

ME AND MY HOUSE

BY

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Me and My House

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“And if you be unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell; but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.” - Joshua 24:15

1. Strong and of Good Courage

“You don’t have to worry, Josh,” my friends told me, “You just have to give off a don’t-fuck-with-me attitude.” I think it’s awful that people have to give that off. A person should be ashamed to give off that attitude.

Yes, I’m from a small town, but that doesn’t mean I’m some sort of rube or bumpkin. But yeah, I was worried about violent crime. I was visiting my girlfriend, Charlie, who had moved away only a few weeks before. Charlie is a girl but she has a boy’s name. She and I were going to make it work. Oh God, what a cliché, but we went along with it, for the sake of a potential and particular future.

I was in the big city for only a few minutes when I realized that I had underestimated graffiti’s potential scale. There was miles of it, all along the path of the train, flung onto the backs of buildings. I imagined sprayers standing in the dark, backpacks rattling with marbles, thinking to themselves, “Here’s a good spot where folks will see my spray.” They must do it at night, with dulled flashlights. Some sprays were so tall I could only assume that they brought ladders along. It must require an industrious spirit.

My anxiety worsened as we approached the center of town. For two reasons:

1. That the people lived smashed together in tall rows with the backs of the buildings visible to me on the train, which implied, “nobody here cares about this side of our homes, and by extension, the lives of the people within.” It must be the case that the people grew lonelier and smaller. Their houses must squeeze in around them. I began to get scared.

2. That a person approached, saying --Hold that train! Hold that train!

(the doors opened and a man got on who was skinny and violent)

(the man made a sound like a kid on a swing) --Weeeeeee!

(the man stumbled into the seat in front of Charlie and I)

He said --Fuckin lies on this train! My name is Billy Song! Whas you stop?

(I held Charlie’s hand and said) --Don’t fuck with us, man.

(the man stood up and got off after a minute. His stop was underground.

When the train started again, I could see workers flush with the walls, or standing in tunnel-cubbys. The train passed four inches away from them. “No loose clothing,” they were presumably told their first day on the job. “You have to wear this reflective jacket.”)

A few minutes later, still underground, Charlie whispered, “I think we’re under the skyscrapers now.” She knew I was looking forward to seeing skyscrapers. For some reason, being underneath them made me even more terrified. Sickly orange lights flashed by. I wouldn’t allow Charlie to hold my hand. The doors opened and closed, people got on and off. Someone was singing outside, but this only startled me. I don’t know why. Finally, I saw the darkness descending past my window as we were ushered above ground again. I wanted nothing more than to go to Charlie’s new

apartment. No more sightseeing.

When we got to Charlie's horrible apartment, I decided that I wasn't going to go outside until it was time for me to go home. Therefore, I suggested we order in. Charlie had a tourist guide that mentioned where we could get authentic-style pizza.

"Do they deliver to your horrible apartment?" I said.

"It's not horrible," she said. "I've got some nice stuff in here." Charlie pointed at the things she owned.

"Can't we please just stay in here for now?" I said.

"You don't want to go explore downtown?"

"Maybe tomorrow," I said. I started reading a book about bleeding.

The authentic-style pizza arrived. It was ok, but I didn't know what to do with all the sauce. At some point, Charlie went to get some groceries at a store she said was nearby, but she didn't return for at least two hours. When she got back, without groceries, she admitted that she had taken the train to let Mark know that she was in town now. Mark is a guy that she knew from back home; they had sex several times. I didn't know what to say about Mark. I couldn't focus because I was so lonely in Charlie's apartment. Also, I was bored, and I saw a spider, which I munched with a fly swatter, but there were surely more. It was a fucking wolf spider. I had nightmares concerning them on my face. Charlie's bed was too warm, also.

The next morning, I woke up and locked myself in Charlie's bathroom for a few hours. She didn't pound on the door.

"Listen, Josh. I'm going to stop by Mark's house. He's got some movies I want to borrow," she said through the keyhole.

"Why doesn't Mark bring them here?" I said. "We can all three of us watch

them together.”

“Because Mark’s place is nicer than here,” she said. “There aren’t as many spiders.”

“You’re teasing me about my fears. This is ridiculous. I don’t understand what’s going on.”

“Are you coming along or not?” Charlie asked.

“No.”

“Fine, then.” She was angry. “I’m leaving you a spare key, on the table. Now you have agency,” she said.

I was by the bathroom window, so I could hear the train go by. I sat in Charlie’s awful bathtub. Eventually, she left the apartment and I was alone. I climbed out of the tub, sat on a beanbag in the living room, and started reading the book about bleeding again. Apparently, there’s lots of different types of bleeding, inside and out.

She came back with some movies and authentic-style hot dogs. I thought the pickle was a little much, but I became infatuated with what Charlie informed me were called “sport peppers.” Also, Mark had said something rude to her, which I don’t need to go into: it’s just not that important. Charlie started crying, and a tear fell atop her hot dog, plop.

I felt guilty. “I’m sorry I’m being such an ass,” I told her. “Let’s go out and get more of these sport peppers. I’ll bring a jar back with me to Kansas. I’ll spread them slowly across the nation.”

“I wish I could go back with you,” she said. “I don’t know if I can do this whole thing without you.”

“You can do it, my sweet pickle,” I said. “I’ll be more supportive and less

reclusive. Now let's go find a jar of sport peppers."

* * *

There was a fresh graffito in the back alley behind her terrible apartment. It looked like a red fox jumping over a black fence made out of unreadable letters. Quite intriguing! Also behind the apartment was a feral community garden containing a bench. All the vegetables were presumably dead, but I saw some mint. We sat on the bench with city weeds stretching upwards and sideways. Charlie still looked sad, so I tried to decipher the graffito quickly.

"Why do you care about graffiti all of a sudden?" Charlie said.

"I just think spray paint is interesting," I said. "For example: whenever my grandpa used a bottle of spray paint up, he would get out a can opener. Not one of the geared ones, just a little church key. And he would puncture the bottom of the empty can until he could tip it up and a marble would roll out. Then he would clean the marble in whatever solvent was appropriate for the particular paint it was, and give it to me..."

"That's nice of him," Charlie said. "My dad, for some reason, wrapped empty spray cans in newspapers before he threw them away."

"...except it wasn't actually a marble, Charlie. It was just a ball bearing in there."

Charlie and I sat and thought about the things that rattle around inside spray cans. Ball bearings and marbles. We both wondered if this long distance thing was such a good idea or not. At least, I wondered. Charlie looked like she was wondering, too.

"What about the sport peppers?" Charlie said eventually. She smiled encour-

agingly.

“Pepper time!” I shouted. At the sound of my exclamation, the garden remained quiet; the city, wailing. Charlie smiled; she appreciated my fake exuberance.

It wore off at the Tower. The building stood like a black devil waiting for souls to slam into it, unawares, down the wider and easier path. It had horns like radio antennas, white bone armatures that felt around for skyward sins. We imagined the people in elevators, circulating. Do not go in it, do not transfuse yourself! But we did, and from the devil’s eyes we could see the city writ large. It should have been a together moment. I don’t know what was wrong with me. Like I said, something seemed to wear off. I had a vivid memory of spray painting a lawn chair white, and letting it dry. The paint had not affixed, had not cured properly. It flaked off in my hands when I rubbed the armrests. I wanted to get away from her all of a sudden. We descended, and as we left the elevator into the lobby, I started staggering. I couldn’t help it. Our conversation grew fuzzy -- more talk of peppers. I just needed to go home again.

A disaster happened. Charlie and I got separated because I jumped onto the wrong train just as the doors were shutting. She mouthed something at the glass between us as her train pulled away: “What are you doing?” It took an extra hour to figure out the right train, the one going in the right direction, and I rode it alone.

* * *

We didn’t mention the train when I got to her apartment. We slept in, tossing.

The next day, Charlie made herself some brunch: meat and crackers. “I’ve got a thing to do today that you’ll like,” she said. “I’ve been saving up for months.”

“I don’t want do do it.”

“We’ll have to hurry. Get dressed up fancy.”

“I don’t care for the things to do here,” I explained. “I like the things we did back home, in Kansas.”

“I live here now, and we’re going to make this work, please. It’ll only be a year before you can move here, too.”

“I’m sorry, Charlie. I simply don’t want to move to a place where I don’t like the things to do.”

She thought for a moment, chewing on her meat and crackers. I think the meat was blood sausage. “I got it,” she said. “I’ll make a list of things I know you’ll like to do here.”

“How long of a list?”

“It’ll be several pages long, double-spaced, with boxes for check marks, denoting completion.”

“Alright, Alright, Ok,” I said, and got dressed up with a tie and a jacket. In the mirror, I looked like a rube. My hair was unmanageable.

It turned out that this was the last thing we did before I went home via airplane. She had gotten us early dinner seats at the most highly-regarded restaurant in town.

Even though we had reservations, we still had to wait in the lobby. The restaurant was beautiful: off-white and secretive. The name of the chef was on one of the walls in a dignified font. I pointed and said, “Hey hon. His name is Charlie, just like yours.”

“Stop pretending to be a rube, Josh,” my Charlie said. “Just be yourself.”

“‘Be yourself’ is a cliché,” I said. “This better be good for that kind of ge-

neric language.”

“You’ll love it,” my Charlie replied. “This is the best restaurant in the whole big city.”

“We’ve got high hopes for you, Charlie,” I said, meaning it, thinking about the list.

“Which Charlie are you referring to?” she asked. “Me or the chef?”

I was referring to her, my Charlie. Even after I went back home, I found myself referring to her.



Rahab the Harlot and the Scarlet Cord

2. A Rope Through the Window

My mornings wained, grew more compacted. All things became routine. I smashed my morning rituals into fifteen minutes, from alarm clock switch-clicking to arriving at the furniture-making shop where I worked. The crunch came from the weather--the colder it got, the longer I wanted to stay in bed. What a waste of morning to fill it full of wakeful motions.

When school started back up, I quit my furniture-making job and started teaching Wood Arts at the university. I got up at 7:00 AM and got home from classes at Noon. I ate and took a nap until 3:30 PM. Then, I stayed up until 3:00 AM. Things kept shifting. I got up at 7:20 AM, got home at Noon and napped until 4:00PM, puttered around until 4:00 in the morning. Things kept shifting with the sun. I showered every other day. I ate two meals a day. I had three bowel movements, one at 9:00, 10:00, and 11:00 each morning, no more. Eventually, I stayed up all night, taught morning classes before bed, and ate in weird spurts, like the opportunistic-hunters I watched on survival T.V. shows.

I drank gin with ice cubes when I got a hankering, which became more and

more often. One afternoon after class, I drank so much that I blacked out. When I awoke it was dark. I looked out a window and saw shapes moving in the back yard. It was a family of foxes, trotting through the glare of a motion-sensing street lamp. Their breaths fogged the air around them; the foxes were like little snorting horses. They came often, usually between 4:00 and 5:00 AM. One especially cold night, I built a little camp fire out there and cooked a hot dog, hoping to lure them, but all I managed to do was irritate my roommates with my flickering. I put the fire out without complaint--they were turning a blind eye tacitly, thankfully, to my cycles. The colder it got, the more gin it took to rotate.

* * *

My Wood Arts class flourished for some reason. The students' projects just kept getting better and better, while things got worse and worse for me. The kids were producing furniture. Some very nice stuff. These were art kids, not industrial kids. They weren't supposed to be making bookcases and tables and some kid was even making a Shaker chair!

"You all aren't supposed to be making practical things," I told the class. I smiled. "You're supposed to be making Wood Art. Like boxes and shit." They loved it when I cussed. Also, I was drinking between sections, which caused some minor issues with my fricatives.

Weeks passed, and the foxes started dragging trash onto the back lawn at night. They were making a pile. One morning after class, before bed, I made a little oriental screen out of pine and canvas and some staples, and I set it up around their pile, leaving a gap for them to go through. I just wanted to afford them some privacy. The screen was a big hit, I think. They kept putting their bits of trash in there.

* * *

This particular cycle reached its lowest point one morning before class, as I put black rum in my black coffee. It tasted ok, but not as black as I would have hoped. I was going for inky. In any case, I was intoxicated when I arrived at the Wood Arts class, not just tipsy.

The kids grabbed safety goggles and I switched on the dust collectors, making them hum and breathe. The shop smelled good and spicy from the stacks of kiln-dried wood. A girl began sanding the arch of a rocker on the oscillating spindle sander. She was building a rocking chair with her boyfriend. He started cutting the other rocker on the bandsaw, which screeched because I hadn't oiled the wheels in weeks. Weeks and weeks. I walked over to the bandsaw because I could tell he was freehanding it.

"You've got too much blade exposed, young man. You're not supposed to use the bandsaw like that. You'll cut your finger off."

"This is how Sam Maloof does it. He's a world-famous woodworker, and his chairs are in the Smithsonian."

"Ok," I said. I didn't care all that much. "Just make sure your chair gets into the Smithsonian or you get a fellowship for the arts or something of that nature for your bandsaw work."

"You sound drunk," the boy said.

"I don't care that much how you use the bandsaw," I said. He shrugged and kept cutting.

I went over to check out who was working on the lathe. It was in a faraway corner of the shop, so I had to keep an eye on it for safety. Also, I wanted to bang out

a water dish for the foxes.

One of my beautiful students was turning the leg for a fold-top table. She was almost done cutting it. I grabbed a rosewood blank and waited. “Hurry up, babe,” I said. “I need to bang out this dish.”

“What did you call me?” she asked.

“I called you a newborn babe. Like a baby,” I said.

“Wait your turn. Or just do it after class. We’re supposed to be learning, and you’re supposed to be teaching.”

“Put your hair in a bun,” I ordered. I backed away and said, “Do as I say or your hair will get caught. That’s a teacher’s order.” I turned around so I wouldn’t have to see if the beautiful student did as I told her or not.

The events leading up to the grand accident are fuzzy in my mind. I remember that one kid had a long and thick piece of rope on a table, and he was attaching a seat. I guess he was making a rope swing for a kid sister or something. Also, I remember that I was supposed to be catching somebody’s board as he pushed it through the whining table saw. What must have happened was that I pinched the board as it came through, causing the blade to catch and kick back. The board flew backward like a rocket. It smashed into the rope kid and knocked him down, somehow picking up a loop of rope in the process, and the whole bundle flew out a window.

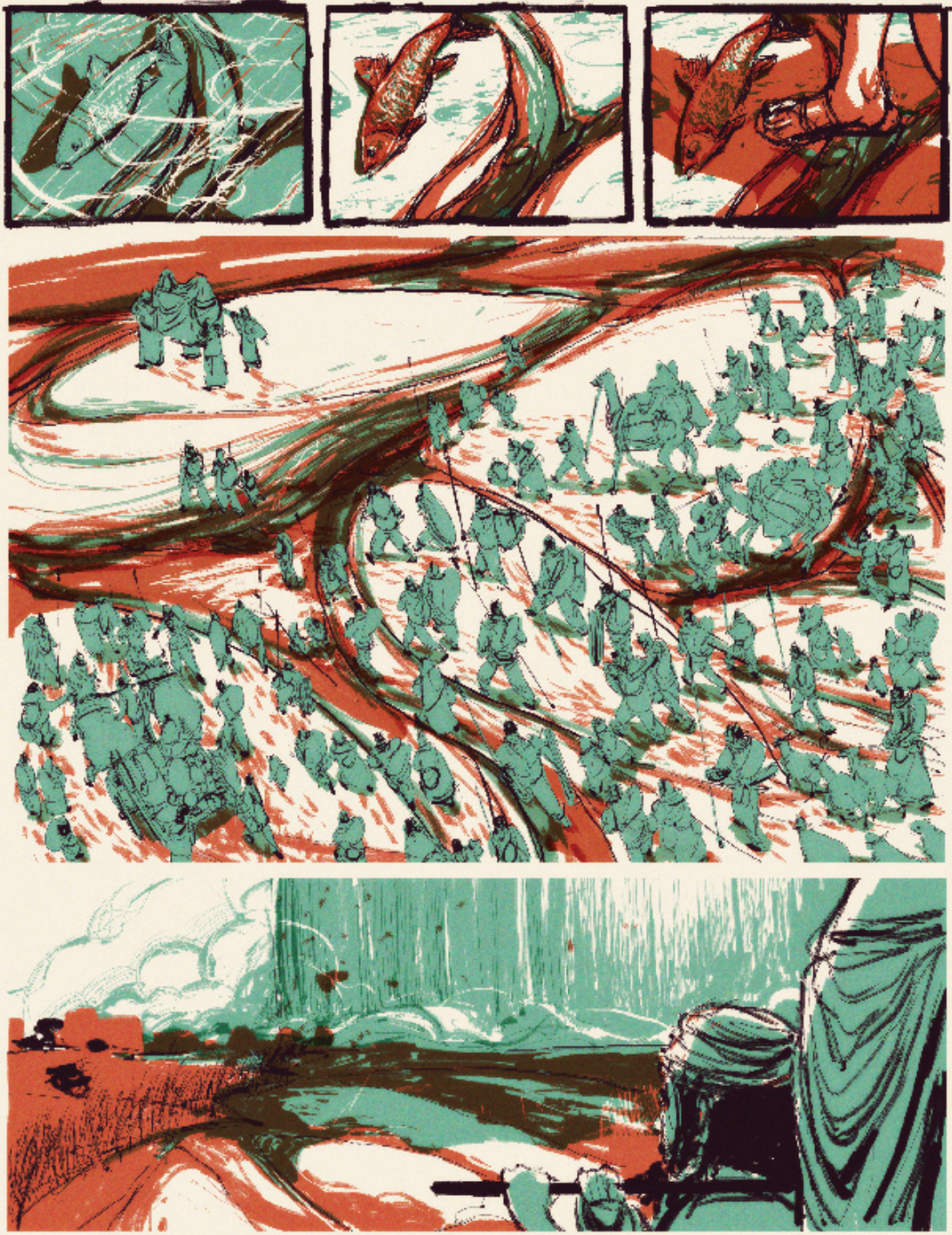
Everyone started cursing at me and crowded around the unconscious kid on the floor. The rope dangled halfway in, halfway out the broken window. Thinking back, I should have tied off the end of the rope and lowered myself out the window, straight down to the parking lot where my car was. I could have potentially avoided the police. But I did not. I stayed with the class, crying a tiny bit and saying that I’m

so sorry. My students hated me, and the police came. The kid woke up and was ok, so I just got a misdemeanor. Reckless endangerment. I lost my job and paid a fine.

* * *

When Winter came in fully, the fox family stopped coming back to the back yard. It snowed in piles and drifts. One day, I got in a mood. I hauled my little screen and all of the trash that the foxes had piled up out to the curb for the trash men to take. It was just junk! Tin cans, a ruler, a plastic cup, and various wrappers, candy and otherwise. What trash! I looked up “foxes” online, but could find no information about their stockpiling. Maybe my foxes were unique. I didn’t care. Who cares if something is unique because it collects trash?

However, I did hear one of them early one morning, far away in some other neighbor’s yard. It made a sound like “wow-wow-wow.” Maybe a new life cycle was starting over there. It didn’t matter to me, because I figured out that it’s a mistake to view the bits of life as cycles. If not a mistake, at least an oversimplification. I put my trust in a more complicated metaphor: that life is like a window with a rope flung through it, which could have been useful for escaping down had I only been smart enough to figure it out in time.



The Israelites cross the Jordan.

3. The Waters Coming Down From Above

Early in the morning, before I went to work, the rain gave up on being liquid and turned into snow. It was only a matter of time and wind and temperature. The snow began to pile upon the horizontal things outside, such as the lid of the dumpster I stood beside on my break, later that same night, smoking a cigar. The fry cook was doing a little drug deal. He was over by his car, selling to a guy wearing a tag which identified him as an Audio Specialist at the neighboring electronics store. The snow fell on them, too.

Everything horizontal turned white. It had been making heaps all day. Few customers came in, which was nice. I hated being busy, running around and shouting, runners, I need runners! I looked at the snow and tried to figure out what a weird lump was in the parking lot. It was almost a little scary, like when you wake up at your friend's house and the room is different than what you're used to. Or when a big heap of snow covers something up and you wonder what's under it. I don't care for surprises.

I went inside when my cigar was only half smoked. My break was up. They

were going to try to mess up my clothes. The bartenders grinned at me when I peeked out at them from the kitchen. One tipped a can of whipped topping at me. “You’re going to get it, Applebuddy.”

At Applebee’s, we called our fellow employees, “Applebuddies.” I’m not sure if the word came from official cooperate lingo or if it was just something we said.

I worked in the kitchen with many Mexican ex-gangsters. They all liked me because I was taking a Spanish class and would practice with them. I’ve got nothing at all bad to say about Mexican ex-gangsters--they were always nice to me and told great jokes. Maybe they were all rehabilitated, I don’t know. They also got a kick out of the fact that I knew all of the words to La Bamba. I loved singing that song because the English translation is so awkward: I am not a sailor. I am not a sailor. I am a captain. I am a captain. I am a captain.

I was the expo that night. I also knew how to work the fry station, but I preferred being an expo. “Expo” is short for expediter, which is the title given to a person in a fancy restaurant who calls out the orders to the chefs, and makes sure that each plate looks right. In fancy restaurants, the head chef or sous chef usually expedites. At Applebee’s, I spent most of my time putting honey mustard into ramekins. I also told the cooks whenever a server had a food-related problem. The servers were not allowed to talk to the cooks, just to me. The idea was to keep noise and confusion down in the kitchen. So, I had to yell a lot and people yelled at me.

A beautiful waitress named Claire, who never yelled at me, walked up to my station. It being my last night and all, I decided to ask her out on a date. I had been building up the courage for months.

She said no because she already had a boyfriend. Why didn’t I think to

check? Whatever. I am not a sailor. I am a captain.

I should have known not to ask her out, but there was no way of knowing that she was taken just by looking at her. There should be a special ring that people have to wear that indicates every type of romantic involvement. Or at least, if a beautiful woman is dating some other guy, she should have the common decency to wear a ring that indicates that. It should be a law that everybody must wear an indicator ring. I think there's something like that in Scandinavia. All single people have to wear a special ring there.

At the end of my final shift, the cooks ran at me with an open can of chocolate syrup, one of the big food-service cans. They also had a can of wing sauce. I sprinted out of the kitchen, flinging off my apron. The bartenders saw me heading out. They grabbed little bins of cherries and olives out of their bar stations. There weren't any customers in the front, so who cares? Why not make a mess of me? I ran out the door, and they followed, shouting and laughing.

It turns out that the weird lump I had noticed in the parking lot was a moped. I knocked it over accidentally when I opened my door. I jumped into my car, but the snow had piled up on the windshield. I locked the doors and clicked on the defroster, while they dumped sauce on my car. "You're no fucking fun!" they yelled. "Get out of your car and get what's coming to you!"

Everyone lost interest in me. It was cold, after all. I sat there for twenty minutes, afraid to get out to scrape the snow off. The defroster got it all melted eventually, but not before red rivulets of cherry juice ran down down down the windshield, soaking through the ice. It looked like I was in the middle of a sno-cone. It felt as if I were the ice in the middle of a sno-cone, and some great figure was pouring syrup on

me. *I hope you get sorry, Claire, I thought. I hope bad things happen to you, too. I hope things don't work out for you.*

4. What Do These Stones Mean?

The end of our relationship neared when we brought sandwiches to the wedding reception. We packed them into our pockets, sealed in baggies. Stacy thought it would be funny to eat them at the worst of times: when someone hit or slapped somebody, or when a loser struck up a convo. *Whatever shall we do now! As for me, I suppose I'll just eat this sandwich.* At the party's end, I saw her pinned by some pathetic horny devil's description of his occupation. She was nodding and nibbling on egg salad on whole wheat. We gave each other the faraway eyes, and we knew that our motives were no longer adjacent. She was better at the eyes, more distant.

* * *

Dressing down was our default mode of recklessness. "Let's show up at the wedding not wearing the right things," she had said.

"But I'm the damn best man."

"I can't be concerned with practicalities!" she had cried.

* * *

The service was mostly made up of logistical lies meant only to usher folks from

one place to another, more distant, place. The preacher explained what the rings meant. The gold meant “purity of love,” the diamonds meant “permanence.”

* * *

After the wedding but before we broke up came a peace that passeth understanding, passing over our heads like, you know, how clouds do.



The Commander of God's Army appears to Joshua.

5. Drawn Sword

I swore that it had happened, that somebody had drawn a sword at some point, a Renaissance Festival prop or something, but Charlie insisted it had not happened at all.

“You must have been on the patio when it happened,” I said.

“I was with you the whole time,” she said. “You were drunk by 7:30.”

“Somebody had a sword out. The one Henry bought at the Renaissance Festival. I think he bought a sword there. They were waving it around.”

“Nope. No swords. You pretended you were Benny Hill at one point and honked my breasts. That sure was something...”

“You should call someone else who was at the party. Call Henry. See if he brought his sword to the bar.”

“Nope. And you owe me an apology for honking my breasts.”

“I don’t remember doing that. It wouldn’t be sincere.”

“This is why I don’t come back to visit very often,” Charlie said. She had come back to visit me for a few days. I was making a mess of it by remembering things that never happened.

* * *

She slept at my house, running around during the day, visiting the friends she had left behind when she moved. I'd seen that behavior before. It was something that girls did. Girls liked to visit all of their friends, major and minor, every time they came back to town. It was selfish of me to think it, but I thought she should spend more time with me. After all, I was the one trying to make things work long-distance. That was a lot of work! I should get special treatment, attention above and beyond.

I made her homemade pizza. I was proud of the dough. I modified it from a recipe that a celebrity chef uses. He puts wine in his pizza dough. I used dry vermouth. His recipe calls for honey, but I used malted barley syrup. I topped the dough with just a little homemade sauce (canned tomatoes, basil, onion, shallot, garlic, salt, and pepper), some anchovy-stuffed olives, and some authentic Parmesan cheese that I got at a cozy cheese shop downtown. It took pretty much all day to put together, if you count the multiple risings of the dough. "See," I said that night at dinner. "This is way better than that deep dish crap."

"I like deep dish pizza."

"Then you're a stupid American. Deep dish pizza represents everything that's wrong with today's society."

Charlie got mad and said, "Fuck you." She slammed down her plate. She ran into my room and locked the door. I was messing up Charlie's visit.

* * *

I had a weird dream where my buddy Henry was chasing me with a sword, shouting "Get your shit together!" All through the dream, I tried to do just that. I paid my bills and balanced my checkbook with Henry standing behind me, sword out. I wrote Charlie a love poem, but Henry made me re-write it with a quill, which he sharpened with his sword. "Use

this quill,” he said. The dream ended with him chasing me again because I forgot to put stamps on the bills. The poem I wrote was obscene.

* * *

Charlie and I woke up together. The vent on the floor blew hot air at us. It was a wonderful temperature-based feeling, because the room was so cold. Charlie was warm on my front, and the air from the vent was warm on my back. I felt relaxed and happy to be in love or whatever I was.

“I had a dream about Henry’s sword last night,” I said.

“I don’t think Henry owns a sword,” Charlie said. “Don’t start in on this again.”

“It was just a dream. Maybe I was wrong about him having a sword at the bar.”

“You are most definitely wrong about that.”

“You’re right all the time,” I told her nicely. “I should listen to you more often.”

“Yes, you should.”

“That’s what I’m going to do all day today. I’m going to listen to every word you say.”

“You should do that every day.”

“Just today for starters.”

We got up and I made breakfast bowls, full of tater tots and eggs and sausage gravy. As I was browning the sausage, Charlie started talking about something having to do with blood, which grossed me out, so I made myself stop listening to her.



Jericho's walls are destroyed.

6. Things Devoted to Destruction

Grandpa and I walked down the driveway with machetes on our belts. The sun came down in sheets and then waved over the gravel. I adjusted the hilt with the machete in it.

“If I catch you playing with that, I’ll make you cut me a switch,” Grandpa said.

“No you won’t need to.”

He was singing a nonsense song to make me feel better:

Hi Diddely Dum Dee!

Joshua climbed a ... plum tree!

He climbed so high he touched the sky!

Hi Diddely Dum Dee!

These were the words Grandpa sang whenever I was behaving good or Grandpa wanted me to cheer up. Sometimes I climbed different types of trees in the song, depending on what tree Grandpa was looking at when he started singing. He sang other words if he thought I was pouting:

Hi Diddely Dum Dee!

Joshua climbed a ... pine tree!
His foot did slip! He broke his hip!
Hi Diddely Dum Dee!

Grandpa stopped and pointed - two fingers out and thumb up - like a gun. "Which way am I pointing?" he said.

"That's north," I said.

"So, what's all this stuff I got growing in the north field?"

"That's corn."

Grandpa's driveway was a mile long. There were no curves in it. It just connected the house to the road. The sun made me want to eat something sweet.

"Grandpa, can I taste an ear of corn?"

"Absolutely not. People eat sweet corn. This is Field corn, for cows. It's also called Dent corn."

He pointed again. Before he asked, I answered correctly, "South."

I didn't know what was in the south field. It looked like cattails with lots of seeds on top--hundreds of red, round seeds. Grandpa could tell that I didn't know.

"This here is called milo," he said, pointing his gun hand across the south field.

"You've never seen it before because you lived in the city."

"Is milo cow food or people food?"

"Milo is also called Grain Sorghum or Sorghum Bi Color. It's cow food, or food for poor people," Grandpa said.

"Let's try eating some," I said.

"I already told you, no. Grandma gave us our lunch. We're not poor people. We've

got to do work before we get to eat any more.”

“I don’t think I should have to work. Because I’m still a kid.”

“You aren’t a kid, you’re ten years old. You and your mom and dad lived in the city. But you live here now, so you have to work a little.”

“Yes sir. But I just wanted to taste it.” I felt a cry.

“You’d better not,” Grandpa said. “A ten-year boy doesn’t cry.” I stopped getting ready to cry, because he was right. I was too old. Only babies need to cry. I remembered my mother crying in a blue hospital room with Tiger Lilies in a vase and I didn’t cry about it. My dad died too, but I didn’t need to cry about it.

My grandfather left the driveway and waded into the field. I watched him from the driveway, afraid to follow him because I could tell that he was getting upset by the heat and my pestering. He kept going a ways into the field. “Come over here right now,” he said, “and I’ll show you what we’re going to do with the machetes.”

I followed him into the milo. I was only a little taller than the milo around me. It was like the ocean at first, but then it reminded me of the Maize Maze we had been to the week before. But the Maize Maze was corn, not milo, and the paths were tall and turned corners. The milo rows were perfectly straight. I followed Grandpa deeper down a milo row.

It was slow to walk because of dirt clods in the middle of the row. I kicked some of them, and others I stepped on, smashing them. One clod I kicked hit Grandpa’s foot. He turned around and said, “Are you trying to pester me?”

“No, sir. I’m sorry.”

“Then walk right.”

I got hotter and blinder from the sun. I wanted to start chopping the machete.

We came to a patch of some plants that were much taller than the milo. The milo heads were fat and red, but these taller heads were black and wispy. “Are these the weeds?” I said.

“Yes, these are weeds,” Grandpa said. “We’re growing milo, but these are sweet sorghum.”

“Can I taste the sweet sorghum?”

Grandpa looked slanted-up at the sun, and then down at his shadow. He pulled the machete out of his green machete belt. The blade was black, not silver like I thought it’d be.

“Watch me,” he said, and chopped a stalk with hardly any chopping at all. He barely moved the machete. “Don’t let the blade move more than five inches,” he said.

“Can I do one now?”

“In a second. Chew on the stalk.”

I chewed on the sweet sorghum stalk and could taste a far-away sweetness.

“You can boil the juice and make molasses. But because of where it is, it’s a weed we gotta chop down. Now, start a pile for the weeds. Don’t shake the black seeds off.” I put the sweet sorghum stalk down at my feet. This is where I would start my weed pile. The only one weed made me feel lonely like I was going to cry again, but I didn’t.

“Now listen while I explain this for a minute,” Grandpa said. “Every time we plant milo, we spray a poison that kills everything but milo.” He smiled gently now, because he liked to talk about how farming worked. His face had some wrinkles when he smiled and he was bald.

“But you see, this sweet sorghum is too much like the milo. It’s in the same family. So the poison kills everything else, but just this one kind of weed still grows.”

“Why can’t we just let the black ones grow with the milo?”

“Because if we don’t get rid of them, more and more will come back next time we plant, and eventually they’d dilute the harvest.” Grandpa knelt down and looked in my eyes to make sure I wasn’t crying. “Do you understand, Josh?”

“Yes sir, I understand.”

“Then get out your machete,” Grandpa said. I got mine out of my belt. It was heavy and as long as my arm, with a plastic grip. It wasn’t as black as Grandpa’s machete.

“Isn’t this too dangerous?” I said.

“No, it’s not dangerous. Do you know why?”

“No, sir.”

“Because it’s an expected danger. Out here on Grandpa’s farm, there are dangerous things like tractors and machetes, but they aren’t gonna be dangerous because we’ll expect them to be dangerous. That’s what it’s like to live in the country.”

“The city I lived in was dangerous, too.”

“But the city is different, because you didn’t expect the danger. How could anybody?” Grandpa was right. I didn’t expect the danger. The city was dangerous because I didn’t expect the danger.

“Heft it and chop, boy. Remember, only five inches,” Grandpa said. I chopped a black-seeded weed, letting the blade fall slanted, like how I’d seen it done, but the machete was heavy and I almost dropped it. “No boy, too much,” Grandpa said. “This isn’t a god-damned jungle.”

“Yes sir.” I chopped again, and then better and better.

“Your mom and dad would be proud of you.”

Grandpa left me to work on my own. The work was boring and made me feel bad. I wrote some more words for the song, but they didn’t help much:

Hi Diddely Dum Dee!

Bubble climbed a ... Gum tree!

It popped and died! I didn't cry!

Hi Diddely Dum Dee!

* * *

At first I made two piles, one for black ones and one for milo. Eventually, I stopped sorting and just chopped and let fall. Sometimes I chewed on the sweet ones, and sometimes I ate the bitter red seeds, and sometimes I bit the stalks and chewed the leaves. I even put the machete in my mouth for a second, but it was too heavy. I spun around with the blade out. The goddamned clods of dirt tried to slow me. At some point I decided to make a maze. A part of me knew that I shouldn't, but there was so much milo that Grandpa wouldn't notice if I kept the maze small. I focused my chopping into making a path that started at the driveway.

I took breaks and got my drinks from an Army canteen. Grandma had filled it with iced tea for me, but she had also put some lemons in it that made the tea pour poorly. I kept missing my mouth because a lemon would get in the way. On one drink break, I put the cut end of a sweet sorghum into the tea. It did not make my tea taste sweeter, but the cut end did taste like tea when I chewed on it.

It took a long time. Then it was dusk and I heard a screen door far away, which meant that Grandpa was coming back out. There was a sunset starting.

I knew by then that I was going to get in trouble. I had gotten carried away and had chopped too much milo, making a maze that was too big. There were hundreds of stalks cut down everywhere, like a red milo carpet. The maze I made stretched for hundreds of feet. I didn't have time to make any forks or branches. I stood at what I thought was the end, and I

saw that it was a terrible maze. The empty rows made it too easy to cheat. There was nothing stopping anyone from skipping my maze and just walking down a row to get me.

Grandpa walked down the driveway and then saw me, far away. He saw the entrance to the maze and started down it. The sunset happened. I got scared because the maze wouldn't hide me. But for some reason, Grandpa didn't cheat and go down a row. Instead, he went down the path I had made, left and right and weaving. Why didn't he go straight down what was left of the rows? Why didn't he go straight to me and get me? Even when he faced me, only ten feet away, he didn't leave my maze. I didn't understand his face. He didn't walk straight to me. Instead he took out his machete, cut, and gathered the sugar weeds I had missed along the way, stomping slowly down my crooked path, being careful not to shake the black seeds loose.

7. My Tent

I once went fishing with my uncle Jake. He was a sportsman, trained dogs, and trained birds for the dogs to bite. He brought along cherry-filled donuts, which we ate in the morning.

We fished early. I caught a catfish and we ate it. I thought it delicious. We also ate the donuts. Those were the best smells of entire life. I remind myself of those smells whenever I get the chance: cherry-filled donuts, gray stinkbait for the catfish, and dank smoke when it's cold. (Other smokes aren't quite as good. For instance, the smell of smoke produced by a grill or by a fireplace doesn't do it for me. It has to be smoke from a barely-smoldering outdoor fire when it's about 60 degrees out and a little damp.)

I was about fourteen when we went on that trip. For the next few years, I fantasized about living in a tent permanently. I bought camping magazines and figured out what was the best gear, what I would need. I started getting catalogs with equipment, and I circled the things I would buy and wrote down their weights. Weight was important, I discovered. I only circled the lightest things, which were usually the most expensive. I bought a map of Colorado.

I saw a show on PBS about a guy who went to Alaska, made a log cabin from

scratch, and lived there for decades. He made a bowl using an axe in only a few minutes. He put his food in a tree house to keep bears away. He had a refrigerator that was just a hole in the ground. Every year, a plane would drop off some stuff for him, like coffee and dried beans.

So when my best friend at the time, Andrew, threw a camping party, I decided I would go, even though I didn't feel comfortable going to parties. I didn't drink in high school, nor did I have sex. I knew there would be drinking and sex at the party, but I just wanted to sleep in a tent again. For some reason, I never got around to camping until that party, even though I often had dreams wherein I lived in the woods.

Andrew and I went to a local gas station to get fishing permits. "Let's get the 6-month permits," I suggested.

"We're only going to fish tonight," Andrew said. "You know you're going to get bored with this and we'll never go fishing again."

He was much more practical than me, and was better with girls. In fact, he had just recently kissed the breasts of a girl that I had wanted to. I felt like I had the better claim: she had told me she loved me at a dance. Andrew had assured me that her breasts were no big deal. He had short hair, and he was always saying things like, "Josh, will you go with me to Shear Perfection? I need to get my hair cut before the camping trip," even though his hair was always less than a half-inch long. Practically buzzed.

The time I went fishing with my uncle, I had liked waking up and eating cherry-filled donuts. I brought some along for Andrew's camping party. What I wanted to do was wake up early the next morning, go sit on a rock, put some stinkbait on my hook, and eat the donuts while I smelled the fire that we had made the night before. That was my great plan, but it didn't happen.

It turned out that it wasn't a camping party. It was just me, Andrew, and the girl that had told me she loved me before allowing Andrew to kiss her breasts. It hurt my feelings a little that she was there, because they weren't supposed to be dating. Andrew had said that it was supposed to be just a one night thing. Apparently they were a couple.

They had brought an entire brick of pot. Andrew had stolen dad's golf clubs and traded them for it. It was huge and had duct tape on it. Absurd!

All night, the girl kept talking about how bad the pot was. "This shit is terrible," she would say. "It kinda smells like gas."

Andrew would reply by saying something like, "There's so many fucking seeds!"

I didn't catch any fish that night. I minded my own business, but tried to be polite. I didn't want to mess up Andrew's party.

That night, I went to bed early in my sleeping bag. They stayed up way later, outside the tent. I was determined to wake up early so I could actualize my scent fantasy before Andrew and the girl got up. I couldn't sleep, though, because they ended up having sex right next to me in the tent. I pretended to be asleep. I put my hands on my ears. They were trying to be quiet, I guess. I felt ashamed because their noises kinda made me aroused, too, and I felt jealous because she had told me that she loved me.

When I woke up, I saw that they had thrown my donuts into the lake. The donut box was floating on the shore. As a matter of fact, I soon realized that they had thrown everything they could into the lake. I must not have heard them doing it. They must have thrown things into the lake quietly. The things missing besides the donuts included:

all of the firewood

my fishing pole

the stink bait

the brick of pot

my shoes

my pan

my spatula

an ornate box containing weed-smoking tools

the rocks I used to circle the fire

Everything was gone into the lake. They kept sleeping. The morning was dark as I waited for this time to pass. I sat on a big rock beside the lake for awhile, and thought about Andrew and his girlfriend sleeping in my tent, and how I hated them. Still, I wondered who I should apologize to for feeling aroused by their awful lives, their pointless actions. I should probably apologize to somebody.

8. The Ambush

It flew up before our faces and exploded in the air. “That’s how you shoot it, rockheads,” Ricky the shooting counselor said. He was next on our rotation. “Don’t be a girl and wait for the pigeon to start dropping. Shooting isn’t a sport for girls.” There were, in fact, several girls in our group. They seemed unconcerned with Ricky’s scornful glare, which peeped at them from under the brim of his hat with word “SAFETY” on it in orange letters, orange on black.

“When are we going to get to shoot?” I asked.

“When you know something about safety, rockhead,” Ricky said.

“When are we going to learn about firearm safety?” another camper asked.

“I’m going to tell you right the heck now!” Ricky got out a piece of paper from his shirt pocket and began shouting at us what was written upon it:

“Firearm responsibility is your responsibility! There are four simple rules that you must follow at all times when you are handling a Firearm! Number one! Treat every Firearm as if it were a Loaded Firearm! Rule number two! Do not point the nuzzle of the gun at something you do not intend to DESTROY! Three! Keep your finger off the darn trigger

until I TELL you to put it on there! And Four! Be certain of your target and the area behind it!”

The loud speech went on for awhile. We learned where the safety button was on our rifles, and then took turns shooting at the clay pigeons. When it was my turn, I hit a couple--smash smash!

The camp was going horribly for me. There was only one other kid that I knew from my 4-H club. His name was Tom and he had bright red hair and was in a wheelchair. He was three years older than me, and was an asshole. Before he got in a car wreck, he used to come up to me in the hallways at school and show me where my pressure points were. “Here’s a pressure point,” he’d say, and push hard with his thumb behind my neck. He did stuff like that all the time. The teachers and students felt bad for Tom after the accident and said that he had a great spirit, perhaps in the hope that he wouldn’t be so much of an asshole, but he still was. During our eighth grade graduation ceremony, a few weeks before camp, he managed to wobble up to the podium on crutches and braces, but he still was a jerk so I didn’t clap for his spirit. Nor did I want to hang out with him at camp, so I didn’t.

I didn’t hang out with anybody. I never talked to anyone other than the camp counselors from time to time, when I needed to. I didn’t make a single friend. At first it was a little awkward, like when we had to use the buddy system at the pool. The pool counselor didn’t pay much attention, so I never had to find a buddy when everybody else buddied up. It was a little lonely, but camp only lasted two weeks, so I knew that I could manage, as long as I was able to entertain myself. I had plenty of friends back home.

Camp lasted for two weeks, and after a week, my grandpa came to visit me. He had gone to the same camp when he was a kid, but he wasn’t in 4-H. He was in Future Farmers of America. It was pretty much the same camp: Camp Firestone. More kids went to it now.

There were maybe two hundred kids?

I asked Grandpa for more money. “Where did the money I gave you go?” he asked.

“I spent it at the snack bar.”

“That’s a lot of snacks.”

“Not for a whole week. That’s only three snacks per day, Grandpa.”

“Well, how much do the snacks here cost?”

“It depends on the snack.” To tell the truth, I had spent all thirty dollars buying extra time at the shooting range. I spent my non-assigned time there. We got only a certain amount of time at the range as part of the admission cost of the camp. We paid extra for extra time. I shot the rifle as much as I could.

“Here’s thirty more then. Don’t buy so many snacks. Or, buy cheaper snacks, like peanuts or sunflower seeds.”

“Ok. Thanks, Grandpa.” He went away, and I began week two of camp with thirty more dollars. That was enough to keep me occupied at the range until the end of camp.

Smash!

* * *

That second week, Ricky taught me everything he knew about shooting. I don’t remember the details of what he taught me. Something about holding my breath: “Hold your breath, rockhead.” The only reason I mention this whole camp story is that I’m seriously considering buying a gun. I’m not suicidal or homicidal, nor do I like the idea of shooting somebody, nor do I want to go to a firing range particularly. I am, however, a little lonely--the same kind of lonely that I remember feeling at camp. Wouldn’t I feel better with a little nickel-plated gun stuck in my pocket? I remember liking the sound bullets make when they go off close to me.

* * *

On the last day of camp, over half of the campers went to a big dance, and the other campers, including myself, watched movies in an outdoor amphitheater. The first movie was about a boy who turned into an adult, and the second movie was about a baby that thought in words and sentences. It was midnight by the time the movies were over and I got lost trying to get back to my cabin. It took me a long time to find it.

There were some kids outside it, and they were messing with my red sleeping bag, filling it full of gooey stuff like shaving cream. Tom was there; I could see his wheelchair silhouette. I figured they were trying to get back at me for not making friends with any of them. I hid until they were done filling my bag. They pulled it back inside the cabin, dragging it through the dirt. I could hear them giggling with anticipation. Tom's chair squeaked as he wheeled around in there. I thought about how Ricky had taught me to hold my breath.

My hoodie was plenty warm, and I took off my shoes and used them like a pillow. They were soft enough. Then, I fell asleep outside, under the stars, which twinkled.

9. We Are Very Far From You

I started smoking when I was eighteen, and I quit when I turned twenty-three. I found the motivation because I had a bad breakup with a girl named Stacy, (things thrown, smashed against the walls) and then she started smoking, so I decided to stop because I wanted to be her opposite.

I also stopped wearing my tongue ring after we broke up because she started wearing a tongue ring.

These were the things I wanted because I was ready to die, on the brink. Pluses need to become minuses. What can I say? I had a nervous energy about me.

The good thing about quitting smoking was that it made me find more things to do in those spaces of time when I used to smoke. The bad thing about quitting smoking was that it made me gain a little weight. It wasn't a big deal; I expected it. I chewed nicotine gum, which had a pamphlet about weight in the included written materials. It read:

Some people experience minor weight gain after quitting smoking. This is to be expected and is not a big deal. The risks associated with minor weight gain (diabetes, heart problems) are far less likely than the risks associated with smoking.

Also, the fact that I was getting fatter made me more unlike her, because she was skinny. So that made the shame of being fat easier to bear.

Actually, I hated being fat, so I decided to loose some weight--just enough to make me presentable to a potential mate. I figured that the fact that I was so self-conscious and depressed about my body made me her opposite enough: she was self-assured.

I exercised at the gym regularly for a month, but it was too stressful and depressing. It was stressful because I worried about getting an erection, and depressing for reasons too obvious to mention. I bought a drug that made it so my body wouldn't absorb the fat I ate, and I tried to eat very low-fat food for awhile. One day, I was eating a nice, light omelet at IHOP and I had to use the restroom. I must have had too much fat to eat that day, because I crapped this oily stuff. The medicine warned about oily discharge, but this was too intense. That discharge was the single most disgusting and disturbing thing that has ever happened to me. Fecal oil. I stopped taking the medicine after that and ate fatty stuff whenever I wanted to.

As I mentioned before, there were new spaces in my life that I used to fill by smoking. They totaled about an hour per day, I estimated. I set aside an hour each night to do something productive with my life.

During this time, I decided to start my own small business: a design company that designed things that lasted forever.

My new company's first big project was to design a coffee maker that would last forever. (The coffee maker I bought Stacy (my ex) for her birthday stopped working after only two months, and I didn't save the receipt so I couldn't return it. This general ineptitude on my part sparked another fight, which culminated with Stacy throwing the glass carafe at a wall, which broke the carafe. Then we broke up, too.) After a few nights of research, I came

to the conclusion that due to laws of entropy, etc., nothing lasts forever in a state that would be capable of making coffee. I yielded to the laws of physics and compromised my company's mission statement. I would design a coffee maker that lasted for two million years.

I designed a website so that my company would have a web presence. There was a picture of me on the front page, holding a broken carafe similar to the one Stacy broke. Then, I added a Contact link and a link for Jobs Available. I made it so that when a person clicked on the Jobs Available link, they would go to a page with a picture of me at my computer in my bedroom, working. Under that, I wrote:

Are you interested in creating household appliances that last for two million years?

We're looking for a few creative people to join our team!

Email: Joshua@InvetionCorp.com with your resume!

I set up shop in my basement and started testing materials for the coffee maker.

A quick internet search taught me that the only tools that have lasted for two million years are made of stone. I was hoping to use some sort of plastic, but it turns out that most plastic breaks down in less than five hundred years if it's exposed to light. I had been under the impression that plastic just went into landfills and sat there forever. People had indoctrinated me about plastic. Perhaps the civic engineers who design landfills should leave giant shafts open so light can get in? Based on my research, I decided to use stone wherever possible for my coffee maker.

The only stone bowl I could find was from a mortar and pestle set I got for my birthday (from Stacy). It was granite and was the same kind that a popular celebrity chef uses on his TV show. Using a special drill bit and my shop vac to keep the dust out of the way, I made a one inch hole up the side of the mortar. My coffee maker was almost complete. It had only taken me about a month thus far (I had to special order the bit).

I wanted my coffee maker to have a filter. A permanent coffee filter is a tough thing. I decided on pure gold. I figured that gold is a kind of stone, too, and it's non-reactive. The only filters I could find online were gold-plated stainless steel, which was not good enough. The plating would wear off way sooner than two million years. But I was just prototyping, so I bought one of the plated ones and simply noted in my design documents that the final product would have a pure gold filter.

I cut the filter into a little gold disk and using an air chisel, I carefully notched around the hole I drilled into the mortar, creating a little slot for my filter to go into. I slipped the filter into the slot and I was ready to test my invention.

But first, I called Stacy. It was time to separate us. I wanted to be as far away from her as possible, but counter-intuitively, I needed to be close to her just one last time in order to push away. Like when you push two magnets together and they spring apart. Also, like when you swim to one side of the pool and do a flip and push off and go back the way you came.

She answered her phone with a cough. I imagined that she was smoking weed. I've never smoked weed. "Stacy, I think you left some of your stuff at my house," I said.

"What stuff, Josh?"

I had prepared a list. "An apron, a bag of decaf coffee, your bike, a fish, ten hairpins, a lamp, a lemon, two limes, a bottle of Makers Mark brand whiskey, perfume, shoes, a Sonic Youth album, your toothbrush, and a half-full bottle of White Zinfandel, which I bought for you and you never finished."

"That list was alphabetized," Stacy said.

"You said that you were going to use the rest of the White Zinfandel for cooking, but you never did," I said. I suddenly felt terrifically sad.

“I don’t want that stuff.”

“What about your bike?”

“You can keep my bike or sell it. You could buy a new coffee maker with the money.”

“I already have a new coffee maker, Stacy. Just please come over and get your things. I’ll put them in a box in my back yard.”

“Alright, I’ll be over in a few hours.”

She hung up and I thought about weed-smoking, how I hated it.

I dug a hole in the back yard and filled it with newspapers. Then I put wood on the newspapers and set it on fire. I kept adding wood and poking the fire with a fireplace poker until I had a nice bed of coals.

I put some coffee beans inside the mortar and ground them with the pestle. Then I carefully added water up to the hole. I set the bowl into the fire pit and waited. It took over an hour for the coffee to brew and then Stacy came around the side of the house, perfect timing.

“Hey Josh. What are you doing?”

“I’m making some coffee.”

“Oh. Do you have my stuff?”

I had forgotten to bring out her stuff. It was in a box downstairs in the prototype lab. I went down and got it for her.

“Your bike is in the garage. How do you want to get it home?” I asked.

“You can just keep it,” she said. I was still attracted to her, even though I did not want to be. I felt nervous.

“Would you like a cup of coffee?” I asked.

“Out of that?”

“Yeah! I invented a coffee maker that will last for two million years.”

She seemed a little confused. “Ok, I’ll try a cup.”

“Just wait,” I said. I ran into the house and grabbed a mug and two welding gloves.

Outside, I put the gloves on, set the mug on the ground, and carefully poured coffee into it.

Stacy drank some.

“Whoh! It’s so bitter,” she said, smiling in order to be polite.

At that point, I was ready to not be in love with Stacy anymore, but I couldn’t stop because she didn’t love me, and I was finally her opposite.

10. Every Person In It He Utterly Destroyed

My old classmate Andrew told me that when he was a little kid, he used to roll around in a patch of mint that grew behind his house. It freaked out his parents. “I just liked the smell of mint,” he said.

We were in an examination room at his practice. He was a doctor now, and I didn’t like him much any more. I came to his office by accident.

The thing that had got us started about the mint was my cat. I showed him a picture of my cat on my cell-phone, and he said, “That’s a weird looking cat,” (my cat is a Persian) and I said, “Yeah. He has trouble smelling things. Even catnip,” which got us talking about mint in general, and then he told me the story about rolling around in the mint patch. All this was before he even asked what was wrong with me, what the problem was, or where I hurt.

After the catnip story, I felt like I should tell an embarrassing story, too. “Remember that camping trip?” I asked.

“Oh man!” he said, laughing. “You totally freaked out! You were so pissed at me!”

“You threw my stuff into the lake!”

“Oh man! I guess I did!” We both laughed. That was a long time ago. I wasn’t

particularly mad about the camping trip anymore.

“So Josh, why are you here today? What’s going on?”

“Well, I have an itchy rash on my arm.” I held out my arm for him, and he put on some gloves and checked it out. “Maybe I’ve been rolling around in poison ivy!” I joked.

“This isn’t poison ivy.” He looked at my arm more closely. “Looks to me like you’ve got ringworm.”

“Oh.”

“Yep. Good old ringworm. You probably got it from your cat. Any sort of anti-fungal cream will take care of this.”

“I used to get ringworm when I was a kid,” I said. “My grandma would daub some beach on it.”

“Don’t use bleach. Your grandma was wrong. Anti-fungal cream is cheap, it works better, and it won’t damage your skin.”

“It burned when she put it on,” I said.

“I bet,” Andrew said.

“She used to wait until I was asleep and then put it on, but I would wake up screaming. I remember that it burned in a weird, cold way.”

“Just use the anti-fungal cream,” he said.

“I’m just making conversation,” I said.

“Yeah, I know. Good to see you, Josh. Let me know if it doesn’t clear up in a week or so.”

* * *

I decided to go ahead and put bleach on my ringworm. I sat on the edge of the bathtub and daubed some on with a Q-Tip. At first, it felt cool, like cold water. Then it started to burn in

that familiar way. I blew on it. This brought back memories of Grandma putting bleach on my ringworm and blowing on it while I cried. In between puffs of air, she would sing little bits of “Joshua Fit the Battle of Jericho,” in order to distract me. I liked that song because it had my name in it. After about fifteen minutes of holding my arm, the burning stopped and Grandma let go.

“What does ‘Fit the Battle’ mean?” I asked.

“It’s an old-fashioned way of saying ‘fought the battle’,” Grandma said.

“Where is Jericho?” I asked.

“It’s in the desert,” she said. She held out my arm and traced around my ringworm. “Joshua and his army walked around the city for seven days.” She drew circles around the ringworm with her fingertip. “And then they stopped and blew a trumpet.” She blew on the ringworm. “And the walls around the city fell down and Joshua’s army went inside.”

“What did Joshua do then?” I asked.

“They had a battle with the bad people that lived in the middle of the city. Like how the bleach has a battle with the ringworm.”

Grandma went through this same routine the three or four times I had ringworm as a kid. The burning reminded me of her vividly. But there in my bathroom, I had to blow on my own ringworm. It stopped burning after awhile. Andrew was wrong about the bleach: it worked great. It utterly destroyed the ringworm after only about a week.

11. The Land Had Rest

The metal trash goes into the gully. Plastics and paper are burned in the orchard behind the house. Foodstuffs are thrown into the field.

Here's how to burn the trash. First, you drag the bags out to the orchard. There's a pile of ash where you do the burning. Bring along some matches. If the bag is one of those big, fifty-pound sacks that once held dog food, you can just light a couple corners of the bag and it'll start to burn. If the bag is plastic, you'll have to find a piece of paper in the trash and use it like a torch to light the bag in different spots. The plastic will drip but not burn very well, so just melt a hole and concentrate on burning the trash inside the bag. If you're like me, you'll poke at the fire with a stick and play with it. You can chew on wild mint while you do this, or eat mulberries. One day, you'll discover that mulberries have tiny worms that live on them, on every single berry, and you'll never eat another mulberry again.

Here's how to throw scraps into the field. Grandma will hand you a colander filled with potato peels or coffee grounds or whatever, and you'll go out the front door, down the sidewalk, past the driveway, into the field. You'll want to just dump the scraps there and go back inside, but you'll get in trouble if you keep throwing scraps where people can see them

from the driveway. To do it right, you have to go deeper into the field, then fling the colander around in an arc. See how far you can throw the scraps. Pay attention to the direction of the wind.

Here's how to dump the metal trash. Go with Grandpa out to the trailer where you have been accumulating sacks full of cans, bottles, and other junk that won't burn. We call it the "metal trash" but there's glass in there, too. Grandpa will bring around the tractor and hook it up to the trailer. You will ride in the trailer full of trash with your feet dangling on the ground. Grandpa will remind you once again to stay away from the PTO shaft, which can tear your arm off.

You'll arrive at the metal trash gully, and Grandpa will tell you to get out. Then, you must stand back as he backs up the trailer to the gully and dumps it. Help push the trash out with a shovel. The gully will be full of generations of trash that you and your father and your grandfather and your grandfather's father have made. You're not allowed to play with the trash. Eventually, when you get older, you might want to go out there with a backhoe and shovel dirt over the thing.

12. Thirty-One Kings

Charlie and I came to the conclusion that we needed to find more things to do when she came to visit besides just watch movies and TV. I liked playing backgammon, but Charlie did not.

We went to Wal-Mart and bought a puzzle. The puzzle depicted Santa and elves making little toy trucks. There was a huge pile of toy trucks behind them.

“Look at all those identical trucks,” I said. We were putting the puzzle together on my kitchen table. “Santa has changed his mode of production since the industrial revolution.”

“You’re a goof,” Charlie said, and gave me a big kiss.

It took us two days to put the puzzle together. There was a lot of wood grain that all looked the same, and all the elves had green outfits that were the exact same shade of green. When we got almost done, it became apparent that a piece was missing.

“This is such a clichéd situation,” Charlie said. She was on all fours, looking around on the floor. I checked out her breasts.

“The puzzle situation is a bust,” I said. “Let’s throw it away.”

“But we just bought it!”

“Are you going to want to put it together again next year, knowing that there’s a piece missing?”

“I guess not,” she said.

So we threw the puzzle away and went back to Wal-Mart and bought Scrabble. As soon as we got it home, we ripped off the plastic and started playing it. The trouble soon started when I played “THIRTY” and Charlie tacked on “ONE.”

“I challenge,” I said.

“What? Why?”

“THIRTY-ONE has a hyphen in it.”

“Can I take it back?”

“Nope. Once you play a word it counts.”

She was mad for a bit but didn’t say anything. Later, I played a bingo, “CATLIKE,” and Charlie tried to add an ‘S’ to make “SCATLIKE.” I think she honestly thought that it was a word.

“SCAT-LIKE has a hyphen in it,” I said. “You lose another turn.”

“But you played ‘CATLIKE’!”

“It’s an exception,” I said. “Look it up.”

“We’re done playing Scrabble,” Charlie said, and dumped the tiles back into the box. Then she threw the box away in the kitchen.

“There was nothing wrong with the game!” I shouted.

“We’re not going to play it again!” she said, and went into my room and slammed the door. I thought she was being unreasonable and I pulled the game out of the trash. I slipped it into a closet, figuring that I’d take it to Goodwill or something.

I got Charlie some pretty great Christmas presents, so for the next few days (Christmas Eve, Christmas) we got along well. The day after Christmas, we were bored again, so we decided to play checkers. It was the only game I had left in the house besides backgammon, which Charlie didn't like for some reason. The back of the backgammon board was for checkers, so that's what we played.

Charlie beat me again and again, "King me!" That was fine. I was OK with Charlie being better than me at checkers.

After awhile, Charlie and I got bored again. There was nothing to do.

"Let's go walk downtown," she said. "We can go Shopping!" She knew I hated shopping, except for kitchen equipment.

"I guess we've got some Christmas money," I said. So we went shopping.

I bought a multi-colored sweater and Charlie bought some new gloves.

The next day, Charlie flew back to the big city. She sent me an email later suggesting that we break up. I didn't respond.

Then she called me and I didn't answer the phone. After five minutes, my phone made a series of beeps that indicated that Charlie had left a message for me. I didn't listen to it, but I assumed it was more information about breaking up.

I walked downtown by myself. There was a new store opening up called "FUN-N-GAMES." They had pretty much every type of game imaginable that two people can play together. The one that caught my eye was a marble rollercoaster set, which was assembled in the store for kids to play with. It was actually pretty amusing, trying to guess which path the marble would take. I put a marble in the top and guessed wrong.

13. According To Their Families

It's Charlie, the pretty one. She's come early for the first yeasty loaf. Charlie likes her bread leavened chemically for the holidays, and with raisins. Charlie seems like she'd be a good wife. The baker would make for Charlie the best husband he could, but with such meager ingredients! Plus, he believes Charlie is married, but he's never met her husband.

Meanwhile, I am five-hundred-and-fifty miles away, draining the oil out of my truck. I'm not her husband, but I used to be in the running. I picture Charlie again, at the bakery.

She takes the bread with twitching hands.

"Oh, I can really smell the yeast today," she says. She inhales hugely.

A brown cat, done with washing, rubs the baker's leg. "Get out of here, love," he says.

Charlie turns around. She had been looking at the floats lining up.

"Did you just call me your love?" she says.

"No, miss. I was talking to the cat. Here is your change."

Oh, what a fool he is to call a girl his love! He'd like to kill the word "love" in his mouth.

“Thanks, buddy,” she says. The little bell dings over the door as she leaves. The church bell peals again, a mistake this time? He does not watch the way she goes, because he’s making a point to stop dreaming about the marital acts during work hours. Dreaming makes for a hard day of work. Charlie would be a fine wife, but she wouldn’t have him. The next bread needs slashing, so he grabs a bread-slasher and goes with it.

* * *

Charlie notices that her soles are slipping. *These goddamned old-timey side-streets*, she thinks. She lifts up a foot to check the tread, and damn it all, worn down again. The soles of shoes wear down--that’s just what happens and she’ll have to get some new shoes, simple as that.

She nibbles bread and walks down the street. *I’ll eat the rest of my bread in the park*, she thinks. She loves being outside in the open spaces. She feels, suddenly, a tiny bit lonely, but then ok again. She finds a bench and eats faster. She eats larger pieces.

First, Charlie thinks about the parade she signed up for, the floats lining up. Then, Charlie wonders if she forgot anything. She is sure that she forgot something. After failing to remember what she forgot, Charlie considers her bread. She finds it not quite as good today as usual. This is either, she reckons, because of her mood or because of some disgusting practice of the baker. The bread tastes smoky, like the baker had been smoking.

There is a “Please Recycle” sign on a bin. It also reads “Réutiliser SVP” and “Bitte aufbereiten.” She has been thinking about translations all week. Also, alchemy. She chews bread, then giggles. *Bread into gold*. The bread is gone, and she tosses the wrapper at the wrong recycling bin. *Translate that!* she thinks, as the paper goes into the hole meant for cans. *Paper into metal!*

The park spins a little and then she remembers. She sits still and holds onto the

bench. She remembers that she purposely forgot to remember that we broke up.

* * *

Meanwhile, five-hundred-and-fifty miles away, the cut and flattened box Goes under my truck. It Keeps the oil off my driveway. And, it's softer on the old back. I Crawl under, I Push the pan in front of me. I Roll over.

The first wrench is 9/16". I Position pan. I Wipe drainage bolt clean with old rag. Old oil. This old bastard must be leaking. Too late to sell the damn thing, too late to fix it. Too expensive. "Why don't you take your stupid truck to the Grease Monkey?" she asked me once.

"You're making a damn joke, Charlie!" I said. Grandpa would march out of his grave. Grease Monkey! I Twist and Break the bolt loose with the 9/16". I Finger Loosen.

I Feel the pressure of the gravity of the oil. Pushing between the treads, outwards. The dirty black oil. I Keep Turning the bolt. I Don't Drop it this time. The grit in the threads feels like sand, but it isn't. It must be worn out, tiny metals, shorn off by the brasses and the rings.

Then the bolt comes loose so quickly, oil pouring in a steady push back into the black pan, staining my fingertips, but better this time because I Don't Drop the bolt, and I Push myself out from under the truck as it drains.

I Stand Straight and Wait.

* * *

Land and Lemmy can be seen on their porch across the street. I watch them as the oil drains under my truck. They rent the house from an old lady who is away someplace where the weather is nice all the time. Indeed, the faded gingerbread details on the porch suggest *an old lady owns this* but Land and Lemmy insist with their hung-over faces *a newer genera-*

tion rents it.

They are drinking last night's beer in a fit of frugality. The specter of their deceased beer fund flits past their faces, focusing their eyes on what lies directly before them. There is nothing there except public spaces (work, libraries, etc.) and therefore, implicitly-suggested sobriety.

"I'm sorry I said whatever I said last night," Land says. "Dreadfully sorry."

"It's forgotten," says Lemmy. "Truly, I can't seem to remember what we were even arguing about."

"I believe that we were arguing about who owns the moon."

"I do now recall the conversation," says Lemmy. "You stated (while quite drunk, you must admit, Land) that the United States owns the moon."

"That is correct," Land says, his word only hinting at the slurred. "As evidence, I offered up the popular image of a US flag being inserted into the moon." Land swallows more old beer from his can. "You, Lemmy, were above averagely drunk also, and rebutted something about Google."

"Yes. I pointed out that Google Image wasn't a credible academic source."

"According to whom?"

"According to the academic community. The ivory tower."

"A moot point. The image was from the Smithsonian's website."

Lemmy leans back on his plastic chair. The legs buckle a bit. "That's the issue at stake," Lemmy says. "I don't think you ever rebutted my point that the same exact image is posted on conspiracy theory websites, etcetera. Those folks claim that the whole thing was fixed. The most problematic of sources. How can you use an image to support a claim that is upheld by both smart people and dumb?"

“Your damn points are muddy, Lemmy! You’re not talking sense.”

“And just because an American astronaut put a flag in something doesn’t mandate ownership!”

“You might want to brush up on your history of Americans putting flags into things,” Land says. He tips his chair back even further than Lemmy’s, until his chair bumps the wall.

They are resigned to several facts: that the conversation will last all morning, that the beer is flat, and that it will all be gone soon.

* * *

Charlie needs to buy candy for the float she signed up for, so she goes to the candy store to fill her bucket. She enters the candy store, which is called “Mr. Everything’s Candy Store.” The company logo is displayed on the wall behind the counter—a grinning cartoon-child standing on a globe, clutching an amount of candy to his chest. The quantity of candy he holds is meant to suggest that he has one of everything.

“I’ll have a bucket of your cheapest,” she tells the little boy behind the counter. He seems too young to be working here.

“Do you mean our cheapest candy?”

“Yes, young man. Whatever that is. I’m going to be throwing it onto the street today.”

“That’d be the Choco-Dangs,” he says. “And also the Berry-Bangs. They’re the same price because the same company makes them.”

“How old are you?” Charlie says.

“I’m eleven but my parents own the store,” the boy says. He’s wearing a cute little apron with the company logo. Charlie notices that the cartoon boy looks like the real one. The little boy grins and nods, suggesting that this is old news.

“Ok then, young man. Please fill half of this bucket with each.”

“It’s self-service in here, ma’m,” he says, and points at a wall full of candy containers and scoops. Charlie fills her bucket at the wall of candy, in layers, choco-brown and berry-red.

* * *

I am...mostly drunk in the morning. On Chartreuse! Lucky me, the green kind. Gold coins in the fountain, or copper: No, gold. Lucky me! This is made by monks. This is made in barrels in their cellar: Let’s get into the fountain and get the coins. Ah, so cold! Up to the knees and beyond! The stars, through difficulty. This is easy, though, just free money that people put in here. Wee! My name is Billy Song! Fuck you, people. You’re damn jealous you didn’t get in here first.

Afraid of getting their feet wet up to the pants. I’ve got me wee little pocket for a wee little gold coin. So tedious though—coin coin coin.

Get out of there, buddy! Go to your fucking home!

This is my home! This is the outside! This is my home! This is outside in the fountain.

I’ve hurt my foot and its cut and bleeding. Someone must have put glass in here. Now it’s bleeding more and more. Now it’s in the water and more.

* * *

Charlie walks down the row of floats, trying to peer through the holes cut into the chicken wire and plaster and frizz and fuzz. There are people hidden in there. One person per float, waiting in the dark. One hole per person, blinding-bright, hard on their eyes. Those hidden persons look out and think different things as their floats idle and inflate. People take their places on the backs of the floats, clutching objects meant to show their pride. Charlie wants

to tell them, “It’s no use hiding. We’re all going to get what we’re going to get, each according to our families. The outside world swells with pride, and it will spill through even the tiniest hole.” Instead she drops her bucket of candy because she feels a sudden surge of sadness, concerning me--the fact that she left me.

* * *

Charlie feels the pressure of tears behind her eyes and starts running for home. She passes the candy store again. The child is pictured on the front window, hands holding candy. A man rises from a fountain with bloody, wet-water hands and green drops on his lips. Five-hundred-and-fifty miles away, next door to me, two guys on a porch are shouting, sticky with beer on their hands. I wave at Charlie with oil on my hands, seeing her run in my mind. The parade starts, pushing against her, pouring past her, while people wave and shout. Everyone waves all around her. In a window, the baker watches her and pets a cat. Her house is now only a block away and empty.

When she finally runs into her silent home, she unplugs her phone so she won’t be tempted to call me. Then she can’t help but cry a little, even though she knows it’s so clichéd. There’s something really humbling about trying to live in the place she wants to, and failing again and again and again.

14. Give Me This Hill Country

The world seemed rounder that morning. I had just gotten some new glasses, so maybe that was the problem. It took me longer than most to become accustomed to new glasses: almost a week sometimes. The sidewalk looked curvy as I walked along, like I was in a tiny half-pipe. I was feeling a bit depressed about Charlie having broken up with me, but mostly I felt like I was going to be ok.

A local art institute had hired me to teach box-making. The place was so hard-up for instructors that they didn't ask what had ended my previous wood-arts stint. *This is a brand new start for me*, I thought. *I'm going to be the coolest box-making-teacher ever*. Heck, I even almost started skipping as I walked to my car, down the half-pipe sidewalk. I pretended that I was on a skateboard and I knew what I was doing, like I was a professional skateboarder, and I pretended to Pop an Ollie. Just a little jump, achieved by kicking the back of my imaginary skateboard with my right foot. Then, I popped another imaginary Ollie with my left foot, Switch-Style, which is harder. These actions were way more fun than skipping would have been, but they must have looked like skipping to somebody if they were watching me secretly from a window.

The box-making classroom was smaller than the wood-arts shop at the university I used to teach at. Also, they didn't have any power tools. Not even electric hand tools, like routers or cordless drills. We were going to make boxes by hand, the way our ancestors did. The art institute had an intensive one-year program for freshman that instilled within them the basics of different types of art. First they learned how to draw, how to paint (oil, water, acrylic), how to paint naked people without laughing or crying, how to make fabric, how to make a booklet, how to silkscreen a poster for a band, how to make boxes out of wood, and finally, how to weld shit together.

Each section was taught by a different instructor, a specialist in their art field. As I was preparing for class, a man with a mustache poked his head into my classroom.

"Hi there, fella," he said as he entered. "My name is Tony. Everybody calls me 'Touchdown' or 'Touchdown Tony.' I'm the welding instructor."

"Nice to meet you. I'm Josh, the new box instructor."

"The new box man!" He slapped me on the back. I had grown a mustache once and all my guy friends thought it looked great, but all the ladies thought it made me look stupid.

"I really dig your mustache," I said.

"Thanks, man! I originally grew it as a joke. I was shaving, and I thought to myself, what would happen if I didn't shave the mustache? So I didn't, and lots of people got a kick out of it, so I kept it, you know."

"I look stupid with a mustache."

"Some guys do. So Josh, have you got your bearings yet?"

I looked around the classroom. There were a couple of cabinets full of neat rows of planes, scrapers, braces and bits, and other hand tools. In the middle of the classroom were four big work tables. There was a stack of chairs in the corner and a computer and a desk

and an overhead projector for me to do my teacherly duties with. “Seems pretty straight forward,” I said.

“Well, I’m in the metal shop next door. Just stick your head in if you can’t find something or something.”

“I will. Goodbye.”

I decided that I hated Touchdown Tony, the welding instructor. As he walked out of the classroom, I thought about how boring he was and how depressing. His mustache was definitely awful. He must have been a football player in college or something. He was big.

After a while my first class walked in, and I had them set up chairs in a semicircle so that I could lecture.

“Welcome to box making,” I said. “My name is Josh and I’m a new instructor here at the Art Institute, so be easy on me.” I grinned disarmingly. “But before we talk about how to make boxes, let’s take a moment to talk about shop safety.” I handed out a sheet I had prepared that listed stuff about shop safety.

I realized after awhile that the class was looking around anxiously. They were getting bored. But I had so much stuff to do. I had to tell them about the different tools and how to use them. I had to take roll and play a get-to-know-you game wherein each student matched the first letter of their name with a type of fruit, etc. I had to show them online pictures of different types of artistic-looking boxes with the overhead projector. They fidgeted more and more. I guess I must have been talking for an hour when an extremely attractive girl raised her hand and asked, “So are we going to get to use the tools today?”

“I’m sorry...what’s your name?”

“I’m Saffron.”

“Um. Yeah, Saffron. During the last hour we’re going to practice using the brace

and bit. We're going to drill holes."

"Oh. Ok then." I decided I needed to show the students how cool I was, particularly Saffron. She seemed older than the other students and had bright red hair and I was interested in what her breasts looked like. The projector was showing a Youtube video of a guy using a spokeshave to make the back of a rocking chair.

"This video sucks," I said, and stopped the spokeshave video. "Have you guys seen the new Madonna video?" I brought it up and played it. The class started laughing, because it was unexpected and cool. "This video kicks ass," I said. I suddenly wondered if I were the worst teacher in the world. What kind of a teacher shows a Madonna video in class?

"Put it on the new Avril video," some guy shouted. It was too late. I felt like I had to show the video. I brought up the Avril video and he and a girl started dancing. The class was getting out of control, and I knew it was my fault. The song ended and I said, "back to work," so that the students would know that I knew how to have fun, but also that I wasn't going to be a pushover.

At the end of class the students put away their braces and bits, and I made them sweep the floor into the dust collector vents, even though they really hadn't made too much sawdust. It was good to get them into the habit of cleaning. The students left except for Saffron.

"This class seems like it's going to be fun," she said, up at my desk. "Most of the other art classes we have to take are really strict."

I tried to think of something to say that would be cool. "It'll be fun if you like making boxes and shit," I said.

Saffron smiled at me. "I just wanted to tell you, um, I'm reading a book about different personality types, and I just wanted you to know that you are a type B secondary

personality, which is why you showed us music videos today.”

“Uh, that’s interesting. What does that mean?”

“It’s complicated, like, you’re compensating for childhood things. I just mentioned it because most of us art students are type A primary personality types, so you’ll have to develop compensating techniques in order to, um, avoid contra-power harassment.”

“Thanks, Saffron. I’ll watch out for that.”

Saffron left and I wondered if I were the worst teacher in the world for having sexual thoughts about one of my students.

I packed up my stuff and walked out to my truck. Touchdown Tony was out by his car, an old Cadillac. “How did your first day go, champ?” he asked.

“It went just fine,” I said.

“You wanna go get a drink with me? There’s a bar just three blocks away.”

“Alright,” I said, even though I didn’t like Touchdown Tony. I wanted to drink something dark, muddy, and brown, and also I wanted to be polite.

The bar was awful and smelled like asparagus urine: grassy. We talked about our pasts. (Touchdown Tony had been a football player in college. I had been a football player in eighth grade.) We talked about the art institute and what I could expect. Touchdown mentioned that he took some of the kids on a trip each year to England to visit a metal sculpture museum there.

“How many students usually go?” I asked.

“Oh, about seven each year. I try to get more girls than guys, though.”

“Why?”

“Aw, come on. You know why! You’ve seen some of the girls that go here!”

“Yeah,” I said. “I’ve got a real looker in my class.”

“Which one?” he asked.

“I think her name is Saffron.”

Touchdown Tony grinned and in deliberately drank the rest of his beer without pausing: gulp gulp gulp. “She’s gone on the trip.” Tony leaned over and whispered. “We had a trip to remember, if you get what I’m saying. We got to see the hill country, everything.”

“Aw man,” was all I could say, and I tried to smile but I couldn’t because my hands started shaking. I imagined what it would be like to drink myself to death. There were a series of images, blood pools around my head, people mouthing vowel shapes around me, caught in the middle of saying, “He deserved what he got.” Touchdown Tony wiped foam from his mustache.

15. The Upper Springs and the Lower Springs

The electric bathroom scale underneath my bed beeped on and off as I rolled around during the night. It was an awful bed in so many different ways. The upper springs, the ones in the mattress itself, were fatigued, bored with supporting me, tired of snapping back. The lower springs, the ones in what is called the “divan,” (I looked it up) had split through the pine slats. The edges of the boards and the cut ends of springs pressed down into the carpet like knives. Sometimes I had nightmares about snakes underneath my bed, and I would wake up and roll around so that if there were a snake under there, the broken slats and springs sticking out from the divan would impale it.

It was Charlie’s bed originally. She slept on it all throughout her undergraduate career, and when she went off to grad school, she left it for me. When Charlie would sleep over, we would take turns sleeping on the stage-right side, which gently sloped in towards the middle of the bed. The stage-left side was almost impossible to sleep on, the slope of the thing was so great. We would both end up in the middle at some point in the middle of the night, and we’d push off each other’s backs, striving for purchase. Stage-left had the option of wedging themselves against the wall. Stage-right sometimes got so pissed that they’d get

up and go sleep on the couch in the living room.

Charlie claimed (over the phone) that she didn't "love-love" me anymore, but she still "loved" me. That got my hopes up. With a little effort, I could appeal to Charlie again. I would start by fixing our bed, so that if Charlie came back into town to visit her family or whatever, and she stopped by my house to talk to me about how I was doing, and we talked late into the night, and I said "Why don't you just stay here tonight?" and her eyes welled up, we'd be able to sleep in comfort, possibly even holding one another. Or perhaps we'd just sit on the edge of the bed and talk about what went wrong, and she wouldn't notice at first that it was a new bed because I'd keep the old comforter, and then she'd notice how firm the springs were and ask me, "Josh, did you get a new bed?" and I'd say, "Actually, I invented this bed. Do you like it?" and she'd say, "I love-love it."

The first step was to salvage what I could from the old bed. After dragging it to the basement, I carefully cut the top of the mattress off with a utility knife. There was some foam, which I wasn't going to save because it looked stained in places. I ripped it out, exposing the springs. The coils in the middle looked pathetic, wilted, but the ones around the circumference of the mattress still had some pep to them. I was hoping I could just take the springs out one by one, only replacing the ones in the middle, but all the coils were connected in a large grid by more steel wires. I pulled what remained of the fabric off the springs and hauled them outside to the curb. The trash men would probably not pick it up, but somebody might drag it off. Somebody might need some mattress springs.

At the hardware store, I picked out a brand of expanding urethane foam that came in two separate metal cans. When I got home, I started sewing the mattress fabric back together with the sewing machine. This process took several days. I'm not very good with the sewing machine.

Finally the mattress was ready to be filled with the foam. I poured the first can into a large bucket, and then the other can. I briskly stirred the mess for about twenty seconds (it smelled terrible). Then, I tipped half the bucket into a funnel I had stuck into the hole I left in the mattress. Working fast, I lifted up the mattress so that the liquid would pool at one end, and sure enough, the foam started expanding right away. I started to get light-headed. The fumes from the foam started making me feel like I was choking. I had forgotten to properly ventilate, so I ran over to the basement window and started cranking the handle that opened it. Unfortunately, my elbow knocked over a large bottle of thick-viscosity superglue I had been using to seal up the seams on the mattress. The superglue splashed on the floor and my shoes in a puddle. I threw down a wad of paper towels to try to soak it up, but the towels started smoldering instantly from the glue, sending off thick tendrils of acrid smoke. I almost fainted a couple of times before I made it upstairs.

I ended up putting everything into the back of my truck and hauling it to the dump. I had to pay a fee. Then I bought a new bed and mattress from a store downtown that I swore I would never do business with, because their commercials are so offensive. In their commercials, they have an actor dressed up like a superhero and he beats up a guy holding a pillow who is supposed to be a terrorist. The terrorist has a red ball-gag in his mouth, and the superhero whips him. The commercial tries to make a connection between terrorism and high prices and bedding. I didn't understand it.

16. The Towns That Were Set Apart

I had a childhood friend who died because he got stuck in a culvert. The boy screamed so much that he passed out into a puddle of murk. I ran for help, but got sort of lost and did not know what type of help to get. I eventually found an adult sitting a drug store, eating a gloppy egg salad sandwich, who called the police, who arrived too late.

You would think the experience would have turned me against egg salad sandwiches, but the opposite developed. Later in life, I became a master of the egg salad sandwich. I devoted myself to egg salad sandwiches. I can't divulge the exact recipe I settled upon, since it's now owned by the Eggwright Sandwich Cooperation. (I gave up the rights to the recipe for five thousand dollars, which paid off some bills. You see, I won this sandwich competition, and the grand prize was that they'd manufacture the winning recipe, mine.) I can tell you the three main points. One - fresh mayo, made with raw (pasteurized if necessary) eggs. Two - the salad eggs are baked, not boiled. Three - shallots.

I still think about that childhood friend of mine whenever I make anything involving hard-boiled eggs. It's strange: I can't remember his name, but I do remember going over to his house (I lived in the country, he lived in town, so Grandpa had to drop me off) and work-

ing on a fort made out of Lincoln Logs. His name started with the letter 'J'. That's strange. I even remember the name we gave the fort: Fort Friends. We made a little sign.

I have a picture of me and my childhood friend working on Fort Friends. We're smiling and wearing plastic army helmets.

His parents were strict about education. He wasn't allowed to watch anything except for public television, and he didn't have toys like regular kids had, just educational toys like building blocks and flashcards and a rock tumbler. I guess his parents must have thought that Lincoln Logs stimulated his brain in an educational way. In any case, he had thousands of logs, ranging in size from around an inch to a foot-and-a-half long.

Fort Friends was more of a fort complex, rather than just one central building. The main tower had holes in it for jump training. Attached to the tower was a mess hall, and attached to the mess hall was a chapel with a vaulted ceiling. There was a quad in the center of the main building that the soldiers who were jump training would aim for. To the north of the main building we made an obstacle course with see-saws and a climbing wall. To the west we made a runway for jets.

To the south and east we made small towns, each with several small cabins, for the soldiers and their families to live in. The towns were set apart from the regular base by paths of semi-precious stones, made smooth by his rock tumbler and progressive grits of polishing medium. Today, as I examine the picture closely, I can make out some tiger's eyes and agates.

The kid's mom gave me the picture of Fort Friends when I graduated from high school. She said it'd be something for me to remember J_____ by. I'm not sure why she even went to the graduation ceremony, since her child had died years ago. I suppose that mothers of dead children do things like that. She didn't seem weepy at the graduation. She

looked like any other parent there. The only difference was that her child had died because I didn't know what sort of help to get when he got stuck in a culvert and I ran around until I ran into a drug store and found a man eating an egg salad sandwich who said to me, "Slow down, Josh, and speak clearly so I can understand you."

17. I Am a Numerous People

I've been to six different strip clubs in my life. A certain one of those strip clubs (The Sugar Shack) I frequented on three separate occasions. I am thirty years old today. That means that I've encountered ten-thousand-nine-hundred-and-fifty nighttimes, and of all those nights, only eight were spent at strip clubs. So when you consider my overall time spent in strip clubs as a percentage (.07% of total nights), it's almost like I've never even gone. Let's just say that I've never been to a strip club before.

But I have heard stories from numerous people concerning strip clubs. Strip club stories are usually very dull. Mr. X is very lonely. Ms. Y goes to a local college; also, has a kid.

People get interested when I tell them that I know something about strip clubs, because most people think that I'm not particularly lonely. "You're not the type," they say. "Perhaps," I say, "but I've heard about them from numerous people."

And for those occasions when I'm having a conversation with people who insist upon my being not particularly lonely, I've combined and modified all the interesting parts of every strip club story that numerous people have told me into one interesting, yet believ-

able, narrative flowchart, as follows:

1. Andrew and I leave town, traverse the countryside, arrive at a shack with no windows.
2. Andrew is already too drunk. He falls out of the car and breaks his nose. We go back into town, hospital, then back home.
3. Next night, back to shack with no windows, this time with bandage on Andrew's nose.
4. The beers are expensive. Everything costs extra.
5. You know, it's lonely in there.
6. It's my birthday or something. VIP costs extra, but there are extra benefits. We each pay \$50 extra for the extra benefits.
7. The benefits are that the girls come to our section and pester us.
8. They each tell a story. Many have babies. All mention college.
9. I select the girl with the saddest story--something involving internal bleeding.
10. Because the strip club is out in the country, and because we paid for extra benefits, when I am taken back to the VIP room for a lap dance, the stripper (Crystal) whispers to me, "You can touch them if you want to," which I do, and I do.
11. Isn't that amazing that it's allowed! It must be a zoning thing.
12. Anyways, I secretly decide that I want to go ahead and have an orgasm, so I pay Crystal for six dances in a row (\$20 per dance, \$120 dollars total) and in the darkness of the VIP lounge, as Crystal rubs against me and presses her breasts in my face, I have an orgasm in my pants.
13. I am only somewhat disgusted with myself.
14. We get thrown out. We'd only been there for thirty minutes. The end.

* * *

If I were an honest person, then I'd tell the people about how I went back the next week, and they let me in, and I achieved an orgasm with a lap dance by a girl named Candice, but the following week when I came in my pants, the bouncer said that he was sorry but I couldn't come back. I went to a new club each weekend and each time I attempted to have an orgasm in my pants. My eighth and final attempt ended with the bouncer breaking my nose because he had heard rumors from numerous people about some local guy who was making the rounds, going from club to club, and having orgasms in his pants, which happens to some guys but this particular guy was making a habit out of it. "That's what you get, you fucking pervert," he shouted at me as I ran to my car, trying to hold the blood in. I went to the hospital, then back home to bed.

18. You Shall Describe the Land

As a teenager, I mowed at a golf course out in the country. Nothing fancy. Actually, it gets a little fancier every year. Thomas, the guy who owns it, keeps adding plumbing. When he first made the course (consisting of only 9 holes then, now a full eighteen) he only had money to extend pipes out to the greens. Now, almost three decades later, he has enough pipes to keep the fairways watered. The whole place gets greener each year, in a general sort of way. The roughs in-between fairways aren't watered, of course. During dry summers the land looks like a yellow blanket with big green stains on it.

Also, as far as getting fancier, Thomas pours concrete for about twenty feet of cart path each year. When I worked out there, most of the cart paths were just gravel.

My first day of work, Thomas showed me where the pipes were, even before he showed me anything about cutting the grass, so I could keep an eye open for leaks. He never got around to drawing out where the pipes went, which could be a problem if he ever decides to sell the place, or when he dies, which all people do eventually. He had it memorized; the muddy patches which indicated a broken pipe beneath the surface served as the only reminders of the paths he chose.

The arc of his arm moved from Hole One fairway to Hole One green. I had out a scorecard. The scorecard had a tiny map of the course on the back. I marked the pipes with a short, stubby pencil.

“This pipe waters One fairway and green, then branches off north to Six fairway, then Six green.” We went from spot to spot on a squeaky electric cart.

“Where does this pipe branch, Thomas?”

He drove the cart forward to the spot. “Here, do you see? If it’s going to break in the winter, it will be here, most likely. This spot is easy to remember. See that tree?”

“Yeah, I see it.” It was a hedge tree.

Thomas drove me all over the course, plotting lines, arcing with his arm, pointing down at the ground, this spot here.

“This is the boulder I stuck in the ground to mark One’s tee box,” he said. “I made River Creek with my own hands.” Thomas had a strangely deliberate way of speaking. I didn’t like it at first, but I catch myself talking like him sometimes, like when I tell someone to do something.

“This is the sand I poured in with a dump truck,” he said as we drove by a sand trap. “I’ve raked it over and over, into a grid with straight lines.”

“This grass I have mowed a thousand times over and again. The mower cuts straight lines. You see how the lines circle around trees. Over here, the lines melt around hazards but always form up again into the grid.”

The roughs were exactly three inches tall. The collars around the greens were a half inch. The greens were a quarter inch. I was amazed by the greens. That the grass, after years of breeding and pesticide and herbicide and fertilizer and aeration and pre-emergent and weighted rollers and mowing in two directions every day and thousands upon thousands

of cleated foot prints, is alive. A golf green is beautiful, and a living, breathing example of man's triumph over nature. I'm not sure if golf greens are good or bad, I'm just describing them.

As we were driving around on the electric cart, Thomas saw some kids around one of the tee boxes. He started frowning and floored the cart, which remained almost silent (it was electric) but lurched at an alarming pace, cutting across fairways. I couldn't tell what they were doing until we got closer. They were smacking what I first thought were enormous green golf balls with their irons, going for distance. When I got closer, I saw that they were hitting hedge apples, also known as Osage oranges: the awful, day-glo-green fruit of the Hedge tree.

Hedge apples look like little green brains. Usually, they're covered with ants. When punctured or bruised, they give off this nasty white milk. Nothing alive today is able to eat them. They're sticky, resinous. Scientists think that some sort of Midwestern Dinosaur maybe used to eat them. But anyways, those three kids were busting them up with their golf clubs, sending brain fragments all over the fairway.

When we were about thirty feet away, one of the kids, who must not have seen us approaching, smacked one of the hedge apples, and it blew apart. One of the brain fragments hit me on the forehead, giving me a tiny cut. Thomas didn't say anything, didn't shout or yell, "Cut that shit out, you kids! What do you think you're doing!" Instead, he drove his electric cart into the kid, going maybe five miles per hour? In any case, it knocked the kid over, knocked the club out of his hands. I remember his hat said RAIDERS on it.

"Are you kids on the golf team?" he asked, still in the cart. Andrew didn't shout, but spoke in that weird, deliberate way.

The kid on the ground grabbed one of his legs in agony and said what you'd expect,

something like, “Why the fuck did you just hit me with your golf cart!” The other two kids said, “Yeah, we’re on the golf team.”

“None of you are ever to come onto my land again. You’ll have to quit the team. Have your instructor call me if he’s got any questions. Now leave. Leave your cart.” He made them walk, even the kid who was hurt.

Then Thomas drove me to the pump house, to show me that works. Lots of valves and switches and two pumps. And that was all; he was through showing me where the pipes go. They go to the pump house, which goes to the lake, which goes up into the air, which goes down into the sea, which goes out into the ocean. That was my first day at work, at my first job ever.

“Your cut is bleeding a little bit,” Thomas said, and handed me a surprisingly clean tissue out of his pocket. The tissue was still folded nicely. I put it to my forehead, and sure enough, I was still bleeding a tiny bit. Three red drops on the tissue: drip, drip, drip.

19. An Inheritance

It was a bottle of Chartreuse V.E.P. Charlie's mom gave it to Charlie to give to me, right before Charlie's mom died. Charlie withheld information. A type of cancer that they found too late, didn't know about. It was a two week deal, and then she died. There was no will, just an informal inheritance talk. I had to imagine the scene. What did the mother say? Perhaps, "Make sure that Josh gets that bottle of Chartreuse that he likes. He always liked drinking it when you brought him over."

V.E.P stands for "Vieillessement Exceptionnellement Prolongé." That means, "Aged Exceptionally Long." When I think about that in regards to Charlie's mom and her death, much too young, the phrase becomes either poignant or ironic.

I also got a soda siphon. It came with a box of CO2 chargers. It was a two-part gift. Charlie bought it for me as a belated birthday present, on the occasion of her mother's death. No, that's not right. That makes it sound too pleasant. She brought the siphon over, after her mom died, and gave it to me, along with the bottle of Chartreuse, and started crying on my couch until I hugged her. Over the course of the night, I comforted her and we decided to try again with our relationship, and I promised I would try harder at things, and we drank the

Chartreuse V.E.P and talked about her mom and cried, and Charlie slept over and we woke up the next morning and felt ok, not like we had made a mistake.

But mostly that night, we talked about the things in our immediate surroundings.

“Did you know, Charlie, that monks make Chartreuse?” I said.

“Really?”

“Yeah. They live in the mountains and they have a vow of silence.”

“I didn’t think monks were allowed to drink,” she said.

“They drink all the time,” I said. I was pretty sure about that.

There were things that Charlie and I discovered together that night: we learned about how to properly fill a soda siphon. Our first attempt was a foul up. We put the fill-tube in, filled the siphon, added the siphon-tube, screwed on the nozzle, inserted the CO2 cartridge, and squeezed out some water. The bubbles were awful. They wilted and dispersed. Then, water started jetting out around the nozzle. I squeezed it all out and we tried again together, as a team.

We read the instructions more carefully. We added extremely cold water from the refrigerator, because the booklet said, “the colder the water, the better your carbonation will be.” We made sure the nozzle was screwed on super tight and that the seals were lined up. Also, I shook the siphon for ten seconds after I inserted CO2 cartridge, which I guess is supposed to incorporate the gas into the water better. Finally, the other thing we did differently was to remove the cartridge after it had charged the bottle, so that we wouldn’t get a metallic aftertaste. Our second attempt produced spectacular bubbles. In fact, these bubbles were so good that we started laughing. We had made some great bubbles together. I sprayed some carbonated water onto our glasses of Chartreuse.

“Why do you know so much about Chartreuse?” Charlie asked. We were sitting on

my couch, drinking.

“Because I always loved drinking this stuff at your mom’s house, and I looked it up. Did you know that they use several hundred different alpine herbs to make Chartreuse? Also, did you know that the color ‘chartreuse’ is named after the liquor?”

“No, I didn’t know those things,” Charlie said, and dried up her tears. I like to think that maybe, by talking about the monks, I had distracted Charlie for a moment. I’ll admit, perhaps she just got tired of crying about her mom dying from cancer. At some point, everybody gets tired of crying about the things that originally made them cry.

20. Cities of Refuge

Stacy and Andrew and some girl Andrew was dating and about a billion other people and I were at a lake. Andrew had a log cabin that he rented in the summertime. Or maybe it was a timeshare.

“I can tell the different types of trees just by looking at them,” Stacy told me, but I didn’t care. “That one is birch and that one is pine. And those are conifer trees and that’s the mighty oak.”

Andrew and the girl he was dating left quite early that morning, which I thought was interesting, and I wanted to tell Stacy all about it, but I didn’t because I lost interest after awhile.

* * *

I made breakfast with four eggs and a piece of fatty ham. I cooked the ham first and put it on a plate, and then I used the ham grease to cook the eggs.

Stacy said, “Did you see Andrew and that girl leave this morning?”

“Yeah, they left really early,” I told her.

“What were they up to?” Stacy asked.

“Friends of theirs on the other side of the lake were going to have a fishing contest,”
I lied.

When the eggs were done I put them on the same plate as the ham. Then I took out my survival knife and cut right down the middle of the food. Stacy held out her unfolded Army mess kit and I pushed half of the food into it with my middle finger. I made myself get a bucket of water from the lake and extinguish the fire before I ate, because I like to have all of the cooking things done before I eat.

* * *

“I betcha you don’t know what kind of bird that is on top of the cabin,” Stacy said.

I looked at the top of the cabin and there was a freaking cardinal there.

“That’s a cardinal,” I said.

“You’re right! But do you know if it’s a boy or a girl? Can you tell just by looking at it?”

“Yeah, Stacy. It’s red so it’s a boy cardinal.”

“Right again, know-it-all!”

* * *

We took the dishes inside and washed them in the sink and put them away and went back outside and looked at the lake while we sat on some benches. There were people everywhere, on skis with boats and fishing from different docks. Three hot girls were sitting on the floating rope that defined the swimming beach.

“Stop looking at those girls. Oh I’m just kidding, you can look at them.”

“I wasn’t looking at them, I was looking at the cabins way on the other side of the lake.”

People kept going by our cabin on jet skis and in motor boats. The cabins were sup-

posed to be places to get away, but they weren't. The world was practically shrieking around us.

* * *

"Do you know which cabin Andrew and that girl went to this morning?"

I got ready to lie. "They went home," I said, "but they told me that we could stay at the cabin as long as we liked."

"I don't get it. Why did you tell me they were at a fishing contest? Why did you lie about the fishing contest?"

I didn't say anything because I was losing interest in the conversation.

"Why did they leave early?" she said.

"I've completely lost interest in this conversation," I said, which was really, really true.

* * *

"I know something is going on with you and that girl. I'm going to call Andrew and ask them why they left early and if it has anything to do with you," Stacy said.

"I'm going to make a boat out of a lawn chair and those life jackets," I said.

Stacy watched me as I tied our two life jackets to the legs of the lawn chair. I put it in the lake and sat on the chair, which wobbled but floated ok.

"This is going to work," I yelled at Stacy on the bench.

"I'm going to talk to that girl when we get home," Stacy screamed back, loud enough so that everybody could hear her. She screamed other stuff too. Two guys going by our cabin on jet skis turned off their motors and looked at me, sitting in my floating chair, and asked me pointedly if everything was ok. Another guy floated by in a boat, looking at me. A girl in a bikini swam by, staring at me, and I looked back at her, gawked at her private places, just to even the score.

21. All the Good Promises

I started feeling a little nervous when Charlie said goodbye to me at the airport. I'm not a very experienced flier. In fact, I'd never flown by myself before that trip. In fact, I felt a little nauseous. In spite of those facts, I ordered and ate a hot dog like an expert: "One jumbo Char Dog," I told the man at the hot dog booth. "Walk it through the garden." In retrospect, I should not have eaten a hot dog right then.

It was snowing in a furious manner, but Charlie had helped me check on my flight and it was only supposed to be twenty minutes delayed. There was a crowd of people watching a football game in an airport bar, and they cheered wildly when I walked by. I was gently carried down moving walkways (which was fun) until I got to the terminal I was supposed to go to. There were only ten-or-so people waiting for the plane.

I saw people talking to a lady behind a counter, and she printed off tickets for them and they ran away, sprinting. It was alarming. I stood in the line and asked the lady what was going on, why those people were sprinting away.

"We don't know if this plane is going to make it, due to the weather," she said.
"We're transferring flights to another airplane that is already here. Would you like to trans-

fer?”

I wanted to call Charlie to figure out what I was supposed to do, but my cell phone was dead because I had forgotten to bring my charger along on the trip. I decided to transfer to the other plane. I felt frightened at this point, because things were not simple, like Charlie had promised me they would be.

Remember? She said, “Don’t worry, Josh. You don’t have to check any baggage, and you’ve already checked in online. All you need to do is go through security to your gate! It’s simple! You can do this, I promise!” She had promised that things would be simple, and they were complicated.

The flight I transferred onto was packed. We all packed ourselves onto the plane, along with the things we had packed. I choose a seat next to two attractive girls, not because I was going to flirt with them, but because why not sit by attractive girls?

We all waited patiently for things to happen. I personally waited by reading a terrible magazine that the airplane company provided. There was a terrible article about places around the country where one could eat different kinds of pizza. There was a place that sold pizza in a cone. If one were to go to a particular city, he or she could eat a pizza in a traditional Neapolitan style. There’s a place in New York, I think, that sells grilled pizza and claims that they invented grilled pizza, but doesn’t that seem dubious? If one were to want clams and other seafood on their pizza, one could get a pizza like that, too. One could just go to a particular city on a particular airplane, on any old day except for Sunday because this place is closed on Sundays. There was a picture of clams on a pizza with white sauce and it made me want to throw up.

The pilot got on the intercom and said something about how we were going to have to wait for the de-icing trucks to de-ice two other planes before us and that he was sorry

about the wait but to please stay seated with our seat belts on and with our cell phones off and to just sit back and relax and enjoy. I thought it was weird that he said, “enjoy.” I started to do what I can only describe as quietly panicking.

After awhile, I turned to the attractive girl next to me and I said, “I’m really sorry, but I’m worried that I might throw up.” I said this fast so that I wouldn’t throw up as I was saying it.

She made an unattractive face. “What should we do?” she said.

“I don’t think there’s anything to do. I’ll just turn away,” I said. I grabbed a barf bag from the pocket in front of me. I was waiting to grab the barf bag because I was afraid it would trigger me.

Then the captain got on the intercom again and said that it was our turn to get de-iced. After about ten minutes, two trucks pulled up with fellows with hoses on extendable ladders, and the gentlemen started spraying warm water(?) on the plane. I could hear the jets of water on the roof, which made me feel like I was in a coffin with dirt being put on it, but I shut my eyes and opened them and shut them and opened them, and that seemed to help. Then, the gentlemen started spraying green slime onto the wings of the plane. But they didn’t really spray it. It kinda glooped out. We all waited. We’d been in the plane for over an hour at this point.

The captain clicked on the intercom yet again and said something about how one of the de-icing trucks had broken down out there, and that he was sorry but that they were going to try to get it fixed and he promised that we would take off just as soon as we could. I wanted to die. I wanted to throw up, but I wouldn’t let myself. My head felt like I had been drinking.

When we finally got to take off, there was turbulence, which surprisingly enough

didn't bother me much. I trust airplanes and the physics of flight. When we got above the clouds, I felt a little better, like I was going to make it. I was not going to throw up after all.

Of course, I eventually did throw up, into my barf bag. It happened when we were landing. There was fog everywhere. I kept trying to look out the window, trying to see the ground. I knew we were landing because I heard the landing gear go out, and because of the motions of the plane, and because the wings had their extra landing flaps out. But I could only see fog out the window. Everybody knows that pilots have instruments that allow them to land an airplane even if they can't see anything out the window. I knew that. But it didn't matter because I still started panicking.

At the very end, the lights of the runway made the fog glow, but I couldn't see the individual lights. It looked like foggy daylight outside. It looked like we were landing in heaven, and that's when I went ahead and threw up.

22. To Cleave

It had something to do with separation. Spinning wildly, the diamond saw, then cut into two, twain. It was an educational program. We wondered about its worth.

“How much do you suppose?” she said.

“That one has to be expensive,” I replied. On the TV screen, the diamonds plowed into one another.

“When should we get married?” she said. Was she joking? We both wondered.

* * *

There’s a lot you need to know. Are you familiar with the pavilion angle? What about the girdle thickness? What about the star length? Culet? Table size?

Alone at the diamond store, I learned new names. Charlie did not go with me, in order to create a surprise.

“Stick to a budget!” she had pleaded, hoping I wouldn’t.

“Practicalities!” I cried, and then swooped out the door.

* * *

I got a ring, got giddy. Maybe we should have a baby boy, too! I’ve already got his name

picked out: Scintillation. He can go by either “Scint” or “Tilly.” Scintillation refers to the little flashes of light that one observes within a diamond when the diamond moves, or when observer moves, or when the light source moves.

23. You Marry Their Women and They Yours

I finally introduced Stacy to Charlie at the wedding of a guy that we all knew, a mutual acquaintance. It was a country-themed wedding. There was a bluegrass band and a barn full of hay that the kids were climbing on, and a pot luck table filled with little smokies and meat and green bean casserole. It was all outdoors, on a farm. Charlie flew back, as per my request. I didn't want to go to the wedding by myself, because I knew Stacy would be there. I wanted Stacy to meet Charlie so that Stacy would be jealous. Stacy would see that Charlie and I were together, and she would feel bad about breaking up with me all those years ago.

Growing up, I had to learn two careful ways of walking; one, how to step while ever-so-slightly kicking forward, to disperse larger clods of dirt; and two, how to step high, watching carefully, to walk on stacks of hay bales, so that I wouldn't sink in between the bales. I knew how to walk in at least two different ways befitting a man who lived where I did, which was a small city in the midst of the countryside. Pretty much in the country.

So then, I used the particular way of walking to climb to to the top of the hay bales. There were kids all around me, playing. I suppose it was kind of dangerous, but no one seemed to mind. I mean, the bales went up about twenty feet. Some of the bales made a

little staircase, so that the kids could get to the top. I went to the top and sat down, just to be alone for awhile.

I was eating a stick of flavor ice. The ice was in a plastic tube, and I was enjoying it. It wasn't the calories that satisfied me, but the sweetness. My tongue was stained cherry red. I rolled up the plastic tube after I was done, and put it into a pocket of my vest. I would throw it away later.

I looked down upon the party. Kids were ascending and descending the hay staircase. Adults sat around card tables, drinking beer out of plastic cups. There were two kegs containing remarkably nice beer, nestled in large plastic trash cans which were full of ice. The bluegrass band was in a corner, playing a song that no one seemed to want to dance to.

Then I saw that Stacy was ascending the hay staircase. Stacy did not grow up on a farm, and didn't know quite the right way to walk on hay bales. About half way up, one of her legs hit a seam between bales and shot downward. She said, "Shit!" and the kids heard her. She smiled, apologized to the kids, pulled her leg out, and continued climbing. She sat down by me. She, too, had finished eating flavor ice--her tongue was green.

"Are you trying to avoid me?" she said.

"I just like the view up here," I said stupidly.

"I met your girlfriend, Charlie," she said.

"That's great. She's the best girlfriend I've ever had."

Stacy didn't even blink. "Yeah, she's awesome. We've been talking about the election, and we both share the same views about politics."

I don't share the same views about politics as anyone else I've ever met. I did not feel very satisfied. I mean, as I was talking to Stacy, I realized that I didn't want to make her jealous after all. Then Stacy looked at my hat. Actually, I did want Stacy to feel jealous

about my hat.

Here's the story about the hat I was wearing. I got it because one day in town, I was going to a coffee shop and I saw Stacy on the sidewalk with her new boyfriend, and she was wearing a cowboy hat. You have to understand, we lived in a city in the midst of the country. Nobody wore cowboy hats in town. It was a college town!

Then Stacy and her boyfriend walked up to me and we said hi, how are you, I am fine, etc. People kept walking by on the sidewalk and looking at her hat, and one person even said, "Great hat!" And I felt jealous and awful because I felt jealous and I shouldn't be feeling jealous because we broke up so long ago. Years and years ago.

I decided I wanted to get a better hat than Stacy's hat. I grew up in the country, after all, so I could wear a cowboy hat around town if I wanted to. Who had the better claim? The answer is I.

My grandpa always wore a white cowboy hat, so I decided to get one just like his. (He had passed away years ago, but I didn't know what had happened to his hat.) I remembered it was a Stetson, and that it was the same hat that Lyndon B. Johnson wore. (He would say things like, "Don't touch Grandpa's hat! That's the same hat that Lyndon B. Johnson wore!") A little research turned up that the model was called the "Open Road." I also learned that Eisenhower and Truman wore Stetson Open Road hats. I bought a nice one online for one-hundred-and-seventy dollars. Stacy's hat was a knock off, a fake. Some cheapo used-clothing-store purchase. Some ironic statement. I had the real thing, something nice.

But all she said was, "That's a cool hat," and it didn't do anything for me. She said it nicely, and there was even a hint of jealousy in her voice. She did actually like my hat.

We agreed that it was a nice wedding. We couldn't complain about anything.

The only other interesting thing that happened was that while Stacy and Charlie and I were sitting around a table drinking the beer, the bride and the groom had a weird little fight. The bride had been drinking a bit too much, and had said something sassy to the groom, and the groom said something mean in reply. They made two groups, bridesmaids standing around the crying bride, patting her hair, and groomsmen standing around the groom, patting his shoulders. Everyone spoke earnestly to them for awhile. The bride and the groom then approached and hugged and smiled, and we all clapped nervously, because we knew that this did not bode well for them.

24. The Fruit of Vineyards and Oliveyards Which You Did Not Plant

So then. Charlie made a list of things to do once I moved to the city:

Swimming in the Lake

Frank Lloyd Wright tours, try to sneak in?

Discover place to eat in Greektown

Smash plates, Orzo shots

Also, visit markets in Greektown

\$1 tacos in Pilsen

See good improv (we'll have to be super-selective. All the ones I've seen so far were terrible)

Walk around Andersonville and eat Swedish pancakes

Spend an afternoon in Book Cellar (a cool bookstore that is also a wine cellar)

German beer hall in Lincoln Square

Hang out in Wrigleyville during a Cubs game

Try to watch a Cubs game from those bleachers on top of nearby buildings that you like

Remember? You saw them from the train

See the Chicago symphony

Visit the Art Institute of Chicago

Visit the Field Museum

Visit the Aquarium

Attend "Reading Under the Influence"

Visit Myopic books. Drop names of famous authors until asked to leave

Shop at a Polish market

Charlie Trotter's (again)

Go to a bar at the top of the Sears Tower, if you want, we don't have to go back

Go to the Green Farmers Market in Lincoln Park

Eat Indian food on Devon Street

Do live-band karaoke

Check out fountains in Grant Park, walk around until you get bored and antsy

Eat Garret's popcorn, feed some to birds

Spice House in Evanston

Soul food in South Side

Explore Bookstore Row in Hyde Park

I love you!

I got the list in the mail. She had used nice paper and wrote it out calligraphy-style, which I didn't know she could do. The best part was that she sealed the envelope with a wax seal. How old fashioned! The imprint was a bunch of grapes. The wax was purple-red, the color of grapes.

I was preparing to move to the big city, to move in with Charlie. The only thing that

kept me from going was that I had to finish out the semester at the Art Institute, teaching the kids how to make boxes. The fanciness of Charlie's letter inspired me to do something fancy for her. I decided to make a presentation box for Charlie's letter, so that when I finally moved up there, I would show her the box I had made to house her letter, and she would realize and understand how grateful I was for the list, for her, etcetera.

I made the box out of Brazilian Rosewood, which is expensive because it's from an endangered tree, and because it's beautiful and dense. In fact, it's illegal to trade for it or import it, so the only domestic supplies are dwindling. Every once in awhile, somebody finds a stash. Like once, someone discovered that the pews in an abandoned church were made of Brazilian Rosewood. Also, someone discovered coffins in the basement of an old funeral home which were made of the stuff. I like working with it because it sands and cuts well, and it's sawdust smells sweet.

The box was of a simple construction, two brass hinges, felt-lined. To make it special, I inlaid some tortoise shell that I had salvaged from an old hand mirror into the top. I cut and filed the shell into the universal icon representing home. A square with a triangle on top, and a little rectangular chimney jutting out. I wanted the box to represent the home Charlie and I would make together, cohabitate.

I don't know. It should have been a special moment when I slid the list into the box. I was expecting an internal mechanism to click, something that I hadn't designed but had found its way into the box or inside me or whatever. Instead, I felt strangely unfulfilled and lonely. I knew that on some level, I was happy that Charlie and I were going to get married and live together, and I was going to stop being so stupid and make it work. I had a job lined up, working on cars. I was looking forward to learning about how to work on cars.

Maybe I was disappointed that Charlie had taken me back. It was like a favor to

me. She wrote out that whole list because she knew I couldn't do it, that I couldn't make it there by myself. That I would have nothing to do and that I'd be bored and lonely. Does this make any sense?

* * *

One day, as I was demonstrating to my box students how to use hand scrapers, I felt a wave of unawareness move over me. "Does this make any sense?" I asked my students.

"Yeah," they said. "We see what you're doing."

I was pulling the metal across the grain, varying the angle of attack, not trying to scrape too much at once.

I kept at it, hoping that my actions would be good enough. I couldn't seem to explain what I was doing with the scraper, so I just shut up and didn't talk. "Are you alright?" a male student asked me after five full minutes of silence. I was feeling anxious and not alright.

"What do you mean?"

"You just stopped talking."

"I'm busy demonstrating. You should be paying attention."

"I am paying attention!" the boy protested.

"I don't want to talk any more," I said. "Please just watch me."

I pulled and pulled on the scraper. Shivers of wood collected around the board, and I blew them away. The kids rustled and the scraper made scratching noises. I did this for too long, almost fifteen full minutes. I knew the kids had got the point. They were ready to try it for themselves, but I wouldn't let them for some reason. I just wanted them to keep watching me, and that's what they did. They made a little circle around me and my bench, a frustrated circle, bored to the point of rebellion, waiting for me to finish what I was doing.



The Death of Joshua.