

Julian

I'm standing above the bathtub. The bathtub's full, the water clear, cold. But I'm not getting in.

Above the water, I hold a thick, 180 page notebook with a worn, blue cover. The notebook is almost completely full of words. On some of the pages the writing is so dense that there are multiple lines within lines, regardless of where the college rules are. On some pages there are only a few words, but they are gigantic, and say things like *this sucks*, and *what am I doing? I have no idea what I'm doing anymore*. The words are almost all uniformly in caps; some written in a swirly scrawl, others with the appearance of being traced over and over as if to emphasize seriousness, anguish, conviction.

This is my journal of the previous year.

I fan the pages above the water like an accordion, shaking it to more effectively loosen each page from the others. That way, all pages will be exposed, and at their most vulnerable when I drop the notebook in the water.

"I've brought you a gift," says Julian.

He steps into the apartment and two young women follow in after him. They are – not bad-looking, I guess. Odd? Homely? Perhaps European? Appalachian? Hard to tell. Clearly from out of town. Both are blonde, early twenties, sort of cute-ish, in need of orthodontia.

Julian, in round glasses, rainbow scarf, shoulder-length woolen cap, purple thermal shirt, ripped jeans, and a ratty overcoat, looks like a cross between an elf, John Lennon, and Tom

Baker-era *Dr. Who*. The girls are dressed similarly – in colorful, woolen caps with ear-side tassels to their waists, ratty coats, ripped jeans. Both look lost – like they hitchhiked here, looking for adventure. What they found was Julian.

“Lisette, Becca – this is Seth,” says Julian.

“Hullo,” they say.

“Uh. Hi,” I say.

And they walk in and look around.

Julian, himself, only arrived from Boston earlier this morning. We’ve known each other since we were tots growing up in Milwaukee. We were those kids whose parents were friends, so they stuck you together and hoped for the best. But with Julian it was different. He had only a few close friends – and would go through periods where he would call me every day, a playmate to get in trouble with.

When he was about ten, two significant things happened to him: his father died, forcing his mother to move the family to an apartment across town; and he discovered he had an innate talent for drawing exquisitely detailed biblical-cum-pagan pen-and-ink grotesqueries which became his lifelong passion. Over summers, he was generous with his art even giving me a rapidograph, which I still have dried-up in a box to this day. At 18, he went to art school in Boston, apprenticed for C-level artists, and began transforming his own ideas into oils, metal, sculpture.

“I don’t need a gift,” I say.

“Course you do. C’mon, get your stuff. Let’s go.”

“Where are we going?”

“I dunno. Guess we’ll find out when we get there. By the way – you have any pot?”

“No.”

The girls giggle, confused.

“I promised weed!” He turns to them. “That’s why they’re here. So, we must find some!”

Lisette raises a hand.

“I have to pee,” she says in broken English.

I point to the tiny bathroom, and both girls go in. Julian looks at me, his eyes wild.

“Who are they?” I ask.

“Dunno. Just found ‘em.”

“Where - ?”

“In a line buying hot dogs, up at Third – “

“You found them in a line getting hot dogs?”

“They’re not from around here I don’t think.”

“Where are they from?”

He shrugs.

“Sweden or maybe Kentucky. I really have no idea. Who cares?! They’re extremely friendly.”

“Uhm.”

“Which one do you want?”

“Neither.”

“Well, you have to pick. That’s my Christmas gift. I found them. So, you get to pick.”

"I don't want a Christmas gift."

"If you don't pick – I pick – and I already have an opinion!"

"And - what do you want to do with them?"

"What do I - ?" He grins. "I'm open to suggestion."

"I'm going to stay here," I say. "I'm in the middle of something."

"What? This? Are you at a critical juncture?" he goads.

I sit among dozens of papers with little color-coded marks all over them. Sheets and sheets of a terrible screenplay that's going nowhere, but that I feel extremely committed to. Or maybe I'm hiding behind it, I wonder.

The girls come out of the bathroom, beers in hand, grinning.

"Who's ready for exploring?" yells Julian.

"Whoo Hoo!" they say, waving their beers, unsure what's going on.

"Friendly!" Julian announces. "I like it!"

Julian darts out into the hallway. The girls follow after him, and now, I figure, might be a good time to try Terri again. But I get her message for the fourth time today and hang up.

Out in the hallway, I hear Julian knocking on my neighbor's doors, several at a time. I look into the hallway as he's asking an elderly, half-asleep Greek woman: *Have any pot? No?! Anyone else inside there?* She slams the door on him, but he's already knocking on other doors. *Got any pot? Any pot for me?*

The girls giggle, loiter. I grab him.

"These are my neighbors!"

"Well, somebody's gotta have some. Shall we try the crack house, then - ?"

"No!"

For the decades I've known Julian, I've envied his wildness, charisma, artistry, freedom, good looks, and knack for getting away with everything. In fact, I consider myself, essentially, dull around him. As far as I know Julian has only ever envied one thing of mine: my apartment.

My apartment is an awful, awful apartment. With crumbling walls, bugs, faulty heating, occasional rats, and no upkeep whatsoever by the landlord, it is easily the worst place I've ever lived in my life. It is tiny, meager. A Hobbit would feel cramped in this apartment. And for this luxury palace I pay almost two thousand a month which – as a paycheck-to-paycheck temp worker – I can never quite afford.

But. This shameful unsafe apartment – which by the way is located upstairs from a ramshackle tattoo parlor fronting for an actual crack house with actual junkies lying on the stoop every day – just happens to be located at 8th Street and 2nd Avenue, an area in Greenwich Village commonly known as Saint Mark's Place.

So, it's a shithole, but – to folks like Julian – a shithole in the Center of the Universe.

Washington Square Park.

The park is crowded with huge, lit up Christmas wreathes, people colorfully dressed, and competing musicians playing dissonant carols on violins, guitars. There's a chaotic festiveness to the atmosphere which we drink up. It's not the Christmas of my youth. But then it hasn't been that for a while now.

Julian confers with several drug dealers, sniffing wares, demanding samples, negotiating prices. He thinks he's in a terrific movie about himself, but his elfin charm is lost on the locals. He's too bright and shiny.

He returns to me, energetically.

"Got forty?"

I give him money and a minute later we're all huddled on a bench lighting up. The girls pass joints and are excited again. And a thick, but not windy, snow begins to fall.

"I love Christmas in New York!" shouts Julian, jumping up, opening his mouth and catching the snow. The girls joyfully mimic him, and he reaches out to Lisette – the taller, ganglier one – and kisses her. She pulls back, surprised, but then gives in and lets him. Becca looks curiously at me. But all I can muster is an embarrassed, frosty breath.

"Where are you from?" I ask, gently.

She stares at me, confused.

"English?" I say. "Sprechen sie – English?"

"Uh - uh - no - " she says and holds up fingers indicating "just a little."

"Europe?" I ask. "Germany? Sweden?"

She shakes her head.

"Utrecht," she says.

Utrecht? My geography for the East Coast alone sucks. I have no idea where Utrecht is.

"Netherlands," she says.

"Oh. Oh," I say. "Norway? Norwegian Wood?"

She looks at me, confused, tries to think of something else, comes up short.

"Netherlands," she repeats. She points at me. "New York?"

"I - well, now - I guess. Not always," I say. "Milwaukee."

"Milwaukee?" she repeats, smiling. And I suppose, to her, I just said "Utrecht."

"Old Milwaukee!" says Lisette waving her beer bottle.

"Ah - Old Milwaukee!" repeats Becca.

"Old Milwaukee," I say, nodding stupidly.

And Julian winks at me.

"Hey - hey!" says Julian, "want to see something?"

We streak down Sixth Avenue, past rows of netted, bundled Christmas trees, Salvation Army Santas, holiday wanderers. We wind our way to Soho, Prince Street, restaurants, shops, galleries. Julian whirls along, pointing out sights and sounds. Finally, he stops at a small, closed gallery with several tiny pictures in the window. The girls look at the window – it's nice, but seems no better or worse than any other shop. But Julian, grinning his Cheshire grin, points down, and there it is in the lower, right hand corner of the window: a framed, paper-and-ink drawing of a snake-enwrapped fertility goddess. The picture is tiny, but the detail – the line work – is remarkable. The curves, the texture, the clarity. It's the smallest picture in the window yet in fierce intensity all the other pictures pale. The tag on the picture says:

Rapture. \$5,000. Julian Gold.

"That's - that's incredible, Julian," I say. "It's beautiful."

"It's – good?" Lisette asks.

"It's him," I say, gesturing to Julian.

They look at him, confused.

"Him. *He's* Julian." I point to Julian, and I mime drawing - and then the drawing going in the window. And Julian grins idiotically, as the clouds lift from their eyes,

"You - make?" says Becca.

"And I have more inside." He says, pointing. "More inside!"

They look back and forth from the window to him. Becca presses her face to the glass, peering into the darkness to find more pictures. Finally, they comprehend their accomplishment: they've found an American Rock Star.

"We – come again – tomorrow!" says Julian. "See more!"

They nod, eagerly.

"Well, we will, anyway," he whispers to me.

Half an hour later, back at the apartment. An exhausted Becca sits sidled up to me on the couch, cradling a new beer, exploring a stack of Julian's drawings. I check my cell to see if Terri's called yet. Sounds of Julian and Lisette having loud sex emanate from my bedroom. Occasionally, Becca glances at me, sadly, left out. *What's wrong with you?* her eyes seem to say. *Why are we out here? Where's your art?*

And I want to leave, but don't. I can't. I have absolutely nothing worthwhile going on in my life. Terri won't return my calls. I can barely finish a script, let alone sell one. I have no money, can barely pay rent. And when I do work, I'm temping at some pathetic law office or bank where I'm just filling space while someone else is on maternity leave.

Why can't I accept this gift? Why can't I accept this homely, but probably-not-so-bad Utrechian girl not quite wrapped up in a bow on my couch waiting for me to do something? Why can't I simply share the holiday with her? Why can't I let go?

And the bedroom door opens a crack. And Julian pokes his head out and looks at me.

"No?" he says.

"No," I say.

"You sure?"

The sound of Lisette's voice comes from the room.

"Becca!"

And without a backwards glance, Becca jumps up, disappears into the bedroom, and closes the door.

As I mentioned – this notebook that I now hover above the water – this journal of my previous year – there's a lot of stuff in it. Meeting Terri for the first time – falling in love – perpetual fighting, breaking up, getting back together, over and over. I describe other women too, and why I'm so useless around them. I review multiple lousy jobs – getting them, losing them – and why everything seems so meaningless and mundane all the time.

And there are other things: uninterpreted dreams; news of scripts sent out and rejected; restaurants eaten at; daily infractions and personal slights; money troubles; books read; movies seen; rarely acted upon ways to actually improve my condition; and some super rare moments of true joy and happiness.

And there are non-diary-type thing: bits; prompts; lists; two ideas that actually flower into something bigger (one being my current screenplay); and many many fragments, most unlikely to have resonance or bear fruit for years to come.

When I drop it in, the pages – lovingly fanned as they are – will quickly soak up the bathwater like a thick, three-sectioned spiral-bound sponge. Words, thoughts, dialogue will melt into mush, junk, and a mist of blue ink will seep slowly, steadily into the water like that first swirl of unstirred Kool Aid. And I'll push it deeper, deeper, watching it soak, watching ideas I may never exactly remember melt and die in front of me. I'll feel a sense of tightening, and then – then – that expected light-headedness – that release – that *what have I done? – what have I*

done?! – fragments of scripts and ideas – elation – meeting Terri – no – no! – what have I done?

I wake, disoriented, on the couch around two a.m. Julian is there, reading intently.

“Where’s the girls?” I ask.

“Other room,” he says. “Asleep.”

Great. I close my eyes.

“This is good stuff, Seth,” says Julian. “Very therapeutic, I bet.”

I blink my eyes open and see he’s reading my journal.

“Hey. Hey.” I say. “Jesus Christ, Julian.”

“I very much like the pages with the giant words. Have you considered burning it?”

“What?”

“You should. You should make a bonfire. Right here. This. Everything. Throw it all in.”

“Shut up.”

“It’s tying you down, man. Closing you off.”

He shows me the pages with the big words.

“This is the equivalent of screaming, yes?”

“Julian – “

“I mean – why not just scream? It’s so much easier.”

And he screams, at the top of his lungs. And God, I’ve got a headache. He screams again, grinning, jumping about the room.

“Julian – someone’s gonna call 911 – “

Lisette comes to the door in t-shirt and underwear, groggy, reacting to the noise.

“Uh?” she says.

“Look at this,” says Julian, throwing her my notebook. She looks at it, sees giant meaningless words.

“Destroy it, man. Burn it. It’s the only way! Want me to?”

“No.”

“Happy to do it. Happy to help.”

Now, Becca is up, too.

“Hullo,” says Becca, yawning. She plops down near me on the couch, rubs up against me like a tired cat, lays her head in my lap. She sees the pile of Julian’s sketches on the floor, picks through them. Lisette goes through my fridge, finds a pint of ice cream.

“You think it’s crazy. It’s not,” says Julian.

He reaches down and takes the pile of sketches and fans them out to Becca.

“Pick one,” he says.

Her eyes light up, flattered. She chooses a delicate but breathtakingly detailed drawing of some Hindu-like elephant God surrounded by arrows and stars.

“Good choice,” he says. “No copy.”

And he rips it in half.

“No!” says Becca, reaching for the picture – but he pushes her hands away.

“Don’t touch,” he says, ripping it in half again and again until it’s in little pieces. Lisette, befuddled, eats ice cream.

“See how easy that was?! And that picture was extremely important to me. But I owe it nothing. It has no hold on me, man.”

He chooses another and tears it up, too. He offers the stack to me.

“Go on. Pick one!”

“They’re yours to rip,” I say. “I couldn’t care less.”

“I’m not ripping them. I’m setting myself free.”

“*You’re free?*”

“Absolutely.”

I stare at him.

“Can we call it a day, please?”

“Actually,” he grins, “no. Time for Round Two.”

“Round Two?”

“Absolutely,” he says, turning to Lisette and Becca. “And I am so sick of these girls. Aren’t you sick of these girls?”

Becca, tired, confused, kneels on the floor trying to piece the elephant picture back together. Lisette kneels down beside her, tries to help. Julian puts his hands on their backs.

“Time to go, girls,” he says. “Party’s over.”

They stare at him, confused. He jumps up, grinning, as full of energy as he was six-seven hours ago. He goes into the bedroom, brings out their clothes – socks, jeans, shoes – and throws them at the girls.

“Party’s over!” he repeats, opening the front door. “Time to go! Time to fucking get out and let us get on with our lives!”

Becca looks at Lisette, frightened. They murmur to each other in Utrechtian or Norwegian or I have no idea what. They’re beginning to understand and feel a bit used, tired, pissed. *Who the fuck is this guy? Oh no. No, no. It’s late. We’re not going anywhere.*

And now they're looking at me for help.

"You stay out of it," Julian snaps at me.

He reaches down and aggressively lifts Becca up, lifts Lisette up. But they push back, pull his hands off them. He shoves their clothes at them.

"The party is fucking over!" he shouts. "Now! Get the fuck out!"

"Julian – " I say.

"No!" he turns on me, yelling like a Master telling his dog to sit.

Finally, the girls are getting their pants on, sweaters. They're cursing at him in Teutonic gibberish.

"Get out! Get out! Get out!" he says.

He looks at me.

"They don't get it," he says.

And he collects their shoes, coats, and goes to the window facing the back alley. He opens it.

"Out," he says, throwing their coats out the window.

"No!" yell the girls, freaked out. They jump up, scratching him, grabbing for their shoes, trying to halt him.

"No!" they yell, while Julian, laughs, dangling shoes out the window.

"Get – out!" he says, flinging their shoes out the window. And I can hear them clanking against garbage cans in the back alley.

"Just – go," he says, calmly.

They grab their bags, and purses and move quickly. Becca, getting up nerve, grabs some of his pictures and flings them out the window. Lisette smacks him, and they hurry to the door, cursing him – and then cursing me for being less than useless.

And Julian hurries over and shuts and locks the door. He goes back to the window and watches a moment later as they collect their things in the alley below.

“This is too funny,” says Julian. “C’mere. You gotta see this!”

I hear them outside cursing him more. A moment passes. The voices dim. He starts to close the window, then stops. Instead, he picks up my notebook.

“Want me to throw?” he asks.

“No,” I say.

“You need to throw it out the window. You need me to do this.”

“Put it down, Julian. It’s not yours to throw.”

“Pussy,” he says, putting it down. “Don’t forget that. You’re shackled to this. By your own choice. This is a cage of your making.”

“Mm.”

“Okay!” he says, pulling a small energy drink out of his backpack and downing it.

“Round Two! Let’s go!”

“It’s the middle of the night.”

“Come on. Fifty dollars says I get three more by noon tomorrow!”

“Go by yourself.”

“Stop saying *no!* Just stop it, Seth! All your life – *no, no, no*. You’re fucking miserable! You’re like death, here. This is a fucking coffin in the middle of New York!”

“Uh huh.”

“I’ll go without you.”

“Please do.”

“I will.”

“Good. Go.”

“Give me a key.”

I point to the junk drawer next to the stove. He opens it, and finds and pockets the key.

“Please come with me,” he says. “Please.”

“No,” I say. “Go to sleep and we’ll go in the morning.”

“Douche,” he says.

“Three girls by noon,” he says.

And he’s gone.

It’s a bit after nine a.m. when I wake. The room is bright, but hazy and very cold. The door to my bedroom is open. I appear to be alone. Julian has found three girls and gone God knows where and I don’t care. If I never see him again, fine.

Why didn’t I help those girls? Because I was tired? Disoriented? For the same reason I didn’t have sex with either of them? Fear? Fear that something – anything – would go wrong. Some odd something? Some intangible, irrational thing – that I would regret if not now, then eventually. So, instead, I do nothing. Nothing. Trapped in my own living tomb.

And I realize, he’s right. He’s right. I have to stop this. I have to let go.

I have to kill the notebook.

But I can't rip it up, or throw it out the window, or set a goddamn fire in my tiny, shithole apartment. What ritual can I enact that will permanently exorcise this demon? And then it becomes obvious.

And so, I stand above my bathtub, fanning out pages. And I'm not afraid. I can do this. Remove the chains. I can. I can. I can.

But I don't.

Oh no.

Of course not. Not even the slightest bit. Not to this poor, harmless thing – with stories of my life and loves and ideas and fragments. I value these scribblings – that have no meaning to anyone but me – more than anything I own – more than most relationships I get into. For me, drowning this worn, lifeless, spiral thing – this inanimate object – would be akin to drowning a puppy.

And why is it so goddamn cold?

I put the notebook down, and drain the tub. I come back into the living room, and see the window is still open from the previous night. And I go to shut it, but poke my head out, curious to see if there's any clothes or pictures still down there. But when I look down what I see are legs. Scrawny legs, in ripped jeans, akimbo in the snow. Someone is lying down there and – and then – the legs move – someone's lying on the ground down there – and then I see – a long, red tassel.

Julian.

Two days later, Julian's mother arrives from Milwaukee to bring him home from the hospital. By the time she arrives she's heard the story several times – that he was mugged returning to my building – and now she just wants to get him out of New York.

The “mugging” leaves Julian a bit of a mess. He had been hit from behind with a blunt object, a tire iron, or a shovel. His glasses were shattered. He cracked a couple teeth. The mugger – muggers? – repeatedly kicked him in the stomach, leaving him with a fractured rib and internal bleeding. And they robbed him. His wallet was gone, and also, oddly, were his shoes. The police considered this a particularly extreme assault, as Julian was not simply beaten and robbed, but the assailant(s) appear to have defecated on him, as well. The police asked me if there might have been anything personal about the crime. I told them that I had been asleep. However, in the nine years I'd lived in the building, above junkies, and crack victims and the like, I'd never personally run into trouble. Maybe, they considered, it was because of how colorfully he was dressed.

I see Julian for just a few moments as his mother wheels him out to the cab. In a slurred, drugged voice he whispers to me, “nailed one in the bathroom at McSorley's.”

The next day it snows again. And I'm still a temp, still without money, still stuck in the worst apartment in New York. But somehow I don't feel quite so miserable anymore. In fact, I feel pretty good. And I decide I ought to do something with that.

So I sit that night in a crowded East Village bar, and get good and drunk and stare at this young woman with short, red hair for a couple hours. I have intense, chaotic plans of things we can do. Finally, I make my way over to her. But before I can speak, she says *creep!* and leaves with her friends.

But I still feel good, and I make another, better plan. The bar I realize – the bar and the girl and Julian and Lisette and Becca – they've all been a test. A test of my love for Terri, which I now realize is terribly, terribly real. And now I have clarity. I'll go home and sleep off this drunk, and then call on Terri tomorrow.

And, returning home, my conviction grows stronger. I feel alive and free and hopeful and good, and I do what I always do when I feel alive and free and hopeful and good, which is to write it all down in my journal.

Tomorrow, I write, I will go to a Korean deli and get the best bouquet of flowers, and go over to Terri's. And maybe it will be a futile effort. Maybe not. I don't care. And I will say to her all the things I ever meant to say, but had fearfully written down instead: that I do love her; that she ought to be treated better; that she ought to be worshipped.

And I write all of this in big, gigantic letters, and then trace over and over them – to emphasize seriousness, hope, and conviction.

I WILL MAKE THIS WORK, I write.

THINGS WILL BE GOOD, I write.

TOMORROW.