was otherwise engaged in eating out a potential suicide girl model they both knew. The worry went away because a second later Bruce was at the door with an inane open-mouthed expression of extreme herbal insobriety. He didn't look or smell like he'd been eating out anyone, unless there was a weed version of the jolly green giant.

"You uh," he wasn't sure where he wanted to go with this, "you wanna teach me how to make mashed potatoes?" Sure, that worked. "Rainy day potato-thon?" he tried in Bruce-talk.

Bruce was overjoyed to teach him how to make mashed potatoes, it turned out. While they peeled side by side at the sink, Bruce told him about his podcast community's 420 thru May The Fourth "long holiday." He didn't want Dan to stress it, he said, but there was a lot of events and parties and dates to meet up on and there would be people staying with them from out of town—in fact Bruce had it on good authority that if Dan didn't mind loaning out the second floor room, he could use the couch at Jean-Paul's for the duration of the long holiday. He seemed to be deep in preplanning considerations and Dan didn't want to be a hitch, so he said the room thing was no problem. It even seemed like it could be nice to sleep somewhere less...moody, for a change. Bruce showed him a dicing technique so the potatoes didn't roll around everywhere while he was cutting them up so they'd boil faster (of course. Why hadn't he remembered anything he'd ever learned about cooking? He had no idea; it wasn't super complicated, even if he hadn't done it in over ten years).

While the potatoes boiled away in their huge deep stockpot, Bruce told him highlight stories about past long holidays and it seemed like it was quite the tradition. It even sounded like it could be fun, for Dan. "And it's like, it's gonna be a real festival sort of a scene, we have a big presence at the May

Day rally every year. It's like, the fair in Charlotte's Web? If you saw that in third grade?" He seemed to actually expect an answer, it had been a while since the flow of chatter had paused for outside input and Dan had kind of liked not having to do anything but listen.

"We read it," they hadn't watched a movie of it. "Was that one of the ones like Babe?"

Bruce laughed, "that was a remake—and it was recent! More recent than me or you being in grade-school anyway. My teachers were like, acoustic guitar hippies; its a really commune-away-from-the-city part of Manitoba, we didn't get a lot of glossy new-release stuff on snowed out recesses." Dan smiled—*well, that makes sense.*

Once the knife Bruce told him to stick in the potatoes felt like it was going through nothing when he stuck it in a potato, they drained the water and Bruce dumped in a bunch of white and black pepper, salt, and garlic powder. Like an unreasonable-seeming amount of garlic powder. Then he hummed and hawed over the best sub for cream and butter available in the kitchen right then, debating about the last dollops of plain yoghurt from a recent find, before deciding the only good option was the remaining half of a small bottle of truffle oil, which he held aloft like it was the holy grail before explaining that it had been a Kensington bin-night find. After exclaiming over the rightness of the oil choice once they'd tried their sample spoons for the spice balance check, he asked Dan if he was interested in coming down to the market with him Tuesday night and, intrigued for the first time by the possibility—in light of how the potatoes with the truffle oil had turned out—he said sure. Apparently there were true treasures in the trash after all. He hadn't eaten something that hit him so hard with how *good* it tasted since the yam soup Bruce had made ages ago. And besides, the café was in Kensington. He could thank Andreah for the blanket, since he'd be down there anyway; that seemed like her kind of style, so he figured it would be the right style to go with.

Bruce said they should watch cartoons in his room with their big bowls of potato and Dan went along, glad to be of use as company. Not really

watching what Bruce put on, Dan noticed the shelf of pipes and things, and saw what he guessed must be Bad Cauldron in the middle, based off Andreeh's description of it and her own, matching bubbler. He wondered what she'd think of his music for Thuh Dope Show, whenever it ended up on it. It seemed like Bruce's daily release schedule as of a few years ago had imploded about the time Toichiro left, or had been gone for however long it took Bruce to run down without a sitter. He put out an episode a week now on the fanpage for it, if that. Andre seemed to fill in the feed gaps with news posts and event promos that were apparently on-topic, like maybe they were old guests or big name community members, he didn't know. She seemed to keep the ballbusting about which demos were do or die, down to what he guessed was her idea of a bare minimum. *Probably so people don't unsubscribe*, he figured. It was actually kind of tragic to look at the dates on the site and track it all. Although, Bruce looked happy enough right then, shovelling surprisingly-heavenly mashed starch into his gullet in between massive bong rips and yattering about the show. It was some 80's toy ad fantasy thing with super-Scooby-Doo-stonerific background paintings. It was obvious why Bruce liked it, but the stilted animation drove Dan nuts and the audio was terrible in a way he found unfunny. Bruce seemed to love it, though, this terrible old show for kids. Dan felt a fond feeling press up against his insides, swelling up from somewhere in the middle of them. It was kind of uncomfortable and he felt like it showed, somehow, that he seemed to be getting some kind of friendship boner over the big baby. He coughed to try to puncture the bubbled-up feeling, then gave up and ate.

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That night, noodling around on his laptop with the theme from the show they'd been watching, trying it out with different layers of shittier material from his fail-tracks over the week, he got a facebook ping. Jean-Paul had sent him a link to an event his ex was listed on. An event in Toronto, in April. In a few days, even. Dan wasn't happy with the discovery, although he messaged a thanks, for the looking out. The event was on 4/4 because of course it was. What better time to drop a nu disco-dreampop single. He

suspected that she knew where he was, somehow, in the sense that she knew he was in Toronto. Maybe one of his sisters had ratted on him after running into her somewhere, that was possible. There weren't many options. Of course, he reminded himself, Toronto was also a place people just came to, to have release parties, because it made whatever was being released seem more official or hype or buzzworthy or something. A career-move, it seemed. Maybe she was getting better advice than they'd been able to give one another, finally. The thought "good for her" did not cross his mind. He felt pretty angry and territorial about the idea of her in Toronto, actually. Feeling kind of seethed-up, he was at loose ends suddenly. His mind drew a blank of what he'd been about to do with the track he was warping around. Staring at the chat, he felt like saying something, having another one of those reassuring conversations like they'd had in January, about how she was a bitch. He thought about saying, *too bad you left Vic when you did*—meaning if he hadn't maybe Dan wouldn't have ended up in that relationship, but then he wasn't sure why that made sense. Jean-Paul didn't like his ex, never had. And she very specifically hadn't swooped in until after Jean-Paul was gone, although she'd been paying attention well before that, Dan later found out. She had gone to see Quothnevermore once too, with her own crowd of mainly-older scenester friends, because it was a guy from school and she wanted to judge him. Whatever she'd thought of the band she had never told Dan, she didn't have much to say about Jean-Paul in general other than a kind of begrudging inability to truly tear his image apart like she subtly seemed to want to. He hadn't remembered seeing her at any of the shows he'd been at, at the time, but he hadn't really looked at anyone closely in those days, he'd just focused on the music. After disbanding the group to focus on MTG, Jean-Paul hadn't seemed so cool to her, she'd said, and the way she'd said it made it sound like he had died. But MTG was when Dan and he had become friends at school, and Dan still suspected that it was residual social credit from being friends with Jean-Paul, that had attracted his ex in the first place. And maybe that was why he'd always kind of prided himself on how Jean-Paul had never been her friend on facebook, and had



stayed Dan's friend this whole time. It felt petty but he didn't really care, now. You were allowed to be petty about your exes. That was just something everyone knew, and something everyone also did.

Jean-Paul must have known the news would rile him up and he was a little hurt, in a way, that he hadn't been protected by his friend softening the blow somehow, but that seemed kind of whiny. It occurred to him from the wording in Jean-Paul's initial message, that Jean-Paul wasn't just warning him in passing, but was actually also angry that she was going to be in town. It made him think of a mostly-blackout-wiped thing Jean-Paul had said back in January, right around the time Dan had apparently started ranting about his hemorrhoids. Jean-Paul had said something about Wishelle wanting to feel like she took something from Jean-Paul, because she had wanted to be friends with him in highschool but he had ignored her, because he was looking more for hookups than friends—knowing he'd move again in less than three years—and because he just didn't like her. Dan smiled at the memory of Jean-Paul primly saying "I just didn't like her."

The single she was releasing was called "witsh bitsh" and she wasn't headlining, even, she was opening some other grimes-ripoff's set at some venue he didn't know. Dan messaged Jean-Paul and said, "love her release title, truth in advertising. So who's the main act, I don't know the name." Mean but causal. Appropriate, it felt like.

Jean-Paul messaged back immediately and suggested "we should squad up and go to her show and stand there staring at her. The other one I know third-hand, not interested. But I could be wrong, it could be she's a genuine, spooky, spirit-medium, avantguard savant. Could be she's the next Kate Bush. We should definitely go." Dan hadn't been expecting that response at all, and didn't really want to see his ex at all but, he was tempted by the word squad. How many people were in a squad? Who all would be agreeable to going to a bar to stand around trying to make his ex uncomfortable? 8-11, the event said. It was the convenience chain logo with the 7 swapped. On Spadina. Somewhere really close to where he'd met Jean-Paul in January. *Small city after all.* Was there going to be cover?

“The others would never go if we have to pay to be there,” he messaged back. He had no idea why they’d go anyway, but it was a practical hitch that avoided the issue of whether he wanted to squad up at all. He couldn’t make up his mind, finding the idea appealing for some reason but also concerned he’d end up in another bad article. “Besides that slackjaw guy might be there, then he’d have all the ammo he could ask for.” He sent another message that said “making himself look good ammo” to clarify and because the salt compelled him to be saltier.

“Slackjaw is fucking irrelevant,” Jean-Paul replied, and Dan saw it and blinked. Slackjaw was pretty big, actually, even he knew that, and they covered everything, including music that often blew up off their article when it wouldn’t have otherwise. People ended up showcasing on SNL and Letterman off a good mention from a Slackjower. A bad mention on Slackjaw was kind of an even bigger deal; they kept doing exposés about the patriarch of Ford Nation that Dan saw photocopied printouts of, wheatpasted on newspaper boxes around the neighbourhood. More negative press wasn’t really on his bucketlist. Let alone, negative press about stalking his ex who he had been so, so terrible to, apparently. So terrible the whole world had deserved to know. According to the guy who wrote for Slackjaw anyway. Why Jean-Paul didn’t do the math on that part of it the same way he did, confused him. Maybe it was because only this scene, the scene his old Dead Cow Couch bobbleheads were—or had been—part of, mattered to him. Maybe it was part of his cultivated angle of social immunity, that nothing else was real to him; and, it would mean that the double edged sword was, what was real had killed him to lose it. Which all fit, so Dan took it in as his working understanding of Jean-Paul’s side of the situation. *Maybe he was projecting some kind of band-breakup grief onto this breakup...technically also a music group split.* So ordinarily, beef occurring outside The One Scene That Was Real, even directed into it at them (the way this out-of-town invasion seemed like it could be), would be a total nonissue. But this seemed like an issue for Jean-Paul.

“I find it kind of relevant, given,” *everything. Given everything.*

There was a pause before Jean-Paul said “I’m going either way.” He seemed to be taking it too seriously, frankly. Dan wanted to tell him to leave it but realized that Jean-Paul might go anyway and he wouldn’t know what exactly happened and it would somehow end up on his plate all the same.

“You know the organizer right? Like you know someone involved.”

“Someone I know knows someone involved. Why? ...I can’t get it cancelled.”

“I’ll go. But I want to have the all-clear. In writing from someone. Like, if you get a hall-pass for me.” He hoped Jean-Paul wouldn’t just say tough luck and go make a mess on his own, anyway. He suddenly got the sense that Jean-Paul had been drinking before going on chat. He wondered if Jean-Paul was at chimneyfish right now, on his phone at the bar maybe. The bar he never took dates to. Just friends. He saw the appeal in having one meaningful reputation and it being shuttered from outsiders. Wasn’t that what being in a couple was for? Hadn’t that been part of his job as a boyfriend, to make that closed circle so small nothing could stop either of you? But apparently breaking the circle had meant shitting directly on that element of it. He kind of wanted to go, underneath not wanting to be in the same city that day.

“I can probably do that.”

Dan assumed he was clear to bail on the conversation and closed the browser entirely, opening audacity and glaring at it. He felt a phantom of the opera moment coming on and tried to focus instead on what he’d been brainstorming over the month with Bruce. Getting wrapped up in his feelings was probably inevitable, but at least it could be something that didn’t outwardly smack of personal grievances. He could do a themed set, for the trash-quality livestreams Bruce’d be doing by bluetooth headset calling-in to his hub page’s autopost service from his weird dumbphone. All he’d have to do was make sure Bruce had a portable speaker, and hand over his ipod and aux cable. Or ask if Bruce had something to put the files on.

He spent the rest of the time he was awake—through the evening and most of the night—looking up old start-of-summer event episodes of Bruce’s show

and finding old fan tweets of the hashtags he shouted-out, and from there looking up whatever videos he could find of the events themselves to get an idea of what people wanted, or at least, were expecting. It seemed like it wasn't all kumbahyas and cola bottles, which was something. In fact, it seemed kind of like there were juggalos in the mix, which was perfect. Opened up the whole rap angle he'd never gotten to bring into his work with his ex. He'd decided he wanted to make something Bruce's audience would really vibe with, that his ex couldn't possibly. That was how people churned milk into butter or spun straw into gold or whatever, right? Using it as motivation? He'd never felt very motivated before and it was almost freaking him out. Turned out he was really productive, when he put his ire to it.

When he shut his laptop just before it seemed like the sun might come up any second, he felt a lot like he had after running several miles in gym class in high-school, when he'd been in good enough shape that running several miles made him feel great instead of painfully winding him like he had every reason to assume it would now. The major difference between his present feeling and that feeling was his eyes drifting shut anyway. Just as he was drifting off after a gently shameless fleece-appreciation wiggle, he wondered if Jean-Paul had set him up on purpose by facebooking him.

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part 16: girls from 8-11 stay up all night (and I can get a discount)

April 4, 2016 10:22pm

The day of the big hoopla, Dan was already exhausted before they left Maison Rokkoku. Bruce had been in a panic through the end of March after hearing through the show-vine that Wrongbar of all places (even Dan was surprised) was gone-but-not-forgotten. After finding out it wasn't a forever thing, and it'd be back sometimes, kind of, but not really, Bruce had gone on

some kind of manic bender and dragged Dan and whoever else he could, to every event he got invited to, which was sometimes two or three venues within five blocks within one night. Or two or three places that were extremely far apart. Dan couldn't remember much about any one place, let alone all of them. They had all had that characteristic humidity, the seasonings varying a bit place to place, depending: sweat and hair product, weed haze, beer and cigarettes, cat piss and patchouli and other weird smells including spilled moonshine. One night after several hours of watching Bruce throw himself around a tiny lightless room in the market, Dan had gone out for air and in the little alley he'd smelled hash-blunt smoke for the first time in his life, which made him feel profoundly underdeveloped in the opposite of the way his weedless life usually made him feel. Andreah had been there as well, with friends she didn't seem to need to bring around for introductions. They all liked Bruce, though, and he seemed to know their names but spent the night in what Dan read as a chemically maxed-out fury. He seemed to think he'd done Dan a disservice by not bringing him to any of the parties he'd gone to that winter; it was an issue of how fast everything changed. And, specifically, he was upset about the fact that Dan had blinked and missed Wrongbar—what was next, Bassmentality? So this was them knocking-on-wood. Refusing to take T.O. for granted. Not letting good things pass them by. Jean-Paul seemed to gravitate toward Higher Grounds for respite oftentimes when their excursions put them nearby, but he came out with them every night and Dan was thankful. The club crawl had taken them through the great outdoors, even; they'd gone back to the ravine one night and had a youtube rave somewhere away from where people were sleeping. It had been green, terrifically green, everywhere new grass and leaves were coming in and the lighthazed-sky oculus over the oasis had dipcoated everything else that bluey-dusk palette. For a few minutes the green had been so bright against the dusky backgrounding he'd thought he'd somehow stupidly tried some of Bruce's bottle of fluorescent-purple "rave juice" earlier and gotten so high he'd forgotten. When the green dimmed down with the nightfall he'd quickly realized that he'd have been much, much higher

suddenly, if he was coming up on Bruce-portion-number-two, and he wasn't. He'd then rightly chalked it up to being slightly high from all the laughs and the shawarma Jean-Paul had gotten him earlier; after he'd preemptively asked Bruce about an ipod dock/speaker set-up for the yearly flashmob bake-in at High Park, Bruce had done him two better and reemerged from his room with a nice compact vintage boombox with an aux cord as well as a two port usb lithium battery with an led party-light clipped in. And he'd insisted on bringing it and them with him, and VJing southward through the ravine (before streetcar hopping south to some hardcore shindig Mouse and Pete were excited about, some multiday fest). They'd stopped in to the Mediterranean-and-shawarma place at the Runnymede intersection to eat, on their way out that night from the Maison. From there they'd walked up, over to Keele, and caught the St. Clair streetcar coreward from there with new transfer slips that had been left in a ziplock bag folded around a magnet stuck to the underside of the TTC shelter bench. Bruce said the magnetbags were all over the city and people even coordinated live in some codeword-heavy facebook group, to find good slips nearby when their stop didn't have any or a bag had been removed. Apparently everyone in the city who rode transit knew to get transfers they didn't need so they could cache them for people like Easter eggs, if not in the bags then just around the stop somewhere. Bruce had said some places on the east side had "set in stone" laundry-line spots and every day there'd be rows of papers like socks drying, folded over a nearby gate top or trash bin. Dan still hadn't noticed any such spots but didn't rule out simply having overlooked them for what they were, before. Like the weird door to the roof from Bruce's room. He'd wished someone had thought to tell him before, so he hadn't risked the sign-foretold fine at the station more times than necessary. That evening the giant spire downtown had blinked up at them, all the way up where they were. Standing in the same spot as he had a few nights back (three or five, just after it had rained and while it was still really warm, before the weather had rewinterized sharply, obviously anticipating his ex's arrival as warmly as he was), the looming antenna weirded him out today, as it had the time they'd

been headed to the ravine. The last time he—they; the squad, such as it was tonight, with himself, Jean-Paul, and Bruce—had been out of the junction. It had snowed again overnight, since then. “It’s like something from Blade Runner,” he spoke without thinking, somehow hearing the thousands upon thousands of other times that charge had been made of the thing. He rolled his eyes at himself, expecting his comment to go over silently. He was leaning against the streetcar shelter wall absently circling the streetcar loop with his eyes. They were at the start of the line, and the sky was turning from lilac to coppery black. It was a cold, clear night. His breaths were back in front of him, a recurrent spectral inverted-shadow.

“I know,” Jean-Paul agreed. “That thing should only be in a movie-city, its really so ominous and alien, there’s nothing in Montreal like it.” He paused before correcting, “although they do have that giant electric cross.”

“Like at the funeral in Romeo Plus Juliet!” Bruce was high off his ass and smoking his first road joint in an attempt to summon the streetcar.

Jean-Paul continued like he hadn’t heard. “But that’s not aliens that’s Catholics, different beast.”

“OH MY GOD,” Bruce bellowed, and a couple of the few other people around on the corner in front of them looked over, unfazed but mildly interested. “That’s exactly what it is, it’s like war of the worlds! Do you guys know that war of the worlds prog record, Jeff Wayne is the guy?” Dan didn’t, and Jean-Paul shrugged so he figured not saying anything covered him too. “Oh snapple-cranapple, we should listen to that sometime this month.” Dan knew what war of the worlds was, he’d seen the Tom Cruise movie on TV. The comparison kind of fit, that was true; one, the tower was clearly made to let you know that the vista you were seeing was of-the-future but, two, maybe the future was kind of hinky in a hard to place, insectoid-seeming way. He didn’t know anywhere in Vic that wasn’t at sea level and the fourth floor condo he’d lived in, stood in the shadow of the only actual high-rise in Victoria (which had seen a lot of the last century before making it in to this one).

They got off the streetcar earlier than they had before, at an intersection with a pizzapizza at one corner. Here Jean-Paul made them wait inside while he went to a side door on the same building and let himself in somehow. He was back what seemed like a long time later, maybe ten minutes after Dan had started reading a free paper he'd found on a table. Bruce had wandered off to smoke a joint across the street in the field before that and hadn't come back. With his friend Elinor at his elbow Jean-Paul finally waved at him through the window and he came back outside, ready to complain.

"Where's Bruce," she beat him to the punch, seeming legitimately alarmed for some reason. It looked like she was gently wringing her hands, even. She had a sweet, shy kind of voice. Soft and high, like his ex's singing voice (which was eerily different from her regular voice). Elinor sounded like Grimes when she talked, and kind of looked like her. She was dressed like some kind of post-apocalyptic punk doing a Blossom cosplay. A fair number of girls he saw around town seemed to, it was close to how Andre dressed but there were several key differences that placed them in distinct girl-genres in Dan's mind. Andre was very granola but these girls looked like they were *more* granola. They looked like they *farted* granola. And then yelled at it for being there. This girl probably only looked like she could yell. He shrugged and said "somewhere getting high. Higher." He could tell already that she was one of those overly-invested, mother-hen mom-friend types his ex always thought were so perfect for a couple of months. He still didn't know what it was about these mom-friend girls that had made his ex try to befriend a string of them, and he wasn't sure what signalled time-up, each time, either. He got the sense that neither did the girls, or his ex. They usually both seemed upset at one another and walked away feeling equally misled, but he wasn't clear on what it was all about so he had no idea who had been right.

"Gotta get up, gotta get up, gotta get up," Jean-Paul sort of mumbled musically to the air, and Dan could hear the 90's dance even though he didn't specifically know whatever song it was. It was that characteristic progression the notes had taken. Jean-Paul didn't seem overly concerned about where



Bruce could be. He was smoking a cigarette happily and had been pre-drinking weird medicinal-tasting craft cocktails in his apartment all evening, with Dan going one-for-two. The cocktails showed on his face by making it pink and pliant-looking.

“I’m gonna text,” she pulled out her phone, looking upset, and pounded some message to Bruce into it. Almost as soon as she put the phone away there was a shout from across the street, Bruce waving the lit square of his phone screen back and forth at them, deadcentre in the dim field.

Bruce boinged his way back to them hastily as they crossed the street to meet him, and got picked up by the deceptively strong hugging-arms of Elinor, who told him never to worry her like that. When she put him down again it was just as someone was leaving a box of crusts inside the pizzapizza, and Bruce hooted, scampering in to heist his next batch of munchies.

“Gross, crusts” was all Dan had to say about it.

“Gross, pizzapizza,” Jean-Paul and Elinor corrected in unison. They laughed together, and Dan could see that they were friends in a way that Jean-Paul and Andre, for example, were not. It didn’t really make him like Elinor more, or maybe it did, he wasn’t sure.

They walked over to the ravine instead of streetcar hopping and again, Dan was admittedly impressed-upon by the sprawling view of the spire, the inland-sea of green around them, and by the ambivalent extremes of the oddly-knowing-and-poetic weather. On the trail Bruce told them something was afoot at the Circle K, which turned out to mean they were supposed to follow him to the gas station at the foot of the path they were on. This was where they’d been met by Andre and several of her friends who were also Bruce’s friends but didn’t seem to know Jean-Paul at all and didn’t know Elinor well but were very happy to see her. They seemed kind of creepy in some way to Dan, like they were *too* happy and *too* super-nice. He couldn’t tell what they were high on but assumed that whatever it was, it was their favourite. Or it was really agreeing with them, at least. They seemed very agreed-with. He didn’t know anyone who acted like that while high. They were seeming to him like hippies in a movie, but not exactly, more like

evangelical baptists or something. He tried to better recall what he was thinking of, *maybe that George Clooney movie O-Brother-Whateverthehell*. It had been a while since he'd seen whateverthehell.

They all trooped from the Circle K onto the subway at Dupont (a station Dan had been through but not out in, which Bruce said was his personal favourite), and went down to Higher Grounds to put their heads together. And caffeinate over a pre-bake. Once they were ensconced in the vape lounge and everyone Dan didn't know was inhaling their own personal balloonbag of stabilizer, Dan realized he was feeling queasy.

"Like about-to-cross-the-graduation-stage queasy. Is there a—" there was a pharmacy nearby, he knew. But he had no idea what he could take that was non-drowsy but good for nausea so his next question died on the way.

"DUDE," Bruce was all agog. Dan knew that face. He raised his eyebrows at it, asking it what the fuss was. Last time the fuss had been that the orange juice wasn't orange juice. "Look around you!"

Dan scoffed. "I don't want to fall asleep on my feet, I'm not captain weed-face," he deflected onto his low tolerance, arguing with a stoner about whether weed was the solution to everything was pointless. One of the Andre-friends laughed like "captain weed-face" had been a really, really funny joke. Apparently in that universe, it was. Dan didn't plan on visiting, regardless.

"You don't need to be, that's not what I'm packing!" Holding aloft a snapcase half full of pre-rolls and half full of bagged loose shake, he proceeded to convince Dan that this weed was exactly what he needed. It worked because he felt like hell. *Falling asleep and missing everything wouldn't be such a bad call*. But supposedly this was high-cbd pure sativa, which Dan sort of approximately understood when he was told. He got that the near-absence of thc was supposed to help avoid the couchlock issue. And he got that Bruce had gotten it from a fan who worked at the ultra-fancy quasi-legal dispensary that had opened up a few blocks down Dundas from the Maison. He just didn't expect any given drug someone was giving him to be all it was built up

to be; years of “really great coke” had never seemed to amount to what he would have called really great highs.

It tasted different in an unexpected way, from the vape bag. Like honeyed woodpulp or something instead of pine sap. He felt something lift off his brain, like a layer of crud peeling off it and blowing away. This was followed in short order by a similar sensation accompanying his queasy feeling’s departure from his midsection. It was a pleasant relief, and he was surprised to be thanking Bruce, and Roscoe for having the lounge. Roscoe was supine on a lounge with his feet up, black unmarked cowboy boots crossed on an ottoman. He rocked the chair occasionally on its pillar base, his arms up behind him. He seemed to be trying to stretch something in his back out. He knew Bruce and Andre’s friends, and seemed to like them. Their names were Raven and Shay, but Dan still wasn’t sure which was which, they seemed to be a paired set. Neither of them looked like a raven. They were both dressed more or less Elinor, who was also trying to layer on a good high before going back out.

Finally Jean-Paul got a text that said the opener was on. The showcase was starting two hours late; they’d gotten down to the market expecting one hour later than the posted time plus fifteen minutes for the first act to warm up. It seemed best to show up after it had started, anyway. No pre-show showdown that way. They coated back up and trooped out the back, heading to the venue with the copyright infringement logo, which Dan saw was up on their exterior, glowing like it wasn’t a legal complaint waiting to happen. Maybe it wasn’t, maybe this was a licensed brand expansion, it *was* right in the middle of downtown Toronto. An ambiguous beacon, and Dan hoped it wasn’t an omen. Raven and Shay were making some kind of fuss about how the Banksy that had been nearby was gone finally, but it was unclear whether they did or didn’t like Banksy. It was pretty clear they didn’t like 8-11 and didn’t really want to go in. Neither did Elinor, she was doing the hands again, hanging back. The window of the place was full of a weird art installation of melting horned masks, lit with panic-inducing marshmallow peeps pink and yellow. There were little cards with text, but he didn’t saunter

up to read. There were people there, smoking outside and talking loudly, and music could be heard from somewhere deep inside the building. The bass vibrated through the ground and everything else, but nothing of the music itself was coherent from where they were.

Jean-Paul was texting someone who came outside after a few minutes, complaining with feeling about the awol soundtech—this was the person who knew the person who was involved in hosting the event somehow. They were ushered inside through a maze of small rooms that were and were full of, the kind of hipster sculptural-conceptual art stuff his ex loved. Dan realized she was probably in heaven, as he followed Jean-Paul following his friend through the pitchblack entrance cave lit only by a tv playing a Warholian “weird footage” film, through several psychedelic rooms leading back to a staircase down to a basement from a grindhouse movie, which was full to the low, grizzled pipe-and-wiring rafters, with happy shiny people. Everyone looked very stylish, sort of like Andre and her friends, but glossier. He saw a lot of logos and brands, not so many stained or ripped or patched things. Glad to have found out about and used Jean-Paul’s small washer and dryer, Dan realized they were the least fancy people there, in terms of the things his ex generally evaluated as fancy, but he really didn’t care. It felt like an accomplishment anyway, to be here, holding himself together. Holding down his new turf, it was supposed to be. Trying to get her to go away, so this wouldn’t keep happening—so she wouldn’t get attached to some appalling idea like moving to Toronto. Like making all new friends for him to run into and later be unfriended by.

Their posse squeeze its way in to the periphery of the thick crowd, shoulder-to-shoulder with one another. Dan heard Bruce ask Raven-and-or-Shay if they were going to be okay and whichever it was yelled back that it was actually a great place to be on acid. The yell barely made it to him from three feet away, but he was focusing on hearing what they said. *Acid, duh.* So that was that mystery solved. He’d never done acid but didn’t really think this place or this crowd would have been in his top ten places to be on acid. It was enough like a visualization of a freaky trip as it was, which really

seemed too intentional to have not been. The walls bristled with a thick, uninviting layer of some kind of calcification that was everywhere, and full of cobwebs.

The first set had ended as they were on the stairs, and despite people overflowing from the dancefloor into the linked circuit of downstairs house-of-frightenstein style alcoves, very little space had opened up while the mc queued up some canned music to time-fill. Dan was again glad he'd taken Bruce up on the weed, and scanned the crowd. People were sweating and looking restless but resolute about holding the floor.

He sighed, kind of glad of the press of people in the harsh yellow light of the maybe-go-outside-for-a-minute between-set lights. He didn't see anyone he knew aside from who he was with, which meant his ex hadn't brought anyone. He wasn't sure who she would have brought, when he considered it. At his elbow Jean-Paul prodded him and when he tilted his head to show his attention was drawn, said "that guy at the mixer is Elinor's friend." The mc. Dan hadn't clocked him as someone who would be in Elinor's circle, but had looked at his outfit and decided he'd never feel like he, personally, looked like too much of a hipster, again. It was reassuring in a way. He was dressed like the opening sequence of rugrats had been left out overnight to form a puddingskin which had then been skimmed off and made into Hawaiian shirts, which he had decided to make into everything he was wearing. He had on one pair of Urkel glasses as a headband and one on his face, and Dan wasn't sure either had real lenses. They might not have had lenses. He was wearing one dangling earring, which seemed to be a string of shorter dangly earrings stuck together. It looked like there was even a tiny figurine in the little flare cascade.

"He's very..." hip, colourful, dressed-up, silly, visible, elaborate, contrived, "very 8-11." Jean-Paul barked a HA and Dan was gratified that they seemed to agree.

"He's sweet. Day job is teaching people tennis. The rent here is astronomical, and they got a C&D for the sign they've been sitting on. But it's really something, what their collective is doing here." Dan wondered

how many tennis instructors it took to mismanage a venue. But he was impressed; these people were his age, presumably, like the little mc who had flittered away with people, leaving the floor-fillers to their own devices in the eye of the oubliette. Dan couldn't have even started to consider an undertaking like leasing an event space and floating it for however long. It sounded like a nightmare. But the place was packed, at least. Then he wondered how many people were there gratis, like the seven person group he was in.

The floor had emptied a tiny bit, and Raven and Shay were now—by some agreement between them he'd missed—flowing out from around the squad into a gap at the centre of the floor. The two of them began to do a quarter-time interpretive dance to the fillermusic, clearing a wider and wider sphere of avoidance around them as tighter-wound attendees side-eyed them and decided it was time for air after all. About half as many as left, stood around with their space-price beers in hand, watching in amusement. If Dan hadn't known the two of them were on acid, he'd probably have guessed quickly. They looked like melting puppets doing a two-sides-of-the-mirror pantomime intermittently. It didn't look bad, but it was extremely uncomfortable in a vague way. Eventually Andre and Bruce joined them, picking up their flow. They weren't bad either, and there were a couple hoots from onlookers. Jean-Paul tapped his elbow again, and gestured toward the entrance with his head. Dan nodded and the two were sort of conveyed via a sort of peristalsis through the twisting warren of parlors, out to the front where it was cold and dark in sharp contrast to the interior. Jean-Paul was smoking by the time they were on the sidewalk. Weirdly Dan could feel himself wanting to be back inside, instantly. He thought it was the cold until he spied a familiar shape with a sinking sensation of dread. It was his ex, standing with people, talking and people-watching casually. She looked a little stiff, like she was exercising a lot of self-control to seem like she was totally at-ease. He knew that was because she was. Suddenly he didn't find running into her very intimidating, because he had, and she just looked like...the same uptight insecure weirdo he had known forever. When he tried to turn around more

fully so that she couldn't see him, it had the opposite effect and from over his shoulder he heard a noise, like she had noticed him.

"Oh, it's you two," she announced herself, breaking away from her people. Dan turned their way and saw them behind her, watching from where they were standing. They weren't glaring or anything, no one was throwing bottles. "Long time no see," she shrugged at them both, forming a triangle with them by the display window.

"Big night tonight," Jean-Paul mentioned, acknowledging that she was there and why. He sounded very bored, but didn't blow his cigarette smoke in her face, which Dan appreciated. He really didn't want a scene. He hadn't planned on talking to her at all, the thought hadn't occurred to him.

"Ugh don't make me think about it, I'm supposed to be in there right now."

"You were supposed to be on hours ago," Dan spoke up, but just carrying on the conversation like it wasn't weird to be talking to her seemed really spineless, so he added, "long time, yeah." He grimaced, feeling stupid. *That was barely words.*

"Oh, Dan, don't be so—listen, I'm sorry," she sounded troubled, and he believed her when she said she was sorry, but he was also annoyed suddenly by how she'd said it. He hadn't even considered that she would apologize to him, it had seemed a lot like everyone wanted *him* to apologize to *her* for wasting her time and money and emotional energy and bla bla bla. "Look things ended, and it could have, it didn't need to be. I shouldn't have listened to that asshole, and I'm sorry I let him publish that, I was just—we were high and I was shit-talking, I forgot—I didn't really think it was all on-record or whatever, after we started doing lines, and yeah. I guess that's journalism. I'm sor—it's my bad. Please don't stay mad at me," she concluded in a kind of wheedling tone. He heard Jean-Paul scoff out a puff of air from his nose, next to him. Suddenly suspicious, he looked at Wishelle closely; her skin looked washed out and too dry, wherever she hadn't put makeup, and he could see that she'd had trouble because she'd decided to glue in extra long eyelashes and it had run into her liquid eyeliner-corrections time. No one

else would ever have noticed, unless they'd seen her screaming at her reflection's eyeliner for hours, a trillion times.

"Maybe I wont," he finally shrugged. "Listen, good luck." He kind of wanted to remind her that she was about to do something really stressful. She groaned theatrically and shifted where she stood, expelling some tension. Her outfit looked cute, dark matte tights sticking out from under her big coat, and it annoyed Dan to be wearing the shoes she liked. And the coat she'd picked. They still looked like a salt and pepper shaker set.

"See you inside?" she sounded fretful, but he wasn't sure whether she wanted them to watch or not.

"We'll be there," Jean-Paul cut in decisively.

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The two-track set Wishelle had put together went fine, if sort of underwhelming. She'd done a sort of spooky-surfy musicbox-sounding plink-plink-plink kind of riff on some sort of old doowop sounding base-track Dan didn't recognize. There were distorted loops of a few samples of vocal sections, the one that was most decipherable was "we loved each other we just couldn't get along." It was about their breakup, hit like an epiphany. He wasn't the only one who kept thinking about when they'd made music together when he did new work. Her own on-mic contributions were repetitions of the phrases sung in a way that sounded like she only knew English phonetically. It was fine, overall, but it was hardly thrilling or innovative. Not as many people came back in for the second opener, but it was crowded and she had a new logo printed the laptop plugged in to her big keyboard. Her music sounded really sad to Dan, melancholic even. It was pretty but he felt it draining him while he listened to it. It was a lot like the feeling he'd been trying to avoid when he'd said he didn't want to get kushblasted before getting here.

They stuck around for the appearance of the headliner, who was another thing all together; candles on plinths were being lit around the spot in the centre of the audio equipment. Some dark synth longplay was on to keep people happy in the downtime. Seemed like a fire hazard to be setting up candles,



from Dan's point of view. Elinor and Jean-Paul were conferring about something under the general din; she at least had stopped looking worried about things. The others were still holding a circle of floor with their ritualistic looking modern ballet, but had been relegated to the absolute front of the crowd. They seemed happy to have started a mosh, such as it was. Wishelle appeared again after ten or fifteen minutes, and seemed intent on watching the closing performance, but after standing in the throng for a minute, looked around impatiently, her gaze quickly locking with his, laserlike. *We crossed the beams*, he joked to himself, feeling sort of pathetic. She drifted his way and asked if he wanted to come upstairs and do a line of some really good coke she'd been linked up with, and for a second he missed her so much that he said sure. Or he missed coke, or having his life make sense to his mom, or something. Whatever he missed, missing it hit him like an icepick in that moment, and he chased her upstairs to try to get away from it. He wasn't sure the others had seen him leave, but he had his phone and if necessary he could get on wifi somewhere and coordinate, or just go back to the Maison himself.

Upstairs in the staff bathroom (which seemed to be as much in use as the other toilet closet), they did the rest of her coke, which turned out to once again be coke Dan wouldn't have called good. He felt worse immediately and said "I can't believe you told that guy I had a trust fund, what the hell was that about?"

She seemed taken aback like she hadn't been expecting bickering when she'd invited him to do coke with her in the bathroom, but she laughed.

"That's *me*. *You're* not the trustfund kid, *you're* the scammer."

"What?"

She sighed, rolling her eyes cokeily, fishing around in the baggy for anything that might form a line of granules. "He was making fun of us both, he's an asshole. Trustafarian scammer. As in, a scammer who targets trustafarians." *Oh*. Dan his misread it. But then, so had Jean-Paul. This way was actually kind of better—at least it was only half a character assassination. He had never been scamming her. Probably that had been the Slackjaw guy

projecting because he *was* scamming her, for a story at least, and assumed Dan was like him. Dan decided they probably *had* been fucking but that it really didn't matter now anyway. "He introduced me to his friend who's a producer but apparently I wasn't supposed to do coke with his friend, so bla bla bla, you know?" They had *definitely* been fucking.

"What a fucking loser," Dan smirked, meaning the guy and her as well, a little. To cover that part better he added "you already ditched him, right?" She loved ditching people.

"Obviously, with that man-bun hair? He was the worst. So pretentious and fake-woke."

He laughed and said "NEXT," as in bring-in-a-new-one, and she laughed because it was a thing they said to make each other laugh, and then kissed him. It was unexpected and awkward, but most of their kisses had been awkward somehow.

"I need to go find—my friends," he broke it off and stepped toward the door. "He's not going to—come on, stay a minute," she was wheedling again, and it was patently unattractive. It took Dan a second to fixate on what she'd started to say, but the word "he" was like a hook, pulling his attention back to it.

"You're just trying to make me stay in here."

She lost her patience, he saw it happen. It was simultaneously when she stomped her little booted foot on the mangled linoleum and balled her fists. She'd never actually punched him but when she was mad she went into what he thought of as her cannonball form. "YEAH, NO SHIT."

"Okay, I'm sorry, look—this is a surprise and I'm not really into it. I'm still—" recovering from when you dumped me because some asshole with stupid hair convinced you it was a good *career* move. Dan felt himself get angrier, the feeling propelled by the stimulant wave like mario doing a spring jump.

"Hey, y'know what, fuck you," and he started to open the door.

She reached past him and shut it with a bang, and the jarring noise clapped the edge off his frustration with her for a second, but he knew what this mood was, and he knew he'd be back to full frustration in a second. This was her

fighting mood. “Please don’t run off,” she sounded annoyed but like she was trying to be calm. “You know I’m just—it’s the coke. You’re being mean, too. We’re both being assholes.” *You’re being an asshole*, he wanted to say. *I’m just here*. “I’m sorry I made things weird, I really want us to be friends.” *Couldn’t’ve wanted that when we were a couple?* he wanted to ask. What had changed, he asked himself. *Everything*, came the answer. He lived in Toronto now, and she didn’t. He was friends with the kind of people who were friends with the people she tried so hard to network with for work. “I’m sure you do,” he said, wanting it to be mean. She looked hurt and angry and stepped away and he could tell he’d been mean successfully. He told her “this isn’t high-school anymore, grow up,” and left her in the bathroom. It felt like the most epic, savage burn on an ex anyone had ever gotten off. He walked away feeling amazing for about half the time it took to get back through the eddies of people in all the little antechambers. By the time he was in the main performance space, he felt kind of shitty. It was utterly black inside except for the candles and a few cell phones, and the maestro was at work. It was quite the production, in fact. Basically a one-man melodic metal band on a synth, with backing layering filled in by a loopstation. The music successfully engulfed him and took him out of himself, and when the house lights were starkly flipped back on afterward, he blinked, wondering who he had come in here looking for.

Jean-Paul was there, his hair a halo, unmistakable as always. Bruce and that contingent were all excitedly talking to the synth lord. It occurred to Dan that they had prior knowledge of the biggest name on the flyer, although he didn’t—it was probably why they’d shown up. He couldn’t image why else Andre would’ve agreed to, when he thought about it. He went to join Jean-Paul and Elinor along the wall, watching people leave. The whole last set had taken only as long as he’d been in the bathroom. He wasn’t sure how long that had been, now. It felt like it had been two minutes. He chewed the inside of his cheek gently, trying to keep his teeth busy.

“What was all that? You missed this Fragonard guy here,” Jean-Paul gestured with his chin toward the front. Bruce was bouncing around, they all looked like groupies. “It was very... heavy metal and reflective.”

“Yeah, uh. I. Saw the candles. Atmosphere.”

Elinor looked at him closely for what seemed like the first time, peering into his face. “You look like you want to leave,” she said, and he liked her.

“I do. I’m, I want to go. Back. Home,” he caught himself add on to the tumble of words. He felt like he’d done something sneaky or wrong—he realized he was feeling guilty, maybe for “relapsing” and not thinking about the others or wanting to tell them. They’d be worried if he did and were worried already because now he was acting different and looked weird. He tried not to make it worse by getting paranoid about it. Maybe it was because they were all there to back him up and he’d ditched them to go do drugs and ...relapse on his relationship. For as long as it took them to get on eachother’s nerves he had half been hoping she’d ask him to move back with her. His thoughts were choppy and it felt like he was getting wires crossed. “I think this place is getting to me.”

Jean-Paul looked like he was going to say something, his mouth opening for a second before he shut it again. He looked at Bruce and Andre and their friends instead, and told Elinor “you take Dan out, I’ll find out what they’re doing now,” before moving decisively to do so.

Elinor slid into the space Jean-Paul had left, looking at Dan still, in that careful, mom-friend way. “I wanted to go upstairs to find my friend and say goodnight,” her tone suggested he might like to go too, which he had just said was the case. He rolled his eyes and then felt like an ass. She was just being nice. Nodding with what felt like an insincere expression of some sort, he lead the way out because she hadn’t. Upstairs he broke off when she spotted Maximum Urkeldrive and went to the frontmost foyer before the main door, hovering in the dark next to the TV with the black and white footage, hoping his ex hadn’t stuck around after he’d gone downstairs. The others found him as a group, with the solo guy, Fragonard in tow. He and Bruce were yaking

each other's ears off about some dude named Shulgin. It didn't sound like music talk.

They left the place as a tangle of walkers of talkers, and when Dan spotted his ex talking to the same people she'd been with earlier, he was thankful all over again for the camaraderie that had been tapped for him. He was so elated that for the rest of the walk north through Chinatown up to the a transfer-laden stop to hop from, he understood that cliché about walking on air. Even on the streetcar he felt like he wasn't really touching anything around him, like he was being propelled through space because there was no resistance, not because he was sitting in something with powered motion. At the subway the group split up, and Elinor opted to go along with Bruce and the others. Dan assumed it was because they were more likely to need a nanny with them and so she was magnetically drawn to that side of the split. They all went off to some other party the music man wanted to go to in Scarborough. Bruce said Pete was there, and tried to beg Dan and Jean-Paul into coming along, but looked at their faces and seemed to catch some clue from whatever they looked like.

On the walk up from high park station, after a long, serious silence, Jean-Paul asked "so, how'd that go?"

Dan felt like it was a question he'd only have asked if he knew something about it from how Dan was acting, but it wasn't like there was any way to confirm it if he just dodged around addressing it. "What, how'd what go? Tonight? I guess I got," *revenge?* "closure," he awkwardly jammed in, because it sounded mature. More mature than whatever they'd really gone down there for. His injured pride? It all seemed to corny in retrospect, and he wondered if he had, at last, managed to have one good coke high in his life after all. When he reflected in belated confusion on his cloud-9 stint, his elevated mood really only made sense in that context. Or maybe he was just in the valley now, and that was why he couldn't figure out why a win had felt like a win.

"I found it all underwhelming, if I'm being honest," Jean-Paul had a tone of arch sniffiness, and Dan laughed.

“Not the next Kate Bush, monsieur critic?”

“Hardly!” His loud scoff echoed off the dark, well-treed suburban enclave they were traversing. In the distance the city was quiet except for the occasional siren of the red-light running variety.

Dan started to laugh, but it caught, and instead he threw up into a hedge, some runny bile that seemed to be all he had left from the stew he’d made himself for lunch and eaten again for dinner. Suddenly feeling very miserable, he thought for a horrible few moments that he might start bawling there in the street, bent over a hedge, with his friend as an audience. He felt like he wanted to be done talking about his ex forever, but he didn’t know how to say that without sounding overly dramatic or caught up in the moment or some other stupid thing. It felt like she was there, like she’d piggybacked along with them because she wanted them to talk about her. Dan heard himself make an anguished sort of moan, the kind anyone might if they were suddenly violently ill.

“Okay there?” Jean-Paul’s hand on his back, the hand of a friend who has been right beside countless other early-morning street-puking fools, and been one many times besides. It made Dan feel a lot better about life in general, somehow. Not just that *someone* was there but the *way Jean-Paul* was there. He felt himself sag almost all to pieces, and let Jean-Paul walk them back to the groundfloor unit where it was warm and bright, and sit him down on the couch and make him tea. Jean-Paul made himself a hot toddy and the two of them talked about nothing for a while, until Dan fell asleep under the heavy silk afghan draped over the back of the sofa.

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part 17: 420 skeleton crew / may the fourth be with you

April 20, 2016 3:18pm

Dan had been trying to sleep but couldn't, and was now watching a movie disinterestedly on the red couch next to the halfpipe. Bruce had finally shown him how to set up the projector. Otherwise, it was just a matter of turning on the wall computer and telling youtube to find a full length anything. More than the movie, he was thinking about Jean-Paul but making no traction. He was sensing the shape of his life revolved around Jean-Paul but the subject had a scope that was apparently ungraspable. He rarely ever saw Jean-Paul unless there was some kind of group thing happening, but everything he did somehow had the direct or indirect hand of his old friend in it. It didn't bother him per se, but it felt strange, like he was vulnerable in some way. Like he was at Jean-Paul's mercy but hadn't noticed because it didn't ever feel like that. When he thought about that, about how it *had* felt, he could easily recall that—it had all along felt more like he was at Toichiro's mercy, wherever it was that Toichiro was. *Japan, wasn't it? Looking after a sick relative?* He tried to remember what kind of fancy pronouns Bruce's yin or yang was using. Something with a Z, was all he could summon up. He noticed that everyone seemed to default to saying "Toi" instead, that nickname that didn't sound quite like toy but that he wasn't sure how to say so it did sound right. Bruce said it more or less so it rhymed with Zoey, when he really listened, but the T faked out his ear somehow when he didn't really listen, and his mouth when he said it, so it didn't rhyme with Zoey, but Roy. He knew Jean-Paul had been really marching-off-to-war on his behalf, those few weeks back when they'd gone to his ex's single drop. But it had been her show, and Dan hadn't wanted to show crash after all. Or maybe he had and that had been exactly what had happened. He was still really unclear on everything about the night of the fourth. He had woken up that morning feeling like he wished he slept on couches more often, and had an odd, sedately-domestic-yet-sort-of-restrained breakfast with Jean-Paul, who was already up and around when Dan woke up, doing something that involved him being up and around.

Since then he'd been trying to focus on having a bunch of tracks for Bruce to figure out uses for, and so he'd have original stuff to mix in to the floorfiller

he was basing his long holiday-end bash around. They were supposed to meet a really large group at the gate of a park Bruce called “the spit,” at the lakeshore way out east of Yonge. He’d been listening to slavic hardbass because of a short conversation he’d had with Pete a few days previous, about his thesis and tangentially, how genre music made its way into and out of Russia as a cultural export pre- and post-collapse. Pete had said he and Mouse were going to be there at the spit, and Mouse was bringing his band friends and Pete was bringing some of the guys he’d mentioned when he’d told Dan about wanting to do a show at the old incinerator. He made it sound kind of like the rave at the spit was an audition Dan had to get through, but Dan wasn’t sold on helping stage an illegal live event for what was probably the sake of a cool video that would last longer than the artistic collaborations of those involved. At the moment he was feeling out of sorts because today was the start of this whole long holiday thing and it was starting to feel like less fun already. He’d run what he had finished already by Bruce and Bruce had what he wanted for today—it was a weird Easter themed commercial jingle mash, but full of bong rips and repetitions of various oldey-sounding clips of people saying “herb” that he’d compiled off youtube, and there was a trix rabbit-themed interlude with more samples, from cereal ads. Bruce said he really liked it, and that it “didn’t need to be more political” like Dan was worrying because it was “already political in a bunch of ways” and if he, Bruce, needed more politics on the track, he would just talk.

Several nights a week once it stopped dropping below freezing overnight, all night, every night—just after his ex left town for her promo sets at a couple parties in Montreal, as he later heard from Bruce who had heard from Fragonard, who was apparently also coming to the spit in May and was from Montreal and had left most of his friends there—Bruce would check in on how his day had gone and listen to whatever Dan wanted to run by him, and then he’d drag Dan out to help him steal things for the garden. First night they’d gone down to the back garden and there had been one of the characteristic orange handcarts from the Home Depot on St. Clair. When he’d asked to confirm Bruce had just given him a long look and said it was



from a garage sale and they'd both been there. Dan had been a second on the uptake. But it hadn't been an issue using it, they stayed in the alley with the cart and loaded it with single run loads of bagged soil from the big chain groceries that were west of them on Dundas, further than the Runnymede intersection where Dan usually drew the invisible hinterlands-start-here line. Then there were fence-hopping early morning missions to grab seedlings from the garden centre at the fancier chain grocery. Mouse came along on these little journeys, and seemed to love it. He moved fast and energetically and chattered an unusual amount, in his non-angry gravelly neutral voice, though. While they were out they were always on the look-out for other things. There was a metal scrapping yard near the fancy grocery where, during the day, various metals could be converted into dollars, like a vastly more forgiving can depot. Dan was interested to find that out, filing it away in case he needed to get some money together for a sandwich at some point. The dumpsters around them were always full of metal things that could be brought in. Other things Bruce liked to pore over were boxes of free stuff, and the suburban blocks around them had these in abundance once the snow cleared, although Bruce maintained that snowy nights were sometimes the best for single large gems like furniture collections. People seemed to put a lot of usable stuff out for people to take from the curb before city pickup got it. Dan didn't know if people did that in Victoria, although it seemed to him that he hadn't seen it. Something that was in-common between the two was the mini-library hutches at the ends of driveways. He'd found a book by a music journalist name he recognized vaguely, and brought it back to the Maison with him. He hadn't read any of it yet. By now there were flowers everywhere and it was starting to get really warm out. It was warm here different than in Victoria—it felt like it sunk in more, like the air was more humid. Everything seemed more abundant here, both living and artificial. Bruce said it was some magical hokum thing to do with crystals or something, like veins in the planet that had the same kind of tidal effect astrology stuff was supposed to have, like some subtle mechanism exerting a magnetism that accounted for why some places seemed to have more

incongruous coincidental occurrences than others. Apparently there were several episodes of the podcast on this topic, this secret map of the world Bruce thought was proven. Dan hadn't happened across them while listening, unless he'd been asleep while it played. It seemed extremely silly, but in a way, there was nothing in his experience to discredit it. It really did feel like something was here, some force of reality that moved or felt different in other places.

Since the night they'd gone to Higher Grounds before his ex's show, Dan had been smoking the weed Bruce offered him, at first only if it was the kind he liked and then he'd decided to try it all. He'd smoked weed a few times at a MTG guy's place in high-school and again working at KFC but coupling off with someone who thought weed was cringeworthy, meant he'd found it easy to live weedlessly. Easier, in fact. But, the first night he'd gone out "spring-teeveing" and Bruce had sent his blunt around to Mouse and Mouse had sent it around to Dan, Dan had decided it might be worth tentatively investigating. He *had* been urged to do that by a doctor, after all. Bruce had a prescription now, even, and he said it was easy enough to get one as long as Dan had an OHIP card, which of course he didn't.

He'd finally figured out what he needed to do to get a health card, and wished he'd applied sooner because if something happened in the meantime he'd have to pay at the gate to get in to a public clinic, which would mean finding a bunch of scrap to sell, which he might not be able to do in a pinch. Bruce had produced for him a surprisingly official-looking form with the letterhead of Mrs. Sakamoto's real estate investment firm, and it said Dan was renting the second floor for \$950 a month and had been doing so for three months. Bruce said not to worry about the rent part until he wanted to apply for welfare, at which point they would need to alter the form again so it wasn't so low that he didn't qualify for the full amount but not so high that the social worker processing him would wonder how he could afford it without income. Apparently suddenly losing freelance work and having no money in the bank and rent to pay, was perfect from that point of view. Bruce said the quotas of people the government was giving assistance to were a lot lower now, and it

was a lot harder to get because they were being careful about prioritizing life or death situations. Dan took that as an indicator that he should probably hold off on trying. He didn't really want a social worker yelling him out of their office for trying to take food out of someone else's mouth when he was able to work. He assumed he was able to work, from the point of view of someone whose job it was to know. Bruce told him it was *their* job to know so he should run it by them.

He hadn't done much work today, was something that was annoying him. But today was some kind of big deal, and it belatedly came across to him, as he stared blankly at the projected movie, that he was stressed about how Bruce using the "silly rabbit" mix on his show would go over with the audience. He didn't really want to go out to the bake-in, it looked like a couple-dozen-person mainly sit-down version of the dancing he'd witnessed at 8-11, and involved a lot of weed-leaf leis and the occasional set of nylon fairy wings, which wasn't Dan's scene and he really couldn't see how it ever would be. Bruce said it was stoner new year, but Dan didn't much care about being there for the big nug-drop. Maybe that had been midnight the night before—he hadn't seen Bruce all day, not since the previous evening when Bruce had swung down into his room without using the ladder and requested the thumb drive with whatever was done.

He had been watching a motionless, blank square for a while. The file had played through and stopped and the projector had gone into a sleep mode. He was thinking about maybe firing up the volcano and putting on something else to watch, maybe leaving some of the recently-appeared dive yams in water to boil and frying some dive onions to top the mash with after. Bruce had started telling Dan how he thought he might use things he found; after the time Dan had asked for help making mashed potatoes, he'd gotten the sense that Bruce had sort of realized he didn't know his way around a home kitchen at all. It wasn't like they had an always-on industrial deep fryer to dump everything in, and besides, it hadn't ever been his job to turn the fryers on or change the oil, so he really had no idea how to use a deep fryer, either.

While he was thinking about his intentions on the evening, Jean-Paul came in, smelling like a bar. He was with several people and they were all talking a little loudly and obnoxiously. “Dan!” Jean-Paul sounded inebriatedly delighted to see him there. “I was just talking about your ex!” His friends tittered among themselves, looking at Dan with a range of disinterest. “She’s been running around my old neighbourhood smoking meth on people’s doorsteps, it’s quite the spectacle apparently!” Well that was a surprise. Dan was completely unprepared for every part of what had just happened, from the sudden appearance of a lateday-wasted Jean-Paul, to the addition of guests who were strangers, to the mention of his ex and possibly their relationship being discussed with him absent, and finally, the news itself. “Let me introduce my dear old friend Dan to you all, I’ve known him since we were kids!” Dan wondered who his oldest friend might be, if he wasn’t it—his mother, probably. Dan hadn’t heard of someone Jean-Paul had kept up with for longer than himself. He immediately forgot the names of the people from Montreal he was being introduced to. Two french sounding names, like Jean-Paul’s, and one probable-anglo.

Jean-Paul had come by to see if Bruce was there still, and when informed that he hadn’t been around all day, he slapped his hand to his forehead and gnashed his teeth theatrically. Apparently Bruce had something he’d meant to give to Jean-Paul at the party they’d been at together the previous night, and he had assumed Bruce would be home between then and when the bake-in officially started at 4:20pm. He and his friends headed down to the park post-haste, and Dan kind of figured that it was drugs for his out-of-town guests. It seemed like this was the flow of things as summer approached, lots of here-and-there and back-and-forth between things-to-do and places-to-be.

Left alone again he felt like a typhoon had come in and hit him in the gut on its way back out. He realized Jean-Paul had been drunk, and that it had been weeks since anyone had brought up his ex—precisely since he’d barfed about it into a shrub, in fact. It didn’t really do anything to change the state he was

in, now, knowing it wasn't anything he was going to hold against his friend for doing. He planned on bringing it up, though.

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Jean-Paul came back after the sun had gone down, without his guests, or had left them downstairs for the time being. His face appeared next to the ladder and he looked more his usual self. "Good, you're awake," he said, looking very strange there. He had never talked to Dan from the ceiling before, and Dan had a hard time picturing Jean-Paul stretched out on the floor above, or kneeling there, but supposed he must have been. "The bake-in afterparty is in phase one if you want to go down there, he's got quite the group together. Look, about earlier," he started, sounding sorry.

"It's fine, I know you were—didn't mean it. But don't," not sure what the next word was, he stopped, hoping it meant enough.

"I know, I wont. But," Dan felt a glower bud on his face, "but, I have one last thing. There was more." He really didn't want to hear whatever it was. "One last thing. Short thing?"

Jean-Paul seemed to want to make a joke but stopped himself. "Okay before I start, I wasn't making fun of you, and if I'm being honest I wasn't making fun of her either. Earlier. But my friends who are visiting have her on their radar now and I thought it might be worth humanizing you a bit, or they'll only hear about you from her." It was how Jean-Paul ran interference, Dan guessed—it was the same reason he'd told the others about Dan's roid. Since shortly he'd after been sick his roid had been almost completely in remission, a small blessing, although the party nights had finally flared it up briefly, by the end. He wasn't sure which lifestyle alteration had done it, the laundering of his clothes with scrap money at the laundromat across the way, the fact that he was showering more and eating less canned dollarstore food that upset his stomach and more of the unprocessed stuff arriving regularly in the kitchen. He never felt bad about eating the things he found, mainly because he knew they would go bad otherwise, moreso than knowing it was there to be eaten.

"Thanks, that whole thing—" was a pain in the ass to even contemplate.

“She’s coming back here later in the summer when her sublet is up. She’s got a couple shows booked in town. We can avoid them.”

“Great.” He stared up at Jean-Paul, expecting a departure. They were perpendicular to one another, their eyes making contact at an angle to one another. It felt weird to Dan and he stretched his limbs and flexed his wrists to clear the feeling away, but it didn’t.

Jean-Paul seemed stuck, unmoving. Finally he said “there was another article. I’m sorry, I’ve been estalking her for months. I don’t have to tell you about it. If you don’t want to know.”

Dan made a noise like “Buughuhhuhh” and rolled over. With his face half pressed down but with a gap for sound to come out the side, he said “is it about me,” thinking about how her music had sure sounded like it was about their breakup.

“Actually,” Jean-Paul started and then there was a pause. Finally Dan turned his head enough to see Jean-Paul from the corner of his eye. Jean-Paul seemed to be kneading his upper lip with his teeth inside his mouth, considering something. “You might want to, I don’t know—I feel like I should tell you this later, maybe over a drink or something. I’ve got people downstairs and the floor isn’t too-too comfortable.”

Dan said “sure,” although he wanted to get it over with, honestly. This was a really slow peel-off with a really mean bandaid.

Later he was woken up by a commotion upstairs and groggily determined that it was Bruce plus howevermany people. It sounded like he’d brought the whole High Park contingent home. They all set up camp in the living room and pretty soon he heard hand-drumming and the whir of the volcano, which he had availed himself to earlier, in between Jean-Paul visitations. After some time there was a new face inquisitively peering down at him, and the face said “oh!” and he’d been discovered and cajoled out of his cave. He didn’t mind; someone had found a dumpster with ten frozen pizzas and everyone seemed to have a joint or a pipe or a bong in rotation. There were only eight of them besides Bruce, after all—hardly the whole parade.

The sun came up and so did Jean-Paul and his guests, who seemed to find the scene upstairs unremarkable, or at least, not unusual. One of Bruce's friends knew the anglo name Jean-Paul had introduced him to, from somewhere. They hadn't seen each other since some festival he'd never heard of, that they both had lots of amusing not-so-horrific horror stories about. Everyone had a lot of festival stories. Several of them had been to burning man, which made sense once he was told. Burners. *Obviously*. He'd never met any, that he knew of.

All the guests of both camps decided to go downtown to the market because Andre and Andrea had made a big pair of steam-trays full of vegan banana bread and were about to head over to the dry fountain in the park with it to share around. They said they'd made some with cannabutter that was at their place, via texts to Bruce, and everyone seemed excited for food and edibles, even though they'd been eating pizza and smoking weed all night and morning, and presumably most of their lives, whenever they could help it. It seemed to be serving them pretty well, they all seemed very happy, which Dan still found faintly embarrassing for reasons he could no longer grasp with the clarity he'd had on the issue, say, a year ago.

Jean-Paul left his guests to their own devices as they scattered to the city with Bruce and the rest of the electric smokycat swingers club, and asked if Dan had slept before inviting him down for tea. Dan detoured to grab his small pile of borrowed-and-worn clothes, and brought them down to wash. It turned out Jean-Paul liked her single, when it wasn't live, so that was one thing. The other thing was that she was apparently having a highly public meltdown and had given an interview that Jean-Paul described both as unhinged and psychotic. It wasn't about Dan at all, it was about her divorced parents who she'd recently become less estranged from apparently, and a brother she'd never had but was apparently now getting telepathic messages from. One of her parents had brought up something about a miscarriage and it was apparently all she could talk about now, which was uncomfortable even to hear about second hand. And apparently Jean-Paul felt guilty about it, even, because around a month ago when he'd found out she was doing a tour,

he'd maybe said a few things to a few people about what he thought of her, and maybe it had created so much latent hostility in a couple social environments for her (that were maybe everywhere she went) that her drug use had accelerated and she'd had a complete psychological break. Dan could understand feeling guilty, given the details—he was feeling guilty himself, given their relationship. He'd never really thought of her as needing more help than he did. She asked for it more, and he didn't really know how to ask for it, but maybe that didn't mean she'd *always* asked or that asking had ever helped. It apparently hadn't. Neither of them there in the kitchen knew what do with it besides sit there and deal with the feelings.

Eventually Jean-Paul consoled himself aloud by pointing out “I hadn't remotely done everything I could have to hurt her chances of success with this solo move, it's not something I'm out to take from her. And nothing I said was meant to, oh,” he sighed “ruin her life or drive her off the deep end or anything.” There was a pause in which Dan didn't have much to say. He hadn't meant to drive her off the deep end either. Apparently he could have, maybe the thing in the bathroom had really shattered her, or even seeing him afterward leaving with everyone. “But, maybe I hesitated because I'd known that was a risk, you know, subconsciously, deep down, without ever thinking hard in that direction.” And now it seemed like he hadn't pulled back enough, or if he'd pulled back more there'd be less of a mess. That was when Dan told him about the coke in the bathroom, and Jean-Paul clearly forgot about being angry at himself although he didn't seem to puff up to his former championing self either. He asked if Dan was okay, and Dan felt like usually, he was. He had been for most of the month, anyway. It had been a surprisingly good month, over all. And it was far from over. Right then, he felt like he was ready to crash until next year. He wasn't sure if he was feeling so bad because of one or more of the hard-to-say-how-many strains of weed he'd been passed to try that morning. It was also possible he would have reacted worse if he'd been entirely sober.

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For the next ten days no one was home to check on where Dan was at with the music; if Bruce was at the Maison at all, he was up on the roof with people or hanging around the mini-tentcity that seemed to have sprung up surreptitiously in their back yard. Dan's room never ended up being commandeered. The visitors seemed to avoid going inside much and went to places like the tim's to use the bathroom there where water was free, just as Dan had been doing when he first moved in. It seemed like all or most of them having come from the trainyard one night. There'd been a welcome BBQ with stolen veggie dogs on sticks and 40 ounces and a big bag of pattyking dived stuff and a little fire in a pit as the centrepiece, even though it was against a bylaw. Pete seemed annoyed by the abundance of trainpunks, who, he told Dan in passing, were "too close to oogles" for his liking, and he'd gone to stay with a girl who lived somewhere else in town. Mouse was around, Dan assumed. Dan didn't see whether Mouse was around the traincore kids because Dan didn't go out to the back much; in the downtime between big dates, he had managed to put together at least an hour of prepared set that he could work around, with some original stuff that sounded a lot like ritualz had a few years ago, but, that seemed like an appropriate vibe. He'd looked up pictures of the place this party was going to be, and it was easy to see why Bruce had it there, but hard to see how it was all going to go in terms of power, or how it would be that they wouldn't get in trouble or get someone hurt or something. But Bruce said it was fine. And besides, it wasn't Dan's circus, as he reminded himself.

A few days before May Day, Jean-Paul messaged him while he was on his laptop, and said he'd gotten the new article removed by getting Andre and a few of her twitter friends riled up about how it was clearly exploitation journalism and so on. Dan hadn't really wanted more news about it but he didn't hate the news. It felt like they'd done something that might actually have a net positive impact on her career, at least. He didn't want to track it, and asked Jean-Paul if he wouldn't mind dropping it off his radar. He'd agreed to, although Dan wasn't sure whether he would, or even be able to, if he was getting posted by friends about it. Whether things were even or

balanced out or whatever Jean-Paul wanted them to be, Dan wanted off the coaster. He changed the subject by asking what Jean-Paul planned to do on the first, whether he was going to the big demo downtown, if he wanted to meet up and go together. Dan was wondering about it, how many people went to the popcultural capitol of Canada's yearly cross-denominational lefty wild rumpus. The pictures of previous years had made it seem like a massive event. This year Andre had Bruce and various of the podcast fans and friends doing a big FNB smorgasboard, as they had other years, and they had been prepping and pre-baking everything they could at a union hall near the park where the May Day celebrants met to kick things off.

Jean-Paul said to come on downstairs and get off the internet, and they went down the street for a patio beer. Since finding out about his ex smoking meth outside he'd felt strangely alleviated about his own drug use, and relaxed slightly about whatever he'd been residually worried about each time he'd been drinking that year. That it would somehow be the same as doing so much coke it killed him, that he'd get drunk and make some kind of life-threatening mistake, like doing so much coke somewhere that it killed him. It didn't really seem like he knew anybody who did coke at all, though. He had no idea where he would have found this life-threateningly large quantity he'd been secretly freaking out about.

"I'm planning a banner-drop tomorrow night, for May Day promo. I was going to grab a sheet from that big pile of shit Bruce brought in from that closed goodwill." Just around the corner on Runnymede a big thrift store had shut down, and Bruce had been swimming around in the leavings every time they'd gone spring-teeveing, because every night there were fresh piles. They'd met people there, even, everyone laughing and wadding through old tinsel garlands and bags of coats and piles of kids books and loose puzzle pieces, aiming for a fish tank or a vaccum that wanted unearthing. Mouse had walked away with some books and old man clothes that looked about his size.

“Oh,” Dan was surprised, whatever a banner-drop was didn’t really sound like Jean-Paul’s style. It sounded kind of highschool gradclass prank-y. “Uh, do you need a hand?”

“Thanks, the more the merrier. Besides the company, we can scatter more ways if OPP or someone rolls up.” Dan must have made a dismayed face because Jean-Paul laughed and added, “kidding, that never happens. Besides it would probably be city cops, I just want to do a bridge across the DVP out east of the city, so the morning rush sees the info. Maybe they’ll come by on their break from work, see what its all about. Fill out the crowd. I’m going to paint it tonight so its dry by then. Usually Bruce does it because he’s good with spraypaint but, he’s busy and I have to use a brush. It’ll take longer.” He seemed to be itemizing now, more talking to himself than to Dan. Dan realized he was nervous about it, like Dan was about DJing in a few nights. His edge of anxiety about his contribution to the show going over okay had passed when Bruce’s pizza-ordering guests had said they all liked it a lot. They’d said a lot of nice things that mainly boiled down to “trippy” and “cynical in a good way,” which he was relieved about. It wasn’t exactly the same as cynical in the right way, and it wasn’t necessarily awesome to be cynical, but at least it wasn’t too-toxic-to-cope-with cynicism.

Not wanting to feel like a cynic, because he was honestly sick of feeling like a cynic, Dan said “do you need me to get anything?” He wasn’t sure what. “Paint?” They had nice pocketsized paints at the dollar store. There was the big chain craft place and the other dollar store up an intersection on Keele, as well.

“I went.”

It seemed to Dan that Jean-Paul didn’t really need him for this banner thing, and besides, he’s said something about– “so who else is going?”

“Oh, Andre of course, she knows her way around the east, we’re going up where she grew up, out at Rouge Park. There’s an overpass there that’s perfect.”

“The eastside?”

“No, more east. Ass-end of Scarborough. Past the bluffs, even.”

“Why so far?”

“Don’t shit where you live, basically, local squaddies don’t need to pay more attention to us. We’re not on their collective house watchlist, so far as we can tell. The less people matching our descriptions are associated with stuff like banner drops, the better. Somewhere along the line we’re going to disappear from view into a forest, and someone in really nondescript clothes that don’t match any of ours, is going to come out of that wooded area somewhere else, and is going to hang a big, weighted ad for May Day on the overpass. And then they’ll walk back into the woods and disappear, and we’re going to unrelatedly finish watching Bruce smoke a big fat joint. I will probably have a smoke and a drink myself, to celebrate his smoking. Then we’ll all bike home.”

“We have to *bike* out there? This doesn’t sound like a very romantic date you’re asking me on,” he had been trying to be funny as a way to get out of going, since other people were going and it was sounding like a lot of work. “Why can’t we take transit,” he tried to redirect away from the joke he’d made, because Jean-Paul was making a kind of funny, uninterpretable face, like someone whose straight, dear-old friend, had just forgotten that he was straight and that they were just friends. He suddenly realized he might have been flirting, and felt kind of bad. He’d been trying to turn what seemed like a friendly gesture of including-him-because-maybe-things-were-weird-because-of-the-whole-thing-with-Wishelle, into a friendly gesture of not-making-him-bikeride-for-god-knew-how-long. And maybe a friendly gesture of I-wont-hate-you-for-not-doing-this-activisty-thing-because-our-friendship-is-about-more-than-The-More-Onside-The-Merrier.

Jean-Paul’s expression sort of destupefied and he said “transit is full of surveillance. We’re really not trying to get listed. It’s a huge pain in the ass. Besides, the weather is superb, at last, and exercise is good for you. Good for your heart.” That felt like overkill, he hadn’t needed to go for the aorta like that.

“Or it could just be the nail in the coffin,” he countered, feeling rascally.

“Don’t—” he seemed to realize it was a joke and changed tacks mid-sentence, “act like you’re made out of sugar,” and he stood and took their empty sleeves of beer over to the counter, ordering two more after waving at Dan and asking by gesture whether he wanted another. He felt pretty comfortable and shook his head, but pointed at his stomach and did questioning hands. Jean-Paul saluted, and it struck Dan as patently old-timey in the way American civil war photos were, like he had invoked a whole way of life, remanifested a different world with a totally alien sense of comportment that still clung to the gesture, even in jest. There seemed to be a melancholy touch to it, and it transported him to that alien-feeling time or place. A wash of nostalgia came over him out of nowhere, like a sepia tint-shift bar on the big insta panel in the sky had been slid hard, and he was glad he’d said no to a second beer. More-so, glad that food would soon appear.

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He spent the next couple days baked and stacking up potential content for the spit party, which would start after the Global Marijuana March that was usually sanctioned by the city but had been officially cancelled in some fit of punitive pique by Mayor DoFo, and go past midnight until May the Fourth. Dan wasn’t sure how much of the day of the fourth they’d be there but anticipated that there’d be people like Shay and Raven dancing past dawn. He’d been building little Star Wars-related riffs into otherwise-unremixed club hits from the past few years, for the occasion. Otherwise he was sorting things into themed playlists that layered together witchhouseishly if ordered in a complimentary way, so he could switch between two or more of them in different media players, and do some cross-fading. He had a russian rap playlist, regular rap, russian hardbass, ambient, dungeon synth, some oldschool batcave stuff for Jean-Paul, basic club, and the club stuff that sounded most world-music-y. He intended to not worry about beat-matching, because it really didn’t seem to matter. He liked how it sounded when it was kind of off-kilter, it was kind of weirdly fresh to his ear. It was the kind of thing his ex hated, she was fanatical about not appearing to make mistakes,

even if you were doing something on purpose that you personally liked the sound of.

The night of the thirtieth, Andre surprised him by being the marshal who appeared to collect him, her dual-layer hair falling into the empty space cleanly in a sweep like an animated princess's hair or something, in exactly the way no one else's hair did when they stuck their head into his room.

"Dan! Come on! We're getting the bikes loaded with picnic stuff! Are you ready?"

Her head disappeared and, feeling slightly like he was in a trance, he climbed upstairs and followed her outside after putting on a flannel he'd found and some old tennis shoes from Jean-Paul. Around the back of the building the picnic squaddies were assembling. Elinor was there, and she said "Dan! Hi!" "Hey, Elinor, hey," he felt silly and added, "nice to see you again." He suddenly remembered her tentative mood when their parties had split up at the start of the month. She seemed much happier now, and it made her look different. Less peaky, healthier. Maybe it was just the change in weather. He wanted to thank her for going to the show with them that night, but instantly regretted thinking about it at all. He went to ask Bruce if he had a spare on-the-road.

"Yeah, OBVI," Bruce seemed bouncier than usual. He was practically levitating in good-natured excitement. Dan felt like he was almost physically seeing positive vibes actually rippling out of him, like an oil-slick-mirage effect in the air. "Hey you're still on the house wi-fi out here right?"

Download this wifi map app I'm email-sharing you a link for right now, if you get lost on the bikeride or somewhere else just walk around until you find somewhere on the map. Download everything in the GTA now so you'll have it offline. Its full of passwords for secured places like salons and stuff. Not that you really need it, there's so many all-night places with open wifi everywhere near where we're going. But y'never know, I've seen people get llllllllooooooo-ooooost. Better safe than sorry!"

"Right, thanks," Dan told him, installing it. He felt slightly condescended to, but, it wasn't like it was off-base, he knew. This was the guy who had taught

him how to mash potatoes, after all. It was amazing he hadn't tried to tie Dan's shoelaces doubleknotted for him when he'd gone outside. He looked around for the bike he was supposed to be using, and saw a row of newly-rowed-up bikes under a tarp. The traincore kids had left gifts. Saleable gifts that were also vehicles. *Not very oogley of them*, Dan concluded. It was the five of them headed east, it seemed like.

It took them two hours to get to the park Jean-Paul wanted to have their moonlit picnic in, stopping twice for stints of group-joining texting that were also breathers. By the time they got to Rouge, there were a dozen of them, including a couple people on skateboards who had shown up right as they got there. The bike people locked up outside a nearby tim's, after an announcement from Andre that it was going to rain right around the time Jean-Paul wanted to drop the banner. The plan was to go sit in the tim's after they left the park, and sort it out from there how they'd get back. No one had anticipated rain, and Dan was glad that it seemed like he wasn't the only one made of sugar.

The picnic turned out to be the highlight of the night, and it made him feel like a killjoy for having wanted to miss it all. They listened to music with Bruce's boombox, pulled out of his big backpack, and ate charcuterie Andre had packed along with ciders a couple people had shown up with. One of Bruce's east-side friends was up and playing with devil-sticks, which he hadn't seen since a streetfair when he was younger. It seemed so B.C. somehow, so Saltspring. A lot of Bruce's friends did, of course, but this one in particular, with his beet-juice dyed harem pants and his little leather fannypack thing. Dan asked Jean-Paul if he knew the guy, and he'd said no, so he'd asked Bruce where he was from, and found out B.C., but the interior, "near Kelowna, do you know Nelson? It's pretty small but it seems like a lot of people come from there." He didn't know the town. But he liked the guy's seed-loaf a lot, it was sweet as hell and had a texture like birthday cake. Eventually Jean-Paul and Bruce's big duffle-pack disappeared into the inky treeline together, off to do something devious. Andre's phonescreen flashed on, catching Dan's eye, and he watched her text for a minute before also

leaving. They were back twenty minutes later, both looking slightly flushed from the daring-do of tying a big sheet to the side of an empty roadway. It started raining on their way out of the forest, with Jean-Paul and several of the others including Andre, swinging a magnum of cheap prosecco back and forth and singing something in French that sounded like some kind of old union hymn. It was kind of moody and pretty with the rain, but it also felt very cold once they stopped walking, and Dan was glad to go hide in the tim's and have coffee for a while before everyone picked their transit options and went their ways to wherever. It seemed like everyone there was going to go home and sleep and meet back up at the FNB tables later in the afternoon to help serve. Everyone was trying to be optimistic about how the rain would impact turnout.

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Dan had no idea how the demonstration itself went, because after biking to the go train station with Jean-Paul and Andre and Bruce and Elinor, waiting for the first train to Union for over an hour, and then TTCing up to the Maison with Jean-Paul, and having a hot shower, Dan passed out and slept until the morning of the second. It was the most exercise he'd gotten since he didn't know when—probably the longest time he'd spent doing any kind of high-impact activity in his life, since it had been a lot more work than gym class, and he'd never actually done a lot of physically active things. His parents didn't have time to take him to lessons for anything and he'd spent most of his childhood inside, watching TV. He hadn't had a bike since his first bike, which he'd gotten too big for around age 11, and hadn't used more than a couple times before that. Mostly going to the corner store in the summer, in between watching reruns on the comedy channel or music video countdowns.

He spent the days of the second and third adding buffer-noises to the openings and endings of his music files, to make the transitions easier. About two hours before the officially cancelled march was about to start, Dan stuck his laptop in its padded laptop bag and took a bike from the yard to ride down into town. He realized quickly that daytime traffic was extremely not-the-



same as the nighttime empty streets they'd had for their Rouge mission, and decided that probably, biking wasn't this thing. When he got to the cafe, he was out of breath more from the traffic than the cycling, which had been mostly down hill the whole way. Hence why he'd taken the bike instead of trying to get onto the bus, in the first place. But the vaporizers in the back room were happy to see him, and Bruce was happy to weed him. Roscoe seemed happy, bustling around the front-end and seeing to an endless-looking line of people in a staff apron. Dan mentioned the crowd to Bruce, noting that the back was busier than he'd ever seen it as well. He'd found out they were pretty much all podcast listeners, and Bruce had gotten him a coffee because some caffeination was called for before they went out. Jean-Paul wasn't there but Bruce didn't know where he was, and hadn't been worried. He said Jean-Paul usually missed podcast parties anyway, which left Dan feeling slightly let down for some reason. It wasn't like he needed Jean-Paul there as some kind of wingman or defence, he knew other people there. He was friends with other people there. But with Jean-Paul missing from the picture it seemed kind of empty somehow. He realized he had really wanted Jean-Paul to see him DJ for once. For the first time, ever. He had a whole playlist specifically worked out for the sole purpose of catering to Jean-Paul. It was easy enough to just not incorporate those tracks now, but he had kind of been mentally factoring that component of the sound-orchard into the whole thing all along. He felt really let down, and decided to stay behind at Higher Grounds while the march happened, and meet everyone at the gates to the spit later. Bruce seemed gently concerned by the sudden change but didn't push about his reasoning or gameplan.

After everyone had left Dan to the lounge in solitude, and someone who worked there that Dan didn't know had come in to give Roscoe a break, the two of them had a small dinner together courtesy of Roscoe, who materialized at the door carrying takeout from the churro place. He seemed very amused by Dan, but didn't really say much of substance to indicate to him what it was he found funny. They talked about Bruce, mostly, who Roscoe obviously loved like he'd love a puppy; he said Bruce's money was

no good at his businesses, and that he always saved the toasted shake from the vapes for him because he was “a sweet mooncalf babychild,” which, Dan had to agree was true. Dan was impressed that Bruce, whose major need in life seemed to be being stoned, had put together such a sweet get-my-smoke-for-free life. It really had a kind of clockwork precision to it, but it was clear above all that it only worked like that because Bruce was completely honestly Bruce. He put out and pulled in good “vibes” without any ulterior motive. Mentioning his thinking along these lines to Roscoe, he was told “people don’t give you weed because you’ve created a life that petitions the world for free weed, people give you weed because you’ve helped create or maintain their lives and they want to repay you.”

Finally around dusk, after a last check his facebook via the cafe wifi and seeing no word from Jean-Paul, he took himself down to the streetcar stop and coasted eastward along its smooth silver rails, feeling like he was going to miss the stop any second right up until he didn’t. From the starbucks it left off near, he checked his phone again but there were no messages except some facebook statuses from Bruce and Andreah about being at the spit gate, a little under half an hour old. He PM’d Andreah that he was at the starbucks up the road and walked around the corner to head south. In the not-so-distant distance he saw a chorus of cell phone screens light up and wave at him.

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It was truly an epic party, Dan had to admit. At least a 9/10. Easily 9.5, even. After waiting at the gate another hour, smoking weed and staying out of sight, the mass of them headed south down the dusty main road of the park, walkers and longboarders and so on. There were a couple dogs with them, which Dan was surprisingly happy to see and get to pet. He had always wanted a dog of his own but his parents hadn’t wanted two. He’d had fish. He hadn’t thought about it in years, wanting a dog. His ex wasn’t an animal-lover and their building had had a policy. People were getting rambunctuous and starting to wave around sparklers they’d brought and were now lighting, and the dogs seemed amused, dancing in the lane with the people waving the

little wands. Dan felt the warm fading from the air, and the lake-moisture chill settle as they went further into the park.

It was a truly bizarre place, once you got into it. Dan had never been anywhere like it. After what felt like an hour of walking they arrived at the part of the “beach” Bruce had in mind. At the waters edge the rounded lakerocks were small and there was a tall embankment edged with rounded bricks and old cinderblocks. Weird rebar-and-whatever sculptures and cinderblock formations that looked constructed were really everywhere, and some of the podcasties ran around setting up candles so they wouldn’t blow out and lighting them, and Andreah pulled out a some stuff from her pack and started a bonfire using it as starter. Dan figured that was his cue to start setting up and turned to Bruce’s discarded bag for the boombox and cord. When he looked up from collecting together some scrap wood and blocks for a little booth to set up in, he saw that Bruce had brought out his usb party-light, along with another couple batteries of the same size that were powering two strings of mini leds each, which when stretched out and laced around the area made a loose circle that easily had enough space for everyone to stay within it, although people seemed to dip in and out of the lighted area at will, leaving for a leak or snort or a quick fuck in the tall grass or just some alonetime on a stroll. About half of them seemed to be on acid, if Raven and Shay seeming like they were on acid again and a bunch of the other casties looking the same was anything to go by. Bruce revealed the big game-saver in the form of an rv battery under a big picnic blanket (the one they’d used at the picnic a few nights before), which when clipped up to a dc/ac inverter box thing, just barely had the wattage to power his laptop. It made noise too, so he left it off a couple hours, until it was necessary. The first track he decided to cue up was ritualz after all; he’d been right, that was the vibe.

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part 17b: may the fourth be with you

May 4, 2016 3:18pm

Sometime before dawn, Dan queued up the premixed for-a-piss-jaunt four-track and creakily sidled out from the somehow-increasingly-dense tangle of stuff on and around the makeshift sitting-height booth, which was powering and playing and had a non-rotating led laser usb dongle. It seemed to also be a coatcheck and phone deposit but he didn't feel in charge of that and was leaving his own shit there too, anyway.

Stumbling over uneven, rocky ground and scrub brush between boulders, he made his way away from the shoreline and its sparking fire and starry starry night and scattered merryfaced figures. The air was clear up on the dune and the city glowed metropolitanly just past the other edge of the spit, blooming light pollution. It was pretty, from back here, he felt. A class field trip to the Swan Lake Christmas Hill nature preserve blearily came to mind as he looked through daytime pictures of where he was on the map, scrolling while pissing.

Waving his phone as a kind of beacon and hoping to not trip via some stroke of luck and glancing led, Dan shuffled back to shore, noting that it smelled like something chemically had gone on the fire either recently or without him noticing until he was out of the smoke's zone of inclusion.

On the dusty road between his chosen patch of brush he looked out over the endless-seeming water at the first faint rimfrosting of dawn light on the horizon, then back at the city, its own predawn bubble of hazy chiaroscuro. In retrospect he wondered why he'd bothered walking so far or waiting two or three times longer than he might've otherwise; various people had been making less scenic and much shorter strolls to get to a desirable spot from their point of view. Were there snakes out east, he belatedly wondered. Someone had mentioned coyotes but he'd always filed coyotes alongside geese and skunks, urban wildlife-wise; possibly startling, somewhat annoying, basically too small to stress about. He was more concerned by venomous things.

Trying not to be out-awol'd by his own set, he clambered around a bit climbing back into place, feeling like a hermit crab coming home after an open-house at another shell or something. He had ignored the few

anonymous figures along the higher elevation lip above the party, but he caught himself glued—painfully socket-screwed—to his peripherals as he tried to decode whether it had been Andre and Andrea he had seen having what could really only have been furious half-clothed partydrug-sex against a large stand of cinderblocks.

Later his line of vision came across the pair nearby on the shore, having an argument about something in strident yet somehow hushed voices. Andre looked truly high, her veins stood out and she was clenching her jaw like a nutcracker doll, like she could chew through wood. Dan noted with approval that Andrea, by contrast, had a much more mellow mood on, which seemed appropriate to the hour. Almost everyone was packed up and gone somewhere to camp or nearby, rolled up in a beer jacket to keep for later, cherubic smiles tucked into elbows and under hats and into the sides of dogs. Only a handful of partiers had planned on making rocks pillows by drinking enough to get to sleep country canada.

He watched Andre deftly mount goat her way up the dropoff and take off on her bike, managing to cycle angrily, somehow, even in silhouette.

It wasn't long before Andrea found him packing everything up, Bruce fluttering around over his shoulder playing preferred selections of recorded audio from his phone. Walking back toward the distant streetcar line, he nudged the topic of the fight and got a pretty unambiguous play-by-play, with Andrea sounding very bored for someone going on at length. Apparently Andre had demanded to be fucked, wanted nonetheless to be somewhat discreet in light of spectators, gotten mad about Andrea putting a hand over her mouth, and then snowballed over to being mad that Andrea had actually fucked her right there, as requested by a then-much-higher Andre. Andre, now rapidly coming down but not

sobering up per se, was haywire-angry about the whole thing, although Andrea seemed to attribute it mainly to the tidal-pull effect that Pete and his friends being in the crowd had on Andre. Dan hadn't seen who, of the constellations of people in attendance that a.m., was avoiding who, really. All the out-of-towners had seemed delirious with festive cheer, and that had set

the tone until they weren't accounted for anymore, either individually or amassed as the largest group-within-a-group there. Weed smoke, at one point plummeting all around their soiree as it remained stationary, now trailed along with them as Bruce heroically held aloft a blunt and proclaimed "shares," before sneezing once abruptly and concluding "for the honor of weedskull. I don't have a cold pee-ess, it's allergies."

Andreah teased him about being city-adapted, concluding "I thought you couldn't take the country out of the boy."

"Take my sinus out-of-the-boy, please!" Bruce was barely coherent and Dan thought he'd been doing whippets all night or something. He didn't seem to know about Andre being gone, because he didn't seem to care. Carefree even for Bruce, was the sort of unexpected not-even-my-final-form move he should probably just learn to expect, he figured, watching Bruce seemingly maneuvering to evade capture in the large invisible butterfly net zigzagging around the service road, chasing after the tousled nest of hair that denoted the broadcaster-and-apparently-bonafide-e-celeb, niche as that celebrity seemed to be.

He abruptly wondered why Jean-Paul had missed out, he'd kept the party soundtracked right. Pete and Mouse had been there. Pete had even been DJ for a turn after shooing Dan off the laptop to lakepiss a beer he hadn't noticed he needed to until Pete was demanding the seat. He'd thrown on a thumbdrive with some of his friends tracks and they rapped along live, harmonizing with each other and themselves while Pete filmed from the "booth". They'd done one and Pete couldn't get them to do more so he begrudgingly gave the night back over to some ambient trance mixed with indie rock and then old horror movie synth, low. In the light of day he didn't regret how he'd played it. Bruce had kept requesting beach dad stuff he didn't have, like Jimmy Buffet. Then he'd insist on hotspotting and emailing him files.

"Hey, play some Buffet on your phone," he called to Bruce. Andreah

groaned.

“I’ve got something better, it’ll take us to the gates,” Bruce bounced back to them boing-a-boing-a-boing along the road. After some thumbing he bounced away again with his phone aloft, trailing a ribbon of synthwave “country roads.” The sun wasn’t quite up yet and Dan wondered why more of the people sleeping at the shore weren’t crashing with Bruce or Andreah and figured it was just more romantic that way, and Bruce was there to see them both home because he’d had enough of that brand of romance already. He’d let Andreah wheel the bike cart with the battery and stuff, and so unfettered he fluttered by them on the road again, singing along, and changing West Virginia to Maison Rokkoku.

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part 18: the big rockabilly wedding in the woods

June 28, 2016 4:22pm

3200 Dundas Street, Toronto West

“And—oh, OH! This REMINDS ME,” Bruce looked epiphany-struck, interrupting his own smattering of updates, and Dan waited in anticipation, paused in heading to his room down the ladder. Mouse looked sleepy and glared from the couch at the shouting.

After sleeping off the big stonerfest around the start of the warm days, there'd been a blur of parties around town and smoking on the back balcony with Bruce if they were both up. Dan was used to random outbursts. So was Mouse, ultimately, but he had just woken up and was annoyed by the noise—fortunately Dan had also developed an immunity to the laser eyes, and they weren't directed at him anyway. They'd been on entirely friendly terms for a while, after the day he'd spent being co-host as Mouse's substitute when Mouse had a been AWOL for a day or two as usual but was off schedule with Bruce for once.

“Duuuude, *DUDES*,” Bruce shouted out from the kitchen like the two of them were the studio audience, “my brother’s getting *married* in August! And you’re *both invited*! DAN, you’ve gotta come to my fam’s place for this, the

parties are balls-out *amazing*, and weddings are when the funfetti hits the motherfreakin' FAN." He did explosion hands. "Hey for real, they said I could bring the whole crew—the kit, the caboodle, fuckin' everyone." Maybe he'd seen Dan looking incredulous.

"They really have room for all of us if we all want to go?"

"*We get to camp in the driveway,*" Bruce enthused, arms raised in a cheer.

Dan shot a look at Mouse. "You have my R-S-V-P," Mouse said, enunciating but not raising his voice. He rolled over with his face into the couch-cushion.

"Oh-my-*what*, dude, it'll be so *funnnnnn*? You've *gotta* come, I'd invite all the loyals if I could but it's, y'know, not my circus. I'd've given you more of a head's-up and brainstormed a track or audiocollage or whatever for them with you but it's like, they're kinda ultra into this niche retro genre stuff? In a way of not liking remixing...or like, sound production of any kind? Iiiiiiiiiit's a rrrrockabillyyyy weddinggg," he laughed, having obviously tickled himself somehow. Dan sensed Bruce found his sibling slightly comical. It for sure went both ways, he surmised.

"Should be a hoot." Dan felt himself smiling. A great big rockabilly wedding in the middle of Manitoba. The heat from the airless second floor was oppressive and he resolved with himself to do some research about rockabilly music while he waited for Mouse to vacate the nap station. At least he knew what to talk about at the wedding.

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August 1, 2016 4:22pm

Dan made some pants he'd found on a bench last week into an extra pair of cut-offs, and stuffed them, along with some tank tops and t-shirts he'd found in a box next to a donation bin, into an old featureless canvas backpack from the perverse cellar.

The plan as he knew it was, they'd leave this evening, arrive in two or three days, and the wedding was in five days. He opted to nap after packing, until



someone got him well after dark, when the roads were clear. He figured on a quick shower just before getting underway, maybe three or four minutes to soap and rinse.

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August 2, 2016 3:44 am

It was a sultry night, a kind he'd never really encountered in Vic; the air was fizzing with promise, and some strange majesty. It was as warm as a day. The call had finally come down the line, it was time to go. There was a haze of Bruce's pre-leaving weed vape saturating the air like a fog, and some jungle was playing softly. Dan wished he had the lexicon to identify it. Outside traffic noise, which usually echoed through the cracked-open front window, was silent-as-the-dawn at this time of night. He decided against worrying about shutting the window fully while they were gone, no one else had cared. There were no big rainstorms upcoming according to the forecasts for western Ontario and Manitoba, so there was no way rain would come in or something, the way his Mom had scolded it would.

He didn't know the leaving plan in detail, just the leaving-when. Dan wasn't clearly sure of the reason for the overnight departure, but Bruce had finally gone around and asked everyone to assemble in the common space, at 3:30 am, expecting to be underway within half an hour. Taking ten minutes to adjust to being awake and slightly apprehensive, Dan climbed into the living room and was greeted by the body populi of Maison Rockkoku. *Group photo*, he thought.

“The bus is out front, it's all tuned up and running.” That answered the leaving-how. Bruce was texting quickly, friscalating with excitement—understandably, with everyone in the house agreed and assembled to attend a blow-out wedding at his family's weed farm. Andre hadn't been willing to take work off to be Bruce's plus-another-one for the trip, and Andreak had told Dan off for asking her to be his own date. Their absences felt not-uncomfortable, but this occurred only vaguely to Dan, who had been staring at Pete since emerging from the second floor. There was some phenomenally mole-like air about Pete today, which Dan would've expected if he'd thought about it: he had on his thick Buddy Holly glasses instead of contacts, his skin

was completely washed out like he'd been inside since the spit party, and his black hair was hanging in greasy clumps in the most extreme gravity-defying reverse mullet Dan had ever seen him with. He looked as ghastly and haunted as a cartoon of a guy working on his PhD alone in his room for over a year, might. Dan decided against prying about it when Pete glared his way.

“Whose place did you have it at, again?” Jean-Paul studied his nails while asking, his summerwear impeccable and inasmuch very funny to Dan; he was wearing transparently-expensive black jeans made into cut-offs, with thin-strapped flip-flops and a very fine cotton tee, hanging from the plunging v-neck of which were some fancy-looking shades. Dan tried to catch the brand and finally saw that they were *Dolce & Gabbana*. It was too much, his friend looked like a mall billboard ad of a not-so-sporty goth having a beach-day. Dan took it for his lakeshore look, finding it very funny really. Next to Jean-Paul, where he leaned against the couch, was a perfectly plain black micro-duffle; what an accessorizer, at least he had packed light. Bruce was perched atop the half-pipe, vaporizing again gleefully in an ancient hyper-colour shirt, hair pompadouring under his wraparounds. “Whose place,” Jean-Paul repeated impatiently.

“Oh, Rose-Marie’s, she’s got that little side-alley off the driveway that she doesn’t use, right?” Dan wondered if Jean-Paul knew Rose-Marie, assuming he’d already known the Maison had a tour bus. It was probably a burning man shuttle or something. Probably whoever Rose-Marie was she'd been using it as a guesthouse. He was still watching Pete, who occasionally glanced back impassively from where he was leaning at the kitchen island, eating a cucumber as if he did things like eating where people could see him every day as opposed to twice a year. Occasionally he’d swipe the cucumber through a small dish of something dark and clear. Mouse sat in the little white chair next to the couch, reading with his usual falsely-bland air of contained intensity.

“Well, everyone’s here now and so is our transportation,” said Jean-Paul, crossing his arms loosely. He peered up at Bruce expectantly.

“Hey, whoa, I’ve got like, six whole minutes here,” Bruce jumped down from the half-pipe though, and cleaned the volcano’s mouthpiece. He then disappeared down the hall and emerged moments later with a sand-coloured rucksack into which he was stuffing a shirt and a bag of weed approximate in dimensions to a throw-pillow. Dan saw Pete roll his eyes and smile. It seemed like a lot, and Dan’s first thought was that it was backup in case they got stuck or needed to trade for a ride to a gas station or something. Bruce looked jubilantly out over them and burst out with “*dudes* you’re gonna fuckin’ looove the shit my fam grows—but I figure like, *roadtrip*, right? Plus, they’d wanna try this, it’s completely bomber shit and like, my Dad, he’s super down on hydro so it’s like a, a...*dude you’re gonna looove this shit*, teachable moment thing. I’ve been trying to get him into indoor growing for years,” he was rolling road joints now.

“Whee, woo, four-twenny,” Pete smirked, waving his hands ironically.

“It’s always four-twenty somewhere,” Mouse quipped back. Dan was relieved that it wouldn’t be an issue of smoking alone with Bruce while Jean-Paul was around being sniffy; though, for his part, Jean-Paul was giving off an air of total nonchalance though, utterly lacking in judgmental vibes as he waited, now standing upright with duffle in hand, expectant. Dan was glad he wasn’t too wound up, either—it felt like a long road to farmcountry ahead. Mouse put his book down spine-up on the couch and stood up, apparently bringing nothing. Dan randomly guessed that he got carsick, and made a bet with himself to get a frappuccino somewhere if he was right. Bruce handed each of them a lit point-five joint of his illity-ill and made *smoke up* gestures at them, and even Jean-Paul, the weed-Grinch himself, toked the dank trees.

They all trooped downstairs finally and were greeted on the street immediately in front of the building by an ancient-looking school bus, painted bright pink. To Dan’s surprise—although, he realized, he could easily have assumed by now that *someone* needed to drive it over because obviously none of them had, they’d all been waiting—there was someone hanging out of the driver’s window, grinning ear-to-ear at them; someone with stringy bleached hair, teashade sunglasses, and a purple holofoil cowboy hat on. Dan suddenly internalized that the bus was parked facing the wrong way, or, the

right way in the wrong lane. Traffic on their side of the street flowed the other way. He felt himself goggling up at their driver.

“G’day SLOWPOKES,” they were greeted, accompanied by a blast of drumming on the door below the driver’s side window. The driver had a girly voice but an unplaceably ambiguous everything-else. Dan could already tell this was Bruce’s friend from raves.

“Facing into oncoming traffic,” he tried stating the obvious. The street was deserted, however. No wonder they were driving at this hour.

“Have you met Alice?” asked Jean-Paul from Dan’s side.

“No...I don’t think so...” he hadn’t. *Alice, Alice, “it’s a song about Alice,”* why wasn’t this clicking? He dropped his roach, now only filter.

“Alice lives on the roof.” Jean-Paul told him whimsically, sounded covertly amused. Dan felt patronized.

“Where’s ‘the roof,’” Dan asked, feeling odd, like he knew this already. ‘The roof’ sounded like a patio bar. He thought of a couple old photos Jean-Paul had been tagged in.

“What? The roof! Up there! *Our* roof. *She’s a housemate* of yours.” He heard the latent *don’t embarrass me* between the lines. “I knew you didn’t know,” Jean-Paul sounded pleased to be right and somehow also like he was indicting someone. Like he was saying *I knew you couldn’t really vibe*.

Bruce bounced around, bopping parts of the bus that didn’t appear to be gauged by bopping. “I totally mentioned Alice! I think!” He shrugged. “Myyyyyyy bad!” Mouse sighed rhetorically to signal his impatience and took Jean-Paul and Pete’s bags, carrying them around the front of the bus to the open door. Dan looked up at Alice more and Pete followed Mouse. She seemed fun—he felt like he liked her already.

Jean-Paul said “hello gorgeous,” to Alice and she gave him a hand to kiss. Alice tipped her purple cowboy hat and grinned, cheshire.

“*Enchante*,” she piped coquettishly.

“Have you met the bus yet?” Jean-Paul asked Dan. *Oh my shit! ALICE*, he belatedly realized.

Dan shook his head no, slowly. He guessed Jean-Paul thought that he might've seen it when Bruce had gone to some hippie festival up north recently, but actually Dan had stayed in bed when Bruce was leaving to pout about a call from his sisters instead. They didn't think what he was doing counted as meaningful work.

“HER NAME'S LA-VENDA,” shout-talked Alice, slapping the side of the pink bus below her window again. Alice looked like Jean-Paul's sister might, if Jean-Paul had a stubbly sister who did a lot of speed, but also lifted weights and hit the lakeshore to tan a bit.

“So...have you been living on the roof...long?” He was suddenly concerned that this was an important time and place to make smalltalk. It was very early and his mental processing wasn't engaging properly.

“SINCE 2010!”

“Alice usually over-winters in the metal...construction on the third floor,” supplied Jean-Paul, still sounding amused. Dan suddenly remembered the winter, and the 2nd floor cellar door to the garden being jammed, and even something about, there was a door in Bruce's room. And about the little nap shack thing. He felt like his memory files weren't in order today.

“You—” don't look very transitioned he almost heard himself say out loud. Then he realized he *had* heard it out loud. Jean-Paul had clapped hand to forehead and looked pinched.

"Sorry, it's four in the morning, my brain isn't in gear," he apologized sincerely. Alice was obviously cool, Dan just didn't have it together right then. This was the kind of thing Bruce and Jean-Paul had specifically been worried about, he realized.

"Get in the damn bus and I'll explain off-market estrogen availability to you," she told him.

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August 2, 2016 7:22am  
Trans-Canada Highway, Ontario

A few hours later he was still sitting up front talking to Alice, who he'd belatedly been told was on "some *heavy-duty* amphetamines, dude, *heavy-duty*" which he rolled with because she hadn't killed them all yet. She drove like a maniac and claimed that was the only way to drive the bus. On the highway it didn't matter much how unwieldy it was, but it handled like a bathtub and even as a non-driver he could tell Alice was basically qualified to make the claims about it that she had, about it being "fiiiiine."

Dan had learned more about prescriptions (expensive and difficult to maintain because some doctors refused refills without regular bloodwork etc) and what got provincial coverage (hormones but not most surgeries and not re-dos) and how to get it covered (jump through twenty fiery hoops held by fascists at some place called CAMH, which sounded positively Orwellian when she explained it) and why that was difficult, and about supply issues on the resale level. After that they had begun talking sort of tangentially about her client pool and how most of them were roped in to "donating" to her "breast augmentation fund," meaning they each thought she was saving her allowance up, from one source, for big new tits to play with, meaning they were more likely to be generous, the faster they wanted to see that happen, which she was playing against their desire to keep her broke and coming back for work... she seemed serious that she was actually relying on hormone-based naturals growing in, which she was actually delaying intentionally by not getting refills, in order to keep being marketable to the clients who liked her to look like she did now and dress super girly for them in private with special little outfits and talk about how great having giant fake

titties would be and stuff, because she didn't really know how to attract other sorts of patrons. She insisted that "augmentation" was a matter of semantics so she wasn't lying to her clients per se, since she did actually sometimes spend their money on off-market HRT, and then she'd insisted that there was nothing to worry about anyway, when he'd asked about her business model and long term plans from the perspective of, are your clients safe to string along. None of them were particularly lucrative or hospitable from the sounds of it but she seemed determined to make light of everything and insisted that at the rate they were paying expenses including hormone pickups, she was the one being strung along. She assured him that none of them knew where she lived or that she had any association with their address, which actually made him feel better, meaning his concern had been mainly selfish.

"Besides, it's not like I *have* to see them. I ignored calls all winter and it was fine."

"Were you *stuck* on the roof?" He felt he'd been lead to believe she had options. Like sleeping inside in the living room. "I never saw you inside..."

"What the *fuck*?" Alice laughed, half giggle, partly yelling over the highway noise. "I've *got* a *house* there. It was so *frikkin'* WARM this year!" He laughed at how she'd said it.

"Alice decided to spend the winter this year in hermitage after that eighteen degree day last December," said Jean-Paul from behind him. Dan hadn't realized he'd been listening at any point. "I go up to visit a few times a week, make sure she's eating and alive."

"Brucey an' Andre like to check in on me too, bring me soup, blah blah." Alice was staring at the road through her tinted sunglasses. She seemed to think more explanation was required. "It's honestly fine with a space heater, I've got it airtight in the greenhouse, with insulation over the windows. Compost the humanure in-house either on the roof, or I take a bucket for the big bin down on a rope and pull it back up later." Dan thought that when he had time later, he might simply decide to die dead from the comedy of finding out people with composting toilets said *humanure*. "The stairs go

down to the back garden, right, so when I need food I come out at three a.m. and take on the gritty city's dumpsters at my leisure." She sounded like the goth girl in *Jawbreaker* saying *cool, you got a stillborn*. "It fucking ROCKS dude, I totally Dick Proenneke it," she held a hand out, indicating wide open space, "alooone in the asphalt wilderness, minus the fly-ins from my friends."

"If Dick Proenneke also happened to wash up at the occasional party," Jean-Paul added. Alice pursed her lips, looking sort of impish and smug in the rearview. Pete and Mouse were asleep on a bench seat apiece behind them, closer to the back of the bus, and Bruce had headphones on, playing some game on his new smartphone, probably something turn-based that Toichiro was also playing, far away.

"So you're taking a break from being a mostly-hermit to drive a giant pink bus named Lavenda," he was interrupted by Jean-Paul.

"Lavender," he told Dan curtly. "You're not Australian," he mentioned pointedly to Alice. She looked over her shoulder, outraged. "Eyes on the road!" Jean-Paul yelled before she could argue.

"That's *the line* though!" She howled, nearly gnashing her teeth. He had some sense that he should know what the line was from because they both did. They were arguing like it was theology.

"Just *kill* me, lord," Jean-Paul moaned. Dan decided to try a defuse.

"Whatever—Lavender" he acknowledged hastily "—and, so, you took a break from being a hermitess," she looked very slightly placated by the verbal gesture, still glaring at Jean-Paul in the rearview, "to partybus-driver out to a rockabilly wedding at Bruce's parent's pot farm in Manitoba," Dan asked and stated, wanting just to say it. "That's...got to be a contrast."

"SHOULD BE A HOOT!" Alice hollered, throwing up her wiry arms. Hadn't that been what he'd said too, in June? Maybe Bruce had mentioned it to her and she was quoting him. He felt sorry that he hadn't met her already,



if she felt like he'd been avoiding her on purpose. Maybe they all kind of thought that could be the case, actually. Her arms were back down with her hands on the wheel before any swerve of the bus. She was wearing a tie-dye crushed velvet t-shirt that Dan had found himself mesmerized by, admiring it; it gleamed iridescent pastel aqua and purple in the hazy, blown-out light from the sunlit highway.

Dan guessed maybe Alice *was* echoing him from days back because Bruce had quoted him to her. Maybe he'd used that expression some afternoon on the podcast and she'd listened to it, he mused it over. Her outfit almost seemed thematic: ranger on the open road, *rider on the storm*.

“We’re about to go through Sudburrrrrryyyyyyy,” Alice called out. Dan checked on the back—Bruce had one headphone off and the others were waking up. “Someone buy us breakfast!” She commanded cheerfully, which, free food post haste sounded tip-top to Dan.

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August 2, 2016 6:05pm  
Trans-Canada Highway, Ontario

They'd loaded up on snacks and cheap hot food that morning at the Sudbury Costco because Bruce had a membership. Dan had never been to Costco and was quickly intoxicated by the guilt-free nature of ordering more food than he could eat for less money than he minded asking Bruce to pay. He'd crashed in the back once they were on the road again, and had a beautiful food-coma for a serious chunk of hours, waking up to a mild feeling of roadsickness that quickly cleared up. He didn't want to reinvoke the feeling so he avoided checking his phone and pondered instead the transmission route of the phrase *should be a hoot*. Mostly when he'd been on the podcast, Bruce and he talked about parties they'd gone to together, and Dan found himself acting as a defacto live EDM reviewer from being dragged places and then asked followup questions about the time he'd had. He didn't think he'd called anything a hoot but maybe he had. But the trip *had* been obliquely mentioned at some point, lately, for sure, because of the episode hiatus while they were away. Had Bruce said it then, about the hoot? Dan

suddenly wished he'd known-known Alice lived on the roof—in retrospect, having ignored her and now relying on her driving, he'd really have liked to have visited, see what was new, catch the view from the roof...figure out if she had a driver's license and whether he trusted it to meaningfully gauge her ability to drive...not that it really mattered after all now, he'd decided over and over as she sobered up over the day and acted less and less wacky. All that notwithstanding or, not to mention, the general sense he now had of the weird charm of knowing this hyperactive alien was rattling around up there.

“Should be a hoot,” he nodded slowly to himself. In his mind's ear he heard an itchy-bitsy Gwen Stefani go *uh-huh, this my shit*, and he felt the earth move a tiny, tiny bit as they rushed along its surface, as if budged by the echoing stomp/clap-track playing in his mind. Swaying up to the front of the bus again, he told Alice "nice work getting out of the Junction this morning, by the way," he meant her parking spot had been a hoot.

Alice grinned again and said “*fuck* the po-lice.”

The interior of the bus was decorated with various hangings, a couple strings of prayer flags, and at the front, a small disco ball. Unfortunately there was no aux intake on the radio, just a tape deck. On Alice drove. Dan was relieved about their success so far; in spite of Alice's good cheer, dealing with cops was stressful even if he hadn't technically been the one to break the law and wouldn't feel particularly at a loss if he somehow missed this wedding. He really didn't want to see police clashing with anyone, let alone their driver, who seemed determined to clash with anything that presented itself. Dan could tell she was having lots of fun with alarming him occasionally by being reckless. He wondered if she was as cavalier about her own wellbeing as it seemed, and prayed quickly to the stars that they made it there and back safe. He was along for some ride, that was for sure.

“Where even are we now?” He could see she didn't have a GPS out but she'd surely been reading the road signs. It was about four hours from sunset, and the ambient heat in the bus was just shy of sweltering. Did she have the heat on for some reason? *Why*.

“It ain’t Kansas, Toto,” she told him. “I took a shortcut, we’re on Jupiter now. There’s a great beach just over there...”

“Fine,” he rolled his eyes. They passed a sign that said Thunder Bay was 200km away. It didn’t really tell him anything. He’d barely even heard of Thunder Bay. It was supposed to be cold there, right?

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August 2, 2016 11:29pm  
Trans-Canada Highway, Ontario

Thunder Bay hadn’t been cold at all but it had been strangely difficult to drive through without stopping for drugs. In fact, they hadn’t. Alice had found a link drive-by style, and managed to do business out the window with the sunset blazing its vibrant glory across the scene like a blessing. He wasn’t sure what Alice had picked up but guessed it was her own business to judge the quality of the wares. Two hours of road later now, mostly in the dark, plus one stop for a “break” for Alice and Bruce, and he’d gotten somehow deeply into the topic of Alice’s philosophy about living on a roof and hustling reluctant-feminization fetishists. Bruce was hiding under a blanket in the back and the others were passed out.

"So a chaos mage does what, create chaos?"

"Nooo, I mean maybe sometimes, but anything does, in its own way; every gesture re-randomized probability, causality, whatever, right?"

“Like the butterfly effect,” he thought he got the gist.

“Totally. A chaos mage calls on a vast sort of material and immeasurable continuum of like, quantum theory’s strings or something—the Goddess’s mindstuff—to like, grant wishes and stuff, you know, Do Spells. Normal things mostly, like a spell to find a book or whatever. To not have leaks. You have to balance asking and giving and expect balance to come regardless, if you don’t expect it that’s when you shouldn’t mess with chaos.”

"Okay so its praying? And the god you ask for help is like, a nebula or fractal or something," He thought of that one episode of Futurama. Dan knew he sounded facetious and was trying not to, but he liked Alice better when she was driving semi-sober during the day, and not in the pitch dark in nowheresville after "taking a break" (doing some random Thunder Bay drugs with Bruce at a truck stop).

"So if I pray to chaos to bring us less chaos," he started his brain teaser but Alice smiled triumphantly.

"Exactly, go ahead. But you might find yourself agonizingly bored, as agonizing as the stress of engine trouble. But yeah, ask for less chaos, except its more like, you do rituals to petition different forces within chaos or you pray to some signifier or *aspect* of it—if you're going to pray. So pick your name I guess. I pray to different aspects of The Goddess because I personify the whole system that way. And I think she likes it. I dunno, like, go ask Kali. Petition Mother Mary." He didn't know who he would ask for less chaos, and briefly thought of a joker card before dismissing the whole idea.

"Maybe I'll pray to you, directly, that you slow down."

"Gotta go fast," was, of course, all she had to say about that. He sighed, condemned.

Fifteen minutes later they reached some small town with barely any street lights and Alice coasted to a stop in whatever she had figured for a parking spot.

"What," Dan looked around at the nothing out the windows.

"Time for a break, we'll get going again in the morning" she shrugged and hopped out, disappearing. Dan considered following but opted to grab a pillow and sleep. With a couple milk crates arranged in the aisle, he could stretch his legs out. He was soon out entirely.

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August 3, 2016 12:06 pm  
Trans-Canada Highway, Ontario

The addition of a new person to his Maisoniverse wasn't unpleasant per se, but it was throwing him off; he wasn't able to picture the same dynamics that were his best-case and then likely-case scenarios for the trip (neither of which had been objectionable, so he'd been tentatively excited). He had no idea how this was going to go overall, now, once they got there, or even over the rest of the trip. Ontario was apparently a million miles across, it was unfathomable how much road they'd travelled that was just endless inland trees and creeks on either side, occasionally fenced by weirdly beachy rope-and-post knee-high guardrails that made no sense to Dan because they weren't near the sea.

Having stopped for whatever Robin's Donuts were at a hotel on the way out of their overnight town around 11 (Alice insisted they'd all missed a great time at the local tavern, by last call; she'd materialized around 10 am after finally being texted about it), they were back on the road and Alice was driving insanely again/still but Lavender seemed to be running smoothly. Dan had seen the bus yesterday morning and imagined a series of breakdowns, no longer wondering why they'd planned to take days when the route he'd checked said it was a 23 hour drive.

Bruce handed him a menthol-flavoured spliff over the seatback. "Yo it's a genetic cross from one of the casties, mango-somethin-somethin-or-other. It's totally a hashplant haze derivative, dude, soooo head-high. He sent it to Andre but she's all weed-abstinent right nowwww," he inhaled, talking in a strained voice through the inhale, "anydoodle, you like, can't really hit a fruity tasting note or whatever," he held it, then pulled in a little more air, and added "—or I can't—but it's furry and yellow as fuck," he concluded, breathing the lungfull out after a pause, and re-fumigating the front of the bus. The open window quickly sucked it out into the already-hot, muggy afternoon air. The early morning's low-hanging sunny fog had lifted hours ago, and the highway glowed with a gilded magma film ahead of them, the reflected light shimmering like an inverted oil spill. Dan thought of that one track that went like *gold on the highway whatever comes my way*, repeating the phrase *gold on the highway* in his head over and over with different

distortions. “I rolled our day-opener with mentho-malated papes!” Bruce trilled to them with maximum good cheer, ignoring that he had been doing dabs by himself all morning, “in honour of JP, the smokeless smoker,” Bruce nodded to Jean-Paul behind them, who gamely hoisted his very-mildly-toned-yet-nearly-tanlessly-white arm on cue, to show off several fresh nicotine patches to them.

“For the kids,” he smirked, sounding droll. “So you don’t get can-sker from my coolboy fumes.”

“Right, that certain *savoir-faire*,” Pete chimed in from looking bored out the window. “Might melt us.” He was wearing sunglasses that clipped in to his regular glasses. They looked cool to Dan, kind of steampunky, like from that one Will Smith movie in the old-timey desert.

“More like *wither*,” Jean-Paul sounded tart, behind his own shades. “Wouldn’t want you to *wither up* from—”

“But Alice is smoking,” Dan notified him, cutting him off. Alice had lit up and was hauling away at a Belmont with both hands on the wheel, taking a corner wide.

“I’M THE *DRIVER*, MOTHERFUCKER. *I DO WHAT I WANT*,” shouted back Alice.

“...I was more trying to tell *him* to just go for it than wondering why *you* were giving me can-sker,” he repeated the idiomatic pronunciation memetically, thinking about diabeetus.

“I can’t now,” he was informed from over his shoulder, “I’m covered in *these* fucking things. Besides, she’s got the only window that opens.” Dan had noticed that, sometime around his midday suffocation nap, yesterday. They passed an inconspicuous blue roadsign that said WABIGOON and Dan turned to watch what Wabigoon looked like as Bruce passed the spliff to Mouse and Pete. It didn’t really look like *anything*. But, it reminded him of anywhere—rural parts of the island, or the Friday the 13<sup>th</sup> movies that were

set out in the country, or those terrible smalltown-teen soaps his ex had liked to watch reruns of when they were at her mom's place. It was nice to be next to the water, at least. It shone at them amber-white, like a mirage.

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August 3, 2016 12:44 pm  
Trans-Canada Highway, Ontario

Through the countryside they drove; any view of the four of them in the very back, 'boxing the bus, was obscured by trippy batiks and one cloth Iron Maiden tapestry. Dan felt *remarkably* buzzed, like positively balanced *and* high, and realized after some time that it must be that the sativa or whatever didn't interfere with his natural adrenaline high, in fact it made it nicer, easier. He'd always suspected that strain-talk was pretty much bullshit but the more he internalized by osmosis the more he thought in the same pattern anyway. It seemed to matter more what state he'd been in before smoking, but he could still play the strain game and explain it that way to himself. He'd been feeling caught-off-guard by waking up—something about the vastness of the surrounding landscape mixed with the ghost-towniness of their stop—and was now totally engaged and talkative.

Bruce had suddenly wanted to talk about Dan's ex for some reason so Dan had coughed up whatever answered the questions and kept up with the rotation, migrating to the open area at the back with the others for the rest of the multi-spliff sesh. Jean-Paul had curled up and fallen asleep a few seats back, again, shortly after Pete and Mouse joined the wake-and-bake up at the front.

“DEEEETOURRRRR!” Alice yelled back at them at some point, hauling hard to starboard on the wheel for all it was worth. The image of skeletal Eddie wielding a bloody hatchet, looking like a zombie version of Alice herself, fluttered in the thin air as they took the turn.

Bruce hooted joyfully back, unstressed: “whoop-whoop!”

“Welcome to whoop-whoop!” She cackled back, smoking again.

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August 3, 2016 2:05 pm and 28 degrees  
Lake Wenasaga, Ear Falls, Ontario

The detour turned out to be, the absolutely genius idea of actually jump in one of these lakes they kept passing. Dan had no idea why they'd driven another hour-plus north out of their way for this one lake, but with the cool water winding between every hair on his body as he lay submerged in it, the question seemed quite irrelevant.

The six of them spent the next several hours there at the rudimentary boat launch off the weird sort of logging road they'd rumbled down, with Bruce eventually starting up another couple spliffs when they were all ready to dry out. Even Jean-Paul joined the rotation this time. Alice started a small fire, illegally, and they all had big veggie sausages roasted on sticks at the water's edge, which was a first for Dan, and a welcome one—they were delicious, full of fennel seeds and fatty deposits of some sort—hitting the spot without feeling too heavy or chemically. Mouse never seemed to say much, really, but lakeside, under the sparse shade of the few poplars, when he made note that the sausages were “DAMN good,” it seemed to Dan that they all *felt it*, exactly, *just like* that—and that Mouse had spoken for all of them, resoundingly—from the bones.

Alice then begged off briefly, saying she craved a jelly sandwich as a follow-up. She came back with two cold six-packs from somewhere and some folded over bread, with purple leaking out the end, in-hand. Bruce *whoop-whooped* again and finally pulled out a bluetooth speaker, before complaining that he wasn't getting a signal for data on his phone and so couldn't flood the air with ICP while they drank their two beers a piece. This wasn't such a grand loss to Dan.

Looking out across the lake over his perspiring can of Laker Ice, Dan felt like, he'd never known how to get here, but had always *wanted* to be there, in this moment, surrounded with friends all having a wet, hot, Canadian summer together. Right then Alice came to Bruce's rescue, sort of, and pulled a tiny portable radio out of her fanny pack—“sort of” to the rescue, because when she turned it on, it was Drake, and she was too tall for Bruce or Mouse to get the radio away to change it to something less hokey like they both



desperately wanted. Pete and Jean-Paul were too busy not caring to care, and didn't move to help. In fact they were engrossed in competing against each other in the Olympics of who could care less, each reclining on beach towels Alice had pulled out of somewhere in the bus earlier, their drying shirts hanging between them on a fallen branch that lay perpendicular across the worn log behind them. Dan secretly cheered Alice on, preferring to let it play; *now the whole team here*, he agreed.

Shortly Alice gave up and threw Mouse the radio, settling down to tan as well. Promptly growing bored and concerned, Bruce was now commencing an aerosolized sunscreen offensive on their exposed skin after exhorting them to "COVER THE BEERS, BOYS."

"Cover my beer, boys," Alice mumbled into her folded arms, apparently preparing for a nap. All Mouse managed to find on the radio was some old hair-metal CanCon. He made an exasperated noise and threw the radio at the sand.

Dan drank some more of his beer in response, nearing the end of his first, staring out over the lake. There was a fog of humidity that you could actually see, as water evaporated into the deepening heat of the day. It seemed strangely dreamy, and he wondered if they were planning on camping there overnight.

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August 3, 2016 4:44 pm and 28 degrees  
Lake Wenasaga, Ear Falls, Ontario

It was hours before someone showed up with a boat to launch. Even though it was coming up on the blessed August Long Weekend—as everyone kept saying; even the donut place lady had wished them a good August Long Weekend, that morning—today was still only Wednesday, a Wednesday much like any other, and there had been no one at the lake all afternoon as they swam and drank intermittently, letting Alice and the bus engine wait out the worst heat of the day. Dan felt bad, now that they were piling back onto the bus, finally realizing that she preferred to drive overnight when it was cooler

out but that she had stopped last night at his prompting—for his comfort, even, maybe.

They drove somewhat tentatively back the way they'd come, with Alice suddenly edgy about the road quality. It hadn't mattered as much when a splashdown was waiting at the end of the lane, obviously.

Finally back on a real road, they headed south at a cruise, nominally intending to get back to the highway and cover some ground.

“It’s *still too hot* and *I want* more beeeeeer!” Alice whined promptly at the edge of Ear Falls, and slammed on the breaks. “I can’t STAND this much DRIVING, you GUYS,” she emphasized, throwing her hands up. There was no other traffic but it still gave Dan anxiety to be stopped there. He was resolved to be less uptight about the driving choices though, moreso now than when it had occurred to him at the beach earlier; with Alice starting to get tetchy about being the chauffeur, Dan planned to be extra zipped up about it so it couldn't be his fault, whatever happened. None of the rest of them had a licence, Dan had cumulatively discovered—in fact none of them except Alice really knew how to drive at all, let alone a fullsize, *old* schoolie like Lavender. Dan wasn't entirely convinced that Alice herself had an active licence, but she at least knew what to do to make the bus go.

“We’re still ahead of schedule if we crash here tonight,” Bruce ventured. They were still crowded up at the front, except for Pete and Mouse who had moved further back.

“So let’s get you some beers,” Jean-Paul consoled her.

So agreed, they turned in at the town beach just ahead and prepared to hunker down for the evening until or unless they were kicked out because it wasn't for overnight camping; locking the bus, they trooped over to the nearby legion hall, which they were informed was closing in an hour. A thick cloud had temporarily gathered over the sun outside, giving everything an on-edge, tense atmosphere in the sudden false-twilight. Alice immediately ordered them two pitchers of beer, “one for me, one for you,” and began to slam her first pour with a hasty thirst like you only get in the summer after a long day.

Pete began, “SO,” very loudly, midway through their impromptu beerfest, turning the heads of random patrons. Once he clearly had everyone’s attention, he asked if Dan had ever heard of Grassy Narrows, which was very nearby. Dan hadn’t, so everyone started to talk over each other to tell him they’d all just spent the afternoon swimming in mercury poisoning. Fortunately, he was drunk, and instead of getting freaked out he figured, *well, I guess fair’s fair. These guys swim in it—they have beaches.* Someone told them that when the legion closed, a good place to go for dinner was the hotel bar & grill up the road, and feeling famished, they’d gone there directly, staying the two hours until close, again shutting the smalltown joint down with the regulars. The six of them split another pitcher of beer, Alice and Pete and Mouse drinking most of it. The place was weird—there was a deer’s torso, practically, looming out of the faux-woodwork, and the ambience mostly said mining-town line-dance hall—but the food was hearty and hot. Jean-Paul had to eat plain french fries, though, while the rest of them had cheese-steak subs.

Afterward they tried to mosey back to the bus as subtly as possible, clearly wasted and wobbly, hoping to dodge the potholes, with Bruce and Alice and Dan all holding each other up and slowing each other down in equal portions. Alice couldn’t have driven if she had had to, so they were relieved to see nothing changed and no law enforcement on site at the bus. The park was dark and empty, the sky above them an arcing million, trillion specks of shining star, in wide, far ribbons of stardust.

Jean-Paul hung back outside for a cigarette in the cooling night air, having peeled his patch collection off after the first swim that afternoon. As Dan was slipping into a spot on the bus to grab the greatest booze nap of all time, he saw him through the window, seeming luminous like some wild night-orchid out there, and wished he wasn’t so drunk and had something poignant to say, so they could stand out there together and he could say it. He fell asleep and forgot the moment entirely, immediately afterwards.

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August 3, 2016 11:54 pm and 19 degrees  
Ear Falls Public Beach, Ear Falls, Ontario

Dan found himself awake in a fit, a few hours later. A lightening strike flashed outside, as if on cue. The boom that followed by a beat helped him belatedly realize that a similar sound had probably just woken him. Dan was glad they weren't on the road for this. Right here seemed like the perfect place to ride it through, from inside looking out. He could faintly hear the drum-n-bass playing softly from Bruce speaker, somewhere.

“Eerie, huh,” Alice’s face appeared suspended over him, turned to the side to face out the window toward what she was addressing. Some of her hairs were much more curled than others, and with these standing out and framing her, she looked like a cameo brooch, strangely, in the next flash, lit starkly. *Lost Lenore*, Dan thought.

“It’s incredible,” he heard himself say back. There weren’t big storms like this in Vic.

“It’s kind of perfect,” she noted, “because we can always say we had to pull over to avoid the storm if someone comes knocking. I was kind of planning on leaving in the next few hours anyway, just to avoid anyone with questions...I just need to sober up more.” That made sense to Dan, and he fell asleep again, also still extremely unsober.

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August 4, 2016 5:14 am and 18 degrees  
Hwy 105, Ontario

The next time he woke up, it was still dark and they had just gotten underway again. His phone had its satellite signal back—although he still hadn’t gotten a working number—so he checked the map to track their dot and found that they continued to be a ways out from making the turn back onto the highway.

He fell asleep again within five minutes, seeing nothing out the window and still feeling funky.

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Regaining his awareness from some misty eddy it had fallen into, he found himself climbing something, some weird and crumbling ziggurat covered in moss and vines and alien plants like something from Dr. Seuss. He wasn't sure why he was there...it seemed like he was racing many people on all sides of him, but he never saw them. He imagined the ziggurat warping to keep him in this one channel, constantly forming around him to obscure his view of, or path to, anyone else. The parade of small ledges he was scaling kept crumbling under him, forcing him to surge ahead or be sucked backward into some newly spawning gulf. At the top, finally, he found himself walking into an indistinctly lit classroom, panicking, looking around for his papers that he needed to hand in but had only half-finished. He knew it was lined paper with the super crenellated edges from being torn out of a spiral-bound notebook—*his* 200 page primary-blue spiral-bound, he knew *that* part. He could remember doing it, but it was hard, so hard, to remember even a word of what he had said in the work he had done. He didn't really know what he was looking for to see it, because he couldn't remember what it looked like at all, no matter how he panicked, but knew he had to keep trying, knew he was in *trouble*, about it. He had to hand in *something* and it had to be *his* work, in *his* writing. He knew abstractly that the teacher could see this happening. He couldn't find anything with his writing on it anywhere, no matter how many other students desks he went through, making his excuses in a humiliated fog as they scooted aside for him, some of them sympathizing, others angry and impatient. Wink was there, too, watching him, smirking. She was sitting on a desk off in a corner, leaning towards him, hands braced on either side of her, hair long, so long. When she warped to his side and started taunting him, sounding so scornful, he couldn't tell at all that it was a dream, even though her hair was so unusually long, and so unusually dark, too; they began to argue, bickering in front of the teacher, who seemed overbearing but patient, demanding repeatedly that he hurry up. It all seemed horribly plausible—too real, even. His heart began to hurt him, beating too fast and hard. He couldn't seem to shake the sense that he was forgetting something important, something about how he could just leave, like it was just a dream. He wished it *was* a dream, so he could leave; he found himself on the verge of stress-crying, about to just open his mouth and wail aloud with the futility of his wasted life that made no sense, wail at his ruined everything, wail to his

former future-wife—his would-be wife, his wouldn't-be wife. With a gasp, he found himself blinking at the roof of a schoolbus.

At first he was confused, not understanding where he was, until Alice hollered “WE'RE BACK, BABY! TRANS-CAN HO~OH!” The world abruptly swung on a 90 degree pivot to the right, again. They were headed west on the 17, ol' death-or-glory itself, same as before.

“Fuck,” he smiled to himself as the greatest, most sublime relief washed over him. He wasn't having acutely painful tachycardia recurrently after all, it had just been the dream. “FUCK YEAH,” he yelled out to all of them in reply to Alice.

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August 4, 2016 7:18 am and 19 degrees  
Kenora, Ontario

It was overcast and dull outside, had been all morning. He was sitting up at the front again, talking to Alice about his whole relationship with his ex, and—after hearing Dan and Alice uninhibitedly gossiping for long enough, probably (certainly)—Pete and Mouse had gotten up and gone to the back to join Bruce in singing along to the radio (Alice insisted on radio rather than the tapes in the milk-crate behind Bruce's usual seat). Hearing the three of them sing along to the Cranberries was eerie, their plaintive yodels harmonizing in uncanny synchrony with that boldly melancholic vocalist he couldn't ever quite stand. They'd kept up back and forth for the better part of an hour after that, depending on who knew which top-40 lyrics. It didn't achieve the same effect again as their singing had with that Cranberries song. It was beautiful outside by eight a.m., in contrast to the morose radio station they'd chosen, sunny as a memory. He was glad of the change, particularly as they had just hit the Manitoba border, finally, but he felt heavy from it all nonetheless, and could feel himself pulling inward. His answers got more evasive as he drifted out of focus, withdrawing into the haze of the day. After Alice got bored of quizzing him, and Dan was bored of being quizzed, he turned and watched the summery world pass by in silence, but for the choir.

He listened with his full attention to some Beach Boys on the radio when Alice dialed over to it, and as it played he thought seriously about chillwave, and surf rock, and rockabilly, and mostly, how to build a dubstep-inflected centre with curlicues of cooling tropicália around the edges; how to capture summer like it had been by the lake yesterday, maybe a hotline bling-heavy megamix sort of thing but with risers and drops; he pondered how best to make people feel good, and how best to make people feel like moving. How best to distill the desired action from a sound; how best to lead a dancer to dance. He thought for a long while, after the Beach Boys were done playing and it was other songs on, about how to convince—to nudge, in fact—a crowd to move together, how to dismantle inertia. After a spell of that he got up to lurch over to the second seat behind Alice and pick through the tapes, see what he discovered. It was mostly bad or super-popular old-school thrift finds, or bootlegs without track listings or contextualizing stuff like a date. He recognized some of what was there. Mostly it wasn't his style, a lot of hard and soft rock from decades he didn't care about, and power-ballad stuff.

Bruce came and dolled him out his ninth joint while he was studying the cassette collection; they were all supposed to be keeping score of their joint tally, like in that one Always Sunny he'd watched with Wink the year before, about out-drinking Wade Boggs (Bruce had been smoking three joints at a time the entire day, like he was determined to arrive weed-light). There were some Alice in Chains tapes in the crate, and it got Dan thinking about Alice's name, after he thought vaguely about whose bus the bus was and who had decorated it and what, in all, it had been used for.

“She was dating this girl,” interrupted Bruce with storytellers gravity, after Dan tried to re-engage her by asking if Alice was her legal name already.

“I was dating this *warrior*,” corrected Alice, and Bruce ceded the story. “For like ten years, we were common-law partners,” Dan saw her look back at him in the rear-view. “I'm like, 33.” Dan could sort of see it. Alice acted roughly seventeen-going-on-ageless-going-on-eight-going-on-too-old-for-it-all. “And we were, well, *you* know, always at war with everything. The ecocidal patriarchy and everything, *you* know,” she echoed herself. (Dan *didn't* know.) “She was *super* at-war. I just didn't expect...I *never expected* her to go to war

*with me*. Like, as in seeing *me* as a—as her enemy, just like, bam, out of nowhere, and it happened...so suddenly.” Alice seemed choked, and very unhappy—as Dan hadn’t seen her be before this; desolate, forlorn. “I was *always there* for her to go to war with, like, as in, *at her side*, as her *ally*,” there was an agrieved pause before she continued in an artificially bright tone. “...Anyway, wayyy-wayyyy back-in-the-day, like when-we-were-kids-type-times, people-were-*always-asking*...” she had begun to accelerate her singsongy speech, as if getting this part over with, but also made it singsongier, pausing now for emphasis “...if-her-name-was-Alice-cause-they’d-mishear-her-say-Alix,” she paused, “*like-Alix-with-an-i? Which-is-also-MY-old-name-coincidentally, which-is-also-how-we-met, incidentally. At camp! So-instead-of-us-both-being-Alix-I’d-be-like-no-I’M-Alice-you-sillybilly-she’s-ALIX*,” she recited. So Alix, both the name and eventually also the warrior, had come unstuck from Alice, and Alice’d gone to live on Maison Rokkoku’s roof. Where presumably, just like on this trip, she did what seemed like an *awful lot* of drugs, an almost steady stream—he hadn’t met her entirely sober yet, the whole time. In a burst of clarity he realized that she did the work she did specifically in order to access and afford the drugs she wanted in order to manage her difficult feelings (of grief mostly), and the whole system didn’t leave a lot of excess *anything*, left over, specifically income, for improving her situation, but it didn’t give her a lot of stress, either. Maybe the clients were even kind of validating, at the end of the day. He hoped so. Importantly, her lifestyle didn’t let her focus on her regrets. Made sense.

Maybe all along the others had been as sympathetic to him as they had, because they knew from Alice how serious it was, to have a relationship like that *die*. He felt grateful to her for listening to him, though in light of her story it made sense that she felt kindly toward him, considering what had happened last year, and all, with his break-up. Hers sounded more monumental than his, even—listening to her, he wasn’t sure at all that he’d ever been even remotely as *in love* with his ex as she had been with hers...even for a moment, even on really great coke, done together. He wasn’t sure that he’d ever been as crazed for Wink, to be with her, to be *hers*, as Alice had been for her old flame. Wink had always said it was a major personality flaw, that he was so bad at changing for her. What if he had changed and changed and *changed* and it still wasn’t enough. What if it was



a paradoxical snare and she'd hated him for changing, called each change a monstrous lie even after demanding them all, like Alice's ex had. He wasn't sure he wanted to know exactly what had happened. It was giving him second-hand hurt.

“It seems like you're saying, it's extra fucked up to get dumped after someone makes you into a woman, like,” he wasn't sure what he was trying to say—something like, do you think she knowingly and maliciously set out to castrate you or encourage self-defamation in the eyes of conventional society or whatever by encouraging you to fulfill a role she later resented you for out of some deep seated belief that you can't really *have* that role.

“You think she *made me into* a woman?” She shrieked around barely controlled laughter.

“It seemed like that's what you were saying,” he tried sheepishly to not be evasive. “I'm...sorry?” Alice laughed harder, veering slightly.

“Am I aaaalllllllll woman?” She chortled, but Dan sensed a pain to it, hold-over from the serious parts of all they'd just talked about. “Hey, hey—who made *you* into an IDIOT, *jerkstore*? YOUR MOM?” That, rung with truth. Plus, it was funny. He loved Seinfeld reruns, “jerkstore” always got him going.

Dan smirked, he knew this one: “Oh for sure, I mean, I *was* BORN THIS WAY...Lady Gaga,” he noted the attribution to her in an academic tone, hoping the irony of informing her scanned.

Alice screamed, “*THAT'S IT!* I'm *putting it on!* Dan?” she snapped to him, veering again briefly. “Get *the tape!*”

“NO!” Yelled Jean-Paul from about five seats back, arms crossed and eyes resting, shades tucked in the V of his v-neck. He opened his eyes and made eye contact with Dan. “NO!” He repeated, emphasizing.

Dan was torn, he didn't want to bro-flail on Jean-Paul by siding against him, plus it felt like The Critic had spoken, like it was now forever written that that song just wasn't a bop, that liking it showed *such* bad taste. However, he actually kind of liked it and severely wanted to be a party trooper, not a party pooper, right now. He didn't want to leave Alice just twisting in the breeze like that, it didn't feel right.

“*Solidarité*,” he said simply, as he started going through the tapes. He suddenly wondered if anyone on the trip knew who it had been, playing Mario outside the library that time he'd seen all the wheatpastes.

He handed Alice the DIY Gaga cassingle she wanted, with Jean-Paul remarking “traitorousness,” over his shoulder behind him.

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August 4, 2016 9:45 am and 17 degrees  
Winnipeg, Manitoba

They stopped in Winnipeg for more gas (Bruce's treat, all of it, as always, which was nice and made the trip possible for Dan at least, who'd have stayed home otherwise) and then went for breakfast at a place Bruce insisted was dy-no-mite, with the bus parked nearby, and Alice saying she wasn't hungry and had to meet up with someone about some drugs. When she got back to the bus empty handed, she was in a tetchy mood again and slept until well after lunch, waiting for her local link-up to get back to her. Dan ended up dozing off himself finally, and woke up with the Lavender mystery tour getting underway again. He wasn't sure if Alice had finally met up with the plug or not. He watched the sun spread out from behind them over the highway. It still hadn't really gotten hot again since the storm, which was a blessing. He felt the thick edge of road-mania begin to ebb away from him, almost missing it.

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August 4, 2016 4:14 pm and 21 degrees  
Just outside Boissevain, Manitoba

By later afternoon that day, they were there. A house on a hill with a big yellow field belonging to someone else on one side, a big yellow field belonging to some other someone else on another other side, and massive green fields all around it (which Dan guessed was alfalfa, identified from the scattered, early times his ex had dragged him to wannabe horsegirl things, and from childhood trips to the Beacon Hill petting zoo). A long, long driveway to nose the bus up.

The waving green fields of whatever surrounded a personal acreage on which there was a further, large plot of corn growing as a screen around a slightly-shorter central weed patch, stretching out behind the house in an emerald cape, spilling down the slope of the hill just behind the residential footprint. They were somewhere in the middle of a vast lake-filled rural nowhere, this was all Dan knew from having gotten there. The big bungalow at the end of the lushly overgrown driveway didn't have any kind of vibrant hippie commune, Villa Villacoola type of vibe, and Dan was disappointed. It looked a little dilapidated even, somehow under-cared-for and lonely like a lot of the buildings he'd seen on the trip. A very covert house-of-all-sorts, he realized vaguely. He wondered for the first time if Bruce's family was actually full of biker drug barons. There was a bleached and gnarled rootball at the foot of the driveway, with address numbers bolted in. That hadn't seemed very biker, going in; Dan had looked down at it through the window of the bus as they passed it, and been amused by what seemed to him to be the total incongruity of driftwood in landlocked farmcountry. It was the only thing in sight that was artificially decorative in any way anywhere in the actual garden. Dan had been lowkey anticipating a bunch of wacky artfarm stuff like kinetic outdoor art. He was sort of sad for Bruce, actually; the place was kind of dismal. This was where their ringleader, the cartoon man made of sunbeams, had grown up? Dan realized he'd always kind of thought of Bruce as a surfer. Like Spicoli. Dan was more of a surfer than these people were, on reevaluation (he'd at least drunk a lot more of the Pacific, probably). Bruce's family had a small contingent assembled out front on some dingy porch furniture, under swaying wind-chimes and wisteria vines. The *plants* were certainly cared for—everywhere Dan looked, something vegetal was bursting with abundance.

The voyagers all piled out of Lavender onto the front gravel lack-of-lawn obligingly when the bus door opened, coincident with a small woman coming

out of the house drying her hands on her olive utilikilt. It was only obvious that she might not be a very mountain-climbing-weathered thirty-something by the abundance of surrounding twenty-and-thirty somethings. She looked like she should be heading a militia, although she was quite short; sort of like a leathery Twiggy—like if Twiggy had been going through a Bruce Lee phase for ten or fifteen years. She immediately ran over in her slippers, with an alarming quickness, when she caught sight of the big pink bus looming there; gave them all painfully tight hugs and rustled Bruce’s hair with both hands, hauling his head back and forth through the air between them.

“MY LITTLE CITYBOY” she yelled. Dan looked at her and at Alice, who was grinning and looked delighted and hyper, even slightly maniacal still from the solid hours of breakneck driving she’d just logged, and decided the two of them looked alike. Moreso than Bruce and his mother did. He wondered seriously if Bruce hooked up with Alice sometimes, or if they ever had, and thought *how Freudian*. It hadn’t occurred to him before. But then, of course, he wondered—not for the first time since the start of the trip, and sort of by force of habit by now—whether Andre or Jean-Paul had hooked up with Alice, either of them. She had more history with them than the others, so he’d been told. She and Mouse had been living together a long time and seemed tacitly avoidant of one another, but he wasn’t sure why. There wasn’t the same frisson of tension between her and Pete, not like there was between Pete and Jean-Paul.

There were various introductions and reunions, with Alice appearing to be a treasured prodigal, which was sort of nice—if they liked Alice, Dan figured he probably wouldn’t be offending them easily. Alice immediately called Bruce’s mom “mom,” which was a surprise that had him guessing again. Bruce’s mom told them all to call her mom, of course, proclaiming that it was 4:20 and to smoke em if they had em.

There were too many regular siblings on the home team to keep track of; Dan couldn’t remember all the names, and Bruce started handing out fat little trees of mango-whatever from his bag right away, before they had even encountered his father. He appeared presently from behind the house, and Dan was swerved a bit by the “literate biker” vibe of Bruce’s dad, looking sort of like a tougher, leatherier, bespectacled Oliver Platt. Like a pirate who

was remarkably intact, like he should be missing an eye and have a peg leg, or at least have a huge cutlass scar somewhere. He was more stoic than Bruce's mom but no less enthusiastically hospitable—in fact it was where his enthusiasm most showed—and Dan liked him well enough to not feel awkward about being there at his house.

There was tremendous activity everywhere inside and behind the building once Dan got to taking the tour—people, related and otherwise, all focused on various tasks and projects, conversations ranging in liveliness filling most every corner of the house. There were a few very small kids running around but they were mostly concerned with their games involving capturing each other's bases in the scattered stands of trees around the yard, and of course, running around.

At night there was an abundance of food available in the kitchen, including a huge pot of boiled corncobs from the garden, with local, salty butter. It was like ambrosia to Dan. Actually they said that was what the corn was called—Ambrosia—he'd only heard of peaches-and-cream out west, apparently corn was like weed and had a million big name strains.

Bruce looked deliriously happy and satisfied *all the time* when he was around his family. It was a little bit annoying but Dan got over it easily, battered magnanimous by multiple helpings of mom-food and the first round of last year's homegrown-turned-cannacookies, with butter made from the family weed, frozen in batches to keep them fresh. Bruce's dad said it was Northern Lights crossed with Skywalker OG, with pride. It was his own strain, he'd nicknamed it The Yoda; he referred to it gravely as The Yoda whenever he was offering it to them, like “anybody need another dart of ...The Yoda?” Everyone was encouraged to never use legally problematic language like literal terms, just to keep good habits. Dan found himself keeping up with the game easily, pulling out half-remembered BCisms like chron-chron for every “Lucy-lettuce,” “green goddess,” or other some-such that he heard. They'd finally begun to congregate on the back patio around sundown, which was well after dinner and, for some of the family, after another last round of preparations before the penultimate date. There were black and red garlands everywhere, including ringing the above-ground pool, which had first been wrapped in wide strips of old dark red linens. There was a little wooden stage already built between the patio and the pool, mostly from pallets,

stained a dark walnut, to be used first for the vows and then for the band that the couple was friends with to use for the rest of the night. Dan had discovered that most of the wedding party proper was staying a few doors down, so to speak, in a cul-de-sac of airstream trailers on the other side of the property from the main house, where the couple lived with their friends who were in a different band that didn't want to play because they liked the other band better anyway. No one at the house really knew anything about rockabilly music so Dan couldn't figure out from their cues whether the party was going to massively blow, or be fun and cool.

There were no spare cushions anywhere on site for them to pad out their bunks back on the bus, but the bugs at night finally drove them out of the few hammocks near the patio when Bruce's dad had insisted on turning off all the bug zappers and sound repellents to conserve on the electrical. It was a cooler night, a far cry from the heat of the last weeks, and they all took the inward facing benches at the back, except Alice and Bruce, who had floor space inside, with air-mattresses. Dan didn't begrudge it, he'd been forewarned before leaving for Manitoba. From inside the bus, he could just see the sky—it was magnificent, like no sky he'd ever seen. There was a shooting star right when he guessed there'd be, and he gulped at it, wondering what to wish for. *World peace*, he thought hurriedly, remembering that old Bill Murray movie that was always on TV for a few years when he was a kid, the one about incessant repetition. Did you have to wish while the star was still visible, for it to count? He wasn't sure.

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August 5, 2016 12:19 pm and 22 degrees

Just outside Boissevain, **Manitoba**

The day before the wedding, Dan and Pete were standing on the back stoop watching the little lawn transform as siblings and motivated out-of-towners organized tables and string lights and chairs around the grass, dry running the change over from rows on the patio, to dining arrangements on the lawn. They had been mumbling back and forth about the luck they'd had with the bus not breaking down since Pete had posted up with him with the confidential aside that it was an overwhelming number of white people to be

in the middle of nowhere with, not to mention later when everyone would be drunk and the sun would be down. Bruce had apparently assured him there would be native rockabilly girls there for him to flirt with but they weren't there on set-up detail and Pete was exhausted by the whole thing already.

“Maybe they’re hiding on the other side of town, you know, with the newlyweds-to-be.”

“Right, the trailerpark. Pass. Feels too thirsty to go all the way over there.” It was a six minute ride if he borrowed a bike, but Dan understood, he thought. It was the optics of going begging up the driveway looking for inclusion, like the kid in *The Sandlot*. The walk around one side of the farm just to get to the “vehicle storage” area driveway at the other end, was a full half hour.

“Besides, they all just got back from some rockabilly fest in Winnipeg, right, they’re probably over there retuning their banjos or something,” he laughed.

“That’s folkpunks,” Pete scoffed. “And retune is redundant, it’s just tuning.” There was an awkward pause, which made Dan feel kind of sulky. He’d been being glib, no need to make it an indictable offence. Pete sighed, finally, and in a very casual way asked "did Bruce tell you that the Maison is selling?" Dan felt like a bomb had gone off in his brain. It was anxiety.

"No," he found himself almost mute.

Pete must have detected his forced tone, and he consoled "it's not a sure thing and it's not until the winter anyway. So I'm not worrying about it for now, myself. If he didn't tell you it's probably no big deal, right?"

"I guess. That's... a surprise. No Maison?"

"I know, it's an institution."

Dan didn't care about that. Watching Mouse up a ladder affixing another cluster of gold fairylights to one of the fishinglines that crisscrossed between

trees and the eaves of the house, above the patio and lawn, Dan was at a loss. He hesitantly put his mind to it, felt out his implicit understanding of the Maison crew as the missing Toichiro's brainchild, Toi's toys, collected into the Toi-box by the same wave Toi had been, the podcast. Dan didn't really belong, in that way. What if he alone got lost in the shuffle and had to go back to BC, defeated? Dan realized the house was probably much more of a shared project and vision between Toichiro *and* Bruce; having now seen how they did it in Manitoba, it all seemed to be based mainly on Bruce's huge, collaboratively-operational family. And Bruce liked him, Bruce hired him to help work on the podcast—even though he was working at a steal because his commission rate was far below minimum wage, it still felt like a nod, like he was actually “now a part of the tribe,” like C-3PO said.

Having worked alongside Bruce so long, Mouse fit right in, here, and was actually being helpful. He was the only one of them who was, today; Dan couldn't see the others anywhere except for Pete, who had clearly agreed with his read that it was a too-many-cooks scenario. Where would Mouse live if the house broke up? Another investment property owned by Sakamoto Holding Group Ltd? Some mouldy warehouse like that one episode where Bart gets into foreclosure auctions and buys a factory that's just a gutted hall of hazards? Dan tried to think about the others instead of panicking for himself. He had no backup plan for staying in Toronto if there wasn't another similar property for B&T to shuffle them all to, but supposing that the others didn't have alternatives lined up either in that case, kind of made him feel better, on top of it feeling good to be thinking outside his own new problem. "Maybe I could rent somewhere with Jean-Paul," he mused out loud.

"Sure," Pete sniffed. "If you want to live with that."

"What do you mean," *is he a bad roommate*, Dan started to ask, but realized that Pete probably knew as much about having Jean-Paul as a roommate as Dan did, or less.

"He uses his apartment for work. I hate these guys being around, they're always gross scumbags. Alice is smart, she doesn't like people knowing where she lives." Which didn't account for how everyone but Dan seemed to know she lived on their roof. Dan had never seen anyone he thought was a client of Jean-Paul's around, outside, either.



The sun was just dipping from its zenith, and hitting them full on, now. He shielded his eyes because it was something to do with his hand, and surveyed wherever Bruce might be with a joint. At least Pete had taken his mind off the possible homelessness issue. He privately felt like Pete was being unfair and kind of randomly mean, but that was often how Pete seemed to him. He wasn't as inherently welcome with Pete as he was with Bruce or Jean-Paul or Alice or Andrea or even Mouse...Roscoe...random podcast listeners. Most people, in fact, in Toronto, were less frosty to him than Pete was. He supposed a little standoffishness was to be expected somewhere, sometimes people were standoffish. It seemed like a *bygones* issue, Pete's beef with Jean-Paul's worklife, so Dan felt like begrudging him and being hostile about it on the trip were further *bygones* issues. When Pete asked if he wanted a beer from inside he said sure, and they sat out on the lawn watching the festivities from a different angle, still not spoiling-the-broth. It was Chinese beer in fancy formed bottles that were shaped like a laughing monk dude, "Lucky Buddha." It was all the couple wanted at the wedding. Everyone was supposed to save the bottles, of which there were about 200, nestled in an ice-filled kid's-pool that was up on a couple tables in the garage, plus assorted bar options inside in the kitchen—rum and coke, etc. Dan was happy with a beer, planning on stopping at two, maybe three by the end of the night, and having water with dinner. Little did he know about the pending arrival of the groom's out-of-town zany uncle (Bruce's mom's side) with the dozen magnums of cheap, California champagne in suitcases, inbound northward from the Peace Garden Duty Free where he knew a guy, exactly at that very moment, along the long and winding road out of North Dakota.

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There were tree platforms at roughly the four corners of the family's backyard "cornfield" and from his perch next to Bruce in the one closest to the house, Dan could see the boundary-wall of pure corn thin out at six rows deep, closer to the middle of the weed patch. The wedding party whirled below them under a spiral circle of bunches of yellow lights on copper wires, blinking in sequence so they glimmered bewitchingly against the deep gloam. He was trying to avoid feeling too high to be up a tree in a DIY crow's nest but all the motion below was giving him vertigo.

Bruce had been prattling incessantly since dragging him up the tree. Dan had agreed to the climb stupidly, because it was stressful to be a random spare at a wedding full of backwoods rockabilly friends of the couple. In spite of what Pete had said, there *were* also three folkpunks there, *with* banjos, and their two hyperactive dogs were intermittently tearing around, and being yelled at and dragged somewhere by their humans. Bruce's mom had explained that she was going to shoot the next one that got into the plants, and his dad had already gone to bed to avoid having a fit and ruining the reception.

Seeing it from above he was still sure it was worth being up a tree, but better to be looking at the nice stamp of plants behind them. "I believe that we are all aspects to reality, each atom, each thought, each being, each element of the whole is itself a full reflection of the nature of reality. When we vibrate together, this is reality seeing itself for itself, do you feel me?" Dan nodded but he wasn't listening. He thought about telling Bruce he should record his nightly ramble and use it for the podcast, but maybe he'd said all this before to everyone but Dan. "We *are* sitting some distance apart, and you have a different way of behaving as an aspect of reality than I do. But we're the same—we vibrate. We're vibrating together right now, harmonizing our frequencies. And I...think I've realized the nature of reality," Dan leaned toward Bruce, pulled in. Wasn't everyone always trying to find the meaning of life? Bruce said he had it. Dan found he was holding his breath. "Reality is invincible."

"You think people are *invincible*?"

"Yes. When things happen to us, they are always good and bad. You steal something, and you get 'noid, but then you've got the thing and you also felt good. Say you get caught, and that's stressful—but then you've learned something, like that first-offence petty theft is brushed off by the court system because they're busy. Maybe you never stop with the petty theft," Dan felt judged, theft *was* his livelihood. "Or you never get good enough not to get caught sometimes and you go to jail—jail is horrible, jail is a torture-farm, yet you could read anything you were interested in, you could self-educate or get various diplomas if it was a long enough stay. You could make great friends. Say you live on the street, and you have to deal with hatred and

dismissal and prejudice and violence and unfairness every second—you're also a part of a worldwide, historically visible ascetic culture of public, impoverished living," Dan felt himself squinting narrowly at him, probably looking dubious. Bruce tried "like the sadhu? In India? And that's leaving aside how there's a local culture oftentimes that is based on mutual aid more than it is on competition and fear. That tent-city spirit of being present together and letting each other be, letting go of the need to always be judging people, or obtaining from them. Say you're born rich and you live an amazing life of pleasures and stimulation—this is at the expense of others, as the class system is unabated by your squandered position of upholding it, and let's say you don't care, but maybe someone keys your BMW or someone hates you without knowing you. Things happen to us, and they're both good and bad. Yet we go on."

Dan shrugged, "some people don't, they die from the things. They freeze outside, or overdose in their bathtub." He had overdosed on someone else's dirty floor.

"Sure, our bodies rot without our souls in them, of course they do, and each part, the material and the immaterial, go on separately, changing but still, y'know, present. Even if we're ashes the ashes are a part of us, being around still. Baking into the crust, like, bound to be there," Dan wasn't sure about souls, although Bruce took it for granted.

"About death, though, like what if I go to jail or live on the street and I get killed, or this thing breaks and I fall. DO I go on as a ghost? Really?"

"Death is but the final frontier."

"So you...believe in what? Reincarnation, heaven...?"

Bruce's face looked very kind. "Yes," he paused. "And I believe in science. We are all star-stuff, we are all connected." *Like Carl Sagan said in that autotune*, Dan thought. "Our body dies. Maybe our minds disassemble. But reality existed before matter and exists with antimatter in it and exists regardless of what it's made up of at any given time. Even if it was all

antimatter that would still be happening within reality, it would still be the current simple facts of existence, and that would be like, the sum of reality. So it is what it is. I am part of reality and I am what I am and I will be what I will be.”

“Invincible,” Dan tested the word.

“Just like you. I like to leave my hair and fingernails in nooks and crannies—you never know when it’ll be millions of years from now and every other trace of our species is gone somehow and it’s just my hair that an alien finds to interpret. I guess I could worry more about someone doing a hex on me with it,” he laughed. “I dunno, I don’t want to get so wrapped up thinking about evil wizards today that I’m not excited about alien archaeologists pulling a Trog on me.”

What the fuck are you talking about, Dan wanted to say, but, again, realized belatedly that he had actually said that.

“*Trog*, Dude! It’s this movie about, some scientists like lock on to a caveman kid in the past and tote-a-lally transport him back-to-our-time, with their equipment or whatever, to study him? That could be me! *I* could be the trog!” And then he rock-screamed “*TROGDOOOORE*,” which ordinarily really annoyed Dan but he was actually in a mood to just find it funny.

Maybe it was the bubbly or the weed, or that way summer has of making everything else far away and okay somehow, but Dan finally understood why Andrea had been trying to get him to care about Bruce’s podcast back in February. He felt weirdly inspired. “Can you help book me a show at 8-11 in the fall? I need a venue,” he said. He hadn’t asked about the Maison selling. For the moment, he was invincible. Unless a black hole ate the earth suddenly or something, erasing every physical trace of his existence from reality completely. But what were the odds of that happening? It had never happened before, that he knew of.

Below them, the bride was doing the thing of, getting everyone who wanted to fight over the bouquet to huddle up. Dan had been to a few weddings because of Wink, but mostly she just had this weird thing about movies with

weddings in them—so he was sort of crestfallen to see such a typical, played-out scene again, now. Earlier the kids had had a big, red, heart-shaped pinata with black ruffles of doiley along the edges, which had been way better. One thing about this crowd was, he had never seen so much crinoline in his life; he didn't specifically know what crinoline was, but half the girls there were decked out in some. There were a lot of tall hairdos and Amy Winehouse eyeliner looks, and the bride wore the bluntest bangs Dan could ever have even contemplated witnessing. She reminded him of a Latina Winona Ryder in Beetlejuice. Bruce's brother, the groom, was dressed kind of like Slash from Guns 'n Roses but with stringy, streaked hair. He was wearing dusty workboots. Most of the guys looked like extras in Grease but at a tiki bar, and covered in tattoos.

Dan felt like the newlyweds were, indeed, avidly devotional about one another, today at least. Maybe often, maybe usually, maybe even in perpetuity. They made him feel like looking away, paying attention to the band. They kind of bugged him, it was a kind of swingabilly sound, his only point of reference was the Cherry Poppin Daddies, who had always seemed really cringy because his mom's single brother with the stupid hat liked them. He had been hoping for more of a surf rock vibe, but the crowd seemed to be having fun. He saw Pete managing to rattle off some moves like spinning the girl and finger snapping across the space after her, with one of the cute bridesmaids.

Dan decided to go down and get rejected by someone else's date, who he'd mistakenly assumed was there alone. After that he stayed up drinking a giant plastic handle of pink Cuervo cooler with Alice on one of the grassy knolls behind the pool, because-of.

"I should have worn a poodle skirt to this sock-hop," Alice cackled, raising the handle. Dan guffawed and then found himself barfing the sturgeon steaks and fennel salad from dinner all down the lee side of the knoll.

"Alice, why," he moaned, wondering what else was in the bottle.

"Sorry champ," was the last thing he heard until he woke up alone in the cold grass under the moon much later. The folkpunks were at the fire-pit on the

patio, smoking. One dude from the band that hadn't played was picking someone else's guitar, from the band that had, presumably on loan until the morning.

Dan thought about getting in the pool but decided he actually felt kind of strange and that it was time to try curling up on the front porch because he couldn't get into Lavender.

He woke up the next morning to another hot day of summer's Sunday, feeling strangely serene, and magnanimous about his stint out in the elements.

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August 8, 2016 9:56 am and 18 degrees  
Boissevain, Manitoba

Gassing up for the first time on their return journey, a sudden storm opened up in the blue sky, out of nowhere, and, as he watched Alice walk from the pump to the station, through the bus window, there was a massive arm of lighting suddenly tapping the parking lot, followed by a tangible boom. Alice dropped flush to the oil-stained pavement like she was in a live-fire zone, and after a moment of flat silence in which nothing moved and the ozone fumed, Dan followed the others off the bus to go to her aid. The clerk came out, staring at the hellmouth opening in the sky overheard, and told them that the meters had all rezeroed and that there was no way to charge for the gas. The others all cheered, and after Alice dusted herself off she opined, "chaos," matter-of-factly, throwing up the horns nonchalantly.

As they were driving through town on their way back to the highway, there, looming out the window, was a giant realistic turtle on its hind legs. Smalltown Canada seemed to be full of these bizarre oversize roadside tchotchkes that were always the world's largest something-or-other. Dan looked at it quizzically, amused by the reaction meme image of his own face in the window reflection.

"The smalltown turtle's gonna getcha," he heard Alice tease Bruce.

Bruce bellowed “THAT’S IT, BACK TO WINNIPEG,” and the two of them laughed like hyenas, at what Dan guessed was a gentle dig at Bruce’s many siblings who had moved to Winnipeg. Bruce was the furthest one out, in Toronto. The others had never left the province except to visit their uncle’s winter trailer-spot in Albuquerque.

He listened to more Beach Boys and thought of how he could do a whole album of stuff with it, going off what Bruce wanted Good Vibrations to sound like. The phrase *wouldn’t it be nice* wouldn’t leave him alone.

It took three hours to get back to Boon Burger for another round of their existentially dire, paradoxically desiccated vegan fatboys, which Bruce claimed were so good, “better than the cheesesteaks in Ear Falls,” as he’d said the last time he’d made them stop at this horrible place. It was a blatant lie, or at least patently untrue. Dan was upset about it, it was the exact diabolically terrible food everyone always laid at veganism’s feet. He’d had better vegan food from the garbage. Many times now, in fact. This was like eating a mummy’s turd served in a TVP golem’s diarrhea. On bread.

“You know what,” he asked, putting his fatboy down decisively. “Some people hate vegans, but I don’t. I hate *this*.” Jean-Paul began laughing hysterically.

“Yeah, yeah,” Pete interrupted after a minute with a big eye-roll, “it *wasn’t* that funny.” The air in the restaurant was stale. There were no other patrons left from the midday rush. The day had turned sunny again hours ago, there hadn’t been another dark cloud in the sky since they’d driven out from under the storm.

“I can’t,” Jean-Paul was wailing over and over, still laughing. Pete and Mouse began throwing fries at the two of them, which was a waste, because the fries were the best part by far. The poutine sucked, he’d had it last time and the famed Daiya cheese in lieu of curds had been, frankly, disgusting. Dan grabbed some fries out of his lap and ate them at them, feeling impish and defiant.

“What’s thrown, and what’s grown, eh,” he slyly elbowed Bruce, quoting him from months ago. “You’ve been breaking edge this whole trip.”

“Bite me, bucko,” Bruce pouted, finishing his sandwich. “*Luh*’ this place.”

“Friend, you make better at home,” Mouse nodded toward his half-finished sando in its paper. “You can have my leftovers, if you would like.”

“Yippie-ki-yay,” Bruce casually shot the air with finger guns, and used his semi-vegan powers to cram Mouse’s leftovers entirely into his mouth, exaggeratedly making om-nom-nom noises. “It’s *awesome*,” he told them again around wads of food pulp. Pete and Jean-Paul both put down their (substantial) remaining sandwich stumps in front of him. Dan followed suit rapidly. Bruce was still swallowing, and upon clearing Mouse’s portion, he looked at the next three askance, a bit despairingly even. “Okay, I guess they *could* be...less shit,” Bruce admitted begrudgingly. Mouse made there-you-go hands, and Pete picked it up with a know-when-to-fold nod of ratification.

Alice splattered against the window outside just then, making a zombie noise and startling Dan, who went “aah!” He then realized it was just Alice, and she was okay. She came inside twirling a 12-inch lavender and fuchsia faux fur banded tail on a keychain, which she then attached to her pantsloop.

“Darling!” she exclaimed to Jean-Paul with an over-the-top accent like some notorious boudoir lady. She pulled up a spare seat. “You should eat! You look *emayyy-ciated!*”

Dan privately agreed with her, hypocritically of course, but Jean-Paul sternly told her “don’t *dare* quote my mother to *me*, missy.” Bruce went *OoooOOOoo*, and Jean-Paul added, “*Miss Thing.*” Dan didn’t exactly get what that meant and thought it sounded kind of adversarial really, like he was calling her Princess Dong-haver, but Alice just threw her head back and laughed.

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August 9, 2016 at midnight and 20 degrees out  
Terrace Bay, Ontario

After ten hours solid on the road, with Lavender seriously starting to overheat, they had to admit defeat and take a break. There had been more radio karaoke as the sun went down—Dan had even done a rendition of Teenage Dirtbag that had brought the house down, surprising him, because he'd never heard of anyone else liking that song, before. He couldn't really sing any other song. That had been hours ago and everyone was now working with a stronger mix of sleepy, cranky, or wired.

As they were trooping out of the bus wherever it had been limped off the highway to with the heat blasting (to try to keep the engine happy, it turned out; oh, he'd asked), Alice stretched at the threshold, using the doorframe, and made an old person stretching noise. Dan was staring bug-eyed into an astronomical event and didn't really hear her. "Back-back-back-again," she chattered to him. "Remember I said there's a great beach here?" She turned and must have noticed he wasn't hearing.

"What the fuck is—what the fuck am I seeing?" he asked her, not expecting a real answer about it. Comets streaked the sky continuously above the vast body of dark water that covered the horizon ahead of them beyond the narrow spit of fine, pale sand they had arrived at. Every light in the sky was reflected in the gently waving water

"What? It's just the Perseids, my guy," so blase about it. What the fuck was "the Perseids"?

"This is the coolest moment of my life," he said, sounding extremely silly. "I feel like I'm in Avatar or something."

"I hate that movie," Alice sniffed crossly. "The big moral is no one's going to die if a tree they think is magic is killed. It's bullshit." Dan was pretty sure they'd seen different movies. Avatar was about *saving* the tree or whatever.

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August 9, 2016 9:56 am and 18 degrees  
Terrace Bay, Ontario

They had made a small illegal fire some distance down the beach away from the spit, and Alice had produced another handle of the wretched cooler, which she admitted was spiked with “some kind of synthetic mescaline from Montreal.” Dan had debated it for a second before thinking more clearly and remembering about the passing out part before the waking up part. So Alice had called him a buzzkill but didn’t end up drinking very much, herself, before they doused the little fire and went back to their blankets on the bus. The mood hadn’t been ruined at all though—everyone was too busy marvelling at the sky, except Alice, who had done it already a million times on every promising drug possible. She said the northern lights were a lot better. So Dan had called her a buzzkill, getting even. Eventually he’d even given in on the noxious brew and had a few ginger little sips as it was being sent around, to be convivial.

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Dan opened his eyes in the wan light of a dark place. There were other people here, sleeping. Where was he? He felt his eyes dart around, trying to understand what he was looking at. There were forms in the dark, shapes made of other, different dark. They were too close, they seemed menacing, laying in wait for something. He couldn’t turn his head, when he tried, and he felt a fear grip him intensely: something was wrong. He had to get away from *something*, he felt instinctively, but he couldn’t move. It seemed like he was about to be attacked somehow, while he was stuck like this. He felt disoriented and dehydrated, and sick with wishing he could just move. It felt like it had been a very long time already that he’d been awake, but it had been a moment.

As he watched in horror, one of the dark humanoid shapes ambiguously in front of him started to stir, and a ghostly thing began to happen: he saw now that the figure was just Jean-Paul, getting up from a nap, and he felt so relieved he wanted to shout for joy, but no sound came, still. As he lay

pinned, the figure of Jean-Paul, seeming strangely luminous somehow, like a firefly, raised its head to lock eyes with Dan, but there were no eyes, just smooth flesh. Dan tried to yell but the figure put up a hand, and Dan remained paralyzed. As he watched, it looked away and hung its head slightly, starting to change and warp...it slowly began to look exactly like the weird blue forest god in that Ghibli movie he'd seen at someone's birthday as a very little kid, making him think faintly about Avatar for a moment again. The creature was dripping with a kind of oily stardust around the edges, its face long, like a muzzle. In fact it seemed to *be* muzzled, now, in a delicate cage of liquid mercury...it raised its too-elegant hands to the sides of the oddly leonine face and seemed to weep. And then, it simply faded away, dissolving as if dust in the breeze, leaving Dan blinking at the still-sleeping form of his highschool best friend. He felt himself go unconscious and however long later—it felt like seconds—he gasped and sat up, breaking the lock on his body.

They were in motion again, he quickly realized, but going slower than usual. *Sometime around four in the morning probably*, he guessed. The other passengers were all sprawling comfortably in the back of the bus, a living formation, emitting soft snores and sighs. His attention was attracted out the window and in the wan moonlight, he saw swampy looking countryside blurring by, dead spooky trees towering over tufts of spiny beds of rushes.

“Whoa, there!” He heard Alice but didn't understand at first, disoriented by her slamming on the breaks. Everything jolted, and Mouse looked up, now awake. He saw Dan, and Dan made a hapless little gesture and got up to go look.

There was a small herd of deer in the road, some of them stopping to stare down the bus briefly, as they all departed into the scenery. Mouse came up to watch, too, and the three peered out into the half-moon mystery of the night, watching the deer phase through the highbeams in the middle-distance.

“Where are we,” his voice sounded far, and young.

“Wont be long now,” Alice assured in a cooing, kindly way. He felt mothered; held, but condescended to.

“But where,” he tired again, cranky.

“Just outside the infernal vortex,” she shrugged like obviously.

“The what?”

“The eternal waypoint.” Dan rolled his eyes and spun his hand like his finger was in an old reel-to-reel projector like *keep it coming*. “Hitchhiker’s hell.” She was playing. “Had enough yet, or are you thirsty for more,” she jeered dramatically. It sounded like a meme but he couldn’t quite place it.

“Got any more?” Mouse asked her.

“Go fish.” She sighed, and added, “we’re coming up on *Wawa*, please-Goddess-don’t-strike-me-down...”

“What for,” Dan didn’t get it.

“...for my impudence, because I’ve dared to be speaking that place’s name, of all names. For lo, it’s a cursed land, an absolute zone of universal limbo. Cursed, I say!”

“Fuck off,” Mouse clapped back, storming off to sleep some more in the back. Dan watched him go, not sure what his issue was. Alice seemed funny to Dan.

“So it’s cursed huh,” he prompted. Lavender crept forward on the road, onward toward morning, and glory. “What’s the story?”

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part 19: superstar dj, here we go  
Sept 21, 2016 11:18pm  
186 The Esplanade, Toronto

There was a backdoor to the venue and Dan was glad after all that they'd had it somewhere else; Nouveaux Deux, or Newtwo as he'd heard it called. It felt like Bruce had maybe coined that on his show, while in the throes of being hyperfixated about this temporary resurrection before ultimate destruction. Bruce was excited because the first one, Fiesta Nouveaux, had been a big deal to them back in the day, when he and Toichiro had been more footloose around town. It had closed before Toichiro leaving; they'd even inherited some band gear, which was now stashed in the perverse cellar, naturally. The building was long since out of commission legally but someone had opened it up for the night again, one way or another. Otherwise it was unoccupied and there was no business licence so it was BYOB; if anyone asked it was a rent party. The event had been filled with podcast listeners mainly, and Dan had gotten them moving, which had been his only goal. The adrenaline was high, the venue was insane—it just had this crazy energy, Dan felt, like a reverse haunting. Even though the place was built like a bomb shelter, it felt like they shook it a few times.

He was sweaty and happy, standing on the small porch staircase and nursing a joint Bruce had left him with. Although the sun had been down a few hours it was still daytime-warm and inside was a tsunami of human moisture trapped by the brick walls of this painted-black bunker of a building. It had been a summery afternoon, building his arsenal of edited tracks and samples into a one-off assemblage of parallel-play playlists (and visually archived loops and other clips just to gild the lily; for this he made a folder and set the icons to unlocked-from-grid, then used the freedragged icon positions as a memory aid, like the zone of drone or the ambient marsh, the blastbeat emporium, cartoon alley, etc). He had mostly put it together that day in a last minute frenzy sitting on his laptop in the library around the corner on Front Street, before grabbing a sandwich at the Rabba next door and heading down to meet Bruce and his squad at the lakeshore right there, for the start of their sunset sesh on the big rock that ran up into the boardwalk at Sugar Beach. It was as far south as he'd been since the spit, strolling in the white sand, looking up at the marmalade sky.

Now, the flat, flaking metal bars of the railing fit satisfyingly against his palm as he steadied against it, scanning for stars in the deep copper-infused mauve fresco of smog. He felt comfortable, like he'd stay and help clean up

after the last DJ, maybe shoot the shit and casually read the room about his set. Felt like a smart move, anyway. Earlier in the night, a while before his turn near the midpoint, he and Jean-Paul had found Andre back here having a panic attack about going in at all, something about the claustrophobic atmosphere and too many wasted people and not wanting to get kettled there by 51 Division, whatever that meant. She wasn't sure they wouldn't get paddywagoned for trespassing, he inferred. No one else seemed worried—everyone was acting like, it was with the building owner's full permission. Getting out in case of a raid seemed simple enough to him in the moment, partiers flowing freely past and around them in either direction from the 6-step-high wrought iron stoop they'd been monopolizing. She'd gone home promptly once they found her, with Bruce and Elinor escorting because of how shaken she clearly was, but, he'd stayed to play as billed, and Jean-Paul had hung back with him, gratifyingly. Andre didn't need *that* many nurses and he was glad to be left with at least one friend there for morale. He felt like finally showing off his work to a critic he could trust to have supportive ulterior motives. The other DJs there were incredibly talented, really, but they were all working with genre-trope heavy soundscapes, or familiar structures and other mixing fallbacks he found kind of played out, and he felt like, he had a shot at being the sleeper art-house pinch hitter of the night's roster, which was exciting. He also felt like Jean-Paul being in his corner came with a sense of prestige in itself, and he was finding himself musing repeatedly, all of a sudden, about asking Jean-Paul to act as his management or something—take a hand in his “career” in some capacity, like a benefactor of some kind, to steer him away from bad calls, and most importantly, get people to pay him. Jean-Paul had stayed through his set at least and Dan was looking forward to his good review confidently. He knew his friend hadn't moved from the bar counter corner he'd perched at, but he'd watched everyone who was dancing have a good time. Dan had found himself expelled from the space, with a gasp for air, to the outside after being moshed to the edge of the throng during the next person's set-up, having thrown himself on their mercy at an over-hyped crescendo he knew would cut off in static and tinny waterfaling Joker giggles after the riser, his only riser—Suicide Squad was still in theatres but everyone he knew was sick of hearing about it since location filming. There were at least a few incidental greenhairs in the crowd so he'd thrown the giggles in as a last second call even though everyone

would groan and shove his head in a locker. Now he was alone outside. Everyone who hadn't already bailed looked intent on keeping the area around the booth jumping for the rest of the night, there were no mingling smokers just now, no other scenes unfolding. He inhaled deeply, out of roach but missing it. If someone had been around to ask for a cigarette, he would have. He looked up at the towering tree next to him, and felt accompanied by it. *Look at us, just a couple of air conditioners*, he thought at it fondly, laughing because Always Sunny memes always made him laugh. He wondered what kind of tree it was and started to take out his phone to check his texts and maybe try to work out an identification by using the right search phrase.

"It's you," he spotted Jean-Paul surface from the depths behind him, finally.

"Oxygen," Jean-Paul gasped to heaven, arching slightly backward in a stretch. He looked wan, probably dehydrated without even moving, from sitting so long in the sweatbox.

"So what did you think, it went well huh?" There was a long pause.

"That was a nightmare, I'm sorry." Jean-Paul looked at him askance with a pained remorse, wincing apologetically, and then shrugged helplessly. Full service contrition. Dan shrugged back, at a sudden loss for concern, which was kind of its own shock, no bigger than if he'd been hurt by the unexpected turn of candour. Who cared about the opinion of the one guy who hadn't been having fun out of a room full of people having fun.

"Hey no problem." He distantly applauded himself on the casual indifference he'd managed to tap into. The crowd had gone wild for it, so he felt amazing. Suddenly he felt like, whatever Jean-Paul's library of music lit had taught him, it hadn't counted for much. "Andre couldn't even stay." He meant to sound appreciative of his friend's time—Jean-Paul could have just bailed with the others or gone to walk along the water, where there was supposed to be something happening with lights now that it was dark. "I didn't find it so bad in there...is it just hangover blues or?" Jean-Paul really looked sick. They were interrupted by Bruce's gristly old hardcore buddy and the venue "manager" wanting to get the gear that wasn't staying, out of the way, which

meant that he had to skedaddle his laptop before the last guy showed up later, which was supposed to be this big surprise, the mystery headliner. Dan decided to be stupid but loyal and take Jean-Paul home immediately before he passed out and made Dan look like a *total* asshole for hanging around like this. He knew he should stay but he also felt compelled to run away now before anyone thought he was just waiting around to be acknowledged, which he more or less was. He unconsciously felt so self-absorbed Djing, still, partly because Wink had always made a big deal about him getting too into it and disappearing into the editing, abandoning her. (Part of it was wrapped up in older, multi-child nuclear family pathos.\*) The more confident he was that he really liked doing his thing with it, the more paradoxically ashamed he subconsciously felt for doing anything at all. (\* “Jumping on stage,” “begging for attention,” “just being needy,” “trying too hard,” bla bla bla, a litany of buried but foundational phrases from his parents and older sisters, the bedrock of his later disordered affectiveness and constrictive self-esteem difficulties. Fortunately, this traumatic family-wide reception to him being energetic at all, or demonstrating “too much” enthusiasm, or betraying any stage-based aspirations, hadn’t just behaviourally deformed him into a virtual nonstarter in life, it had also inured him to being deemed distressingly untalented by the people he was closest to and expected the most kindness from.)

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Sept 22, 2016 12:02 am  
213 Augusta Avenue, Toronto

They stopped in the Market because Jean-Paul was after a cbd-infused canned coffee left for him in Roscoe’s new Easter-egg box, over which Jean-Paul had explained his falling out with Toronto, which had happened in layers and was almost complete now. Seeing a friend take a stage again, in such a familiar place, had brought him back to the nightmares of being a band manager, being so invested, and failing because no one would give an inch with each other anymore—Dan thought it was an odd coincidence really that they’d both privately zeroed in on the topic of Jean-Paul being a manager, and he got an uneasy, creepy feeling like something was wrong. Like he had done everything all wrong. Jean-Paul admitted that he'd spent the



whole time Dan was playing just *hating* the mixing, hating the musical choices (mostly chopped and screwed floorfiller teasers over refried, beaten-up stoner doom with occasional hits of moshable hardcore; it “wasn't very coherent,” apparently, except to Dan and the people who had been there to move to *something*, which meant virtually everyone who'd been there *except* Jean-Paul).

He said “the mere concept of it happening again and again has me drained. Of anything. The will to go on even, or, I don't know, I'm just being mean for fun now.” He had made the decision to leave Toronto a while ago, he explained, but now he knew for sure that he was finally too old and joyless and that he had to make good on his escape to solitude. He had saved up a lot of thousands, over his years of entrepreneurship, and had been aspirationally combing real estate listings the entire time so he wouldn't be learning it all on the fly with the money already in hand. This part of the conversation, about the process of picking a plot of land to live on, was extremely boring to Dan. He had the impulse to be salty about Jean-Paul's respective wack mixing conversationally, but let it go, feeling sentimental already about his friend leaving town, even though talking about the real estate part of it was stupefying and kind of annoying. He didn't begrudge the earning of it, just the having.

“Congratulations,” he offered, as Jean-Paul's chatter lulled. They were sitting on a bench together in the parkette, their hands in their pockets now that the drink was empty. There were still a few people out, wrapped up in their own business. It felt highly ironic and a bit tedious, to be so magnanimous as to congratulate Jean-Paul when he'd been expecting to hear it himself, all night. This venue show had been a big deal to him, but it felt like literally no one he lived with had really cared. At worst, it was making them manifest PTSD symptoms to try.

As they transited back to Maison Rokkoku, Dan found himself a little embittered at Jean-Paul for having a foot out the door and not telling him until *now*, a bad time. He was also mentally skirting the sense that there was or had been some other music he could've delivered that would've made Jean-Paul as happy as the people whose goal *had been* a good time: some music that would've made him feel the way he had when he'd been smiling so big in the shopping cart that winter, or when he'd seemed so fulfilled at the banner

drop picnic. Jean-Paul was saying that Toronto made him miserable and what made him happy was thinking about moving back out to the west coast and living in a yurt. It hurt Dan's feelings but he knew the drill, and kept a lid on it. He was supposed to be happy for his friend like he wanted his friend to be happy for him but wasn't, because life liked being unfair.

Now he was drinking tea at Jean-Paul's little kitchen table, feeling fatigued and hearing endless-seeming minutia about somewhere called Savary Island and about yurt building companies and Jean-Paul's dreams of his stacks of books and two cats named Bongo and Poko. It sounded lonely to Dan, but he wasn't sick of people. It felt lousy to not be company worth keeping, mostly. "You're stranding me here for the Maison getting demoed in this sale thing that's supposed to happen in a few months," he reproached Jean-Paul, hearing himself sounding whiny for the first time that night and knowing it wasn't going to change a mind or win a heart, because it never did.

"You're always welcome at my place, when it's done. You know I have to have it legally notarized that it's in my name to even move out there?" Dan didn't care.

"Headache," he agreed.

"It's a lot of money to have up front for a real estate buy, partially out of nowhere. I'm banking on crossing my fingers and filing my taxes as a "private performance artist" again without them doing all the math across years about where is this money from—besides, maybe it was a one-off donation from a generous patron, that's not illegal, I don't have to declare it. There's a lot of cash gifts unaccounted for there. I haven't been willing to take the plunge yet. I should have in the summer but I thought, maybe one more year. That's more or less what I'm committed to now, just plowing ahead and relying on bureaucracy to fail. Worst case scenario, I'm living back in Lavender on a bench seat in Rose-Marie's driveway for a few months. If you're worried about the Maison being torn down before my place is off the ground, and having nowhere to move to here, you could always come back to BC in the meantime, and live with someone in your family until you have income, roommate options, that kind of thing."

"Fuck," was all he could say. This was so depressing. His birthday was coming up in a month, and he resolved to get on income assistance for real before then, so he could at least afford to bus *himself* back to B.C., whenever the grim time came. He'd put it off so long, he might be gone again as soon as getting on it—another irony. "This sucks." He sighed a long sigh, about to take himself upstairs to bed.

"The sword of Damocles, *n'est-ce pas?*" Whatever that meant, it sounded too pretentious for life and Dan unceremoniously made good on his exodus after shrugging and mumbling something incoherent. He was startled outside by a massive raccoon trundling along the little alley past him. The sun wouldn't be up for another couple of hours, so he chalked it up as a home turf issue and gave the bandy bandit some space before heading to the other door. It snobbishly paid him no mind.

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part 20: the year-end bonus  
Dec 20, 2016 2:53 pm  
3200 Dundas Street, Toronto West

It was the unexpected appearance of a long-since unfamiliar face that kicked off the day: Andreah was cackling over chai with Bruce in the kitchen. "Oh sure, in the spring," she nodded to whatever he was saying. Probably about how he and Andre were planning on a bike tour all the way up Yonge street and back. They'd been conspiring about the plan for a few days, also over chai. Bruce's Dad had sent them a big bundle of weed the other day along with which was a sample bag of his new holy basil test crop, loaded with cinnamon and cardamom. He was thinking of diversifying, with legalization pending. Dan wondered if Andreah might be here looking for Andre, in fact, rather than a teaparty with Bruce; neither of them came over much anymore and now they'd both been over recently like this, but in shifts. He felt mystified trying to track their relationship according to the vectors he knew, and felt himself drifting inward. Were they okay or not okay? Should he try

to flirt in case Andreah was on the rebound? He was feeling up for another round, lately.

"Dan, Dan, hello young man," she sounded a little jovial and a little condescending, mostly just jolly. Did it count as flirtatious or dismissive? He mentally scrambled. "Are you excited?" That helped, the question gave him a lifeline to his speech centre.

"About what?"

Her teeth flashed in a long smile and she nudged her little sunglasses up. "Oh, a surprise I guess," she chortled.

"It's--" Bruce was overruled by Andreah's arm outstretched lightening fast.

"Don't ruin the moment!"

"Dan's been shy-ee-ayy about this whole thi—" She shushed him again. Dan could see her breath in the air, there was no heat again. "It's not fair to keep a budinski in the dark like this," Bruce went on, whining, but he let it drop with that. "I'm going to check on Mouse and Pete, we might all be here," he announced his exit, leaving the mug behind as an afterthought. Dan felt a sludgy dread curdling his insides and found the chai smell suddenly wretched. Why was Andreah so cheerful, *schadenfreude*? She and Andre had been scarce since reconciling in the fall. Andre'd run away from being another door fee at his show into the arms of a gratified girlfriend, who liked being more fun than watching Jean-Paul drink and Bruce's friends having a dance party for the nth time.

"I heard our dear *ami, Monsieur Devereaux* is phoning it in, good riddance," she was clearly kidding but he took it personally anyway.

"That's what you'll say about me," he pouted.

"It is," her smile morphed into a tight smirk as she laughed at his hapless way of walking himself deeper into the hole.

Dan harrumphed through her laughing and grabbed some old bagels to eat, wanting to go back to his room but feeling like he should wait, if they were forming some kind of posse.

Bruce came back after a minute. “No one else’s home,” he initiated Dan’s fumbling exit with the two carb bombs, which he had to hold in his mouth and pin between his ear and shoulder to climb back down the ladder.

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Later, having retreated under the electric blanket for a quick private nut, leaving his waist bare, Dan found himself distantly annoyed by a banging and a crashing on the stairs below, and then the landing outside, his door, which was suddenly being rattled. He paused what he was doing and tented his left leg higher under the half-off blanket, protectively, only half-way comprehending what might be about to happen: while he listened quizzically, not yet nervous to cram his boner in to the corduroys because absolutely nothing like this had ever happened all year and possible outcomes weren’t registering, there was a last unlocking sound, and the door was nuclear-blasted open, tearing all the graffiti labels Dan had come to see as chakra suppressing seals because Bruce had made him watch a bunch of Naruto for the first time and it just kind of dovetailed with the whole Paper Street Soap Company-on-hiatus vibe. “HEY--” he started to say something, defensive of the familiar view.

The figure in the doorway lowered the highly combat-booted foot that’d kicked the door in and grinned toothily at Dan, reminding him of Andreah in a flash of recognition. They both had the narrow glasses, but whoever this was had a massive, teased hairstyle like a spiky black spiderplant, with big scene-girl raccoon-stripe extensions framing the face now leering at him from under thick, triangular bangs, a face with noticeably more and sex-workier makeup than Andreah or Andre ever wore...were those false eyelashes? They looked so thick and feathery. The eyebrows had been buzzed and higher, archier—sassy—pencil-thin lines were in their place, like a goth y2k camgirl...Dan froze, bogging at the Porn Star Experience scene that had just

apparently started in his room. "Nice dong, honky" was all he got before the doorcrasher threw a heavy canvas duffle at his head and ran off on those booming platform combats, up the stairs to the third floor, crashing all way up. "Toooooiiiiichiiiiiro's hooooome!" The holler rang out following the bang of the upstairs door slamming open. Dan couldn't quite parse what it meant but it seemed like a lot of excitement. This was why Bruce had been trying to round people up, he realized belatedly.

Dan felt like if he hadn't had the duffle pinning him like that for a second, cock-out, he'd have pulled the blanket over his head and taken a minute. He pulled his pants back on, foiled boner flagging. Somehow, however, a feeling had taken hold of him, like he was flooded with adrenaline. He felt focused, anticipatory, barely resentful about the untimely and uncomfortable interruption.

"Dan!" Andreah was yelling for him, there was an accompanying stomping. He was on the ladder already. He hated it when people thumped the floor to flush him out, but he let it work anyway, entrenching it.

Popping his head out of the floor he caught the newcomer finally pouncing on the simultaneously-emerging Bruce at full speed, loudly crooning the phrase "oohh sexy giiiiirlfrrriend," which rung a bell with Dan that he couldn't immediately reverse-lookup.

"*You got bouncy-bouncies,*" Bruce's muffled shout of surprise from the middle of the impromptu cuddle puddle, made him laugh: he finally understood, and his mind felt like a rubik's cube clicking into ultimate place. This was the big face-to-name moment. This was the return of the grand dame, the master of the house, the reason for the season, the prodigal jedi.

Dimly he heard the command "get grabby" squealed gleefully at Bruce and thought *oh-kay kids, wow.*

*Toichiro's home,* he recalled the holler. He wandered over to join Andreah at the kitchen island, watching the pair on the floor exaggeratedly rolling around in the general film of dust and grit. Toichiro pulled out the raccoon

stripe strips and lashed at Bruce's face with them, admonishing him for his grip on the hardware.

Dan found himself puzzling over the phrase "oh sexy girlfriend." He knew it was something 80's, something popcultural. *Retro and references*, he noted to himself, somehow instantly resolving to make sure he was as funny as possible to Toichiro. He wished he'd grabbed his phone so he could do a quick quote search now, suddenly thirsty for ways to make great smalltalk whenever they came up for air. Dan found himself on the verge of feeling deeply superfluous and precarious, like he might be about to be kicked out as an afterthought so the honeymoon could begin. He'd never really had to pledge this clique, before. Not in any specific feeling way. *This* felt specific, important—it had gravity, somehow.

Speaking almost unconsciously he remarked "good heavens Mz. Sakamoto, you're beautiful," managing to use just the right volume and tone to be heard and sound funny, he felt—sounding almost like Jean-Paul, more than the old man in the Thomas Dolby '82 Canadian-chart-topper he was quoting. There was a shrieked ping of laughter from the floor, gratifyingly, and Dan felt like he'd made a new friend. He quickly whispered to Andreah "*pronouns*," realizing he had no idea what he'd been told and that he would probably have avoid using them anyway for all practical purposes to avoid messing up.

Andreah led him sort of intimately by the arm over to the stove and handed him a mug of hot water with a green tea bag steeping in it because, ever the pro, she already knew he didn't want the chai, and with an air of compassion she whispered "*hir* with an *i* instead of *her* and *ze* with a *zee* instead of *he*, I think, *right now*," in his ear which sent a pleasant zap around his nervous system. Then they were watching the couple upright themselves, all silly-limbed with happiness and clearly snuffling and pawing at one another with a sort of long-starved desperation, still, sounding slightly like guinea pigs. He thought, *they must have meant to get to all that later, right? Stupid, really, making plans to be social right now.* He remembered his own bout of coitus interruptus and grimaced, already missing his room but feeling cranky like he wouldn't want to go back to jerking off when he got there anyway. Taking in

what Dan now understood to be the new figure of who he now understood to be *the* Toi, Bruce had already gotten almost entirely too carried away. *Guess the big surprise was a bigger surprise than you knew, bud.*

Toichiro spun in a circle, pleated black mini-skirt arcing around the black thigh-high tights peeking over the tops of the boots. "They're still numb," was noted with obvious amusement, accompanied by an illustrative bounce of the overcarriage upon completion of the final three-sixty. "What do you think of my vintage," a coquettish eyelash bat accompanied the little flick at the torn red bow trailing in the front from under the parallel eaves of collar. The top was long-sleeved and looked oversized but too short, cut-off maybe.

"You look like an evil cheerleader, it's great, you're great," *oh great*, they were all over each other again, it was ten times worse than when Andre was clinging around, Dan realized, because Bruce was constantly initiating it. *Down, boy*, he thought of saying but put a pin in because he'd lost his chance.

"Surprise, I secretly had funds as of months ago, the inheritance transfer went through faster than, ah, I may have implied." Toichiro raised one delicate hand to one flawless cheek, looking contrite. "I wasn't really dealing with the funeral and escrow that whole time. Forgive me?" Bruce nodded furiously and went in for a bearhug and motorboat combo, looking ridiculous and fully delirious.

"Dead dad gift to yourself?" Andreah spoke up, sounding bored. She was rolling her eyes, when Dan checked.

"Andreah, you're so tactless," laughed Toichiro in a mock-scandalized way, hands moving in Bruce's stupid hair.

"I knowwww, she's so meeeeaan, why is she here?" Bruce came up for air and rubbed noses with Toichiro, speaking as if through a misty haze, sounding distantly reproachful but still playful, like the others were barely there.



“*You’re the one* role-playing jailbait-chaser in-*fron’* of us, skeezer,” Andreah remarked tartly, seeming ready to start leaving.

“Could be a college or pro level cheerleader,” Bruce shrugged. There was a meaningless pause.

“O-KAY, *seeing how it is,*” Andreah began again in an aggrieved huff, when they didn’t either-of-them make any immediate move to join the rest of the group civilly, and then she began to wrap up in her extraordinarily long coil of ash-grey scarf, in a non-rhetorical sort of way. Dan thought about asking to crash in the market for the night, but realized maybe it’d be the same for him down at their place, once Andre got home from work or whatever else had kept her too busy for this floorshow.

“So Pete and Mouse aren't home?” He asked for some basic clarification, arms crossed on the counter, torso bent halfway over. “What about Jean-Paul?” The overhead warm-yellow bulb beaming on the smoothed concrete was reminding him of being on an old ship, of dining in the cabin under the lamplight. If the others were expected back maybe it would be best to just stay in tonight regardless of the situation at Andreah’s.

“Alice is home,” Bruce informed him inanely. *Alice never hangs out anyway, he thought. She’s always home, isn’t she? She never leaves the roof except secretly because she’s paranoid about the plants getting stolen.*

“Okay,” he prompted in a leading tone. It didn’t work. “So are we doing a group thing here tonight? Are we waiting to go out somewhere to celebrate?”

Bruce sighed earnestly then, explaining “I have noooooo idea where the others are. Could be days til I get a text back from even a-one-a-them, those three are impossi-bibble.”

“Don’t text me with stuff like *come right over for a party* when there are no other RSVPs, next time, B,” Andreah sounded salty, but kindly all the same, like she was calming down now that she’d committed to leaving. Seemed reasonable to Dan, if she didn’t want to hang out, given the general vibe, but he also felt kind of burned by not counting another RSVP when the other

Maisonites would have, as though he was so redundant. “Sakamoto, *you* let me know when you’re actually doing a coming-home *party*,” Andreah shoved her big black winter coat on and headed for the door. “Kisses,” she sort of scrunch-scrunched her gloved hands over at them. “It’s good to know you’re back safe.” He watched her go. “Also fuck youuu, biiitch, youuu lo~ok to~o go~od,” she yelled through the closed door, headed downstairs. *There goes my chance to bail, I guess.*

"We're taking Jean-Paul's suite Ayy-SAP," Toichiro told him abruptly from within Bruce's still-circled arms. "And *you're* moving in next to Pete and Mouse—that's *if* you want Bruce's old room *and* you get Alice's okay about it," Toi paused and looked expectantly at him so he nodded. "Because-of, that door to her place that's in there, *you* know. The boys already said it's fine to shove you in the bachelor ghetto. They just didn't want to trade rooms. So you're at Alice's mercy, com-pleeeetelyyy!" He recognized the AM radio reference in the enunciation, it was The Shirelles. That was a thing about Wink too, she loved doo-wop. He panicked and started beelining slowly toward the door, intending to let himself in on the second floor the conventional way for once, post haste, to collect up various cum mop-uppers before Toi went after that duffle. "The second floor is the place we have shows and do the podcast, as of now. Tonight it's where we-two get reacquainted, you're kicked out as of now."

"Oh," Dan said. "Now-now." His backlogged thoughts were catching up with him. Bruce surfaced from conjoinment and made moves to find a lighter for the spliff he was collecting out of his stash necklace. "I thought we were all moving out, aren't you here to get your old stuff out or something?"

"No! Weren't you listening? I just got my inheritance. So I'm here to buy my mom out and get coo-coo for something-puffs. We had a rent-to-own sweetheart deal in place. It's been a long time we've paid rent. Now we can just *brrrrreathe*—" a giant haul on the spliff, held by Bruce, illustrated this in curlicues on the exhale. "It is so very uncool being a weedless stoner AND closeted for family, I'm so glad to be back." A kiss to Bruce. The phrase closeted-for-family reminded him of pretending he was "making a living" as a DJ in any conventional sense, over the phone with the younger sister, a

couple months back. He realized in retrospect that it was stupid to react that way to feeling pressed, because it just lead to more interrogation. Technically he had some kind of proof, he was tagged in a photo from the spit. He didn't want her on his facebook though, or any of his family—and didn't want to send the one picture for her to have anything to say about it. Like why aren't there more, why is it so unprofessional, what was his take-home pay, bla bla bla. They were all the same, and they all reported to Big Mommy anyway. Really, Dan had finally gotten on provincial income assistance back in November. It wasn't enough to move anywhere with solo, especially on short notice, and maybe they wouldn't pay him the moving bonus he'd been told about then, anyway, if he had to change addresses so fast. He might not even have the same office—he realized he probably wouldn't. He'd kept hoping no news was good news, in terms of them all having to bail. This time, the adage was the truth. He just had to stick the landing and make sure it was fine with Alice. *Better than 50/50*, he figured it likely.

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Dec 20, 2016 at 6:02 pm  
3200 Dundas Street, Toronto West

"So we're out of the frying pan and back in the grasslands," Alice crowed in delight, raking the air with her hands, joint firmly clamped between between two fingers as she shimmied through doing some liquid-dance handwork style moves, looking celebratory, satisfied, against the backdrop of plants and hydroponics and grow lights over her shoulder in the greenhouse. "Feeling blessed," she gloated, eyes squeezed shut, still doing a kind of invented yoga. *Well kumbayah, Shambala*, he thought. *I'm fucking freezing.*

"Nice," he sounded corny. "I'm feeling...lit." It was the adrenaline from getting there and still needing an answer. Dan had had a quick whip through of his old room, understanding that it was on him to adjust to the upstairs hammock bed instantly, including however it smelled—which, adjusting was feeling like by far the best alternative, since he didn't really have a rental agreement, he had a letter saying he was a subletter from Bruce and noting a highly calibrated figure as his nominal rent, which was fine by his social

worker but didn't feel like something he could use as a legal barrier to being removed as a trespasser tonight—and get his suitcase and other stuff hauled up there pronto. *Ayy-SAP*. It had been deeply uncanny to walk into his desanctified cave via the desanctified door. He faintly recalled packing up in a blur, running out of suitcase space and stuffing the last things into an Honest Ed's tote he'd found in a free box recently—mostly some dried snackfood bags and canned pasta from the food bank down on Annette (the dollar store near the Maison had started staffing a security guard lately), and the garbage he'd mostly crammed into an empty chip bag, at the start. There were even a couple roaches, and he'd thrown them out too, feeling at once sacrilegious and in response reactive, petulant. The loveydoveys'd have the place littered with all the roaches they could want, in no time, he was sure. He'd thrown the stuff in Bruce's room and tried the inside door, after finding the little ladder to use behind the long couch, but, it had been locked. There was no answer when he knocked. When he had gone back to the kitchen and found it empty, and the living room looking strange in the orange half-light of the early evening, he'd decided it was past time to get his phone back in hand, having finally gotten everyone in the house added to at least one type of contact list. Tandem texting and chat messaging Alice quickly from Bruce's old room, he had gotten a text back commanding him to climb the ladder and make her feel like Rapunzel.

Then, out of his mind with vertigo, he had gone up the back ladder to find Alice, after a quick avoidancy jaunt to the A&W for a paper carrybag of all day breakfasts to take along inside his coat, for shares (bribes). It was an unconscious thing, more or less, that he'd been avoiding this exact situation because of his issue with heights, he'd realized at the lip of the roof. It had taken holding on to an old sock he was tied to by a belt loop and running it under and over successive bars as he climbed, cinching himself to every other waist height bar briefly as he went. About half way up it'd been every bar, but wanting to arrive with the food warm had pushed him to shove himself over the last and most horrific hurdle, the part where the parallel handrails finally stirrupped over the edge of the stonework. It'd felt like it could give way any second, maybe suddenly lift out of where it was bolted down on the other side. It'd been vibrating constantly in the wind and when he'd finally pitched himself onto the roof it was with a massive high of relief, hoping he never had to do it again.

He'd found himself in a little corridor beside the one sloping gable, the front part of which had been gutted for Alice's sunken greenhouse, which was inset in the roof somewhat like a dormer, cut into the side of the gable perfectly natural-like, really.

Now the two of them were sitting in that gravelly trough—the rain catchment/diversion area—around that same southwest corner outside the greenhouse, smoking Alice's dangerous joints. They were pulled up to a pallet tabled on milk crates, on their two folding chairs, ashing into the million-year-old corrugated tin can Alice had there for a butt-bucket. The big trough around this part of the roof prevented the monsoonal Toronto rain from pummeling off the originally-uninterrupted slope of the gable onto an unprepared awning or pedestrian below; instead the excess was all funnelled sideways along the lip of brick wall, off the terminal edge of the gable and into storage vessels. Alice had explained already that the excess, when it wasn't snowing, just spilled over and followed the slope down a drain in the corner, over which they were seated. It had been blessedly dry all day, today, fortunately. From a sitting position within the courtyard of the roof, the road wasn't visible below them, and Dan liked it better than being on the ladder to an extent that was dizzying. Maybe that was still the climb messing with him, or the weed. They'd already inhaled the food. There was nowhere to sit and eat, really, inside, was the thing. So they'd been hanging out here sort of shooting the shit with Dan not knowing how to ask the relevant question. He tried for roughly the same ballpark and finally asked, "it's okay for me to go back inside through your greenhouse, or...?"

"Did you want to walk in on the reunion special? It's not your room, anymore, is it." Right, of course, she already knew he'd been kicked out of the second floor.

"About that, is it—do you mind me being in Bruce's room? Since there's the door."

"Oh that door," she waved away nothing-or-other in the air. "There's a lock on my side already, isn't there. I'll open it for you when you text, next time you want to come visit. We didn't really need to make you ritualistically ask permission I guess, since the door's moot anyway," he saw she was side-

eyeing him, hands cradling the back of her head, icy blonde hair trailing halfway out of the messy high-bun. She winked. He realized he was being entrusted with the location of the secret garden, that he was being trusted to hang out there, and to not mention it otherwise.

"You're going to miss Jean-Paul right?" He asked her because he felt like the only one who would. Like maybe having a say about Dan was a peace offering for not having a say about Jean-Paul.

"Some people have a way of not being gone, it's called a phone. Don't get survivor's guilt just because he's not staying. *He's* moving on as planned, according to *his* schedule. *You* haven't been here long enough to burn out young, yet, and there's almost no time left before you're old. A year or two." She paused, assessed him shivering outside the aura of weed haze and her cocoon of adequate winter coat. "You know that curse, may you live in interesting times? These are the interesting times. I'm glad you're staying." She looked at the sky, clear but not many stars. "I've paid in on the rent on this place, Toi has to pay us out now from the windfall money or repay us in free rent. I kind of want to keep the ball rolling here, you know?" It made sense, he felt. She was a lot calmer up here than behind a wheel or at a wedding. Seemed like it was her natural environment, really. "Like, it's just about to get stupid-fun, *I* think, or maybe just stupid," he found her reassuring for the first time, and noticed himself laughing.

"I am too, actually. Here to keep it rolling." He'd avoided the curse of the early bloomer, for sure. Now he saw Jean-Paul fading from view just as things were going anywhere, and thought *what a shame*. It wasn't going to be the same, but nothing ever stayed the same. He had enough for a bus fare back to BC, too, but it was worse there in so many ways—what did having money to get back even mean when there was nothing that made sense to go back to. It was time to lean in and make a real run of it in Toronto. Booking and banking whatever he could, that kind of thing. Making good on the collab house, getting known.

"Thanks for trusting me to..." he groped through his high for concepts, "be around, and whatever."

“Well, it’s not like you’re going to have random weird dudes dropping you off, JP is honestly wild for that, I’m still noided. I *stay* noided.”

“Right, I just assumed he wasn’t really doing that,” he didn’t mention who had brought it up.

“Oh he did, before we had a stern word about it, but I’m still riled because I never got the feeling he took it seriously.” That answered whether she’d been consulted. Seemed like things were more in Alice’s win column than anticipated.

“Damn,” he looked out over the roofs and skyline to the south—it was humbling, breathtaking even, if that wasn’t just the rapid drop in temperature as the night fell harder. He felt like it was the scale, the vastness. It seemed so endless and at once eminently learnable. “It goes on forever,” he finally said, feeling kind of cinematic.

“Like the art of getting along gracefully,” Alice quipped. “Time to go inside?” She started to get up.

“We’ve got to get back, back into the Maison,” he sang without thinking, instantly misattributing it to the Monkees. The Monkees’ TV show theme quickly drowned out his other thoughts and he started to beatbox it to Alice mostly as a trumpet.

She laughed, and told him “by the way there’s a big solstice party tomorrow, I’ll message you the event page link, it’s a pay-what-you-can rent party—at a thirdfloor walk-up in Montreal! We’re supposed to go to the mountain at midnight or something, afterward, you *so have* to go with, everyone else is at *least* coming to the indoor part.” She sat him down on a beanbag chair while she slid open the back side door of the greenhouse and unlocked the padlock on the inside of the wood door on the other side.

“Everyone else?” he asked her spiny back. It was warm in the greenhouse from a space-heater, and she’d taken off her huge arctic survival coat and

hooked it across the southwest entrance. Clearly the coat was her idea of putting on weight for the winter, he caught himself disapproving, hypocritically.

“Oh, the lovebirds opted to stay in their nest this whole adventure, *but Jean-Paul promised he was in*, because he’s going away, and I want him to feel bad for leaving even though I’m also mad that he fucked up so much over the last couple years that he stayed.”

Dan got up on stiff legs and crab-scuttled past Alice on the narrow travel-path, heading out the greenhouse’s northeast door. “Okay, you got me, I’m in,” he conceded at the other threshold.

“Perfect! It’s good to be sentimental, you know. I promise not to cram your face into a pile of coke, by the way, I know about your heart—anyway welcome back to your new room,” she gestured at him to go through. It reminded him of the poster for *Being John Malkovich* that one of his ex’s friends had always had up. Fortunately Bruce had left the ladder in place to get out of the alcove the door was in.

“Home sweet home,” he noted, climbing inside.

[the end]