

*Note: Some footnotes bleed onto the next page, which I know is distracting. I can't seem to fix it, so I implore you not to dock points for that formatting issue (and to flip to the next page to finish said notes, when needbe. Thank you for your understand. Damn you, Microsoft Word. And now, our feature presentation.)*

## **MISDIRECTION**

### **MARK**

Pontius Pilate is on his mind and Dylan's *Blonde on Blonde* on his stereo as Mark relives the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade play—his life's starring achievement—and listens to Maddie and Em talk while they pass his expertly made joint of inexpertly grown schwag among the three of them. Maddie keeps attempting a discussion of a job she isn't excited about but will “pay the bills” for a while, though the nature of these bills remain mysterious, but Em is forcing a conversation about the taste of the color purple<sup>1</sup>. Mark had begged to be Pontius Pilate, but when the play premièred, he never wanted to wash his hands. Instead, he wanted to save Jesus.

He opens his eyes to find the discussion of the color purple has evolved.

“... not if the receiver isn't, like, predisposed to receiving a smiley face, you know. Just 'cause you put a colon doesn't mean they're gonna get that it's eyes, not without, well, you know. Shit, is it a quotation mark or that other thing?”

“You mean a parenthesis.”

They look at Mark, confused. Then Em speaks up. Where did Em come from? He thinks she's that girl Tommy's crazy over. At least that's probably how she came into the picture. It doesn't matter. All that does matter, at least tonight, is that he puts out the olive branch—cheap weed—so Maddie could maybe repay with her own olive branch—looking at him like more than some shitty bartender.

His plan may be flawed.

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<sup>1</sup> Thus far, they've come up with “grape” and “purple drink,” which makes them giggle and restart the conversation, peppering it with “quid pro quo” or “ipso factum.” It should be restated: they are stoned as hell.

“We’re coming to visit tonight!” exclaims Em as she takes the burning joint from Maddie. Mark groans jokingly.

“Don’t worry,” Maddie says. “*I’m* not.”

Em looks away embarrassed.

“Nah,” Mark says slowly, beginning to float away in his head. “Nah, that’s cool. Who’s *we*?”

“Her and *Tommy*,” Maddie says. “And some other people.”

“I don’t get what your problem is.”

“Poor guy’s head over heels for you,” Maddie looks to Mark for confirmation., who closes his eyes, takes a hit and fakes a cough.

“He’s one of my best friends. I can’t just stop hanging out with him.”

“Don’t go out drinking with him and his friends,” Maddie says. “I mean, you don’t even know anyone else in that group really, so just chill with me tonight.”

“What, and watch you try to sleep with Jacob for like the tenth night in a row? I don’t think so,” Em says, and Mark’s circuit breaker surges.

“Who’s Jacob?” Mark asks too quickly. Or slowly. Who knows? He’s stoned.

“Nobody,” that was definitely too quickly.

“OK,” he whispers. “Hey, either of you speak to Adam today?”

“No, why?”

“I was wondering what time he’s coming in.”

“He gets in *today*?”

“Yeah, tonight, I think. Don’t know when.

“Is he flying into New Orleans or Baton Rouge?”

“Be honest, I don’t really know. I guess Baton Rouge with classes starting back and all. And I doubt it’s that hard to find a flight direct from New York. Whatever, I’ll call him before I go in.”

And thus Mark starts mentally preparing for another evening of bartending at Reggie’s, part of what he once coined the Moments Adding Up To Nothing (phonetically, Mau-ton) during the particularly strong cannibod high via ingestion, the preferred method of the black linecooks of his day job at The Chimes Bar and Grille<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> A fact which never ceased to surprise Mark, nor ceased to make him feel a smidge racist.

The decidedly sophomoric denotation wasn't meant to refer to the whole of "life," merely the moments that put the brain on ice, such as working during Free Drinks 'til 10 night, the eponymous evening always leaving Mark a drink-fetching machine with no down time since he never has to stop and collect cash or scan cards or try to decipher drunkenly yelled names to close tabs. The tip-to-complaint ratio usually remains absurdly low while the workload is staggering<sup>3</sup>, a trend continuing this evening Mark learns three hours later as he wipes down the wood grain of the bar and breathes, finally able to request cash in exchange for plastic cups of collegiate aphrodisiacs.

He stares at the bar's single television and, though his view is somewhat obstructed by the purple and gold Confederate flag, can piece together the story about an airplane crashing into the Hudson River when it, get this, hit a flock of seagulls earlier that day. The rumbling din of the bar/extremely loud rap music blocks out the newscaster, and nothing on the screen indicates number of survivors, if any. Adam's number is displayed on Mark's iPhone when his five friends walk into the bar — Tommy, Em, Cassie, Matt and Jeff.

Adam does not answer.

## EM

It'll be good to see Tommy. After all, it's been since Halloween — the one where he dressed as Everything<sup>4</sup> and she dressed as a plain white bed sheet<sup>5</sup> to poke fun at him, though all evening both were mistaken for ghosts and, this being the deep Louisiana South, Klan members. She had planned to open her heart to Tommy at that lame costume party with the like 400 black and orange Jell-O shots, going so far as to have a little ploy about "open-heart surgery" since she figured someone there would be dressed as a doctor.

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<sup>3</sup> Tips were low because who's going to pull wallets from back pockets or purses worn more for affect than functionally, especially when the bar is crowded enough to make its lonelier members feel an embarrassing bit of sexual stimulation from the friction of navigating to the Bud Light-or-whatever-soaked bar. The complaints, though, were easy enough to quell — they tended to be of a "this drink is too weak" variety (a shockingly greedy notion, in Mark's mind, since they were *free* after all) — since a splash of whiskey or vodka or whatever on the straw and the rim would be enough, and since the bar was so crowded i.e. a veritable controlled riot, it was all the same shit in the end anyway, right?

<sup>4</sup> Just a plain white bed sheet.

<sup>5</sup> Just a plain white bed sheet.

As luck would have it, a block-headed rower was wearing scrubs, but the Taaka/Gatorade mix Maddie gave her had more Taaka than Gatorade. Em ended up with her back on a bed while, quote unquote in her own words, she was dully slammed with the boring precision of someone who wakes up at six a.m. every morning to row a fucking boat. Tommy, filled with about six Jell-O shots too many, she later heard, just stood at the bottom of the stairs and studied the woodgrain and hummed “This Little Light of Mine” for something like an hour.

Since then, they’ve only spoken once, in the Quad, when Em was on campus to pick up some transcripts. Of course, she hasn’t really talked to anyone in the past month, “crazy-busy applying to jobs!” but really sitting in her room with the fan spinning as fast as humanly possible — freeze the feeling! — while drinking inexpertly homemade cosmos (vodka and cranberry juice, essentially) and watching *Friends*, *Sex & The City* or whatever MTV reality show she could find. The comfort of the FUN IN THE SUN afghan bought at a tourist trap in Destin on a Spring Break trip, SBK2KX!!, seemed more beneficial than being ensnared by the quicksand that pretty much surrounds the whole of Baton Rouge, in her mind.

But tonight, with the boost of Mark’s weed and the pomegranate&gin (eww) she had with her roommate Ali,<sup>6</sup> she felt confident and happy and alive and all of those things that were decidedly false.

It pretty much takes until she’s walking toward the cracked wooden door opened like it was kicked and covered in flaky red paint that it occurs to her this is exactly the kind of night on which she declared a moratorium. The world moves up and down like  $y=4\cos x$  on a graphing calculator<sup>7</sup>, a series of sick waves thanks to that stupid joint of schwag. She drives a speedboat on choppy waters as she stares at the word Reggie’s in scrawling red paint across the building’s side. She can’t discern the g’s from 8’s.

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<sup>6</sup> Who, yes, was crying *again* about her ex-boyfriend, which kind of spurred Em into thinking maybe telling Tommy something, especially before she leaves his college town, might not be the worst decision.

<sup>7</sup> Em has always been fairly proud of her advancements in mathematics, learning multi-variable calculus during her English classes — in which she received a D — jr year of high school. In fact, she partially blames her overdrinking on “having to keep up,” being one of the few females to have double-majored in biomechanical engineering and discrete dynamical systems (more a concentration than a major). Why she works at a day-care center instead of using these, at the moment, is a story wholly unto itself but you can safely assume it’s linked to what *The New York Times* has dubbed the “Quarter-Life Crisis” of the Millennial generation.

“Shit.”

“What?” Tommy places a hand on the soft fabric of her pink hoodie.

“Think I’ve had too much.”

“Already?” Tommy squeezes her arm and chuckles. “Don’t worry. I’ll keep you out of trouble.”

Suddenly she’s at the door, showing the bouncer her ID while the man behind him handing out wristbands stares at her fairly generous cleavage.

Nauseous, she zips up her hoodie and leans into Tommy’s warmth, the whole time worrying about the very warmth she leans into because, when presented with the query “Is he ‘Mr/s. Right’ or ‘Mr/s. Right Now’” in that colloquial back porch/bedroom banter heard over whiskey and weed/Crystal Lite and Smirnoffs, their answers would almost undoubtedly differ. Tommy, Em assumes, would be headstrong in his insistence that of course she was Ms. Right, their statues of youth be damned<sup>8</sup>. Be it age or sentiment or circumstance, who the heck knew which, Em was fairly certain while Tommy could one day be Mr. Right, right now he was Mr. Right Now, a response so circularly absurd she would almost chuckle at it. That is, chuckle until she considers Tommy sitting alone in his room, downloading off bittorrents films she’d mentioned (in passing) wanting to see, with the sole hope she would watch them with him, and they would spend a couple hours at least on the same ratty old couch. Which Em would like but ... you know. In other words, if Em ever meets Tommy in the way she knows he dreams of, she will crush him. And she loves him. A paradox as sensible as it seemed confusing. Luckily, since the question that throws her into this tailspin of doubt is usually offered with a giggle, a sip of the Crystal Lite and Smirnoff and a wink at the thought of his toned legs or arms or fairly-well-to-do penis (or so he jokingly claims, a fact somewhat backed by his too-tight jeans), she could ignore the implications. Until now.

Because, as they walk into the bar and get the first then second then third round of free whiskey and Cokes — thanks Mark — it becomes clearer and clearer tonight might be the night either Tommy tells Em or Em tells Tommy — if there is anything to tell,

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<sup>8</sup> Anyway, let’s be honest, they weren’t that young, a fact Em was increasingly aware of with each passing post-graduation fee bill sent to her .edu e-mail address (how are they *so many*), reminding her that, while her friends were living in large cities where the term “missed the bus” had meaning, she was still peddling her roommate’s fixie to class/the day-care center since the used Camry her parents bought her broke down, and she couldn’t afford to repair it.

which is still rattling around in Em's mind like a pinball in a piñata. And it's awkward anyway, how Cassie won't even look at her (save for the occasional death glare), how Jeff is busy trying to find a lady, how Tommy continuously leans in too close then pulls away too abruptly, how Mark can't take his eyes off CNN's coverage of that fairly harmless looking crash, how Matt is ... who the hell is Matt anyway?

She just downs another bit of liquid courage, not considering the selfsame drinks that will make her able to discuss whatever and ever with Tommy are also making it impossible for her to speak.

Eh. What's new?

## **CASSIE**

Sort of amazing, the class separation existing in a wooden bar, and Cassie can't help but kind of wonder when exactly The Great Divide occurred. The 2L law student shouldn't even be out right now, exams looming and her future hanging in the balance by a spider's thread<sup>9</sup> but Tommy's her best friend (not to mention the montage stuck on a loop in her mind of Tommy, no lie, *holding her hand*), and he'd been cooped up complaining about Em for a while.

Of course, Cassie had no idea Em was actually going to be here. You would think The Great Divide would separate the two. Yeah, she was well educated but working at a fucking daycare when you get down to it, and Cassie was on her way to at least being an A.D.A. or something.

So when Em falls back — “slippery floor!” a.k.a. she's so fucking hammered she can't fucking stand, again — and Tommy catches with his barely bulging pearly arms, Cassie's stomach sours, and she wonders why everyone is even here.

Just to look away more than anything, she scans the bar, feeling the pulsating rap song vibrate her skin while some angry young black man screams disaffectedly into his microphone “Ain't nothin' to fuck with/I was here in the first place,” and she can't help

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<sup>9</sup> And believe you me, it's a freaking spider's thread: an average of like 3.2 on her law exams at the end of her 1L year doesn't exactly bode well for finding a job in a recession-born economy that finds itself more in need of demolition companies than it does law firms, since no one can afford the law firm to avoid the demolition.

put consider that *she* was, and Em is some imposter who considers her double overstrap boots (that make her look like she should be riding a reindeer) more than Tommy. Her eyes find a larger girl in the corner, the type who looks like she'll never, by the boy she loves i.e. "her Tommy" or anyone else, be touched, the kind of girl with maybe a harelip and the rolls of fat that don't do anything remotely positive like fill out to baggy breasts or build up in her hips the way some guys like, but instead just slosh around like a water balloon rolled across a rock garden.

This girl must be pretty drunk, because she kind of waddles her permeable form over to Jeff — Cassie feels horrendous for considering any of this, feels it's as involuntary and automatic as digestion — and does what could be described as dancing or grinding but more just rolling on Jeff, who shoots the bar this mock look of horror,<sup>10</sup> contorting his face as hideously as possible, and Cassie flashes to a stereotypical<sup>11</sup> depiction of this girl's life, a brief biopic including candy wrappers hidden in pillow cases, photos of strong-jawed celebrities sprinkled in tears and fingers' oily smudges, public jokes about masturbation to retain while rejecting the sadly off-putting reality of her as a sexual being, constant comments of "how cute" celebrities or "guys I dated"<sup>12</sup> or men from different professions are — a classic diatribe from the zaftig types — and an empty longing that feels like choking at pretty much every experience involving a male or the thought and/or conversation thereof. Cassie can't help, though, but think of Tommy, and how drunk that girl is and how drunk Tommy is and, frankly, how drunk Cassie is, a choking up of her own consuming her so quickly she temporarily wonders if she is nauseous, until her eyes slowly heat up and turn red like the coils of a space heater, right here in the middle of this fucking bar, and a sudden shake of her head keeps the frame moving long after her head does — thank the Long Island Ice Teas — so she pushes through the crowd toward the bathroom. "Don't fuck with me/I was here in the first place" just continues as some drunk guy reasons with a speaker that who knows who was actually here in the first place and dogmatic arguments are mostly fallible anyway.

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<sup>10</sup> Which isn't really fair considering he tries dancing with two girls before one takes: the first uses her backside as a battering ram to force him away and the second, drunk and ferociously uncoordinated, steps on his feet at least four times before he realizes she is, in fact, sober and extremely coordinated.

<sup>11</sup> But probably truthful.

<sup>12</sup> Or aka guys she had like two phone conversations with.

The bathroom offers no surprises. Thankfully, the two girls smoking cigarettes and discussing the philosophical differences between “dating” and “going out,”<sup>13</sup> walk out, leaving Cassie with her tears (which have doubled as tears of embarrassment join the ones of sadness that she felt, all night, like they were camping in her stomach). She studies her pitiful reflection, the nightly party just inches away, through that door. The Arcade Fire t-shirt sweat-adhered to her flat chest seems pathetic. She studies the subtle definition of her almost non-existent breasts. Cries harder. Her hawk’s eyes on Em seem pathetic. Her razor-cut night-black-dyed hair seems pathetic. She indulges momentarily in the thought of Tommy striding up behind her and sliding his hands across the rough fabric of the thin T, wrapping around her stomach but it clenches (and seems pathetic), so she walks back out, thinks of talking to Mark but he’s still staring at the freaking TV.

Tommy’s waving blue shots around the place, and so Cassie takes one as he yells “It could happen on any other night, but let’s always remember this blue shot of Red Stick Reggie’s shit, and let’s take the world in a flash. Ladies and gentleman, start your engines. Bottoms up, bitches. See you kids on the other side.” Goes down like Drain-o. Cassie thoughts get dark as even more tears fill her eyes — this time from the drink — but lighten, even as Tommy stares at a couple of strangers making out on the dance floor with wide-eyed amazement, maybe anger. She places a hand on his side. He jumps, immediately shivering to her touch. She sees confusion in his eyes and a hesitation in his lips as he leans on her. Then he pushes away, saying “hold on,” and walks away, but that slight hesitation feels like life.

## **TOMMY**

When "Rock the Casbah" comes on, the place is like literally shaking — blame the bass or the drinks — and Tommy's stomach gurgles with sour sick when he glances from Em to Cassie<sup>14</sup>. The term "casual" means as much to Tommy as it does to a Chanel

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<sup>13</sup>The main point being can she fellate the gentleman in the torn white LSU baseball cap who had an affinity for Beam and Coke and offered her several tequila shots.

<sup>14</sup> You should realize Tommy isn't really used to female attention (one real girlfriend). He's one of those closet-quiet kids shouting at the top of his lungs to hide himself — something obvious about his runaway



salesman. Things speed up and slow down like they were in a movie, and the man with the remote control keeps pausing it to grab some popcorn, and suddenly Tommy's phone is violently vibrating in his pocket.

He ignores it to raise a toast to “this blue shot of Red Stick Reggie's shit,” and as he finishes choking on the mysterious blue liquid, he still holds Em's shot and, his economically sound mind not wanting to waste 75 cents, tosses that down the old hatch too. Almost like the drink unleashes every bit of loss the boy's ever felt, he goes through all the psychological stages of loss — Denial (Cassie won't get hurt; I'll kiss Em tonight), Anger (had heard some guy earlier mention Em's great tits), Bargaining (let me be with Em, and I'll quit drinking and study harder and, etc. (this stage is boring)), Depression (I'll be alone forever) and finally Acceptance (I'll check my cell phone).

Pulls it out to see Mark's text: IT'S NOT THE END OF THE WORLD. In a desperate attempt to understand what isn't the end of the world, he turns to see Em locked in the death throes of drunken, twenty-something-year-old Baton Rouge passion of a sloppy kiss with a stranger in the middle of a rhythmically pounding bar, full of people Tommy never wanted to meet, because then he would have to play the game. And now he's lost. To a man without a name.

Cassie reaches out to steady him, he guesses, and he leans on her, hit by this totally random flashback that grounds him like a tree for a few seconds<sup>15</sup>.

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father who waited until he was fifteen (his father, not Tommy) to split — so through all the jesting and yelling, he never really had much time to get too close (and certainly not intimate i.e. sexually and/or emotionally, though some would argue the latter is not true) with any women. So having Cassie adhering to his every word — don't think he doesn't notice — is nice but making him feel guilty as the twin narrative of pining after Em who has never once visualized the fact that he has a penis (and would probably jokingly deny he does) almost makes him want to just shut up. Because, to put it bluntly, the poor kid is scared shitless more by the prospect of what happens *if something actually happens*. Whiskey helps.

<sup>15</sup> It's the first time meeting his now ex-girlfriend's parents, and her backyard, surprisingly, is a lake. Like, literally. You walk out the back door, down some concrete steps and find yourself on a well-made (by her father) dock (her name is Anna Andaria, by the way). Walk along the grainy wood with a glossy sheen, and you'll find a boat suspended by thick, cinema-style ropes ... this is just down from the elegant koi pond somewhat out of place out here in Southern Louisiana, but you take what you can get, so the few moments of silent reprise it offers — especially before embarking on a lake-traversing journey — is usually appreciated by anyone lucky enough to make it this far in Anna's parents' (step 3, sort of) home.

But anyway he's visiting Anna, and her dad is taking them for a summer evening boat ride around the lake, at first thinking a get-to-know-the-asshole-probably-fucking-my-daughter tête-à-tête was in order but finally relenting and inviting Anna and her almost violently pretty mother to join. Thus, the four of them are ferrying out to the docking area, all holding Abita Ambers in their somewhat sweaty palms — Tommy's, Anna's and her mother's from nervousness; her father's from, actually, an inherently banal/natural sickening trepidation (Tommy's the second boyfriend ever to visit) — and Tommy is trying

Then he says, “hold on” and pushes through a sweaty crowd to get a breath of air outside, to just breathe some oxygen for once. Tommy wasn’t always like this, you know. No way. In fact, the boy’s far happier sitting at home with an old movie, after working out to the point of emotionless exhaustion, eating Reese’s and watching Clark Gable let the walls of Jericho fall.

It was just Tommy and his ma for so many years, and you can’t begin to imagine how lonely that house could get. Not to get graphic or go for any shock value here, but consider this: when the boy was coming into his sexual own (i.e. discovering girl’s effects on him plus the whole masturbation debacle recently teenaged boys discover), his mother was spending hours sniffing in her bedroom. And who the hell was he really supposed to talk to about all this, no dad or brother (or even older sister) around?

In some ways, it worked out, he thinks as he looks for Mark, glances at the television, looks for anyone, sees some guy from his memoir class in a corner and goes out back where he knows his best friend takes breaks from bartending to smoke his Camel Silvers. After all, Tommy is one of the most respectful people re: women you’re likely to find, probably because he felt like a protector for so many years while being protected. But he’s also a frail, fragile mess (let us again direct our attention to his pretty

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to take it all in: the huge orange setting sun, the circling herons and purple martins, the greenness of the lake’s skim as the light hits it. On either side of the canal that leads from the dock area to the lake are houses. And there’s this one bit that when Tommy sees it, he writes in his mental notepad that he’ll forever remember this moment without ever really knowing why. He’s turned away from Anna — he doesn’t want to accidentally give up to anyone how much he actually cares about this girl (the word “love” frighteningly and immaturely comes to mind) — when he sees through a house window a family playing Yahtzee or Gin Rummy or something (the game’s not really the point). Two parents: simple, white, middle-aged, nothing too spectacular there. Two kids: one boy, one girl, young, excited, television-ready in their picturesque doll house of a home.

Tommy almost like chokes when he sees this, confused eyes suddenly feeling hot, so he turns away. Sees Anna but still wants his intentions/emotions to remain mysterious, so glances at the other side of the canal. There he sees another house, this one vacant. Through great glass-plated French doors, he can see a dark, empty interior that looks like, for all practical purposes, a collection of dark, empty rooms. Not really anything out of the ordinary, but at this moment, after the unfortunate “oh, Ms. Andaria, getting yo’ hair did” line he convincingly delivered (Anna persuaded him, private joke) and the glass of whiskey with Mr. Andaria (family tradition?) and the moment of being on this boat with the girl he honestly, at this moment (and, it will turn out, for many years after it ends), wants to spend his entire verve with in a cocooned world of private jokes and personal anecdotes known to no one else, in this moment that empty house becomes almost existentially transcendent, at least that’s how he’ll later describe it, and he stares in a trance-like state until Mr. Andaria has to ask for a third time, “I said, ‘what are you planning on doing when you graduate?’”

toned body and general loudness) who couldn't get a decent relationship started if you paid the sonofabitch to date a saintly supermodel.

All he does know is he's never up for nights like this, even though he instigates them. And he knows why he does: what he wants from this wretched shell of a life is a family. A wife and children, happy in a simple white house. Hell, toss in a picket fence. When you've seen the debilitation and destruction Tommy has, you're no longer impressed by it. When life holds no more shock value, you end up wanting that simplistic, boxed lifestyle. Best part is Tommy'll probably get it. Worst part is, Cassie and Jeff and Matt and Mark probably want it, don't realize they want it, and will ruin themselves before they can get it.

But that's just a guess.

Tommy opens the door to find a blackout drunk Em sitting in a rusty puddle and Mark dragging at a cigarette<sup>16</sup>.

## **JEFF**

It took longer than usually, Jeff muses as he practically drags girl #3<sup>17</sup> out Reggie's bar — think a six-year-old dragging his new puppy around Xmas morning — but it's fine, as they sloppily make out in his red Ford F-250 for a few minutes while waiting for this cop car with the flashing lights et. al. to move a little further down the line to fill a DUI quota or whatever.

As he drives down Nicholson toward the dorms, trying to remember girl #3's name or nickname or just some believable pet name to stick with for another few hours, he keeps his thumbs in line with the road's white and yellow hashmarks, an age-old pastime of nocturnal collegiate transportation. As he reaches the Student Level 3 parking

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<sup>16</sup> Should have mentioned earlier, though it's probably obvious by now: the one option Tommy never considers, almost surely because he's not used to the choice, is the option of "none of the above," "start over," "something about passing Go and not collecting two hundred big ones." Anyway, at this moment in his short life, tomorrow couldn't have seemed further away. Whiskey never helps.

<sup>17</sup> Zeta, bleach-blond, public relations major (he knows none of this). Not, obviously, the heavysset girl — he shoved her off after a couple of laughs, so she's stuffing her face with cheese fries and a burger at Louie's or more likely home (again, stereotypically), deep into Baskin-Robbins/*Love, Actually*, which makes Jeff think "Love, Unactually," a decidedly weak joke but it causes Jeff to chuckle. The thing about Jeff is pretty simple: he's an asshole, probably because he found his infant brother's body (SIDS) when he was nine, but no one knows this and he's not about to go around spouting it off like some goddamn gossip rag. This probably accounts for his inadvertent six a.m. hair-bleaching as he swims his 1,500 meters, not to mention his 25 plus minute sauna "yoga" sessions.

lot by West Laville dorm, he pats himself on the back (awkwardly literally) for never swerving<sup>18</sup>, he notices girl #3 has fallen asleep on the truck's cold, pollen-coated window, so he shakes her awake.

He does so about seventeen minutes before they have sex.

### **MARK and EM and TOMMY**

The bar speeds up as everyone starts noticing their cell phone clocks mentioning that closing time is ambling forward, so the third time Matt — Mark doesn't know this guy from Adam (turn of phrase, but it should be noted Adam hasn't answered his phone either, making the night that much more stressful for poor Mark) — asks for a free whiskey coke “or whatever dude,” Mark makes him pay. The dude goes off on this half-conceived rant — main point: Mark's a dick — so Mark shoots Tommy a text that says, “It's not the end of the world” since the kid tends to take things a little more seriously than he probably should.

In this circa two-minute break, he glances at the television but it's the same as it's been all night — why the hell don't they just tell you how many people, if any, survived? — and Em stumbles up, and it almost looks like she's wearing roller blades.

“Mark,” finally he looks over to her.

“Are you OK?”

“I'm way too drunk, Mark. Can you hear me?”

“Yeah, just go outside or something.”

“You're not even listening. Whatever, I'm going outside.”

The front of the bar is overcrowded and conversational drifts of “can The Hat<sup>19</sup> even come close to doing it again?” so she wanders to the back, slumps on damp concrete and watches the ground turn to water. That's how she is when Mark finds her, as he steps outside to call Adam for like the ninth time and to smoke another cigarette — a habit he'll quit one day when his best fucking friend isn't probably fucking dead because of a bunch of fucking seagulls.

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<sup>18</sup> A decided falsehood.

<sup>19</sup> National Championship-winning LSU football coach Les Miles, nicknamed so for his white baseball cap worn at every game.

Tommy throws the back door open, guns blazing, fire in his eyes and all of that. Em can't really process what was going on, and Tommy can't really understand why Em can't process what was really going on. It is the curse of being 20 years old and intoxicated — when life should be happening, it's hidden in the dark veil of what is vs. what should be. It is drowned out by the rap and the drinks and the sweat and the fucking and a point is reached, somewhere at the end of the line, where a choice has to be made. Tommy's made his choice, but Em hasn't even come close. Says Mark as he washes his hands of it: "Don't mean to see this, and don't think I do."

"What the hell are you doing out here?"

"Tommy, hey ..."

"We need to talk. Like, now."

"Huh? What for?" Em tries standing, but her world is seen through a camera spinning on a tripod.

"I'm, just, sick of it. I don't care that I shouldn't be saying this, that I never have, and that now I'm fucking trashed I'll say it, whatever, *baby*, you getting this?"

"Wha ... you sound weird, Tommy."

"OK, I'll grant you some truth in the statement you just made. You hear me, darlin', you've been granted some truth. There. Truth has been granted. OK? *OK?* So can I, like, fucking talk now? Do you mind? 'Cause I'll be honest. Totally, because I'm the one who created this whole thing and I'm just going as fast I can trying to get out of it and — Mark, what the *fuck* are you doing? — sorry, hold on. Mark, can we get some privacy?"

"No," he says but turns around with long drag on his Camel Silver. Tommy's back to Em anyway.

"Look, I just know that lately you've been ..."

"You don't know *what* I do," she says in a manner suggesting that knowledge gap to be a vast gloaming ether of all the sinewy acts Tommy's stomach starts churning out acid at the thought of, and his inner person — the real one — is brought to his knees. What she probably actually means (save for the rower) is that she lies alone at night and dreams of a white dress and a tuxed Tommy in tow, a simple happy life married to him with kids and solid careers and being thirty at PTA meetings and all that jazz, but she

can't admit this to anyone because she's in her mid-twenties and expected to be "free," which just kind of means selfish when you think about it, but anyway she's too drunk now to explain any of that, so Tommy just thinks she constantly has a dick in her mouth and, even more harrowing, a guy holding her and rocking her soft body to sleep<sup>20</sup>.

"I'm aware," so quietly Mark barely catches it and decides to focus on the neighboring bar back alleys where other bartenders sit and smoke and then stare at the sky because it is just so fucking *big* and thus easy to get lost in and disappear from a moment forever.

"Look, I just mean Halloween and then tonight, after you just go to a bar and listen to shitty-ass rap from nineteen-*whatever* and I look over and you making out with one of *them* and I just, I just thought you had more dignity or something than that, and I ..."

"I don't want to hear you say that. Ever, Tommy. *I don't want to hear you say that.*"

"What?"

"I don't want to hear *you* say that."

"What?"

"You're an asshole."

"No, you don't want to hear me say *what?*"

"I'm trying Tommy. What else am I supposed to do? I just want to go home. That's all I want. Why are you still mad about Halloween? Why are you mad at all? I smoked weed with Mark before coming out here. I feel so bad, can you please just bring me home?"

"Wait, why are you out here?"

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<sup>20</sup> The irony herein: Tommy likes a certain brand of purity and innocence in his ladies, and Cassie actually likes (and could someday love) him but does the whole sadness-into-sex thing (you could guess from the stereotypically razor sharp black hair, the faded tattoos of zero significance but "oh so much [unexplained] symbolism," the etc.) which means she's spread her legs for  $\times\wedge n$ th guys making Tommy, with his jealousy issues and tough-as-fucking-nails moral fiber, unable to love her. And while Em's kind of a bitch, she's fairly pure (let's try to forget the rower, it was a one time mistake). Not because of morality (though she's got it, one of the things that draws Tommy to her) but more from a steely selfishness (i.e. maintaining said morality creates a sense of higher being in her, the whole "I'm not an animal" thing) than an actual adherence, but all this is making them both sound like bad/sad/mad people, which isn't totally true and none of this really matters anyway, not tonight at least, as you can see for yourself if you just keep reading.

“I don’t feel good, Tom ... I don’t feel good at all.”

“Well, shit. Of course I’ll help you home. I’ll always help you home, Em. One day, I guess, uhh ... can you walk?”

“One day what?”

“Nothing, can you walk OK?”

“I guess so.”

“Look, you live way too far away. You mind staying at my place? I’ll take the couch. You can have the bed.”

“That’s perfect. Just help me up.”

Mark hears her, walks over and slings an arm around her waist, wrapping one of hers around his shoulder. Her legs collapse at first, but she straightens them and stands.

“Can you handle her?” he asks a red-faced Tommy, who nods. Mark considers telling him, “Be sure you take the couch” and jabbing him hard in the ribs for being such a jackass, but he knows Tommy. He’ll take the couch. He’ll always take the couch, not even just to make sure Em never has a sour thought about him. Then he’ll call Mark and complain for hours. But he doesn’t mind.

“Tell everyone where I am,” Tommy says. Mark just nods, pulls out another cigarette and watches them limp off into the bleakness of another Baton Rouge night.

## **MATT**

So many of the moments didn’t seem to lead to more moments, all little cul-de-sacs and dead-ends, but that might be the 1:47 a.m./glut of fermented sugar wreaking havoc on his liver talking. One way or another, it seems like everyone’s left the bar but Matt and Cassie, but since Matt doesn’t (nor ever does) have any idea what is going on, he just sips his last drink of the night — it may as well be water — and sidles up to Cassie, who is teetering in a corner and watching her cell phone.

“Where’d everyone go?” he asks Cassie.

“I can’t hear you.”

“I said where did everybody go? Man, you look annoyed.”

“Fuck you, you fucking asshole,” Cassie shoves a completely unsuspecting Matt, who stumbles and slips on some glass shards from a broken Abita bottle. He crashes to the pisswater-soaked ground.

“What the fuck?” Cassie, eyes wide, turns red and attempts a retreat but a crowd forms a moat around them. Matt pulls himself to his feet, disgustingly examining his drenched jacket. As the crowd disperses, he quickly walks back to Cassie.

“What the hell was that?”

“Sorry, but you were an asshole.”

“Why, ‘cause I said you looked annoyed? You *did*.”

Cassie’s face, already red under her black hair, grows redder.

“*Annoyed?*”

“Yes. Jesus.”

“Sorry, I thought you said, umm, something else.”

“What?”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“No, you shoved me and probably ruined my fucking jacket. What’d you think I said?”

“I don’t know, Matt. God, I don’t know. Something about me looking like a boy or ...”

“Like a boy? Why would I say that? You’re hot as hell.”

Thus the courting process is completed. As the music dies and the lights flip on, they are ushered out of the bar and stumble to Cassie’s apartment to have a few more beers, fill a condom and black out.

## **MARK**

Thankfully the blue laws in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, set by religious tradition, allow Mark to finish work at a “reasonable hour,” thus the bar is empty at 2:05 a.m., which is when his phone begins buzzing. ADAM is displayed on the screen, and he feels a mixture of relief and, to his horror, disappointment. As he answers he knows full well the aching loneliness he’ll feel after the phone conversation, the one he can’t explain, the one that becomes so tangible in the Moments Adding Up to Nothing he can almost see it.



That could be the tinny afterglow of the cheap weed<sup>21</sup>, which wore off hours ago but left that sickly headache kind of pounding away in the din like hearing music while you're doing a breath-holding contest in a pool.

"Hello."

"Hey bro, sorry to call so late, but I have like thirteen missed calls from you. My plane was delayed because of the whole crash thing."

"You didn't think to call or, you know, answer your phone in all that time."

"[Chuckles] Sorry man. I left the phone in my checked bag. Anyway, they kept saying over and over again that no one was dead or injured or anything."

"Yeah, I was working. I see that now, though. Just worried. How was flying?"

"Scary. But whatever, just had to wait at LaGuardia for hours. Anyway, I'm fine. How was your night?"

"Worked, so I watched a bunch of confused people doing a bunch of confusing things."

"I hear that."

"Yeah, but this time the assholes were our friends. Tommy and them."

"Nice."

"Yep."

"Anything interesting?"

"Nope. Cassie seemed more pissed off than usual. Tommy and Em got in a fight, and some good shit was said that needed to be said. But I doubt either of them will remember, really. Plus I don't think I have a shot with Maddie, but whatever."

"Ahh, old Baton Rouge."

"Yeah, how was New York?"

"You know, big, cold, bright. I knew no one really, and it was alienating but it still felt like home. It certainly wasn't Baton Rouge. A plane crashed there. Anyway, I

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<sup>21</sup> Originally, he was told it was Orange Cush, but it turned out to be a light green color with beige crystals, earning it the name Northern Lights (which isn't light green with beige crystals) from his next-door-neighbor-drug-dealer, but Mark (nobody's fool), wanting to spend the M.A.U.T.N. as painlessly as possible (and for as cheaply as possible) pointed out — he actually said this — he could smoke oregano for half the price and twice the effect, so give him the goddamn weed at a reasonable price (and without the bullshit nomenclature), and he wouldn't like call the landlord or anything.

should go and call my parents to let them know I made it in all right. I just saw the tons of missed calls and figured I should hit you up.”

“Thanks man. Glad to know you’re safe. See you tomorrow, I guess.”

“See you then, brother.”

Mark, alone and twenty-six, takes a shot of whiskey without really knowing why, then sips a beer. Twenty-seven is coming on quickly. Flips another chair onto a table and leans on it. Morning is coming on quickly. The bar’s bright silence is eerie, and there’s another hour or two of work left. Looks around the room, at broken glass and discarded napkins, crushed plastic cups and puddles of beer and whiskey, empty stage and lonely bar, rows of half-filled bottles and blank television screens, closed doors and ripped LSU sports posters, flipped chairs and bare pool table.

It looks like any other night.