

## ABSTRACT

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Thesis Directed by               Professor Maud Casey  
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A collection of short stories exploring the dynamics of personal and interpersonal identity. Through the use of first-person narrative, the stories expand upon the inner lives of characters whose sense of self is under attack.

THE LIMITS OF PERSONAL SPACE

by

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## Rick Porcello isn't taking you deep

Hi there.

Hi folks, thanks for giving me a minute here. Packed in like this, are you comfortable? I mean, our High School auditorium, or is it really our? I mean, did you all go to school here? I have a feeling a lot of you sent your kids to this auditorium; maybe I knew them...

Ok, don't raise hands. Not testing you. I'm just here to give my input.

My name is Kevin Saunders. Hi, yes, it's me Kevin.

You can stop waving. I just want to say my piece.

I'm Kevin Saunders, and I believe in community, in the old fashioned ideals that created this government. I believe in this town. I chose to speak here in town meeting, just to clear the air.

After all, why are we here? Are we here to debate the effects of directing some jets further from the sky over our homes, or do we want to actually clear the air? Everyone deserves clear air, and a neighborhood that stands uncontaminated. While I'm not for or against certain types of pollution, I am here to clear the air between myself, my girlfriend and fellow taxpayer in this community, and one of the alleged stars of the Detroit Tigers.

You know Kym? My girlfriend? Okay, I can see the shaking heads, look; she's just my girlfriend, okay? That's all you need for this. One of these college relationships, it happens. I'm a student. So I'm back here in my home town because, well, I have to get things clear, right from where everything started for me.

All you need to know is my surname-less girlfriend has an unhealthy thing with this Rick Porcello. I mean, we know our Tigers around here, and, well he...is one of them. That I will say.

Well, a few months ago I'm studying with Kym and she interrupts me.

"How is that Porcello this week," she asks and in my foolishness I thought this was an effort to draw us closer. Thank you for trying, I thought, but somehow you never see this guy is not on my team.

My fantasy team, I mean. Don't think going to school in the city has dragged me from Tiger loyalty. I mean, who am I?

Who I am is what Kym has forgotten.

My girlfriend said that she's sorry she's in love with Rick Porcello, but sorry will not erase his name from her mailbox. I hate looking up every minute of a baseball telecast I am trying not to watch, knowing she is watching with nervous hunger. The Tigers can be my team and hers; but in this relationship she is on my team, or hers, just not Rick Porcello's.

Who is Rick Porcello anyway? A pitcher unrecognizable and little known, too young, obscure, too irrelevant to draw attention from fans and to receive kisses launched at a TV set. Too young to be pitching a second year in the Major Leagues, to face the pressure. Too young to be stealing anyone from me.

The way I would describe Rick Porcello in terms of Fantasy baseball is very different than the way I would describe Rick Porcello in terms of having stolen my girlfriend from me. I don't want to come home to someone looking at wallpaper, screen

savers, or Player Raters of Rick Porcello. I am being pushed from my own home, and for what? I refuse to let this fantasy occupy my apartment.

“Kevin, Kevin, how is Rick,” became Kym’s refrain. Before I knew, it was “Rick, Rick, Rick,” her sentences begun as if I had changed my name.

The time for action is now. Will you help me?

I am here tonight not to speak of government or to meet the town or call for a town meeting beyond this one. I have an issue, and the agenda this evening is that we resolve the key issues in our hometown before we resume our separate lives.

I come to you not in humility or pride. I am here to state my case, and my case is this: it’s a strange world where Rick Porcello has a place in my home.

We’ve lived in a strange world, even in this small town, a worried world, the odd world we live in, a world of choices. Without the delays that allow us to recalibrate our choices, the media’s electronic hand pushing into our lives each day. It’s a strange world where our access outreaches our experience.

Take music. Who has enough? No hands going up, but I think you’re still with me. Yes, none of us has enough, but we don’t have time for the choices we’ve already been given. So my brother, yes, JJ, my brother alone sends me music and more music and Kym sometimes gives me music.

I find myself stuck in this paradox, where I want what’s new but I have no time for it. Like I said, it’s strange, this digital world.

A strange world where I can ignore White Rabbits. How many animal bands do I need? So I am also ignoring Grizzly Bear. Not a physical Grizzly Bear in the forest eating something I hope is not my leg. Where I forget that there are Gillian Welch albums lying

somewhere in my digital heap. JJ plays these things, and I listen, and then I forget. It's a strange world where no one stops me. There's this excess of brilliance, an endless reservoir of waiting moments, pushing up against the glass on the 26th floor, ready to burst into my life.

I've come to accept that the world is changing, perhaps preventing us from realizing our lives become a little absurd as it does. For now, I am okay with being absurd. Are you willing to accept my absurdity?

How many truths can I tell before these kind people at the table up there, before they push me out? Are you going to push me out? Don't leave, this is not the time to get up for water, please, no, really, please sit down and listen. I have to tell you why the world is changing and what we can't accept.

We're still neighbors, aren't we? Yes, I see that nod, I know, oh, well, you're not a neighbor I've met, but welcome. Welcome to my neighborhood.

It's unavoidable that, as a sports fan, I have accepted the absurd into my life. Accepted is a strong word, but even without television, sports fill the hours of my day.

I no longer watch basketball, football, racing, or golf, and yet they occupy so much of my thought. I watch baseball out of habit, more than interest or passion. The games themselves are only catalysts for the diversions I bathe in daily.

So I listen to the talkers and the writers and the opinioned masses and I ponder a life where I am the one who inspires these second and third-level analyses.

I play fantasy sports.

It may help you to know that some of your friends and neighbors engage in this pastime. If we are to debate zoning issues and budgetary allocations, we all should realize

there are among us a good quantity of people who play these fantasy sports. I am one of those people, and admit to being such here, before you, my neighbors and taxpaying comrades.

No, I'm sorry, I don't mean comrades; I mean democrats, er...citizens, friends, Tigers fans, fantasy players and friends of fantasy players. We all live here. Or I live here when I'm not in school. That's not what's important. We need to band together, fantasy enthusiasts or not.

What is this word fantasy? Is a fantasy world one where we don't have to watch jet fuel burned above us? I don't need that of fantasy. I don't need to ride a dragon or find an ancient sword in a cavern hidden in a storm drain. I have no desire to meet a prince or pick healing herbs for my flying horse. These fantasies replace the real world, and maybe we all need a little of that, whether the fantasies come from sports, or werewolves, or the dreams we have for our children.

Now, yes, now you understand, don't you. I can see the smiles. Fantasy and reality aren't that separate, it's just life. Let's live.

I'll live in reality, as long as that reality is free of my girlfriend's fantasized Tigers pitcher. Fantasy sports don't get embroidered on pillows or slipped in piles of photo albums supposedly devoted to a real life and relationship.

This is where you have to draw the line. Let me warn you. Yes, let us all beware. Fantasies play out in real time, and we need boundaries. Unlike your fences and hedges, those walls are never high enough. Take note of that.



Fantasy sports don't get their own spot at the dinner table or the fattest breakfast sandwich even if they never show. Fantasy sports have never been the problem.

Fantasized sportsmen are a problem.

Are you still with me? I mean, are you still following? Because you need to know. We all need to know.

I play fantasy sports, hoping to create my own dynasty from cast-offs of dynasties past. I waive and claim and trade and bench the athletes that make up my team. The key word in this equation is "my." In control, in charge, and unrelentless, I build a team. I research and listen and watch for secrets that will run me to victory. I listen to the voices pitching investment in players who will break out from the everyday, the statistical mean. I draft the players each year, desperate to exceed the standard of my past performance, sweating in anticipation of the season to come. I just never thought the players would raise a sweat on anyone who should be sweating over me.

My fantasy world is a mirror of the coming successes of those worthy to wear my banner. I draft and pick the players. I pore over stats and subplots. I reconsider my decisions and review my blunders and the risks I'm taking. The fantasy world draws me to extremes. It consumes hours pledged to family or school or employment or to making myself competent at something more than collecting numbers assigned to familiar names. Now the fantasy is consuming hours that should be devoted to me.

Can you stand with me and fight the fantasy menace? No, sorry, sit, sir, you may sit, but be with me! Be ready to fight!

Let me take a minute to remind the law enforcement personnel on duty that I do not mean an actual fight. Yes, officer, I mean it, but we have to fight the menace! We can't let the fake fantasies rule our lives!

I'm not saying that fantasy baseball should be out of my life. I won't leave that mirror world, where I make the rules. My team places me in the center, makes me the player. My skill is the element being tested. I do all of this to own a little piece of the players I love. But loving players cannot be the same as truly loving someone.

And now I find the bitter reversal that has come as an arm reached out from the lower reaches of the rotation of never-stars in a failing city.

Okay, no, I'm sorry, I know many of you lost jobs in Detroit. Well, what else are you prepared to lose? I'm about to lose a girlfriend, and I need you to help me stop that.

Now, I should admit I once fell for the hype. You should all know, having watched the Bondermans and the Maroths and the wreckage of Tigers pitching past. Sometimes we get caught in the excitement.

Yes, me too. I once wanted Rick Porcello.

I lamented last year when I was too late to pick up on Rick Porcello, his young arm offering hope in my long summer struggling to compete. Rick Porcello, youthful, lean, and forever not mine. Rick Porcello, who strayed out of reach, has taken now from me the one person I always feared losing in the midst of the madness of my fantasies. I will never own Rick Porcello, but now Rick Porcello owns my girlfriend.

I believe in the value of Sports as a common ground. No one cares why you left your house at five thirty last night except when this means you missed the third and final out of the ninth inning of an afternoon game you'd skipped work to watch. At work, the

main subjects of conversation involve ways people you live with have angered you, ways people you work with have angered you, and ways athletes have angered or inspired you.

Athletes are the people we collectively praise. If they cause anger it is only in reference to your favored team -- either they performed badly for your team or they performed well for the opposition. I look to sports for inspiration, for a topic all can discuss with equal qualification. The fan is merely interested in the progress of a team. The fan should not form unnecessary attachments to one player for reasons incomprehensible to other fans. The fan especially should not interchange the identities of fans and players, seeking to erase other fans from her life.

Kym has broken these rules, and I need them unbroken.

This is where my pollution problem originates, and I hope you will listen to my warning, of the pollution of my own life, but I am a part of this town, and we are here meeting to discuss the issues that exist in this town. One of those issues involves me, and as I have stated previously, it also involves a pitcher for the Detroit Tigers.

Rick Porcello, you stole my life, and I need it back.

I am opening an athletes' hall of hatred in my bedroom, and I will give you one guess who the first inductee is going to be.

No, sir, not Roy Williams. Shouldn't we just be glad he's with the Cowboys now?

We're talking baseball anyway, and I mean Rick Porcello. Now if I can just finish.

I like a lot of things, and a lot of people. I just happen to hate Rick Porcello.

Perhaps I should be happy to be in the stage of my relationship where I can be jealous of Kym's professions of love for a kid she'll never meet. Like the clear skies we wish to protect, having something to lose is always a positive step.

I could accept when her favorite baseball player was Albert Pujols. Not only is he actually talented, he plays for the St. Louis Cardinals. A star in a far-away city. That I can take. There's no chance she would uproot herself and move there to stalk him 24/7. I am the lifelong Tigers fan, and I'm not the one who has Rick Porcello's license plate number taped to my bathroom mirror. Well, maybe I'm selling myself short. There are plenty of athletes I am not jealous of; Kym needs to pick one who's not an idiot.

If you happen to talk to Kym, you know, maybe some of you business travelers, I know you're in the city often enough...so if you see her, please let her know that I'm not angry about the juice boxes.

That's right, she's not just a college student, she's a youth soccer coach. Now do we need some funding for the youth sports here? Okay, settle down, you're not voting by applause. But let's hear it for some funding. That's your tax dollars, come on, share the wealth! So maybe people don't have to take their boyfriends' juice boxes, like a certain girlfriend in a certain city?

I'm not even a beverage person. Kym can give my stuff away. No, I know those soccer kids need something more than carrot sticks and apples sometimes. While I'm on the subject, I suppose it wouldn't be beyond me to suggest we do funnel a little more money towards youth sports—maybe new lighting for the fields or a second parking lot that can fit the cars of all of the interested patrons of youth sports in our community. No one likes the street double-lined with parked cars. I don't always help out with the kids;

that's Kym, but if I had been around when she gave away my juice boxes, I hope I am not bragging by saying I would have been proud of my own sacrifice there. It's community.

Really, stop laughing. The city can be a community, too. But if you really believe you're better, that your town is better, it's time to show that! We're here about community, all of us, and I would add that there are no Rick Porcellos in this community, so why are they in my life?

The longer I spend on Porcello patrol, the less time I have to give to my community. They can have my juice boxes, but not my pitch-perfect sideline soft clap. It's action time, and I am here to act.

I am scouring laptops, mobile phones, and ringtones, erasing the Rick so there is room for Kevin. My nights now are a labor not of finding the fantasy gems but of finishing the job of severing this alien growth from my life. Those of you who want to contribute to the community, I ask whether your inclinations toward preservation might be directed towards disarming the electronic menace that surrounds us.

In all my searching, I cannot locate a player deactivator, a brown-irised boy virus eradicator, or electronic Porcello fumigator. Like the dog that takes over your house after its first taste of mashed potatoes, this Rick Porcello is digging his paws into my daily life in ways that have to be faced head-on.

It is a battle, a daily struggle out there. I'm not back here with some big city tale of rat racing. I'm here with a real-life tale of fantasy gone wild. I wouldn't have to scan the old VHS tapes daily for signs of secret Porcello highlights if I knew this Rick would just stay out of my life.

Heck, if I was around town here more often, I probably would have found some dried prunes to give your young athletes. I can pitch in too. I think prunes are a really healthy food and you know those kids can take just about anything that has calories and keep going. Kym might even be here, yes here, to help with a summer league team. The girl is just too kind. Coming to my hometown to coach soccer? It's hard to believe. She thinks giving back to the community means helping de-energize overfed brats outside, where their parents don't have to clean up the mess.

Oh, don't get me wrong, I mean, sir, you can get your exercise later, you don't have to run up the aisle at me, like...what are you...doing?

That was a nice tackle.

Okay, officers, see, I'm not the one who was here to fight. Thank you, though, and sir -- calm yourself. I'm not talking about your children, or anyone's children, as overfed. I mean, it's not the ones who play sports who are obese.

Your kids, though, they are something to watch. There's more trouble on those rec-league fields than I ever remember when I was young. All this coaching business makes me worry for Kym's safety. Half the time I expect her to come home covered in mud and bleeding from cleat marks. When you mix a couple dozen kids with sports and natural stimulants like prunes and juice boxes, there's no telling what will happen.

I wouldn't even blame them even if she had a rib broken; children can't be held responsible for their actions. It's you, the parents, who truly suffer in these cases. Lawsuits and all that. Just be aware. Do you know which coach not to mess with this summer?

No, sir, not Jim Leyland. Funny though, I mean, he's the Tigers' man-ager, not coach, but I get the joke.

Yes, yes, let's get our laughs out. Because I'm warning you, when Kym comes to town there will be no child tramlings. Are we clear?

Should some gaggle of children beat out Rick Porcello for the top spot on my things that are people that hurt Kym wanted list, it will only take one phone call. My girlfriend has parents, too. So protect your little ones, and protect their coaches from your overcharged youths. I'm sure Kym's folks would sue just for making her go see a doctor. It gets me worried sometimes. You can't get sued for running a fantasy baseball team, right?

I love Kym, though, I want that to go on the record. We are in a public meeting here and I am sure there's a record. I just want her to be a better person. We always take the people we love and look for ways to improve them, do we not? I have a few goals of my own regarding the re-education of my girlfriend, but there is one that comes first. Just as we need to enact a resolution that will protect our skies, I resolve to protect my life.

I have enacted Kevin Saunders' special law of maturity as it pertains to professional sports.

Hold on a second for me to read this out.

According to Kevin Saunders' special law of maturity, it is inappropriate to choose a favorite player for non-athletic achievements. It is similarly inappropriate to display signed postcards mailed to you by that player, especially in a heart-encrusted frame. Most crucially, if you date someone named Kevin, it is inappropriate to start asking him if it's okay if you call him Rick sometimes, or to call him Rick without

asking, even if it's late at night on the phone and you're a little out of yourself. Kevin Saunders' special law of maturity as it pertains to professional sports is a non-negotiable condition of my relationship. It inserts itself into the code of laws as assumed by the parties who entered in to that relationship, neither of whom is named Rick. I rest my case firmly in favor of making amends and recovering what is mine. And if I have a girlfriend, to some extent, she has to be mine. Let's get past the four-flavored reanalysis of that statement and admit it holds true, in however symbolic and socially mitigated fashion.

We remain, however part of a public discussion here tonight, and thus I offer these public suggestions. Do not worry who might pollute the clear skies above your home more than you worry who might pollute the shared spaces within it. Do remember that baseball players are people too, however inappropriate it may be to carry on fantasy relationships with them. On some count, we can remember they are the players and we are the fans, and in appropriate circumstances a favorite player is no bad thing.

And so for those who wonder how to pick a favorite player, let me offer the following advice. Do not prize youth over experience. Pick experienced youth over youth that only offers promise. Make do with ordinary if you must, but only when the other options are below par. You must pick, and wisely, for one option eliminates the others.

This means Grady Sizemore, not Scott Sizemore. Melky Cabrera; or Miguel Cabrera. Keep clear, though, of Asdrubal Cabrera. There are better options, and context is everything. BJ Upton, Justin Upton, both provide what you really need, but for the student of the game you need to be with Carl Crawford. Take your players always for what they have done, not what they might. For whoever might be chasing Drews, JD and not Steven. Jimmie Foxx not Jake Fox.



Tell your children of these lessons, your husbands, wives, and significant others. Share often, that our community may grow strong with spreading knowledge. Take these principles with you, think over the lessons of my life, and ask yourself: did you come out this evening to vote on one issue or another, or did you come here to change your life for the better?

## Why Do You Call Your Band That?

“Peter,” she says, turning in her seat, “you ought to be in a band.”

Most people would take this as a compliment, but it’s different when you’re a working musician.

She’s here to record, not to encourage me. I smile, my lips tight, and she turns around to the computer. I’m sitting on a low bowl-like chair, watching in the control room. The engineer, now quiet, chops and slices. Her mouse arrow becomes a blade and suddenly is an arrow again taking flight. Colored bits of sound fly from track to track as my morning in the studio changes shape.

This room is long and narrow, built to oversee the players in the booth. With my scheduled tracks finished, now I am the observer. We’re surrounded by outdated gear, the racks of signal processors and tape decks showing the studio’s past. I want my mixdown, but she thinks I need career advice. I should bang my head against the wall, but the acoustic foam in our narrow booth makes that an exercise in futility. Stretching out my arms, I can punch both walls at the same time.

To my left, through the glass, my guitars lounge in the recording booth. In the studio, I like to watch the engineer count me down to the next overdub, but not all musicians work this way. The second booth is a padded room -- all sound dampening and no windows, where songwriters lock themselves away, shouting regrets. I don’t want to

be that guy, but I can't see why I have to be in a band. I mean, I am in a band, but that isn't the point.

This "be in a band" stuff is hard when it comes from producers and your manager. It's tough coming from your parents, kind enough not to bother you about getting a family and a job with a retirement fund, but blunt enough to tell you that you can't stand on your own two feet.

I hate that idea. I hate people who think bands are superior to the solo songwriter. I'm not saying I have to tour alone, or that I don't appreciate the benefits of rhythm guitar or a horn section. Arrangements and stage presence aren't the issue. I want the recognition, the respect.

Touring under your own name, paying people to sit in a van with you and play your songs, you're the boss. Not that I have to be remembered as successful enough to be able to afford a good backing band. I want my own sound, to be responsible for creating the atmosphere.

I'm still about atmosphere, even after fighting my way into and out of bands. Collaboration hasn't dulled my sense of taste. I've made it through The Gopher Talls with Rich and now I'm in Why Do You Call Your Band That without Rich. A band, especially with Rich, just means compromise.

Rich wasn't trying to be in charge. He just knew he wanted a say. We had to create that atmosphere together. Rich knows he isn't a big star performer. He's fantastic at facilitating, at living just out of the spotlight. Rich will play lead or rhythm; he'll play bass and not get stuck trying to show off. Rich will even hit a triangle in 4/4 time while belting backup vocals. On stage, he's a contributor, but in private he wants a role. If you

get in a situation where he thinks he's part of a negotiation, he'll work to get exactly what he wants. He's no Dave. Dave plays the keyboards and doesn't second-guess the setlist. Unless it's just stupid.

I get that stuff. I mean, a bad setlist will kill the performance. A good setlist will save you from your own mistakes. The whole idea of planning what songs to play is to avoid melting away the enthusiasm, to ensure the casual fans don't hear their three songs too early. At the very least, the setlist saves the arguing on stage about what to play. That would be stupid. I don't do stupid. Stupid doesn't create an atmosphere.

I have a thing about setlists. Even this morning -- I'm staring at mine through the double glass I taped it to before I began recording, the tracings of my block letters showing through the thin paper. A setlist should be fine-tuned. It's okay to be stubborn about things that you're better about than anyone else, so when we're picking songs it has to be my way or else someone had better make an airtight case for why not. Giving an order to the way you're introducing a given audience to your music is important. Those decisions shape the way you communicate with an audience. I never thought Rich got that. He's just looking to play the songs he likes best, which is ridiculous.

Rich wouldn't say that. He'd say there was a genius in matching one's mood to the audience's mood. He wants to feel empathetic. If he picks the song order and the audience gets it, then he made a connection. It's ridiculous. You can't form connections with people by trying to stay true to your selfish ambitions. Audiences have their own ideas.

It's this studio time when the order can be all mine, but as I look back at my morning song list, a crossout or two reminds me that I never think of recording as just

me. The engineers and producers are professionals, but I imagine how they might work best, alternating tempos and putting the complex arrangements in the middle, where we're communicating and still fresh.

The layout of that list is even more critical in front of a paying audience. If you're playing a couple shows in the same general area, you need to mix things up. That way, you reward people who try to get to more than one show. Go ahead and surprise them, but surprise them with nostalgia. Make people think, but only if there's no smooth way to lead each song into the next. Always, the setlist has to create that atmosphere, no matter how obscure the venue.

Rich doesn't seem to get atmosphere. Maybe he's spent so much time in practice spaces struggling through the same song a thousand times. He's forgotten what it means to see the connections between songs. Rich thinks atmosphere is a word for interior designers. He has all the mechanics down. He gets chord progressions and lyrical twists and how to use negative space to accentuate a solo. He just doesn't appreciate the interactions between that tempo and subject matter when it comes to planning out a set.

I remember playing a lonely dark show in a barn, starting off at a rapid pace. It seemed perfect for the rural setting, graying wood around us and the scent of dirt and tree bark on the breeze.

We were on a stage that creaked with every footstomp, the boards beneath us vibrating along with the show. I looked back at Dave, who was whaling away, his guitar thrusting with the beat. He was utterly Ahabish, the energy pouring from him. Dave still hasn't met his white whale.

Looking to the audience, I saw maybe three heads moving to the music, and just barely. There a girl toward the front tilted her head as she danced, her hair swung in reluctant clumps. People gave her space, standing a foot back from her, as if driven off by the smell of her styling products. I looked back around the room, scanning over dozens of unseeing eyes below me. A hollowness crept into me. We were halfway into our first song, "Lost Dance," a relative favorite of most audiences that usually provides energy at the beginning of a show. My fingers were moving automatically. I could barely sense the strings through my calloused fingertips. That wasn't the problem. On a gut level, I was missing the feeling that can sell a live performance. Like the dancing girl's gummed-up hair, I was struggling with my own wooden movements.

I traced my eyes through the crowd again, hoping to get a smile or a shout from one of the truer fans. My eyes found a guy in the back as he carried beers from the bar past a group of talking girls. The girls had formed a circle, the ones in front looking away from the stage shouting to their friends.

I skipped a chord, dropping my guitar to hang from its strap as I grabbed the microphone stand with both hands, flapping through the words. No one caught the difference. I grabbed the guitar again and stepped back from the mic, leaving the words to the wallflowers in the back who have all the songs memorized.

With no one in the audience responding, looked down to my feet where my gear was set up, effects pedals looped to each other, tiny lights to guide me from my frustrated fog. I wanted to stomp a metaphysical go pedal, to find the switch that would launch us into tune with the evening. Every pedal at my feet was useless, only able to bend the

sound from my guitar. I looked shyly to the crowd, then back to my feet. Between the red lights of my gear, I saw a series of dots, blackened spots in the wood.

It looked like I was sweating already. I felt slimy, like an overexcited kid at a dance. Everyone was nonchalant about the performance except me. Still not singing, still whipping my hands through familiar patterns on my guitar strings, I looked up and through the roof to the darkened sky above. There was no roof above my head. I could see the outline of a jagged hole in the boards above, and above that floating cloud shapes illuminated by moonlight.

It occurred to me that it could rain.

I hate rain, or I don't really hate it per se, but I refuse to play a supposedly indoor show in the rain. Even outdoors, they usually build a tent over the stage, but here I was exposed, my head bare to assaulting raindrops. I stepped back to the mic, sang one last chorus and turned around to the band. With a dip of my guitar neck, I let them know it was time to end the song.

"Does anyone here watch the weather channel?" I asked the audience. I had to know when the rain would be soaking instruments and amplifiers. Talking continued back through the ranks of the crowd. Suddenly, I was a party crasher. I felt like an undersized college kid trying to win over the apathetic circle of girls in the back of the place. I was talking the weather, but for real.

No one answered me.

I knew better than to beg the reluctant audience for information. I didn't need people throwing beer at me. I turned back to the guys for help.

“It’s starting to rain and there’s a hole in the roof.” I had to shout a little over the rumbled conversations that filled the barn.

Dave looked at me, his face trembling a little. He brushed his long hair behind one ear and looked to Rich.

Rich held up five fingers.

“Rich, what?” I said, looking back over my shoulder to make sure the audience was still behaving themselves.

I saw nothing unusual, so I turned back to Rich. He held the five fingers again and motioned a slow strumming with his other hand. Rich wanted to play Five String Shuffle, a song about playing a busted up guitar on the porch in the rain. This was a great choice of subject matter, but a terrible momentum choice. It also wasn’t on the set list.

Five-string shuffle is basically half the tempo of the song we’d just played but a great song as far as Rich was concerned because it had all these pauses in the lead part, so he could make ridiculous five-finger gestures at the audience. Just like he was making at me. It didn’t matter that we’d already talked about which songs to play and in what order. We were five minutes into the show, it was about to rain, and all Rich wanted to do was throw away the plan.

It was ridiculous. I didn’t want to be the petty one, but I wasn’t the one who was destroying the order of songs. Somehow, Rich was more concerned with messing up my carefully picked setlist than he was with avoiding the rain.

“Fine, so we’re swapping the songs. Fine, I don’t care, we have to get out of here before it rains anyway,” I said, signaling Dave to play the intro.



A band that can't communicate on stage will fail every time, which is why I never use the blind booth here at the studio. When something's going right or wrong, I want to see the engineer's reaction, feel the intensity in his eyes. As he continues mixing and selecting, adjusting parameters and applying filters to pieces of my morning's work, I start thinking about the name for this project. You always need a catchy name.

When I was with the Gopher Talls, people used to ask me "why do you call your band that," which seems like a fair question. Rich had this dream once that he lived on a red soiled, grassy planet with exceptionally tall gophers. Also on this dream planet, Rich happened to be a phenomenal basketball player. Everyone on the planet loved basketball, loved Rich, and loved his soup commercial. It starts with Rich running crossing the ball back and forth between his legs at midcourt, eyes focused forward as he accelerates the movement of the ball. Then with a rapid cut, he's dunking over a gopher and as the ball goes through the hoop, red dust blooms from the rim.

"When I'm winning games, all I think about is going home to a nice bowl of Tomato Soup," Rich says, wiping a red stain from his chin and licking his palm. The shot changes to Rich in a blue-painted kitchen with a bowl in his hand and a kettle of soup on the stove. He launches his soup bowl in a frisbee toss and the camera follows it across the room and down into the vat of red.

The bowl lands perfectly in the center of the pot, soup billowing out, a mirror of the image of the dusty basketball hoop.

"Drains the three," Dave says, as more soup splashes from above into the bowl. Then more soup pours into the bowl from above, which is where the dream gets weird. Where is this soup supposed to be coming from? If Rich wants a bowl of soup, why eat

from a bowl that's floating in more soup? Whoever made that a hit commercial on an alien world sure was weird.

It must not have been the strangest of planets out there, though, because they apparently had the NBA and soup. The odd part was that Rich was a phenom high school player. Amateur athletes aren't usually allowed to endorse commercials. Plus, Rich was playing power forward but projected maybe more as an oversized shooting guard in the NBA.

Rich wasn't the burliest fellow around in his freak alien NBA prospect dream, but the announcers liked to say he was cat quick and gopher tall. That mix of rodent height and feline speed certainly sounded like a nice combination if you wanted to score a lot of points at the pro level. When Rich woke up, he thought it would be pretty cool to write down the dream. Immediately, he figured he would write a song about it. He told me he almost called me in the night to tell me. I don't thank Rich for a lot of things, but I shook his hand when he revealed that he hadn't phoned me and thanked him for respecting my right to a solid night's sleep.

Rich never had good ideas about how to write a song. I didn't try telling him that too often, but there were times it would slip out, because we'd be debating maybe which tracks would get cut and which ones would make it onto an album.

I would always point out the stupid Gopher dream and he'd realize that, yes, since that was about the best idea he'd come up with for a song, we'd just have to lean more on my ideas.

I'm shifting awkwardly in my scoop chair. The editing drags on. I have no control over this mixing process and yet I'm paying for it. People can talk all day about the line between art and commerce, but there's always a financial connection.

Even Rich and I started out more as business partners than bandmates. We were just two guys hired on to do the soundtrack for a kids film. You'd think perhaps that meant swelling duets and piano choruses. It was not that type of kids movie.

No, in fact it was your basic teach kids the importance of good dental hygiene film. A whale-sized talking tooth holds a huge brush in its Gumby arms and tells the kids to brush and floss every five minutes. Then a green-black talking blob of germs goes in with the reverse psychology, telling the kids not to brush.

There's a party in your mouth, and I'm bringing all my friends, he says as his red-and-yellow eyes expand with glee.

Then the tooth is back, urging you to brush off those uninvited guests. If you watch close the lips on the talking tooth never match the dialog. The animators never talk to the writers, and upon repeat viewings there's a surreal counterpoint to the whole production.

Perhaps if you were home schooled, your education never included these films. They generally get sent straight to video or aired on a public station that Volvo drivers wish their kids would watch. That's forgetting fact that those kids put on MTV or Spike the second their parents turn away, watching reality shows and sugar-high commercials that make talking germ blobs squeal with delight.

I had scored most of the film already, and I was just mailing off sheet music for Rich to practice. Rich would call me sometimes, questioning a tempo shift or even to

drop in a key change. He's a bridge specialist, Rich -- he can stretch any pop song you give him with a long transition that plays just a little off the melodic themes. He'd hold the phone against his shoulder and give me a little acoustic strum to show what he was thinking of adding. I'd just listen once and write it in. One thing I've always been able to do is nail a melody to the page.

If the changes were urgent, I'd get a courier to take it over and Rich would practice his own bridge all night. Then we'd get in the studio and bang through the parts. I just had to cover vocals, rhythm guitar, and drums. Rich took the rest. He's that good. But when he told me about that gopher dream, I was worried. It sounded like he wanted the lead songwriting credit for at least one track.

I didn't have a problem with that, but I was trying to find a song to go with a scene that had just been added to the latest cut of the film. The problem on an educational product is that once the animators finish a scene, the budget's never going to allow them to re-do it. Even if they go way off script.

The storyboard had this one-minute digression in the battle against mouth disease where the heroes are shopping for toothbrushes. The scene we got showed a big animated tooth jumping around a cave with a slice of pie. We had to tell the whole story of what type of toothbrush to buy in the actual song. Rich's dream was a terrible fit for the soundtrack, and I was stuck up late at night dreaming up songs about bristles, floss, and periodontitis. Stubborn Rich was still trying after I rejected the gopher dream. He knew that one was a long shot, but he kept meditating before bed, preparing himself for lucid, inspiring dreams.

It's funny now to think about Rich's goofy ideas, but on that project I was legitimately stressed trying to calm his misguided enthusiasm. Rich was a rare combination of nerves and bad ideas. This woman in front of me, the engineer, has all the professional poise you'd expect from a studio mind. She works silently, eyes forward, keyboard hand snapping to the hotkeys like a bass player going through the familiar scales. If there's one comforting thought as I watch my studio time melt away, it's that I'm not paying for brainstorming and fever dreams.

One night on Project Tooth, Rich and I were in the studio late. The sound guy at the film place had rigged up a multipurpose space, which no one else wanted in the evening. This place was badly designed, with a giant window that risked leaking sound from outside. It stood twenty-six stories above the tangled traffic, which began to ease as the late sunset darkened the studio space. We'd left the main lights off. The two of us sat on amplifiers in the semi-dark, strumming with the amps turned off waiting for the engineer to fix a problem with Rich's mic.

"You hungry at all?" Rich asked me, as he undid the strap on his acoustic.

"I want to finish here first," I said. I didn't want to take a break for calzones or Korean BBQ. There was nothing I wanted more than a break, but we had to make it through another two dubs that night in order to stay on budget.

Rich placed his guitar lazily on the ground. It rang out a semi-melodic thump. He stood up and walked away from me, looking out the window until he turned to speak.

"Yeah, I get it, I just want tofu and mashed potatoes. I have this feeling if I eat vegan tonight, I'm totally going to dream our way out of this rut."

I didn't feel like I was in any sort of rut, but I nodded to Dave as he placed one hand to the window and looked down.

When Rich called me the next morning, I was half hoping he had dreamed a decent song we could use. Instead, he had phoned me to say he'd played cricket with Michael Jordan and Woodsy owl.

Rich might be a better songwriter than I had realized back then. He's just been miscast. We should have worked on Space Jam.

The paycheck for the tooth video, though, measured out to a real heap of Air Jordans. More importantly, Rich and I realized when the job was over that we were a decent enough team. I had half a dozen adult type songs worked out by then. They weren't my usual style, either. It seemed that a band was forming organically around the new material.

The timing turned out to be perfect. Rich had just been kicked out of the Slag River Turncoats for skipping practices to attend his yoga classes. I knew he'd been doing yoga, but I never thought of classes at the health club as the sort of thing someone would place ahead of band practice. I think Rich had an unnatural affection for exercise. He always said it was just something his parents had wanted to share with him. The yoga thing was Rich's family time. I'm all for spending holidays together, but family is a terrible thing to keep you away from your band.

It wasn't much of a band, Rich said, at least not the sort of band that had any idea of going anywhere. Now this is the part people are always getting wrong about The Gopher Talls. The witty, scripted response would have been for me to say that he had

about as much idea what band is going somewhere as he does of being gopher tall, but that didn't happen at all that way.

As a solo artist up to that point, I didn't know much about bands, or at least what it was that got people in and out of them. When you're just hiring some people for a tour, you mainly want to avoid big personalities and drug problems. Both of those are easy to spot if you just set an early enough chat on a Monday. The people with real problems invariably party late Sunday nights.

I had no idea then whether Rich was a practice flake. Maybe his excuse with the Turncoats was a one-time thing. Maybe they were a lousy band. He wouldn't have skipped out of something quality. All the weird dreams and tofu had never made Rich more than ten minutes late for a studio session and he played a lot of instruments.

Certainly, there had to be reasons for the breaking up, just like any breakup. I didn't realize at the time that bands were like any other relationship or club, and so I just sort of asked Rich if he missed being together with his old band or not.

Rich thought about it, surprising me. Maybe I oversimplify people. I assumed Rich had a limited range of possible responses and could sort through them quickly. He figured for the first three to four weeks without the Turncoats, it had been incredibly strange, like his life just didn't work the way it should. The band's demise hadn't, however, made him sad, except for the occasional boxed-in feeling he got when he was struggling to rework his life.

The weirdest part, as far as Rich was concerned, was the fact that he'd woken up at some point and gone to the studio to work with me on that teeth movie. That silly kids

project saved him. He hadn't dwelt on the band he'd left or even the fact that he'd forgotten to think about them.

As his recovery and our project lengthened, Rich's hope shifted subtly. He felt like he'd like a little more of both--the old life and the missing of it. The new life he was supposed to find was there in the studio. That's why he made sure to convince me to form a band with him. It was the only future he could see.

Now, though, I've got the solo work and *Why Do You Call Your Band That*. This little studio is just enough room for my ideas. I have plenty for the band, but today I'm all about my stuff again. It's comfortable.

Rich and I have parted ways, or if you believe the reports we're just making a joke of it since the name of my new band sounds like a commentary on how the old one was received. The Gopher Talls have played their last show, but that hasn't erased the band from the cultural landscape. I should spend more time online, but I don't like knowing who's posted mistyped versions of my lyrics or argued about my taste in hats.

I won't try to pretend the Talls are faded or ignored. Three albums and a couple dozen blog interviews don't disappear. There are fans and there are theories and algorithms. I think this kid in Houston has got it decided if *Band That* plays the precise set list he's mapped out on the precise day, that Rich will just pop out of the audience and bang on the drums like nothing ever happened.

There are a few problems with this theory. I know the easiest way to feed a conspiracy is to deny it, but let me point out the most obvious flaw: Rich can play just about any instrument, but not the drums.



I guess that's the problem with fans though. The possibilities they see are both more limited and more expansive than the scope of options opened up by our talents. When the audience hears or remembers the wrong thing, they fill it in better than it ever was. They're looking for the genius of a particular moment to be repeated in a predictable way. In desiring that, they're forgetting everything else musicians might be able to do.

That's the thing that makes me nervous though about relying on this engineer. It's not the waiting or the weird chair. Everything I've felt, played, sung has to get smashed into a finite stream, like apples pressed into cider. I can see the process, and I know enough to understand this woman's workflow. What I can't control is the match between the song in my head and the mixdown I'm still waiting to hear.

Somewhere along the line, that tension between hope and possibility may have been a reason for the breakup of the Gopher Talls. Rich developed increasing levels of frustration with his failings as a songwriter. Of course, I had no such trouble. I didn't want it to be a competition, so I tried to downplay everything. Rich was doing plenty without contributing original lyrics or melodic structures.

Rich did have something of a gift for insanity, which could have been the root of genius. The night before the start of the Gopher Talls' inaugural tour, he had decided there was nothing more important in the world than the commissioning of a commemorative ode. We were packed, which meant that the people we employed to do our packing had put our things together.

Several band members had gathered in a room in Rich's apartment for a meditation session. I don't know how this was formulated in Rich's head, but in reality it involved people sitting on the floor and drinking herbal tea. It was almost summer, and

the heat of the tea was a little much to take. Still, we sat talking, trying not to think about coming tour problems--who might forget the words to a chorus or spend all their money on drugs.

We were against drugs, at least on paper, and certainly we all personally avoided the abuse of illegal drugs. What we were joking about when we talked about spending money on drugs was more the pharmaceutical kind, to make up for the sleep we might miss. I also knew that the subject of drug abuse bothered Rich, so I sort of let our hired drummer and bassist talk through it all. Essentially we were playing a game that allowed us to accuse Dave of hypochondria. We'd actually tried to play up some controversy by firing our original drummer.

"Not Tall enough, I guess," he'd complained to his new media publicist/girlfriend. So of course that spread. We had Dave give a statement to Kevin, one of those short skinny dudes who programs too much and writes too little. That dude's site is crazy organized, though. People read him because it's like his layout puts you at ease just being on the page.

Kevin's post got picked up a few places and other people called Dave, who had of course chucked his SIM card and switched numbers after the interview. So we got talked up a bit, we all had to reprogram Dave in our phones, and the bassist left because he hadn't been considered important enough to interview about the firing.

B, our new bassist was asking the new drummer, Tab, if he'd ever tried to OD on Mentos.

"The apple ones, you know," B was saying, "it's the apples that mess you up."

"Stop with the drug talk," Rich croaked. His vocal chords sounded awful, making me glad I hadn't yet decided who should be signing the main backing parts. "I invited you here to meditate. There's nothing remotely meditative about this conversation."

I looked at Dave through the bottom of my empty mug, which means I was actually blocking his head from view.

"It's just the tea talking," I said.

B dropped out of his spot on the couch and lay straight down on the floor, his mouth nearly touching the carpet.

"You are drinking chamomile tea," Rich whined at me. "There is nothing remotely psychedelic in your mug, so don't pretend to be looking at me through it." I was trying not to laugh at B making out with the rug, glancing over to see him shoving chocolate chips in between his lips and his clenched teeth. Sugar, I thought to myself, might be enough to ruin this guy.

"Oh man, chamomile?" Dave complained, "I heard the other day there's this genetic thing, where if you drink too much chamomile, your eyes turn green."

I looked back at B, wondering if he might agree. He must have some reason for eating apple Mentos, and turning green could be it.

B was massaging his own spine though, a dark stain on his smile as he worked his hands up toward his shoulders. I wondered why Rich didn't take B to the yoga studio, but then I pictured him throwing up Skittles while trying to do the advanced moves.

Meanwhile, Dave was dipping his tongue in his tea. He tried this several times, then placed the cup on the ground and stuck both thumbs in it. He licked one thumb, then the other, and then picked the cup off the ground. I thought he was going for the tongue

again. Instead he brought it up so close to his nose that I think he dunked that in the tea as well.

Dave was doing a fantastic job of playing the hypochondriac. We hadn't really known how he would respond to our teasing, since he was a new keyboardist. This is the other reason we'd had him give the blog interview. Dave knows nothing and thus can make up the best rote answers. He had been with us a month, during which time he'd switched phone numbers three times. Generally, keyboardists seem so replaceable that we rarely bother learning their last names. With Dave switching his number all the time, it was like we kept getting new keyboardists, but always with the same first name.

There's a reason, though, that Rich isn't in *Why Do You Call Your Band That* and Dave is. I never realized this before today, but the explanation is in that one moment. You can see it in the difference between Dave and Rich's responses to the sight of me staring through the bottom of my mug.

Rich picked up a teakettle from the middle of the room and approached me with it, waving the kettle in a manner that revealed how precisely unmeditative this experience had become for him. He looks like he's trying to kill someone with that thing, I thought to myself, but I couldn't imagine anyone killing me with tea. I kept my reaction light, to bleed off the tension Rich was throwing into the room.

The chaos began to bleed. I was losing the battle. Tab screamed "My name is not Trevor, dude," and began kicking B where he lay on the floor. None of us were wearing shoes, but kicking is never cool. Weirdly, B just started acting like a slow-moving cylindrical soccer ball, rolling toward obstacles with a determination that seemed excessive given the light kicks Tab was administering.

As the rhythm section angled their human soccer game toward the kitchen, I stared again through my teacup, bringing it closer to my left eye. I figured I was behaving better than most people in the room, so it wouldn't hurt to play things up a bit.

"Why don't I top you up," Rich said, moving toward me with the kettle. I kept staring, closing my right eye in order to focus through the blue cup on Rich. I sensed he had stopped in front of me to offer tea, so I swung my teacup eye as if examining him from varied angles.

Tea splashed off the top of my head and down against my neck when I didn't offer the cup to Rich as a target. I had to put my teacup down to dry myself. As I wrung lukewarm tea from my hair, I noted the knot in Rich's jaw. He turned to see me looking at him and turned back slowly, leaving me staring as his eyes swept the room for his next victim. There were scraping sounds from the kitchen, like chairs skidding on the tile. Rich looked briefly in the direction of the noise and gestured a sarcastic salute with his teakettle.

Rich then turned to Dave, who was alternately rubbing his eyes and looking deeply at his fingertips as if searching for evidence of the encroaching green.

"In case no one's told you," Rich said to Dave in what he seemed to think was a calmly superior voice, "you already have green eyes. It doesn't seem to have killed you."

I did have to laugh at this.

Rich pivoted back to me, dropping one shoulder as he turned and threatened with the tea kettle, a little spilling out the end as he brought it rapidly round to face me. Rich has this gift of making jokes he doesn't want people to laugh at. Dave stared up at him with a horrified look on his face and dug his phone out of his pocket. He held the phone

out to Rich, looked down at it, smiled nervously at Rich, and switched it for his mug, which Rich filled halfway with tea.

Dave took the mug in both hands, brought it up to his face, and stuck his nose as far in it as he could, inhaling deeply. Carefully placing it back on the ground next to him, he shook his head as he picked his phone up off the carpet, shrugged, and began pecking at the keys with the concentration of a sculptor working with marble.

I risked another bath of tea by daring to speak

"Why David, are you possibly looking for a doctor to confirm the diagnosis?"

He looked up at me, with a grave look that suggested he was trying his best to maintain his composure.

"Peter, I am afraid it's too late for that sort of thing," he said, as he broke from my gaze to stare briefly at the cup of tea.

"I have already entered stage two, as the tea now smells of ripe cherries. Before long, I will be taken from you. In preparation for this moment, I am composing my will."

Dave spoke in a tone that suggested his words should be chiseled carefully into a limestone monument to his bravery. That was probably what he was working on -- his epitaph, and not a will.

I wasn't ready to give up on him. I opened my mouth to offer consolations, support, anything that might ease his transition to the next world, but Dave held his hand gently before him and silenced me as he gathered his thoughts.

"I have no regrets, Peter, I just want Rich to know that I'll have to leave him out of the will as I am composing it here on my phone and the limit seems to be one hundred

sixty characters. My calculations may not be accurate, but it seems that I need at least seventeen characters just to write out Richard's full name."

At this, I jerked forward laughing and fell straight out of my chair. I could not help but laugh for a good minute straight. It was helpful that Rich hadn't poured me any extra tea. I eventually managed to choke out a response.

"But...Rich's...last...name...is...Grant," I sputtered, and I'm sure that Rich glared as Dave calmly gave his reply.

"Peter, you are a generous soul, just as Richard is humble, but even you may not realize the reach of his powers and the depth of his humility. While he has presented himself to you as Richard Grant, his actual name, with its titles and honorific stanzas, is far more complex. Unfortunately, in legal matters, it is important to be specific, and that is why, Richard Stanley Tearoom Artist Grant, I cannot include you in my will."

By this point, I had recovered somewhat, and I looked to Rich for a response. There was a hint of fury in the tilt of his forehead, and I was prepared for a lecture when he opened his mouth.

"Oh, I think I see it now, Dave, yes, you really have got a lot of green in your eyes," Rich chuckled. As Dave looked to him for a hint of a smile, Rich suddenly took the kettle, which he was still holding, and hurled its contents at Dave, who dove to the side and hid his face with both his arms as the tea splashed the carpet and the lid from the kettle thudded to the floor. Rich followed his initial salvo of lukewarm tea by throwing the kettle itself at Dave's head. It passed over him and hit the floor with a decisive clunk.

“All you need is a T, an A, and two B’s and you’ve got half the band. You can fit me in the will no matter how many ridiculous honorifics you tack onto my name,” Rich said, while stabbing a finger towards the defensive ball of Dave.

“Idiot,” Rich growled, and I waited for something to say, but Rich turned around and walked out before anyone spoke. Metallic sounds from the kitchen suggested that the soccer had grown more violent, and I did not want to engage with that mess.

"Have we reached nirvana yet," Dave gasped from the ball he had made of himself.

"Well, Rich has left, so I think we're pretty close," I said, as the door to the apartment shut with a sort of medium-loud sound.

"I think he's actually angry enough that he didn't want to slam the door and give us something else to laugh at," I decided. I looked around and saw Tab and B, their faces rubbed red, smiling from the far side of the room.

The good thing about Rich leaving us in his house, we all agreed, was that he had tremendously comfortable couches and a mountain of sugar in his kitchen. I dug through the freezer in search of the perfect variety of ice cream bars while Dave and the others argued whether there was supposed to be a Twins game that night.

There was no Twins game, but we did get to watch The Sixth Day while drinking the last of Rich's cream soda. We thought it would be perfect if he came back, saw us eating his food, and blew up again. Anything breakable in the house was his, and we had tons of sandwich cookies and licorice to defend ourselves with if it came to that.

Somehow, Rich stayed out until we gave up waiting for him to return. With no final



entertainment to seal the evening, we separated to our own homes around 2:00 am that night.

When we showed up the next afternoon to leave for the tour, Rich looked happy and handed us each a packet of three-flavor cream wafers. I guess he'd gone off that night to research the health properties of trans fat. As long as he stayed happy and his revenge was passive-aggressive and misguided, we figured the tour would go fine.

Looking back at those days, it would be easy to say that Rich was difficult or that he was the reason the band broke up and we were glad to be rid of him. Dave and I don't see it that way.

I wonder, though. We don't actually talk about the past or at least not about Rich very often. Why Do You Call Your Band That is sort of an homage to Rich, even though we didn't choose him, or he didn't choose us as bandmates once the Gopher Talls were over.

Maybe I should name this solo album for him. "How to get Rich," that could work. Leaning back a little to try to stretch, I feel suddenly like I'm back with the band, with the Talls, and that things are all right. Maybe I should think of the good memories.

A few nights into that first tour, my voice felt thin, and since Rich knew all the lyrics and had an admittedly fantastic voice, he agreed to take over vocals on three songs. This also meant Rich was the face of the band for a portion of our set. I had mixed feelings. I wanted him to do well, but I also wasn't sure how I would handle standing to the side.

We agreed before the New York show that Rich's songs would be the encore songs. He'd have a moment to shine, as well as a chance to sort of surprise the crowd. It

was a relief to have this worked out. During the main set, I wouldn't have to change roles. If we all walked off the stage and they saw Rich wander back out, maybe they'd mistake him for a roadie. Dave wanted to put a flannel shirt on him and a safari hat, so he wouldn't look like the Rich who'd just left the stage.

While Rich didn't respond well to that idea, none of us cared. We did want him to play the first song solo, though, heightening the tension of his surprise. When the band disappears, it's supposed to be the main guy who comes back out. It felt like we were challenging the entire notion of our band's identity. It was liberating.

That first New York show where Rich got his moment was a little bit of an oddity, not because it was sold out, which it wasn't, but because of the crowd. Usually we would accept the fact that we didn't sell a huge amount of tickets on the east coast. We played places like New York because anyone can sell out a weekend show in Manhattan. We were playing on a Tuesday night, a fact that would have consoled us if we were bothered by the attendance. We were not, however, and as the Grape Zipper played their melancholy opening set, Dave and I watched from the back while pointing out funny people in the crowd.

"That guy's like ninety years old," Dave said.

"Obvious critic," I replied, making Dave laugh. He never spots that sort of thing. Even today in Band That, Dave sees all the tour stuff as if it's for the first time.

"There's a woman here selling neon hats," I said in a half-shout. The Grape Zipper were performing "Studio Homebody," which their singer Conor Zell was singing with a surprisingly emphatic chorus. It made question whether Conor was ever going to be

happy on tour. Dave followed my pointing arm, and saw something a little more interesting than I'd assumed.

"That's some tour group, idiot." he replied. "They're wearing the hats because they're all together. She doesn't want to lose any of them."

I looked again, more carefully, and I couldn't disagree with Dave. It didn't make sense for a tour group to be at a concert on a Tuesday night, but maybe the cheaper Broadway stuff was booked. I took a step forward to get a better look.

I could see one middle-aged woman in a neon orange baseball cap, standing behind and to the right of a cluster of teenagers wearing the same hats.

"Should we dedicate a song to them," I asked. I had never seen a tour group at a show before, and had little idea how to respond.

"We'll ask her for the name of the group and write it on Rich's guitar," Dave said. We used a dry erase marker, but I think it messed up the finish somehow and he never quite got rid of the letter shapes.

Our set went off perfectly, my setlist pulling the right waves of tension from the crowd as the night deepened. As we held our last note and the lights fell, I dropped my guitar to the stage and grinned.

We ran off stage, listening to the cheers. Someone wanted an encore badly. Probably just a few obsessive fans, the kind that are never fun to meet. The pulse of the stage was gone, and I felt exhausted and embarrassed at my glee. I was a professional; it was a performance.

Rich ran back onstage, minus the wardrobe change. We watched from just outside our dressing room as he looked out at the audience, still pumping out the cheers.

Everyone was now yelling and clapping like people who need their encore.

"Thank you," Rich said, "Thank you all. We're the Gopher Talls," he said inaccurately. He was the only one on stage at the moment. With a presence of mind I would have thought was beyond his faculties, he smiled and gestured with one arm and then the other, as if acknowledging bandmates. The applause faded to laughter, which died into expectant silence. Perhaps it was in that moment that Rich realized he could be a frontman.

"Why do you call your band that," roared someone from the audience, and a moderate chuckle confirmed the audience's approval of the apparent irony. Rich was onstage introducing the imaginary members of his band, and this kid was refusing to play along with Rich's joke.

From where we stood, none of us could tell who the heckler was. Our sound guy told me later it was one of the neon hat kids, which makes the story even better. Rich didn't really notice that he was being laughed at, and he thought maybe the kid had shouted a request.

"Wow, can't blame the noise, but what did you want to hear again," Rich said into the mic. It's never good to encourage people who yell at concerts. The kid bellowed with added fury, "WHY...DO YOU CALL...YOUR BAND THAT?"

Rich threw back his head a bit, laughed, and said, "Sorry, I don't know the verses for that one, so I guess I'll play something else."

It's possible that Rich still didn't understand the kid, and I guess he figured the audience probably hadn't heard what the kid said either. He stood tuning his guitar, looking up to the audience for a second or two at a time, carrying himself with a relaxed stance. He seemed to think this would show that he knew it was a little silly for him to be the one standing alone on stage.

He didn't realize, still, that he was being asked a question, and so when the kid screamed a third time, "NO. WHY DO YOU CALL YOUR BAND THAT, OR ARE YOU JUST DEAF," Dave grinned again, awkwardly, and started playing the opening chords of "Older than the Narrow Sea."

With the kid yelling over and over, the applause now faded to murmured conversations, Rich could tell the crowd was about to turn on him. For once, he had chosen a song based on what someone else wanted to hear, knowing had to play something they all liked.

It wasn't a disaster, and when we joined Rich on stage for the final song of the night, "Georgian Reminder," Dave grabbed a microphone and fake-slurred "We're the Gopher Talls, although we might change our name to That Kid in the Hat," the crowd cheered and shouted.

B woke me up the next morning, hitting me across the face with a newspaper. Even worse, he read to me about our performance. The general details of the encore heckler dominated the ninety-year-old critic's review of the show. I hate critics for those stunts, but I know critics are maybe a bit like musicians. They see so many shows that they remember them by the oddities. After a while, a show isn't a musical performance as much as it is a habitual blend of experiences.

The neon hat night was one Rich might like to forget, but it was one of his great moments for the Gopher Talls. I bet if you played him a recording of his rendition of "Narrow Sea" that night, he'd be impressed. Sure, he won't remember it as a moment of triumph, but I try to remember that show for the music. I don't want it to be about the neon hats or the heckler. I want to remember the way Rich managed to get a little more stab into the guitar solo and the obvious pain in his voice. Rich had been humiliated by a high schooler, and he'd responded by giving the definitive rendition of a song about the perils of believing age and wisdom went hand-in-hand.

That was a night when music met the challenge. As the engineer pulls me back to now, to ask if I have any more edits, I shake my head no. I'm still trying to think back to a time and place, to find the moment Rich took his own course, but all I can picture is what's here in front of me -- her face against the glowing screen. Are you ready then, she asks, and we're on the edge of the moment. Mixdown, and the music plays.

I wrote this

Hey, wow, thanks for coming out. You know, I should explain for a second what we're doing here, because I know coffee houses don't generally have a cover. It's just a few bucks, like not even cheap t-shirt money, so maybe pretend you had an extra latte. Or some weak flower tea. Hey, I mean, that's all I'm drinking. They comped me, though, first class.

Oops, wait, shouldna left my phone on...oh, it's the Twits. Lemme see what we gotta...

I'll just read it for the crowd. For the six or so of you.

This is from @kayss, who says: "@ricky2two plz cn i hv mah \$\$ bk? #hostingsux"

Really? Shut your phone off and pay attention. We're just getting started, you wanna listen or not. Arrright, I'll just tweet 'cha back here...typing...ok, you ready for this?

I'm all..."I got tha moniez now," and I retweeted you. Now your "#hostingsux" hash tag has one more tweet. So you made that up, right, and now there's two tweets if you search it, haha. Okay, a little splash in the bright lights for ya, and I need to get started.

Like I was saying though, it's an unusual arrangement hosting a gig at a coffee shop, but we're in my home town, I did go to school here too, and it's the summer, so what else I got? I'm just doing a little gig here cuz I know the owner. It's not like I'm

some huge deal. I mean, you have your levels of your levels of notoriety and I guess, look at Twitter, eleven hundred people follow me? I'm not even sure why.

Right, but me hosting a bar thing would be weird, so here we are.

Q&A first, I'll take one question...yeah, ripped oatmeal sweater. Yes, you.

Nope. I do not remember you from High School.

All right, two questions, that was too easy. Someone else?

Yeah, I brought these notes. These are my notes. Nothing else you wanna ask? I gave you all two questions, but...well, I'll try to explain maybe.

Occasionally, I speak to large groups, or to a few folks in a coffee shop.

What? It's...I want to give you the accurate version, the real stuff. I came prepared, yeah.

No, these are not talking points.

I wrote this.

I did write this. It gets tiring these people talking off how everyone knows who I am just because of who I dated. Or that the reason they don't want to know me is because of who I've dated. Fame, even campus 'that guy' fame, has its inevitable backlash, and I get that. Maybe it sounds dumb now, like bragging, but when I got back from sober camp, I was the hottest thing on campus for three straight years. You don't get there just planting a few on the right set of lips.

I get some of the jealousy, even the English faculty with their constant "oh, Rick has such a unique perspective on the transforming whatever of narrative." Worst minor ever. Don't even bother, for real. Because even if the professor isn't taking a minute every other week with these weird you're a tool comments, the English minor is just a



sham way of cutting the wait list for that Bob Dylan course. And seriously, multiple faculty members had the idea I was like the poster child for the fictionalization of our lives.

I don't know what it means either.

When people around town started on the same tactics, that's when I called foul. I never was anybody before college, okay. That doesn't mean I need my barber asking me if I know the dude saying "no @ricky2two sightings 2day. #isdead? #skipthefuneral." I get some backlash from having a female hand pushing me on the populace. Still, I don't think people would call me a tool ever. Such a moron word. It's not like Paula uses me to cut locks off her bike.

That's a weak prank, people. Very High School, and not in the 'yeah, like back in High School' sense. More like the "are you sure you finished High School" sense. Because if Paula Love ever cared about being able to cycle through campus, then I don't have what to say about her.

Look, hey, supershades in the back, stop moping, I don't think you guys are the bike lockers.

Seriously, though, people, I was completely real in college. I know you probably imagine me wobbling around campus on a Birdhouse mini logo deck, failing to ollie curbs. It's not like I'm complaining about the #sk8fail tag - I can take the Twitter jokes when they're fair. But I wasn't any better a skater then than I am now, which doesn't have to matter. I had status. Not like I cared. Just I have to put the situation in context. And just let me talk through things, give you some of my alleged secrets.

Who knows where it starts, but it's hard not to have status dating Paula Love. I think she hosts a reality show in England now, which is all the better with her soccer star cousin representing the country and all, but yeah, she was famous enough on a local level to drag a few of us in her wake. Even Lisa Green, daughter of the dean, was no faster than her pal Paula. Maybe I'm not the person to ask about that since I dated both of them. Because I hate the idea of the whole comparison, right?

Lisa wrote me all through sober camp; at least, I got letters with her name on them. "Who wrote this" isn't important to her ever. Still, Lisa or some ghostwriting Lisa would write me all regular, and send me goodies, even after week two when I found out it wasn't just for alcohol. The smoke alarm was just "beep beep beep," and not because the batteries were low, so that helped them confiscate my K2, which I reminded them was perfectly legal but no one cared. But, you know, I was a little down on my fellow sober campers and missing that tickle of the board under my feet. So I'm roasting a little of the K2, getting my natural high, and all of a sudden that horrid beep materializes into a couple happy-eyed lackeys who actually smile at me while making my life that much worse. I was ready to make microwave popcorn of them. Buncha would-be miscreants.

Lisa mailed me potpourri every week after I wrote her about that fiasco, the potpourri confiscated as well. Good thing since I probably would have tried to eat it by week five in that place. I thought I'd lucked out not being stuck in outback-Arizona-Native-Fauxmerican-hippie-Jesus trail camp.

That is your true haven for modern-day torture. You're like stuck on the moon remaking the barest of basics, but they make you rebuild civilization out of hemp and twine, and if you can't start a fire you can't sit at the fire -- and forget about finding or

cooking food. Don't ask me how I know all this, but yeah that stuff happened at our high school.

Come on, back me up, oatmeal sweater. Yeah. See he knows. And he wasn't sent thirsting through sand dunes. It's just something that's been done. Not that I was there either. My parents weren't the ones who desert-ed me at fourteen or anything, but sometimes when people go off to the reservation, it e-ffects me, k?

So I had a nice indoor sober camp, locked off from little but premium cable, schoolwork, and booze, and yes, they saved me from K2 and super-quality wine coolers and thank you very much for that, but is it possible the ordeal would have been nothing if I'd just gotten a Paula Love letter in narc jail?

It's a want the thing you cannot have deal. You don't need addictive tendencies to get that. Remember, I mean, if you want to learn something, you overvalue these things when they're just out of reach.

So I wanted Paula to write when Lisa or The Desk of Lisa Green was writing. Like I said, it's not about comparing the two of them, but since the difference between high school and college is basically that there are more channels, in the social sense, I might need to explain a few things. Lisa is your basic good girl who's both secretly and fake-secretly bad. Secretly meaning underneath it all she might actively be trying to destroy people, and fake-secretly meaning she likes you to know she wears stolen pearls.

Paula, on the other hand, is your falsely-good bad girl who is permanently and secretly good. Or, she's a reality host. Maybe Paula was just a girl who messed with a lot of people. Her primary role on campus was to create a context for success. You can define yourself as certain things, and a big part of that is presentation.

Both Paula and Lisa are into Johnny Cupcakes, for classically different reasons. Lisa wears their shirts under a cardigan, or with some other ruse to make it just barely apparent. The cute/punk aspect of the cupcake and crossbones is the ideal complication to her half-hidden image. For Paula, who hates both cupcakes and self-conscious substance avoiders...oh, maybe that's it...I mean she and I were doomed from the start, right? Anyway, she likes the j-cupcakes and I think for her it's just...they just make shirts she likes.

Of course, I need to make sure I don't give the wrong impression of Paula, who does no drugs, or didn't in college, but no one believed it. But studio gangster Lisa enjoyed being known as the ironic source of most of your quasi-legal stuff on campus. That seems like a weird pair, but people get along for reasons other than what shirts they wear or how many luxury cars their parents own.

I've never wanted to think it's just a union of convenience. Paula and Lisa are not quite your Shaq and Kobe partnership, but the implications are similar. Maybe more Jordan/Pippen, the harmonious kind. It's not like Lisa didn't send the old "@plove\_cesc tell me how my gr@\$ \$ taste," but that was her overreacting to Paula's joke on me. When I K2'd the smoke alarm and Paula tweets "#chrisrock #letterman @ricky2two there is no rehab for stupidity." That was a little mean, maybe, but yeah The Desk of Lisa Green twit flipped on Paula, and come on? Tell me how my grass taste? Insulting and libelous. You wonder why people never believe Paula could pass a drug test. But those two got along. You can accomplish more by joining forces, and both of them were smart enough to know that.

Whether it's winning that NBA or owning your 3,000-person social space, people who won't join a real team get left behind. And don't tell me Kobe won without Shaq. People don't respect Gasol either.

I know, I'm off track a little. Maybe I should change up the tempo, get you checked back into the story.

The five things you should know about Paula Love, in order, are as follows...

No, hey, flower guy. Sorry, no, nothing person-I, not making fun of your Obey shirt there, but don't take notes. I'm just setting the background. For real, were you a journalism major? Put that massive laptop away and listen.

But I'm giving the background. So, Five Facts about Paula: first, her email has this surreal reply-to; she's got it set up so you hit 'reply' and bam, you're writing 'to: uforlove,' so you're special right there. I mean, get one of her emails and then you write back and you're like 'man, I really am in this club now.' Plus Lisa's never set that up, so you write her you're just writing Lisa Green.

Second, the whole tool business and my general notoriety came because Paula and Lisa Green both tweeted everyone they know - "dong of the yr - @ricky2two #ismyhothotsex." With that, the campus tweeps were all over me. The speculation got going, so "@ricky2two #soreal" was battling "@ricky2two #iswho?" but the battling was enough. I wasn't in the conversation. I was the conversation. And that's the key. If they're talking about you, you're it.

Third, when I walked out on the class trip, stole Lisa's car and half of Paula's stuff and left it all in the rain, convertible top down et al, you'd think Lisa would've had me F'd into oblivion.

Did not happen.

I'm pretty sure Paula told Lisa not to have her dad flunk me. See, we were down in Atlanta? For some, who knows...I can't even remember. Picture a bunch of kids hiding from the rain on a tour bus that wasn't touring anywhere. For whatever reason Lisa had driven the whole way. Because she could, I guess. But she gets bored in her Benz I guess. Then she just leaves the keys in it to come talk to the serfs on the bus. I'm not a selfish person, but I know opportunities. Watching people drain their smartphone batteries, cooped up waiting out a storm is not an opportunity.

Before Lisa could even brush the rain off her suede Varvatos pea coat, Grand Theft Auto was more than a video game. Why she wore leather in the rain is beyond me. You can actually change clothes inside an SLK. It's been done.

Where am I? Fourth, right? Let me just look back at my notes...

Okay, fourth, Paula let Mark date her after we broke up, plus never stopped being friends with either of us. The Desk of Lisa Green I don't hear from except maybe when she's looking for a deal on...oh, it doesn't matter. It's cool though that Paula never ditched me or Mark. I have to admit it made a lot of sense, but mainly it made sense because she made already made us disastrously cool people. Which I get because parents want to hang out with their children - being proud or you know - but this is a college girl, right, I mean, my real parent's not Paula Love. Because why would my mother be in college with me and how in the world would I let her date my best friend.

Figuratively and everything, Paula was one awesome mom.

Now, the fifth and final thing you should know about Paula...yes...

Fifth, when I stole her car the second time and left my Vans in the trunk, she didn't just give them back. People have no idea how bad it sucks to lose your shoes in a heist. It's like the whole rush is killed because three days later not only has it worn off, but you can't match your hats and feet. But Paula sort of beyond saved the day there. She found my shoes, called Vans, and a few months later they came out with a Rick Toué signature model Prison Issue. I never knew being the worst skater on campus was worth a shoe endorsement, but Paula convinces.

I totally should have married the girl.

I met Paula in college, or really I knew who Paula was even before college --we ex-townies know things, right oatmeal -- but okay, Paula, she met me my freshman year of college on a Thursday night at the all-night campus coffee shop...

What? No, really, that's weird. That's weird you didn't know her. Missed that one on the SAT? I mean, I hope you had fun at your state school. You were class of when? Really... Didn't know Paula back in High School...

I knew her. Who she was. Then there was one of many Thursday nights with Chem problems/motivation problems. That's college, I mean, oh right, that's college if you go somewhere half-difficult. Sorry, oats-n-hunny. It's okay you were on the state safety school slip-n-slide. That's why we didn't know each other in HS. Plus you weren't on the team

Yes, I was a jock, or not really, but I played. Whatever, they were good guys but I wasn't friends with that crowd. No, never really.

We're talking college though. College. We're talking about college. And me meeting Paula love.

I was on a desperate study binge, while she was trying to throw armchairs, an even stranger sight considering she was wearing a thin layer of lime jello, Arsenal away shorts, and a sports bra. She didn't have her earrings, and the jello film through her hair was extra venomous, so maybe I was unclear who was tossing chairs about the place, but one landed a foot from me and the thought of nearly losing a leg popped my gut like a balloon of wheat squares and vodka-bull-chata. I was heaving, the real heave-ho. Where you just empty out, you know. As I puked all over my Vans, I felt like I'd lost a relative, those two-tone redorange-and-grey Authentics being a key part of my signature style at the time .

I should get into a little detail though. It started as this annoying thing, I have to be saying here if I want to get it proper. Holed up in my all-night study spot, my head making waves at maybe one-thirty am, desperate to focus on the Chem problem set instead of my upended cereal box or the dual-spiked contents of my Nalgene.

Last think I needed was a buncha simpletons and their derivative antics. These streakers came laughing in as a mob, all wearing shorts, even the dudes, which got me just annoyed. I was about to just heckle, these embarrassingly modest streakers, thinking to peak off their night they should give a half-clothed shock to the other late night crowd. I mean, the true studier, sleeping through some really great problem sets.

Incredibly self-indulgent, these people, I thought watching them dance in jello-stained socks and run out the door. Then they ran back out and I was sort of watching through the floor-to-ceiling glass walls, and jello people are more interesting than Chem, and the one girl stops suddenly, clotheslines this dude, and runs back to the cafe.



That's where I got sort of interested, I mean, in what was on, because you can't get interested in jello-scented women, so says the freshman handbook and all. Plus it was weird how the Jello Warrior sort of stood and took those last few steps gradually, like just walking into the cafe for a two-am review session. And I was thinking that is the least-laundered-looking pair of my team's shorts I have ever seen, and then I was sort of half waking up and thinking yeah, but a girl at this school likes soccer? But mostly I'm thinking how awful it was for a quality bit of sportswear to be dunked in jello. I reminded myself that I might be the next person she'd leave grimacing in the dirt, and trying not to think about clotheslined dude. Then I was thinking how the fluorescents weren't favoring her complexion anyway -- which, I get it, sounds weird. But what superpower prevents guys from knowing these things? The room was all grey and stale but she's all glowing and glowery, and what in the world was wrong with her. By this time, she was hefting chairs over her head and tossing them.

Armageddon had come, and the other side had all the nukes.

No one did a thing, because while the cafe stays open all night, there is no staff past 11pm. The rest of us were pretty much glued in our seats from fear or exhaustion, and feeling like mellow-frightened-subdued-subhuman. Because guess who has the upper hand in a late-night space for studying and jello streaking, it's the people on their feet, but I was ticked just because some girl thought she could track sweat and jello everywhere and throw junk like a wild animal.

"Yo, superdude, how bout you lift those nasty shorts up into a washing machine?" I yelled as a white-blue chair skipped across one of the unoccupied tables and crashed to the floor. All I had in my corner were the remaining wheat squares, piled on one of those

frill-edged de-notebooked college ruled sheets. Yeah, sorry, oatmeal, if you're the recycle-y type. I don't carry plates around campus.

Anyway, my washing line wasn't supposed to be me, but I figured whatever shop she'd stolen the shorts from -- before attempting to remodel our coffee shop -- would probably appreciate if they got the kit back in the proper redcurrant with the badge all crisp, rather than a gelatin-stained mess.

"Hey, to prove your ultimate strength, you could even throw them in the dryer after," I continued. Suddenly a chair was growing massively towards me, streaking the scene and hiding the stalker. This is where the vomiting came to happen.

I dove to my left, away from the hurtling furniture, and felt my stomach leaping in the old giddy fashion that signals hardcore butter consumption and true romance. Except I was puking, crouched in a yakking ball, the mess weirdly warming my toes as it soaked through my shoes.

"Superdude," I shouted. "You almost hit me in the dong."

It was kind of stupid to keep calling that volatile green giant a dude, but I was mad, and I guess you can see where the dong of the year junk came from, but I was serious at the time. Like this girl was pulling a pay-per-view rampage in the only all-night study space on campus, and managing a scary dignity throughout, getting me this idea I must somehow like her, which was just a little weird for me. I was both angry and impressed.

Paula saw me and the puddle of guts, and started laughing.

Then she walked over, stuck a knee right in the middle of my back, crushing my jaw into the floor, and wrote her name in a giant purple heart on my forearm. As

temporary tattoos went, it was sloppy, but felt nice. I didn't know what she was writing at the time, but I knew better than to fight her, because I could already feel the jello seeping through my shirt as she knelt on me.

There are times you can fight girls, but freshman year of college after puking on yourself is not one of those times.

"Seriously," I groaned under the suffocating pressure of her knee, "didn't you have any other shorts for your jello fight club?"

Paula took her weight off me, standing up as I gasped for air, and kicked me in the ribs. I squeaked, her foot getting me just hard enough for me to bleat like she was Kenny G and I was the puker-a-phonie. I had no desire to be her instant symphony, and the shock of the first blow had me holding my side, waiting for her to walk off and leave me to sort things out with my sneakers and the problem set she'd undoubtedly decorated with her slime

"I'm sick of you judgy freaks," she barked, a disarming manly quality in her voice. As she said this, I began to wonder whether her hair might look better than Kenny G's in a stronger light or with less dessert in it. I crawled a little further under the cover of the table in case she was back on the rampage.

"Uh, yeah, no one's judging you, superdude. I just thought it was cool finding an Arsenal fan," I replied, lifting my head slightly to speak and then hitting it on a table leg as I tried to duck back under cover.

"Yeah, 'dude', right. Call me what you want, but I guarantee you're not washing that arm," she said, looming above me. It was impossible for her not to, I mean, she's nearly five foot nine and I was balled under a table.

"Yeah, well, the shorts clash with your, whatever -- skin tone," I yelled, rubbing my head where the chair had tried to take my ear off.

That's when Paula grabbed my jacket where I'd left it on the table, tied it around her neck, took this awful yellow brown overstuffed monster of a chair, and lifted the thing over her head.

"Up up and away," she yelled, then carefully slammed the chair down just hard enough to make me put my hands back over my head, before she ran out of the cafe, arms outstretched like the man of steel.

For real, these are the things I learned in college. Like I bet you got a good story about that sweater's origins, huh oatmeal? But we're not here to hear your stories, sorry man...and it's not like I got my story down that well, being in such a late night state, but subsequent events proved that wasn't me dreaming.

The next day, fashionably late for class, I would have been fine except I'd forgotten it was Friday pajama day, and basically everyone turns up on time to hand in the problems.

I'd like to say my homework smelled the best, or that when I pulled it out of my briefcase everyone laughed, but instead they were laughing because it was 20 degrees and I showed up in a ski hat and flip flops, wearing a t-shirt that showed off the fact that Paula Love had autographed my arm the night before. Now, I'm sure that sent off some more "@ricky2two #soreal" tweets, but that should have been all...

Basically, I had picked the absolute worst day for the cool math teacher to be the one at the blackboard as I walked in, and he's all "this must be the first time a student has brought his homework on a walk of shame." I put up a hand like yeah yeah, thanks for

the memories, lucky classmate, because at that point everyone in the room is staring around trying to figure out which one of the girls (or guys) I'd hooked up with the night before, because in all seriousness if you bring your homework back from a hookup, you weren't exactly out with some slow boater like Paula Love.

But I was.

But I was, and they couldn't change that, I thought, and I don't care if she's on the seven-year slow boat through college, she's Arsenal. I wasn't about to say this all out loud, but you know I thought it as I lamented for a second the fact that Paula still had my coat and my bare unwashed arm was solid evidence as to who I had not hooked up with the night before.

In fact it was clear evidence for anyone who'd been against me, showing the “@ricky2two #iswho” doubters of the previous night's activities that I'd been basically laid out rather than laid, but professor whoever-im-cool shut them up by announcing a pop quiz, which meant mandatory silence, which led to people sort of jabbing each other and pointing at my arm once they'd discovered it, which led to el prof pretty much tossing his chair at me, which came by way of flunking me for starting a cheating scandal, which led my parents to send me to sober camp.

There I was trying to do the quiz, with regulation black ballpoint and one sheet ripped from my notebook, since that stuff makes just as good for writing as paper plating. The three impossible problems were on the board already, I had my tap tap routine going with the pen against my unmarked arm, and while I struggled to keep my eyes on the board, my peripheral vision kept blipping up warnings that there were pointings in my direction.

"Rick," someone said; I did nothing, but there was another "Rick" from the same squeaker, and another "Rick," and some whispered "Two, yo Two"s and I could barely concentrate.

So I had no chance of passing the quiz with all these ex-band geeks making small talk of my exploits in the middle of an allegedly silent quiz, and I just started whispering back at them, because what else was I gonna do, harpoon the teacher with my two dollar pen?

"Rick, dude," I heard one more time, and I lost my patience.

"Would you shut up?" I whisper-roared. "Would you just shut up now and try not to flunk the quiz? Since you've already lost my mind for me, if you get anything on that paper you'll stay off the bottom of the curve."

That should have been it, because I could have gone straight to the front of the class and made el prof put a stop to it all, but instead I used my personal resources to solve my own problem, and then I look back up to take one last stab at a non-zero result and he's looking right at me and saying nothing.

So everyone passes in their papers, and I hand in mine, which inexplicably has a sketched illustration of Wojciech Szczesny stopping a penalty with one finger. I'd gotten the boyish leer and the reverse bullet spot-on, but I had this fear maybe that it would look like less like a spectacular save and more like I was flipping someone off.

"We'll just end class here," el prof smiled to us, gesturing at the homework he had enscrewled in his tiny print, "except Rick and I have to talk over the homework," a total lie because he knew I never discussed my homework, or he would have if he had ever tried bringing it up before.

So while the pajama'd throngs bumped fists and cleaned their rimless eyewear before trotting off in a blissful haze, none of the "Rick, Rick, Rick" gang bothering to slap me an encouraging five, I sat there staring down at my purpled arm and wondering what was happening with my life.

Up until about that moment, freshman year had been perfect, with me ruling over the sincere but talentless skater set, but lonely since that grouping consisted of only me.

To kill time as the try-harders repacked the half-dozen books and binders that helped them make sense of whatever pre-organic chem we were allegedly learning, I unpocketed my phone and it was taking forever to load email, which then showed wall to wall "blah blah is now following you on Twitter" messages, and they weren't the usual spambots, and suddenly I'm just like man, I am something. Which I have to say just made me feel like the significant moments in my life weren't always about ruined shoes or girls that smell like cheap sangria.

So the last of the tuba dorks was out the door, not that any of them were talented enough to perform at the college level or anything, but marching bands at your smaller campuses like ours will surprisingly take anyone. Literally.

But while I saw the classroom clear and I thought a little smugness over my instant swell in twitter followers was premature, profety-andy himself was pacing at the front of the class and fingering his overalls.

"Well, I guess you're out now," he said, and I had no idea what he meant.

So I looked at him, because I know teachers are supposed to recognize and eliminate stupidity on sight, plus it was morning and you don't get much peace sleeping on the 7th edition of Zumdahl&Zumdahl. I didn't have the mental faculties to understand

what was happening, especially not with the yeasty smell of my shoes beginning to fill my lungs.

Say what you want about the so-called decline and fall of Gravis footwear, but they have never made an odorproof backpack.

A few gears in my head stopped slipping, though, and I pulled myself a little out of my stupor.

"You don't want me in your class?" I asked, which seemed like a logical question, but the rag-doll started waving his arms like I had uttered my real opinion of his Keen blanket slip-ons.

Oh, you know, look at oatmeal's feet, he's got some. With those big rubber bumps on the toe? I was silent in the moment, but I will absolutely say this now. Once boulder soccer becomes a mainstream pastime, Keen footwear will be way useful. But if you don't kick rocks, stay away from their clownish toe cladding. It's one thing to define your brand as utility-first; it's something else when those design elements have no place in real life.

But I wasn't thinking about bad branding there with my legs squeezed into the stadium seating of that midsized classroom, I was watching a man wag his arms and stare at his ugly shoes. He looked up at me with a face that said something, but I really didn't care in the moment. I wanted more to run out of there and reorganize my gear while I could still divide it into the categories vomity and non-vomity.

"So I'm kicked out of class," I repeated.

"No, you're out of school," he said, and then that was about it, because I figured if I was out, I was free to depart, which I did while el prof tried to yell things after me, but I



had gotten apparently enough trouble already with my silence-breaking comments, so I was out.

Another glance at my inbox later that morning showed his official recommendation that I be referred to whatever committee it was and kicked out for leading my classmates in an effort to collaborate - aka cheat - on the pop quiz. It's great to be seen as the ringleader and all that for the social Darwinians, but I felt like I was taking a symbolic fall for the wrong offense.

Cheating was punished by a solid year's suspension from school. I was on the rocks the minute that quiz pointing had begun, even though I'd done nothing. Although it emerged that my infraction was more bad judgment than anything else, the dean of the faculty insisted she didn't raise any liars in the instructional ranks, and el prof had for some reason decided to take a midterm leave to follow some dark metal band through lower Norway. Celebrating my dismissal, if you ask me.

So while the administrative machinery worked my fate, I attended class and shot my wad on snowboard gear as if nothing had happened. Eventually I was officially tossed out, which was primarily a lame way of getting me back in my parents' house just long enough for them to pay my sober campership.

Living in town sucks when you've been academically disenfranchised. They technically won't let you on campus, while the Paula Loves and Lisa Greens can dance between dormitories all day long taking their single courseloads of being the dean's daughter.

Technically, this is incorrect. I wouldn't want you to get the wrong impression. Only Lisa is the dean's daughter, and she's actually the president's daughter, but she does

have her own academic department, which is of course where Paula takes a good number of her courses, and where I knew I'd be welcome once I returned from being Paula'd.

That isn't some euphemism for the act my mathchem classmates thought I'd been up to while getting my marker tattoo. When you get chunked for a year, it's easier and less incriminating to say "I've been Paula'd" than to explain the nature of your dids and didnt's. It gives a certain institutional credibility to the process.

In my case, being Paula'd was a complicated reference. I'd been stamped with something that very evening of the jello frolic, and I came to realize that she maybe had been too. It wasn't necessarily the Arsenal for her but the fact that her temporary tattoo had led to my apparently inevitable sentence to one year's academic suspension, and so Paula and Lisa had this chat the night Paula chunked the chairs at me, where they promised something or other and dinged me into campus fame with a couple of tweets. Paula let a lot of the madness play out, but she started new threads in the conversation, the #freericky and #sk8overh8 stuff that people started on. I think there was some retweeting around of things like "innocent but incompetent - he cheats like #sk8fail #freericky #sk8overh8." Skate over hate. I wish I'd thought of that.

No, I'm not selling the shirts, man, sorry. Paula owns that, too.

Anyway, I was in limbo for a bit on campus, but my nonacademic life was still rolling.

The next night, early Saturday night, I was eating dinner in my room though, my dining card good but my dining hall status confusing. My room status was easy, as a lucky frosh with a single, trying to press a can of RockStar energy drink to my head and fight off the old dim lighting/LCD headache while balancing a tray of chicken and gravy

on my lap. I was leaning on the hot wall next to my bed, the one with the steam pipe, but even combining that with the hot food and a gargantic bedspread, I felt oddly unwarmed. Then this knock knock knock almost tips me over, and I dropped the RockStar to the floor as I try to reach over for the door, which opened anyway with Paula walking in going "Well played, Tooie, good work acting the dirty misfit," making me laugh for lack of any better reaction as I rubbed the heart she'd scribbled on my arm.

Paula looked over at my desk, grabbed my laptop, and threw it at the futon, where it hit before bouncing to the floor. I saved my lips from releasing a childish screech like back in the cafe, but only because I had a bite of mashed potatoes stuffed in there.

She pulled herself up on the desk, strangely at home, while I looked at the computer she'd almost broken -- "I'm sure you've got the warranty, or you can have mine," she said -- so I didn't have to stare at the black plaid coat she was wearing instead of my coat, her impeccable Supra workboots, or the diamond watch.

Where did she get this stuff? The coat I felt I should know, it was someone famous and posh, but I couldn't remember. And that watch...It was this overdone Nixon-meets-Roger Federer's-Rolex thing, but I wasn't worried so much about the glow emitting from her wrist as the incredible reddish brown sleekness of her hair, which seemed to have recovered nicely from Thursday's jello'd excitement.

"Tooie, can you imagine dating me," she said, and for a second I was one hundred percent sure I was dreaming. Here was this girl wearing designers I couldn't place, and I realized there that I couldn't even process her facade. I was half convinced she didn't exist. Then she undid the clasp on her watch and hurled it at my face, the thing bouncing

heavily off my head in an 'authentic, not some ebay fake' manner before falling between the bed and wall.

Struggling to ignore the pain bouncing in my skull, I looked as long as I dared into her eyes, which I think made her go weird, because she kicked my chair over and made my fortunately unopened can of RockStar go wobbling across the room in the process.

I wanted to say something cool and super-dude-ish, which is to say, I wanted to play her off like I didn't care, but in a way I couldn't care because as tall and bejeweled and surprisingly polished as she looked sitting on my desk, she had in less than 24 hours nearly crushed my nuts, my cranium, and my second-favorite laptop computer. Then there was also the kicking out of school business.

"I gather dating you qualifies as national military service in several countries," I finally replied to her strangely forward query. "You already broke half my stuff and we've barely met."

"Of course, the kid pretends not to care but loves his Karmaloop crap like a potbellied pig," she said. "Who are you trying to be? It's like you've velvet roped your own corner of every streetwear boutique in the country."

"Sure. And you're like a jacket stealer with more jackets...and you know that wasn't like my real laptop, right dude?" I said, leaving out the 'super-' but pulling my reclining self up to my complete junior-varsity-college-place-kicker height trying not to freak out that she knew more about my clothes than I knew about hers. But when I pushed aside my little bursts of fear, this other thing crept in, a picture of us holding hands and wearing Patagonia fleece pullovers.

It wasn't even the right image; the reality was we were both partial to a different aesthetic and as a couple would project a sort of rough edged skate lifestyle slash couture image, at least if she kept flashing those diamond earrings and wearing a year's tuition on her wrist.

"I get it, not your real laptop," Paula sneered, "because you're such a fan, your real laptop is a six-pound Arsenal sticker, and that one's just your let-some-crazy-girl-kick-me-in-the balls-and-take-my-junk laptop. You're unnecessarily predictable," she said, pushing a few of my Juan Francisco Ruiz pre-owned pens to the floor. Because you know, stuff is just stuff no matter which sketch's ballpoint art came out of it.

Okay, yeah, I'm sorry, JFR's kinda cool, but you know he's sketch too. I can't not say it.

Maybe I just have a hard time keeping my mouth shut. See, I also couldn't resist another dirty shorts dig at Paula that Saturday.

"And you're in trouble if you don't give England's own Kieran Gibbs his number 28 shorts back, properly laundered," I said.

"I'm glad you can look up uniform numbers successfully, but do stop this habit of memorizing girls' clothing. Which cousin Kieran gave me, so I can do what I want. Things get dirty. Speaking of which, did you ever wipe the puke off your shoes or are you gonna wear your little skater socks with sandals now?"

This comment was a bit of a sting, since I happened to have my Vans ankle socks on as she spoke. Paula and her xray eyes. I tried kicking the black lettered abominations off under the layers of blankets that hid my legs and feet, but couldn't get my toe in

between the back hem of the sock and my ankle. There is such a thing as socks that fit too well.

"So? You're playing the puke card on me? See, I've got at least three, no, four pairs of shoes in my closet right now, none of them sloshed on, but I'm going to keep sitting here eating my dinner. If all you want to do is brag about your steroid-induced jello rage, go back on Twitter. I don't care. You can make up #rickpukes and all the other hash tags you want. You can come in here with your weirdly sleek hair, your 5th-Avenue-skate-couture and your laptop-chuck shock therapy, but that doesn't make me want to date you, as smugly fetching as your Supra'd out legs would look if JFR ever agrees to do my holiday cards."

"Right, because like all other American Boy ex-longsnapper campus dong legends, you're bigger than your own creation myth," she said as her jaw tightened. The watch's aftershocks in my head were getting miserable, and I wished that cold drink was still pressed to my temple.

She was stretching the truth anyway. I was a current football player, in fact, place kicker and never-longsnapper, but that didn't lessen the sting.

"Yes, I know you're aware of the mod job Lisa and I worked on your campus profile. Now that some hash tags and 'dong of the year' twice twittered have made your reputation, why don't you stop undressing my legs and join us for dinner." She had lovely legs, though, that was the thing.

I didn't even think to ask what she'd done with my jacket. I just rubbed my sore head and smiled. It was the weirdest (only) date I'd ever been asked on, not least because it seemed that the implicit consequences of my refusal were either an immediate Supra-

kick to the balls or a metaphorical but inevitably more lasting de-donging at the hands of the girls' twitter accounts.

I rubbed my Paula Love'd arm again and eased the tray of cold chicken to the floor. I lurched out of bed to jigger into a pair of those fake-skate Globe slip ons as Paula pointed at the wall and I remembered the watch. Lying face to the carpet and reaching my hand as far under the bed as it would go, I just got my fingers on it.

"From what I've heard of your skateboard skills, those are a good fit," she laughed as I wobbled my way towards her in my sad-slippery Globes. I wondered though if she had heard how campus curbs were my own personal crumple zone before the chair toss or after. When I was close enough, I held out the watch and she snatched it from me, her fingers leaving a

"And people who drink RockStar go blind at forty. Let's dump that where it belongs," Paula said as she picked my dented energy drink can (my can - her dent!) off the floor and backboarded it off the wall into the trash.

I made a break for it, tipping my dinner tray to the floor as I sprung out of bed to grab shoes from the closet before she dragged my stockingfeet away. I had enough presence of mind to dig my blue plaid Everybodys from the back of the closet, the lumberjack theme a nice match for Paula's sneakerboots.

She kept this death grip on my elbow to walk me out into the hall, frog-marching me sideways through the doorways while trying to look as charming and enraptured as possible in case anyone noticed us. The careful observer would have read her body language as cause for a restraining order. Paula's twitter doesn't lie, so she had a real

show to put on, but I kept thinking how best to protect my face if she went all Chris Brown on me.

We stumbled our way down the dorm's granite front steps, a task that became easier once Paula decided I was a limited flight risk and held me by the right hand instead of the elbow. As we made our happy-couple dance through the thin ranks of late-to-diners, I saw fall term French film studies friend Mark make a creepy salute at us. I tried to steer Paula's gaze away from him, but the shakily firm pressure of my left hand against her face made her look the opposite way than I wanted - toward Mark - who began waving both arms as Paula kissed me on the ear. Her breath felt cold on my neck; her lips stuck a little too long, as if the gelatin was still gluing us together.

Mark whooped and Paula reached one hand up, yanked at my neck and made out with me right there in the middle of the green, shoving her caramel corn-tinged tongue at my mouth as I grabbed dreadingly at her hair. The top of my skull throbbed harder, my brain started leaking fluid, sticking in the April mud of my parents' front yard as she left one last whispered kiss on my cheek.

That was all the Paula Love love I was gonna get for another year plus. Weirdly, though, it got me way psyched out of the meeting Lisa thing, which is why I walked in holding hands with Paula - still definitely just for show. When we held our hands up for Lisa and I saw her knit cap, wink, and toothy laugh in the booth - waiting for us like a million other fuzzy-sweatered college girls - my mind sped up or slowed down again and I was right-footed. My move, I thought, and as we walked up to Lisa I dropped Paula's hand. With my freed digits, I gave Paula the slightest feather touch on one cheek, an echo



of her last kiss that slid her into the far side of the booth, opposite Lisa. I popped in on Lisa's side grinning and kissed the dean's daughter on the mouth.

And that is how I dated Lisa Green, but that's not what matters. I mean, whatever, I'll just tell you a secret.

You wanna know what sucks about the whole thing?

It was never me.

It could have been you. Any of you. Yeah, like you, cracklin' oat bran. So, whatever. I get why you're all just skepticizing me. I get it.

But look at it this way: I talked through the story, right, and I was in the story. Don't you see it now? Once I get my notes a little more polished, once it's just all there, I can take it. Because I wrote this.

## Jamie's in my head

Chris Martin pretty much nailed it - “You’re in control, is there anywhere you want to go?” I was on a permanent roadtrip with my friends, a permanent escape. We had chosen where we wanted to go, which was nowhere. Cutting the cords with our wider networks, we were focused in a narrow field, no matter how many miles we put behind us.

It was me who finally brought up the idea of running away. Running was the route we’d chosen by leaving the fragmented connections of electronic life for the deeper friendships offered by constancy. It was too fun to be any use.

I was never in control, but I wanted someone to choose where to go. My role in the group was to ask the right questions. Unlike Clara and Darrin, I lacked the funds to live as I please. Of course, I didn't mind taking the comforts offered by the shared benefits of their funds. While I wasn't on permanent Clara fellowship like the Chris and Chase consortium, I managed by letting the others take care of things. With food and a roaming house, I was set.

I could, perhaps, have done more Steve work, but there was often a chat that interested me more than the gas pedal and watching the skies through the windshield. There is only so much driving and fixing, and Steve mostly covers it. I should have run a telebusiness empire like Loy or Jamie, but I did not. I could have joined the house band

with Chase, Chris, Darrin, and Loy, but I did not. Product management had gotten the better of me. With our group, I got into the teambuilding business.

"We're not here to escape, how dare you say that," Jamie said, standing over the grill on the smoking schooner, the wood of the deck and railings framing our scene as we cruised a few miles an hour through the parking lot.

"It's no escape, cooking for the seven of you, and running all the restaurants on top of that. It's not escape when I can't turn my head without Loy asking if I'm feeling good about the quarterlies or Chris trying to challenge me to another game of marbles.

"If I wanted to escape, wouldn't I have left my job responsibilities or avoided my social ones? All I've left behind, all any of us left is the gritty little stuff. The social sand, the bits that are supposed to fill in the gaps but end up taking over everything."

"But if you're still in touch with work so much, don't you feel like that's more of the sandy bits getting in your way?" I asked the chef, whose meat was barely cooking yet.

"Look, it's a matter of priorities. I thought you knew that, or did you actually join us to get away from your career? You have to accept who you are, and also what we're doing.

"Yes, I'm in constant touch with my restaurants. But I'm also in constant touch with each of you. I may still be working full time, but if this project hadn't shifted my priorities, I'd be managing everything the usual way. Putting my time in at an office and trading texts with half-forgotten friends. Our group changed that for me."

"What really changed, though?" I asked him, "In terms of priorities or how you live? How we live?"

Jamie shook his head and kept on.

“Look, I made a choice, we all made a choice, to run with the few friendships that felt real. We chose not to string ourselves out over the wires, living through shared pictures and snipped-up text streams. We are together, and it’s a demanding job keeping it together.

“Our group has a coherence that trumps this other stuff. No matter how many times Loy asks me if I want to check out Chris' spider farm, I give her a yes or a no. I don’t jump into my email when the dinner conversation gets boring.

“That’s what is critical. You can argue that we’re running from the world, but we never run from each other. We’re in a shared space. We don’t have to click share on a website, because we share over a meal. We share the van and the schooner. Shared space and shared lives.”

“So how do you reconcile your work demands with your no email policy,” I said. I knew Jamie was making a point, but I didn’t see all the connections.

“There’s needing to communicate and there’s wanting to communicate. I do the work stuff, anything outward when I need to; everything else goes to you guys.”

That was an easy logic, and it was noble. The picture came together with the need versus want speech. We weren’t running away, we had just chosen to concentrate our energies on the group.

Our conversation shifted back to the casual stuff. We talked as the grill smoked, as stars deepened above our highest mast, night forming. The schooner, unlike your typical boat, runs on wind power and pneumatic tires. It also sports a larger-than-average grill. The kind of grill that serves eight without a problem. Chris and Chase weren’t big eaters, but we still had enough mouths to go around. Which gave the schooner's grill a

specific importance. Carefully outfitted, it allowed a nighttime ritual that broke the occasional monotony of traveling all day.

My friends, unlike your typical friends, travel all day and grill all night. We tow the schooner until we reach a large enough lot, and then it's time for the dinner routine to begin. The long evening meals on the Schooner or back in the van give us time to relax and slow down after the rough days on the road. Even with a wheeled boat and a two-story traveling home, it's good to pace out the days. Otherwise, we might make each other crazy. We were together, and separate from the rest of the known world.

I did think of it as an escape.

The important element sometimes is less where you are escaping to than your destination. Our destination was just friendship. It was a lifestyle, not a place.

The togetherness meant compromise. It meant knowing your role. Darrin was supreme controller of maps and routings, issues I never pressed. If there was a cross or a circle on some corner of a carefully hidden street-level grid, I didn't need to know.

What was important was understanding my role. I tried to ignore the more sinister implications of roles, keeping myself from the hierarchical side of things.

Whose letter is higher in the alphabet isn't huge to me. It set things in order for us, but I was not stuck on that stuff. You had your top end, the Claras and the Darrins. While my name isn't something I like to use, it did start with a K. The alphabet rule had me outranking the Loy half of the Jamie-Loy rivalry. I stayed out of the troubles.

So we sat, the touring vehicle in its multi-level glory Chris-parked for the evening, the rest of us passengers on the schooner. As Steve guided its fragrance-free

path through another parking lot, the only destination I was escaping toward was the dinner table.

"Jamie," I asked, as the chef-man looked up from his slowly cooking ribs.

"You know it," he said in half-acknowledgement. I tried a question anyway.

"Weren't we having steak tonight?" I asked, my eyes looking first at the jar of home-made barbeque sauce I hoped contained no spider parts, and then back to Steve at the wheel. Steve, that classic join-in non-complainer, was not worried about dinner.

"There's no hope for you," Jamie said, and I took a first step away as he turned to light me up.

"Do you under-stand the value in ribs?" he sneered, removing his monkey hat to drag a hand through his hair.

Jamie had me. During our conversation, I had barely registered the ribs. I didn't know the price or value of ribs. Darrin handled the major purchases, plus routing and gasoline procurement. We may spend our nights without fossil fuel propulsion, but few that allow sailboats. It doesn't matter how many tires they have. We've stuck to four, that number a little less arbitrary than British carmakers once thought.

"I am making food," Jamie continued, another logically flawless declaration. He had that barbeque sauce, a smoky fire under the ribs, and a few metal tools that he could use to chop and poke the ribs until they sat down neatly at the dinner table.

"Yes, lovely food," I heard Loy say, walking up behind me. Now, when I mentioned that being in between Jamie and Loy was not a pretty place, I was not exaggerating. Loy had a maroon tracksuit on, a strange sort of dinner attire, but I decided not to comment, since fashion merchandising is not a business I want to get tangled up in.

Especially while I'm on an endless roadtrip with free ribs for dinner. Telecommuters like Loy can wear what they choose, even after hours. The top floor of the monstrous van has enough conference rooms for her, or any of us, to stay hidden as long as she wants.

"Oh, right, I'm so lovely to be here, cooking everything while you bask under the stars. Oh, that Jamie, he's such a good cook, why don't we have Jamie make dinner? Doesn't matter who made dinner last night. Oh - was it Jamie, I don't know. Why don't we just ask him again? Maybe we could ask him what we're doing on this wheeled schooner, or how sand is a metaphor for online communication."

As Jamie's words soured, Loy tried to get happy, smiling new shapes into her face as she reached an open hand toward the chef.

"You certainly did it again, J. Your ribs look wonderful, but I ate an hour ago, but make all the dinner you want," Loy said, and turned away, awkwardly. I noticed that she had sneaky-looking shoes, these ones a badly brightened blue. Their soles looked soft as felt. They were shoes for a midnite gelato heist.

"What are you...already ate?!" Jamie screamed at her back, and Loy turned to him again, that smile inexplicably wider than before.

"Yes, a client dinner. I even mentioned how nice it was we had a trained chef making us ribs later," Loy said, wheeling back and shuffling three rapid paces to the stairs and down into the lower deck. Though she moved with a disarming grace, Jamie continued to shout after her.

"The monkey ate the bicycle! Nice talking to you. A salad and a conference call is a client dinner? There's no point eating food over the telephone. Absolute worst idea of the week."

It was hard for me to make out the remainder of this speech, as I had given Jamie a pat on the shoulder and flip-flopped my way after Loy. Jealous of her silent speedy footwear, I stumbled on the first step down, nearly face-ing my way below as Jamie spun himself into a rage.

Safe below decks I found Darrin and Chase, trading spider venom recipes with Clara. I think Chris had sat out back on the gigantivan because he was more into spider remedies and thought food was a waste of arachnid mojo. Either that or he was trying to practice noodly guitar lines in private again. Being just the singer can get him down since music is his main thing.

Above us, Steve continued to drive the boat.

I was surprised, as I entered the lower deck with my head in its proper place, to note how cool Loy appeared, now marching from point to point in her athletic gear. The others paused from re-indexing their handwritten three by fives and Chase waved to me as I approached. It seemed they were expecting something from Loy, but I guessed Darrin was hoping to take advantage of the situation to help talk Clara out of the secret to her zero proof tarantula tequila. All Darrin had in his fresh trading stock were evil pancakes. I had tried evil pancakes, and they lacked the bite to match their name.

Darrin glanced carefully at Clara as the rest of us watched Loy continue her revolutions.

Loy's temper was overactive with Jamie. It was natural there was tension between them. Of the two inevitable pairs in the group, they scuffled with a frequency that made up for the prevailing tranquility.



Darrin would never have fought his superior the way Loy did. The reason Darrin and Clara got along was that Darrin had no chance. Clara, unassailably above the fray, exuded a disarming confidence Darrin could not challenge. Jamie would have been wise to study her, but keeps his own counsel.

You never saw Jamie complain about Clara's leadership, but then he had a half-dozen plus restaurants to run. Jamie's need to work did mean hours that kept him away from the group at times. We'd be up staring at stars, counting silently on our fingers. The non-Steves among us could share quiet anecdotes once the schooner was out for the evening, but Jamie might be logged on a seven-way chat with his executive chefs. Other nights we found him with a sleeping finger pressed to a keyboard selling stocks. The worst was his burning eyes when he managed to stay awake past the hour of reasonability, desperately locking onto growers who might provide fresher arugula. The man was driven to a fault. It's for the best that he didn't buy our groceries.

I wasn't thinking any of this in the moment, and couldn't even pause to consider the metallic component of monkey diets, because Loy was immersed in her Jamie impersonation.

"Monkey circus bikes," she tottered, paddling one hand before her as she spoke.

"If you can't find me a monkey that can eat a circus bike, while riding a circus bike, and throwing a circus bike in the air with its other hand, then lower your fee," she gasped, struggling to spit the final words in a single breath.

It wasn't her finest work. Loy used to have the impression of Jamie, silently stamping around mimicking the enraged chef's movements on the deck. I had seated myself next to Chase, who kept tickling my ear when I was struggling to keep my

attention on Loy. We watched her back, now turned to us. A part of me kept thinking it would be best if she gave up her act and maybe tried to slip the scrip for eight-legged dead fudge from Chase's binder while he concentrated on tickling me into a fury.

Then Loy jumped in a half circle, landing facing us with her eyes worked wide and calmly sealed lips. She hopped in the air again, but stayed facing front, landing while extending both arms as high and wide as she could and triple-clawing her fingers.

"My name is Jamie! If don't give me a good price on your monkey I'll...bake your ears!" she screamed, the husk in her voice projecting into us like a hose full of water.

I preemptively backhanded Chase in the face to stop him from getting my ear. He didn't even react. He pushed my arm away, but in a calming manner.

I looked over at him, and saw that he and Darrin were staring at me, giant smiles on their faces that were slightly forced.

We had to laugh for Loy. This happens; sometimes you fake it to keep the friendship going.

That was the problem, and I had been too busy preparing my Maginot tickle defense to see it. I looked to the far end of our seated group, where Clara sat smiling carefully at Loy, and realized it would be up to the boys to take care of this.

We each began hawing and spitting, bursting with mirth as if we could barely stay upright. Chase was careful to actually fall into me, his uncontrolled hand catching me hard below the temple as he leaned in. Chase, like your actual rock musicians, has less time to eat and exercise than play music, and did not bear down heavily when falling upon me.

I reached a palm over to Darrin for a contact high five, the seal to our performance. Loy stayed in character despite our warm reaction, stomping up toward us to loom above our heads like a pomelo. Loy's small height raised the level of menace.

I wonder sometimes how pomelos manage not to drop off their tiny stems onto the typical pomelo picker. How many citrus soccer balls does it take for orchardplace injuries to decimate the labor force?

Fortunately for us, Loy did not break her threadlike pomelo stem, leaning back up and away from us. Job well done, I thought, looking at her as she continued some less citruslike impressions of the flambeeing chef.

We're well practiced at controlling our reactions to Loy's Jamie impression. Sometimes we'd laugh out loud, leading to the challenge of figuring how hard we could laugh without attracting Jamie's attention and further stoking his temper.

It was hard work laughing at a specific volume. It takes a group effort. I had even considered sending Clara to laughter fantasy camp, in the hope that she would be able to learn to pitch in better. You're only as strong as your friends, Chris says. This is a natural point for Chris, as his main utility to the group is noninstrumental musical talent and the wearing of clothing purchased for Chase but not hip enough for Chase.

His intent though isn't some weakest link business, but more like the weak force none of us really learned about in physics. If we strengthen our friendships, we strengthen ourselves. Allowing Clara to gain confidence in her laughing would facilitate a higher participation rate, greater success ratio, and safer decibel range for our mutually moderate laughs. The hallmarks of group dynamics. If I spend someone else's money to get there, I'm doing my job. Teambuilding is, after all, my new forte.

My best idea, team-wise, was that we should mediate disputes via ping-pong. It was a defining moment in the establishment of the group. Clara was trying to keep us from overreacting, and the whole eye for an eye thing seemed a bit much. Steve, Chase, and I were debating the new mediation policy. Chase took a Central American military intervention strategy.

"People wanna argue, we blast 'em out," he insisted with a self-conscious swipe of a hand at his left eye.

Steve took one hand off the wheel and gave a puzzled glance to Chase's slouched body in the passenger's seat. With his skin-tight basketball jersey and thigh-clenching jeans, Chase looked like a well-done sausage.

"Won't firecrackers carry the risk of igniting our carpets?" I asked.

"One less spot to vacuum," Steve joked, taking off his sunglasses to toss them in the bucket of shades in between the front seats. "Too dark for mirror lenses. You have anything in a greyer tint?"

I poked my way into the bucket of shades, aiming to please. It was a standard plastic construction-site bucket, swivel handle and all. The thing was halfway stacked with aviators, giant-eye fashion frames, and those ballplayer wraparounds. Rattling my way through, I heard rolling sounds from the bottom of the barrel, which apparently had been storing Chris' second-string marbles for some time.

I jammed into the muddle and gripped on an arm, pulling a set of oversized purple-lensed wayfarers from the bin. They came out trailing a pair of super-hideous, plastic framed, wire-armed glasses that I threw over to Chase. He tossed them on the dash and gave me a look like I was taking away his freedom.

"Let's not start any new conflicts, okay," I said with a little grin as I handed the wayfarers to Steve. He put them on with both hands, using his knee to steer.

"Dangerous," Steve said.

Chase and I laughed, not knowing whether it was more dangerous to wear purple sunglasses or drive two stories of steel without hands.

We three were running our special subcommittee meeting for enforced conflict mediation the slow way.

Chase broke the silence that had settled in as the dangerously accessorized Steve continued driving. "Should I run by the kitchen for more yogurt pretzels?"

I looked at Chase, wondering how he planned to slouch his way out of front seat manor, over my cross-legged body, and back for supplies. I had difficulty finding our third committee member's reaction. Steve's face was now partly camouflaged, the jungle print of his shades breaking up the soft angles and light-orange scruff of his face.

"Ever notice how the longer you bake pretzels and yogurt, the less the final product looks like what you buy in the store?" I said.

Chase picked the nerd-armed glasses and, bending the arms a little straighter, placed them on his face before turning to me. He looked intensely South Californian with the shades on his face and the jersey exposing his overdone arms, but I was at a clear disadvantage, both my co-panelists now shaded out.

"That is not the question."

I didn't know what the question was, and I was about ready to seek out a book on type design before we completely lost our rails.

"You...are the question," Steve cut in. "Your entire approach to this problem is fitting of an armed force, not a few people trying to figure out their differences. Imagine if we were having this conversation and someone tossed a handful of firecrackers at us."

"I wouldn't want to be the one without a good pair of sunblockers," Chase insisted. I tried to intimidate him with a quick glare, but as I had feared, the bottle-green tint hiding his eyes took some bite out of the deal.

"What is the point of throwing firecrackers at arguing people, though? Are we trying to separate them through violence?"

"It's not violence, it's music. Come on, I said blast them, not blow them up," Chase replied, shutting down my line or questioning. Steve looked extremely puzzled by this response, tilting his shades up on his forehead to rub one eye and then the other.

"Come on, Chase, how can you let us keep talking about firecrackers and now you're correcting us."

Chase looked at him and gave a little cough/laugh as I leaned back where I was sitting on the floor and tried to flip the shades bucket's handle from one side to the other with my feet.

"Chase didn't correct us, he just backed off the firecrackers," I said.

"I never wanted firecrackers," Chase shot at me.

"So we can't talk about blowing stuff up now, even if you wanted to before, but at least explain what music has to do with this."

"The point is to blast them out..." Chase insisted.

"You said you didn't say blast them out," Steve replied, cutting him mid-sentence.

Chase put a hand to his belt buckle and got right back in there.

"Blast them up and blow them out are still different things."

"No, they're not. Now, you're mixing metaphors," Steve insisted. "You keep changing what you say. First you talk firecrackers, then you're not talking firecrackers, now you're blowing the coverage on your terms."

I laughed at the blown coverage bit, which reminded me of football. Then, as a tension and lack of talking fell, I saw that I had made the situation worse.

"Seriously, can you two promise not to let this get out of hand? We're working together, so let's just settle put everything on the table and move on," Chase said.

"You two have this contagion," Steve said. "It's like metaphors are allergic to...like you're allergic to metaphors."

"So maybe we're allergic to metaphors," I said.

Chase put up a hand to signal that he was done with my comment. I decided not to take it personally, since two members of the subcommittee were already feuding.

"Steven," he said, "I personally take exception to this lumping of myself with persons who are unable to formulate coherent metaphor. You asserted that I established and then switched a pair of metaphors. This accusation presupposes that I am capable of creating metaphor.

"I dispute the accusation itself, but irregardless, you have placed me clearly in the category of people who can work with metaphor, which is incompatible with an allergy to metaphor."

Steve let out a bit of a snort after Chase wound to the end of his speech.

"Really, 'irregardless?'" Steve said, "Are you sure you're not wearing your boat shoes today, Chase?"

Then suddenly I heard Darrin's voice from behind me.

"Right, because people who spend time on boats use the word 'irregardless.' It's not even a word."

"Well, Darrin, all of us spend time on boats," said Chase.

"The schooner isn't a boat," I replied.

"No," Darrin agreed, "I don't think Steve was thinking of the schooner."

"Maybe Darrin has boat shoes too. Without socks. Since he knows what I'm thinking."

While all of this continued, I saw in my head the various conflicting parties forming alliances and continuing the argument beyond the three hour block allocated to our committee meeting. Schedules are critical when your time is flexible, and I had to keep us on the admittedly slow clock.

"No, really, since you're all on the table now..."

"You still have no idea where you're going with this table," said Steve as he struggled to contain a laugh.

"Actually, I do," I said, a strong statement that warranted a provocative pause. This gave me a second to collect my thoughts.

"If you and Chase can't settle the business with the firecrackers, you should take it out on the ping pong court."

"You mean table," Darrin said.

"Thanks Darrin, no, I can do that, take it to the table." Chase said, a little smile breaking his serious mood.

"We have to do this, because table tennis is a forte of mine." Steve said.



"Now I have boat shoes," I shouted.

"You mean, now Steve has boat shoes," Darrin corrected. He was still lurking behind me, so I peered back to see that he was wearing flip flops, with jellyfish embroidered on the straps.

"Oh, Steve has boat shoes because he said 'table tennis?'" Chase asked.

"I think it was more the 'forte' thing," Darrin mused.

"No, I get it, I am wearing boat shoes, not that it has anything to do with our dispute," Steve said.

"You wear boat shoes," I sputtered.

Right as I spoke, Chase squealed a sentence I couldn't understand.

"What did he say?" I asked.

"I could pong your tennis any day of the week," Darrin said.

"You know, fine, we'll play too," I shot at Darrin.

"No, that's what Chase said to Steve," Darrin corrected.

"Yeah, I doubt that," Steve said.

"But what did he say?" I asked. The conversation was escaping me like a helium-filled pig.

"I could beat you wearing sunglasses," Chase said.

"Oh, right," said Steve.

"Well, sunglasses or not, I say that's the conflict resolution," I said with a feeling of accomplishment.

"We're agreed on that already," Steve said.

"No, I'm not sure that we are," Chase said with a surprising note of venom in his voice.

If Steve hadn't been driving, I think Chase would have ripped off his sunglasses and jersey, leaped across the room, and tackled him right there. It's a good thing he didn't. Chase looks like one of those guys whose bare sheen of tough is worn off quickly when things get testy.

"The best thing to do, in these situations," Darrin said with a hand on my shoulder, "is to let the idiots run."

"I'm not letting them run and play ping pong at the same time," I said, "Steve's been at that drinkable yogurt all day. It's just not compatible."

"What isn't compatible is your temperament and these two idiots."

"I don't see what you mean," I said, as Darrin dragged me from the room and out back to a couch. We sank into the leather cushions, and immediately I found myself wanting a drink. Instead, I was in the middle of a serious chat with a Connecticut Yankee. I stretched myself out on the couch, relaxing into its excessive padding.

"Are you appending yourself to the subcommittee now? We were in a meeting until you interrupted," I said, trying to get Darrin on the wrong foot from the beginning.

"Not, no, it's..."

"Because I see your goal, and if we don't get those two to fix things on the ping pong court, I have no idea what will come next," I continued.

"What's going to come next is they'll be asking me to help them play a live rendition of *Animal Rights* outside your door at seven o'clock," Darrin said.

"Well, not exactly classic material, but I could appreciate that," I said as I considered the spectacle of waking up to a tribute to Moby's punk vegan album.

I didn't understand what possible interest Chase would have in a morning hallway rehearsal, but I let that slide.

"See, no, you're missing the point. There are times you have to let people do their thing."

"Well, if Chase's thing continues to involve developing a basketball tan while exercising less than once a week, then, yes, I will have a hard time putting up with that," I said.

Darrin stood up and stretched, his need for some immediate exercise apparent.

"Why don't we just call it off, then."

"So you're not joining the subcommittee," I said cautiously, "Or is this your way of voting us out?"

"None of the above. Let's just play."

"I'm going to leave that to the disputing parties. But I appreciate the invitation," I replied. I sat my ground, watching as Darrin looked lazily away from me. He was trying to lull me into a game of ping-pong, which I didn't appreciate. I stared defiantly at the wall behind him, where Clara had exhibited a remarkable puce and taupe study by a famous but forgotten advocate of unknowable colors. Suddenly, the painting was alive, a monster blooming from its desert seas.

I realized in a second that I was looking at Darrin's hair rising above the bottom frame and into view, blocking part of the artwork. The effect was not completely pleasing, but if I'd had my photography kit in order, I might have snapped a few just to see the moment rendered permanent.

The painting was hung as carefully out of the way as possible, which meant that its lower edge was just in line with Darrin's jaw. As he turned to walk out of the room, it became again its two-dimensional self.

I was left with a feeling not of artistic fuzziness but of satisfaction, as I had maneuvered Darrin out of the way and made sure the results of my subcommittee meeting stood. Though its origins soon seemed lost to history, the ping-pong system became canon.

Disputes of a significant nature were rare, but inevitable to our situation. Everyone who felt a claim on an item would come together. First taking a ceremonial sip from a bloodred juice concoction Loy claimed would enhance court vision, the participants met to nod knowingly at each other before the disputation got going.

Darrin would read out the rules of the competition, making sure to announce specific arguments that might be permitted or disallowed during the heat of fire. Some tactics are out of line, especially those that involve the introduction of peripheral accusations into a debate. Imagine trying to return a spin backhand when someone is accusing you of sleep talking.

Mostly, we frowned if anyone appeared to ignore Darrin's prefatory remarks. The tying of shoelaces and ponytails while he spoke was not indicative of the sort of respect he deserved. Once a properly deferential beginning was completed, the unspoken agreement was to ignore Darrin's rules and play the game to ten points. The first person to win two in a row secured the right to negotiate a settlement, a task that could then be farmed off on Darrin or Loy. I'm not sure why, it just happened.

But that is the nature of these things. The agreements are made formally, and other elements are more casually introduced, until there is a working system.

These ping-pong showdowns often outstretched my attention span, skills being so evenly matched. Chris in particular was known to devote hours to practice, but showed little improvement from that.

Chris having proven that training was futile, we began seeking other means of distinguishing ourselves. Whenever Loy could convince Darrin to make a bookstore stop, everyone rushed to get a hand on the latest technical guides. Searching for a playing style that could ascend past the others, Loy was known to speed-read these manuals while driving.

As Loy so infrequently bothered to clear her work schedule to take her required turn at the wheel, Steve began replacing her just to avoid the sideseat driving experience of worrying as she flipped her eyes constantly from book to road.

When he was driving, Steve practiced endlessly, alternating fore- and backhands over a mini table and off the opposite window.

The fearsome length of matches and the unsightly nature of Loy's poorly curated ping-pong how-to library soon made it clear that change was needed.

"Why don't we just compete left-handed?" I asked Darrin as he soaked his sore hand in a tub of alphabet ice cubes.

"It just has to be this way," he groaned. He was trying to itch his aching wrist, but had this pained look on his face as he struggled to reach it without dipping his opposite hand into the educational ice bath.

"No, it doesn't, we have to stop the midnight practice sessions," I insisted.

Of course, this statement turned out to be pure folly. I blame myself for what later became Steve and Jamie's midnight ping-pong club.

One morning, I awoke to find a note from Loy stuck to my door with maple syrup. It consisted of a series of toasted bread slices, which had the following note written on it in squeezable chocolate:

Midnight ping-pong club

must be stopped

Steve and Jamie

awful cheats

First, I wondered why Loy's handwriting was so small on the first slice, which had four entire words written there. I shouldn't give the impression that I recognize her handwriting on sight, but I knew if Darrin had left me a note it would have been in French preserves, something berrylicious.

I ate my way through the information at hand, trying to wipe my fingers on my jeans to remove a slick of maple syrup, which Loy had used as the adhesive. When I walked out the door, still licking denim fuzz and sugar from my right palm, I found Loy waiting for me with a hoodie and skirt on and her phone to one ear.

She clicked the phone shut and looked at me with downcast eyes. I think she was trying to intimidate me by minimizing my apparent size, but our height difference made it seem like she was glaring at my shoetops.

"Is that the rest of my note you're licking off your fingers? Did you read it first?" she asked with a frustrated motion of the hand holding the phone.

She wanted to be get back to billable hours, I could tell.

"Chocolate and maple syrup wasn't exactly what I'd expected," I said as I struggled to blow the blue fluff off my tongue.

"You know, they're just trying to circumvent your policy," she said. She had the phone out again, trying to eye-dial it. I was momentarily glad such technology didn't exist. It was vaguely insulting standing there watching Loy and her clear disinterest in our chat. I thought Jamie had said we weren't about ignoring people to talk on the phone. I don't like to take exception with my friends, but Loy was positively impolite. You don't glue breakfast notes to someone's door and then expect them to wait while you leer at your mobile phone.

"Well, I don't have any policies, so I expect they can't be circumvented," I said confidently, "it's convenient that way." Of course, while the logic of my statement was impeccable, it was factually flawed. Sometimes rhetoric relies more on a good story than the literal truth.

"Fine, but next time your subcommittee wants to resolve a dispute, you should test the members' loyalty to previous resolutions," she said as she tucked the open phone into the pocket of her hoodie. I was glad to have her full attention, but simultaneously worried she had optically dialed Jamie and was only trying to get me to pull him to pieces via speakerphone.

"Yeah, well, off-handed, I just..." I began.

"No, that's perfect. They can play with their opposite hands. Let's see them practice that," she cut in with a smirk.

"Sure, okay, but what makes you think there's a problem anyway?"

"In case you forgot to read your toast before smearing it on your pants," she replied as I looked down and noticed the maple syrup glue stains on my jeans, "I was half asleep last night just trying for a pear juice from the fridge and suddenly these dough balls were flying at me..."

"Oh, that's the problem, isn't it, Jamie has to stop cooking late nights, especially the flying dough."

"No, they weren't real dough balls, I just thought...the point is they hit me right here," she motioned to a smooth, unbruised temple, "and when I woke up I had this chewed lump of plastic in my mouth."

"So that's simple. Going forward, do not sleepwalk or munch plastic in bed," I added with a grin. It was great to hear that Loy had made such a fool of herself. With all the time she spends on clients, I wondered if she was working more to keep herself above the rest of us than out of financial or professional necessity. Because she wasn't supposed to be doing that.

"It was the ping pong ball!" Loy exclaimed.

"What ping pong ball?"

"That they threw at me."

"Why were they throwing ping pong balls while Jamie was baking last night?" I asked as I tried to picture what had happened between the kitchen and the games annex in the dark hours.

"No, it's their midnight ping pong club. They weren't baking anything."

"Good ruse by the boys, then," I said.



"Really?" Loy asked and took off without another word. Then she slowed and turned back.

"At least you solved the problem. Off-handed. I can't wait to see this."

Jamie, once the news came out of Loy's polymeric midnight snack, felt bad and confessed his roll in the midnight ping-pong conspiracy. All ping-pong practice was then banned, and wrong-handed ping-pong began its roost.

Soon enough, it emerged that the tragedy had only driven them underground. Darrin found Steve and Jamie trying to order silent ping-pong balls from the internet, again while we slept. If I didn't have better things to do than stay up at night monitoring browsing history, I'm sure I would have caught them myself.

The discovery was, in fact, low tech. It involved a dusty drinking glass and the similarity between the nighttime glow of a computer monitor and the enticing pull of the open refrigerator. If Darrin wasn't such an insomnian wanderer, he wouldn't have been pacing the rooms like a man on a stationary bike, chancing upon Steven and Jamie.

After that happy accident, I found myself better able to accept Darrin's refusal to drink from the same glass twice. He would sit at dinner with an array of cups, goblets, and mugs. Each would be filled with precisely one swallow of mountain nectar, a concoction whose ingredients and brand history were equally appalling.

How many clashes would Steve and Jamie won before we realized their scheme was still on? Darrin's discovery, in fact, saved us from a second front in Steve and Jamie's European theater. While pretending to hold an Ibsen bookgroup, they had concocted a shockingly effective smokescreen, with Steve insisting he should be registered as

ambidextrous, with the only reasonable accommodation being that he would alternate hands every game.

"The key is," Steve had yelled from the tiller of the schooner, one hand on a chicken leg and one on his dinner, "we can't resolve this on the ping pong table. Nothing but a full public forum can get us to the bottom of this matter."

We weren't taking him seriously in the moment, mainly because Loy had pointed and snickered at his unnervingly tight knee-length shorts and the twiggy limbs emerging from them.

"How's that chicken leg," Chris yelled. We all waved to Steve before heading below for a Sam Raimi film festival. Movie night would not be interrupted by Steve's provocative stance.

The next morning, though, Jamie reminded us what was at stake.

Handing pinwheel waffles to everyone at the table, he took advantage of his standing position to begin lecturing.

"Everyone realizes the significance of the claims Steven and I would like..."

"Steven and you would like to make thuk-lames?" Chase asked.

"Does that have fish in it? I hate fish," Chris added.

"No, what..." Jamie said.

"What in all your high-concept casual dining empire is a thuk-lame?" Chase asked. He had on a green t-shirt under his orange jersey, which made for an unusual twist on the bashful college baller look.

"I have no idea what you mean," Jamie scowled, "but be ready for a serious debate on our claims."

A silence fell over the table, which Chris and Chase took as a cue to eat their waffles while kneeling towards each other on their chairs. They ate faster and faster, as Darrin handed over waffles to keep them well stocked. When Chase finally toppled over in a pile of melted whipped cream and strawberry syrup, the rest of us decided to leave.

We spent two days, though, dreading the next lecture about the biology of handedness, until the morning we came to find screenshots of the silent ping pong balls taped to their chairs.

"This isn't an airplane, I don't want seatback television. I mean, I don't want people staring in the vicinity of my vertebrae," Chris insisted. Darrin shot him a stare, so that Clara didn't have to, and Chris shut up, rolled up the sleeves of his arm-stripe cardigan, and took a bagel.

Darrin then gave us a good five-minute belting on the subject of the systems that create ridiculous behaviors. No one complained. Perhaps we were too tired to fight back, or we were just hoping we'd get the computer screens in our chairs if we listened politely enough.

Clara and Loy rapidly accepted blame, so in general we were forced to accept that we'd been wrong. The easy answer was to simply allow practice, making ping-pong back into a social and competitive event. In retrospect, our practice ban could have had far worse implications. It encouraged us to spend time away from the group.

Clara went so far as to encourage her charges to spend time with other group members. Chris didn't want to be involved in her unity scheme, but she told him to get to know Darrin better. Whether she wanted to smooth over the seatback thing was unknowable, but her word was final to Chris.

He and Chase took a week to study the history and culture of Connecticut, minus the collegiate basketball stuff everyone knows. They were to the point of rehearsing opening lines when Loy got tired of waiting to get her state history books back.

"All you're learning is how to become colossal bores," she said, "and no one wants to hear about the Hartford Whalers anyway."

Taking the sound advice from a friend, the boys abandoned their plans for Chris' approach to Darrin.

Instead of leading with the discussion of the economics of sports and local industry, Chris went random. He just talked about cameras, possibly because the boys had been planning a photo shoot for an album cover that might inspire their next set of improvisations.

Oddly enough, Chris discovered that Darrin had been photo types during college. The two of them sat in matching armchairs, facing each other as their eyelids flicked on and off in subconscious mimicry of their subject matter.

We kept far from these conversations. The technical talk was jarring enough to require earplugs, but gradually an untold story emerged. It was, as Jamie might say, the sort of knowledge that brings people together.

As Chris, Loy, Clara and I stood at the stern end of the schooner, watching Chase take a turn at the tiller, Chris gazed out towards a distant streetlight and spoke, his voice projecting away from us. Darrin was off the boat, advising Loy on business etiquette. Though his back was to us, Chris had a classic cockiness to his stance that told us we should listen.

He spun towards us, a backlit halo from the faroff lamp shining over him.

"I will reveal," Chris intoned, "a story too sad to tell."

He held up a hand to pre-empt interruption, drawing on the moment before continuing with two hands bracketing his ballcapped skull.

"A tale so sad, it has not been known among our ranks. It falls to me, however, to reveal the story of Darrin's lost future."

We listened, staring into his shadowed eyes as he told Darrin's tale.

The pressures of inherited wealth upon him, Darrin had spent his junior and senior years struggling to figure out which career he could abandon in his first three post-graduate years. To spite the misguidedly ambitious D, his professor had pushed him towards a magazine internship in NYC.

The experience had started well, stock photo and gourmet beverage procurement, but Darrin soon found himself distracted by the variety of clever haircuts he encountered. After a few weeks of early meetings and three hour midweek dinner parties, Darrin found the best way to cope was simply to stay up all night.

"The main advantage of this, for anyone who has tried," Chris interjected, "is that it prevents you from dreaming."

"I like dreaming," I said.

Ordinary people might have crashed, axed for dozing off in a full conference room. Darrin just kept burning on two hours' sleep.

"Mass transit is more useful than most people realize," Chris joked.

"It's okay, Chris, we're not against mass transit," Clara said.

"I know, our transit is as massive as..." Loy agreed.

Despite his subterranean mobile naps, Darrin got worse and worse at his job in the way people expect of pedicured suburban dandies.

Perhaps he should have been fired. Instead, he blundered through an increasingly odd series of mishaps that gave him the opportunity to pass at least three random drug tests.

At a bagel brunch one Friday, Darrin watched circles disappear into mouths. Some vanished in increments. Others were cleft into paired C's - one to be discarded on a paper plate, the other to be Cookie Monstered as a small hand swept crumbs from a velvet suit jacket.

Darrin felt sorry for the round rings of dough slaughtered each week. Struggling to plan for their liberation, he drew a map on the square for September 24th on the breakroom calendar.

"Did that fix the problem?" I asked.

"I can't see a map on a calendar helping things," Clara said smiling.

"You know, you're right," Chris said. "He was back there pondering over it, but he never knew what he'd planned, and the bagel death continued."

Workplace food continued to haunt Darrin. On his boss' birthday, he ate half the cake for breakfast, thinking it was a giant cupcake enscribed "Happy Darrinday." Though her secretary found out before real damage was done -- a replacement cake screamed in via heavily pierced bicycle messenger -- Darrin's decline was real.

He began to confused office metaphors, a revelation that shocked me.

"Wasn't Steve the one who was hypersensitive about metaphor manglers?" I asked.

"When was this?" Loy said.

"We were talking about blowing things up," I replied. "He was...he said blasting and blowing weren't the same thing. Or that they were?"

I left the conclusions to history, though, and tried to pick up where Chris was talking.

"Someone gave him a dry erase marker that he used to edit documents on his computer," Chris was saying, squinting one eye shut and scribbling with a phantom implement.

The situation only got worse as the magazine staff began trading rumors of Darrin's behavior. He was alleged to have performed a song and dance in the rooftop fountain, confused about the nature and location of Karaoke Happy Hour. He wore mismatched shoes several times a week, but never at the same time.

"I don't know what that means," I said.

"Come on, just let him tell the story," Loy said calmly.

Perhaps the only reason Darrin stayed so long at the internship was his tenacious desire to overcome his shortcomings. He tried making up for his morning fogs by keeping a couple pair of shoes under his desk. It was so large that he could fit up to a dozen pair of shoes and still have room to work.

This only made things worse. Darrin would forget which shoes were the right ones, wearing five different shoes during the course of the workday.

Observers kept trying to catch his odd footwear, a habit growing in the office of clandestine surveillance. Darrin's co-workers were walking around holding their mobiles, hoping to capture video evidence of his fashion misstep.

Instead, the archived footage brought down the shared drive, a catastrophe Darrin is convinced saved his bacon. A memo went out that all video files would be deleted. The perpetrators would be punished. The surveillance footage went unexamined. Corporate security and IT were overwhelmed tracing the origins of each file, and the bosses were wary of starting further controversies.

"It doesn't matter how much information you gather if you can't process it accurately," Clara said.

"I can't process that and listen to Chris at the same time," I complained.

In the midst of the continued havoc that this institutional logjam facilitated, chaos ruled at the office.

One of Darrin's coworkers took the shoe swapping as excessive showmanship, sending flowers to reciprocate Darrin's veiled advances.

The bouquet arrived on Darrin's desk just before noon, and he was excited to receive lunch without even needing to phone in an order.

"He was thrilled," Chris said with an outward thrust of both hands, "to receive his lunch without even needing to the phone."

Like his co-workers, Darrin faced the daily struggle to take in nutrition with troubling results. In a dream-vision, he appeared to himself wearing shining orange slacks and a coral-blue sweater. Why do you have such odd pants, Darrin asked himself.

Listen close, said the dream-Darren.

The mentorsoffice will bring you strength.

You mumble and you have odd pants, Darrin said in reply.



I feel my time is finished. Good day, Darrin, said the dream-Darrin before vanishing in a circular puff.

This dream-Darren convinced himself to eat mentos and hummus each day, except Wednesdays when he brought food for the office. This usually consisted of paperback-tuna salad, which Darrin invented after watching an infomercial selling brain-boosting supplements.

"Eventually," Chris laughed, "a late night involves useless television."

"The only useless television is the one you don't have," I said.

By the end of Darrin's internship, he was so sleep deprived that he was found talking to himself in an elevator trying to send emails on a bar of soap. The security guys told him the next day they'd clocked him at forty-seven minutes riding that elevator up and down. He had the soap out because he was so bored by the talking door he was supposed to be interviewing as his replacement.

To prove the story, the guys handed Darrin his soapberry.

"It was just like any high-tech bar of soap," Chris' smile spread wide, "with a tiny replica of Darrin's inbox etched on its waxy blue display."

He looked at us as if this sealed the performance, and I started clapping wildly to signal my enthusiastic approval. Clara nodded, and Loy joined me with a more subdued applause, muffled by the long sleeves of her sweater, as Chase flashed a double high five from his position at the helm.

At that moment, the boys attained a strange reverence for Darrin. In any event, when Chase saw the enthusiasm on Chris' face telling that story, he began pushing Chris

even harder to write songs for their new side-project, Joghurt and the bears. Chase wanted them to be the ultimate wedding/party band.

"What's your target audience," I asked over a half-frozen diet cola. The ice and fizz forced me to smile, but Chase frowned at me, his disturbing tan lines showing as he shifted in his seat.

"We don't need an audience. We perform at weddings."

Just then, Darrin walked in carrying a pitcher of water and three glasses. I knew better than to ask if he could pour us a drink.

Setting the crystalware on a side table, Darrin sat down and looked me straight in the eye.

"Joghurt and the bears," he said as he looked to the side to grab the pitcher and quarter-fill a glass, "is the ultimate wedding/party band for people who want to create their own matrimonial mythos."

"So you're going for the crunchy, medieval recreation types," I said, puzzled as I watched Darrin drain his glass and set it aside.

"No, it's more..." Chase began as Darrin put a hand on his shoulder to stop him.

"We're more of an anti-cover band," Darrin said, and poured a good swallow into each of his remaining glasses. "The bears would refuse to play anything remotely like a cover, although you could fill out an online form if you want to request one."

"I don't get it," I said. "I thought you didn't play covers."

"Playing covers is different from taking requests," Darrin continued.

I noticed that he was out of water. Unphased, he kept on. "The option we're giving people is to hear music that isn't familiar to their guests. It is possible the happy couple might request something that is fresh enough that we could waive the cover ban."

"So if there's a ban, what happened before there was a ban?" I said.

"There was no band before there was a ban," Chase said, laughing at his own joke.

I looked forward, in that moment, to following Joghurt and the bears, though at least a portion of this was in the hopes that actual joghurt bears would appear at some time. They are, with hope, better than yogurt pretzels. The new band, however, represented a deepening of certain relationships in the group, and I knew Jamie had pointed out how critical that was, back when he smoked ribs and reminded me of our purpose.

"In his enthusiasm, Chase is skipping over the point," Darrin said, "the genius in our online request option is that it provides an important slot in the band for someone with no musical skills. The fact checker is absolutely responsible for determining which songs are familiar enough to be banned."

I didn't want to get my hopes up too far, but it seemed like that would give me a perfect slot into the band. This was a moment for a deepening friendship. For my involvement in the process that was our destination.

I decided to approach the position with caution. Friends are tricky to negotiate jobs with, so I figured I would let them approach me about the position should it become available.

The cover ban was possibly a classic Steve-like smokescreen to help justify Joghurt's ambitious songwriting plan. A band that plays no covers needs at least one heavily-stoked songwriter to provide material. Though Chase would not admit it, his goal seemed to be to give Chris a chance to work his way into something beyond lead vocal competence.

You could have a Joghurt song debuted at your event, and have it be your song. Custom songwriting can be expensive, but the key tenet of Joghurt's contract was the waiver the couple-to-be would sign. They would each promise to avoid changing any of the song's words to match their story or situation.

I got the feeling, though, that Chris was getting nervous about the demands the band placed on his time. Many nights returning from the schooner I'd see him, rumpled rugby shirt and high tops, penning songs for yet another of Steve and Loy's fictitious weddings.

Chase, reviewing my first monthly analytics update, noted that his site was pulling in huge prospects. He had piles of requests for debuts at a variety of weddings and wedding-themed events. My favorite was the corporate wedding retreat, where employees would be married into a mentorship initiative.

Whatever subterfuge had inspired the cover ban, the entire Joghurt project was now under attack by a foe so thoroughly Steve-screened that Chase couldn't know what was hitting him. Steve's favorite part, of course, was figuring out as many ways as possible of ignoring the ban on subtext.

Steve and I were discussing these possibilities in one of the top floor conference rooms, when Jamie came tearing in, a crazed look on his face, like he was exploding with urgency.

"Guys...Darrin's napping!"

"Can I have his scarf," I asked, figuring we were going for a classic lights-out clothing swap.

"No, because...look, he's talking in his sleep. You have to see this!" Jamie whisper-shouted.

I threw my paddle on the table and followed Jamie as fast as I could. Steve followed calmly after us, bringing his ping-pong paddle and looking from Jamie to me and back, as if we were the two options in a daily poll.

We stood over Darrin's body, terribly drawn circus animals decorating a quilt pulled to his neck. One arm lay out, the hand grasping wide as if to hold a mug in classic New England fashion, the fingers hugging the barrel of the mug. He was chanting softly, repeating a phrase or two between breaths. The routine was an endless loop of film, playing for our audience of three.

"What is he saying?" Steve asked.

"It sounds like 'beware the race of great fish.' Is that a song of theirs?" I asked Jamie. Maybe "song of yours" was the right expression -- there was that fact checker spot possibly occupied by a Jamie or someone like him.

Jamie looked back at me, blank face warning me off the speculation game.

"Is Jamie, I mean, is Darrin in some kind of cult?" I asked.

"It can't be a cult," Steve said, "listen -- 'Bear he ate some grate fish...' bears eat fish, right? It must be one of their songs."

"Are you a wildlife expert, then?" Jamie asked, snapping to an upright posture. Was he trying to intimidate Steve? His medium height made him seem more rigid than threatening.

"I'm an expert in knowing bears eat fish," Steve said.

"Well, Mr. Bearologist, what are the per diem fish consumption requirements of a bear?" Jamie asked while maintaining what was now clearly an imitation of a petrified forest. His hands didn't move a claw's width as he spoke. More strikingly, he was breathing through a trick of some sort, such that his shoulders did not rise and fall.

"Bears don't just eat fish. It's more complicated than that. I don't need my degree in bearology to tell you that one," Steve said with a lazy swing of his paddle.

"There is no bearology. I was making that up," Jamie said, a wrinkle in his cheeks betraying his growing frustration.

"So bearologists don't have schools, or a formal way of discussing the eating habits of bears?" Steve asked.

"You don't have formal means of discussing the eating habits of bears," Jamie fired back. "You don't know the first thing about what bears eat."

"Well, if the bearologists don't have a way to talk about what bears eat, it doesn't much matter what I have to say," Steve said.

"Stop it, you're yelling him back awake," I said, realizing a little too late that mine was the loudest voice.

We all paused, Jamie relaxing his posture while Steve and I slowed our movements. It was as if two robots and a sculpture had become a trio of gently moving trees.

Darrin had paused his incantations, but slept on.

I gathered momentum in my right arm and slowly placed a recording device on a shelf, between a dented license plate and a line of books and records.

Steve looked at me as if my caution was unneeded.

"Dude, I guarantee you put that in his face he won't know. Darrin's allergic to technology. He pretends it doesn't exist."

"Obviously he's not allergic to technology. Any more than bears are allergic to whitefish," I said.

"Oh, why are bears always eating salmon?" Steve asked.

It was impressive the way Darrin's sleep patterns swept him through our debates. Despite his soapberry internship, he was someone who could not fathom the tiny gadgets Chase embeds in his life.

Tape recorders make good television, even when you're not on TV. I knew Darrin was sharper than occasionally assumed, but why he might worry about one silvery toy was beyond me. Falling asleep talking to yourself is enough mental activity.

To get the recorder back, I sent Steve around collecting for Allen Tramend's Tramenda/Sky legal defense fund. Allentra Menda Suit was suing them over naming rights, and Darrin was certain to have an opinion. Allentra Menda ran the premier business wear house on the east coast, and she was trying to stop the founder of Tramenda/Sky from opening the Tramendafun Warehouse.

Maybe Darrin wasn't in favor of fun, but he'd think about a donation. While he thought, Steve would ask him if he thought collecting records was for fun or business. Then Steve would start touching records and Darrin would get nervous, and Steve would make a show of pulling one carefully out from the stack. While Darrin was yelling at him to put it back, Steve would grab the recorder in one hand and slide the record into place with the other.

The only problem with this plan was that Jamie was sitting in Darrin's chair when Steve went by, tapping my recorder against his chest.

"Tramend is a horrible tipper, you know that," Jamie said.

"He's still getting sued for opening a Fun Warehouse," Steve replied. He was ready to leap right at Jamie and take the device, but something held him back. Steve thought for a second he was dreaming, that somehow he was on a rock wall, restrained by Clara's spider harness. Then Jamie spoke.

"I don't know, Steve, I mean you can say the man behind Tramenda/Sky, the tramendalemur, all these things, that he'll always do the right thing. I say he doesn't know how to tip properly. Even when we sat him at the calculable the night he came to Integral, he tipped \$20," Jamie said reluctantly. Steve thought in that moment there was a hissing hesitance to the chef's tone, as if speaking ill of Allen Tramend pained him. It was then that Steve realized the force restraining him was not the overlapping webbing of a spider harness, but a respect for Jamie.

"I think \$20 is a generous enough tip."

"Not when your meal costs four hundred, not when you stuff all your food in your mouth like a bike-eating monkey," Jamie said sadly. Steve told me that in this moment,



he was focused not on Allen Tramend's tipping habits, but on the expense of Jamie's restaurant. As Jamie frowned over the idea of a man leaving a five percent tip on top of a four-hundred dollar meal, Steve wondered why he charged that much for a meal at his calculus-themed establishment, ripping off eager nerds who only wanted to impress each other.

Steve couldn't believe, though, that anyone would pay that much for a meal.

"I think at \$400, you'd get a negative tip from me."

"I knew it, you're a total Tramend defender," Jamie said, his accusing finger pointing wildly, as Steve laughed.

"What," Jamie said with a cross look in his eye.

"Of course I'm a Tramend defender. Why do you think I'm collecting for his legal fund?"

Steve wasn't just collecting for the legal fund, he was on an errand, and he was angering the man who held the recorder that I had asked him to grab.

"That's the problem with digital," I said to Steve as he re-emphasized the growth of frustration on Jamie's face.

"Huh?"

"If the recorder was on tape, you could have brought it to me in pieces, as long as the tape was intact."

"What do you mean, if the recorder was on tape? Like that I had a video recording of the existence of the recorder?" Steve looked at me, trying not to laugh, and failed when I threw a bottle of pickles at him. It's a good thing pickle bottles come in plastic.

"All jokes aside, do you have the..." I said.

Rather than answering, Steve pulled the recorder from his pocket and pressed play. The digital hiss was the first thing I noticed, a crackling that distracted me from the words. Then I realized there were no words, and I looked to Steve for guidance, my brow lowered in confusion.

Sounds began to build from the static, a swirling of noise that broke into speech.

"Beware the race of great fish..." Darrin said on tape, and I stared into the machine in the hope something would emerge.

"Be where the races ate fish," he continued, and I shifted my focus to Steve, who was as enthralled in the musical repetitions of Darrin's voice as I was.

"Be where the raisins are dished," I heard, then a breath, a brief silence and it was there again, "Be where the raisins are dished."

I knew in that second we had uncovered a puzzle, and I knew a second later that Steve hadn't seen it. He was so intent upon the digital flashings of the machine's display that he had not registered the connection I made.

"Be where the raisins are dished? This is something about dinner, isn't it," I asked, and Steve broke from his detachment to respond that he had no idea what I meant.

"I thought he said phrases," Steve replied. My certainty over the interpretation of the phrase fell, but I had nothing to fall back on.

Later review of the tape would reveal that, beyond the Chanting, Darrin spent a good portion of his catnap detailing ketchup's nutritional benefits. The phrasing was straight from a 1980s school lunch debate.

When I played it back for Jamie, he couldn't stop laughing. He was squirming out a word here and there, but as he fell deeper into his fit of hilarity, I lost its thread.

Something about chefs and their ketchup.

After news of the tape spread, people were more interested in the fact that Darrin talked in his sleep than his possible involvement in cults or ketchup industry lobbying.

A few of us traded speculations over an unscheduled midafternoon meal.

"Do you realize," Chris said as he eased a series of breadsticks over the upturned collar of his turtle shirt, "Joghurt is going to go mad with this."

"Mock that up," Chase admonished him. I had a hard time taking Chase seriously wearing mismatched basketballin' snap-offs.

"Yeah, mock it up, man," Steve repeated, right before tramending a cone of waffles into his mouth. Steve had collected four or five maple almond infused thin waffles. He leaned back on his stool, wound the waffles into a single cup shape, and decanted mustard straight into the middle.

As Steve squeezed out mustard, Darrin walked in to join our meal.

"Three cheers for...is that muss-tard?" Darrin said with a yelp, snapping his fingers frantically to get Steve's attention.

Steve flipped his head back to a level position, spit the funnel of waffles and yellow sauce onto the plate in front of him, and began frantically swallowing motions. He grabbed his throat in one hand, massaging and gulping to finish the savory mouthful.

Darrin stared, then turned his head, covering his mouth as if to stifle an unpleasant reflex.

Coming up for air, Steve choked, "Wd...you...stop it with the ketchup stuff already? There are other condiments."

Clara, who had been watching this entire scene with a faint smile, peeling and eating a set of kiwis, looked up from her pile of fruit fur.

"What he means, if I may put words in your mouth," she said turning to Steve, who was again amassing legendary stacks of waffles and stuffing them in his mouth, "is that there's no reason he should put ketchup on his breakfast when there's perfectly good mustard."

At this comment, Steve nodded a vigorous assent, simultaneously pawing a little desparately in the direction of the pitcher.

"Save some for the bears," I nodded towards Chris and Chase as I poured Steve a glass, "they've got work to do."

"I still don't get what this work is," Chris whined. Maybe it was the breadsticks talking, but he had an ugly air of petulance.

"I'm thinking EP-length concept," Chase replied, before standing up, grabbing both sides of his warmups by the wasteband and tearing them suddenly outward, the cloth flying from his body to reveal a stained pair of khakis.

"Distressed khakis are back?" Chris asked with a wistful grin.

Distressed khakis were not back, but it was odd to realize that Chase's apparent morning lazewear was just a facade built over his musician's getup. The deliberateness of his outfitting told me that Joghurt was on the march.

Later that afternoon, sitting in lounge chairs by the kitchen, Jamie and I wondered over this album project during an extended Joghurt jam session. Darrin had been drawn

deeper into the project with the promise of free Swedish fish. His involvement launched in Jamie a fascination with the semi-fictitious band.

"I can't understand," he said, "how they can embark on an EP of his sleep talking."

We sat in lounge chairs by the kitchen. Jamie had claimed it was important to be near the supplies in case someone called in an unusual recipe problem. Good restaurants don't run by themselves, Jamie had said. I wanted to ask if they came up with \$400 entrees by themselves, but the EP talk took priority. It was as if we were watching Joghurt bubble from the primordial milkshake.

"You mean, are they going to tell him it's based on his recording?"

"It's not whether they even tell him. What would you say if your subconscious became music?"

I thought about this for a second, because the answer seemed so easy.

"That would be fantastic," I said, and I saw as Jamie scratched at his chin that he and I had sniffed out the situation differently.

"It's like having your thoughts stolen," he said.

"What do you mean, thoughts stolen?"

"The entire concept of this band is that they base things on nothing. Or they base nothing on the real world scenarios that make people want music. Now, they're appropriating Darrin's dream rantings to make logic in musical form. Some things shouldn't be distilled. Not everything can turn into an answer."

I looked at Jamie as he said this, and looked back at the floor, not knowing how to meet the inquisitive gleam in his eye.

I nodded to him in a false-knowing way, then stood to find a space for my thoughts to congeal.

Upstairs, I found Loy conferencing out her professional issues. The phone took in her concerns and sent back reassurances. Don't bug her, I heard Jamie's voice in my head, people need to work. A dialogue was underway, and while I admired Loy's ability to work it out, I needed time to get my own thoughts together.

Walking back downstairs, I skirted the kitchen and lounge, finding Steve driving as usual.

Before us a road extended, like any road, offering not answers but a series of possibilities. It was endless to me, because I don't look at maps.