

Six Pairs of Socks

Statements from the Rock Reef Apartment Complex, Hawthorne, CA

1. The Noise Complaint, *Alexandra and Jules, Apt. 2A*

A: We started having the parties...

J: They weren't really parties, more like get-togethers.

A: You're right. We started having the get-togethers right after I got the job at Manchego, you know, the cute little *tapas* place in Santa Monica. It was usually less than ten of us, whoever had the Sunday shift that week, Marie and Stephanie and Belle and Marco and Sebas, and even if they weren't working sometimes they came.

J: And always Case.

A: Oh yeah, of course.

J: Alex has a huge crush on Case, ever since she started the job. I think that might even be why she applied for it in the first place.

A: I think *you* might have had something to do with why I applied for it in the first place. She basically got me the job. And they weren't just about him, the parties, I mean.

J: The get-togethers.

A: The get-togethers. They were something to do. You know, to get together with everyone *outside* of work. Pablo and Jose and John always came, too.

J: The boys from the kitchen brought the coke. They are fucking lunatics.

A: They do tell crazy stories.

J: Like the one about Flea, how he came in late night right around closing all strung out, and they gave him a cheeseburger and after he ate it they brought him back into the kitchen and gave him a habanero and a bump and he perked right up and drove home, A-okay.

A: I love the Red Hot Chili Peppers. I grew up listening to them.

J: What '90s kid didn't?

A: Well, we didn't usually play them at the parties.

J: The get-togethers. RHCP aren't a get-together vibe.

A: You always say that. You just like to put on that chilled electronic music.

J: It's called trance.

A: And John always demanded reggaeton.

J: And would be dancing with *all* the girls. Like grinding on them like it was an 8th grade JCC dance.

A: He's a great dancer. Has a natural sense of rhythm.

J: And the one time Stephanie's boyfriend came and brought his DJ equipment and all he played was drum and bass. *For hours*.

A: What was his name? Mason? I think it was Mason. He was nice.

J: His music was shit.

A: Everyone's music is shit to someone. I think that might have been the first time we had a noise complaint.

J: And every time after this fucking neighbor...

A: His name is Paul.

J: Every time this fucking Paul had something to say about it. But what the fuck was he gonna do? So we would turn down the music for ten minutes so his ugly little baby could get to sleep, and then go back to partying, I mean, uh, getting together.

A: He's not ugly, you just hate kids.

J: I fucking hate them. Never gonna have any.

A: I would like to. I mean, if I meet the right guy, like if the situation's right, you know what I mean.

J: Try Case on for size. When are you gonna make a move? He's always staring at your ass. He *wants* you. Or your ass at least. But if you have kids I won't be your friend. I'm serious.

A: Sometimes I can't believe you.

J: And sometimes I can't believe what goes on in this building.

A: The socks on the door handle were weird.

J: They were fucking weird.

A: The day after one of our parties...

J: Get-togethers.

A: After one of our getties...

J: Ooh I like that. Let's getty bitch!

A: Let's getty that baby!

J: What?

A: Nothing. I meant like the Getty guy who got kidnapped, like the museum.

J: What the *fuck* are you talking about? Eww. Don't talk about kidnapping. It's gross. I don't want any around, especially not that fucking baby.

A: Sorry. So anyway someone put a sock on our door handle.

J: It was after the night we invited the guy who worked at Costco.

A: Yeah it was. I think the sock might have been from Costco, too.

J: I have no fucking clue. I just remember you pretended to like him because we thought he was cute and would be a nice fuck for Molly.

A: I wasn't exactly thinking *that*...

J: But you agree she needs to get out more, take it easy with work.

A: I do. Anywho, the sock appeared in the morning and I took it inside and then after lunch another was there. Like its partner or whatever. I wasn't sure if they were a gift or an apology or something.

J: Or a threat.

A: The socks seemed new. I wouldn't wear them, though.

J: I know it was Paul up to some weird shit. What did he think, that we had some fucking Dobby in here?

A: I thought it was a nice gesture, whoever did it.

J: Well, get a load of this, this takes the big fucking melted mess of an ice cream cake, one night during a getty this fucking psycho Paul showed up in a Nazi uniform, you know like from the movies, and he had a gun.

A: I think it was a Luger.

J: A what?

A: You know, the little German pistol, like from the movies.

J: You know what it was? It was fucked, is what it was.

A: The uniform was really good quality, it made me think that he was an actor or an enthusiast or something, but one thing stuck out. He was wearing white socks like he was

about to go play tennis.

2. One More Cup of Coffee, *Molly, Apt. 2B*

M: It was the morning after, and the guy would. Not. Leave. Has that ever happened to you? I know, it's happened to everybody, and it is *miserable*.

I had already told him I didn't have to go to the hospital that day—big mistake. And he was so happy with himself, still lounging in my bed after I had gotten up to make coffee—not coffee for us, mind you, I said I was going to make *myself* coffee, notice there was no offer—but he just kept rolling around in the sheets and looking at me through the door with a dumb smile like Rudy. Rudy is my family's black lab F.Y.I. and Rudy is a real idiot.

This guy had doggish mannerisms. He attempted to smother me while cuddling, pressing my face into his chest like I was a sad boy's teddy bear that 22 minutes before he'd been humping. When we had sex his tongue hung out, and when he slept, he drooled on my pillow. He had shown up at my door the night before like a lost puppy, saying something about how the girls next door had told him to come here to wait for a party. What else could I do? Puppies are cute.

But now it seemed he was ready to move in, even had a fresh pair of socks that I half expected him to carry around in his mouth. He pulled them on and said some bullshit about how crisp life is and then tread across the linoleum still naked to sit on the counter next to me and the coffee maker. I told him to get down. He did and then started looking through the cupboards for a mug. You know, you never find what you're looking for in somebody else's kitchen on the first try. So he banged around and once he had it, he poured himself what was going to be my second cup and said that I must not take it with sugar because I'm sweet enough. I would have thrown my coffee in his face if I had any left.

We stood there and he talked about his work and his family and his childhood and fucking kill me, I didn't say a word. And he kept going, twelve minutes after I had finished my coffee, and he asked, "One more cup?"

“No beans. This isn’t a diner,” I said and pointed to his jeans. He looked at me with those sad puppy dog eyes you’re always hearing about, almost like I was his master and he’d done something wrong. And before you go there, it isn’t like that. I’m pretty vanilla in bed. The kinkiest thing I like is the occasional spank. He was a man dog, pure and simple.

Finally, he got the message and got his things and as he went, he asked me for my number. What could I say? Seventeen minutes before he had been telling me about how his grandma died from complications from the trans-tibial amputation that was meant to treat her peripheral artery disease caused by her Type 2 Diabetes. I had almost said, “Well, it isn’t bothering her anymore.”

But I didn’t, I kept up my bedside manner, and then he wasn’t bothering me anymore—he was gone thank fuck—but he left his socks. God, I thought, if he tries to text me about them as an excuse to see me again I’m going to kill him.

It’s because it wasn’t just one pair of socks, but a whole pack that he had bought earlier the day before and then been carrying around with him like a fucking weirdo. He had even joked about bringing them to the girls’ party next door to hand out like party favors at a bowling alley birthday. Then he thought about it and said, “No no,” and stuck them in the back of his waistband.

Christ what am I doing with my life? Has this ever happened to you, when you wake up after giving yourself to somebody, some deadbeat nobody and you wonder, am I one too? No, God no, I’ve never thought to bring any fucking socks to a party. So I went and left them on top of the mailbox next to the gate and if he came sniffing back around I figured he’d find them there. Though I do have to admit that I took a pair for myself, and they’re very comfortable.

3. News of the World, *Charley, dumpster outside Costco*

C: I was walking by when I heard the shot. They happen often enough that I didn’t think much of it. Back when I was a real estate agent, I heard of a guy who shot his gun off in his backyard once a month to keep the property value down and the taxes low. It seemed

crazy to me at the time but now I understand it. I prefer to think of that guy than somebody dying.

I don't live too far from there, a few blocks away, under the 405. I remember it because on top of the mailbox of the building, there was a pack of socks.

I only took one pair. I could have used them all, no doubt, but I figured someone else probably could use them, too. It's that kind of world we live in—a lot of people could use a lot of things.

And just after the building, there was a row of palm trees springing from the concrete. Palm trees made me happy when I first came to L.A. Now they look spiny and unwelcoming, like the rest of the world. That changed probably around when they started putting bumps and rails on benches so we couldn't sleep there. Like those spikes for pigeons. And what have the pigeons ever done? Brought the news—way back, that is.

Want to buy a paper? It isn't much. But the fella who writes it does his best. Talks about the issues at large. Can be funny, too.

They've tried to fence in my little plot three different times, but I always cut a hole with my cutters. I like it back there, wedged at the top of the bottom of the overpass. But I'm sure the fences will eventually win and I'll have to go somewhere else. Hawthorne's motto after all is "City of Good Neighbors."

I'm mostly not but I'm happy a little. I think people are like that, like me, wherever they live. I know I was about the same when I lived inside. Sure, out here it's miserable and I suffer, but at least it's obvious, right in the open, honest in a way. I like that. The hidden suffering, the something's-not-right feeling that I used to get when I was alone in my apartment after work was worse.

I drink is all. I like that too. It's killing me. Maybe if I stop I'll get inside. Maybe I'll die. It can be hard but it ain't so bad. These socks are nice. Want to buy a paper?

4. Anonymous, *Jacob, Apt. 1A*

J: I'm not so delusional to say that it's not my fault. I get it. People want to fuck attractive people. I want to fuck attractive people. I'm not attractive, by birth nor by girth. And I

think we all know that sitting down, being inside, and looking at a screen isn't good for the body. Yet what does society require to be considered a success? Exactly that.

I wouldn't call myself a success. I wouldn't call myself an "incel," either. Someone else might. I'm not having sex and it's not a voluntary decision. But I don't associate with their community whatsoever. It's sad. It's sad to even call it a community. The only thing they have in common is anger. It deserves the bad rap it got after Elliot Rodger. You remember him? It would be easy not to, considering how many mass shootings there are these days. Santa Barbara. He posted Youtube rants and an online manifesto about how he was taking retribution to punish women for rejecting him. I hate that entitlement shit. It's exactly the opposite of the spirit of the Internet. Though I hate people who talk about the spirit of the Internet, too. Like have you looked around, buddy? There's no soul here.

I have to admit that recently I've been into cooking videos. They're great. So satisfying, a meal that would take hours done in minutes. And all the cooks seem friendly. This one, George Vaca, eats nothing but burgers, and he gets so fired up about them. It's the kind of wholesome shit I need in my life.

I don't cook much myself, but the other day I tried to make Juicy Lucys. You put the cheese inside the patty and then cook it. They were a gooey mess and after I felt like a fatter slob than usual. The socks were good oven mitts, though. That's half the reason I actually cooked instead of ordering from DoorDash. I found these socks out by the mailbox, two pairs actually. I've heard one the girls upstairs always screaming and swearing about "Ouch! Fucking hot the fucking pan goddamnit!" I have a good ear. Though let's be honest, she talks incredibly loud. It's a little shocking. But I like her voice.

I went upstairs early in the morning after one of their parties. The noise doesn't bother me, by the way. I know it used to bother some of the neighbors, but I would just put on my headphones and play Fortnite. I knew they wouldn't be awake for a while so they wouldn't catch me. I slipped the sock over the door handle. I thought that was funny. I was going to leave a note but then at the last second I didn't. It seemed weird. The whole thing was weird. I'm weird.

Later in the day after a morning of over-thinking I went back to leave the note and the sock was gone. So I put another sock there. And then in the end I took the note with me. I wonder if she figured out it's meant to be an oven mitt.

The night in question was different though. I had my headset on like I said. I didn't hear shouting at first. It was footsteps. I could feel them in my chest. When I took off my headset, I heard the shouting and knew something was wrong. So I took my Glock 19 out of the safe, loaded it, and went upstairs.

5. The Man Dog, *Gavin, Costco checkout 16*

G: They discourage the employees from eating the samples. At least Jeff, my manager, does. When I was a stocker, I used to sneak one now and then when no customers were around, but he caught me with my mouth full too many times. Now I'm a cashier. Most coworkers see it as a promotion, but I preferred being a stocker. I got to roam around more and nibble.

Stocker as in stockboy, not as in creep. I want that to be clear. The girls were the ones who invited me. Now as a cashier, I find out a lot about customers based on what they buy. If they have pets, kids, a pool, parties, a fancy credit card, a vegetarian ambition, a big freezer, a routine. Most people have a routine. The same five, ten, twenty items.

Mine is to go to a different Costco, the one by Hawthorne, on my day off and have samples for lunch. That's when I met the girls. I remember it was a Sunday—the best samples are out on Sundays, at around 11 in the morning before it gets too crowded. I was minding my own business, having a few Kirkland Signature Cooked Meatballs Italian Style Beef, when they came up to me as if I worked there. I wasn't even wearing my nametag.

“Do you work here?” the pretty blonde one asked.

“Where's the alcohol?” the other pretty blonde one said before I could answer the first.

“Well, err... not exactly, but it's over there in the middle by the books.”

They came up to me again later to ask where the cups and paper towels were. I pointed them out in the back of the store and then tried to explain, “You know, I actually don’t...”

“Hey, by the way,” the first one said, “Are you doing anything later? What time do you get off?”

“That’s what I was trying to say. I don’t...”

“She thinks your cute,” said the second, pointing to her friend. “Want to come over later tonight? We’re having a small party once we get off work, around 11.”

“Umm, yeah! I mean no, I’m not doing anything, and yes, I would like to come.”

“Here’s my number. Text me later for the address,” said the first and handed me a strip of paper. On it were ten numbers, a heart, and a name: Alex.

I finished up my lunch with three or four Delizza Patisserie Belgian Mini Cream Puffs. And when I say three or four, know that it is four at minimum and could well be more. They are the finest dessert available, aside from the Butter Cinnamon Sugar Loaves, which everyone knows are divine and so which rarely are sampled.

Now, from a moral point of view you can’t exactly leave a sample fest like mine without buying something. Everything in the store feels like its \$10 minimum and is big enough to last me half a year. Except for the rotisserie chicken, which goes for \$5 and which I can stretch over two or three days.

I’ve done exactly that plenty enough, but recently I’ve gotten into the routine of buying a pack of new socks, wearing a fresh pair every day, and then throwing them out. It’s a six-pack of standard, white athletic socks, and let me tell you there is nothing better in the world than pulling a never-before-worn pair of those socks on. If I’m ever short on sleep, the soft cotton taut over my toes galvanizes me for the day. Not having that Sunday morning makes me completely sure I’ll be back at Costco for lunch. In fact for the last two years, I’ve only missed it once when my grandmother Flo (short for Florence, as in Florence Nightingale, or Florence, Italy, though the Italians call it Firenze, she always used to say) died of complications from an amputation. She had diabetes, and I have to admit I found it a little in poor taste that a Costco Tuxedo cake that was served at the repast after the funeral.

I biked around for a couple hours waiting to text her. I did a full lap of the airport, listening to planes pulling away overhead, off to somewhere, and I imagined all the people on them, going far away to do whatever it might be people take planes to go do.

I might seem like a loner, but I'm not. Whenever I'm away from people, I wonder what they are all up to. That's why I like the bike. I cover a lot of road but slow enough to see what's happening—an old man walking home with his groceries; two kids playing catch across the street; a girl in a nice dress—those little moments of life are mine. You don't get that with a car. There is nothing happening on the side of the freeway. L.A. is so much freeway it might seem like nothing is happening here at all. The whole place is on the road to something.

That's why I like the supermarket. The people are there and I know that they are grocery shopping. I can imagine what they will do based on what they buy. I knew the girls were having a party before they invited me. When I finally texted Alex, she gave me the address and told me to go straight there. It wasn't far from the Costco where we met. When I got there I saw another text that they wouldn't be back from work for a couple hours but that I could pop over to their neighbor Molly's apartment to wait. I rang the bell for 2B and the girl who came to the door was definitely not expecting me. I introduced myself and tried to explain the situation. She cursed under her breath and then invited me in for a drink, saying that it was cocktail hour after all. And you know how that goes. We never even made it to the party next door.

At the time I thought the apartment was great—she was great, everything was great—but looking back I notice how often she was cursing. And I was too, though I normally try not to. It was “f-this” and “s-that.” It was like there was a spell over the place that corrupted language, causing sweet, well-intentioned people to use it foully and suffer all the degradation that comes with that kind of talk. Like in the movies.

I stayed too long and left in a rush and forgot the socks and it doesn't seem like I'll be going back. I'm sad about that. It's not that I don't have more (I do) or that I can't get more (I can, and I will), it's that I've been robbed of one of life's best pleasures—putting on a new pair. I guess in a way I've shared it. I hope they went to good use. I haven't seen the socks or any of them again.

6. Re-enactment, *Paul and Mary, Apt. 1B*

P: God, that kid is angry. And it's not just that he cries all the time. Babies cry. I don't love it, but I get it. They can't do anything else, just suck tit and cry. And I get it. They want more tit. Who doesn't? But *scheiße*, this little guy's crying could have taken down the *Wolfsschanze*.

The anger, it's screwed up in his ugly little face. That's why he's ugly. That and Mary's mother, the rotten drunk. Don't worry, she's out shopping.

What does make me worried is my angry little kid. Sure, I blow my top from time to time but I'm no natural born rager. At this rate he looks like he'll end up dead or in jail. I know I'm being over the top, but that's the way I see it. What he needs is more sleep.

I've never slept much, and I've never subscribed to the idea that more sleep can make you beautiful, but I do think getting woken up in the middle of the night by a party thrown by a couple of *Huren* who live above you is enough to piss anyone off, babies included.

Every goddamn Sunday they are up late making noise. I can hear the one with the raspy voice shout-talking through the floor, with the other laughing all the time. She even laughs like a valley girl. "Hahahaha-uhhh!" And the music would keep me up even if I was deaf. It shakes the whole shitting place.

Every time, I go up there to ask them to turn it down. Nothing crazy. I told them about the kid being awake—they know him, they've seen him around, the laughing one has even called him cute, the liar. I started out nice but I've gotten less and less. The last time I went up there, I planned on never having to go back. And I haven't.

I wore my uniform. I did it to scare them. I knew they would recognize it. Not as a reproduction Waffen SS officer uniform from the 12th SS-Panzer-Division Hitlerjugend but as something to be taken seriously. Even if it is a reproduction. It's better to have a reproduction. The authentic ones can get you into trouble. Ask my buddy Bill. He ran into a problem with Interpol, and those are guys you don't want problems with.

Normally, I don't act alone. I'm no Japanese holdout or lunatic gunman like you see these days. I'm a living historian, a member of the California Historical Group. We

put on large-scale tactical events three to four times a year. Armor on both sides. Trucks and motorcycles ripping around. Once the Air Force even lent a couple old L-Birds.

Everyone always asks me, why the Nazis? First, I tell them that I'm Axis. I happened to be in a German division when Lars, a buddy from work, brought me back when I was in my twenties. It was a good time.

Then I tell them look, somebody has to be the bad guy. Everybody wants to be the good guy, but there's no war without the baddies and there's no reenactment without someone playing the baddies. And that's all we're doing—playing. You think I believe this shit. You think these Hollywood actors who play Nazis believe this shit. They're just doing their jobs. I'm just doing my job. Well, uh, that sounds bad. I'm playing my role. It's a spoof—to remember history, to preserve it. Someone has to preserve history around here. The place has none. It's spoofed history since it showed up. And it should have never showed up. I don't mean that in a bad way. Just a fact. But I guess I'm wrong. The forces of history have deemed otherwise and here we are in L.A.

Mary wouldn't understand. She's sweet, but she has no sense of history. She's too sweet for it. History is filled with bitter, sour, scalding stories, and any good ones are savory, not sweet. So that night I just told her I was going upstairs to have a word with our neighbors, then went and got the old Budweiser box with my uniform in it from up high in the hall closet where she can't reach.

I went upstairs trying to scare the neighbors silent. And it was working. The raspy one opened the door and said, "What the fuck is this, Paul?" The way she said it was so bitchy. "*Paul.*" That's when I pulled my gun. They didn't say another fucking thing. Finally they had gotten more than they bargained for.

We're always getting more than we bargained for. Anyone who's not is missing out on life. I was in the wrong. I'll admit it. But when the weirdo from downstairs showed up with a Guy Fawkes mask and his Glock like a school shooter, I thought it was over. I was screaming, "It's a replica," and pulling the trigger to show it didn't fire. But he had these big bulky headphones on.

He fired a shot. I swear it whizzed right by my ear as I hit the deck. Face to the floor, I reached forward and put the gun at his feet. He picked it up and realized.

The girls came into the hall and were as shook up as us. We all stood there looking at each other wondering what the fuck had just happened. I thought two things in quick succession. How dumb am I? And, how the hell am I okay? The girls took it the best, I think. They invited the two of us in for a glass of water. A few other people were hanging around the room looking sobered. We sat down on the couch, sipped the water, and took a breath. Then we all talked it out, decided it was just a big misunderstanding. Better to drop the whole thing and never talk about it again.

And...oh, hi Sweetness!

M: Hi, Honey. Costco was rammed. I got you those socks you wanted. Who's this? What are you guys talking about?

P: Oh, nothing. It's nobody.