

WALKING SHADOWS

by

Michael Hantman

A Thesis

Submitted to the

Graduate Faculty

of

George Mason University

in Partial Fulfillment of

The Requirements for the Degree

of

Master of Fine Arts

Creative Writing

Committee:

Director

Department Chairperson

Dean, College of Humanities
and Social Sciences

Date: _____

Spring Semester 2016
George Mason University
Fairfax, VA

Walking Shadows

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at George Mason University

By

Michael K. Hantman
Bachelor of Arts
American University, 2006

Director: Susan Shreve, Professor
Department of English

Spring Semester 2016
George Mason University
Fairfax, VA

Copyright 2016 Michael K Hantman
All Rights Reserved

DEDICATION

This is dedicated to my mother and father, my brother and his family, and my dog Jayne.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my friends and family who have helped me through this process. I would also like to thank my thesis director, Susan Shreve, and my thesis committee, Steve Goodwin and Courtney Brkic, who were incredibly helpful and supportive.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Abstract.....	vi
1. Kevin.....	1

ABSTRACT

WALKING SHADOWS

Michael K Hantman, MFA

George Mason University, 2016

Dissertation Director: Professor Susan Shreve

This thesis is the first section of a three part novel. In this section Kevin, an undergraduate student whose past parodies the film *Home Alone*, is introduced. The text follows Kevin throughout a day in his life as he deals with his mother, his friends, and a girl he likes. Through these interactions Kevin confronts his issues of intimacy and trust.

KEVIN

When he was about ten, Kevin's parents left him by himself. This was just before Christmas, it was snowing and it was cold and there's little Kevin in his house and on his own for the first time. His parents, maybe, weren't completely negligent. They had seven kids and each worked full time, high end, white upper class jobs. The kind of lives, you know, hectic, fast lane and a million things to do and always rushing to get some contract in before they take some call, before they pick up a cake for so and so's party before they pick up one of the kids up from soccer practice before they drop the next one off for a piano lesson or to see their math tutor or some other thing, before getting dinner and then everyone sits down for forty minutes dammit and spends some time together, even though it's always chaos, even though there's always fighting and other bullshit, before descending into more stuff for each of them to do and even more shit that they have to make sure each one of their kids does and on and on like that for longer than either one of them could remember.

So they were, as usual, stressed, this time about going on vacation with five kids, the oldest two having left for college by now, and getting everyone packed and ready and all of that. And little Kevin, the youngest, I should mention, just seemed to slip their minds. As to why they didn't call, I guess that's the big question, one that I suppose,

though I'm not really certain, has racked Kevin's mind over the years, though I can't say if he's ever gotten to bringing it up with anyone. Maybe his shrink. It's possible that by the time his family realized their mistake Kevin had unplugged the phone lines, but who knows? As much as all of this has been scrutinized, I'm sure by Kevin and his mother and the rest of family to some degree, I'm not sure how much, if any, of this scrutiny has ever occurred face to face. Maybe between one of his sisters and a brother, and maybe even at times his father weighs in on things with one of Kevin's other siblings, but for the most part, and especially around Kevin, things went unsaid.

The irony here, I guess, is that this story, this little thing in Kevin's life, could have been so many other things, and I'm not trying to drag this out here, but it could have so easily been this little anecdote that was told every Christmas, this thing about Kevin by himself, and Mom and Dad and everyone rush home to find him and he's set up this whole elaborate thing, and they get to the part about the toy soldiers on the steps and maybe mom even stepped on one with her bare feet, after taking her heels off as she rushed in the house (because this thing has become such a habit that the rote performance of it occurs even during emergencies) but she still runs up the stairs anyway, going past the rest of his contraptions all to find him. And she still has this little mark on her foot but in the end it's Ok. It's a reminder of how scared they were and how glad they were to see him and all of that.

But ultimately, well, the thing was, now I'm sure at this point Kevin had been by himself, and he was, by nature, even at his young age kind of a loner. Maybe loner's not the right word but the kind of kid who was content on his own, even if he wasn't on his

own that much, but sitting on the sidelines of things, pleasantly ignored as his brothers and sisters played X-box or talked or what have you. In his own space but still having a sense of accompaniment. But this was the first time he had really felt alone, like he was on his own, and in his mind he was either terrified or wanted to prove something, like he was glad to have some independence for once, though I think even that impetus would have turned into terror as well, and this was maybe why he went a little nuts.

He started to worry, started to wonder if his family would ever come back, started to wonder if he would have to get a job or learn to cook, thought about making spaghetti. He saw a white van with tinted windows roll up and down the street. Three times he saw this thing and it freaked him out and then he received a phone call where the caller hung up upon hearing his voice and that's when it started. He started to unplug things, phone cords and computer wires and for some reason the dvd player, he got the idea that someone or something was after him so he prepared. He scattered the aforementioned toys across the stairs, he found his dad's bowling ball and set it up at the top of the same staircase so he could fling it down at intruders, found a hockey stick and mask and kept them on him so he could defend himself. He did a bunch of stuff like that, kid stuff, the kind of things that maybe he knew wouldn't actually protect him but would ease his young mind, would occupy him. It made enough sense to him, in its own way. But the last thing, that fatal thing, when he filled up a bucket of water and poured it onto the cold front steps, letting it freeze over in the harsh winter. It probably wasn't completely frozen less than an hour later, but it was enough. His mother, panicked, just like she would have been, jumping out of the car as the minivan pulled in front of the house and racing up to

the door to see if her son was alright, and she slips on the ice and she goes almost completely vertical and her back thuds against the hard cement and there wasn't even a scream or anything, just that hard thud before Kevin looks out of his window and sees his family gathered around his mom who's lying there in the snow.

She broke her back, paralysis in the trunk and legs, so she couldn't walk, was in a wheelchair from then on. And after that there was just this thing with Kevin, this removal of self. At first there wasn't any noticeable change, he even tried to act more playful, more carefree, tried to make things the same. He'd poke at his mother's legs and he'd look at her and smile, he'd take rides on the stair lift, stuff like that, maybe trying to convince the rest of them that things could still be the same. In school, around his friends and other kids is where he changed, is where he just began to feel tired and resigned and became quieter. There were a few calls to his parents, at least back in Chicago, and they talked to Kevin, asked him if he was alright. It took a while, longer than maybe it should have, but eventually his mom sat him and down and told him that things weren't his fault. I think somewhere within her she knew this was necessary, even before settling into it, even before the melancholy and all, but she waited for it. Maybe she wanted it to come from someplace real, maybe she was scared he would be able to read something beneath her, her bitterness, her falseness, her anger, but whatever grace she expected to arrive in order to make this easier never came. And so it was what you'd expect it to be, like lines from an average movie about this sort of thing. These things happen, not your fault, mysteries of the world, god's plans, we'll get by, same as always, you're forgiven, things will be great, they'll be super, even better than before, and so on, all the while with a

slight cringe on her face, all the while wondering if her kid was the stupidest fucking kid on the planet, if he had any thread of common sense or any remorse or any realization of what had happened.

But with that it was done, and Kevin was who he was, and this might have just been true anyway. It wasn't like he was bad or anything, didn't get in much trouble, got decent grades, never showed much enthusiasm though, was still kind of quiet, reserved, an introvert you'd suppose. The playfulness dulled all around now, he was almost always quiet, and considerate, and now fiercely attached to his mother, or at least to doing right by her. The house in general followed this trend. The rest of the kids still bickered and were entitled enough to act bratty over one thing or another. Many of the family dinners were almost quiet, not what, perhaps, a normal person would consider to be quiet, but there was definitely a sense of distance now, an unspoken something. Dad, Ken, old Kenny, began to feel like his wife's servant while she, so used to running around so fast and so frequently, doing so many things at all times, was going crazy due to her new found inertia. She kept her job, still went in to the office most days, though she was allowed to stay home from time to time, consult on things and so on, but something was gone. She needed help now. She couldn't run errands or run around her office, do a quick drop in to a client, didn't feel independent. She needed help with every goddamn thing and it pissed her off.

But things changed, things subsided within her. A few years down the road she and her husband got a divorce, or Kenny left her, depending on who you asked, and a few years after that she left Chicago with Kevin and his older brother and sister, and they

moved into a decent sized house in the suburbs of Baltimore, a place in a little community around Towson. And by now she was calmer, a bit morose and needy. Clingy even, but calmer. She took a consulting job that she could do mostly from her house, set up an office and a bedroom for herself downstairs, she had grown damn tired of using the stair lift. This was coping, this was acceptance, even if it had its draining aspects. Kevin took up an increasing kind of dedication, a notion of service to her. There was something like a bell inside of him that, when she seemed to need something, any sort of thing, it would go off and he'd abandon whatever he was preoccupied with and he'd be up at her side, ready to help. It was as if some human part of him left and there was now just this helper, this servant almost. It could be worrisome at times. He saw a psychiatrist for about a year in eighth grade (and then another one several years later) to try and work through any sort of guilt, but it was mostly ineffective. He hated it and stopped.

And then he took on, as he got older, a kind of independence. A kind. He was still very reliant on a number of things in many ways but he had this streak, this thing where he knew how to lean on himself, knew how to be alone and how to survive and how to do what he had to do. By the time he was a sophomore in high school he practically lived on his own. His siblings were all off to college or out in the world and his mother hardly, if ever, came upstairs, and he was left with the vacancy of the top floor of his house to his discretion. It was an odd thing, he could have done just about anything he wanted. His mom did have a helper who came around the house but she didn't bother much with him. The real thing was that there was just a sadness, a sense of guilt to it all. He could feel something observing him, telling him to keep his room clean. He'd feel a tinge if he was

up late, listening to music, even pacing, as if every crack of the floorboards caused by his feet would somehow echo down into the bottom floor, into his mother's house, into her room and it would let her know. I mean this wasn't the whole thing, this wasn't everything, he had his rebellious streak, he had times when he slacked off and was neglectful and he was human and all that shit, he learned to drink by himself at a young age, but for the most part he just had this kind of life, this teetering between helping his mom and then being completely out on his own, monitoring, wondering what would come. Kevin's other life, what would be his social life, was where all the shit really hit him. Something within manifested and doubled over. He had troubles with school and with people and with belonging and all of that. He came up with, or maybe without, for a while anyway, this sense of place that's instilled in you at a certain time by certain people. When you're in school, or maybe just when you're young, you get this thing, the world around you reacts to you and it tells you who you are. In high school you just have this drummed into you over and over again. You get this place. If you're weird then you learn that, and from then on, from the first inkling of this until it becomes so ever present you can't stand the thought of it, you struggle with that notion, that capacity of yourself

For Kevin, I guess, while this was supposed to develop, while you're supposed to try and find a place, an identity among peers, trying silently to persuade people to think of you as smart or funny or sweet, he was preoccupied. I guess you could say similar things about a bunch of people from troubling situations, and I didn't know him in high school (I mean I know about him in high school, you could guess, but I don't have that visceral something that you get from being there) so I can only say so much, but he was

tired, exhausted by a whole bunch of whatever, all of his things, the kind of issues, I guess most people reach when their older, so he didn't take part in this game. And when he did get to that point where he would start to be beyond his other issues, and when he began to come to this realization that he had to begin to take part, to go back and forth in this way, in these ways, with these people around him, he was already labeled. He was something to them, even if he didn't know what this something was, even if he wasn't present for this assignment of place. Something awkward, weird and slightly off putting, too raw perhaps, too noticeably troubled in a way that penetrates that bubble of high school sociability, and so he would be a step removed from everyone.

And all I'm trying to get at here, and I won't go on too much longer, but it's just this thing about him, it's trying to find, well, you look at Kevin and you see someone vaguely normal, but not quite. There's always just this little thing sticking out. It's this indescribable little nothing but it stands out somehow and I think people can just read it and they know, there's something going on there. And I think most people stay away from that, and if they don't stay away then they approach with caution. And this affects him even more, makes this thing stronger, even when he's not aware of it. And with this little pain, this little thing that so many of us probably share but so few really accept it or feel the force of it when it becomes noticeable, but it's a thing with him. And it can be hard to move, hard to breathe when the world circles around you like this, and, fuck, I mean it's not always there, but quite often, and no one will really say why or how, but there's just this force, and maybe it's not even related to the whole thing with Christmas and Chicago and his mother and his dad leaving and the empty halls on his upstairs floor,

but that, like this thing about him, it just sticks out. And so you put those two pieces, the past and the present, the story and the situation, you put them together because they fit. But maybe they're both just symptoms of something larger. Maybe. I couldn't really tell you. But they just, when you look at it they fit in a way, something lights up, and you can almost see something, some pattern or something, this little spark, not just about him but in him, and you wonder if this is some grand failure or if it's just a path towards something less common.

The rest of this, the recent stuff, was in April, around the end of the school year. Kevin's second year at Towson and after a few problems as a freshman he was doing all right. He had just moved out of his mom's house about three months prior, picking up a lease from a kid who dropped out at the beginning of the semester. He was now living with this girl Sandra, a kind of bright little pot head who, while she didn't sell it, you could pick up a bag from her from time to time. I think he actually liked this. I think he liked having this stream of people drop by his place, and even though he wasn't a big smoker he liked sitting around while a bunch of people got stoned and made conversation, like he was a part of something now. It's how he got to meet a bunch of people, including myself.

He still saw his mother all the time. He still ran errands and stopped by the house and drove her from spot to spot, picked up the phone when she called, on a dime, and he still had nights where he felt uneasy, where he worried. This was on a Friday, Friday in April, and Kevin comes in with a bag of groceries for his mom, a bunch of juice and fruit

and some rice and a pie crust, sugar, and blueberries, and he asks her if he got everything. And she rifles through the bags.

“Potato chips?” she says in a quiet tone, her eyes soft and there’s that small and sympathetic little glare of disappointment that just kills.

“Potato chips?” he says back.

He walks around the room over to where she’s sitting, next to the bags, and he starts to rifle through the stuff.

“Did you ask for them?”

“I’m pretty sure,” she says.

She didn’t, he would have written it down, but still.

“If you asked for them then they should be in here,” he says. And he keeps rifling.

“It’s Ok,” she says, and there’s that small hum, that breathing, that action designed to avoid the normal sigh but still participate as if it were one. And Kevin keeps rifling.

“Really,” she says. “Stop going through it. If they’re not there they’re not there.”

And he stops.

“Do you want me to pick some up?”

“Really,” she says.

“I can run out to a 7-11 or something no big deal.”

“It’s fine,” she says.

“Are you sure?”

And she sits quietly for a moment.

“Really,” she says. “It’s fine.”

And so he unpacked all of the stuff, put it all away in the appropriate drawers and cabinets and in the fridge, and he took a seat at the kitchen table and began to peel a banana.

“So?” she said.

He grabbed the tip of the banana and pinched it off, stuck it in his mouth.

“How’s school?” she asked.

He nodded, still chewing.

“Any new friends?” she said calmly, lifting a People magazine from the stack of mail in the middle of the table.

“Oh, I don’t know,” he said.

“Any girls?”

“They’re around.”

“You should meet someone.”

“Yeah, I guess that’d be good,” he said, taking a second bite.

“Are you getting out?” she asked. “Going to things at all?”

“I guess,” he said.

“Are you drinking?” she asked.

“Just a little bit.”

“But you’re not...” and she paused and gave him a modest kind of glare.

“It’s fine,” he said. “I promise I’m fine.”

She looked him up and down and let out a small breath. She rifled through the pages of her magazine.

“Do you know who Ringo Starr is?” she asked.

“I’m pretty sure I do,” he said. “You guys used to play the Beatles all the time.”

“You remember that?”

“I remember who Ringo Starr is.”

“Well they just put him in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.”

“He’s not already in there?”

“I guess not,” she said, and flipped the page.

Kevin finished his banana and placed the peel on the table. She flipped through the pages, just that crisp sound of paper ruffling, floating through the air. He clenched his fists and then brought his arms down and rubbed his knees. She looked at the peel on the counter. He flexed his shoulders and brought himself up, grabbed the banana peel and escorted it to the trashcan.

“How’s that girl you live with?” she asked.

“Sandra,” he said. “She’s fine.”

“You still like living with her?”

“I guess.”

“Are you gonna stay there next year?”

“Oh,” he said. “I dunno.”

“This is all very interesting,” she said.

“Oh, sorry,” he said, crossing the room and sitting back down at the table.

“Well, she’s fine I guess. She’s dating this guy.”

“Is he nice?”

“I don’t know, he’s nice I guess.”

“Is he handsome?”

“I don’t know.”

“She was a cute girl,” she said.

Kevin didn’t move.

“Whatever happened to that other girl?”

“What girl?” he said.

“The, the one,” she said, moving her hand around in the air. “The English girl, the one you had the paper with?”

“Oh, that wasn’t really a thing,” he said.

“Well, what happened?” she said in a calm voice, her hands holding the magazine in front of her face, her eyes straight forward.

“Nothing, it was just kind of, I don’t know, it wasn’t a thing.”

“You should meet someone,” she said.

“Yeah.”

“You should,” she said. “You’re a good kid.”

And she meant it, I’d like to think. This was kind of regular thing with her, every few weeks she’d try, to little effect, to pry into his love life, to see if anything was happening. Most, if not all of the time there wasn’t. Kevin had only once before brought a girl home to meet his mother, it was a somewhat unintentional thing. He wasn’t really

dating her so much and the visit was meant to be casual, just like a friend was coming over. He'd met this girl in school, high school, they had a science project together where they had to test the water in the Chesapeake Bay, and they started to click a little bit. He was kind of friendly with a bunch of her friends, she was a crunchy city girl, had hippyish friends that Kevin got along with. So the two dating wasn't out of the question, though nothing ever fully formed.

When she came over to the house, I don't know, either his mother picked up on some sort of vibe, had some sort of motherly sixth sense about the thing, or she was so intent on seeing something there, even though she had no formal reason to think that something was there, that she saw it. Either way the event was somewhat awkward. At first she pinched, literally pinched, young Kelly's (her name was Kelly by the way) cheek and there was just this overwhelming bizarre sense of joy. She went on like this, bit by bit, implicating romance between them, making googly eyes at Kelly from across the room, all kind of small, meant to be subtle things that have a way of resounding, especially when someone's caught off guard. Kelly took it all in stride but eventually, and this was the weird part to Kevin, there came an undercurrent of bitterness, of ugliness that was, again, officially subtle, but that was hard to miss. At dinner Kelly spoke up about how she had gotten her dog (a tiny little thing) to become a vegetarian and there came an avalanche of comments. How can he not be hungry? Does he ever just stare at meat? If you starve the little guy I suppose he wouldn't have a choice. He probably sneaks out at night and devours squirrels.

And this went on, on a variety of topics, and Kelly took it all well enough, I suppose, and maybe that's not what killed off any chance the two had at young love but it did something. And Kevin never brought this up, of course, he didn't have the stomach to chew out his mom, didn't have the nerve to address the weirdness with Kelly, wouldn't have even known where to begin. First, somehow dismantling this notion that they were together, that it seemed like he was that delusional third grader who tells people he has a girlfriend when some girl waves at him or something, and doing that without destroying the possibility that they could be together, and then the other stuff, and all the weirdness and just, fuck it! Let things go the way they go, he thought. And they did.

Kevin plugged away at a few more chores around the house. He had developed a kind of sense of Zen in doing chores. He mowed the lawn, tuned into the motorized sound of it, the green dust that billowed out of the sides of the thing, the sight of the grass, the flatness of it, its look now calm and centered. He wiped counters, making straight square edges, lining one wet streak along another. He washed the dishes, felt the warmth of the water on his hands, the feel of the soap, that slight sensation in the muscles of his forearm, tense to scrub and then loose as he wiped the surface of a plate, smooth and light.

He took a shower in his old bathroom, spent some time kind of picking away at his things. He flipped through the pages of an old Will Eisner book that was on the stand next to the toilet. He looked up at the ceiling tiles and little sparks went through his head, little memories, memories of nothing perhaps, but there was the inescapable notion that

he had spent so much time here, had so many memories that didn't have a firm attachment to anything particular, no precise place in his mind. The bathroom, the image and the feel of it, was this kind of crystallized thing. The brown tiles with little spots on them, the thin wood paneled counter with two sinks, each overlooked by a circular mirror, the right one always being his default. The smell of it, not a bathroom smell but one of almost nothingness, a pristine absence, and there was this constant notion of water, as if there were a waterfall or a pond within its walls.

There was this ghost here, in his bathroom, of all places, a permutation of himself that stood under the showerhead staring up at the ceiling tiles for minutes on end, almost able to escape existence altogether. Taking in warm water and steam and then switching the hot faucet off completely and straining in coldness, and focusing, and liking it, like one of those monks he'd heard of and Googled who sits under a waterfall for hours. Or he'd stand in front of the mirror and look at himself until he was no longer there, until he was beyond the reflection and was now made up, simply, of little distinguished marks that he'd never noticed. Or sitting on the toilet, sometimes without even going to the bathroom, reading comics for long periods until, if anyone was outside in the hallway, they might begin to worry.

It was this ghost that made him calm, gave him composure, escape. As long as he held on to it, he had something, like the monks, how they can always go up to the top of the mountain and simply exist, or Quasi Modo and the bell tower. Still, some part of him, the firm part, worried about it, knew, or thought, or knew that as long as he entertained

this, it would grow, and he would fade, and he might end up locked in bathrooms the rest of his life.

Sometimes he wondered if this ghost was more truly him than any other part. It was as if he could see himself, almost as if from above, himself apart from all the other stuff. And he had to come into this notion, had to take hold of this ghost and push it down, back into himself, aware that, on some level, at some point he would have to shift dramatically one way or another, either into the ethereal or back onto the terra firma. But for now it was just somewhere beneath himself, separated, in his center, pressing itself upon the outer layer of his being, face stuck upon the cloudy window so that it was only barely, if at all, perceptible.

He snapped out of it, put his clothes back on and sat on his bed for a few minutes before returning downstairs.

“Are you hanging around for a while?” he heard his mother call from the kitchen.

“Oh, um, I have class today.”

“Which one?” she said, her voice still echoing from the kitchen, growing as he moved closer to it.

“Astronomy,” he said, walking through the archway into the painted white, clean room where his mother was still at the table.

“Oh,” she said. “You like that one don’t you?”

“Yeah, it’s great,” he said.

“Are you gonna stop by later?” she asked.

“Um, I don’t know.”

“Do you have plans?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “I might just hang around.”

“Well don’t worry about it if you’re doing something.”

“I mean I could stop by,” he said.

She brought her arm up and waved him off.

“I’ll see what happens,” he said.

“I was thinking about making a pie,” she said.

“I gathered,” he said. “What brought that on?”

“It just seemed like a thing.”

“No occasion.”

“Nope, just thought it might be fun to bake something.”

“Well good luck, with that” he said.

“I’ll need you to help me eat it,” she said.

“Alright,” he said.

And he scratched his head and stared up at the ceiling.

Kevin sat about two rows back in class, never sat next to me for some reason. He’d always give me a wave or a nod when he came in and then he’d sit himself down and he’d be fully engrossed the whole time, staring at images of stars and planets and only breaking his glance to quickly scribble down some notes, more so what he found interesting, what he didn’t want to forget, than what he needed for the tests. I don’t think he actually did that well in in the class but he loved it.

On break I went out to smoke a cigarette and he walked up next to me. I waved and he gave me a nod. He was a perpetual nodder, but a full one, not those quick and barely perceptible cool guy nods but deep and genuine. I lit my cigarette. He stood next to me and looked out over the campus, like there was something there.

“How’s it goin?” I asked.

He nodded again.

“You liking the lecture?”

“Oh yeah.” He said.

“You really like this stuff huh?”

“Yeah, I guess,” he said.

“You just always seem so engrossed in it.”

He scratched his face and averted his gaze from the scenery in front of him, turned slightly in my direction, like he was about to speak, but he didn’t really say anything.

“Are you thinking about majoring in science or, I guess space or something?” I asked.

“Oh no,” he said. “Or not space science anyway, or maybe.”

“Oh.”

“It’s just, it gets me, well, it helps with things.”

“What things?” I asked.

“Oh, you know,” he said. “I mean, well, sometimes you dream and you get this thing where stuff keeps, well, I guess you see dreams in your life, I’ll dream about bugs

and then I think I'll find a bug somewhere or, well, you can't—it's just you don't know if you're in this weird reality or something, like if the parts of your mind that see all this stuff are kind of controlling you, y'know?"

"Ok," I said.

"But then you get to all this stuff, the stars and everything, and it just calms it all down kind of, it gives you a perspective and you don't worry about that other stuff as much, because it's all in perspective."

And I nodded. And I took a drag of my cig. And I took this in stride, because this is the kind of thing I've come to expect from him. It was always kind of this way, maybe less so at first, but always this kind of quick barrage of weirdness that's somehow tamed by some sense of actual logic, of a thought process, abstract as it may be, behind it all. And in truth it was never the thoughts themselves, but their presentation, their spontaneity, that sense that someone, that he, could either lack or have this quality, that he could function without that basic instinct to appear on level, to preserve normality, and that he didn't go against the grain to go against the grain, but due to just, something. It was either impressive or off-putting or some combination in between but it always let me know who I was talking to.

We both had that, me and Kev. We both had this thing where, like, I can talk on and on about bullshit, him less so, but I can rant. But when it comes down to something, like that basic human instinct, y'know you see someone and they're sad and you go over and you know you should say something comforting, but you don't have the words, and for most people it's just instinct, but for me, me and him, we go over and that thing, that

instinct clicks, but then it's just followed by this jumble, this word vomit, and what we were trying to get across is confused.

I think there was this recognition between us, me and him, and it came pretty quickly, without words, just this thing where we could tell, could tell that those kinds of words were hard. It's this thing that pain makes you unique. And that's how we got along, me and Kev, because I think our strangenesses were familiar to one another in a way. I could get high and go off on shit, not even talk a lot but just punctuate silence with weird shit and he was, I guess he's the type of guy who you can sit next to him and get high and even if he doesn't, he won't freak you out, that type of thing. And we'd just communicate shit and understand. And we didn't have a deep relationship, a deep connection or anything, but there was that common knowledge.

So we'd go off, I'd go off. About nothing. But I'd get stuff from him. He told me this joke once, not funny, but it's just, so, well here's the thing. There's no story with me and Kev. Like with most people you have some story of how you met so and so through such and such and he said this thing and it was weird but then this there's this moment and whatever. With Kev I just met him. He was Sandra's roommate and he hung around while we got high and he never made that much of an impression but before long he was just kind of a part of things. Like a puppy or something, one of your friend's pets and at first you think it's nice but after a while it's almost part of your life, you can't wait to see the little fucker. I don't even think we have stories, me and Kev, there was just this thing.

But the thing I'll get into, the moment I'll pick out of a hat because it stands out to me for some reason, is me and Kev hanging out, and I was high and he wasn't and Sandra

had left, because by now she was fine leaving the two of us together, like we were babysitting each other while she did shit in her room, and we were watching Adventure Time. And this ad comes on for another cartoon, Uncle Grandpa.

“It’s like they pick out weird shit just to be weird now. For the kids or something,” I said. “Like there’s a zaniness quota or something.”

“Yeah,” he said.

“It’s so, I mean everything has, like, it can’t make sense, shit used to be weird but there was some logic in it and that’s why the weirdness worked, because it came from something genuinely weird. Now it’s like, I don’t know, execs or something picking shit out of a hat.”

And I went on like that for a while, and Kevin nodded and yeah’d me. And finally I stopped and then there’s just quiet and noise from the TV, and a minute or two passed, a full stop in the conversation, and then Kevin just turned to me and said,

“There’s a lot of incest in there.”

And I started cracking up. Not just because it was funny, but because I just got this picture of him sitting there, this full couple of minutes, maybe more, maybe the whole time I was talking, working out this premise and wondering whether or not he should say anything and then it just comes out like nothing and it killed me. I liked that. Liked that about him.

“It’d have to be,” I said. “He’d have to fuck his sister and then, wait, he’s an uncle and a grandpa so...”

“He’d have had to have sex with his mother,” he said. “And then his kid would be his sister and his daughter.”

“And then he’d fuck his sister-daughter and he’d be that kid’s uncle and grandfather,” I said.

And he nodded, and smiled at me. And that fucking killed me.

The other joke, the one I was talking about, that joke was, Ok, so he went through this shit with this girl his freshmen year, which he kind of glossed over when he told me about it, but nothing since then, and me, my hypocritical self from inside my bubble, I told him to get back out there, mix it up and all that. And he wasn’t really into it. And we went back and forth about “how are you ever gonna meet someone if you don’t…” and all that shit and he says, “There’s an old joke about this.”

And I went along and asked him about it.

And this was back, all this was back, maybe about two or three months after we met, after I was trying to find my through and all this shit, being back in Baltimore but still not knowing a lot of people and feeling weird about the whole thing. And I knew more people than him but they were kind of a drag, most of them, but I would have guessed that he needed a friend more than I did. It seemed kind of like he had burned what bridges he had the year before. And this was just around when I started to notice him and Julie and they’re kind of unspoken whatever that he would never talk about, and I felt weird bringing it up, at least directly. But I don’t know, I just liked hanging out with the kid, not that he was fun or anything, I mean he was fun to me but he wasn’t, well, he had this thing about him.

“So,” he said. “Well, just with people, it’s, well the joke is, do you know how porcupines mate?”

And I didn’t.

And he says “Very carefully.”

And he gave me this big goofy nod.

And I shut up for a moment and took that in.

And that’s what it came down to, I guess, with me and him, the dual recognition that we both were leading careful lives, that this was me and him reacting to the situation around us. That his affliction, ours, was that there was space, this distance between us and them, and not so much because of that we were dangerous, but when you can’t hold on to anything, there’s a void. And when and if something comes to fill that, or seems like it will, something happens, you go crazy, but you have to keep that muzzled. And then you fall further back into that void. And that’s a thing. Because the world splices, peppers, the normalcy of the population with people who don’t, can’t, I guess, get along. Who breathe and eat tension. And this isn’t such a bad thing, it’s the way the world grows, it’s the way it gains a conscience, because otherwise people don’t pay attention, people without problems don’t think, but if you’re outside and you’re constantly trying to be, whatever, be this thing that’s different, this thing that’s disruptive, well, careful’s a good word for it. And we knew that, me and Kev. And I was leaning into it, into that, I think.

I took another drag of my cigarette as he looked out over the campus.

“The video was pretty cool,” I said.

“Which one?”

“The supernova exploding.”

“Oh yeah,” he said.

And we stood there looking out and I took another drag.

“Y’know we’re coming over to your place after this,” I said.

“Oh,” he said. And he scratched his chin. “Who’s we?”

But he knew pretty well.

“Me and Julie,” I said.

And he nodded, this time a big one, one of those goofy ones, up and down like a cheesy video of a kid who’s beginning to understand something. And he scratched his face. And he very quickly rubbed his earlobe.

“You guys are smoking huh?”

“Yeah,” I said. “If it’s cool.”

“Oh yeah,” he said. “I don’t mind.”

“You want to smoke a little?”

“Eh, I think I’m alright.”

“You’re not into it?”

“Oh, you know it’s just, it gets me going.”

“Yeah?”

“Not in good ways,” he said.

“Like you get paranoid?”

“I don’t know, not so much that but, I don’t know, it gets me going.”

“Ok,” I said.

I took another drag.

“Sometimes I get paranoid,” I said.

“Yeah,” he said. “Me too.”

“But I still like it,” I said.

And I took a final drag and bent over and put the cig out on the sidewalk, and then brought it up and pinched the tip to see if it was still hot. I held it in my hand and shrugged and we made our way back to the classroom.

After class I waited for him outside and we walked back to his apartment. It was close by. His place was this apartment building for students, right next to campus and across the way from Shepard Pratt, a big time mental hospital in Baltimore. One in which he had, a little less than a year ago, after all his stuff with that girl and all this other shit, spent time and recuperated and hit what was possibly his low point, and recovered and escaped only to move a mere matter of feet from its main entrance. You literally step out of his building and you look at the place. It’s kind of weird I guess, him living with that reminder, that shadow always casting. He kind of averted his glance from the place as we walked by, maybe, it was hard to tell but I think it was in his mind somewhere, that thing he didn’t want to recognize.

Sandra, when we got in, pulled out her weed from a little jewelry box she kept under the coffee table, told me it was mellow shit, an indica or something, Blue Pine I

think it was called. She had just run out of some deep trippy shit and was coming down into mellower highs, more sociable, not stoned to the point of staring and drooling and forgetting the thing you were on every other second. Kevin took a shower when he got back in and Julie was on her way but the two of us started to get high anyway.

“I don’t know what he does in there?” Sandra said, hearing the water rushing through the walls.

“Some people take long showers,” I said.

“Yeah but he’s a guy though, he doesn’t do anything with his hair or anything.”

I made a jerk off motion with my hand.

“No,” she said.

The water clicked off and she looked at the wall.

“Watch, he’ll be in there for like, another twenty minutes.”

“You like him though,” I said.

She nodded, picking up the bowl from the middle of the table, taking a small hit.

“He’s a good roommate,” she said.

She gestured the bowl in my direction and I waved it off. I had taken a hit or two but I didn’t want to go down that road, not too far, to get where you’re like, I don’t know, sometimes you get high and you see things that aren’t there, or maybe they are there but you’d be better off not seeing them. There’s a tranquility in just being in one moment, not this repercussive thing that bounces into your head and off the walls and shit, just the high and whatever mundane but pleasant as of right now thing that happens to exist.

“Waiting for Julie,” I said.

“Phhhht,” and she rolled her eyes and put the bowl back on the table.

“I mean I guess he’s better than Clark with all that all that crap that happned with him. He doesn’t really bring people back or anything and, like, he’s cool about stuff.”

And I sat back in my chair and stretched, put my hands behind my head and my elbows up in the air.

“He spends a lot of time in his room and he’s not really, like I mean he’s friendly but you know.”

“He’s his own guy,” I said.

And she looked around the table and picked the bowl back up.

“He’s a good roommate,” she said, and took another hit. And she lifted her chin into the air and blew smoke up towards the ceiling.

“Where the fuck is Julie?” she said.

“She’s on her way.”

And she put the bowl back on the table and then sat back, kicked her feet up and stared at the ceiling.

“Do you have a dog?” she asked.

I shook my head.

“I want to get a dog,” she said. “Like a little one,” she said, bringing her hands together and making a circle with her fingers. “A schnauzer or something.”

“Cool,” and I nodded.

“Do you think Kevin would let me get one?”

“I dunno,” I said. “I think he’d be fine.”

And she rolled her shoulders into the couch, grabbed a strand of her hair and pulled on it lightly.

“Dude, did you hear about Adam Cressler?”

“No,” I said.

“He drove a car into a fucking house.”

“Shit.”

“Fucking, um, Amanda, like she broke up with him or something, and she was, I think she was with this guy Devon, and he keeps calling her and he’s drunk and he gets on the phone with her and you could hear him, like over the phone literally hear him driving into this fucking house!”

“Jeez,” I said.

“Like into it!” she said. “I mean he didn’t hit anyone but into the fucking house, like through the window. And she thinks he was like, I don’t know, y’know like he was trying to prove something or something, shit like that.”

“Fuck,” I said.

“Yeah, fucked up,” she said.

“So what’s gonna happen to him?”

She shrugged her shoulders. She picked up the bowl.

“Dude can you hit this? I want someone to get high with.”

“She’ll be here,” I said.

“Fucking Julie,” she said.

We'd wait a little longer, and we wouldn't say much. And Julie would show up almost right after that, almost on cue, like her ears were burning. She had this weird thing about her where whenever you're wondering about her she kind of drifts in, or not drifts, she makes a presence, but you know. You'd be trying to get in touch with her and she'd be gone, she'd be like this vaporous thing that you can't find but it's on your mind and the, boom, Julie, and she'd just be there.

She would be carrying her bag, a little black and orange satchel with notebooks and papers and she would be smiling and shuffling around in that way that people do, people who are rushing and go from thing to thing and it's almost like it takes them a second to realize where they are but then they smile and they're polite, like they were meeting someone new, before they sink into their comfort zone and they finally realize that they don't have to keep smiling and making eye contact and if they want to they can cuss, or in her case, smoke a bowl.

And, so well, I'll get into to it now I guess, but Julie was always kind of like this. She was always that girl, I suppose, the one who seems somehow successful and happy and solid even if she's not part of the popular crowd or what have you, balancing on that line between someone you can be around and someone that, maybe they can go places or something, like they actually have a future, they're good at things but still act, or try not to act, like they have a stick up their ass. That girl that every guy below a certain line of confidence or popularity has a crush on, not because she's so damn pretty, but because she seems somehow attainable, almost at least, in some realistic fantasy or something. And through that she's smart and funny and somehow relatable and actually kind and

just foreign enough and still pretty decent looking and maybe there's a shot there but these guys, they're all too timid to talk to her. I mean they talk, they have conversations and then replay these conversations in their heads as if they're the greatest things ever until they see her having the same conversation with some even nerdier kid who, I can't be as nerdy as that kid, and maybe that conversation was pity but ours wasn't, was it? And then she goes out with Vince Flynn who plays football and has parties goddammit (which was pretty funny while it lasted) and then I, we, they, think she's a bitch until it ends and then she must be looking for something real now right? And then it's their time isn't it? and all these guys hang on her actions and every words, this flock of nerds, and the whole thing is almost hysterical in a way I can't fully describe to anyone who's not cynical enough, who hasn't been just completely outside of things without actually having been pushed that way.

That was kind of the first impression she gave, and still gives. But then she was, when we started to hang out in high school, when we became friends, I think she was trying to go against that grain of the stereotypical hard working and persistent Asian girl which she is only in part, which I guess a lot of people struggle against those things. But she maintained a nice balance, a nice in between. Her parents are actually quite laid back. Her mother at least is very sociable and kind and relatable and asks Julie about parties and boys and that type of thing, though I'm sure there's a serious parent underneath of all that. Her dad kind of intimidates me a little, though she insists he is a pussy cat and her brother was cool, but I only met him once or twice.

I think maybe her brother had something to do with her, as she tells it he was always a good guy, maybe a bit too lazy, or dysfunctional in a way, maybe obsessed with the wrong things, but he was always a good older brother, looking out for her, imparting things to her, Mos Def's first album, Wu Tang also, Akira and Reservoir Dogs and Dazed and Confused and even The Breakfast Club, and Street Fighter II and Mario Kart, as if everything that was cool, and not so much cool as in accepted but cool in that way that it's something that hits you and you see colors, like there's a brightness that you now know exists, came from him. She told me once that her first accomplishment, the first real thing she remembers getting right, was Ryu's haduken. Learning that half circle B, doing it over and over again, her brother sitting there with the SNES controller in front of her face showing her that motion, that timing, over and over again until she got it that first time, and then as she struggled again, until eventually she could sit there and rain fireballs over her brother's E Honda, mainly because he let her. But that was a gateway, an introduction if you will into the world of slackerdom, to people who let things slide. And she had this with her, this demystified male, this fat slob who broke down some sort of notion of what you should seek in life, something I've maybe been drifting towards.

Then we met. I mean we knew each other, I had been over to her house for some party in middle school and we had been in classes and shit together forever. But I was at party, and so was she, and I never really saw her drink much at parties, but I was out in some kids back yard smoking a joint, by myself I should mention, and she comes up to me. And she had never been high before, and I think she didn't want to try it in some cypher, in front of people, particularly if those people mattered in some way, but she

wanted to try it. And she got this look on her face, this lightness in her eyes like she had found something. And I don't know what motivation she had, that she has, that keeps her from falling down that hole into full fledged pot headedness but she has this ability to resist, to not get too high and not do it too often, but she had definitely found a thing. We got high a lot, we'd drive off campus and smoke in between classes, and then in the summers she'd call me up, like she couldn't find another source for weed, but it was ultimately a good thing because we made something out of it.

And with her and Kevin, I don't know, there was this thing you could sense, I could sense, this underpinning, this mutualness that was just there, me being, perhaps, the conduit, either the thing through which this sensory, ambiguous, non-relationship of a relationship coordinated and responded, or the very reason for its existence, the two seeing in each other what didn't exist in me. And either way it seemed like a good enough thing, something to egg on, slightly, casually, if nothing else.

"He reminds me of you," she said to me after the first time the three of us hung out, not the first time the two had met, but the first time I brought him along as if he could be part of us, part of our thing.

"I'm not that off," I said back.

"I mean but you have that thatness to you, like he does."

"I do not."

"Maybe a little."

"But not to that extent, I mean, not nearly just that..."

"You like him though?"

“Yeah,” I said. “He’s a good guy.”

And she smiled.

And still with all this shit nothing really bloomed between them, in only that way that nothing can bloom specifically because maybe something should, and therefore definitely doesn’t. Didn’t. Hadn’t, up to that point. And of all the shit she tells me all the time she only hinted at stuff about him, like I was that boy in the class passing notes, and she only skimmed around the subject. Maybe she was still hesitant, who knows? And Kevin you couldn’t really get things out of anyway. But there we were and Kevin’s still in the bathroom (or maybe in his room by now) and Julie comes in, and acts like she does, like she would and did, and goes through all the aforementioned motions and sits down and looks at the bowl on the table.

“Fuck, I can’t get that high,” she says, and does that sympathetic half smile half frown thing, I’m sorry and don’t hate me and this is still light isn’t it? And so on.

“It’s cool,” Sandra says with no emotion or registration at all, after hounding me for twenty minutes about her need to get super high. “Just take a few hits if you want.”

And I roll my eyes instinctively. And Julie picks up the bowl in this delicate little way, as if the glass is poised on the tip of her fingers, the weird way that for some reason for some people you notice the way they touch things, for her it always being this strange notion of delicacy and her tiny fingers, and she clicks the lighter in the opposite manner, thumb coming down against the flint again and again, clicking and clicking until there’s a flame, and takes a hit, oddly proportioned, to the point where it makes you question the

exact timing of the hit, if there is some sort of funky math that she does in her head that figures out just how high she can be and just how big of a hit she can take (factoring in that she'll want to take three or four more hits after this) in the pursuit of being exactly high enough. And she lets out the smoke and at first attempts to do it slowly, like she's cool, but then just exhales, quickly, and one or two quiet coughs and then she relaxes. And she slumps down on this... it's one of those chairs that's like the half circle thing, and she relaxes and there's a quick smile on her face.

"Can I just get," she says to Sandra, "I can't smoke that much now, and if you don't want to it's totally fine, y'know, but you don't care if I ask you for a little bit," she says.

"S' cool," Sandra says.

"Cool," Julie says, and she smiles, and she takes one more quick hit.

"Do you wanna do it now?" Sandra asks.

"Whenever," and Julie sits back, leans back into her chair and her eye lids hang down, almost shut, content, and she folds her hands together on her waist and turns her head to the side, towards me.

"You got a haircut," she says in a soft voice, smiling, drifting, as if she just woke up.

"Yeah," I said, patting the sides of it, this fade kind of thing where the sides are shaved.

"It's very fancy," she said.

"My dad said it looked a little queer."

And she gave this almost frown, like a pout, but then a smirk and she looked at me.

“I mean, but I feel like, y’know tough guys and ally kids or whatever, this is how they used to do it.”

“Ally kids?” she said.

“Do you think it’s too hipster or something?” I asked.

“It looks good,” she said.

And Sandra nodded and picked up the bowl.

“What inspired you?” Julie asked.

“Desire to be fancy,” I said.

And she turned her head back towards the center of the room and slumped some more.

“Is Kevin here?” she asked.

Sandra pointed towards his room. “He’ll be out.”

And we all sat there for a while, not really looking towards or away from each other, kind of drifting, Julie being the most uncomfortable with this, used to it, but still kind of itching to have something there.

“Music?” she said.

“I can put something on,” Sandra said.

“Or wait,” I said. “I got something.”

“Not techno,” Julie said.

“Techno?”

“Electric whatever.”

“Chill techno.”

“Something musical.”

“Musical?”

“A band,” she said.

“I don’t have a stereo, just my phone,” Sandra said.

“You don’t have a computer?”

“It’s in my room,” she said.

And Julie gave her a look.

“Go get it if you want.”

“Can we do Wilco or something?” Julie said.

“Not Phish,” I said.

“Wilco.”

“Not the Dead.”

Fucking Wilco,” she said.

And I put my hand up, kind of middled it.

“Well what then?”

“Not fucking Willie Nelson,” I said.

“Not Kenny Rodgers,” Sandra said.

“Is he a pothead?”

“What?”

“Not the fucking Disco Biscuits?” Julie said.

“That’s fine,” I said.

“Just put it on shuffle.”

“No shuffle,” I said.

“Fuck it,” she said.

And then ten seconds later Julie went to grab the computer. She brought it back with a smile and played the Disco Biscuits. And then Kevin came in, kind of meandered, peeked out from the door and moved towards the three of us, blonde hair kind of wet and slicked back. I almost thought he was gonna pop out in a towel at first, he’s kind of cut, he’s skinny but has muscles in that way a runner or maybe a swimmer has, but maybe that’s not his style, too brash or something. But he came out and he was kind of nervous, half smiling, like he didn’t know where to put himself, and me and Sandra didn’t make any notice because we had just seen him, so it would be weird I guess, but there’s that thing, like there’s this social temperature that permeates the room, an aura, one of calmness, and it’s hard to break it. So no big hello from Kevin to Julie or Julie to Kevin, just he nods and she nods and he looks around and he finally sits down, across from Julie, next to Sandra, and the music keeps humming and things persist.

And finally Kevin breaks the silence, “Oh, Disco Biscuits.” he says.

Me and Sandra nod, and then more silence for the duration of the song. And Kevin sits there and rubs his knees and looks around and doesn’t know quite where to rest his vision.

And things went like that for a bit, sparseness, calmness, so on. And the whole time there was, still a calmness, but on top of that, with Kevin at least, a nervous

percolation you could sense, like this question, these questions that you get, is this weird?
Am I being weird? Should I say something?

“So,” he said, looking at Julie, “Um, have you seen Mad Max yet?”

She popped up, back into consciousness, her back straight again, taking a second to regain before talking.

“Oh, It’s not out yet.”

“Oh,” And he rubbed his knees again, stopping when he realized he was doing it.

“But you’re excited for it.”

And she bit her lip calmly and nodded, a deep nod.

“It comes out soon right?” he said.

“A few weeks,” she said.

She sat back and there was this awkwardness in the air.

“I wanna do like a marathon,” Julie said. “Watch all the old ones first.”

Kevin nodded. “Cool.”

“Mel Gibson,” I said.

“I’ve only seen one of em,” Kevin said.

“The best part,” I said. “Is where that girl’s riding in the car, and he steps out and calls her sugar tits.”

“Thunder Dome,” Julie said, smiling, still nodding, speaking now more to the room than Kevin.

“Or when he does his monologue about the Jews.”

“Like crazy eighties hair,” Julie said.

“Eighties sci fi hair,” I said.

And Kevin looked over to me, and then back Julie.

“A lot of mullets in eighties sci fi, nineties sci fi, sci fi in general and mullets,” I said.

“Like the super mullet,” Julie said, smiling, almost giggling. I looked at her.

“Remember with the Riddick movie you said the guy had a super mullet.”

“Oh yeah,” I said. “It was like a mullet with a mullet attached.”

“Why would you get a mullet?” Sandra said. “I mean you knowingly go out and do that to yourself.”

“It’s a sign of a vitality,” I said.

“And passion,” Julie said.

“Sexual prowess.”

And I leaned forward towards the table and searched for the bowl, pawing my hand around expecting to find it. And there’s that noticeable quiet again. And Kevin spoke up and broke it.

“Waterworld,” he said. And nothing. “Did you ever see it, um, Kevin Coster I think, he has a mullet there.”

“Yeah,” Julie said. “Another one.” And Kevin smiled. “Not quite the super mullet though.”

I took a hit. And I tried to make a few smoke rings before coughing. And then the bowl went back on the table and my eyes kind of shot up and my head perked, like the

dimly lit cartoon light bulb you saw in Beavis and Butthead or something like that, when that idea that should be blatant and obvious comes down and you think, for some reason, it's a genuine thought, one which requires more of you than some basic procedure.

“Book!” I said.

The room barely noticed. And I squirmed out of my seat and dug through my bag and brought out a faded sky blue little paperback book with, on the cover, a silhouette of this little bald guy, walking on the very bottom of the paper, and to his right a line that forms the outline of several buildings.

“Oh, hey,” Kevin said.

And I held it up.

“Check it out, faded light blue,” I said, the book flopping back and forth between my fingers.

“Oh god,” Julie said.

And Kevin looked at the book and then at Julie.

“Are you just prodding me with more,” Julie said.

And Kevin kept looking around.

“I don't get it,” he said.

“He knows I have this thing with faded colors.”

“No, but the book,” I said.

“What's wrong with faded colors?” Kevin said, a nervous grin.

“It's just this thing,” Julie said. “Like everything today, cover art and posters and books, are this faded white green or yellow.”

“Oh,” Kevin said, and sat back a little.

“No,” Julie said, leaning forward and pushing a strand of hair back behind her ear.

“It’s just this thing, like, everything today is that, that idea, that thing where it’s almost purposefully mild or something, just casual y’know? This faded, laid back, faded lime green where it doesn’t feel serious, or, I don’t know, I guess it’s stupid but it’s just...”

And she lightly, jovially, clenched her teeth.

“Oh,” Kevin said. “So you want, I guess a primary color or something?”

“Like a deep red or pitch black,” Julie said. “Something that feels like, y’know this is a thing.”

“But the book,” I said.

“It’s a good book,” Kevin said.

“You’ve read it?”

“It’s his,” I said. “You remember I was telling you about it?”

And Julie kind of paused.

“Back when we were at Corndall’s and him and Lisa and Dave all stepped out to smoke for like twenty minutes and I told you about this book?”

“That was like a month ago,” Julie said, chuckling a bit.

“You don’t remember?”

“You’ve been reading it for a month?”

“I went back over it,” I said. “But I told you you should read it when I’m done.”

“Ok,” Julie said.

“It’s a good book,” Kevin said.

And Julie took it from my hand, lightly, scanned the cover, flipped it over to the back and glanced it over.

“What is it?” she asked.

“You don’t remember,” I said. “I went on for like... this monk and he goes into the city and all of that?”

“It’s about a monk?”

And I slapped my forehead. “Ok,” I said. “There’s this monk and he’s like, he doesn’t fit in with or he’s done with the order or the monastery or whatever, he doesn’t really talk about it, but he leaves and he goes into the real world.”

“The Wandering Servant,” Julie said, reading the cover.

“It’s just—he starts to go into, like, clubs and bars and he wanders the streets and stuff, and it’s like, he doesn’t become part of that, but he just experiences stuff.”

“A lot of wacky adventures?” Julie said.

“No,” I said. “It’s not shenanigans. It’s like, he just meditates on this stuff. Like you can experience the world through just—Ok, it’s this thing with him that he thinks, or monks think you’re just supposed to attain this peace right? But then you isolate yourself, like to become a monk, you take yourself away from the world and he thinks he should do the opposite, just go into it.”

“I’d say there’s some wacky adventures,” Kevin said with a grin.

“Aw come on,” I said. “That’s the whole thing is it’s not, I mean it’s—he goes to clubs but he doesn’t dance or trip or drink but he just kind of vibes out these places and sees the people and he even doesn’t really talk to them that much but he gets this thing,

like these vibes from these people and it's a whole other thing, like a real meditation, just, it's like life flows through him."

"Huh," Julie said.

"It's this whole thing about a way to view, or be in life without, I don't know, it's just kind of there and it doesn't move and he doesn't move but there's this thing that happens, he just kind of, I don't know just fucking read it."

"I don't know," Kevin said. "I thought he had some adventures."

"It's about meditation?" Julie said.

"I think it's just," Kevin said. "Just there's this monk, and he's quiet, but he travels and he sees the world and all sorts of stuff happens. It's pretty good."

"But it's all this vision," I said. "It's just this thing."

"I don't know," Kevin said.

"Is it real?" Julie asked.

"I think so," Kevin said.

"That's part of it too," I said. "It's, there's no author or anything for the book."

"Oh yeah," Julie said.

"And so it's like this thing where, you don't know whether it's supposed to be this whole big metaphor or something, or whether it's just this visceral thing, but that's part of the point."

"I think it's real," Kevin said.

"It's this whole thing," I said. "Like you can see a tiger in the jungle and see it, and you still don't get it but you know something from seeing it, and that's the thing is

he's around these people and he doesn't get them but he doesn't turn his nose up, he just kind of accepts them and then it's—I don't know, it gets into deep shit.”

“Ok, fuck, let me read it,” she said. And she put the book down. There was a pause, a lull.

“Does he say anything about getting high?” she asked, eyeing me, giving me a hint of sass.

“He actually goes into that stuff,” I said. “He talks about these people that get fucked up, and they're diluting themselves in a way, but it's also, they're like...”

And I recomposed myself for a second, brought myself forward, hands open and at my side, like I was really saying something, like she was really listening.

“Everyone has this sphere they're part of,” I said. “And he's just going through all these spheres, all these bubbles and he sees that it's—you get further away from this pursuit of life, or this pursuit of intelligence, but you move into this emotional state, these kind of psychic bubbles.”

“So the monk gets high?” She said.

“No the thing is,” I said. “I mean maybe psychic bubbles isn't the right word but it's—these people have a certain feel to their lives, a starting point and an ending point and a path. And a purpose. And attaining, y'know, if everyone became a monk it would take something away from the current of the world he says. So these people, it's like they become themselves, and they become this group, this thing, by moving into specific things, even if they're dangerous or sad or something.”

“The currents of the world,” she said. “Monks and marijuana.”

“But, no, but it’s that he can’t move into this stuff because he’s not in that sphere, so he doesn’t smoke.”

“Sad,” she said.

“It’s like he can’t move into this stuff he sees and he can’t go back to what he left, so he’s becoming his own sphere.”

“Sad sad,” she said.

“It’s kind of uplifting in a weird way,” I said.

“Ok, happy then.”

“I don’t know,” Kevin said, breaking in to our bubble. “I don’t think it’s all that, there’s stuff in there that’s kind of, y’know I just think it’s about him. It’s just a monk and he wanders and he does good stuff.”

And there was a pause for a second, like a brief reminder that we were all somehow, at that moment, stupid.

“I like his version,” Julie said.

“Just read it,” I said.

“Ok.”

And Julie accepted the book, she took it and slid it into her orange and black satchel. And she picked up the bowl and took a small hit, and delicately let loose a cloud, a thin stream, spiraling and translucent, into the air.

“This is my last hit,” she said, that starchy deep weed-echo in her voice.

“Why?”

“I have to go to this thing,” she said.

“What thing?”

“We were gonna meet down at Fells Point but I think it’s in Mount Washington now.”

“What thing?” I said.

“The Tavern,” she said.

“No,” I said. “I mean what thing?”

“Oh,” she said. “Like, um, me and Chelsea and Anna and y’know, Anna’s in town so we’re doing a thing.”

“Pass,” I said.

“Aw come on.”

“I don’t think so.”

“I need a buffer,” she said.

“They’re your friends,” I said.

“You know them.”

“They barely ever talked to me.”

“You don’t have to, just kind of be there so I can get out after a while.”

“I can’t even get in,” I said.

“You have an ID.”

“It’s shitty,” I said. “Plus it’s at my house.”

“Dude you live like ten minutes away.”

“So, that could be like twenty minutes of driving.”

“Whatever.”

“I’m not sure I can invest that time.”

“Whatever,” she said. “Sandra?”

And Sandra began to stir a little, like coming out of some dream.. Like it didn’t register.

“What?” she said.

“Do you wanna come with me to this thing?” Julie asked.

“Nah, I’m alright.”

“Kevin’s twenty one,” I said.

And from this thing there was, well, sometimes you see these little moments, these connections, and you’re not sure how deep they go. I guess everyone is like this to some extent, but you see people relating to one another in a way, they talk about things they’ve done together or things they’re doing together, and you wonder if it’s real. You wonder if there’s truly this connection, if these people actually have some sort of deeper relationship, if it’s common or if it’s, maybe artificial, which isn’t quite the right word, but you see people demonstrating this closeness, but it happens to you too, it happened to Kevin too.

There were, with him, little touches on the shoulder and little inside jokes and anecdotes that reminisce on some time, some good thing, but there was always, I mean there was a sense of joy there too, but a hollowness to it, a knowledge that this was superficial, that it maybe was a show, a demonstration of a bond that didn’t fully or didn’t

really exist. But then you wonder if this is as superficial in others, from these other interactions, as it is in your case, because if you and these people aren't close than are they?

They must be. Because there seems to be something there that isn't there with you, a genuine something, and while you have some presumptions that maybe the whole world is made of some shallow contract, some unspoken bond wherein people agree to be kind, at least on the outside, in order to maintain an appearance of friendship and goodwill and all that jazz, you hope that there's something real. And Kevin, at that moment, at finding that he might be included in something now that previously he might not be considered for, it struck something in him.

He remained quiet, relatively quiet, and passive still, hiding nerves and excitement and so on. He kept it all under his skin. Just touched his earlobe for a split second after he heard it. But it still shook him, his appearance on some level. It was still there, in the room with us, to some degree perceptible, even if the knowledge of this, of all this stuff, always stayed under the surface, at least in our case. And generally it was one of those things that, maybe it's known by the group, maybe an intimate understanding between people, but we never went so far as to actually give it life by bringing it up, by speaking it's name, too deep perhaps, too weird or dangerous.

And so Kevin sat there and just kind of looked up at us, not sure what to do with his face, to look dismissive or anxious or what, so he looked blank and confused and shy.

"You're twenty one?" Julie asked.

“Oh, yeah,” he said.

“I thought you were a sophomore.”

“He’s twenty one,” I said.

And Kevin rubbed the back of his neck.

And Julie, casually, as if it were just a thought, said, “Do you wanna come to this thing?”

“Oh, um I could.”

“You don’t have to if you don’t want to,” she said.

And there was a second, a pause, Kevin searching and trying to play this somehow right. Finding in himself that he actually cared about this in this moment, even though he had always told himself this wasn’t the type of thing to get nervous about.

“Or, um, yeah, sure I could go,” he said.

And Julie says, “Cool.”

In the book, in *The Wandering Servant*, he talks about this thing, how people come in forms, kind of. It’s that, or it’s not that they’re necessarily born as they are and will always be, but it’s formed somehow, this thing, a core, a purpose almost. And he goes on about how these are functions of a larger whole, and how these functions might form is, well, I won’t do the whole thing but it’s kind of like you’re this little thing, a particle or some simple being, and you’re bouncing around off other things, and you take in all this stuff, these moments, and most of them are basic or they teach you survival or something, how to eat, talk, pray or meditate or what have you, but the personality forms

out of these small moments that don't serve a direct purpose, anomalies, bizarre little iotas of existence that get in you and irritate you in way, and keep growing, like a grain of sand in an oyster. And a good portion of this is derived from or somehow related to pain, often abstract pain, and you're desire to either avoid or confront or live with it or do something with it.

And you have this bigger ecosystem of personalities, all bouncing off of each other, and they form around each other, and eventually we all take on roles, and these roles become engrained deeper than just interaction, you wear it on you're face, you wear it in your basic physical movement, and people read it and they react to it without even knowing why. So if you get picked on, it's some part of you trying to grow that invites abuse, not because you deserve it necessarily, because I was a little iffy on that part when I read it. I'm not a big fan of the whole blaming the victim thing, but, and this isn't science, it's a gaze into something, a vision more so, but you invite this stuff, subconsciously, beyond your knowledge, because it's feeding the growth of something. Also he says it's a larger function of ecosystem and so and so on but, not the point. So some people, himself, and probably myself and of course Kevin, all to some degree, become these kind of buffers, these sponges made to absorb things, to take in the shit other people have to put out otherwise it would overflow. This is a thing I've heard before, it was in a comic for goth kids a while ago, I think, and maybe it's a theory for people or crackpots or whoever, and it's not so much that this is a true thing, because it's fucking as abstract as any other crack pot scientific or social or religious theory out there, but the way he uses it, it's not always physical or even verbal, it's abuse in the form of

avoidance, or isolation, or some vague resentment or disapproval that we pick up on even if it's not clear, and the less present it is, sometimes, the more vague it is—the deeper the pain, because you can't even pinpoint why it's there.

So dickheads get to be dickheads and go on pleasantly while you're some kind of whipping boy or something, even though obviously it's not that simple and everyone's a magnet for some pain to some degree, and even dickheads have their own pain and their own lot and so on and so on and so on. But the thing he gets to is, it turns you into something. His upside, so to speak, is that he can take it, the pain, in his case this pain of non-presence, of being sidelined and ignored, of just not having a place, and he becomes this kind of thing. He can be invisible when he wants to, and for an observer like himself (and I'd like to think yours truly to some degree) that can be powerful. Everyone, like he said, has a presence and it affects peoples' actions, but as he learns to know himself, he realizes this presence, for him, is small, unobtrusive, and so he can see the world with a greater clarity, as it almost is. And when he's not steeped in fear, which, and I know I sound almost like one of those positive thinker pep talker people who go around telling people that fear is the enemy and positive thoughts and so on, but when he's past that, which is always hard, but when it's done, he can insert himself as he wants to, and people sometimes respond because that invisible barrier that's put up so much by all this personality is so thin with him, less bullshit to cut through to be someplace real.

And so Kevin, our Kevin, has some advantage in this whole thing, even if it only shows up in small, quiet moments that most people forget. So when he's driving Julie to the Mt. Washington Tavern to see her friends and he's dying inside because he's not

making small talk and so often it feels so awkward at moments like this that he's convinced he can never be around people because the barrier is so damn thick, she's actually enjoying something. And most of the time this isn't it, most people hate you when you're like this, and then they give up on you, and then they're fine, but they've dismissed you. But move just an inch closer and there's something kind of there. Julie sitting and listening to the blue grass Kevin is afraid is weird or off-putting, and her having this moment of peace, like comfort, by yourself but not alone, and she smiles at him, and he grins nervously.

The two of them sat. They were, or at least Julie was, the first of her friends to arrive, which was usual, to the point where it was just a thing at this point, one which for some reason didn't change. She'd arrive ten to fifteen minutes ahead of time and they, Chelsea and Anna, would come by a half hour later, together, smiling, them being the closer of the group, with Julie as a kind of welcomed but perpetual third wheel. And this had a wearing down effect on Julie, pushed her away sort of, and her being worn down and pushed further created notions of a kind of bitterness among her two friends, opened up the idea that she was the outsider, the tie that would be severed, if it had to, or should be, when time came. But they all still got along among the tension, because it was small I guess. Those kind of things are always around, little time bombs ticking, waiting to result in that inevitable drift, that part where people just go away from each other and things slowly end, but for now it was fine, it was cool, it was a mixture of petty grievance and genuine nostalgia, and for the most part, the good things won.

But Kevin, Kevin and Julie, they sat down in the bar, at a table near the wall just before the small mid-section that divides the place into two parts, one more of a restaurant the other more bar. And this part was quiet, the whole place was, actually, given that it was still early in bar time, but this table had some chance of actually remaining so.

And Kevin ordered a beer and Julie ordered a beer, his simple, just above being too basic, as a Bud or something might be, but something around a YuengLing or a Stella, and hers was some sort of spring harvest whatever from some place or something, an IPA maybe. And she talked about her beer for a second, how it was this or that, and he nodded along, and he smiled a bit, and they sat.

“Sooo...” Julie said tapping her fingers on the table after some prolonged silence.

“Yeah,” Kevin said.

“So what are you up these days?”

“I don’t know. The same I guess. The usual.”

“Ok,” she said.

“I’ve been running I guess,” he said. “I should have started a while ago but the weather’s good now.”

“Cool,” she said, nodding her head.

“Um, yeah.”

“What do you listen to?”

“Like, um...”

“When you’re jogging?”

“Oh,” he said. “Nothing.”

“You don’t listen to music?”

“Nope.”

“How?”

“I just like it,” he said. “You’re just outside and stuff.”

“Oh my god I’d go insane.”

And he nodded and looked down for second, and then back up, like something was stirring in his mind.

“I mean it’s cool,” she said.

“No it’s great,” Kevin said. “You’re just kind of unplugged I guess. It’s—I don’t know, it’s good for me.”

“Cool,” she said. “Cool.”

And Kevin scratched his nail against his beer mug, watching the condensation wipe away.

“What do you listen to?” he asked.

“When I run?”

He nodded.

“I need something, like, not pump up music or anything, but something with, y’know a drive or something, something with energy.”

“Cool,” he said.

“Like White stripes or the Pixies.”

And he nodded.

“Some Pixies,” she said. “Or MGMT, some of their stuff, Electric Feel or something.”

“Yeah?” he said.

“It has to be a little weird, y’know? For some reason, just that ounce of—I guess not being completely—just that person jogging, so you don’t feel like you’re...”

And she pulled back a bit, let her eyes wander up towards the ceiling.

“What?” he said.

“I don’t know,” she said. “Never mind.”

“Ok.”

“Just, I feel like most people go with something calm or diverting or something, just, y’know Beatles or something, but to me there’s just this little area that sounds like—I don’t know.”

“Ok,” he said.

“Never mind.”

“Ok.”

And Kevin sipped his beer.

“Do you ever go hiking?” he asked.

“What, like hardcore out in the wilderness and all that?”

“No, I mean just trails or something.”

“Is that what you do?” she asked.

“What like hardcore wilderness stuff?”

“Or no,” she said. “Just, you go on trails and stuff?”

“Oh, um yeah,” he said. “Sometimes. There’s a few good ones around Prettyboy Dam and there’s this, um...”

Kevin caught her looking towards the door, her neck craning, her eyes floating. She looked back at him.

“Oh, sorry,” she said.

“No, It’s cool, it’s...”

“I just thought they were here,” she said.

“So they’re...”

“Is that them?” she said squinting.

“So you know them, they’re like...”

“High school,” she said, her gaze still split between himself and the door.

“Oh cool,” he said.

And she looked away from him and waved. And smiled.

“They’re fine,” she said. “You’ll just, I mean just maybe don’t mind too much of what Anna might says but you’ll be fine.”

“What’s she gonna say,” he said, a modest grin, like it was something funny.

Julie got up from her seat before there was any reaction. She stood there as the two girls approached, one lanky and blonde and all smiles, the other a little short and also blonde and a little stout and a rounder face. And it was calmer then he’d expected, he’d expected yelling or, not yelling, but jubilation or something, but they seemed pretty calm. They stood there about three feet away and Kevin stayed seated, hand on his beer, looking up occasionally and then back down at the table, not sure whether or not to go up

and introduce himself, or if that would be weird or if this was weird and so on. Not sure if he seemed to them, or to anyone around, like he was in any way affiliated with this group of people, or if he was just kind of a lone guy on the periphery, one who kept looking over at them with this weird sense of longing or confusion or something.

Anna confirmed this notion to a degree when Julie finally brought them over and introduced him.

“I kept thinking that guy keeps looking at us!” she said. And Kevin kind of smiled and nodded.

“You should’ve come over,” she said. “We didn’t mean to ignore you.”

“It’s Ok,” he said.

“Are you at Hopkins too?” Chelsea asked, calmer than Anna, saying the words as if they were an apology, an olive branch of sorts.

“Oh no,” he said.

And there was a moment.

“He goes to Towson,” Julie said.

“Oh cool,” Chelsea said, hiding some small amount of pity.

“And you guys...”

“We hang out,” Julie said.

“Oh Ok,” Chelsea said, a small, concealed but concealed in a way that it’s meant to be visible grin forming across her lips and up towards her cheeks. And this grin caught on with Anna and they looked at each other, each holding in a bit of laughter.

“No!,” Julie said smiling as faint chuckles began to emerge. “I didn’t mean like, we were hanging out and I needed a ride so he came with. It’s cool right?”

“Yeah, fine,” Anna said. “Why’d you need a ride?”

“Shit I don’t know,” she said.

And Anna grinned at her.

“I wanted one Ok?”

“Ok,” Anna said, moving her eyes downward and smiling once again.

“I was smoking a bowl,” she said. “I just wasn’t, whatever, Ok?”

“Ok,” Anna said. And she looked over at Kevin.

“Do you get high a lot um...”

“Kevin,” he said.

“Sorry. Do you smoke much?” that fucking grin still on her face.

“Not much,” he said.

“It’s cool,” she said.

“No I just don’t do it that much.”

“Christ, leave him alone for a second,” Chelsea said.

“You like Towson?” she asked.

“Oh, yeah,” he said. “It’s great.”

And she nodded at him.

And they all sat there for a moment or two. Kevin could sense these little subliminal messages being passed from Anna to Chelsea, and Chelsea to Anna, little glances and nods and stares, though he had no idea what they meant. The two of them

looked at Julie's beer and talked about what they were going to drink. Chelsea left to go up to the bar to order their drinks and there was, again a calmness at the table. Anna told Julie about classes she was taking, how hard pre-med was, at points, how she was doing an internship and didn't think she's mind the sight of blood. Chelsea came back and the conversation moved towards other things. People from high school they'd heard about, a guy from the tennis team who had knocked a girl up and was going to be a dad, maybe, and a girl who got kicked out of school. They didn't ask about me, and maybe Kevin took note of that because it was the one topic which he could've possibly weighed in on, even though he probably wouldn't have been able to match their patterns, their cadences and enthusiasm and so on.

The conversation between the three of them rolled on like this. One unapproachable topic lead to another one, kids they knew in high school to some guy one of them dated to that time over at wherever, when so and so got so something and something happened and then something about that thing that happened and how it related to this other someone who Kevin didn't know. Who he'd ask the occasional interjected question about, causing a brief drop in the conversation where one of the girls would answer and Julie would smile at him and look almost apologetic and give him a brief but exaggerated expression and then back to this thing, the whatever, the so and so's and the somethings. And maybe in part he was making excuses, maybe he could've been friendlier, more sociable, if there was a way to do it, which, if there was a way he didn't know it, but even when the conversation roamed off of personal things and on to broader topics, politics, Ferguson, The Daily Show and Jon Stewart leaving, what the world was

like outside of college, he found himself blank. He found himself discussing the topics in his head, to himself, waiting and wondering if any of his points might relate to any of theirs, and they never seemed to, and he never seemed to find a good enough place to say whatever, like every time he had something they'd moved on to the next thing. So he resigned himself to sitting in his corner of the table—feeling free, relaxed, for a few minutes when he left to grab another beer, drinking three of them while sitting down and looking mainly bored, occasionally trying to feign interest, to not be rude. And then, after his third beer, almost without notice, he excused himself, got up from the table, walked over to the bar, and then past it, and then hovered by the door for a minute or two before exiting the place.

Kevin walked. He liked to walk. He liked to let things breathe like this, to just be out of all the shit that may or may not be going on and have it to himself, this little time. He walked around the stores and restaurants at first, the area was a pretty small little gathering of things like that, about a block or two in each direction, nearby, another small gathering of stores with a Whole Foods adorning them, but he went the other direction. Up the road, into the darkness, following the sidewalk next to a long picketed fence as cars passed by the narrow path. He cut left and up a hill into a neighborhood, a bunch of houses, most of which seemed dark and vacant, and he passed them. The road was kind of steep here, he thought he might sweat and worried about the appearance of this when, or maybe if, but probably when he made his way back into the bar, if any of them would still be there. At the top of the hill he took another left down a street that curved and you

could see, through the woods a bit, the sight of the buildings below, or at least you could see that there was stuff, that you were high and that there was something low that existed. He passed a house with lights and looked at it for a minute, went past, kept telling himself he should turn back now but kept walking. Just him in the dark, walking through these streets and past these houses and trying not to sweat but not worrying too much about it, and the air was nice, warm but not too warm, a nice night. And he went further up the hills for a bit, for a while, and after his legs started to ache just a bit and he could feel some energy in his back and in his arms he looked around and he didn't know where he was but he decided it was time to find his way back. He was good enough with directions, knew basically where he was going, though he made a few turns where he wasn't sure if he recognized the street and then looked around and turned, but he got to the bottom of the hill soon enough, and then back on that street and then back towards the stores and then back in front of the bar. And he paused before he went in the door, took a breath, and pulled it wide open and went in.

He found her sitting at the same table, just her now, using a finger to lean the beer bottle in front of her around in a circle, letting it tilt just far enough to almost fall and then bringing it back towards a center. She looked up, gazed up at him, some sense of calmness, or boredom, or not quite malaise but the way you look at the eyes of a cow and they're just there, seeing. There was a brief smile, like a small laugh took place inside of her head.

“You're back,” she said.

“Oh, yeah,” he said.

“I thought you’d took off.”

“No,” he said moving closer to the table. “Just went for a walk.”

“Mhhmmm,” she said, her chin resting on her hand. He stood there for a while and looked around until she made a nice little gesture with her hand telling him to sit.

“Just a nice little forty minute stroll around nowhere in the middle of the night?”

“Was it forty? I don’t know, I didn’t think it was that late,” he said.

“Hmmm,” she said, and plopped her head down into her arms, folded in front of her on the table. She looked back up, like her face was bobbing back into a visible space.

“You have fun?” she asked.

“Oh yeah,” he said.

And then her face went down again, back into the cradle of her arms.

“So,” Kevin said, looking down at the back of her head and the arch of her shoulders. “Are your friends still here or are they...?”

“They went to talk to some people,” she said into the table. She looked back up again.

“You must be terribly upset.”

“Oh, they were alright,” he said.

“That’s why you left for all the fun and adventure of wandering through the suburbs?”

“No, I don’t know,” he said. “I just—sometimes I get kind of...”

She repositioned herself, put her hands on the edge of the table and craned herself upwards until she was leaning back and looking at him. There was a moment of silence.

“Generic, planned...” she said and then trailed off, going back into her head, her eyes wandering around the upper corners of the bar. Kevin waited.

“Generic, planned, present, self obsessed conversation,” she said.

And Kevin looked at her, and she grinned.

“I don’t know,” he said.

“You’ve never heard MJ go on his thing about all these conversations people have and how they’re...?”

Kevin shook his head.

“You and MJ,” she said.

And he stayed still. And he kept quiet.

“It’s this whole thing where, I mean, he thinks people—some people in some contexts. Contextses. Contextses?”

“Contexts,” Kevin said.

“People in certain situations,” she said. “They have this thing, this game that they play where they’re just feeding each other, just like—I don’t know, you give someone a compliment you don’t mean and you talk about someone you don’t care about and you never really say anything but it’s—you just build each other up in this way that does nothing, it’s like...”

“Small talk?” Kevin said.

“Small talk,” said Julie. “That’s probably the easy way to say it. Small talk.”

She let her head tilt backwards, let her chin bob upwards so it pointed towards the ceiling, and then back down again.

“MJ says it’s unsustainable,” she said. “It drowns you in something and kills your nerves.”

“I don’t mind it so much,” he said.

“I woulda thought you and MJ would’ve had that in common.”

“What?” he said.

“That same train of thought. You and him, you both seem...”

“Oh, I don’t mind small talk,” Kevin said. “I mean people get to things even when they’re just, I don’t know, I guess you just can’t always open up about everything all the time.”

“You don’t think it’s the downfall of civilization?”

He shook his head politely.

“You and MJ,” she said. “He says it’s unsustainable.”

“We do small talk all the time,” he said.

And she rubbed the side of her face.

“Do small talk?” Kevin said quietly to himself.

“But there’s small talk and there’s small talk,” she said. “There’s going on into nothing and there’s building something.”

“Like what?” he said.

“Building of the mind,” she said, her eyes wide.

“Ok?” Kevin said. “Like..?”

“Like pothead conversation, which is I guess ironic that somehow he thinks that’s connecting, but the free flow of ideas, conversation that dips into something. That kind of shit.”

“Ok,” Kevin said.

“He doesn’t go on about this shit with you?”

“Uh, maybe a little bit, but not really though.”

“What do you guys talk about?” she asked.

“Me and MJ?”

She nodded.

“I don’t know, just stuff.”

“You seem so broey lately.”

“Broey?”

“Like you’re bros all of the sudden. Like you guys are...”

And she began to snap her fingers, snapping with one hand and then slowly corresponding it with the next and so on, her teeth jovially biting her lower lip.

“Do you guys talk about personal stuff?” she asked.

“Um, yeah I guess.”

“I mean does he know stuff about you?”

“I guess, yeah,” he said.

“I kinda knew that,” she said. “And you know stuff about him?”

“He’s told me some stuff.”

“Anything, like, any one thing that’s...?”

“I dunno,” he said. “Like what?”

“Forget it,” she said.

“Alright,” he said with a grin. “What about you?” he said.

“The same shit I was telling you about.”

“You too?” he said.

“I mean we talk about all sorts of shit, all the stuff,” she said.

“You talk a lot about movies right?” he said.

“Everyone talks about movies,” she said. “But yeah, us probably more than most.”

Kevin scratched his head.

“You study it right? I mean film,” he said.

“Mh-hm,” she nodded.

And he nodded back, once, one big bob of his head and then he sat there and grinned. And she looked at him anxiously, puzzled kind of.

“Do you, or did you see um...”

“I’m doing this thing,” she said as she leaned forward, him receding back into his spot. “This paper on—and I mean it’s not really for anything right now but I wanna use it for something, on like, autonomy. Like artists’ autonomy versus studio interference and audience response and all that stuff.”

“Cool,” he said.

And she sat there and scratched at the table.

“It’s like, I’m thinking of going on this whole thing about Shyamalan.”

“Oh, is he? Or what did he do?”

“Sixth Sense,” she said.

“Oh, cool.”

“But you know there’s all this shit about him,” she said. “I wanted to do this thing where it’s like, this narrative of his—y’know there’s this whole public perception of him and his downfall I guess and how, y’know, all this stuff.”

“He had a downfall?”

“Lady in the Water and The Happening and all that shit?”

“I guess I didn’t see those.”

“Ok,” she said. “Well they’re really, I mean they have some stuff there but they’re really like, they’re not great to say the least.”

“Ok,” Kevin said.

“But it’s like, the thing with him was everyone thinks it’s this thing where he got too big too quick and people were calling him the next Spielberg and stuff and he got this big head and started listening to yes-men and ignored things and all that, y’know?”

“Yeah I could see that,” he said.

“But it’s like—and the paper is—that no one ever takes into account like, their mojo.”

“Ok,” Kevin said.

“Like, y’know, a football player has mojo and you don’t—you can’t screw with his head or it’ll screw up his game. And it’s the same with artists I think, like there’s a

chemistry there and if you put this stuff, or if you screw with it by making demands or something, you fuck with that and they lose it,” she said.

“So too much interference.”

“No, I mean it’s not—I don’t know if he had studio people telling him what to do but, like, he had some chops y’know, but then there was this demand to do this same thing over and over again and to deliver and I think that fucks with you, like kills something.”

And Kevin nodded.

“Like, Ok,” she said. “I heard this thing where it’s—he had a meeting about *Lady in the Water*, which is, well I told you, it’s really indulgent right? But they said they wanted to make changes and he ignored that and that’s why it’s bad right?”

“Right,” he said.

“But it’s really, I mean that movie just shouldn’t have been made. A few notes wouldn’t have done anything, just diluted it, but it was what it was y’know? He just should’ve written it and moved on, because it was like, I think he needed to get it out. But some things you just do and they shouldn’t see the light of day.”

And Kevin nodded.

“And they say it’s an ego trip,” she said. “But if there’s ever a movie that was the work of a bruised ego, of something that’s just hurt and unsure, like that’s it. So it’s—I don’t know just this whole thing, I don’t really know where I’m going with it.”

“Fucking critics,” Kevin said.

“What’s wrong with critics?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” he said. “I guess just, tearing things apart.”

And she grinned a bit.

“I was just fucking around,” she said.

Kevin rubbed the back of his neck.

“I’m kind of thinking about being a critic though,” she said.

“Oh yeah,” he said. “Cool.”

“Yeah, like watch movies for a living.”

“Sounds good,” he said.

And she looked down, pushed some of her hair back behind her left ear.

“So, It’s a good thing then?” he said. She looked curiously at him. “Autonomy,” he said.

“Well no,” she said. “I mean yeah but it’s—I guess it’s complicated.”

She looked at him, he looked eager, or looked like he was trying to look eager, or interested, or something.

“So it’s,” she said. “What I really wanted to do but it was like too, well whatever, but, so—Ok. There was one movie back in that day where the studio gave the director, like, unprecedented freedom, final cut and everything, just complete control over the whole process.”

“Final cut?”

“Like he has complete control over the finished thing.”

“Ok,” he said.

“So they give him all this stuff and he’s such a pain in the ass and the movie has all these problems and then it doesn’t do that well and so they pretty much never did it again. Never gave anyone that freedom because it was such a pain.”

“Ok,” he said.

“You know what movie it was?”

He sat there for a second. “Um, no I don’t...”

“Citizen Kane,” she said.

“Oh, that’s like a good...”

“It’s fucking Citizen Kane,” she said. “I know, that’s like my thing, or my little story or whatever but that’s like, that’s the whole thing y’know?”

“Because it worked out.”

“Because it’s—you get both sides completely. He could do this amazing thing but it’s just a pain in everyone’s ass and they get nothing out of it so why even...?”

“Like constant struggle,” Kevin said.

“Right,” she said, moving into the table, bring her hand down on top of it.” I mean you get like—what he did with that movie was just, constant fucking artistry. He just went in and made up his mind to do everything in a way where it was some new way of doing something that hadn’t been done or had been done a million ways the same time.”

“Yeah?” Kevin said.

“He was on like, thirty cups of coffee a day, and he shot all nighters, everyone worked till six am. And he, like, one scene, it’s him and Leland, who’s like his partner, and he wanted the scene to be like it’s these gods talking, and so he wants a low angle

shot, and he can't get the camera low enough, so him and this other guy dismiss the crew and they sit there and spend the night digging a hole, sitting there with a pick axe and a shovel, digging a hole in the sound stage so the shot works."

"Did it?" he asked.

She nodded her head, once, slowly and reverently, like a small bow. Kevin grinned.

"But it's just, I mean," she went on. "I guess you can't do that, because even after he did it people still don't want it so it's just this one point in time where it was like..."

And she tilted her head up and peered down the bridge of her nose at Kevin and tried to make out whatever it was he was trying to compose through himself. Whatever unreadable stare he was giving her.

"But he had that mojo thing," she said "Him on Citizen Kane. And then they fucked with his next movie, and it didn't work, but Orson Welles man."

"Yeah?"

"I'm kind of obsessed with him," she said.

"Yeah."

"I mean he ended up hocking snow peas and whatever but when he was like, like he took everything he did and made it, I don't know. He was just kind of the man."

"Orson Welles," he said.

"Oh yeah."

"You and Orson Welles," he said. "It's funny that you have a crush on Orson Welles."

“Oh yeah,” she said. “Him and Toshiro Mifune.”

“Oh,” and he let out a small chuckle. “I have no idea who that is.”

“Another old actor,” she said. “Kurosawa films.”

And he looked at her and shrugged.

“Weird taste I guess,” she said.

“I don’t know if I could do it,” he said.

She gave him a curious look.

“What he did,” he said.

“Who said you could?” she said, a tiny smirk, vicious and inviting, forming around the corners of her mouth.

They paused for a moment, a break in the conversation. She looked at him, kept her eyes on him as he squirmed, as he looked around the place, rubbed his neck and so on.

“So, um, why don’t you write about that?” he said.

“I can’t,” she said.

“Why?”

“Because you can’t be that girl who, like, writes about Citizen Kane. It’s like, a film student writing a paper on Citizen Kane.”

“I though it was interesting,” he said.

“Yeah I guess.”

“It seemed better than the other guy,” he said.

“Shyamalan?”

“Yeah,” he said.

“Yeah I guess,” she said.

She rested her head on her arm, elbow bent up on the table, her hair falling below the hand it was perched on. She gave him a look, not intentionally, but that thing where you’re trying to take someone in and in doing so some part of yourself emerges, just briefly. And she looked calm and accepting and friendly but in a way that was slightly removed. It was like, to Kevin, that she was somehow behind something and at the same time reaching out, like catching a person who’s peeking out of their window at you, and you look at them for just a second before they slowly pull closed the drapes.

She let her hand collapse towards the table and brought her head back to the center of his line of vision.

“So what about you?” she asked.

“Me?”

“What’s, um, I dunno, something about, tell me what your major is or something.”

“Oh, biology,” he said.

“Cool,” she said. “What do you want to like work in agriculture or work on, I don’t know, what?”

“I was thinking about maybe botany or something,” he said. “Or maybe going into becoming a vet or something.”

She leaned forward and gave him a warm look.

“Or though, I mean I was also thinking about maybe switching into earth-spaces science.”

“You’re really into astronomy right?” she said.

“Oh, yeah, it’s really cool,” he said.

“Is it weird that I know that?” she said, her nose crinkling, her eyes faced down, as if she was amused by this.

“It’s fine I guess,” he said.

“MJ told me you were like, he was saying you like, you zone out in his class, like you’re going to space or something.”

Kevin put on a smile that twitched just slightly, moved his hand up to his ear and brought it back down.

“It’s weird right?” she said.

“What? That it’s...?”

“That I know—I mean that we see each other and stuff, but I hear MJ say all this stuff about you that I’ve never even talked about with you.”

“Oh,” he said.

“It’s like there’s two yous,” she said. “There’s the you that I see and then there’s like, this mythic you, like the one I hear about through MJ and all this other stuff about you that maybe I don’t know about. Or maybe it’s built up?”

“I don’t know if there’s anything that—or—I’d guess we’re probably about the same.”

“Are you though?” she said. “Because I see you and you’re kind of there, but then I hear this stuff and it seems so, I don’t know.”

“What are you hearing?” he said, laughing just slightly, his eyes still cautious and wide.

“Just stuff, nothing in particular I suppose, some of it more...”

She looked up at him with grin, and then broke a bit and started chuckling.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I don’t mean to be—it’s just I thought it might be interesting to match some of his stories with, like, the actual accounts.”

“Like what?” he said.

“I don’t know,” she said. “I mean this could be serious territory.”

He began to move back slightly, rubbed his neck, moved his hand up towards the side of his face.

“Like we’d be moving away from small talk and into something like...”

She looked up at him.

“Actual conversation or something,” she said.

She looked down, grinning, jovial but just below that something nervous.

“So I mean I guess,” he said. “Just what were you thinking of?”

“Well...” she said.

“I mean I think I have some idea,” he said.

“You got into, I mean I’ve heard that you were in all this shit last year because you got into a big fight with this kid.”

Kevin tensed, noticeably at first, he was squeezing his shoulders into his neck, and his face was calm but impenetrable, where you notice how purposefully calm it is. He brought his hand up over his head, swept his fingers through his hair and brought his hand back down over his right ear, pinching his lobe for a millisecond if you could catch it. His arm fell, he straightened his back and then his elbows rose above the table, his forearms craned back so that his head could fall onto his palms. He had his head down.

“Yeah,” he said.

“Like a fist fight?”

“Yeah, I mean I guess it was, but it wasn’t...”

“See I can’t picture you in a fist fight,” she said.

“It’s not something I normally do,” he said, shifting his head miserably from side to side in the palms of his hands.

“Normally?”

“Just that once,” he said. And he momentarily looked up to catch a glimpse of her, her intent nonchalance, before putting his head back into his hands.

“You seem so passive,” she said. “No offense, I mean, but you don’t seem like you’d...”

And she trailed off. And her mood sunk when she saw this thing in his eyes, like this fear or this pain or this pulse of dignity escaping him.

“I don’t mean to be...”

“It’s fine,” he said. “It just, well, it wasn’t really a good thing.”

And they paused for a moment.

“It’s Ok,” she said.

And he didn’t really respond.

“It’s Ok,” she said, this time with a hint of laughter. “It’s fine,” she said. “I mean stuff happens, I mean, Ok, what happened?”

Kevin tried to find himself, to find his bearings. He looked at her eyes, and they were kind. He looked down.

“So there was this girl I guess,” he said, rubbing his cheek into his palm.

“Ok.”

“And she was, I mean we weren’t really together or anything but, well I guess I liked her, I mean I liked her but, things just, they weren’t, I don’t know.”

“Were you guys like—did you talk and stuff? Did you do stuff?”

“Yeah,” he said. “She was around a lot and she called me a lot and stuff like that.”

“Did you, I mean were you really, like...?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “I never kissed her or anything but she was just—I don’t know. It’s not important really. She just saw this guy a lot and he was kind of an asshole.”

“So you got in a fight?”

“Well, not so much because, it just, it wasn’t a good thing y’know?”

“Really, it’s that big of a deal,” she said. “I just thought it was interesting. I mean people get in fights sometimes.”

“It was,” he said. “I was really drunk, and he was kind of an asshole and he, or I guess maybe I was pushing his buttons a bit, but then he started really talking shit to me.”

“What’d he say?”

“A bunch of shit,” he said. “He started to talk about my mom and I just got really angry.”

“About your mom?”

“Yeah, I mean he didn’t even know her anything, he was just fucking with me but, I don’t know.”

“Did he call her a bitch?” she said.

Kevin pointed his thumb up to the ceiling and motioned it upwards.

“Oh!” she said. “Oh, fuck him then.”

“No, I mean it was bad,” he said. “I really kind of hurt him.”

“Whatever,” she said. “You got in a fight.”

“But his...” he said. “I...his faced was all fucked up, for a while, and I knocked one of his teeth out, and he had to go to the hospital and it was just like, he didn’t even really hit me, I just got him against the wall and I kept hitting him and like, I don’t know. It was bad,” he said.

And there were little contortions rolling around his face, little, barely perceptible, just minute things that together painted this picture, this weirdness, this vulnerability. He tugged on his earlobe for a second, let it go, motioned his hand back towards his face and then consciously dropped it.

“It’s, I kind of have a thing with drinking sometimes,” he said. “I’m not, I don’t think I’m an alcoholic, but sometimes I just get into it and it gets bad, like it did there, but, I don’t know I went to therapy and stuff, which is, shit...”

He was looking down, his face forming from an odd grin into something else, something more serious, his eyes afraid to move up and meet hers, and then he broke out into a brief fit of laughter. It was odd, uncomfortable, and at the same time, I don't know, or maybe Julie didn't, but it drew in her in a bit, even if that caused further trepidation.

"I don't mean to get into all this," he said. "I don't know why, well I guess you asked, not that—but I don't mean to just dump all this stuff onto like, or just..."

And from that there was a silence, a quick pause followed by a moment, another silent moment, but in there a quick deliberation by both of them to try and move forward or away or come up with something else to escape, but they both drew blanks, and they sat there, and then the silence grew long and harsh. He looked down, she looked away, and then towards him, and then back away again. They had come close to something and they both drew back, and felt chilled but still maintained in a moment that is almost impossible to maintain, that kind of awkward silence that can persist only when both parties are simultaneously involved in something and avoiding something else, trying to navigate some complex corridor which requires the endurance of weirdness.

She caught a glimpse of something about him, not the whole thing, not him and Darla, the girl he was previously absorbed with, obsessed with, the obsession which hurt to a degree so as to hinder future obsessions, absorptions, what have you. There wasn't him and her, and her calling him to pick her up and she's drunk and she leans her head on his shoulder in the car ride home and says they should hang out and then she passes out and he calls her the next day and she doesn't answer and he calls her another twenty seven million times in the next week and she gets pissed. Or him helping her move, him

and her brother moving couches and boxes all day for her and then her semi-boyfriend Sam comes by at the end to look at the place and they kiss. And Kevin leaves. Or Sam needling Kevin when he's around, in that almost polite way that's worse than anything else and Darla acts as if it doesn't even register. And Darla bitching to Kevin about him and he tries to be there for her and then she goes back to Sam the next day. And Sam at the party, just exalted, just everybody loves him despite his being an asshole, and Darla curls up with him, and he still needles Kevin, and the needling goes into full on dickishness and beyond but there's no one on Kevin's side, not really, the slight notion in the people around them that Sam's being an asshole but they can laugh it off, it's Ok. And Kevin feels like there's a god damn sign on his forehead, instructions: how to use Kevin, how to fuck with Kevin, how to get him to do what you want, how to screw with his insecurities, how to keep him in his place, how to get him to have just enough hope to persists but then nothing ever happens, not really. All this before he knocks Sam's tooth out and sends him to the hospital.

He wore all of this, condensed, on his face, on what appeared after the normal façade had broken, his eyes terrified. And not even just that stuff, but the stuff afterwards, how good it felt, how god damn good he felt afterwards, before fear and remorse set in, the wind in his hair as he walked around in night and just felt free. And she looked at this, not the whole thing, but the obviousness of it, whatever form it would have or could have taken, just him as this person in this place, and the possibilities of him. And she thought back, maybe, to her brother, and his possibilities and his outcomes, outcome, and maybe went through all the shit with him, him in his darkened dirty apartment moping for

days and other stuff like this, and stuff like this with other guys like that, and maybe back to me.

And she picked out, here of all places, and it shot through her head, probably more so as flash than a whole thing, but she went back to me and my book, Kevin's book really, the book shared by me and Kev. And that it was now hers, for the time being. And she sat on the couch with me as Lisa and Dave and Corndall went out for cigarettes, she saw this, and we, me and her, are fucked up and maybe, I think it was Johnny Cash of all things playing in the background, a record—they had Vinyl, and she's just humming along.

“I here that train a comin' ...”

And “Julie,” I say “Jewels, Jewels of the Nile.”

“MJ,” she says. “Mr. Johnson, Mrrr. Jack Black.”

“Jewels, babe,” I say. “It's—and are you listening here?”

“Hmmm.”

“Are you seeing this?”

“Seeing what?”

“Babe,” I say. “Baby doll. Baby darling Jewels, this thing on the television here. It—I'm explaining it to you here, the whole kit and caboodle darling.”

The TV was on mute, some cop show, maybe Law and Order or something. And they're doing the thing where they're at the end of the show and they're going through all the final shit and the reveals and these things that are supposed be some deep character

moments, the cop sits down and looks through his files, and they show the hooded guy walking around and the cop sees something written, and then we cut back to the hooded guy, who I guess maybe he wasn't caught or something though maybe he should be, then we see a guy behind bars and then a woman and her man and he's rubbing her shoulders and she looks sad but content in a way, all this shit.

"It's the idea," I say. "They have the rhythm down, they're starting to get it," I say.

"MJ," she says.

"It's like, it's the same thing with music," I say. "There's just this beat, this flow that's perfect, that, I mean it's not always perfect, it's fuckin, it's not fuckin perfect here but they're getting at something with it."

"MJ, MJ, MJ," she says.

"I'm talkin about," I say. "They know how to get this flow down. Start with something small, then cut to maybe blackness or something, and then start to reveal something, gain momentum. Like you show a pack of cigarettes and then the music swells and the guy lights the cig and then big reveal, big shot, he's walkin outside and smoking and wide shot and deep colors and then back to small and then..."

"MJ," she says. "Mr. Johansen. What, just what are talking about?"

"Are you watching?" I say.

"No," she says.

"You're a film student for fucks sake this is—this like, you should be here for this stuff."

“Look Michael Jackson,” she says. “Michael Jordan...”

“Michael Johnson,” I say.

“It’s quite a name,” she says.

“You have it.”

“Look Muggsy,” she says.

“God.”

“You always, I get it, you’re into something, but you always do this like...”

“Just listen,” I say. “Look...”

“You always get fucked up, and, I mean we get fucked, and you’re there and then that’s when you want to—and not when we’re just sober and we could actually get into whatever intellectual what have you have here, but we’re all fucked up and that’s when you want to get into some deep mystifying...”

“Just listen,” I say. “It’s—when it comes, just let me...”

And she collapses, her head falls down on the armrest of the chair she’s sitting on, legs folded Indian style under her. I’m on the edge of the sofa, turned towards her but I keep eyeing the TV and I let myself keep going.

“It’s like they know, and I don’t mean to just talk about montages here but I guess the ability to do it in montage is maybe the best example or something.”

“Montage means collage,” she says.

“But there’s this thing,” I say. “They know how to cut stuff together to elicit something, like it’s that path it was supposed to take. It’s getting to where, like, music—music is the purest form of art. But film is right behind it, especially when they get into

pure filmmaking, just the effects of shots and colors and angles and pace and all that stuff.”

“Ok,” she says, her face muffled in the pillowy armrest of her chair.

“But film, and not music, but film needs content, and that’s what they lack. They know the form, they know the rhythm and the music of it, the art of it I guess, but they need the stuff—the stuff that goes inside. And that’s what they lack, and so, because it’s not abstract, because they can’t go abstract, because who gives a shit? They keep falling flat. No where to go.”

“What about 2001?” she asks, her voice still muffled.

“2001 was fucking...poetry.”

“Ok,” she says as she begins to uncoil herself, brings her feet out, sits up and leans back against the chair, knees bent up.

“But 2001 is so simple it’s profound. Like we keep trying to find these deep meanings or these complex things, and then we loose touch with what can basically be said and fucking... fucking simple becomes profound.”

“Very Buddhist,” she says.

“That’s like, in this book it’s like that,” I say. “It’s just, it’s very simple and doesn’t get all into all this shit but it becomes clear.”

“What book now?”

“The fucking, book, the fucking book.”

“Ok,” she says.

“That’s my point,” I say. “Is that you have art as rhythm and art as expression, and expression doesn’t need the rhythm, it can just be simple.”

“Agree to disagree,” she says.

“And it doesn’t have to simple in terms of basic...”

“Rrrrrrgh.”

“But you just do what you do and it’s meaning is inherent, because it’s in there.”

“So just basic stuff,” she says. “People talking and two-shots.”

“Fucking dialogue,” I say. “Dialogue is so, you don’t need dialogue it’s wasted.”

“You just said...”

“In this book it’s like, you don’t get a lot of dialogue but you get what’s being said.”

“Ok,” she says.

“Because any writer worth his salt doesn’t need to use a bunch of words.”

“Then how are you a writer?”

“You know what I mean. I mean you don’t need, like, you don’t have one guy say ‘I think this’, and then the next guy says ‘Well I think that.’”

“Yes,” she says. “That would be a little contrived.”

“No, I mean ‘here’s my problem’ and then ‘Here’s my thoughts’ and then ‘Ok that works.’”

“Aaagain...” she says.

“I mean it’s a back and forth,” I say. “No conversation is actually about words, it’s about gestures. You open something up and it’s taken in or out, it’s the thing where

you're trying to connect but most of the time you fail, but then sometimes, if you just... I mean it's—if you're outside you don't know what's what, you have to know that some things are just these pathways into people and you have to do something to make it something and even though it's all in words it's not..."

And she sat there and rolled her head back against the chair, let her feet fall to the ground and looked up the ceiling. And there was a brief silence before I decided to go on.

"I mean in this book it's so basic," I say. "It's like laying down the bedrock, or you dump the water into the ground or something, and it absorbs it."

"You realize you're speaking, at length, about the unimportance of speaking."

"You realize you're..." And I cut myself off and droop my head down an inch, and she perks up and looks over towards me.

"What?" she says.

"You're perfect," I say. "You realize that Jules, shining shimmering..."

"God."

"You really are babe. Baby Jewels, you're just perfection, just unattainable perfect shining Jewels babe. You really are."

"Thank you," she says. Quietly aggravated.

"If there were just one thing," I say. "Just one thing I'd change, maybe one note that's not perfection..."

"What?," she says.

"Never mind," I say.

And her head falls back down against the cushion.

“I was gonna tell you,” I say. “But I think it would just, what you do you do so flawlessly and being aware of it might make you aware of yourself and then...”

“Oh my God!”

“I just want you to fly baby doll.”

“MJ,” she says.

“Baby doll?”

“MJ, darling,” she says.

“Yes dear?”

“Can we just, just shut up for a second.”

“I’m just trying to open your eyes,” I say.

“Just a second.”

And I take my fingers and zip my mouth shut and stare at her.

“God,” she says.

And I keep looking.

“Tomorrow,” she says. “Tomorrow you can expound all you want, just right now, it’s like I’m high and we’re listening to music and shit and just...”

“Whatever you say darling. Princess Jewles. It’s just funny is all,” I say.

“Very funny,” she says.

“That you’re the one studying this shit and I’m here trying...”

“What’s funny is...” she says.

“What’s that babe?”

“What’s funny is that they’ll come back in here and you’ll say three words the rest of the night.”

“Oh I’ll say more than that,” I say.

And she stays slumped in her chair.

“I’ll say five, six, maybe even seven to eight words. Nine if you include Good-bye. Ten actually I suppose.”

“Mh-hmm”

“Just all the more reason you should cherish my words when they actually do come sweetheart.”

“Tomorrow,” she says. “Just tomorrow. You can rant all you want to.”

And she sat in the bar, Kevin still quiet, the two of them still enduring the moment. And he had this hurt in the way he looked, in the way he held his head, and it was as sweet as it was terrifying. And she couldn’t tell if she was falling into the same bullshit, if she was a magnet for this shit, an enabler perhaps, something flawed, or if maybe this was something else.

“Are you Ok?” she asked, a wincing expression on her, like she just elbowed him in the ribs or something.

He nodded.

“I didn’t mean to get into, I guess just.”

“I’m fine,” he said, grinning. “I’m not that, well...”

“I know,” she said.

“Do you want to get a beer or something?” he asked.

“I’m alright.”

“Do you wanna leave or something?”

“We don’t have to,” she said.

And he didn’t look up.

“Do you wanna go for a walk or something?” she asked.

He looked at her.

“I know that’s your thing,” she said.

They wandered through the little alleyways of the place, beyond that, over the tracks of the light rail nearby and past that, into a small tunnel, kind of a tunnel, a small granite overpass that ran next to a stream, a concrete ravine, nothing grand, but it felt to be just far enough out of the ordinary. Julie read the word “Fuck!” spray-painted with shitty red letters.

“How original,” she said.

“You don’t like graffiti?”

“Not crappy graffiti,” she said. “Not like this.”

“There’s this place, um,” Kevin said. “It’s down this path in rural MD and there’s this wall where there’s all this really good stuff.”

“Cool,” she said.

They went past the Whole Foods, past the other stuff, the stores, up the hill, past a few houses, old and silent and creepy in the night but peaceful still. They had little

chunks of conversation, little interjections that provoked small responses which quickly ran their course, and in between these spurts of language the silences grew longer, but the walk, to them, felt easier, felt natural, and when Julie lagged behind Kevin stood and looked at her and she'd jog over, bounce her head up and down and smile, and they'd keep going.

It wasn't a long walk, they came to a Royal Farms and stopped, Julie said she could eat something. They rummaged through the store, she grabbed some Funions and some chips, some trail mix and a bottle of ice tea. He bought some fries from the counter. They paid, each separately, and stayed in the store, drifted through the aisles.

"I'm always fascinated by these," Julie said, thumbing through the dvd stand, old movies that you either didn't see or you saw them and forgot about them, two boxes each, shrink wrapped together in what felt like cheap plastic.

"Like, The Longest Yard and Kicking and Screaming, what's the connection?"

"Football?" Kevin said.

"Different balls," she said. "You think they try and find, like the most tenuous connection for these things. I'm always fascinated by what the thought process might be."

"Yeah," Kevin said.

"Harold and Kumar and Sixteen Candles," she said. And she turned to him, raised an eyebrow. "Asian people," she said.

Kevin grinned.

“Me and my brother used to play a game when we rented movies,” she said.

“You’d look at the cover and guess if there would be an Asian person in it.”

She took the DVD pack and put it back on the shelf.

“And if there was one, would they be a scientists or a tourist.”

Kevin chuckled.

“Or do Kung Fu,” he said.

“Yeah,” she said. “But Kung movies are their own thing. Like good Kung Fu.”

“Even some of the bad stuff,” he said. “I watched this one, um, The Crippled Masters.”

“God I know that one.”

“It was great,” he said.

“The fuckin, the guy with one arm,” she said.

“Yeah.”

“And he does kung fu with the stump!”

The two fished through the DVD’s, found The Adjustment Bereau and Indiana Jones and the Crystal Skull, the connection was presumed to be hats, and Julie bought them for ten dollars, said they should do a double feature, maybe, some time. They sat on the curb, the two of them silhouettes in front of the dimly lit windows of the convenience store, her knees up at her waist, swaying, munching through a bag of Funions.

“He was,” she said merrily, quickly. “Like before that, Django was this guy in a spaghetti western.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah,” she said, her mouth half full. “He was this badass cowboy who dragged a coffin around behind him.”

“Was it full of guns?”

“It was because he was intendin’ to put somebody in there.”

“Somebody who deserved it,” he said.

“Yup. Someone that done him wrong.”

She kept chewing, wiped the corner of her mouth with her wrist.

“And then Cowboy Bebop took it and had a guy who was like, lugging this huge coffin behind him.”

“Oh yeah,” he said. “I saw that one.”

She fished through the empty bag, crumpled it up and put it next to her. Kevin gave her one of his fries, which he contended were among the best fries, anywhere.

They made their way down to another bar, a little hole in the wall type place that Kevin knew about, that if you walked down the road, back down towards and then past all the other stuff, you could find. A small rectangle of a building not connected to or really near any other type of place where people would gather, a garage and a pizza shop across the way. Inside just a few people drinking, people who weren’t necessarily of any particular type. The bar was a small sideways L, they grabbed beers and sat at one of a few tables in the smaller appendage of the room. They talked for a while, the inebriation of the night fading, still that haze but now clearer, like the walls grew brighter, the air warmer.

“It’s not so much to criticize,” Julie said. “I mean criticism today is like...”

“Everyone’s a critic?” he said.

“Right,” she said. “Yes, and I mean beyond that, it’s—there’s a common criticism that’s just shaped film, it’s shaping film. It’s like, everyone, and almost more out of entertainments sake, they pick out every little thing that’s wrong or unrealistic or heavy handed.”

“Yeah,” Kevin said. “But that can be kind of fun to do.”

“Right,” Julie said. “It’s fun. But it’s become, it’s shaped like...”

She leaned over her beer, her fingers open and curled, like they were claws clenching into an invisible ball.

“What?” Kevin said.

“You wanna know?”

“Well yeah, I’m listening.”

“It’s—this idea of what we can just pick out has shaped this kind of common criticism, like a new standard, a new stick to say what’s good and bad, and that’s shaped film.”

“Ok,” Kevin said.

“Everyone, everybody now, thinks dialogue is supposed to have a certain charm and realism, and CGI and special effects should look a certain way.”

“I don’t know about CGI,” he said.

“But it’s like, when you were watching Beatle Juice or Clash of the Titans or something no one ever said ‘Oh that looks so fake’ because they’re movies, they’re special effects, you’re supposed to go with it.”

“Ok,” he said, a kind hint of laughter in his voice.

“People, for thousands of years people didn’t have special effects, they had people in masks and puppets and shit.”

“But they still have that stuff in plays,” he said.

“But plays—first off, even plays have ridiculous special effects now, and second off, why is it Ok for plays and not movies?”

“Well,” he said. “Movies are supposed to be real right? Or aren’t they supposed to feel real.”

“No,” she said. “It’s, Ok, you go back to old stuff and it has it’s whatevers, it’s oddnesses it’s stiltedness, but there’s like, you watch a movie from the seventies, you watch Saturday Night Fever and there’s a thing to it, you get something about disco, and you’d think disco was this super cheesy thing with no redemption, but watch that and you get that there was a feel and a, like a vibrance to it.”

“Ok,” Kevin said.

“Or you watch Jazz in old Woody Allen movie,” she said.

And he nodded along.

“Or the grain in some of these films, or the speeches and stuff, it just takes you to something if you get it.”

“And that’s why you want to be a critic?”

“Fuck yes,” she said. “It’s not, you don’t sit there and just pick shit apart, you find shit, you go into this world, this vast, fuckin, thing, and you find stuff, you find a way to appreciate what it was and then you try and give it to people, like a bridge or something.”

“Sounds good,” Kevin said.

And Julie gave him a nod, a big over acted nod, and she looked him in the eyes and she took a sip of her beer. She waited a few seconds, scratched the beer mug, looked down and up.

“Because, y’know,” she said. “I mean it’s easy, it’s the easiest fuckin thing to tear shit apart, y’know? Anyone can pick through shit, but to find something that people don’t...”

Kevin looked away for a second, he slid his phone out of his pocket, tilted his head down.

“What?” she said.

He had a serious look on his face.

“Oh, nothing,” he said.

“You need to get it?”

“Oh, um...”

“It’s fine,” she said.

“Oh, uh, Ok,” he said. “Thanks.”

“Ok,” she said, kind of amused, kind of sarcastic.

He stepped away from the table, walked out of here range and answered the phone, talked in a hushed tone. She waited, looked over at him hunching, pacing, serious

now. She looked away, looked at the shabby walls of the place, the guy in the corner, two guys sitting at the bar, flannel shirts, one chubby and older, his head drooping. Kevin came back, he looked sorry.

“Everything alright?” she asked.

“Oh, um yeah. I just have to stop by my mom’s place.”

“Oh, Ok.”

“I mean I can...”

“Oh.”

“Unless you want to stop by my mom’s.”

“Is everything alright?”

“Oh yeah, she’s fine . It’s just...”

“Your mom is still even up?”

“Yeah she’s up late I guess.”

“I mean I could go with you if you have to...”

“Oh, um...”

“Or unless you were just...”

“Oh, no, um I guess that’s fine,” he said. “We can go whenever.”

“Are you sure,” she said. “I didn’t mean to...”

“Or, no, it’s cool,” he said. “Just, whenever.”

They left the bar. There was a moment where it seemed like they would sit down for a little while longer and then go, but the moment was weird, was tense. Kevin

chugged the rest of his beer. Julie left hers. They drove over to Kevin's mom's house, that silence again, this time a little less comfortable, the idea that they should have had some things to say but they didn't. The music blotted out by their quiet. Kevin parked the car in the street in front of the house, turned off the ignition, waited in the silent car, the black of the night.

“Just so you know,” he said to her. “Um, my mom is in a wheelchair.”

“Ok,” she said.

“Just so you don't like...”

“Don't what?” she said.

“I don't know, just a heads up I guess.”

“Alright,” she said.

And he opened the door, that vacuum sound of it clicking loudly through the night. He stepped out. She followed.

Kevin's mom, when she saw Julie, there was this look, shock maybe, very quick, followed by a smile, a very calm and slow and obviously forced smile. Julie introduced herself, was very polite and pleasant, impressive in a way.

“Hi, I'm Julie, this is a wonderful house, I love those flowers are they...”

Slightly too friendly but not patronizing, polite, impressive. She walked behind her, made eye contact, like she was well versed in this sort of thing, like she was a businesswoman and she was visiting a client, making a stable impression, nothing too strong but nothing that would make one feel unappreciated. She almost, almost, moved

over to his mom's chair and offered to push her, but didn't, which was a good thing. Kevin's mom showed her around, forgetting almost entirely about the presence of her son, Kevin trailing in the background. His mom was a litany of details, mostly boring, this was her office, a painting one of her sons had done for her, so on.

When they came to the kitchen there was finally a pause, the awkwardness inherent to the moment resumed, the three of them all wondering what to make of this little gathering.

"So mom," Kevin said.

She turned her towards him.

"Yes dear?"

He gave her the most polite version of an impatient look he could muster.

"Yes?" she said, her face slightly tinged with confusion.

"You called?" he said.

"Yeah," she said.

"So..."

She looked at him for a moment. Blankness. And then it clicked. Or at least it appeared to, the possibility existing to Kevin that she could very well simply be dragging this moment out for God knows what reason.

"Oh," she said. "Oh, if I'd have known you were busy I wouldn't have called."

"It's Ok," he said.

"I didn't know you were out with..."

“It’s Ok,” Julie said to her. “We weren’t doing anything special. I just kind of invited myself I think.”

“Oh,” she said.

Julie smiled and nodded. “We were just hanging out,” she said.

“Is that what you...?” and his mom stopped short.

And there was that old awkward feeling again.

“Mom,” Kevin said.

“Yes dear?”

“Soooo, you called?”

“Right,” she said. “God I keep... Well I wouldn’t have called you if I knew you were out.”

And she looked back at Julie, and Julie shrugged awkwardly.

“Not that you were. I mean you were just hanging out but, well, it’s nice to meet you Julie.”

“Thanks,” Julie said.

“But, I just called because the pie crust.”

“The pie crust?” Kevin said.

“Well you left it...”

“I brought it,” Kevin said.

“Well but it’s not around,” she said.

“Did you look for it?” he asked.

“I looked,” she said.

“Hold on,” and he walked over to the drawers and the pantry, checking the bottom ones first. Julie and his mom waited. His mom looked at Julie, she smiled. Kevin rustled around behind them. Finally he went to the cabinets above the counter.

“Shit,” he said.

“You find it?” his mom asked.

“Shit,” he said. “Crap, I’m sorry.”

He walked over to the table, piecrust in hand, placing it down on the table in front of her.

“Were you gonna make it tonight?” he asked.

“It’s alright,” she said.

“I can still help you if you want.”

“It’s fine,” she said. “I think it might be getting too late for it anyway.”

“Sorry,” he said.

“It’s fine.”

Kevin’s mom looked over at Julie and smiled.

“Why don’t I just make you some tea or some coffee?” she said.

“Oh, yeah, that’d be great,” Julie said.

And his mom smiled again. And she went over to the cupboard.

“What would you like?” she asked Julie.

“Oh, um tea is fine.”

“We have green tea, honey...”

“Green Tea works,” she said.

“And coffee black for Kevin,” his mom said.

“Black,” Julie said to Kevin under her breath, a quick glance and a tiny smile.

Kevin’s mom made the coffee, made the tea, Kevin didn’t help and Julie, for a second, wondered if this was weird, wondered if she should help. The two of them sat there, quiet, calm, Julie comfortably gazing at the interior of the house, the walls, the thin blue strip a few inches below the ceiling with a design of little yellow flowers curling through it, the wooden cabinets, so on.

“Was it just you and your brother here?” Julie asked. Casually.

“And his sister,” his mom said as she wheeled over holding Julie’s cup of tea in her left hand. Kevin, upon seeing this got up from the table.

“You have a sister?” Julie said to him across the room.

“He has two,” his mom said.

Kevin came back to the table holding two mugs. He placed one in front of his mother.

“Two sisters,” Julie said.

“And four brother,” his mom said.

“You have six siblings!”

Kevin held up his hands, held out six fingers with a calm smile.

Kevin’s mother nodded and smiled.

“Can you name them all?” Julie asked.

“Oh yeah,” Kevin said.

Julie started, “Bobby, Rickki, Tommy, Taylor...”

Kevin and his mom looked at her.

“It’s from a movie,” she said quietly.

The two of them kept their gaze.

“Matt Damon has all these brothers and he says their names really fast. But they’re made up though.”

Kevin’s mom smiled. She turned her head down towards her coffee, took a sip.

“Well I promise you they’re all real,” his mom said.

Julie took a sip of her tea. She looked into the mug for a second and then, with her eyes just above the rim, she scanned the two of them, her eyes quickly darting from one to another.

“Do you have any siblings?” his mom asked.

“A brother,” Julie said, letting her mug drift down into her palm, her palm drifting down to the table.

“And you get along?” his mother asked.

“Oh, he was...”

And she stopped, looked down for a second.

Kevin’s mom prodded her with her eyes, with her bobbing head. Julie stayed quiet, looked like she was calculating something, solving riddles in her mind.

“Oh, he was just, he was great,” Julie said. “Great big brother.”

And Julie smiled, and she quickly sipped her tea again.

“Ok,” Kevin’s mom said.

Kevin scratched at his chin. He took his palm and, very quickly, caressed his face, and then noticed and stopped. He drank his coffee.

“All of Kevin’s brothers and sisters seem to just vanish into the woodwork once they move into the real world,” his mom said.

Julie stopped for a moment, felt the silence after this, waited for it to pass. “Oh, I guess it just takes time to adjust,” she said. “I’m sure they all miss you.”

“Robert’s been ‘adjusting’ for thirteen years now,” his mom said.

Julie nodded.

Kevin scratched his ear.

“Even if you’re adjusting it doesn’t kill you to pick up the phone,” his mom said.

“He calls,” Kevin said quietly.

“When’s the last time you talked to Robert?” his mom asked.

Kevin sipped his coffee.

“And Sarah, do you know she’s actively trying to avoid me.”

“Sarah calls mom,” Kevin said.

“She calls to tell me how I’ve done this and that and I need to treat to her like, oh, God knows what? That therapist that I pay for.”

Kevin leaned back, scrunched up his face, pinched his earlobe.

“I’m sorry dear,” his mom said to Julie. “I don’t mean to put you off.”

Julie let out a brief chuckle. “It’s Ok,” she said. “It must be hard keeping track of all them.”

“She has this thing,” his mom said. “Everything’s toxic. I’m toxic, her friends are toxic, her boyfriend, three years together and all of the sudden he’s toxic.”

“Oh,” Julie said.

“I keep telling her she has to learn to deal with people. You can’t just go around making people toxic.”

“But I kind of get that though,” Julie said.

His mom looked over, Kevin paused , wide eyed.

“No, or I guess I didn’t mean, not with you I guess,” Julie said. “But I could see that stuff happening with her friends or her boyfriend or something. Sometimes you just get these realizations about people, or, I don’t know never mind.”

“No, go on, it’s fine,” his mother said.

“I was just...”

“Do you have toxic people in your life,” his mom said with a jovial grin meant to play the question off as a joke.

“Well I guess I just know the feeling,” Julie said. “I mean, but I’m sure you can go too far with it, you can start to do that to everyone.”

“Who do you have in your life that’s so toxic?” his mom asked.

“Oh, no one,” Julie said.

“Because they were toxic?” his mom asked.

Julie chuckled. “I guess so.”

His mom laughed.

“No,” Julie said. “Well I guess, I mean my boyfriend, he and I were just...”

“Your boyfriend?” his mom asked.

“We were just,” she said. “I mean I get that thing, cause we were, I mean there was nothing wrong with us, he was fine and everything but it was just like...”

Julie tilted her head to the side. She drank her tea. Kevin’s mom was staring straight at her, smile plastered on her face.

“Is was just this thing were I got the point and I realized that, almost just because, it was like I knew we shouldn’t have been together, We didn’t need to be in each other’s lives. We were just there.”

“Just like that?” his mom said.

“I mean not just like that, but I kind of, there was no big fight or big thing or anything, it was just kind of there.”

Kevin’s mom nodded.

“I’m sorry,” Julie said. “I don’t mean to get into all this.”

“Well there must have been something wrong with him,” his mom said.

“We just talked all the time,” Julie said.

Kevin’s mom’s eyes widened. “That’s a problem?” she said.

“No,” Julie said. “It’s just that, it was, all we did was talk. He talked to fill up space I guess.”

And his mom kept looking at her.

“It was this thing,” Julie said. “Where we always had to have some stupid conversation. We were always joking around y’know? He’d talk to me about why stop

signs had so many sides, or like, research he'd say, 'Why call it research when you're searching for the first time?'"

Kevin's mom sipped her coffee.

"And then we'd Google research and it was, I don't know, I think it was French for reach or something, and he'd keep joking about it, like 'research the coffee.'"

"I guess I don't see the problem," his mom said.

Julie paused for a second.

"I guess it's, we were just always filling up space. Space with words, like we were drowning in conversation and it was like we were scared to stop or something."

"I guess the honeymoon phase ended?" his mom said.

"Mom," Kevin said.

"I mean no," Julie said. "I just didn't get what was there I guess. I'm sorry I don't mean to... I just had a realization I guess, that I didn't need that, it wasn't doing anything and then I just stopped it because I had to."

Kevin's mom sipped her coffee, the liquid sound of it quite audible.

"Well when you get older," she said. "You start to learn the value of company."

Kevin was massaging his left ear.

"Oh," Julie said.

"It's easy when you're your age to question things, you want everyone to give you some great feeling, but then you learn."

"Ok," Julie said.

"You really think there was nothing to that boy?" his mom asked.

“Oh, no,” Julie said. “I just didn’t think...”

“He wasn’t amazing,” his mom said.

Julie nodded.

“But amazing,” his mom said. “And look, I’m just telling you this. Amazing fades, or rather it leaves, it usually leaves before it has a chance to fade.”

“Ok,” Julie said.

“And those people who might not seem amazing, well, they stay, and you learn about that. You learn that it’s valuable, people who can stick around, who might not be amazing but they stick around.”

“I didn’t mean to...” Julie began.

“It’s fine dear it’s fine,” his mom said. “But you’re telling me this and I’m just...” She paused. She looked at Kevin.

“Earlobes,” she said. “Kevin earlobes.” And Kevin moved his hand away from his face, trying to preempt his mom, but failing, as she reached over to his arm and gently brought it down to the table.

“He has these things,” she said. “Nervous habits.”

“I don’t mind,” Julie said.

His mom gave her an abrupt look.

“I think I’m OCD or something,” Kevin said, grinning at Julie.

“Stop that,” his mom said. “You’re not OCD. You just have bad habits.”

And Kevin kept his arms together, folded on the table.

“It’s the same thing,” his mom said. “You and your sister and your language, toxic and OCD and this and, everything is so...some things you just deal with.”

“I’m gonna go to bathroom real quick,” Kevin said.

And he got up from the table, his mom looking up at him as he rose, a small look of betrayal, her mouth open, a pleading, a very brief, but a pleading insecurity on her face. He faced away from the table, with his mom and Julie behind him and walked slowly away, hearing the silence in the background. As he began to walk up the stairs he heard the faintness of his mother’s voice. “I don’t mean to go on about all this, tell me...”

Kevin sat on the toilet, his pants around his ankles despite the fact that he wasn’t going. There was quiet. He felt safe. There was a timer going on in his head, he didn’t want to be in there for more than a minute or two, but as each second passed he begged himself for another one. He breathed, he felt calm, felt himself, felt as if the whole day, the entire time that had passed since he had last left this spot, this bathroom, were some kind of blur, some kind of lucid dream.

The porcupine’s dilemma is that it needs quills to keep itself safe, but those same quills make it hard for it to get close to anything without hurting it.

The ghost’s dilemma is that it’s ethereal, intangible. It’s found a way to exist, to be safe, untouchable, to have itself and only itself forever. But it can only see the world, it can’t touch it, and the only way to ever feel something outside of itself is to give itself

up, the one thing that has been constant, that isn't painful. And so the only way to get what it wants is to do the one thing it can't do. They can't die again, they can only evaporate and hope something brings them towards something else.

Kevin searched the cabinets in his bathroom. He used to have alcohol in here. He had a flask, or if not a flask he used to empty tiny shampoo bottles and fill them with whisky. He'd spent hours, back in high school, rinsing them of all residual soap, filling them up with water and then dumping it out when it bubbled at the top of the bottle, again and again, until they were clean enough to drink from. But alas, no flask, no shampoo bottles.

Kevin walked downstairs. Walked back into the kitchen. Walked past his mom, who didn't take any discernable notice of him when he entered, behind her, into Julie's line of vision. Julie looked at him, curiously, calmly, not knowing what else to expect.

"So we had the dog," his mom was saying. "And I can let him out but I can't walk him. And no one else seems to walk him. Kevin sometimes, but all these kids..."

Kevin walked up to the counter, rummaged through one of the top cabinets. Julie heard bottles clink as he seemed to be dividing groups of items in search of something.

"What are you doing back there?" his mom asked.

"Just getting a drink," he said.

"What?" his mom asked.

"Just some orange juice," he said.

"The glasses aren't up there," she said.

Kevin pulled out a bottle of vodka, held it up to Julie and smiled. She kept looking at him, cautiously. He unscrewed the cap, holding the bottle by its neck. He tilted it into his mouth and took a big swig, grimaced slightly then repeated. He walked over to another cabinet, one on the bottom, and took out two glasses. He got some orange juice from the fridge. He poured himself half a glass of OJ and filled the rest up with vodka. Then he held the bottle up towards Julie and gave her a look. She moved her head around, kind of bobbing it, like “weeeelllll.” He poured her one as well.

He brought the glasses over to the table, put one of them down and slid it a few inches over to Julie, then plopped down in his chair and took a big gulp.

“I was telling her about your dog,” his mom said.

“Simon,” Kevin said.

“Yes Simon,” his mom said. “Do you remember Simon?”

“Of course,” Kevin said. “It wasn’t really long ago.”

“You remember how I used to walk him?”

“Wheel him,” Kevin said, grinning, his head drooping, swaying around.

His mom gave him that look she always gave him when he was being a smartass. Julie sat back, inched her drink closer to her, didn’t say much. She wouldn’t for the rest of the night.

Kevin’s mom went on about the dog. When she was finished Kevin asked her if she remembered the time at the beach with the pizzas. She talked about them all ordering five pizzas and everything was wrong and she, she and Kevin, sat there picking mushrooms and olives off of one pizza and putting them onto another, making one pizza

plain and another loaded, one vegetarian another meat lovers, and still Sarah complained that there were meat juices ruminating in the cheese. “That’s what happens when you stick with people,” his mom said, eyeing Kevin.

Julie took sips of her orange juice, her screwdriver. She, along with Kevin, had two more over the rest of the night. She became tipsy and quiet, amused and slightly baffled by the performance in front of her, Kevin and his mom, so careful, orchestrated, but weirdly revealing. Kevin’s mom told stories, he prodded her, she, at random intervals, passively prodded Julie. And Julie sat there and drank.

Then they left. They got up. Kevin hugged his mom. Julie was polite, didn’t know what to do about a hug or a handshake or whatever, especially with the wheelchair. She waved. His mom smiled. They left. And the two walked out to the car and got in without talking. Kevin’s head was bobbing as put the keys in the ignition.

“Can you drive?” Julie asked.

“I mean...” Kevin said.

Julie plunked her head back against the headrest.

“It’s weird,” Kevin said. “I can drive, I mean, well, I know people say they can drive when they’ve drunk a little, but I actually, I mean, well, my motor skills don’t go down that much and I’m carefull...”

Julie looked over at him, a cold look.

“Do you want, or um, we could get a cab, or an, um an Uber or something. If you don’t want I can...”

“Just drive,” she said.

The car ride was quiet. Kevin's music, the songs from his phone, an odd and intricate mix, a lot of low key semi-relaxing music, strings, harmonies, folksy, some foreign stuff sung in Spanish or Italian. Julie fell into it, fell into the music, forgot he was there. He focused on driving, they moved at a slow pace. He stopped at stop signs, signaled at turns, waited a second after the light turned green before he went. Very little was said. She told him he could just take her to her place, she'd get her car tomorrow. Gave him directions, small jabs of speech, "Go right here then head towards Falls."

He got to her place, the street outside of her building. He put the car in park, let it idle there in the dark, the music playing softly. The two sat there, quiet, that end of the night quiet, where you maybe have things to say, or things you wanted to, but you know they won't be said. They clung to the silence, the moment that was drifting by. They waited.

Julie rolled her head across the headrest of her seat, looked at him.

"Look," he said.

"Hmm?"

Kevin put his hand on his forehead and let it slide down his face.

"I mean, well," he said. "Well, I just..."

He swallowed air. She looked at him passively. Drunk.

"I guess I'm sorry if it was weird," he said.

"Which was weird?" she said.

"Um..."

“There arrre, there were a few things that could classify as weird,” she said.

“Or, um, my mom I guess,” he said. “Things with her I didn’t know if she was...well...”

Julie rolled her head back into center, facing the windshield.

“Why are you apologizing?” she said.

“I just thought it might have been...”

“You don’t, don’t have to apologize for things. Your mom’s your mom, what’re you gonna do about it?”

“I just , I don’t know, I wanted to handle things...”

“Don’t apologize,” she said. “Don’t apologize for little, dumb little shit. You do what you are.”

And he nodded, a small one. And he grabbed onto the steering wheel and looked forward. The music, this Spanish little guitar thing, this lilting, twangy, slightly cheesy love song that would hit these high pitched little rhythms that, if you were in the right frame of mind, would hit you in that part of the brain that goes sailing when it hears the right notes. Julie breathed, she breathed deep, arched her back, and stretched her arms up, contorting her limbs, her wrists askew. She collapsed again.

“I just donnn’t—I’m not sure I get it,” she said.

He turned his head towards her.

“I mean you’re very, you’re so...”

He gave another small nod.

“Like, I don’t get,” she said. “You’re coming out and out and that’s, or it’s whatever, but seems like, You keep going off into this... I’m not sure what you’re doing. Like you go for walks and shit but then you, then you come back and you’re all...”

“I don’t know,” he said.

“Youuu don’t seem toooo...” she said.

“It’s well, I’m just...”

“Mh-hmmm?”

“I’m, I know I’m, I guess I’m passive, but I have things, I have to fight for things y’know?”

She closed her eyes for a second, let her head sway back and forth, slightly, in rhythm to the music.

“I have to fight for, like my mom, I know she’s, well she’s, I’m not sure I guess, but I have to stay around her. And so when things, when they come up, I stick to them I guess, but, I just have to handle them, and I’m trying to, well, I have to watch out for things, but I fight for things, even if they’re...”

He glanced at her.

“I have to be sure I can hold onto some of things in my life. And I have to be sure I’m there. It’s like this thing where I can’t be sure if I can do something unless it’s there, but when it is it’s like, it’s...”

He stopped talking. She turned her head.

“You’re kiiind of strange,” she said. “You probably hear that but , I mean I’m sorry about it but I don’t know, you just are.”

And he swallowed. He scratched his ear, tried to grin but it came off as a frown. The music played, lilted. They listened. Quiet. Music. Her head hit the back of her seat again, it rolled to the left and her head fell awkwardly upon his shoulder. She let it rest there for a moment, while the guitar did it's high pitched plunky romantic thing. He barely moved.

He looked at her. He gave her this look, this confused intense look. And she looked back, kind of baffled. He just looked at her for a while, this tension building in his face. He inched, not even inched, he millimetered closer to her. And finally she laughed.

“Ok,” she said chuckling. “Ok, it's Ok, whatever.”

And she punched him on the shoulder, and grabbed the handle of the door. That vacuum sound, she got out, the cool air drifting into the car.

“I'll see you around,” she said lightly, her face above the car roof, no longer visible. And the door shut, and there was just that hard clicking sound.

BIOGRAPHY

Michael K. Hantman grew up in Baltimore, Maryland. He attended American University, where he received his Bachelor of Arts in Communications in 2006. He went on to receive a Certificate Degree in Graphic Design in 2011. He then received his Master of Fine Arts from George Mason University in 2016.