WAITING FOR NOTHING

By

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Abstract

In fulfillment of my MFA in Creative Writing (Fiction), I have written a thesis in the form of a novel entitled *Waiting For Nothing*.

In brief, my novel is about young people struggling to define their existence--or perceive a meaningful trajectory--within the troubled, detached-seeming technological present. Structurally speaking, it follows Tom, a young college graduate, who suffers from existential malaise and feels at a loss for what to do with his life. He drifts through vague, short-lived relationships with others, chooses to have only a few friends, spends a lot of time on the internet and its subcultures, and generally prefers isolation over company. His life begins to change when he meets Sara, a young woman who has recently become a paraplegic due to a car accident. The two bond over shared values of isolation, depression and anti-social sentiments, and they enter into a relationship. The story begins to resemble a relationship plot, wherein the young couple struggles to negotiate their togetherness while resisting (and capitulating to) various forces of parental pressure, internet culture, mental illness, physical handicap, drug use, and criminal activity. As their relationship matures, Tom and Sara reconsider their antisocial tendencies and become incrementally more accepting of society and its expectations, albeit on their own terms. Tom begins working a full-time job--something he previously thought himself incapable of enduring--and becomes more responsive towards concerns expressed by his elderly parents for him to become a more responsible person. The ending of the novel sees Tom and Sara in a committed and healthy relationship, in which both feel optimistic and confident towards challenges of the future, consciously resolving their previous asceticism and pessimism.
The themes in the novel connect to my research into American millennial culture, as well as experiences in my own life. In a time when digital information and modes of connectivity are exponentially increasing, it is both meaningful and entertaining to analyze the spectrum of attitudes relating to it. While Tom and Sara have positive views on internet usage and culture, they are also aware of its drug-like effects, and at one point even endeavor to ‘detox’ themselves from the internet by turning off all their devices for a month. By examining their enthusiasm and dependency on the internet, they discern that technology is neither good nor bad, but is useful as a tool and serves to amplify human nature.

In terms of literary traditions of the 21st century, I view my work as fitting into alternative literature or ‘alt lit,’ as it’s come to be known. Born on internet blogs and online magazines, the genre gained acceptance by mainstream publishers beginning in the mid-2000s, with works by writers such as Tao Lin, Noah Cicero, Zachary German, Megan Boyle and others navigating their way into print. The genre typically involves detached, socially pessimistic young people, detailed references to internet usage and subcultures, boredom and drug use. A key feature of alt-lit which has captivated me is its sincerity both in language usage and emotions. In stark contrast to most fiction produced in the United States today, the best examples of alt lit do not employ irony, wryness or exaggeration to achieve social criticism, but rather present information and emotions as sincerely and concretely as possible. In this way, a kind of sincere closeness is achieved between writer and reader, one without condescension or artifice.

Moreover, my work connects to the literary traditions of bildungsroman and romantic plot in perhaps new ways than have been previously expressed. What does it mean to become an adult or to romantically love someone in the internet age? Are the standards our parents obeyed
for maturity, personal conduct and relationships still in place--or is technology moving us
towards new models of how a person should be in the world? On the whole, I do think society is
at a certain kind of inflection point when it comes to becoming an adult in the information age,
when it seems young people are gaining new attitudes and obligations at the same time that they
are letting go of traditional ones. Although the goal of young adults may still be fixed on
cultivating an identity, gaining success and affection, the paths taken to resolve these tensions
seem to me more varied and interesting than they have ever been. My work endeavors to discuss
these tensions and challenges within the framework of established literary genres.
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'I think I’m autistic,’ said Tom, 24, with his head tilted vaguely in the direction of his girlfriend Christie, 29. They sat on a gray sectional couch. The TV was playing *Criminal Minds* on Netflix.

‘Did you hear me?’ said Tom after someone was murdered on *Criminal Minds*. There was a person on an out-of-control killing rampage, which happened in every episode of *Criminal Minds*. Sometimes, after arresting the rampage killer, the FBI agents were seen celebrating by drinking champagne on a private jet. In the next episode there would be another killing spree somewhere else in the country.

‘What?’ said Christie sounding distracted.

‘Nevermind,’ said Tom. ‘I just said maybe I’m autistic.’

‘You don’t have autism,’ said Christie.

‘I read three articles about adult autism today,’ said Tom.

A person tied to a chair was killed with an ax on *Criminal Minds*.

‘There’s a 4.6% chance of someone developing autism after adolescence,’ said Tom, referencing what he learned online about adult autism, mostly through typing ‘adult onset
autism’ on Google, which took him to several blogs and forum threads of people writing about their struggle with adult-onset autism or ‘AOA.’ A doctor wrote a blog post saying there was a link between side effects of vaccinations and adult-onset autism. Reading it caused Tom to remember an incident in childhood when, phobic of needles, Tom resisted and ‘threw a tantrum’ at a medical clinic; he painfully complied when Tom’s mother said she would buy him a Super Nintendo game if he let himself be vaccinated, and he did.

Tom opened his Macbook and read a forum post on Reddit about a woman who became autistic, she felt, after her divorce and death of her teenage son in a train accident, which happened in the same year. She spoke of finding it painful to make eye contact with other people, not being able to respond topically to others’ speech during a conversation, and/or becoming extremely confused when asked to perform simple tasks by others. At McDonalds, while standing near the front of the napkins, the woman was asked by a person with crutches for napkins; the woman suddenly fell into a deeply confused state where she could tell that the other person was saying things to her, but she felt ‘deaf, or something’ and furthermore that her whole body was ‘immobilized.’ Tom felt sympathy towards the woman on Reddit.

Someone in the comments section asked about the woman’s vaccination history, specifically referencing ‘pre-1980s’ ones, when vaccines were ‘especially bad.’ Another person wrote ‘that’s why I chose not to have my children vaccinated, God bless.’ Someone who said they were a medical student in Peru said her symptoms indicated ‘anxiety and nothing else.’ The Peruvian medical student briefly mentioned depersonalization disorder, which Tom vaguely knew about, as something the the woman should research instead of autism. ‘Fuck you shitposter, peru doctor my ass,’ someone replied to the Peruvian medical student. Another poster said they read a book that said autism and anxiety disorders were ‘definitely comorbid’ with each
other. Tom looked at Generalized Anxiety Disorder’s WebMD page; he looked at Depersonalization Disorder’s WebMD page. ‘Do you feel a strange disorienting sensation accompanied by deep confusion, as if always slightly behind, ahead, above, or beside yourself?’ said WebMD. ‘Um,’ said Tom.

Tom looked up from the Macbook and saw someone get killed by a chainsaw on Criminal Minds. It was confusing that the out-of-control ax killer now used a chainsaw. ‘Why is it a chainsaw now?’

‘It’s a different episode,’ said Christie in a distracted-sounding voice. She finished laughing at an Instagram Story posted by a friend in Los Angeles.

‘What?’ said Tom. Christie made a weird noise and continued laughing at a thing on her phone.

‘Nevermind. Jesus,’ said Tom, and relocated, from the sofa to the dining table in an effort, he felt, to be more productive. Later, he stared at the time on the Macbook and realized that around one hour had passed, and that in that time Tom had edited most of one page of his novel manuscript before opening Google Chrome and clicking on several ‘Funny Vine Compilation’ videos on Youtube, sometimes laughing uncontrollably. Tom, feeling moderately-to-severely exasperated with himself for having accomplished nothing during one hour, aggressively slammed his Macbook lid closed. He opened it several seconds later and ‘killed’ each of the many active non-work-related applications--itunes, Chrome, Utorrent, Quicktime Player, Excel, Activity Monitor, Messages, TextEdit, Calendar, Finder, App Store, System Preferences--with the measured insanity, he felt, of a serial killer on Criminal Minds.

Tom went into the kitchen to drink water. He poured water into a cup and spilled some on the countertop and his foot while having the thought ‘I would feel better if I didn’t exist.’
Tom sat down at the table, feeling extremely frustrated at the physical world and his place in it. ‘This is … unacceptable,’ thought Tom while staring at a corner of the Macbook screen. Tom was looking at someone’s Facebook profile when he forcefully had the thought ‘my head would be better off without a body,’ then, after clicking on something which caused the screen to refresh, thought ‘I’m probably retarded.’ Tom imagined his mind as something isolated away from his body, or as an optional usb-connected thing, which would detach at the neck when his body was ‘being stupid,’ or something.

Beginning the previous two or three months, Tom had with increasing frequency noticed himself feeling strange or extremely off-balance in his ability to gauge anything related to his body, including whether he was hungry or needed to use the bathroom. Tom sometimes left a task and went to sit on the toilet only to realize, minutes later, that he didn’t need to go--causing him to feel extremely confused at why he had performed those actions in the first place. Moreover, he recounted himself frequently opening the pantry door and, in a kind of unconscious daze, stand there and genuinely wonder if he was hungry. Sometimes he ate part of a banana to ‘test’ if he was hungry, then transfer the partially peeled and consumed banana to the fridge--only to find another partially eaten banana inside, wrinkled and brown. Something was wrong with his short term memory, or something, he’d decided. If his short term memory was a person, thought Tom, it would be someone who walked off a cliff while casually thinking about things unrelated to the moment.

‘I think I’m retarded,’ said Tom in a loud voice, looking away from his phone.

‘I don’t think you’re retarded,’ said Christie watching a korean sitcom.

‘But what if I’m actually retarded,’ said Tom, ‘and it’s just starting to happen.’
‘You’re not retarded,’ said Christie without turning her head. ‘You graduated from Berkeley.’

‘I don’t think that’s ... good logic,’ said Tom hearing his voice trail off. He tried to remember if he had met or seen any retarded people while at Berkeley, two to six years ago, studying English and Film Studies.

‘There has to be some retarded people at Berkeley, for affirmative action,’ said Tom, moments later realizing ‘affirmative action’ pertained only to race and ethnicity, not to intelligence--but felt it was too late to correct himself since Christie had already laughed, mostly to ‘move past it’ or in a kind of exasperated derision towards him, thought Tom, having accepted it as a kind of joke only a Tom-like person would make. This was happening more and more often: Tom saying something and others interpreting it as a moderately offensive or otherwise extremely childish joke--whereas he had meant it sincerely albeit self-confusedly and erroneously. And there would be nothing left for Tom to say or do except maybe to accept with equanimity that he was becoming ‘the kind of person that says things and behaves like that, or something.’ The only reasonable solution seemed to be to avoid social situations where he could say something and embarrass himself. ‘Be alone,’ thought Tom, sometimes several times a day. ‘Find a way to be alone, now.’

Tom went into the kitchen and began making pasta, slowly organizing the required ingredients and placing them on the counter.

One month ago--four months into the relationship and two months into cohabitation (Tom having sort of ‘moved into’ Christie’s condominium by slowly bringing more and more of his possessions from his apartment into her condominium, eventually beginning to pay $150 a month towards her mortgage)--Christie said she wanted to ‘get married soon’ and ‘start a
family.’ Tom responded by saying he didn’t know how to respond to either of those things--privately thinking of them as formless, almost inscrutable abstractions--and that the situation ‘was unexpected’ since Christie hadn’t talked about these things when their relationship began. From that point, in their weekly or bi-weekly arguments, an irritated-seeming Christie said things implying that she always--not just recently--wanted to get married and have children, and Tom just didn’t know because he ‘wasn’t paying attention.’

Over the course of successive arguments of similar tone and context, it became apparent to Tom that the relationship was ‘not working anymore.’ Christie said the two of them were probably ‘in different places’ in life, repeatedly citing their age gap as the largest contributing factor. Their five-year age gap became increasingly like an entity in the condominium, like a thing that rattled in the back of the refrigerator or the high-pitched ‘squeal’ the dishwasher made near the end of drying cycles--some quietly discombobulating thing in the background of lives.

A month ago, in October, Christie said ‘I guess we’re breaking up then’ while holding a carton of organic, non-GMO orange juice under the bright lights of the kitchen. Tom made a noise signaling agreement then rose and quietly began gathering his possessions. He unplugged his Vitamix and coffee grinder and placed them in a box. He packed other things into boxes. He went upstairs and put his clothes in a plastic tub where most of his clothes already were. While walking towards the garage door holding the first of the boxes, Christie unexpectedly hugged him from behind and said, in a childlike manner while crying, ‘Please don’t leave me!’ Tom stood still wondering if he should--like a character in a romantic comedy film passive--aggressively ‘shrug off’ Christie and finish loading the car then drive off; or--like a character in a ‘postmodern’ northern european or Japanese movie--stand stoically still as the camera slowly zoomed in to show only Tom’s unemotional face then cut to a montage of memories from his
childhood, these seemingly random recollections unrelated to the moment--like a failed fishing trip with his father or a violin string snapping in the middle of a elementary school recital--the greater significant of which would ‘hit’ later in the movie when sufficient context and backstory is established to allow the seemingly ‘random, disconnected’ recollections to be viewable as ‘potentially symbolically meaningful.’

A week after the incident, Christie said in a Coffee Bean and Tea Leaf that she understood Tom’s apprehension towards marriage since he was working on being a writer and publishing a novel, a goal which Christie more or less accepted. She said it was ‘okay’ Tom wasn’t sure of marriage yet and that it would happen ‘naturally.’ Tom, while holding an iced coffee, experienced the sensation of dropping a bean on a damp paper towel and putting it in a ziploc bag, in a second grade classroom, while feeling completely dubious of its eventual sprouting and growth into something green and take-home-able, plantable, and finally killable by neglect on behalf of his mother who had taken it reassuringly and forgot to water it. Or, that Christie’s new behavior of willfully de-escalating her goals and striving to be more patient and accommodating in their relationship felt, to Tom, like an independent furniture store owner allowing a delinquent customer to make smaller monthly payment towards an account, at the same time increasingly worrying about the long-term solvency of the account.

Presently, three weeks passed in which Christie had not mentioned the subject of marriage or children at all. In place of those things, Tom noticed a growing trend towards them saying concrete, practical things to themselves and to each other. They started making small improvements in the condo, together, like replacing light bulbs and buying a special extendable duster capable of wiping dust off ceiling. They purchased a membership at Planet Fitness. Christie started a ‘weekday pescatarian’ diet. Tom purchased organic honey so the green
smoothie he made every morning was ‘completely organic.’ They spent more time making plaintive but mutually pleasing comments about what each had done that day, what they planned to do, and what they were doing currently. When they got into small arguments or disagreed on something, they would go away from each other and do independent tasks. They sometimes broke extended periods of mutual silence with small, low-impact questions, usually having to do with what they were doing in the present moment.

‘Are you hungry?’ said Tom from the kitchen after making pasta with pesto.

‘I ate leftover curry with rice,’ said Christie.

‘When?’ said Tom.

‘Um,’ said Christie sounding distracted.

Tom brought a small bowl of pasta for Christie, who was watching Criminal Minds again. ‘I’m going to clean my desk drawer after this episode is done.’

‘I’m going to swiffer the floor tomorrow,’ said Tom. He worked on his novel while eating pasta with pesto, trying to ‘match’ Christie’s promise to be productive. ‘I’m also going to run the dishwasher and do laundry too.’

‘I feel better now,’ said Tom around 15 minutes later. ‘Less retarded.’

‘That’s good,’ said Christie, who put down the bowl of pasta on the table and turned off the TV.

Tom was alone when he woke the next morning, Christie having left for her work as an executive assistant at a mortgage company. Tom took a shower and made a green smoothie using kale, banana, frozen pineapples, peach slices, flax, and raw honey. He drove to work.
At Pho Sure, a pho noodle and make-your-own sushi roll restaurant near Berkeley’s campus, Tom prepared ingredients while standing behind a prep table. Tom worked every day now that the two other employees recently quit. Jon had been fired for stealing from the cash register several times. Danny, the owner, had also lent money to Jon that he had not paid back. Mark, who lived in a Alcoholics Anonymous grouphome, violated his probation last week and was now in jail. Mark seemed to Tom as softspoken and well-mannered; he never seemed like an out-of-control alcoholic that needed to be somewhere. Working shifts together they had talked about Overwatch, a team-based first-person shooting game on PC, and sometimes about Mark’s brother who drove a tank in Afghanistan. ‘Did your brother get a triple kill … playing tank,’ said Tom when Mark talked about his brother’s ‘insane battle’ in Karachi fighting ISIS. ‘He destroyed two enemy tanks. And a helicopter, I think,’ said Mark grinning. Tom’s only co-worker now was Amrak, 30, a part-owner of the business who came from Cambodia two years ago to travel and practice English. Amrak’s temporary visa was expiring soon. She was thinking about enrolling in classes at Berkeley, to get a student visa, but wasn’t sure if she wanted to do that. Amrak was watching a korean drama on her Macbook at a desk near the back of the restaurant. There was no one in the restaurant. Tom made himself a bowl of pho and ate it while looking at his Macbook.

‘What doesn’t kill you eventually makes you want to commit suicide,’ wrote Tom on a napkin which seemed at least 65% saturated with pho broth. He typed the sentence on his Macbook. He stared at it until each individual word seemed extremely funny, he felt, and laughed. Tom saw his reflection in a half-eaten pho then moved the bowl away from his chest. Danny was somewhere else, probably at the tavern. One month ago Danny opened a large, tavern-style restaurant around 20 minutes away from Pho Sure. Danny still did a few tasks at
Pho Sure. He broke down salmon, which came once a week in a coffin-like styrofoam box.

After breaking down salmon Danny smoked several cigarettes outside, standing next to his dark blue car. Tom would take the salmon fillets and put them in containers.

Someone came into the restaurant and gazed up at the menu displayed on several flatscreen TVs. Tom went in the front of the restaurant and put on plastic disposable gloves, waiting for an order. The man mumbled things as he continued staring at the menu, with a finger near his mouth. He looked extremely confused, or something. The man looked at Tom in a neutral expression then turned around and went out of the restaurant.

After a lunch rush of a dozen or so people, the restaurant was empty again. Amrak went across the street to look at clothes at American Apparel. Tom, editing a chapter of his novel, stared at the screen and, feeling extremely frustrated, experienced a strong urge to use Command + A then DELETE to erase the document. Tom did it and felt a weird feeling of release. He grinned while looking at the blank document. Tom made an avocado smoothie, drank it while watching the street outside, which was sunny. Tom went to his Macbook and performed the ‘undo’ function by pressing Command+ Z.

Tom continued to work on his novel, which described the last 24 hours of the protagonist’s life leading up to his suicide. It described in minute detail the things he did to prepare for his suicide. Tom looked at the screen and felt the story was completely pointless and argued with himself--with a rising tone of desperation of aggression, mostly towards himself, ‘why anyone would want to read the book?’ Despite this, Tom felt a duty to fix the manuscript and make it better, instead of abandoning it to write something else. After reaching a breaking point of frustration, occurring on average every two or three weeks, Tom would melodramatically emotionally commit himself to quit writing and find another thing to focus on
in life. He would, after around a week, return to his writing with slightly less motivation and energy than the last time he ‘quit’ writing, enacting and re-enacting a total cycle resembling, he felt, a child in a sandbox trying and failing to create an extremely sophisticated sculpture, going home with a bad attitude, only to return the next day to repeat the process.

Amrak came in the restaurant holding an American Apparel bag. She took out a wide-brim black felt hat and put it on. She asked how it looked.

‘Nice,’ said Tom.

Amrak said in a frowning expression that it looked different, on the front-facing camera of her phone, than it looked in the mirror in the store. She spun the hat on her head. She asked how Tom’s writing was going.

‘I want to use find and replace to change the characters in my novel to hamsters,’ said Tom. ‘And change the setting to Antarctica.’

‘Hamsters,’ said Amrak.

‘Instead of saying “they said” after dialogue it would be “they squealed,”’ said Tom grinning.

Amrak took off the hat and said she was probably going to return it. ‘14 days,’ she said while looking at the receipt. Amrak said the hat looked better on Lady Gaga, that she wore a hat like it in a music video.

‘Lady Gaga seems just … insane,’ said Tom, thinking of 2008. ‘Where were you in 2008.’

Tom took a 30mg Adderall when his shift ended at 5:00. At 6:30 Tom saw a text message from Christie: ‘where are you????’ Tom felt very confused and remembered they had plans for a Friendsgiving dinner at Christie’s friend’s house. Tom thought of texting Christie ‘feeling sick’ and ‘lying in bed,’ both of which would be lies. ‘On my way,’ Tom texted Christie. While Tom drove in rush hour traffic he saw many texts from Christie expressing different variations of ‘I can’t depend on you’ and ‘I asked you one thing this week.’

Tom drove with Christie to a suburban master-planned subdivision where her married friends, Andrew, 30, and Cindy, 31, were hosting a ‘friendsgiving,’ despite it being Sunday-the-week-of, marking the first of three Thanksgiving-related events Christie planned to attend.

When Christie took—with passive-aggressive force, felt Tom—the store-bought meat lasagna (still a ‘little cold’ in the middle owing to Christie’s forgetting to defrost beforehand) from Tom’s hands and put it on the counter, Andrew said it would need to be heated up ‘on the grill’ in a very neutral-seeming tone, then immediately resumed an automobile-related conversation with two male individuals Tom didn’t know. Tom scanned the kitchen-living room space once more and noted, while sensing a growing sense of unease and a tension headache, that the only people he knew in the room were the hosts and Mia. Tom noted also a heightened self-awareness of he and Christie existing as a coupled unit, like two molecules joined by a weak physical bond, and that they were more-than-usually likely to be seen as a singular unit—Christie and Tom—since everyone in the room was a couple, excepting Mia, as he moved with Christie to the center of the living room, where 14-16 friends and acquaintances of Andrew and Cindy, were sitting, Indian-style on the shag carpeting. Mia came to Christie and they greeted and hugged, and Mia hugged Tom, too, which tangibly improved his mood—augmenting it
somehow, because of her perfume, maybe—to be slightly above ‘generally socially anxious,’ though his headache was still present as an unserious, slightly pulsating, totally interior, din. Someone asked if something was ready yet, and an alert-looking Andrew suddenly interrupted himself midsentence—like an ABORT function typed into a DOS command prompt—and wordlessly rose and opened the screen door and went outside, lifted the gas grill to examine a foil-wrapped bulge, Tom could see from the side of the screen door, which he understood—while thinking of the word ‘Kafkaesque’—as the turkey.

While pouring himself white wine, choosing one arbitrarily from several open bottles—encouraged by Cindy to have a drink—into a red cup, Tom noticed the impressive-looking wall-mounted double oven, stainless steel and stacked atop the other, which he was standing somewhat superjacent to, and continued to stare confusedly at it for around 8 seconds, thinking of the turkey in the gas grill outside, and then what Andrew said about the lasagna they brought, alternatingly, when he noticed that Christie had moved to be standing very close to him—forming a possibly meaningful triangle between Christie and the oven and himself, thought Tom—while displaying an impatient-seeming expression. ‘Andrew’s oven is broken. Both of them,’ said Christie, pouring sparkling apple juice into a red cup, since she didn’t drink. ‘I’m gonna go talk to Mia.’

When Tom joined Christie on the carpet, he made an effort to look at the faces of the people Christie was talking to, for several seconds each, making facial expressions appropriate to the content being discussed, while feeling increasingly ‘aloof’ and wine-warmed. While Tom listened, several minutes later, to Mia talk complainingly about her lazy and often-tardy ‘photog’—referencing her work as a reporter for a local news station—he confusedly felt that Mia had ‘changed clothes,’ but then gradually realized, while sipping white wine, that Mia had
simply removed her peacoat to reveal her black dress, whose cream-colored sleeves (previously peacoat-obscured) had caused her sartorial aspect to ‘jump,’ he felt, from casual to somewhat dressy. After finishing talking about a recent news story to a vaguely bored-looking Christie, Mia turned her torso and head towards Tom in a way that seemed sanctioned, or over-deliberate, for some reason, and asked if he was writing a novel. Tom, after spending around three seconds to deductively reason that Christie had told Mia he wrote fiction—because he didn’t mention it, not that he could remember—answered with a tentative, noncommittal, ‘Yes,’ as he viewed her slightly bucked, but very white, teeth. Mia asked about the genre, to which Tom answered ‘it’s contemporary’ in a vague and somewhat standoffish, to him, tone, adding ‘literary fiction’ afterwards in a mumble, before turning away to perform a fake cough—they helped re-center Tom within awkward conversations, for some reason—before asking Mia, changing the subject slightly, what she liked to read. Mia said she read a ‘crazy variety’ and was ‘all over the place’ with books, paused for several seconds, then said she was interested in ‘black existentialism,’ citing, when asked by Tom for examples, James Baldwin and Ta-Nehisi Coates, the mention of whom immediately reminded Tom of the American Culture course he took during his final semester of college—the laidback, unrigorous nature of which contributed to the generalized sense that Tom ‘did nothing’ his senior year; the course was centered on the HBO show *The Wire*, with sociological readings tangentially related to the acclaimed sociological crime drama sprinkled in, of which Tom remembered only, now, Ta-Nehisi Coates’ essay ‘The Case for Reparations,’ and *Unequal Childhoods* by Anne Lareau, a formative text for discourse on the concept of racial privilege. Tom remembered that the professor disallowed names on pop-quizzes, electing instead to identify students by Student ID, to counteract ‘confirmation bias,’ a move which Tom viewed as socially progressive and benignly technocratic, and disorienting, as
Tom often forgot his student ID—the professor would recite them in a sonorous, semi-singsong voice when handing back quizzes—and heard it three to four times before raising his hand and claiming it apologetically, if nervously, due to being high on cannabis.

After a conversation about ‘shady Uber drivers’ ended (which, towards the end, Christie extrapolated by publicly ridiculing Tom’s never having ‘Ubered’, and then kissed his cheek nonsequiturly, wetly, then wiping with a thumb), Mia talked about the current ongoing at the Dakota Access Pipeline, which Tom vaguely knew as a government-approved project to transport crude oil in pipes through land owned by Native American tribes. Tom listened to Mia say several things which he interpreted as ‘pro-Native American,’ and then said, in a too-loud-seeming voice, referencing a Facebook post he’d seen comparing the violence used against Native American land-rights protestors, against that of white land-rights protestors led by Dave and Cliven Bundy (Several unarmed Native Americans had been shot at, meanwhile the police had not shot at Bundy’s armed militia), that it was ‘white privilege in action.’ Tom, immediately after saying this, awkwardly made eye contact with a white male (one of only two non-Asians in the room), somewhat across the room but directly in Tom’s line-of-sight, whom he immediately, nonsequiturly, decided was ‘duck-like,’ owing to his protrusive-looking lips and frontal-cowlicked hair and rather minimal forehead, interiorially referring to him as ‘Donald Duck.’ ‘Donald’ averted his eyes after around three seconds, pretending, felt Tom, to look at something else, before ultimately wrapping an arm around his girlfriend, who Christie knew was Vietnamese and didn’t like, who wore yoga clothes and was laughing at something unrelated. Tom, feeling strongly that his own speech and behavior was currently unacceptable, that he had used too loud a voice to express a controversial viewpoint (a stupid one, which he didn’t even care about, or necessarily believe was credible, in the process offending a stranger), thought
about how he had deviated from his original plan—formulated while driving to Andrew’s house, reviewed during an extremely long left-turn light—to ‘speak only when spoken to’ and ‘don’t be awkward,’ and then, while pretending to look at things on Andrew’s bookshelf, in the corner of the room, emotionally committed himself, unrealistically, to say exactly nothing else at the party. Tom’s face felt extremely warm, almost to the point of ‘burning,’ as he excused himself and moved away from Christie and Mia and others and stood antisocially, pretending to be doing someone on his phone, in front of the patio door.

Tom watched Andrew’s grill and thought about the thickly foil-insulated turkey inside, deciding it was ‘completely alienated,’ but warm and, somehow, in its own way, happy. ‘It’s not an irreal happiness,’ thought Tom. ‘People’s definition of happiness is too limited, maybe.’ He felt his cheeks, which were still uncomfortably hot. Tom was then seized by a wish to go outside and divest himself of clothes completely, and jump in and swim laps in Andrew’s narrow and long pool, which he viewed longingly from the patio door, facing away from everyone else, and then, around 30 seconds later, barely stifled the urge to exit the party, in a more reasonable way, via the front door, and go sit in the car and look at his phone until Christie noticed and texted him, confused and somewhat worried, at which point Tom would lie about taking a non-life-threatening emergency call involving his sister. When the urge of it passed—like a crashing airplane passing street lines, becoming the problem of another zip code—and his face no longer felt ‘burning,’ Tom turned around from looking at the unmoving water of the pool, and half-resignedly rejoined Christie and the people she was talking to.

Around five minutes later, Mia and Christie separated with 2 other girls, unpredictably, to talk about makeup, it seemed, leaving the boyfriends, in a state of detachment-confusion, to awkwardly slide, felt Tom, towards each other, and choose a subject four strangers could relate
to. When the topic of sports arose, as Tom knew it would, he stopped listening, almost as automatic response, and looked at Christie talking to the other girls about makeup, several yards away, feeling complicatedly wistful. Tom looked at his phone, doing this away from Christie, since it upset her to see Tom on his phone during social gatherings. When Tom anemically returned his attention to the group, the sports-talk had apparently blossomed into ‘fantasy football,’ something even remoter to Tom’s existence and purview than sports, completely inscrutable, and incredibly depressing, somehow, in its own way, to him. Even while actively unlistening to the voices tessellating around him, some of it leaked in . . . ‘my picks were bad this week’ … ‘my defensive line got wrecked… ‘my star kicker got benched… ‘I couldn’t convert any TDs…’ leading a bemused, statically slightly grimacing Tom to decide that, if ever he was forced to play and to meticulously care about fantasy football, he would probably elect to unemotionally hang himself from a branch of a large tree.

To calm himself from what he was beginning to view as a major ordeal--the discomfort of being at an undesirable social gathering while suffering what seemed like acute side effects of too much Adderral--Tom concentrated on isolating himself by looking at his phone, scrolling through the front page of Reddit. When he began listening again, gradually, when he sensed the topic of discussion becoming something non-sports related. Tom heard someone named Dylan speak in a suddenly loud, almost exaggeratedly positive-seeming tone about ‘P-90X,’ which Tom instantly and confidently, somehow, interpreted as a kind of ‘super-soaker’—supported by hearing contextualizing terms like ‘burst, power, max time limit’—and thought of water-wars subculture, that is, of fully grown (usually) males involving themselves in matches of water gun combat for entertainment/pleasure, with the object of ‘drenching’ members of the opposing faction, who had to ‘fall down / play dead’ after articles of clothing were critically saturated with
water. Tom vaguely thought of techniques to ‘hide’ how wet you were, and keep moving and shoot opponents (essentially cheating), which he remembered from conversations with two highschool friends who had regularly hosted games of water wars, and which Tom once, on a summer day, joined in. Tom, somewhat enlivened of these memories surging, he thought, through him, felt compelled to speak and was about to—that he had played water-wars with a super-soaker borrowed by a friend, in highschool—when Tom heard Dylan agree to let someone next to Tom borrow his ‘Blu ray set’ and that all he needed was ‘jump rope and a medicine ball,’ prompting Tom to become gradually aware that ‘P-90X’ was a semi-popular video exercise class designed to develop core strength and cardio through intensive training sessions, which had absolutely nothing to do with the idea of ‘Water Wars’ or water guns. Tom moved his hand near his re-heating-up face to help conceal his extreme confusion, and felt self-incredulous that he had effectively replaced, in his mind, a subculture with an even smaller and more socially implausible subculture; yet, on the positive side, Tom felt extremely glad to have said nothing about water wars, convinced that doing so would have caused him enough physical embarrassment to warrant an exit from the conversation, and (probably) the party altogether.

Ten minutes later, the two groups of guys and girls exploded, thought Tom—like atoms suddenly having too much energy or none at all—dispersing its persons in a moment of deep confusion and leading each single, including Tom, to slowly re-assimilate and resume bonded-couple state. Thus, couple-on-couple talk resumed, and Tom stood next to Christie while she talked with a Chinese couple, who were slightly but not significantly older than they, speak about the exorbitant costs of pre-pre-school childcare, meanwhile Tom remained reasonably sociable, issuing soft ‘oh’-s and ‘I see’-s at appropriate times. Once bored, Tom focused on his developing awareness that the party, from an aerial viewpoint, likely resembled clusters or
‘pockets’ of conversation—usually two couples talking, since interactions involving more than four people seemed taxing and stressful—and considered his own membership, half-bemusedly, in one such pocket. On a nearby couch sat two individuals Tom initially determined—owing to their strong facial resemblance and being of identical skin tone—as siblings, but then revised this perspective, upon seeing them now kiss and ‘grope’ each other, brief moments before Andrew brought the turkey in from outside and said, in a manner Tom viewed as exemplary of a kind of awkward lukewarm charm, ‘OK guys, I guess we can start getting food now.’

Tom collected food from serving dishes on the kitchen island, first putting turkey and mashed potatoes on his plate. In turn he saw Mia’s contribution of tortellini pasta, from Whole Foods, causing Tom to remember, nonsequiturly, the man in Oregon who poured rat poison onto Whole Foods Deli section—who was arrested weeks later and refused to disclose a motive for his actions—who was, as Tom remembered via Facebook image, musculearly ‘buff’ and handsome, with a rather involved-looking hairstyle. Continuing to load food, Tom saw there was some sort of other casserole next to the green bean casserole, which Tom internally classified as ‘Boiled potatoes with ripped bread on top,’ and then further, probably needlessly, deconstructing what he saw as ‘boiled cubed potatoes, mayonnaise, ripped bread.’ Tom studied the surface of the casserole for around five seconds, when, behind him, a slightly irritated-seeming Christie said ‘don’t block people,’ prompting Tom to quickly spoon gravy on his turkey slices and followed Christie to sit down, in front of a couple Christie knew were engaged.

The groom-to-be described his job, in a way seeming mostly dismissive towards his work, as a clinical pharmaceutical trials tech, currently working on trials for several atricyclical antidepressants scheduled to come to market in 2018. His fiance, a dental student currently doing a residency, was more vague about her work, and seemed to want to talk about other things.
When the couple started to talk about wedding planning, which they were doing now, Christie moved close to Tom and stroked his hair, adopting what seemed to Tom as an almost perverse-seeming attentiveness to the couple’s marital plans, while Tom became increasingly anxious that he knew neither of their names, despite the fact that he didn’t need to, probably. Then dental resident explained, in a lamenting tone, that her parents wanted a Chinese banquet, but the hotel they were having the reception at did not allow outside food. They could special order the chefs to make Chinese food, but it would most likely be ‘bad’ Chinese food, which they decided was worse than not having Chinese food at all. Christie squeezed Tom’s hand as they said they were getting married in June, and Christie squeezed Tom’s hand as she said she ‘wanted a summer wedding as well,’ prompting Tom to gradually realize, paradoxically, that all his friends’ parents were divorced and bemusedly pursued the thought ‘who else is divorced?’, first thinking of his parents, viewable as ‘emotionally divorced,’ for decades now, and then letting nearby voices and conversations meld into a mostly unobtrusive din, while continuing to eat successively smaller bites of stuffing, wondering if he desired for lasagna, which he assumed Andrew forgot about, was maybe burning in the gas grill outside, but which—maybe the tryptophan affecting his mood already, elevating it into a sort of blasé unfeeling state—decided he didn’t really care. ‘The lasagna’s burning in the gas grill outside / Everyone gets divorced in the end,’ thought Tom, anemically visualizing a couplet while, for the second or third time, taking an empty coke can to his mouth, deciding that the only credible emotion he felt now, it seemed, was ‘thirsty.’

Andrew sort of unexpectedly sat down at their table, taking the empty seat in front of Tom. Tom had seen Andrew ‘wandering’ around the party, listening to conversations then entering them, in way that seemed to Tom as deft, and seemed more sociable as the number of people in the social occasion increased, which was the opposite of what happened with Tom.
Tom, remembering that he wanted to ask Andrew about coding, knowing that Christie had said Andrew was ‘really good with computers,’ asked Andrew if he knew coding, after he finished speaking with Julie about investing in real estate. ‘Why do you want to learn code?’ asked Andrew, lifting his drink slightly higher in the air as he said it. Tom spoke of his enthusiastic, mostly unresearched view of coding as a ‘necessary skill’ that ‘everyone should know,’ aware he was probably overstating things, and topped his brief monologue by offering the fact that Twitch.com, a video-streaming website created by two friends in a basement, had been recently sold to Amazon.com for 1 billion dollars. Immediately after Tom finished, Andrew said Tom would ‘never be as good as the guys who made Twitch,’ and afterwards, seeming to want to qualify the harshness of this, added, ‘Well, Twitch is much more idea-based than seriously code-based.’ Andrew had, Tom knew from two previous visits, a straightforwardness and verbal expedience which he admired, executed without making the listening party feel ‘bad’ … even though Tom knew from Christie that several people disliked, even ‘hated’ Andrew for having a bluntness somewhat easily, in her view, mistakable as impatience with others. The discussion about Twitch and coding in general continued, as Andrew spoke utilizing terms such as ‘front-end’ (clientside) and ‘back-end’ (serverside), which could be and often was coded in two different languages, yet be made to cohere and synchronize with each other, so that the program ran scripts at appropriate speeds for both client and server, which Tom immediately viewed as ‘beautiful,’ even with minimal, if strictly poetic, understanding of the things Andrew was referring to. Established that Tom was a ‘true beginner’ with no previous training in programming, Andrew offered several points of concrete and practical advice, recommending CodeAcademy and Lynda, as well as a program for OSX called Xcode. When the topic reached its conclusion and Tom thanked Andrew, Andrew’s face returned from a look of intense focus to
a relaxed state—instantly and in a mechanical-seeming way—signaling a readiness to mount new topics, to load new ‘apps’ on the surface on his face, which Tom imaginatively viewed as a desktop screen.

At this point two elderly Asian people, a man and a woman, came into the kitchen ‘tottering,’ Tom felt; the man looked at the food for what seemed to be a long time, before, reluctantly, it seemed, getting a plate and slowly putting food on it, while, in close proximity, a slightly hunched Andrew spoke to the elderly Asian woman while displaying a slightly worried expression. Andrew pointed at the mostly exhausted turkey carcass and spoke words in Mandarin. The elderly woman nodded in a positive-seeming manner and took food on her plate without first staring at it in confusion or mild implied disapproval. They were Cindy’s parents, Tom learned from Christie. Soon a concerned-looking Andrew came over and asked Tom to move over one seat, leaving two seats at the table where they sat—presumably for Cindy’s parents to sit in—but then Cindy’s parents did not come to sit with them, and instead went elsewhere in the house, possibly upstairs.

Tom saw Andrew view with confusion and then begin to cut—after he’d asked the room, nonspecifically, ‘Who brought this cake?’ and no one answered--into squares. A girl standing next to Andrew complained that the pieces of the white-colored cake were too big, maybe, to which Andrew said, ‘Not everyone wants to have cake, I don’t think,’ in a way that seemed expedient yet remaining polite, to Tom. Christie went to the desserts and returned with what Tom viewed as a reprehensively large slice of white cake, prompting Tom to revise his views of Andrew’s skill and attentiveness as cake-cutter, and which he ‘gobbled,’ he felt, as if in a deliberate effort to diminish its bulk before others’ scrutiny could be drawn to it, without much consideration for its flavor or texture, which was … something. ‘What the fuck is this cake?’
whispered Christie, displaying a scrunched, half-repulsed expression. ‘Why is it wet?’ ‘It’s like wet rice,’ said Tom, somewhat indifferently, thinking of rice pudding and tapioca pudding in a mostly positive way, which the cake was similar to; it was sweet and soft and therefore suitable for this specific hour of his life, intuited Tom anemically. Christie took another small, experimental bite, and still looked very confused, and pushed the plate more towards Tom. Mia, enjoying a smaller slice of cake—basically a sliver, which Tom determined as a further subdivision of Andrew’s skillless cuts—took a bite and said ‘that’s interesting—it’s wet but it’s still a cake’ in a way Tom interpreted as ‘journalistic’, and felt impressed by her capacity to report facts and withhold judgment. Someone also eating cake, nearby, said ‘Tres Leches Cake,’ somewhat alleviating Christie’s confusion, as Tom continued to fork cake into his mouth, in a manner which seemed automatic, until all of it was gone, then going after smudges of icing, pointlessly. People seemed finished with eating and drinking now, and several people were standing.

More people stood up and, seeming to attaching themselves almost to the first couple that said got up to leave, created a sort of blockage of six-to-eight people holding fall jackets in the hallway leading to the foyer. Someone said to take a ‘group selfie’ and send it to a currently out-of-view Andrew (he was elsewhere in the house, presumably with Cindy’s parents) which they did, however, while they were trying to decide which one to send to Andrew and what to say with it, Andrew came down, and asked ‘What’s going on?’ with a confused, if bemused, expression, seeing four people huddled around a phone who, apparently, were re-taking the picture. After thanks and goodbyes were resolved, the group left, and the remaining five-to-six people in the party suddenly seemed significantly more ‘antsy’ than before, sitting amongst two mostly open tables and, as if not knowing what else to do, began, as a kind of communal activity,
or ‘game,’ even, to intermittently watch a girl eat from a full-looking plate (assumedly due to having lately arrived); and she, aware of others’ bored-antsy scrutiny, began to eat significantly-but-not-dramatically faster, like video playback scrolled up to 1.3x speed.

When Mia stood up, citing the contextually sound reason of having to wake up for work at 2 a.m., Christie got up as well—looking at her watch after checking her phone for the time, seconds earlier—leading to Mia and Christie and Tom moving towards the foyer ‘as a unit,’ Tom felt. Andrew seemed slightly disappointed to see them leave. Hugs ensued. The girl at the table started eating at 1.6x speed, now, even enlisting the boyfriend to help her eat lasagna, which she didn’t like, it seemed. Once outside, Mia hugged bye to Christie and Tom. They walked and entered into respective Corollas, entreating Tom to hear, in the unfolding seconds, Christie’s almost soundless ignition followed by Mia’s significantly louder, if ‘crunchy,’ one, and feel in this, near-tangibly, some unavoidable downward trajectory, before driving away.

Tom experienced December as a ‘large blur,’ like a storm system on a local news screen where Christmas existed centrally as a red oval that weatherpeople vaguely pointed to with slightly worried expressions. Tom bought a Patagonia fleece sweater for Christie. Christie bought Tom a pair of jeans from Diesel, a store at the mall where her friend worked. On Christmas Eve they ate dim sum with four of Christie’s co-workers. Tom ate dim sum while feeling extremely bored and that everything Elaine—a Taiwanese co-worker of Christie’s—ordered from the carts consisted of pork and/or shrimp with the exception of ‘braised chicken feet,’ which everyone at the table seemed to enjoy but Tom did not try. ‘Try it,’ urged Christie and placed one on his plate. ‘No thanks,’ said Tom. ‘It looks really gross, a little.’
Two days after Christmas, an argument began when Christie said she wanted to go out for dinner to a fancy mediterranean restaurant, and Tom, feeling tired, said he didn’t feel like eating out. Tom moved to the kitchen and proceeded to boil water for a cup of noodles. Christie increased the volume of the show she was watching, a passive-aggressive maneuver to ‘drown out’ Tom talking to her, except this time it was uncharacteristic of her since Tom wasn’t saying anything, only pawing at the plastic wrapping of the cup noodles to get it off, which was difficult since he had earlier that day clipped his nails. ‘You never want to do anything. You don’t plan any dates. I can’t even get you to eat out without harassing you,’ said Christie without turning away from the screen. ‘We went out to eat last week, to eat dim sum,’ said Tom, adjusting the stove to make the water boil faster. It was then that the argument turned suddenly, yet not unexpectedly, grew into a fight.

Christie aggressively said Tom ‘took her for granted’ and said things implying that previous boyfriends of hers had cared more, had planned ‘romantic dates’ for them to enjoy. Tom thought of his parents; Tom said he remembered his mother complaining that his father never ‘bought flowers’ for her, feeling unsure if he was citing what he just said as a joke or an excuse. Christie looked at him with a painful expression and looked as if she might start to cry.

Minutes later, while Tom stood halfway between the living room and the kitchen, became aware of himself apologizing repeatedly and saying he would ‘try harder.’ The kettle made a whistling sound, screeching whistling sound, and Tom remembered how he had resolved, months earlier, to buy an electric kettle from Amazon so they wouldn’t have to hear the whistling anymore, which he found irritating and even somewhat painful to endure. Tom turned off the stove and, less as a deliberate action than wanting to distract himself from a stressful situation, looked for a way to reattach the paper lid of the cup of instant noodles. In a drawer he found a small binder
clip which seemed like an egregious, self-conscious parody of a binder clip, or else one which had been specifically made for this purpose, for fastening the top cover of a cup of instant noodles which had already been peeled, but the person, due to some unforeseen disruption, was unable to go through with pouring hot water into the instant ramen. After fastening the lid with the clip, he sighed loudly and asked Christie, who had stopped talking and returned to watching TV, if she still wanted to go out to eat.

Tom drove Christie to Brio, a ‘Tuscan style’ chain restaurant in an outdoor mall, where they ate pasta dishes mostly not talking to each other, then afterwards watched a movie where Brad Pitt, who plays an American spy during World War II, discovers that his French wife is a Nazi spy but refuses to shoot her in the head as ordered by his British commander. While Brad Pitt ran with a large gun while being chased by British spies and Nazi spies, Tom looked at the side of Christie’s face lit up by flashes on the screen and strongly experienced the thought ‘this isn’t working out, it’s not going to work.’ The drive back to Christie’s condominium was silent, except for Tom commenting on the movie twice in a mumble-like voice.

‘Um,’ said Tom sitting on the sofa, staring at the package of a green tea Kit-Kat which he’d unenthusiastically got from the pantry and failed to open around four times. ‘I feel like you’re putting, like, a lot of pressure on me.’

‘What pressure?’

‘Just … wanting all these different things … when we haven’t been together for that long.’

‘What are you talking about? We’ve been together for five months.’

‘You want to get engaged,’ said Tom, ‘but we’ve known each other for less than a year.’

‘That’s a long time,’ said Christie.
Tom said it wasn’t, and read from phone screen that, according to Google, the average time a couples in North America spent together before getting engaged was 2.65 years. ‘I’m not saying I don’t want to get engaged at some point. But I can’t even think about things rationally if you’re pressuring me and bringing it up all the time. I feel very stressed out.’

‘This isn’t fair.’ Christie ‘slammed’ the remote on the cushion of the sofa. ‘You feeling pressured by anything I say or do, like, what are you even stressed out about, you work part time at a place that doesn’t even make you work, I have to wake up at 7:00 every morning, what are you even stressed out about?’

‘Things,’ said Tom averting eye contact with Christie. ‘I don’t know.’

Christie made a loud, frustrated noise and said ‘You’re always doing this, bringing me down, I’m trying to have the best life possible. If you want to feel negative, then go right ahead, but don’t drag me down with your negativity. Keep your negative thoughts to yourself. I’m going to live my life to the fullest.’

‘You just said, um … a lot of cliches in a row. Like literally everything you just said was a cliche.’

‘Screw you,’ said Christie. ‘Seriously. I don’t know why I put up with your shit. I’m gonna be 30 next month. I don’t have time to waste on you.’

‘I don’t want to be in a relationship,’ said Tom looking slightly away from Christie, ‘where it’s like this.’

‘I don’t either,’ said Christie. She seemed extremely small when Tom looked at her, a figure in a balled-up position in the corner of the couch, a hamster trying to disappear by going inside the couch. She began steadily weeping.
‘Okay,’ said Tom in a calm voice and walked in the kitchen. He unplugged the vitamix from the kitchen counter and lifted it from the counter. The blender cup fell on the kitchen floor and made loud noises, bouncing on the floor. While Tom was upstairs putting things in his clothes bin, he heard the garage door open then shut, then a text from Christie telling him to leave the keys on the counter, and that his number was now blocked.

Around six weeks later, an unsubtly cool breeze was hitting the face of a delicately waking Tom, whose consciousness was rising out of a very vague dream which, denuded of any specific image or detail by the time he fully awoke, could be described only as ‘or something’ when he opened his eyes. For around 10 seconds he wasn’t sure where he was or, to some extent, who he was. He didn’t try moving his limbs--maybe he was paralyzed, he thought unemotionally. He could tell he was alive, but almost ‘didn’t care,’ he felt, about this fact. He blinked several times then closed his eyes, lay silently. An unspecified amount of time later, Tom went downstairs and made a green smoothie. He took clothes off and put on other despite knowing he wouldn’t go outside. Tom looked at the internet on his Macbook. It seemed dark outside. Tom continued to look at the Macbook and listen to music until he felt sleepy. He drank an unrefrigerated Bawls Guarana energy drink with an expiration date of 05192007, discovered behind a large, dusty can of chili in the pantry. Tom opened Facebook on Chrome while having the thought ‘boredom has driven me to look at Facebook.’ Tom looked at the thumbnail of a Facebook group called ‘Recently and unethically used pairs of pliers’ and clicked ‘ask to join.’ A day later, someone named Roberta him to the group, telling him in Facebook Messenger, ‘you used to be friends with Trey right’ to which Tom replied, after hesitating, ‘um kind of.’ Roberta never replied back but added him as a friend, and in a sort of out-of-control
way added him to four or five more groups which seemed similar with names like ‘Are you the person I fucked at the party?’ and ‘Wut am I doing here’ and ‘I’m dating everyone here ide’ and ‘my face is slowly floating away from my skull.’ Tom, while using a G-pen to vape butane hash oil, browsed the feed of the groups, sometimes laughing, looking at nude selfies posted by members, and sorts of cryptic ‘fights’ that appeared on the comment threads, often unrelated to the context of the original post. Tom ‘liked’ a video of someone freebasing heroin while wearing Spongebob Squarepants underwear and performing some kind of dance.

Someone in two of the groups complained about lurkers and wrote ‘who keeps inviting all these randos to the group? It’s private 4 a reason.’ Tom, fearing that he was being indirectly referenced as one of the ‘lurkers,’ quickly posted something, copying several ‘Taylor Swift Hitler Quotes’ memes from a website. There was one where Taylor Swift glared intensely into a fire with the caption ‘Through the destruction of our enemies we earn our salvation!’ --Taylor Swift. Several people immediately ‘liked’ Tom’s memes, a few of them complimenting Tom on his Photoshop skills, assuming that Tom had created the meme himself, although he hadn’t.

Tom found another meme of a swastika carved into Taylor Swift’s forehead and posted it later.

Several days later, Tom sat in his room Facebook messaging with Sara, who also posted things in the groups. Tom learned that Sara wrote poems and flash fiction, and had taken a creative writing course in college. They talked about different memes and ridiculed the ‘drama’ that sometimes happened in the groups, someone politely asking someone to ‘kill yourself’ then posting ‘going to hang myself now’ and leaving the group and deactivating their Facebook--although they would rejoin the group a few days later and resume posting more material.

Tom and Sara sent stories to each other through Facebook messenger, talked about them together. They liked saying ‘aids’ as an adjective, for animate and inanimate objects.
Sometimes they wrote ‘transgender’ on things. Tom wrote a flash fiction story about a transgender pencil sharpener, entitled ‘transgender pencil sharpener.’ A pencil sharpener, after years of having pencils inserted into it, wanted suddenly, increasingly and desperately, to insert itself, conversely, into other non-pencil objects--like dogs and refrigerators. Sara said the story was really good and suggested alternate endings for it. Tom reciprocated by critiquing Sara’s stories.

Over the following week, during which Tom left his house only once--to meet his weed dealer whose car had broken down--Tom steadily messaged Sara on Facebook. They talked about which drugs they took and shared Youtube videos and music playlists with each other. When Tom said he liked Diary by Sunny Day Real Estate, Sara said her schizophrenic roommate in her freshman year of college listened to Sunny Day Real Estate a lot. When Tom mentioned something referencing Berkeley, Sara said she dropped out of Berkeley after two years of taking film studies classes. ‘Jesus,’ said Tom feeling surprised, and said he took Intro-to-film at Berkeley. Sara asked if Tom’s intro-to-film professor was the same one she had. The professor was murdered with a hammer in his apartment a month after the class ended.

‘No I had someone else. But it’s weird, people murdering other people,’ said Tom. ‘Just walking up to someone and killing them.’

‘When I saw it online I was just like “that happened, it’s crazy.” I thought about it a lot, I think. Then I kind of forced myself to stop thinking about it.’

‘You had a highly practical response, choosing to not think about something too much,’ said Tom. ‘I want to stop thinking about things that don’t matter.’

‘Almost nothing matters,’ said Sara vaguely.
‘I’m trying to speak only in concrete specifics and only give highly practical advice to myself and others,’ said Tom. ‘That’s my plan to be better. I want my brain to be like Amazon Prime. I want to have 0-3 emotional responses per day.’

‘That seems really good,’ said Sara. ‘Did you click on the link I sent?’

The link took Tom to a site where people posted suicide notes before killing themselves. Sara said she liked to read online suicide notes and suicide attempt stories posted on Reddit and other places. Sara sent PDF files of her favorite suicide notes from the internet and ‘shared’ them with Tom using Google Drive. ‘Some of them are really funny, I don’t know.’

Sara asked Tom if he wanted to see a metal concert on Saturday night.

‘Heavy metal,’ said Tom with the sensation of grinning.

‘No. Metal,’ said Sara.

At 924 Gilman, a dungeon-like venue near downtown hosting a punk metal band called Obliterations, Tom waved at a blond girl wearing a slayer T-shirt facing his direction, who reacted by looking at him first confusedly then disgustingly, and spat on the ground before walking away. ‘Oh,’ said Tom aloud, remembering Sara said she’d be wearing a Metallica T-shirt, not a Slayer T-shirt.

Tom saw a Facebook message from Sara on his phone: ‘I’m by the stage. Wheelchair.’

Tom walked to Sara. Hi,’ said Tom.

‘Hi,’ said Sara.

‘You’re … um, wheelchair,’ said Tom feeling extremely confused.

‘Yeah, I was in this, um … accident.’

‘How long do you have to stay in it?’ said Tom.
‘Um, for ... six months, I think,’ said Sara distractedly, then said something Tom couldn’t hear, since several people on stage started playing chords at a loud volume, the noise compounded by people cheering them on. Tom extended his right fist in the air, seeing that others including Sara were doing it, with the sensation that the gesture was vaguely ‘Nazi-like.’ Tom stood next to Sara in a ‘frozen’ position, he felt, and as more time passed with no interaction between them, began to feel aversion first towards the loudness of the room, then towards the experience as a whole—as if he had made a grave error by agreeing to attend this social gathering, after nearly 9 weeks of uninterrupted physical solitude following his breakup with Christie.

While the band played songs Tom didn’t know—consisting mainly of crashing instruments and screaming vocals, with some ‘mush-like’ guitar solos between choruses—he waited for a quiet song during which he could re-engage Sara in conversation, ask her questions, or reprise a topic previously discussed on messenger. However the band preserved its chaotic instrumentals and screamlike vocals—in a manner not unlike an angry middle school-aged child continuously whining to his unresponsive yet tenacious parents about something—eventually affecting Tom to ‘give up’ on interacting with Sara who, he saw in his peripheral vision, seemed to be multitasking looking at her phone and sometimes singing the band’s lyrics. Tom began looking at his phone also. He noticed about five minutes later, with a sensation of wanlessness, that Sara had moved her torso to be turned away from him, so the only part of her he could see was her head and dark hair. The lead singer of the band repeatedly shouted ‘There’s only hopeless doom! There’s only hopeless doom! Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!’ in a rhythmic pattern which contrasted with the drum sounds.
Sensing a worsening headache, Tom yearned for earplugs he’d planned to bring (based on Yelp reviews suggesting him to) but had forgotten to bring. His knees felt increasingly heavy and tired, but there didn’t seem to be anywhere to sit. Tom noticed the room rising in heat and humidity, at the same time feeling, increasingly, that all Obliterations’ songs ‘sounded the same.’ He felt excited and relieved when a cover song he recognized, ‘Last Caress’ by Misfits, began playing. ‘I’ve got something to say / I killed your baby today,’ Tom sang aloud, but not fast enough, so by the time he caught up the band shouted ‘I raped your mother today / And it doesn’t matter much to me.’ Sara was looking at her phone. She’s not having a good time, thought Tom, feeling confused about her seeming excited about the concert on Facebook messenger.

‘I wonder where people are getting their drinks,’ said Tom when the band announced they were taking a break.

‘They don’t have a bar here,’ said Sara. ‘There’s a liquor shop across the street.’

Tom said he was going to buy a drink, and asked if Sara wanted something.

‘Beer, any beer is fine,’ said Sara.

At the store across the street, Tom bought a peach Snapple, a ‘tall boy’ of Pabst Blue Ribbon, and Funyuns. When he went to the concert he didn’t see Sara. Tom went to the other side thinking he was on the wrong side, still not seeing Sara. Tom texted Sara on Facebook Messenger, holding his phone in the air for more ‘bars.’ Tom opened the snapple on the sidewalk outside and drank it in nervously large-sized gulps, after which he texted Sara again: ‘Where are you?’ Tom checked his phone every 10 seconds, while staring at the Pabst Blue Ribbon on the sidewalk next to him.

Tom saw a bicycle light in the end of the street slowly enlarge, traversing the distance between itself and his optic nerve, growing brighter. A completely stationary Tom continued his
unmoving stare after the light passed him, imprinting a purplish floater in his vision. ‘Are you drinking that,’ Tom heard someone say. ‘No,’ said Tom not moving his head and with the sensation of having answered ‘automatically’--that, regardless of what anyone said to Tom, his answer would be ‘no.’ Tom drove home and, after taking a long shower and checking his phone to see if Sara had texted, proceeded to look at the internet in a kind of trance, eventually leading to aimlessly clicking links on Wikipedia--at some point he read everything available about Reykjavik, Iceland--as if in a concerted effort to trick himself into believing absolutely nothing else had happened that day, partially succeeding in doing so. He napped unrestfully for two hours then rose out of bed and walked--he was halfway there before realizing, looking up at a watery gray-blue dawning sky, that the notion of driving had not even occurred to him, for some reason--to Panera Bread several blocks away and, once inside, pointed at a pastry thing. ‘One bearclaw, is that all,’ said the worker who displayed a very neutral expression. ‘What did you say?’ said Tom looking at the worker’s nametag which read ‘Todd Worker #3.’ Tom ate the pastry while walking back to his apartment; going upstairs he briefly considered brushing his teeth but ultimately did not, and returned to sleep.

A week later, while lying on his bed absently listening to music, Tom received several texts from a number his iPhone hadn’t stored as a contact. It turned out to be Dave, 28, a friend Tom had not spoken to in several years. He explained in a long, almost stream-of-consciousness seeming text that he’d returned to Berkeley three weeks ago, after living the past three years in Amsterdam--a monthlong backpacking trip which had unexpectedly turned into staying and working at a coffeeshop, owned by a couple he had befriended--on account of the situation with his brother in law, Trevor. Months earlier, the FBI had raided Trevor’s house and confiscated 26
hard drives with child pornography stored on them, and Trevor was recently sentenced to 36 months in federal prison. Dave was put in charge by his sister and Trevor to run 8 Pizza King franchises around Berkley, as acting manager.

‘That sounds really stressful,’ said Tom.

‘You should come over. See the place, hang out,’ said Dave.

Tom’s first impulse was to resist, to say he was currently busy or ‘hanging out’ with someone else--but then realized that Dave used to be the excuse he used to avoid other social situations and obligations, that he would text other people he was currently hanging out with Dave and so was unavailable, which was a valid excuse more often than not, since three to five years he had considered Dave his best friend and spent a lot of time in his company. ‘Looking at the internet, being bored,’ he texted Dave honestly. Tom drove to Dave’s pizza store to hang out with him ‘for just one hour,’ he’d decided--an amount of time he could manage to spend in the company of another person despite feeling, with some earnestness, that he felt embarrassed to be seen by another person or simply embarrassed of being alive.

‘What do you do for fun these days … Magic?’ said Tom after greeting Dave in Pizza King.

‘I don’t have time to play Magic anymore,’ said Dave, referencing the card game Dave and Tom played together, participating in several tournaments a week and trying to qualify for the Magic Pro Tour. In Amsterdam, Dave had enjoyed a life consisting almost exclusively of organizing and smoking cannabis in the coffeeshop, playing Magic in a game store down the street.

Tom, while watching a teenager in a ‘Make Metallica Great again’ trucker hat pace in a circle in the lobby waiting for his pizza, thought of Sara liking Metallica and felt depressed.
Dave said in a suddenly upbeat voice, as if the idea had just occurred to him, that he should hire Tom as a general manager for Trevor’s stores, so that he could play more Magic again.

‘That sounds like a bad idea,’ said Tom in a bored voice. ‘I’ve never worked in a pizza store before.’

‘Fuck,’ said Dave looking frustrated. He opened a can of Monster energy drink and drank it in one motion. Dave said Tom did have work experience, referencing times when Tom had, during college, helped Dave by delivering pizzas on nights when drivers didn’t show up.

‘Oh,’ said Tom. He remembered the ‘game’ he played when delivering, guessing as he rang the bell whether the customer would give him a tip; and how some people would close the door to set down their pizza and open it again to tip a walking-away Tom, resulting in pleasantly surprised Tom.

‘You should hire someone else,’ said Tom. Tom thought of his job at Pho Sure and felt that, for the moment, all his material needs were met—shelter, food, Macbook, internet access. ‘My goal is to live peacefully and not bother anyone else, and not do things that require a lot of effort.’

Dave talked about his sister, Patricia. Dave said she stayed in the master bedroom and almost never came downstairs. ‘She’s probably suicidally depressed, should I do something,’ said Dave. ‘Um,’ said Tom. ‘Can she go talk to someone, or something?’

As Tom watched Dave make pizzas he became gradually aware of himself ‘comparing’ two Daves—the one from short- and long-term memory, intuiting this a sort of background process running in a nonvisible system tray in OSX on a Macbook, compiling checksums and generating reports in a .log file, of their differences. He felt a new, somehow mechanical-seeming affectlessness had entered his voice, clashing with the remembered voice which seemed
to be higher in pitch and more animated. Was Dave very depressed? After boxing several pizzas, Dave ate from a bag of cheddar cheese Combos and drank another Monster--two objects seeming always to exist within a five-feet radius of Dave, displaying a cheerful smile, prompting Tom to revise his belief that Dave was depressed. Overall, the new Dave was still Dave-like. His bald spot had grown.

Tom went with Dave to Card Kingdom, a game store specializing in Magic: The Gathering tournaments, out of boredom and feeling vaguely curious about how the game and the players have changed in the last three years. After playing 2 rounds with a deck borrowed from Dave, Tom felt barely anything had changed, except for the art of the Magic cards, which seemed more CGI and computer graphics-y, as opposed to the handdrawn art Tom remembered and preferred. Dave sat down near Tom and said he lost both rounds and wanted to leave, to join other friends in a downtown movie theater. Tom won both his matches but felt like he ‘didn’t care’ and left with Dave.

Tom played with the touchscreen interface in the dash of the Range Rover--Trevor’s car which Dave drove now--on the way to pick up friends. Dave asked about Christie at a flashing red light, based on having seen pictures of her on Tom’s Facebook.

‘Um, we broke up,’ said Tom trying to get to Youtube on the touchscreen.

‘Why?’ said Dave.

‘She wanted to get married,’ said Tom. ‘And … um, other things.’

‘Oh shit, you didn’t want to get married?’

‘No,’ said Tom. ‘It seems insane … to me … for people to get married.’ The browser in the Range Rover did not load Youtube.com and made a loud beep before resetting to the home screen.
‘I don’t know. She seemed pretty hot.’

‘She wanted to, like, have kids,’ said Tom feeling the need to clarify.

A homeless man came very close to Tom’s window holding a cardboard sign: ‘Homeless Retired Vet, God Bless.’

‘People having children seems even more insane to me, forcing someone to be born and exist when you’re not even sure you should exist,’ said Tom hearing his voice trail off.

‘Robots can make pizza now,’ said Dave changing the subject utterly and unexpectedly.

‘Have you seen that buzzfeed video of the company that made a 100% robot-run pizza store?’ Tom said he hadn’t and Dave played a video on his phone.

‘OK I lied, there’s one person supervising the robots and another one driving the truck that delivers the pizza.’ Tom saw how pizzas were half-baked at the store, would finish baking on the truck on the way to the customer.

‘They’re working with Tesla to get vans that drive themselves,’ said Dave repeating what the video just said.

Dave pulled in the front of a small house in a residential neighborhood and Terry, 27, got in the car. Tom knew Terry from before, him being close friends with Dave and played Magic with them, despite Terry lacked any sense of competitiveness, and so never improved or won any tournaments, but didn’t ever seem to mind. Terry was quiet and spoke in an extremely low monotone, and squinted often as if he was a creature not meant to see light. He always wore a German Army coat, the odor of which Tom assumed was never washed, which led some people to assume Terry was a ‘Nazi,’ which was ironic since the German Republic flag was the opposite of the Third Reich Flag.
Next Dave picked up Alicia, 22, and Darnell, 28. Midway through a conversation with Alicia Tom remembered her as being obsessed with cats, owning four cats. Tom remembered Alicia aggressively learning Japan out of wanting to move to a ‘cat island,’ an island in Japan where thousands of cats roamed free, to work in a cat cafe. Tom assumed she didn’t go do that, since she was here now—and didn’t think much about it afterwards. Following a car-wide silence, Darnell talked about a Brazilian Jiu-jitsu competition he was competing in. Dave asked Darnell if he ever got scared of getting his ass beat in a fight. Darnell said you got used to being hurt after a while, that he ‘didn’t feel scared’ about being hurt anymore. Tom felt impressed and thought it was an insightful viewpoint--not being afraid of physical pain. Darnell said he made friends with most people he fought, regardless of if he won or lost against them. ‘Increasing social skills with people by punching them,’ thought Tom and, feeling pleased by the thought, wrote it in Notes on his iPhone.

At Gaslight Pictures, a theater in downtown Berkeley specializing in independent and cult films, the movie Terry thought was playing--Space Jam--had stopped playing the previous night, leaving them a choice of watching Rosemary’s Baby, or waiting 30 minutes for Texas Chainsaw Massacre.

‘This movie sucks,’ said Dave. Rosemary’s Baby had just began and the names of different people were fading from being superimposed on the screen.

‘You have to wait for the good part,’ said Alicia.

‘Is that when Satan rapes Rosemary and she gives birth to a demon?’ said Terry.

‘OK. I’m leaving,’ said Dave.
‘We just got here,’ said Tom.

‘Yeah but the movies’ ruined for me now. I can’t watch it if I know what’s going to happen,’ said Dave.

‘The hell you can,’ said Terry. ‘You watch every Star Wars at least 10 times a year.’

‘That’s Star Wars. Are you seriously comparing Star Wars to fucking … Rosemary’s Baby right now?’

‘Or Lord of the Rings, now that I remember,’ said Terry. ‘You watch that all the time too.’

Several people sitting in front of them made noises. They were going to leave but ended up staying for a while. They watched Satan rape Rosemary for several minutes. ‘Three people in the audience are jerking off right now,’ Alicia whispered into Tom’s ear. ‘That’s okay, I guess,’ said Tom. They looked at each other and Alicia smiled; then there was a loud sound and Alicia suddenly hugged Darnell, whose face seemed ‘extremely bored,’ Tom saw as the screen flashed in bright colors. Tom recalled kissing Alicia in an empty upstairs room at a party, when Tom was a sophomore in college and Alicia a junior in high school, but it felt distant as a memory from another life--a dimly flashing sector of an old hard drive placed in a new computer, the compressed memory of it accessed by the new computer as a ‘read-only’ file, unable to be read in any meaningful context or operation.

As a montage of Rosemary’s baby growing and developing secret demonic skills played, Tom followed others in a single-file line led by Dave out of their seats. Dave said he wanted to go to Diego’s, his weed dealer’s, house.

The woodpanel walls of Diego’s living room were lined with arcade machines, which Diego bought and repaired and sometimes sold on Craigslist, which Tom assumed Diego was
able to do only because his grandmother, who owned the house, was travelling alone in Europe to fulfill a ‘bucket list.’ Tom, noting that he sat on the same sofa cushion as his last visit to Diego’s house with Dave three years ago, watched the arcade games with curiosity then began playing them. When Diego went in another room to get something, a moderately stoned Terry said something implying there were too many arcade machines in the living room, that Diego’s grandmother would be ‘pissed’ when she came back and saw all the walls lined with them. Diego cheerfully explained that a friend of his worked at a public storage facility, and would inexpensively lease him a unit to move the games into once his grandmother returned. Dave said in a loud, uninhibited voice that Diego was buying more arcade machines since he stopped trying to ‘get laid,’ prompting Darnell to laugh, stop abruptly, then say ‘he’s a nice guy.’ Diego was very overweight and wore, it seemed, the same blue Pokémon T-shirt with a large hole in the back. Tom vaguely knew that Diego started growing weed with two friends--in a remote location referred to only as ‘the growhouse’--because someone, maybe Dave, had said he would get ‘infinite pussy’ for having a lot of weed. Turning his head 90 degrees to look at a large white dehumidifier in a corner of the room, Tom remembered, feeling very stoned, that it was originally Diego’s father’s dehumidifier which he used to make venison jerky, before he died during a hunting accident by falling out of the tree while aiming at a moose. Diego came back in the room holding a 2 Liter Mountain Dew. Terry seemed extremely high now, stumbling as he walked and refusing to sit for some reason, which Dave was repeatedly telling him to do.

‘How high am I,’ said Terry, ‘... off the ground?’

Dave said in a loud voice there was a leprechaun behind the Donkey Kong Jr machine, but Terry didn’t seem to respond.

‘I don’t want gold,’ said Terry.
‘I don’t want gold,’ said Tom distractedly, and tried to think of a ‘practical’ application for the phrase, and imagined it could be the name of a emo punk song.

Dave turned his head towards Tom and asked what he was thinking about.

‘Twitter… I was thinking about Twitter,’ said Tom.

‘Twitter,’ said Dave. ‘Don’t make a Twitter … it’s for assholes. It’s for asshole non-teenage teenagers and their asshole non-teenage teenager friends, or something.’

‘Why do you think Twitter … is so bad? Twitter seems good compared to like, most of Facebook. There’s no censorship on Twitter, I think. Pornstars have Twitter accounts,’ said Tom referencing having browsed several pornstars Twitters, sometimes clicking on button that said ‘show explicit content.’

‘I don’t know,’ sad Dave. ‘It’s cool that pornstars have Twitter. You can make a Twitter and see if it’s good, I guess.’

Tom began signing up for a Twitter account but then stopped, feeling discomfort with staring at the iPhone screen which seemed extremely bright. Tom stood up and walked to the Donkey Kong Jr machine beside Double Dragon which Diego and Alicia were playing, and began playing it. After beating several levels he got to level he couldn’t beat, in which barrels rolled faster and there was suddenly ‘fire things’ on the ground that chased him and killed Mario when it touched him. ‘Mario is totally … fucked,’ Tom heard himself say in an extremely bored-sounding voice, rapidly losing interest in the game. Around him Terry began repeatedly stating he felt hungry, which suddenly made Tom also feel hungry.

‘When are we going to Buffalo Wild Wings?’ said Tom in the direction of Dave, who put his phone down and suddenly acted interested in the idea. ‘Yeah, let’s go,’ he said.

‘Buffalo Wild Wings,’ said Alicia in an extremely high, ‘squeal’-like voice.
Seated in a booth section of Buffalo Wild Wings around an hour later, chewing a garlic parmesan boneless wing, Tom looked at the dozen or so TV screens—having tried several times to count them and coming up with a slightly different number each time—and decided the number of televisions playing was ‘absurd.’ Experiencing a growing sensation of boredom, Tom began, less out of earnest interest than for ‘something to do,’ watched three different football games for several minutes each before deciding football was, utterly and without doubt, ‘submental.’ Then he began, in a half-desperate attempt to ‘see everything,’ he felt, to watch each screen within sight for several seconds each. After seeing and moving on from football, college basketball, baseball, and monster trucks, Tom returned to monster trucks and focused his attention on it while experiencing mild interest in the spectacle. Tom felt confused since he didn’t understand the object of the competition, if there was one. Was it just to destroy the other person’s truck? Was there a internal scoring system Tom did not know about? He watched monster trucks crash into each other, resulting sometimes in one—or both—of them flipping upside down, at which point a yellow bulldozer-type vehicle would travel—at a comically slow speed in comparison to the trucks, felt Tom—to the center of the arena to push the trucks upright again.

‘Look,’ said Terry, pointing at server walking towards the bar area. Alicia made a sound and swatted Terry’s hand down.

‘It’s Agnes, Agnes McGee from highschool,’ said Terry motioning to Dave.

‘Remember?’

‘Sweaters McGee,’ said Dave in a mock serious-sounding voice.

‘Oh my God, that’s actually Sweaters McGee,’ said Alicia. Tom asked who that was. Dave said they went to highschool with Agnes, who was Jehovah’s Witness and only wore
clothes her mother made her, usually these heavy cord knit sweaters. Agnes wasn’t allowed to go to dances or prom, and it was rumored that her mother wanted her to marry her first cousin, or something. In 11th grade Agnes ran away from home with people she met on Myspace. Around a year later Terry found Agnes on a porn site and showed people videos of her. And now there she was, having returned to Berkeley for some reason, working at B-dubs. Terry continued to talk more about Agnes until Dave sort of stopped him by saying ‘who cares’ is a loud voice, and aggressively asked when Terry would get a driver’s license so he could use his grandmother’s car that she didn’t use anymore. Terry shrugged and he didn’t want to drive.

‘You don’t even have a state ID,’ said Dave. Terry shrugged.

Darnell laughed and said, ‘Yo, you seriously have no ID? What if you die in a ditch they won’t even know who you are.’

‘If I die, then I die,’ said Terry casually, and put his hands in the pocket of his German army coat.

‘You’d rather be dead than alive?’ said Darnell in a higher-pitched voice.

‘That’s not at all … what I said,’ said Terry. ‘All I said is if I have to die … and do die, then I’d be fine with it, because … everyone dies.’

‘Everyone dies. Death is the next great adventure,’ he said grinning, aware he was quoting from a movie, but couldn’t remember which one or who said it.

‘Fuck you sadboys, I need another drink,’ said Dave, and took out a Monster energy drink from his pocket and drank it in one motion.

Over the next two weeks, Tom spent increasingly amounts of time with Dave, in a manner akin to simply ‘resuming’ their friendship as it existed three years ago, as if Dave had
never gone to Amsterdam, except now instead of spending most of their time playing Magic, since Dave was focused on managing 8 pizza stores and Tom on his novel, Tom hung out at Dave’s store and worked on his writing. After shifts at Pho Sure, Tom would drive to the store where Dave spent most of his time, his sort of headquarters which he called ‘Pizza HQ,’ inside the office of which Dave had cleared a spare desk for Tom.

On a cloudy Saturday, Tom worked on his Macbook for a few hours and, feeling restless, walked around the store and looked at things on dry storage racks. Dave dragged a 50-pound bag of shredded mozzarella cheese across the floor. Robbie, the assistant manager of the store, lifted the bag and poured it into rectangular trays, while listening to music with earbuds, which he always had on and took off only to talk to customers. Tom had learned from Dave that Robbie was 21 and had two kids. Around 2 pm, Robbie left work early, to take his girlfriend and their kids to Legoland.

‘Robbie seems really fucked, like his facial expression is always ... something,’

‘Angry,’ said Dave.

‘Angry, yeah. Like he’s going to do something,’ said Tom thinking vaguely of Criminal Minds.

‘But he can’t do anything. He’s hardlocked,’ said Dave, referencing a Magic term when a player faces an insurmountable losing situation and can no longer win the game. ‘His mom yells at him everyday, and then his girlfriend yells at him. Then his kids yell at him.’

‘The hard lock,’ said Tom, picturing everyone in Robbie’s life chanting menacingly at him in Greek chorus-like circle.

‘Oh, he’s going to kill his girlfriend maybe,’ said Dave stacking pizza pans. ‘I think.’

‘Really, how do you know?’
‘He told me.’

‘Um,’ said Tom laughing a little. ‘Are you going to do anything … about it?’

Dave laughed and said ‘No, nothing has happened yet.’ Tom pictured Robbie’s car colliding headfirst with another car on the highway nearby Legoland.

‘I’m making a garbage can pizza,’ said Dave referencing a pizza with every topping, except anchovies, on it. He stretched a dough.

‘Can you spin the dough, like throw it in the air?’ said Tom referencing a Youtube video seen around 30 minutes earlier, of the world championship of dough spinning, in Seoul.

‘Like this,’ said Dave, throwing the dough vertically in the air then catching it.

‘Yes, but spinning at the same time.’

‘That’s easy man,’ said Dave and did it again. The pizza dough landed on the floor, now showing a large tear in it. ‘Shit.’

Sweeping the floor while the pizza cooked, Dave said he felt nervous when he was alone—sometimes even paranoid that ‘something bad’ might happen, if he was alone, and said he felt better when other people were around. ‘I feel totally fucked up,’ said Dave, ‘like fucking insane, at least once a day. It lasts for an hour, or something. Then it sort of goes away, and I’m okay again.’

‘That sounds really weird. Um, maybe you’re smoking too much weed,’ said Tom, referencing when he smoked too much or too often, he sometimes felt paranoid and regretted being stoned in the first place.

‘I don’t think it’s that,’ said Dave, and took the garbage can pizza out of the oven. He stared at it with a confused expression. ‘I forgot to put something on this pizza, but I can’t tell what it is.’
‘It seems okay,’ said Tom. ‘Shit, I was going to buy a bottle of Sriracha sauce to bring here, but I forgot.’

The next day, Tom received texts from Dave while at work. ‘Trevor’s getting beat up a lot in jail,’ said Dave. ‘The lawyer’s trying to get him into solitary confinement. It seems really bad, lol.’ Tom drove to Dave’s house after work. He entered the living room to find an uncharacteristically sober and alert-looking Dave, sitting in the living room while Terry played Dying Light on PS4. Tom asked if Trevor was ‘doing something’ to make the other inmates pick on him and beat his ass.

‘How the fuck am I supposed to know how prison works?’ said Dave.

Tom Googled ‘Do child porn charged people get beat up in jail,’ and it said yes.

‘Trevor is totally fucked,’ said Dave and buried his head in a pillow on the couch. ‘He needs to get the fuck into solitary confinement, and stay his ass in there.’

‘You can’t get beat up in solitary confinement,’ said Terry while repeatedly hitting a zombie with a golf club in Dying Light. The zombie kept standing back up, other zombies were entering the room.

‘It says on Reddit that the people with the lowest ‘prison cred’ are child molesters,’ said Tom looking at his Macbook. ‘Maybe the guards aren’t protecting Trevor since they think he’s a child molester.’

‘Trevor’s not a child molester. He just jerked off to naked 15 year olds,’ said Dave, referencing the hard drives confiscated by the FBI were found to contain ‘teenage porn’ as opposed to ‘kiddie porn’ which, according to Dave, helped decrease Trevor’s sentence from five years to three years.
‘It still doesn’t look good when you have to tell inmates you’re there for having underage porn,’ said Tom.

While Dave yelled at Terry to do something in *Dying Light* (eventually taking the controller to do it himself) Tom wondered if Dave was wearing Trevor’s clothes--uncharacteristic khaki shorts with the kind of woven button-down Trevor always wore and were referred to by Dave as ‘Charlie Sheen’ shirts--causing Dave to seem suddenly different. Tom asked if it was Trevor’s shirt.

‘It’s a nice ass shirt,’ said Dave. ‘At first I didn’t like them but they’re hella comfortable. Here, feel it.’

Tom felt the sleeve of Dave’s burgundy-color shirt. ‘Smooth,’ he said.

Tom realized with a neutral if slightly frowning expression that Dave now lived in Trevor’s house, drove his car, and wore his clothes. Dave was turning into Trevor, fitting into the Trevor-shaped hole left by his arrest, thought Tom complicatedly. Terry was not playing *Dying Light* anymore and was watching TV instead. There was a commercial about Push Pops, which Tom remembered consuming in elementary school, and felt mildly surprised by its continuing existence. Afterwards there was a ‘stupid’ commercial about cat food, where cats spoke English to each other while the owner was opening the door, trying to guess what kind of cat food she bought. When the owner fed them canned cat food, they rubbed their faces against the hand of the owner, now meowing instead of speaking English.

Dave said something about Alicia after the cat food commercial, and asked if Tom was going to ‘go for her.’ Dave did a ‘blowjob’ gesture by holding an imaginary penis and repeatedly pushing the side of his mouth with his tongue.

‘What do you mean, Alicia’s dating Darnell,’ said Tom.
Dave laughed and said she wasn’t, that they were just friends. ‘Darnell seems too cool for Alicia anyways,’ said Terry. Dave said things implying that Darnell ‘might be gay,’ then said while laughing that Darnell ‘probably’ wasn’t gay.

‘I’m not … attracted to Alicia,’ said Tom in a tentative-sounding voice. ‘And besides I don’t think Alicia likes people. She only likes cats. She wants to become a cat, I think.’ Tom asked if Dave was dating anyone.

‘Fuck no,’ said Dave. ‘I have to run 8 fucking pizza stores. I don’t even have time for Magic right now, it’s fucked up.’

‘You should get a Chinese girlfriend,’ said Terry while using Trevor’s laptop. He typed ‘buy Chinese girlfriend’ on Google, and clicked on the first link.

‘Wait,’ said Tom. ‘Isn’t this the same laptop the FBI confiscated then gave back.’

Dave shrugged. ‘Yeah, why?’

‘Aren’t you afraid it still has some kind of tracking thing on it?’

‘Why would they do that?’ said Dave. ‘Trevor’s already in jail. What are they gonna do—send him to extra jail?’

‘Maybe we shouldn’t be looking at this stuff on Trevor’s laptop’ said Terry.

‘Let’s not talk about Trevor—that shit’s depressing, said Dave and took the laptop from Terry.

‘Holy shit, check out the tits on this Chinese bitch,’ said Dave zooming into a picture.

Dave clicked on several ‘profiles’ of Chinese girls and added several of them to ‘your shopping cart’. Each profile had pictures and writing about their interests; next to their measurements in height-breast size-hips. ‘It says she likes board games and D&D,’ said Terry.
‘We could teach her Magic.’ They checked ‘next’ they saw a long form and something that said it cost $4000 to ‘finish order.’

‘PayPal accepted,’ said Terry, and asked if Dave still had PayPal.

‘Dude, I was just kidding,’ said Dave. ‘We’re not actually doing this shit.’

‘We shouldn’t be loading this stuff on Trevor’s computer,’ said Tom feeling slightly worried that the laptop browser ‘acted weird,’ randomly lagging then suddenly speeding up sometimes. ‘Or just look at it on your phone, I guess.’

‘Chill man, what Trevor looked at was fucked up and illegal,’ said Dave. ‘All we’re doing is looking at some grown ass Asian women. They’re like … 18.’

‘I found a cheaper site. It’s only $1600 and comes with free tracking,’ said Terry. ‘Wait-um. They’re dolls, nevermind.’

That night in his apartment, Tom ate leftover quinoa salad while standing at the sink, when he received a text. It was from Sara: ‘Hi.’

‘Hi,’ Tom texted back.

‘I ditched the concert the other night, I suddenly felt really bad,’ said Sara. ‘That’s what happens sometimes, I have to just go and be alone, all of a sudden.’

‘That’s ok,’ said Tom unsure of how to respond. ‘Sometimes I feel bad all of a sudden too.’

‘I made you worry, I should have said something instead of turning off my phone.’

‘You deactivated your Facebook account too,’ said Tom.

‘Yeah, I did that too, I guess,’ said Sara. ‘But I didn’t do it to avoid you, I just think Facebook is aids.’
Tom said he didn’t use Facebook anymore, either. ‘Only Facebook Messenger, I quit posting in those groups,’ he said.

‘I don’t even like those people anymore. It was fun to read for a while but then it just turned into everyone shitposting.’

‘I noticed that a little,’ said Tom.

‘My friend wants to order a Chinese girlfriend from this site,’ said Tom after neither of them typed anything for a few minutes.

‘That seems cool, he should do it.’

‘I think it’s illegal.’ Tom said vague things about scams and how random popups came up while looking at the site.

‘If a rich Chinese dude ordered me to be his girlfriend in China, I would go,’ said Sara.

‘And then divorce him and write a feminist memoir about it and win the Pulitzer Prize. Then marry the rich Chinese dude again to continue enjoying the benefits of being married to a rich Chinese dude,’ said Tom.

‘That seems really good, should I do that,’ said Sara. ‘I’m going to make a website called BuyAmericanGirlfriend.com using CSS.’

‘That seems really good,’ said Tom. ‘I don’t know any coding, I would just use drag-and-drop at that site--forget what it’s called.’

‘I felt stupid for not telling you about being in a wheelchair,’ said Sara around five minutes later. ‘That’s what caused me to feel bad leave, I think. I wanted to mention it before the concert but it felt stupid, so I didn’t.’

‘It’s okay,’ said Tom. ‘Just six more months.’

‘No … I lied about that, I’m actually paraplegic lol.’
‘Thanks for telling me that.’ Tom Googled ‘paraplegic’ and read Paraplegia’s Wikipedia page for around one minute, learning that most people with spinal cord injuries used catheters and urine bags because they lacked control over bladder muscles. ‘I watched the movie about Glenn Gould,’ he typed, changing the subject. ‘The one you told me was good. Glenn Gould seemed really disconnected from society--but in an extremely good way.’

Sara said she was glad and recommended Tom other movies to watch. ‘I’ll tell you next time, I think,’ said Sara explaining she sometimes shut off her phone for long periods of time, weeks or months, when the thought of interacting with people made her angry and depressed. ‘Try to do things that make you feel less depressed,’ said Tom. ‘I’ll work on my 9/11 collage,’ said Sara, referencing her project of superimposing magazine cutouts of people and food onto a burning Twin Towers, which she planned to sell on Ebay once finished.

‘Put Kylie Jenner’s face in the middle, between the two towers,’ said Tom. ‘Juxtapose with Lean Pockets.’

‘Kylie Jenner is really funny, I think,’ said Sara. ‘Wait, I just thought of Willow Smith.’

‘Obama did 9/11,’ said Tom. ‘He planned his presidency far in advance. Someone just said that on War on Terror’s subreddit.’

‘Noam Chomsky said America has done more terrorism than any other country,’ said Sara. ‘United States of Terror. That’s the title of my collage.’

‘Show it to me when it’s finished,’ said Tom. ‘Send it to me so I can make a GIF. I want to get good at making GIFs.’

Sara said they should hang out again if Tom wanted to. Sara invited Tom to her apartment on Saturday to watch movies. Tom put Sara’s address in Google Maps and saw that they lived only 15 minutes apart, and wanted to excitedly convey this information to Sara but
then decided not to, fearing it could ‘overload’ their connection which he sensed was still fragile and conditional, liable to suddenly terminate like a faulty ethernet cord which for some reason could never be replaced or repaired, and instead wait their next interaction to tell Sara information about himself.

On Friday evening, Tom drove from Pho Sure to Sara’s apartment. While they’d originally planned to watch *Julien Donkey-Boy*, based on Tom’s having expressed interest in seeing a Dogma 95 or ‘mumblegore’ (combining mumblecore with horror) movie, Sara couldn’t find her DVD of either it or a Danish mumblegore movie she’d talked about, and subsequently gave up trying to torrent *Julien Donkey-Boy* after seeing only one user was seeding it on ThePirateBay.org. After discussing what they should watch for around fifteen minutes, with no resolution, Tom saw the spine of a *Blue Velvet* DVD near Sara’s TV and suggested they watch that, which they did, while eating a garbage can pizza and wings Tom picked up from Dave’s store.

They talked during *Blue Velvet* about the highly exaggerated facial expressions of its characters, and also how they seemed to speak slower than people did in real life. ‘No one talks like that in real life. No one looks like that in real life,’ said Sara pointing at Isabella Rosselini. When Tom asked if Sara was annoyed by his talking, she said she didn’t care since she’d seen it several times. Tom, though it was his first time seeing the movie in full, felt he could ‘multitask’ talking to Sara and understanding the movie, by looking at the subtitles once in a while.

‘Um,’ said Sara. ‘I’m sorry for ditching you at the concert.’

‘You already ... said that. It’s okay, you don’t need to apologize,’ said Tom. ‘I should be saying … sorry, I think.’
'Why?'

'I acted like … I don’t know, someone who never seen a person in a wheelchair before. I acted like an out-of-control asshole who couldn’t process that wheelchairs exist.’

‘No… I should have told you before the concert, to not make you feel awkward or bad when you saw me.’

‘I think I just act … extremely weird… the first time I meet someone. Or it’s just all the time, I don’t know. I’m a high-functioning retarded person, I think,’ said Tom. ‘Or medium-functioning.’

‘It’s persons with a disability,’ said Sara in a ‘triggered’ voice. ‘It’s 2017. Get it right, retard.’

‘I’m a low-to-medium functioning persons with a disability,’ said Tom grinning weakly.

Around 15 minutes later, Tom felt *Blue Velvet* was boring and didn’t feel like watching it anymore probably because Tom didn’t pay attention to it and felt confused by what was happening, Sara said they could watch a ‘fucked up’ Japanese movie instead.

The Japanese movie began with a mother descending into bizarre behavior after her husband inexplicably leaves the family. The mom buys new clothes and gets a temporary butterfly tattoo, then a real one, then begins neglecting her three young kids to go partying—as shown by a scene of her dancing with a large bottle of beer while walking home, singing and sometimes throwing a fist in the air.

‘She’s finding herself … but she’s so fucked,’ said Sara laughing.

In morning scenes, the mom had sober moments where the frame widened and went to extreme close-ups of her eyes blinking while standing in a subway train with groceries. The mom leaves to marry another man, leaving an envelope of money for the oldest child, a nine
year-old boy, with which to care of his two younger siblings. They are happy for a while, sometimes in McDonalds. Then the little sister breaks her neck by falling while trying to decorate the room with paper balloons shaped like puffer fish and cuttlefish. The boy and the younger brother put the sister’s dead body in a suitcase and ride the train to a beautiful meadow where they bury her. They boy doesn’t want to go to the police or call child protective services, as he finds out in an internet cafe that siblings are sent to different orphanages based on age. The nine year-old’s face becomes increasingly ‘samurai-like,’ thought Tom, as the plot progress, except for the times when he is shown playing video games by himself after putting his brother to sleep. The nine year-old has a birthday, during which the electricity is shut off in the apartment. The younger brother has seizures after his epilepsy medication runs out. In the last scene, the now ten year-old carries his unconscious brother into a hospital lobby, where several nurses are talking excitedly about a pop concert and one of them notices the ten year-old and looks at him with a vaguely concerned-seeming facial expression.

While the credits played Tom looked at Sara while simultaneously raising a slice of pizza to his face, in order to make his staring less conspicuous--Tom looked away when Sara noticed and turned her head.

‘What,’ said Sara.

‘Nothing… I just thinking about the movie. That mom…’ Tom heard his voice trailing off. He took an extremely small bite of the pizza then put down the plate.

‘How did it happen,’ said Tom slowly. ‘Getting a wheelchair … Or, um … nevermind, I’m sorry.’

‘Car accident,’ said Sara. ‘I don’t care about talking about it or anything. I’ll tell you.’ Sara talked about the car accident. A car slammed into the side of her car when she drove
through a 4-way. She was in a coma for a month. When she woke up she couldn’t move her legs, only felt this dull buzz, since her spinal cord was injured. Her parents hired a physical therapist to come everyday. After a year at her parent’s house, she couldn’t stand them anymore, and moved out. ‘And here I am now,’ said Sara.

‘I feel like I understand things … better, now. Thank you for telling me those things.’ said Tom.

Over the next week, Tom felt high levels of interest towards Sara, and stayed up most of one night after getting home from work, reading everything he could access on Sara’s Facebook page. Though most of her posts were short tweet-like status updates, and never pictures, he discovered an earlier period dating from last spring when it seemed, while living at her parents house, Sara had undergone intensive physical therapy sessions with the goal of restoring slight movement to her legs which could, it seemed, make walking on braces and crutches possible. However, after about a month, the updates about her therapy stopped completely and the content of her posts had returned to mostly depressing and darkly humorous observations expressing anti-social or pessimistic sentiments about life, death, society, and internet use. On Saturday, while again at Sara’s apartment watching Netflix and movies together, Tom felt weirdly pressured to talk to Sara about some of the things he’d read on her Facebook page, or to ask her questions, but couldn’t think of a reasonable way to bring up those topics, so didn’t. When the third or fourth episode of Trailer Park Boys--a show which Sara liked for its clever use of the ‘mockumentary’ genre--Sara suggested moving to her bed to lie down and listen to music, which they did. While lying sideways on the queen size mattress and kissing, Tom felt very aware of
the black fanny pack Sara wore containing her urine pouch, which he’d seen her transfer from a compartment of her wheelchair to her hip shortly before entering the bedroom.

‘Does that ever …’ said Tom indicating the fanny pack, which had a thin black tube going into Sara’s shirt.

‘Huh?’ said Sara.

‘Hurt? Um,’ said Tom quietly.

‘Oh, catheter,’ said Sara, who seemed to become momentarily embarrassed before smiling a little. ‘No, no, it doesn’t hurt.’

‘You don’t … feel it at all?’

‘Well, I do feel it, I mean. But I’ve gotten used to it, I guess,’ said Sara.

‘That’s good,’ said Tom, feeling a little flushed and embarrassed for asking. ‘Do you like Clams Casino?’

‘I think I have like two songs by him,’ said Sara, who got her iPhone and changed the song to ‘All I Need’ by Clams Casino.

Tom noticed the cracked screen of Sara’s iPhone and asked if she wanted to fix it. Sara said it was okay, that she didn’t mind. When Tom urged Sara that he could fix Sara’s phone for ‘basically free,’ referencing a friend who fixed iPhones, Sara said ‘Okay, in that case.’

Tom’s phone made a high-pitched noise, followed by several more. ‘What the fuck is that?’ said Sara. He said it was Kakao Talk, an app he and his parents used to text each other. Tom stared at several very long messages from his mother, then replied ‘ok.’ Sara asked what Tom’s parents were doing in Korea.

‘I’m not sure,’ said Tom. ‘Just living … I guess.’
Tom talked about his parents, especially his mother’s ‘nagging’ him to come live with them in Seoul, which Tom constantly refused, saying he was working on his writing. Tom’s mother ridiculed him by saying what Tom had to write about if he never traveled and saw the world, implying that travelling would fuel or expedite Tom’s writing career, and efforts which went as far as enthusiastically recommending that Tom ‘backpack’ around the world—the idea of which revolted Tom so that he didn’t want to write ‘about the world’ and that he could tour whole world cities using Oculus Rift goggles and Google Earth in 4k resolution. Tom’s mother, who didn't know what either of those were, had repeatedly commented on how she felt Tom’s behavior was ‘not healthy’ and repeatedly questioned if he was ‘going outside’ and exercising regularly, eating ‘leafy greens.’

‘Do you think it’s weird … um …. that both our parents are trying to get us to move back in with them?’ said Tom. ‘As if it’s the best thing … to be re-absorbed into the nuclear family unit.’

‘Whoa. You just described how I feel … almost exactly. But isn’t that the opposite of what parents want? If you’re a parent, wouldn’t you want instead for your children to go out on their own and prosper, and to not have to worry about them?’

‘Um, I’m trying to think …’ said Tom. ‘When I was a kid, my parents always wanted me to be independent. Whenever I would complain about something, their stock phrase would be “why don’t you make your own money and buy it yourself?” That was the principle they stressed most … being completely independent, self-reliance.’ Tom remembered a time in high school, maybe as a freshman or sophomore, when he habitually complained about the internet service at their house being slow due to having DSL rather than cable, which resulted in high latency when playing World of Warcraft. Determined to buy cable internet to make playing
games and streaming movies more enjoyable, Tom began working part time at Caribou Coffee, an Alaska-themed competitor to Starbucks. A few months later, Tom’s parents had installed cable internet at the house, as the slow download speeds had begun to irritate his father as well. However, by then, Tom had lost interest in World of Warcraft and decided to keep working at Caribou Coffee, saving up money, even in the absence of something he wanted desperately to buy.

‘And now my parents want me to move to Korea, saying the fiber optic internet there is fifty times faster than cable,’ said Tom, and laughed.

‘Huh?’ said Sara.

‘Nevermind,’ said Tom. ‘I was just thinking about the whole parents re-absorbing children thing. It’s just ironic, I feel. Why did they stress going to college so much … when now they’re content with me living with them and teaching English to middle-schoolers, which I could do--anyone could do--without a degree or anything.’

‘What does your sister think of all this?’ said Sara.

‘She wants me to go to Korea, too, I think. But she also complains that I don’t visit her.’

‘Where does she live, again? I think you told me but I forgot.’

‘Washington D.C.’

Unsure of how much he’d told Sara about his sister over Facebook messenger, he reiterated how his sister, having recently graduated medical school, was now a radiology resident in the Army, and had a long-distance relationship with her fiancé, a urology resident in Philadelphia. How she, too, urged Tom to move to Korea to teach English, generally siding with their parents that he ‘wasn’t doing anything’ since graduating college, and should ‘grow up’ and or ‘take action’ with his life.
‘I just don’t feel like doing anything … um … that requires a lot of effort,’ said Tom.

‘I feel like that, too,’ said Sara. ‘Is it really worth it to work really hard on anything?’

‘Yeah. But at the same time, it’s not like I’m going to spend my life actually doing nothing. I’m working on my novel and I teach violin lessons. Isn’t that enough? And even if my parents stopped sending me money, I would be fine, actually. The money I spend now is all on non-essential things anyways. I feel like I would be fine. They’ve actually threatened to ‘cut me off’ of my allowance more than once, but never actually did.’

‘Isn’t there like … um, a cultural precedent in Asian cultures where the oldest son takes care of the parents after a certain point? Like, my friend told me that China doesn’t have elderly care facilities because they live with their adult children.’

‘I’m … not sure. It sounds like something that might’ve been true like fifty years ago, when everyone was poor and family values mattered more. I think in Japan and Korea, the oldest son still gets most of the parent’s inheritance. Still, none of my married cousins in Korea or Japan live with their parents. They all live apart. But they visit family more often, I guess, and have dinners and stuff. Maybe your friend meant to say that the idea of a large family unit means more in Asia than it does here … where it only matters once a year, on like Thanksgiving.’

‘Fuck Thanksgiving,’ said Sara. ‘I’m never going to Thanksgiving at my parent’s house ever again. Last Thanksgiving was the worst day of my life. My parents invited everyone and, like, relatives I never knew existed came and talked to me nonstop. I wanted to go to the garage and chug bleach.’

‘Have children yourself and then you’ll know.’

‘What?’
‘That’s what my mom’s been saying to me and my sister in our group chat. “Have children yourself and then you’ll know.” ’

‘I don’t want to know, and I’ll never have to find out. I’m never having kids.’

‘I feel the same,’ said Tom.

‘I’m glad we agree on this. This is the second or third time we’ve talked about this, and we still agree. That’s a good sign. If we ever start to hate each other, one or twenty years from now, we can just leave without having to consider third parties.’

‘Referring to children as third parties. That’s funny.’

Sara, who had moved to the kitchen to prepare snacks, asked in a distracted-sounding voice what ‘caused’ Tom’s parents to move back to Korea. Tom said he didn’t know. ‘I think my mom said she got tired of cleaning a big house. And my dad said he was tired of mowing the grass. Then they sold the house, at which point my sister helped them look for condos. And then suddenly they bought an apartment in Seoul and moved there. I mean, it was so sudden and unpredictable.’

‘But people are like that. I think it’s a misconception that older people are more stable and think things through. Like, when my mom died, my dad told my brother and me he’d never date another person, because our mom was ‘the one’ in his life. And he didn’t for four years, and spent all his time home with us. And one day he takes us to his favorite steakhouse and he introduces us to his new girlfriend. “I was alone for four years, and then I found Joy.” That’s literally what he said.’

‘Do your parents harass you, too? Or like randomly visit you, since they’re only three hours away?’
'No, it hasn’t gotten that bad,’ said Sara. ‘My dad’s just … doing whatever, we text sometimes. My stepmom is aids. Joy’s emails go to my spam folder.’

‘Your dad gives you money for rent,’ said Tom, referencing an earlier conversation in which Tom mentioned his parents transferring $800 to his bank account at the beginning of each month, and Sara said she got more and for Tom to ‘step his game up.’

‘Yeah. Well, now I have this credit card that they pay,’ said Sara. ‘It’s the nicest.’

‘Sweet,’ said Tom.

‘I want to go to Korea sometime,’ said Sara. ‘I heard it’s really good. My friend said it’s like Japan except with emotions.’ Sara talked about when, as a junior in high school, she visited Tokyo with one of the friends who was Japanese. How people in Tokyo had looked completely emotionless--on the train, on the street, at the store, inside the video game arcade, inside restaurants. ‘Everyone seemed completely fucked … but in this advanced, knowing way. Postmodern, I don’t know.’

‘Korea is… loud, I think. Not as loud as China, but, um,’ Tom said, vaguely recalling past summer trips to Korea, the most recent of which was two years ago, the summer after graduating college, visiting his parents in their new apartment. ‘Korea has … a lot of problems, I think,’ he said vaguely. Tom talked about middle school students committing suicide, then about two recent college graduates who jumped off a 46-story apartment building together, holding hands, after not being hired by Samsung. He showed Sara a picture of ‘smart toilets’ that automatically shot water at your ass when you used them, and how he’d attempted, unsuccessfully, to negate their programming by elevating his ass from the seat. Noticing Sara looking at him with a slightly concerned expression, Tom gradually realized his tendency of ‘always’ talking about Asian countries in a negative context and/or attitude, leading him to
question, while staring at the center of a dimly paused Netflix screen on TV, if living in America for nineteen years had somehow unconsciously caused him to ‘hate’ Asia on some guttural level. But why … would that happen? ‘Um,’ said Tom looking at Sara’s face, expecting her to say something in response to what he had been talking about, but she didn’t, and instead tipped a glass bottle of organic strawberry lemonade in her mouth.

‘It seems like a lot of people are “going back” to Asia,’ said Tom when the Netflix screen prompted “Exit or Continue Watching,” and Sara did something with the remote to dismiss the message. ‘Like, their parents immigrated to North America so their children could go to college and have a “better life” there … and they do, or something … but now they’re going back to Asia and struggling to fit back into the society their parents left because they thought it sucked.’

‘Because it fucking sucks in America,’ said Sara after seeming to contemplate what Tom said for around 30 seconds, in a suddenly aggressive-sounding voice, startling Tom who had thought their discussion on the topic had ended. ‘It’s a fucking joke, living in this country. It’s only good for people like …’

‘The owners of Walmart,’ said Tom.

‘Yeah, like rich white people,’ said Sara. ‘Living here is only good for trust fund babies, and fucking horrific for everyone else. And then there’s racism, not just here, but everywhere. Look what white people have done on this planet. 99.99% of white people on this planet should die in a grease fire.’

‘It’s not even a race thing, I don’t think,’ said Tom. ‘Don’t you think it’s human beings, in general, that are … the problem? Homo sapiens is just one species on the earth, a subset of the upright primate. What gives us the right to, like, control everything? Human beings seen from the perspective of any others species, to ducks and giraffes, we would be just a bunch of
out-of-control assholes … creating infinite Walmarts and McDonalds. Nuclear bombs don’t
serve any purpose to Nature, um …’ said Tom hearing his voice trail off. ‘Do you … ever think
of things like this. Am I fucking crazy?’

‘You’re not fucking crazy,’ said Sara. ‘I think about it too.’

‘I’m glad you think about it,’ said Tom feeling emotional.

‘We are the aids of the planet, human beings,’ said Sara smiling.

‘I think I hate 99.99% of all people on this planet, including myself,’ said Tom. ‘Wait--
um. Isn’t 0.01% of all people still a lot of people, to actively not hate.’

‘Ten-thousandth of … seven billion, so …’ Sara looked at Calculator her iPhone.

‘700,000 people. Wait--I don’t know if that’s right.’

‘Whoa. That’s too many people.’

‘Yeah,’ said Sara. ‘I want to get it down to like, I don’t know, 100 people. I feel like I
can learn, over time, to handle that--not hating 100 people. They have to be, like, really good
though. Everyone else should die in the grease fire.’

‘Do you think we should embrace our antisocial personality disorder,’ said Tom.

‘Subvert WebMD by doing the opposite of what it says--”seek a qualified mental health
professional and/or take prescribed medication daily or as directed by your doctor.” We can
recruit more people with antisocial personality disorder using Twitter. Write a novella-length
manifesto send it to people as pdf. Hold meetings, do rallies and use megaphones outside
buildings like Black Panthers. We can tape orange flyers to trees on the quad at Berkeley, easily
persuade lonely freshmen who don’t like their dorms.’

‘That seems really good,’ said Sara. ‘Let’s be as antisocial as possible, from now on.’

‘As antisocial as possible,’ said Tom.
‘Yes. Celebrate the embrace of being enlightened against society.’

Neither of them spoke for around a minute, then Tom said ‘I feel like I’ve been waiting for ... this moment ... all my life,’ quoting the opening lyrics of ‘Lazy Eye’ by Silversun Pickups, however only realizing it while suddenly kissing Sara again--Tom inadvertently leaning his face toward Sara’s while reaching to scratch a part of his back, and her moving the rest of the distance between them--with his eyes partially closed. ‘... But it’s not quite right,’ thought Tom, finishing the chorus of ‘Lazy Eye,’ while Sara’s tongue moved inside his mouth. Sara made a sound when Tom moved his tongue around in her mouth.

‘Wait,’ said Sara, ‘I’ll be right back.’ She got off the bed and moved her body using her arms towards the bathroom.

Tom turned to his side and absently scrolled through music on his iPhone looking for ‘happy’ music to play, but couldn’t find anything that seemed happy to him. Sara came out of the bathroom and seemed to be back in the room. When Tom turned around, he saw Sara, naked, climb onto the bed. Seeing her without the fanny pack, Tom realized she’d gone to the bathroom to remove her catheter.

‘Tom,’ said Sara touching Tom’s shoulder, and grinning a little.

‘Um …’

‘What,’ said Sara, with mock disapproval.

‘Just …’ said Tom unsurely, looking at Sara’s breasts. ‘Unexpected. Um.’

‘It always is … the first time, with someone new,’ said Sara.

‘Yeah, you’re right.’

Tom proceeded to remove his shirt then jeans, and they began kissing again. Feeling curious as to what extent Sara felt sexual pleasure--both Google and Wikipedia had been vague
on the topic of sex amongst paraplegics--Tom moved his fingers inside Sara in ways previous partners had liked, causing Sara to moan and move her body. A few minutes later, Tom mentioned he maybe had a condom in his backpack, to which Sara responded that she had an IUD and that they were okay.

‘You might feel something, though,’ said Sara. ‘The catheter. It’s pretty soft, and it doesn’t hurt … for me … ’

Tom made a noise indicating he understood. Once inside, he did feel something on one side, but didn’t seem to hurt for either of them and so kept going.

‘It’s okay … right?’ said Sara.

‘Yeah, it’s not a problem,’ said Tom. ‘I mean, I think it makes it better, even. Like an extra bump thing.’

Sara laughed. ‘Stop making me laugh. I feel weird.’

‘Sorry. I won’t talk anymore,’ said Tom, a little breathlessly.

‘Shh,’ said Sara and kissed him forcefully. A few seconds later, the music playing changed to ‘All I Need’ by Clams Casino, a song whose lyrics was about suicide and convincing friends to commit suicide together, which Tom had strangely always felt was upbeat and somehow, paradoxically, life-affirming and even happy.

Three weeks later, sitting in an outdoor patio of Coffee Cartel, Tom held a half-empty iced coffee towards the sun, feeling vaguely entertained by its angular shining. Craig, 33, made a repulsed-looking facial expression after looking up from his Macbook suddenly. ‘Everytime I re-activate Facebook and look at it, it seems society has gotten even more … incomprehensible
… and putrid,’ said Craig. ‘Like a tupperware of rotten food you keep in the fridge, and open every six months, just to see how much more rotten it’s gotten.’

Tom said Craig should write that in *Infected States of America*, a nonfiction book he was working on and wanted to publish on Thought Catalog and HTMLGiant.

‘But it’s something people already know, it wouldn’t be worth people reading,’ said Craig. One more asshole who hates Facebook.’

‘That person’s trying to tie their dog’s leash to a pole,’ said Tom noticing a chihuahua displaying a neutral expression when its owner ‘gave up’ and circled the pole several times and went inside Coffee Cartel. The leash fell to the base of the pole in a loose pile. ‘Will the dog run away?’

‘I saw something on Twitter yesterday,’ said Craig. He said the name of a Russian politician claiming to have killed 11 gay men with his bare hands. ‘He’s running for Parliament and has 52,000 followers on Twitter.’

‘Will he get elected?’

‘Oh, here’s another thing. Someone sent this to me,’ said Craig showing Tom his Macbook screen. It was a link to a GoFundMe to help pay the medical and legal costs of a black skateboarding ‘urban artist’ who was attacked by Trump supporters while graffitiiing the wall of a recently-closed TJ Maxx. The attackers escaped but the ‘urban artist’ was arrested and charged with resisting arrest and vandalism.

‘How do they know they were Trump supporters?’

‘They were saying Donald Trump’s name while beating his ass.’

‘The skateboarder said they were doing that?’ said Tom.

‘Yeah,’ said Craig. ‘346 people have donated $10,251.16 to this GoFundMe.’
‘There will be a race war in the US next year, I think,’ said Tom. ‘Black skateboarding graffiti artists will organize with their allies and gain weapons and stand up for their rights. And other people will find weapons and fight with them, too. Then the people they attack will have to fight back. The whole country will get involved.’

‘Gangs of New York,’ said Craig. ‘Will it be like Gangs of New York?’

‘Yes, it might be like that,’ said Tom struggling to remember scenes from the movie, and visualized Leonardo DiCaprio holding a crowbar near the face of a lesser-known actor, then after a few seconds wondered if Leonardo DiCaprio was in Gangs of New York. ‘Um, was Leonardo DiCaprio in that?’

‘There’s no Asian people in Gangs of New York, I think,’ said Craig nonsequiturly. ‘Oh wait … but there was a Chinatown in it right.’ Tom said Chinatown was ‘really old’ but that he didn’t know when Asian people first appeared in New York City. After a delay of around 25 seconds during which Craig’s face looked as if formulating an intricately complicated sentence, he said ‘I don’t know, shit.’ Then Craig said things implying Asian people didn’t fight wars for social reasons, and only resorted to violence when their ‘whole lives’ were threatened, and ‘never because they feel discriminated against, or something.’

‘Asians will fight for money, I think,’ said Tom and made vague references to the Opium Wars, as well as Japan trying to conquer all of Asia to consolidate power and resources.

‘Regardless,’ said Craig, ‘everyone will have to choose a side when the race war begins. White or Black. Like chess. Or maybe there’ll be three factions—like Starcraft.’

‘Protoss,’ said Tom.

‘No, Zerglings, man. Were they called Zerglings?’
‘The government should let this happen,’ said Tom. ‘They should think of the long term benefits. The US government is tired of people arguing about race. They might not intervene and just let people get racial tension out of their system, let their anger out on the streets.’

‘Wait, but, which side will Asians pick?’

‘Um, I don’t know. White.’

‘My people will try to stay out of it as long as possible,’ said Craig. ‘Jews won’t get involved until Jews start getting their asses beat. And even then they won’t want to get involved, they’ll want to play it safe.’

‘I’ll probably hide when the race war begins,’ said Tom. ‘Find a room. Stockpile ramen and download cached versions of often-visited websites on Macbook.’ ‘Same,’ said Craig.

Around 10 minutes later Craig talked about a date he went on with someone named Lisa; they were talking together when Lisa’s sister and her boyfriend randomly came into the bar and sat down with them. The sister’s boyfriend repeatedly ordered chicken tenders and was eating them in an out-of-control way, using several dipping sauces, in front of Craig and Lisa, who were both vegan.

‘Cockblocked,’ said Tom grinning.

‘It gets worse,’ said Craig. He talked about how the sister constantly made ‘bitchy’ expressions at Craig and said ‘that’s not funny’ whenever he said something, even when he wasn’t talking to her. When Craig said a Jewish joke, the sister said ‘that’s racist, that’s not okay’ in a very loud voice. Then she suddenly talked in an accusatory tone about Hasidic Jews not allowing their wives to drive or to sit next to them during religious services. When Craig said, laughing, ‘I don’t know anything about Hasidic Jews,’ the sister shouted ‘You’re ignorant’ repeatedly. Craig continued laughing as the sister aggressively demanded Craig to apologize for
being misogynistic towards her, prompting a previously silent Lisa to scream ‘What’s your problem, this is why you don’t have any friends’ at her sister. The sister’s boyfriend ordered more chicken tenders and made a loud, weird noise, and went towards the bathroom.

‘Jesus,’ said Tom.

‘That’s what’s wrong with this country. The voices being heard are the voices of the crazy people. In order for society to work the loudest voice needs to be the moderate voice, the educated voice … people who read and listen and take all the information into consideration before saying something. That’s how things were so good in Athens,’ said Craig referencing his recent research into democracy in Ancient Greece. ‘Nowadays no one reads anything, and you can’t say anything without people getting instantly butthurt. There’s just a bunch of triggered pussies. I mean, just look at college students these days. Have you talked to one recently. And I thought things were bad when I left,’ said Craig possibly referencing, thought Tom, the fact that he dropped out of Stanford one credit short of graduating with a degree in political science.

‘It’s hard to say things,’ said Tom. ‘Like, it’s extremely difficult to look at someone’s face and say anything slightly sociopolitical. Someone will scream.’ He said something vague about things seeming ‘extremely polarized’ and ‘totalitarian-ish.’

‘Do you realize college campuses in this country are filled with kids who skip their history classes to attend a rally protesting … something. They don’t know anything because they haven’t read the books, they get all their information from Facebook and Buzzfeed and then go yell at people for not agreeing with them,’ said Craig drinking an espresso. ‘I have been reading these, um, Supreme Court opinions. They are beautiful in a way. Supreme Court justices write these long, intricately structured essays, after practicing law for 30 or 40 or 50 years, they lay out all the evidence and examine the issue from every prevailing point of view, and then they weigh
in. But then you have a 18 year old freshman girl who believes in extreme leftism and bullshit political correctness, she spits on these meticulously written 30 page opinions and screams at people that they were written by ‘old white men’ who are racist and don’t know anything. And the 18 year old freshman guy says nothing and silently agrees with the 18 year old freshman girl because he wants to fuck her. This is what’s happening right now. If this is how the educated populace is going to behave in this country, then democracy is fucked.’

‘Democracy is lying on the floor, gasping for air,’ said Tom.

‘Like, you have to respect people that have read more and have lived longer than you. They know more than you. You don’t have to agree with everything they say, but you have to shut the fuck up and listen to them and consider their fucking opinion,’ said Craig. ‘This is how Greece worked at the height of their civilization. It’s what America used to do before it became retarded.’

‘I should have a non-major character say and think all the potentially offensive sentences in my novel,’ said Tom around minutes later, typing on his Macbook. ‘That way when people scream at me at readings or threaten to attack me in an alley, I can say it’s a shitty minor character in the book, whom the protagonist mostly ignores or even scorns, that said those things, and thus are not reflective at all of my personal opinions. I’ll say I’m extremely liberal and politically correct and show them all the social justice posts on Facebook I’ve ‘liked’ and shared with people, on my iPhone.’

‘That seems like an effective strategy, the extremely liberal social justice warriors can’t get mad at you if you tell them you’re a extremely liberal social justice warrior,’ said Craig. He ordered another espresso and talked about how the counterculture of the 60s was ‘basically’ the dominant culture now, that it was time for a new counterculture to come ‘overthrow’ it.
‘Overthrow political correctness and derail extreme leftist ideology,’ said Tom. ‘How do we do that?’ He was pondering this when he noticed another dog’s leash being tied to the pole where, earlier, the untied chihuahua had stoically waited for its owner to buy an iced coffee. When the owner went in Coffee Cartel, the new dog began aggressively yanking its leash and biting a frayed-looking portion of it. Around 30 seconds later, the dog broke its leash and ran down the street. ‘Um,’ said Tom.

‘That dog is smarter than us. It’s going to a better place,’ said Craig, looking down the street absently.

On Friday after work, Tom picked up Sara and went to a mall near Chinatown. At Urban Outfitters they saw a photobooth and went inside it. Tom said the pictures came out really bad even though Sara liked them. Tom felt frustrated that the machine was a rip-off, citing that in Japan it cost like $2 and there’s more options and more stickers.

‘Don’t get mad, we can steal something to make up for it,’ said Sara quietly. ‘I know how to steal from here.

‘Be careful,’ said Tom.

Tom touched and played with a pyramid-shaped rubik’s cube. Tom put the rubik’s cube down and went to look at clothes in the clearance section. Outside, walking towards Starbucks, Sara showed Tom a red beanie, two T shirts, and the pyramid-shaped Rubik’s cube.

‘Jesus,’ said Tom. ‘You’re really good at this.’

‘I used to do this all the time,’ said Sara. ‘But only sometimes now.’

‘You should write a blog about your strategies,’ said Tom. ‘Write an ebook and publish it on Amazon.’
Sara said she learned some of her strategies from a blog on Wordpress, which was subsequently deleted. The person who wrote it ‘suddenly became religious’ and wrote several long blog posts about not shoplifting, not sinning, then deactivated their account.

They parked in a structure near Chinatown and began walking. There was an art gallery where some kind of reception was happening.

‘What are you doing?’ said Tom as Sara opened the door.

‘Just chill,’ said Sara. ‘Follow my lead.’

‘We’re closed for a private event,’ said an in-charge looking woman wearing thick glasses and a yellowish, vomit-colored skirt.

‘I’m a friend of one of the artists,’ said Sara.

The woman in skirt looked suddenly surprised and apologetic, and said, ‘Please help yourself to refreshments,’ and walked away.

‘Told you,’ said Sara, ‘No one checks wheelchair people.’

Tom nodded nervously then summarized Sara’s behavior to himself as ‘more antisocial behavior,’ but felt strangely endeared by being in her presence.

They went to a long table where snacks and drinks were organized. Tom and Sara loaded plates and stood looking at art displayed on white walls, which seemed abstract, and Tom stood in front of a painting of a red blob inside a black blob.

‘There’s something weird in this hummus,’ said Sara.

‘Have it with a cracker,’ said Tom, and placed a cracker on her plate. ‘Upper middle class crackers.’

After wandering the art gallery for ten more minutes and mutually agreeing the everything ‘looked the same,’ they got more food and went back outside. Tom felt pleasant
while walking and eating crackers and hummus, until he tripped on a rock and dropped both their plates, which he had been carrying. Sara laughed. They used Tom’s weed vape pen and continued walking into Chinatown.

At Wong’s Wok, a Cantonese restaurant Sara said had good Yelp reviews, Sara ordered fried rice with shrimp; Tom ordered drunken noodles with beef. Sara said she liked drunken noodles and they shared about half their food with each other, and while eating, sometimes sort of furtively looked at other diners in way seeming practiced, calculated. Tom thought of talking about working at Pho Sure, maybe telling her about Eric or Jon, or both, but decided it wouldn’t be interesting. When they were almost done eating Sara pointed at a fishtank near the front of the restaurant, which Tom said he hadn’t noticed when walking in.

‘There’s no fish in it,’ he said.

‘That’s sad,’ said Sara. ‘And the water is so dirty, like gray.’

Tom looked closer and saw one gray fish in the water. It was the same color as the water except for a pinkish-brown ‘tumor,’ it seemed like, filled with pus.

‘Fish always have neutral expressions. Like, even while being caught, or being made into sashimi while alive,’ said Tom, having seen it performed by a chef at an expensive sushi restaurant with his parents, in Toronto, maybe twelve years ago.

‘Fish don’t have human-like emotions, because they’re cold-blooded,’ said Sara citing her father, who liked reading science magazines, she said, as a source. ‘Or, like, they’re completely overwhelmed by non-human-like emotions all the time.’

Outside Wong’s Wok, temporarily paused as they were deciding what to do next, an elderly Asian man spat very near Tom’s shoe, and stared at him in a ‘dirty’ way as if he was the one who almost spat on him.
‘That guy basically spat on me,’ said Tom. ‘Should I have done something to retaliate?’

‘Um, shout at him. I don’t know.’

Tom wondered what he could’ve shouted to the Chinese man, and suddenly, nonsequiturly thought ‘Bruce Springsteen.’

‘I should’ve shouted “Bruce Springsteen” at him,’ said Tom, grinning widely.

‘And then what?’ said Sara.

‘Just Bruce Springsteen. Literally just that, I don’t actually know any Bruce Springsteen songs.’

‘Born in the USA,’ said Sara tentatively. ‘Is that Bruce Springsteen.’

‘I’m not sure. How does it go,’ asked Tom.

Sara narrowed her eyes at Tom and sang ‘Born in the USA! Da-da-da-da-da-da-dum! … is that how it goes?’ said Tom.

They kept guessing, in a mutually shared state of not caring enough to Google the lyrics, what came next in the song, as they walked into a ‘more Chinese,’ as Tom put it, section of Berkeley’s Chinatown, as characterized by increased pungency of food odors and decibel volume of Mandarin being spoken by people. They passed a brightly lit Chinese restaurant with a few people in it, and then several small restaurants, dimly lit with a lot of people in it. Sara stopped trying to guess lyrics. Tom smelled a greasy salty smell and stared with unfocused eyes at the dusky horizon, a stratified blur of salmon and a purplish blue. Distracted, he nearly ran into a street stall that sold light-up toys but stopped 2-3 inches in front of it. The man in the stall stared at him and said something quickly in what didn’t seem like English. Sara said sorry.

Walking onward, Tom thought of Chungking Express and other films by Wong-Kar Wai. ‘You
said you like Wong-Kar Wai,’ said Tom, feeling his voice trail off. Sara said she’d seen Chungking Express but didn’t remember much of it, and instead asked Tom about his novel. Tom said the book was a long suicide note interrupted by random, ‘sort of funny’ events, but that he didn’t like working on a novel and he wanted to ‘work on something else,’ like short stories or poems.

‘I feel my food coma subsiding,’ said Tom changing the subject. ‘I don’t digest greasy food well, but it’s better this time. I’m … thankful for automatic process, I think. Like, how much more fucked would my life be if I had to tell food to move from my stomach to my intestines.’

Sara said she had unnaturally good digestion, even to the point of thinking something was wrong with her, anecdotally mentioning when, on a family vacation in Cabo San Lucas, everyone (parents, brother, uncle) except her suffered violent food poisoning from eating at a seafood restaurant, where they had all eaten the same food.

Tom talked about Shoenice15, a Youtube celebrity famous for chugging hazardous liquids, such as mouthwash, toothpaste, several gallons of expired milk, and even a shot of lighter fluid.

‘I’m not going to drink lighter fluid,’ said Sara, laughing. ‘Chinatown ends in like a minute.’ They turned around and walked back to the parking structure where Tom parked his car.

At Sara’s apartment, Sara drew several versions of the ‘Thanks for making me come 13 times last night’ T-shirt, in different fonts. They also worked on ‘Not drowning in existential dread’ and ‘I probably don’t have scabies right now’ shirts. They talked for a while whether ‘rn’ or writing ‘right now’ looked better, before inconclusively settling on ‘right now’ unabbreviated.
While looking at websites selling antisocial t-shirts, Sara expressed aggression towards a new clothing brand called ‘Antisocial social club,’ explaining that she’d thought to start a clothing brand a few years ago with the same name.

‘Steal it back,’ said Tom. ‘It’s your right to.’

‘I’ll call it Extremely Antisocial Social Club,’ said Sara.

‘That’s really smart. Now they can’t sue you, it’s a totally different name,’ said Tom, as they moved into the parking structure and into an elevator.

When Tom started his car, Sara indicated that his check engine light was on, and instructed him to put the car into neutral and press the brake repeatedly.

‘Whoa, it went away,’ said Tom. ‘How did you know to do that?’

‘A friend on the internet told me about it. It doesn’t work every time, and the light eventually comes back on. But it’s funny, I guess.’

While driving, Tom thought of a video he’d seen about paraplegics driving cars using hand levers to control the throttle, and asked Sara if she’d ever tried it.

‘My dad actually got one of those installed for my car,’ said Sara. ‘But I didn’t like it, and then I stopped driving altogether. I like using Uber and Lyft better.’

‘Oh,’ said Tom, and felt his voice drifting off. He briefly wondered if Sara had aversion towards driving or being in cars, since her injury was from being a passenger in a car crash, but she didn’t seem anxious or worried while he drove, which he felt relieved about. ‘Yeah, if I didn’t have to drive, I’d probably choose other means, too.’

Feeling aversion towards himself for talking about something both uncomfortable and boring, Tom pressured himself to say something new and interesting, but couldn’t think of anything.
‘Chick-fil-A,’ said Tom, as they passed a large Chick-fil-A sign. ‘Isn’t the owner of that like complete aids, or something?’

‘Yeah, I think so.’ Sara said she remembered the founder of Chick-fil-A saying that gay people were ruining the country and spreading diseases, or something like that. ‘But their waffle fries are so good.’

‘We’ll get them next time,’ said Tom. ‘Should we act really gay while ordering them?’

Sara laughed and said she wouldn’t know how to do that, but would maybe research on Youtube and try to copy people ‘acting really gay.’

‘Okay. We’ll do research,’ said Tom, grinning.

After working for two more hours, they moved to Sara’s bedroom and kissed, then had sex for around 25 minutes. Showering while seated in the bathtub, Sara sprayed Tom’s face with the showerhead, saying he was unresponsively ‘staring into the universe’ for close to a minute. Tom, feeling sleepy and mostly unaware of what Sara was talking about, spoke vaguely about experiencing severe exhaustion immediately after orgasms, in the past 8 to 12 months, and how he interpreted it as a sign of his body moving past young adulthood. When, without warning, Sara sprayed his face a second time saying ‘stop acting like a bitch,’ Tom forcefully grabbed the showerhead and sprayed Sara’s face. Sara called a truce and regained control of the showerhead. She twisted the nozzle towards a stronger setting and sprayed Tom’s neck and torso, laughing sort of maniacally.

Three days later, after his shift at Pho Sure, Tom picked up Sara to go to Dave’s house, where a barbecue-themed gathering with Terry and Alicia had been planned. On the way, Tom
saw a text from Dave that said ‘You guys can meet Francesca,’ and for most of the duration of a long red light, could not recall who Francesca was, if he’d even met her before. He sent a ‘?’ and committed to driving, as the light had turned green. ‘From China, man,’ replied Dave, causing Tom to suddenly remember and emit an audible ‘Oh.’

‘I thought she was coming next week,’ texted Tom.

Dave, in a series of complicatedly long, misspelled texts, explained how she’d been at his house for three days already, and that he was ‘pretty sure’ he texted Tom two days ago, but that he had been taking ketamine for the last week and forgot things often.

Tom wondered what to do, feeling increasingly uneasy towards introducing Sara to several of his friends at the same time as he and Sara would both be meeting Dave’s new Chinese girlfriend, a totally unknown value in terms of the upcoming social situation, whose speech and behavior he would not be able to anticipate, and therefore felt palpable discomfort and aversion towards meeting. Given this, he briefly considered removing himself and Sara from the situation by pretending to learn via text that Dave had suddenly cancelled his plans to have people over due to Pam having another nervous breakdown (to be fair, she had had two in the last two months weeks) and having to drive her to a mental hospital. But he resolved, while completing a left turn close to Dave’s house, that making up an excuse and suddenly cancelling would be worse than accepting the current circumstance and ‘dealing with it,’ as he(complicatedly feigned a new kind of mock-confidence, or at least one which felt new to him.

‘Um, so we’re also going to meet Dave’s new girlfriend,’ said Tom sort of mumbling through the corner of his mouth.

‘The one from China? I thought she’s coming this weekend.’
‘Yeah, well her flight got changed ... or something, and she’s here now. Are you … okay with it?’

‘I might act weird … a little, I don’t know.’ said Sara slowly. ‘Not at first, but I might get weirder and stop talking later on, it’s how I respond to stressful or awkward situations, sometimes.’

‘You don’t have to be nervous, there’s only going to be four people there,’ said Tom glancing at Sara, having turned on to the long street at the end of which was the four-mansion subdivision where Trevor’s house was. The security guard in the toll-booth-like building waved and opened the gate.

‘I’m not good with really rich people,’ said Sara. ‘Sometimes I get mad and, like, go off on them.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Just, hating them for being assholes. Because they represent capitalism, or something. I’m not sure.’

‘Dave’s cool, he’s not a rich asshole,’ said Tom. ‘He’s not even rich. His brother in law is rich, which makes his sister rich, too, I guess. But Dave’s only temporarily in charge of Trevor’s business while he’s in jail. When Trevor gets out Dave’s going to go back to … I’m not even sure. He doesn’t have an apartment ... or even a car, technically.’

‘Poor Dave,’ said Sara. ‘I hope Trevor stays in jail forever, in that case.’

‘Our friend Alicia will be there, too,’ said Tom while ascending the mansion’s extremely wide asphalt driveway towards the front entrance. ‘She, um, really likes cats.’

‘I once had a cat,’ said Sara, ‘but it got into a fight with another cat, and came home all torn up and bloody. It came inside the house and died on the doormat.’
‘Jesus,’ said Tom.

Tom helped lift Sara’s wheelchair up the stone steps of the house’s front entrance. They were let in the house by Martha, Trevor’s Hispanic housekeeper. Terry was watching TV with Alicia and Francesca. Tom introduced Sara to them, and himself to Francesca.

‘Hi, my name is Mei-lin. But you can call me Francesca,’ Francesca said, pronouncing ‘Francesca’ with substantial difficulty, he felt, almost as though she had recently decided to be called that.

‘Franki for short,’ said Terry.

‘Yes, Franki is easier, and I like it, too,’ said Franki smiling.

Tom asked where Dave was. Terry said he wasn’t sure, vaguely pointed towards the kitchen.

‘I’m going to find Dave,’ Tom told Sara and walked the long hallway to the kitchen.

‘Did you eat all the hot Cheetos,’ said an out-of-view Dave, rummaging inside the walk-in pantry, as Tom entered the kitchen.

‘Do you have any Whiteout Mountain Dew left,’ said Tom announcing his presence while searching the drink drawer of the refrigerator.

‘Tom, oh shit, I didn’t know you were already here,’ said Dave, still inside the pantry. ‘I thought you were Terry. He ate all my hot Cheetos again, I had like three fucking bags.’

‘We can get more,’ said Tom, opening a regular Mountain Dew, feeling slightly unsatisfied. Tom said Sara was hanging out with Alicia and Franki in the living room, that they seemed to be ‘getting along.’

Dave emerged from the pantry holding a large bag of Chex Mix and Ziploc bag of pills.
‘There’s bags of these all over the house. The brown ones are ketamine, I think. I took some earlier. Do you want some?’

‘Um, maybe later,’ said Tom.

Dave opened a large bag of Chex mix with his teeth and poured it into a plastic bowl, spilling a lot of it on the floor. He stared at the Chex mix on the floor then ate from the bowl.

‘Shit, whatever,’ he said. ‘Martha’ll take care of it. She actually gets mad when I try to clean.’

Tom nodded and then commented on Franki, how she seemed really energetic and not jet-lagged at all, knowing that he suffered jet lag for at least a week, it seemed, whenever he flew to or from Korea.

‘Franki doesn’t get jet lag,’ said Dave, ‘how crazy is that?’

‘That’s impressive,’ said Tom uncertainly. He remembered article he’d read that asserted jet lag was an urban myth and didn’t really exist, and that sitting in planes just made people tired, in addition to overworking the immune system with extra germs and pathogens that enter the body during the flight.

‘No, sorry,’ said Dave nonsequiturly a few seconds later, jerking his head in a sudden-seeming way. ‘I was just thinking of something. There’s this Pizza King convention in LA next week. Trevor wants me to go, but I told him no fucking way. I fucking hate L.A.’

‘It’s just too crowded there,’ said Tom, thinking of a probable reason to hate an entire city.

‘Do you want to go instead of me? Its at this really nice hotel.’

‘I don’t want to go to Los Angeles,’ said Tom, and said he was going to the living then began moving. Dave followed several seconds later, accelerating to catch up to him. His hands were trembling slightly, Tom noticed, supporting the bowl of Chex Mix. Dave answered a call
from Trevor’s lawyer and began talking, turned back and said he would meet them in the living room afterwards.

Tom re-entered the living room to find everyone watching ‘Hitler Girl’ videos on Youtube (a 9 or 10 year old British Youtuber claiming to be a ‘proud Neo-Nazi’ and KKK-supporter). He assumed, with a sensation of discomfort and slight panic, that Sara has facilitated their communal viewing of the video, knowing her penchant for so-called ‘cringecore’ channels on Youtube. Franki watched the screen in way seeming ‘dog-like,’ Tom felt, with a confused if mildly-concerned facial expression.

‘Niggers in America are so stupid that all they can do is use welfare and shoot each other, and niggers in Africa are so stupid they can’t even build schools, or feed themselves, so they starve to death like they deserve to,’ said the girl in the video.

‘Someone is definitely paying her to say these things,’ said Alicia while laughing.

Feeling the urge to intervene and get them to watch something else, Tom tried to think of another Youtube channel to play, but couldn’t, for some reason, think of anything else to watch.

‘Do you think this might be too fucked up for Franki?’ Tom whispered to Sara. ‘She’s been in America for less than a week, I think.’

‘There’s so much more terrible shit in China,’ whispered Sara. ‘Like, they harvest organs from political prisoners … without anesthesia.’

‘Jesus. Don’t say that to Franki, okay? Don’t talk about things that happen in China. Or things that people think happens in China.’

‘Okay, okay,’ said Sara sounding annoyed. The Hitler Girl video ended and Sara took the remote and changed the TV to Comedy Central, where a long commercial about squeezable yogurt played.
Tom, feeling that Sara and Alicia were talking too much about themselves, sort of deliberately directed attention towards Franki by asking her ‘what she did’ in China. ‘Crab hostess,’ replied Franki, causing Tom to apprehensively nod then think about Hot N’ Juicy, a Vietnamese-owned chain restaurant were assorted shellfish, steamed and mixed with spices, were served in plastic bags. Tom was going to say something about Hot N’ Juicy, maybe even suggesting that they go eat there tonight, knowing Dave also liked Hot N’ Juicy--when Tom abruptly realized Franki had almost certainly meant to say ‘club hostess’ and not crab hostess, as she talked about having sung karaoke with mostly male clientele, sometimes sitting on their lap and pouring drinks. Franki elaborated, without prompting but, as if wanting to talk about this subject rather than a more uncomfortable one, such as circumstances leading to her becoming a mail-order Chinese girlfriend--about being ‘beat up’ by a rowdy customer late one night, who made her sing the same song repeatedly until her throat hurt; and when she tried to leave, tore her skirt off and slapped her repeatedly, forcing her to continue singing. The manager of the club ignored her pleas since the man was a regular customer. Eventually Franki had managed to text a friend to call the police, and was freed from the locked karaoke booth, but then was fired from her job.

‘What an asshole, you must’ve been scared,’ said Alicia, who’d moved close to Franki and had begun caressing her back as if she were a traumatized or abused cat. ‘We’re glad you’re here now.’ Alicia said she and Terry both grew up with Dave, that he was ‘really fucking dumb sometimes’ but not violent at all, and added, after moments of thoughtful-seeming hesitation, that if he ever hurt her, she would ‘stab him in the balls.’ A few seconds later Dave re-entered the living room, without the bowl of Chex Mix but holding a Tournament Edition Jenga (about 1.5 times the height of a regular Jenga), whose blocks were disarrayed within the box and was
apparently also missing the plastic alignment tool, resulting in an extremely long setup time. When the slightly misshapen Jenga tower fell on Terry’s turn, five minutes into the game--when he repeatedly tried to take out a ‘hard’ block, seemingly diffidently ignoring others’ urging him to pick ‘any other block’--everyone sort of simultaneously lost interest in Jenga and began talking about what else they could do. Franki made a crackling sound with her neck by turning it swiftly, and commented on the sky outside the large bay windows seemed very clear and that the air smelled pleasant in Berkley, much more than in Beijing. She asked if there was a place to go hiking or camping nearby.

‘There has to be somewhere …’ said Tom, who couldn’t remember the last time he’d gone hiking or camping, with the words elongated.

‘Tilden, man. Let’s go to Tilden Park this weekend,’ said Dave enthusiastically, which surprised Tom, as he knew Dave was very, almost exclusively ‘indoorsy,’ uninclined to almost all outdoor activities, and held a strong general aversion, as did he, towards not being inside a climate-controlled building. Despite this, everyone else--Sara, Alicia, Terry, Franki--agreed to go, and discussed possible activities they could do at Tilden Park.

Saturday afternoon, reclined beside Sara in the third row of Trevor’s larger SUV, a Tahoe, Tom projected his voice toward the front of the car and requested more cannabis-infused gummy bears, which they all except Franki had shared before departing. Dave answered, above ‘Spiderwebs’ by No Doubt playing a loud volume, that they were somewhere in his backpack in the trunk, and therefore currently inaccessible. Alicia, seated in the middle row with Terry and Darnell, handed him two pieces of grapefruit gum, which Tom consciously registered as having lost its flavor after ten seconds of chewing, at which point he felt more acutely bored and stuffy--
as though, he complicatedly felt, a depressed middle-schooler on a 12-hour bus ride to Washington, DC might feel—with his forearm gently pressed by the head of an asleep and gently snoring Sara. While partially listening to Alicia tell Franki about the strange behavior of one of her cats which, she claimed, had begun ‘barking’ after eating expired canned tuna, Tom became increasingly aware of himself wanting to ‘do something’ about his irritated mod instead of passively waiting for it to subside, knowing they were still one hour away from Tilden. His mood slightly improved upon changing the Pandora station on his iPhone from ‘Best Electronic Music’ to ‘Relaxing Classical,’ and drinking from a bottle of Mountain Dew. The car passed by a billboard which read, simply, ‘Budweiser,’ then shortly afterward, three consecutive, identical McDonalds billboards that said ‘McRib is coming ….’

‘I want to open a food truck,’ said Tom absentmindedly, for maybe the second time during the car ride, reprising a previous conversation pertaining to Dave’s idea of opening a pizza food truck. When no one, not even Dave, responded, Tom resumed steadily staring out his window with unfocused eyes, and did not look away when the car entered a long tunnel, and instead more intensely focused his vision on the slightly hypnotic, laser-like procession of orange reflective lights lining the tunnel wall. Once out of the tunnel he finally lay his head back on the headrest and slept for the remainder of the drive to the park.

At one of many designated picnic sites at Tilden Nature Area, a grassy meadow-like expanse shaded by several tall pine trees, Tom helped unload food from the trunk of the car. Afterwards he helped prepare bratwurst, hot dogs and hamburgers for grilling. The public-use grill produced a ‘fireball’ when lit by Terry, slightly singing his hair, owing to Dave having squirted large amounts of lighter fluid on the coals despite Tom having squirted some, and telling him so, repeatedly reassuring him he was ‘an expert.’ The smell of the chemical-charcoal fire
caused Tom to slightly step away but then recall his experience, the summer of 8th grade, of being sent by his parents to tennis camp near Portland, at the urging of Tom’s middle school counselor who’d advised his parents it would help address his ‘video game addiction’ and cause him to become more social and assist in his ‘transition’ to high school. At one of two campwide dances Tom, succumbing to peer pressure, drank a cup of vodka and later ‘grinded’ with a girl who said she was a lesbian when Tom attempted to kiss her--but whom, later that night, Tom saw ‘making out’ with another boy while swaying her body to rap music.

After eating a bratwurst with spicy mustard and diced onions, Tom’s mood substantially improved and he noticed himself consciously appreciating that he was outdoors, surrounded by trees and grass with no buildings or cars in sight, secluded within nature with people he enjoyed interacting with. While the group discussed their plans for the rest of the afternoon, Dave suggested fishing at the creek, referencing two fishing pole starter kits purchased at Walmart. Alicia said she wanted to go to the petting zoo, on the other side of the park, which according to her phone featured sheep, mules, alpaca, and several small horses. ‘Alpaca,’ said Tom. ‘I don’t know what that looks like.’ Alicia showed a picture of an alpaca on her phone to Tom, who replied that it looked like a ‘desert camel’ without much interest, despite never having seen a camel in person, either. While eating ketchup flavored chips Dave had purchased from the Canadian Amazon, it became apparent from slack postures and yawning that everyone had food coma or else was tired from the drive, and agreed they should rest for a while.

‘Look what I brought,’ said Alicia around 30 minutes later, holding up psychedelic mushrooms in a Ziploc bag. ‘We should all take some.’

‘Naw, shrooms fuck me up. Y’all go ahead,’ said Darnell, despite being the person who acquired the shrooms for Alicia, from an unknown source.
‘They look like rotten enoki mushrooms,’ said Tom. Alicia said that’s what they’re supposed to look like.

They relocated to the edge of a more densely forested area after seeing a patrolling park ranger on a ‘tricycle-like,’ thought Tom, motorcycle. Alicia divided the mushrooms on a paper plate. Tom took the smallest portion, hesitantly, which almost resembled a ‘smudge’ rather than a mushroom, on his index finger, and ingested it while noting its pungent dirt-like flavor. He felt a medium level nervousness, around five minutes later, which he mitigated by calmly staring at a streak-like section of darker rock within an otherwise white stone near a large tree. After 15 minutes, Tom repeatedly said ‘nothing’s happening’ and felt comforted, if a little disappointed, by Dave and Alicia who said they felt the same. The three of them spread out in the grass to throw a yellow frisbee.

‘I already threw it,’ Tom said at some point, confused as to who had the frisbee, or where it had gone, when he abruptly realized the frisbee was in his hand. ‘Whoa, I can’t feel my hand, or something,’ he said feeling perplexed and worried. Tom threw the frisbee back at Dave, then sort of ‘collapsed’ on the grass in a dizzying, skull-heavy manner. Tom rolled on his back and gazed at the sky, and gradually felt earnestly confused as to why there were no stars.

‘I can’t see any stars, where … are they?’ he said aloud. Tom heard distant-seeming laughter but didn’t turn his head to see who was laughing, or even to discern what was funny, which he couldn’t. He pondered this for what seemed to be at least five minutes. ‘I think the mushrooms told my brain to “look for stars,” I think,’ he sort of yelled. ‘Why am I feeling like this? I took the smallest … thing, not even a whole mushroom.’
‘Psilocybin can be anywhere in the plant,’ said a voice Tom assumed to Alicia’s. ‘Some parts are more concentrated than others. The part you got must’ve had the most psilocybin in it. We’re all, like, fine.’

‘This feels like such bad luck,’ said Tom. ‘I don’t feel … good … at all.’

‘Don’t think like that,’ said Alicia. ‘Just think positive thoughts, if you think positive thoughts then the experience can turn around.’

Tom gradually attempted to calm his racing heartbeat and severely blurred-seeming vision by gazing at the sky again, this time training his eyes on one cloud, directly above his head, which seemed very large and furry. ‘White fur,’ he thought. He gradually felt more relaxed. Some time later, he realized that the clouds were now moving much quicker than before, systematically pulling apart and rearranging themselves into a sort of language—not letters or words, but nonetheless seeming extremely meaningful—whose message he directly intuited and felt he understood, using his body: that, his mind and body, empowered by psilocybin, was now potently ‘connected to the universe’ in a total effort resembling direct communication through clouds and sky to a greater, omnipresent network, without need or want for language or mediation.

‘I can feel the clouds,’ said Tom quietly. He continued watching the clouds and saw them form, newly, a kind of ‘cloud mosaic,’ an intensifying process in which more and more clouds joined the middle; they would lose their individual shape and be smushed and absorbed into the ‘central mass’ which Tom knew interiorally as the ‘megacloud.’ ‘The megacloud is so good,’ he thought, intuiting that, by joining the megacloud, individual clouds became part of a meaningful mass and took on meaning they didn't have before. He also noticed clouds that remained antisocially off to the side, not connecting with other clouds, and intuited that they
seemed depressed. ‘I have to be like a cloud in the middle,’ Tom intuited as if being directly messaged by the newly formed megacloud. ‘I have been living my life all wrong up to this point,’ he thought, then saw an ‘antisocial’ cloud suddenly move across the sky and join the megacloud, causing it to pulsate with rainbow light upon joining. Tom watched raptly thinking ‘it’s not too late … I can change my life’ while vaguely remembering lines from the Rilke poem (remembered only as ‘Something … Something … You must change your life.’) Tom continued to enjoy the rainbow lightshow until, a vague amount of time later, he realized the clouds had mostly returned to normal, and gradually realized that the sky had returned to normal.

Tom sat up on the grass and turned his head to look at the others, who sat on a picnic blanket, eating snacks and talking.

‘We were worried about you so we couldn’t go do anything,’ said Sara.

‘Jesus. I’m really sorry,’ said Tom.

‘We’ve been waiting for two hours … for you to stop tripping balls,’ said Dave. ‘Are you still tripping balls?’

‘Um, I think I’m okay now. Were you really waiting for two hours?’

‘Yeah,’ said Alicia.

‘Jesus. What was I … doing? I was just lying there … right?’

‘Fuck no,’ said Dave finishing a Monster. ‘You were, like, totally fucked up. You were making snow angels on the grass. Then it looked like you were dancing, while lying down.’

‘I wasn’t dancing,’ said Tom feeling embarrassed. He drank water then slowly began eating chunks of watermelon from a deli container.

They relocated to the river, where Tom fished with Dave and Darnell, upstream from where the other were swimming in the gently moving water. Darnell caught a trout and said he
would release it, despite Dave saying ‘I’m eating this bitch.’ Darnell’s reel became stuck and he
couldn’t feel the trout in anymore, leaving the fish to spin while suspended in air, and he lifted
the rod higher to prevent Dave, who had abandoned his own rod and aggressively waded into the
water to grab the trout. ‘The fuck’s the matter with you,’ said Darnell, maneuvering the trout
away from Dave while uncontrollably laughing. The trout fell off the hook and fell back in the
water. ‘Fuck,’ said Dave laughing. ‘I wanted to bite the fish like Gollum and make it my
Facebook picture.’

‘That’s some white boy crazy shit,’ said Darnell. ‘Here, let me catch another one for
you.’

Tom’s attention was engaged by Sara, who said ‘Look!’ while pointing at Franki, who
was in the river treading water against the current. When prompted by Sara to ‘go up,’ Franki
easily swam up the river, almost to where Dave and Darnell were fishing. ‘How do you swim so
well,’ shouted Alicia, who struggled to tread without moving backwards. Franki said she swam
a lot when she was younger, sometimes in the ocean. ‘Just relax,’ said Franki. ‘Just relax and
you swim much better.’

‘I’m trying,’ said Alicia, as she drifted further downstream, towards a bored but tranquil-
seeming Terry with his feet in the water, ready with a pineapple-shaped pool float.

‘You should come in the water,’ said Sara, who sat in a shallow, sandy area of the
riverbed with the water up to her stomach.

‘I’m okay,’ said Tom standing in the water in his sandals, knowing his shorts would take
a long time to dry if he got them wet. ‘I’m glad you’re enjoying it.

‘Just … sit down,’ said Sara, extending her hand towards Tom. ‘Don’t be a pussy. Your
clothes will dry quick.’
‘I don’t want to get wet,’ said Tom. ‘This is good enough for me.’

‘Where’s you phone?’ asked Sara. ‘I want to know what time it is.’

‘My phone’s in the picnic bag. I’ll go get it.’

‘No. Help me up,’ said Sara reaching out to Tom. ‘I need to get up now.’

Tom took Sara’s hands in his and began pulling when, all of sudden, Sara pulled him forcefully sideways, causing him to fall in the water.

‘Oh my god,’ said Tom laughing, his glasses blurred by water. ‘Jesus.’

‘Isn’t it nice?’ said Sara once Tom removed his T shirt and sat next to her.

‘Yeah, I guess,’ said Tom, ‘But my clothes will take like three years to dry. I have nothing else to wear.’

‘I brought extra clothes you could wear,’ said Dave distractedly, who’d begun fishing nearby them. ‘Fuck, tell me if you see a fish. I need to catch one. I don’t care if we have to camp out here for a week.’

‘See? You have nothing to worry about,’ said Sara and kissed him on the cheek.

The following Friday evening at Pho Sure, Tom served three customers using, he felt, an extremely monotone voice then returned to working on things on his Macbook. He looked outside to the softly raining street and saw people walking with slightly depressed expressions on their faces. Technology and contemporary life has caused the resting expression of humans to seem depressed and negative-seeming, he thought, and soon feeling too restless to work on his novel, opened an ebook about Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for anxiety and began reading from a bookmarked page. Tom drove after work to Sara’s apartment, where he slept about two days a week and had recently begun storing a tub of clothes at, and found an uncharacteristically
unresponsive Sara, lying on the couch and staring at her phone. Tom committed to help fix her mood to be more positive, consciously noting he would have to be careful to not exacerbate her bad mood. Tom was about to ask what was wrong, Sara said a ‘stupid’ Amazon package wasn’t delivered when it was supposed to be, and then began talking about her parents in a complaining tone, with whom she’d recently finished talking to on the phone. She told them that she’d declined with their invitation to visit them during Easter weekend.

Tom dizzyingly tried to ‘rank’ these things in order, with the sensation of an SAT paragraph comprehension question. ‘Read the following statements carefully. Then order the statements, from most significant to least significant, in terms of their impact on Sara’s negative mood today.’

A. Her stepmother called her cellular phone.
B. An expected Amazon.com package did not arrive on time.
C. She does not want to travel for Easter.
D. She has a general resentment towards her parents.

‘I hate my parents,’ said Sara.

‘Do you actually … hate them. I mean, they give you money every month, right?’ asked Tom, as he discerned an increasingly teenager-like aspect in Sara’s speech and behavior, not unlike the atmosphere of a Nirvana song--as if temporarily but earnestly regressing to an earlier, more affected emotional state, to ‘prove a point’ to herself, or Tom, or both.

‘I hate them for … I don’t know … everything,’ said Sara. ‘I could even say, well, that it’s their fault I’m alive, like this, right now … when they should have just …’

‘What?’ said Tom.

‘Unplugged … the life support machine while I was in my coma.’
‘How long were you in a coma?’

‘Three days,’ said Sara.

‘That doesn’t um, seem … like a long time,’ said Tom uneasily, somehow complicatedly regretting what he said, or the basic fact of talking about what he was talking about now.

‘But they should’ve just done it. Unplugged the machine and let me die.’

‘Jesus,’ said Tom, ‘You don’t mean that.’

‘But I do mean it. I should have died, but I didn’t. Like, in Europe they don’t even keep you alive in those--my--situations. It’s considered cruel and inhumane to keep someone in a coma alive for more than 24 hours, and they make you pay a big fine for it. So they should have let me go. But instead I was unlucky … and have to put up with this fucked up body for the rest of my life.’

Tom stared with unfocused eyes at a place on the wall where a previous tenant had hung a picture, or something, with the screws still in the wall. A watery sheen had come over his eyes, but he didn’t want to draw attention by rubbing them. ‘I don’t know what to say,’ he said carefully. ‘I want to say something comforting but … I feel it would come off as insincere … or, as if I understand how you feel, which I don’t … and can’t ever, probably, or something.’

‘You don’t have to say anything,’ said Sara.

‘But I’m glad … that you’re, um … alive.’

‘I don’t …’ Sara began to say, but interrupted herself by laughing suddenly. ‘I’m sure it would be better for me not to be alive. I can’t … explain the feeling exactly. But at the same time, I’m not suicidal. I don’t think I’m the type of person who kills themselves, ever.’

‘That’s good,’ said Tom focusing on the I’m not suicidal portion of what Sara said. He went into the kitchen and made a vegan Caesar salad according to a recipe from Vice Magazine,
involving cashew butter and tofu for the dressing, and nutritional yeast flakes instead of parmesan cheese. Sara said the salad was good and they ate all of it together, watching *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* on Netflix. When they finished eating, Sara moved to an upright position on the sofa and faced Tom, who was working on his Macbook, hugged him and said, unexpectedly, ‘Thank you.’

During his work shift the next day, Tom received several Down’s Syndrome memes from Dave, and because he was busy creating carrot spirals, texted back ‘lol.’ Upon viewing the palindromic simplicity of his response, he imagined what it would be like to live in a society where one-word written responses were not only socially acceptable but earnestly preferred by everyone, in all situations and levels of acquaintance, and would never lead to passive-aggressive sentiments being transmitted or perceived between correspondents. This highly advanced society would, Tom imagined, eventually further simplify intrapersonal communication so that only one keystroke was required as a response—somewhat like an emoji—but one capable of expressive the full breadth of emotions they felt and wanted to outwardly convey. ‘Supreme Emoji characters used in place of language by highly-advanced technological society,’ Tom wrote in Notes, and looked forward to developing the thought more—perhaps into a flash fiction story—when he finished prepping vegetables and made himself a salad for lunch.

Around 2pm, Jon, a former employee of Pho Sure, appeared in the restaurant while Tom was looking at the internet and eating stir fried noodles. He asked if Danny was here; Tom said he was the only one working. Standing in place, Jon performed an exaggerated gesture of stretching and yawning at the same time, then announced, ‘I’m so high right now.’ He stood at the counter and asked Tom to make him a cheeseburger roll, saying he’d tip $10. Tom walked
behind the counter, from where in his peripheral vision saw Jon lower a $10 bill into the jar, and
lift out a $5 bill with the $10 bill he was still holding onto.

‘You just put money in the jar then took more money out,’ said Tom.

‘I’m going to the dispensary later,’ said Jon distractedly. His eyes were bloodshot and,
although he was sort of statically grinning, seemed very sad, as if he might start crying. Tom
recalled that Jon’s mother was dying or was already dead, as she had some kind of cancer, he
knew, from previous conversations several months ago when they were co-workers.

‘Nah, forget about it. I’ll make it myself.’ Jon walked behind the counter and put on
gloves. He took a nori sheet and spread to much rice on the wrong side while humming a song
Tom didn’t know. After resuming work on his Macbook for 15 minutes, Tom looked over and
saw Jon motionlessly staring at the nori sheet which was the same except for having, it now
seemed, even more rice lumped on it than before.

‘You get the beef strips, cream cheese, crab stick and green onion,’ said Tom. ‘You
should take off some rice.’

‘My mom … died,’ said Jon. The refrigerator behind him turned on, emitting a dull,
static buzz.

‘I’m sorry,’ said Tom.

Jon was strangely unresponsive for several seconds, then said, ‘Did you just ask me
something?’

‘Huh? I said … I’m sorry.’

‘For what?’

‘Your mom. You said … your mom … um, died.’

‘No I didn’t,’ said Jon, laughing. ‘… did I?’
‘Yes, you did. Just now.’

‘Really?’ Jon scratched his head. ‘I was definitely thinking … about my mom. She’s going to die, you know.’

‘You told me … before. I’m sorry.’

‘The doctor said four months from now, three months ago … last year. She’s not going to celebrate her 45th birthday.’

‘I can finish your roll for you,’ said Tom.

‘Thank you. Oh my god,’ said Jon sounding suddenly relieved. He put his hands together and bowed like someone would in a karate movie. ‘I don’t remember any of this shit.’ He performed what Tom considered his ‘Seth Rogen’ laugh, which made Tom laugh.

Tom removed 75% of the rice from Jon’s roll, and added ingredients to make a cheeseburger roll. As he turned the battered roll in the deep fryer, Tom saw Jon standing in front of the register pressing buttons, causing it to beep repeatedly, locking them automatically system for 15 minutes.

Tom put the roll in a container and gave it to Jon, who thanked him and went to the fridge and removed an orange Fanta; he walked towards the entrance but then returned, put back the orange Fanta and took a grape Fanta instead, then left Pho Sure. Outside, Tom saw Jon motion to a woman smoking on the sidewalk who, after a long hesitation, gave him a cigarette which he tucked in his ear as he walked away, out of view. Tom straightened drinks in the fridge, scooped crumbs in the fryer and wiped the cutting board; he took half a 30mg Adderall and resumed working on his Macbook.

Near closing time around four hours later, Tom felt increasingly incapacitated by a worsening, nauseating migraine alongside shortness of breath, which he attributed to an
abnormally poignant crash from Adderall taken hours earlier. Tom took 1mg of Xanax then went in the bathroom and flushed the five or six remaining Adderall in his pillcase, and felt instantly a little better. He managed to finish cleaning the rest of the prep table and things in the dishtank in a state of highly compromised functioning similar, he imagined, to a recovering heroin addict, referencing an article he’d read on the internet--maybe on Wikipedia--that at some point in the 1970s, upwards of 50% of dishwashers in New York City were recovering heroin or methadone addicts, due to a ‘successful’ but apparently short-lived cooperation between halfway houses and restaurant owners.

At Sara’s house later that night, Tom felt increasingly emotionally desperate, maybe due to the Xanax wearing off, while inattentively watching Game of Thrones--or perhaps inattentively watching Sara watch Game of Thrones--a show in which a major character was killed ‘in every episode,’ it seemed to him from inconsistent viewings. When an episode ended, Tom rubbed his face into Sara’s chest saying ‘I feel so fucked’ several times, whereupon, after about the third or fourth time, he became gradually aware of himself whining to Sara from a third-person, omniscient perspective. As the camera ‘zoomed out,’ Tom slowly realized this is what he did with every girlfriend he has ever had: that, after an initial period of feigning a standard of maturity and responsibility that a similarly-aged person would have, he would invariably relapse to his ‘real’ personality, one characterized by a willingness to behave in an extremely childlike manner at least once every three weeks, blaming others and not taking responsibility for anything, moreover nonchalantly expecting to be comforted by the other person, who at first would indulge him but later increasingly resent him, straining the relationship and influencing Tom to relapse more often and more intensely, exacerbating the inevitable breakup. Weakly visualizing a time-lapse montage of their relationship projected onto
an offwhite screen in a higher, unseen dimension, where it was judged like a submission at a independent film festival, Tom removed his face from Sara’s chest, where she had been gently petting his head, and sat upright.

‘I’m sorry for whining,’ he said.

‘It’s okay,’ said Sara. ‘You listen when I whine.’

‘I shouldn’t whine. All my life …’ Tom said vaguely, and his voice trailed off.

Around 30 minutes later, Tom ordered more Adderall from an online Indian pharmacy using bitcoin, and also ordered Xanax which was recently restocked. On Reddit he researched ways to mitigate side effects of Adderall, copy-and-pasting ‘drink coconut water while coming off’ and ‘take vitamin E every other day’ to a new Google document entitled ‘Make Adderall Great Again.’ When he heard the opening music of *Game of Thrones* around an hour later, Tom absentmindedly asked, ‘Which season are you on?’ Noticing that Sara was asleep on the other end of the couch, he took a blanket from the armchair and laid it on Sara’s curled body.

In the bulk foods section of Whole Foods the next afternoon, where the five of them--Dave, Franki, Terry, Tom, Sara--decided to buy food after watching Star Wars at an IMAX theater, Tom struggled to keep pace with Dave, who seemed to be hyperactively jogging, almost running, down the aisle. Dave grabbed a handful of organic sour gummy bears and gave some to Tom, who at first refused, citing the sign that read ‘PLEASE NO SAMPLING,’ which Dave dismissed and said ‘Dude, I spend like $300 dollars every time I come here.’ Tom wandered to the next aisle and looked at a box of Annie’s Organic ‘Rabbit and Friends’ white cheddar mac n’ cheese for what seemed like a long time, perhaps owing to the kicking in of a large cannabis-infused chocolate consumed thirty minutes prior, before catching up with Sara in the next aisle.
Not finding Sara in the next aisle, he sort of aimlessly ‘jogged’ around Whole Foods looking for her—or Dave or Franki. He bumped into several people and carts and each time apologized, grinning widely at them. Tom found Sara and Dave filling aluminum containers with things in the prepared food buffet. Sara slowly moved down the buffet, seeming to study each item closely before using tongs to pick up one unit of that food, with a nearly scientific-seeming accuracy, placing it in her container. In contrast, Dave seemed to piling or shoving food into his containers very haphazardly, sometimes dropping food on the floor. Franki, picking up Dave’s droppings using brown napkins, displayed a statically worried, nearly parental expression caused, thought Tom, by being the only person who hadn’t ingested potent marijuana-infused edibles before going to Whole Foods. Tom looked at the two packages of organic blueberry fruit leather in his hand—for about 10 seconds not realizing what they were or why he was holding them—before recognizing them and remembering, dimly but in an inexplicably moving way—like recalling a memory from a previous life—that he had planned to buy organic blueberry fruit leather at Whole Food prior to going there.

‘Are you getting anything?’ asked Sara.

‘I’m not sure, what … do they have,’ said Tom. ‘Is it just me, or are the edibles we took … like, very strong?’

‘Um,’ said Sara and laughed loudly. ‘Strong … Yeah, they’re good, I guess.’

There was a sudden splat sound; Dave had dropped his container on the floor.

‘Is that a dead baby,’ said Tom. ‘It looks like an aborted baby.’

‘You killed your … food baby,’ said Sara, pointing at the orange-red-ish mound of food, which looked like thai curry with blobs of other things in it.
Franki threw way Dave’s container and ‘scooped’ up the slimy saucy mess back into the container. Someone with a mop arrived and began cleaning, a Caucasian male with dreadlocks who did not seem upset or judgmental.

‘The Walmart difference,’ said Tom. ‘I mean, the Whole Foods difference.’

‘This is how Whole Foods is different from Walmart … Um, the workers smile while cleaning up dropped food,’ said Sara, loud enough for the person with the mop to hear her.

At the checkout they put all their items on the conveyor belt, a seemingly unending, stream-of-consciousness line of food and non-food items. Dave tried several times to hand his credit card to the cashier, despite the cashier telling him to insert his card in the pinpad in front of him; finally the cashier took Dave’s card and did it for him. Franki drove them safely (albeit illegally, since her learner’s permit was still in the mail) to pick up Terry, and then back to Dave’s house.

Tom sat enjoying many different types of food in a feast-style meal in the living room. When the conversation focused on, for some reason, drug use among highschool students, with everyone seeming to unanimously agree that highschoolers now used more and more varieties of drugs than any generation of highschoolers before them, Tom confidently said it was because highschoolers ‘needed’ drugs now more than ever, and tried to think of things to support this assertion, but couldn’t think of anything. Terry sort of changed the subject by asking Franki what middle school and highschool was like in China.

Franki said schools in China were probably more strict than in America, but that it depended on the teacher. She spoke of having had a few ‘mean’ teachers, including ones who punished students by hitting them with a bamboo rod; that she was once struck on the head with
one during a math class and noticed, minutes later, blood trickling down her face, although she
did not experience pain.

‘Did it make you want to change schools,’ asked Tom.

Franki shook her head and said she forgot about it quickly.

‘That sounds really fucked up, though,’ said Sara.

‘At least no one gets shot in Chinese highschools,’ said Terry, in reference to a school
shooting last year in the highschool he and Dave went to, which had received wide media
coverage. ‘Unlike ones here.’

‘Oh shit, I almost forgot about that,’ said Dave, who contemplatively paused then began
talking more about school shootings, about their frequency and severity in a tone seeming,
weirdly, almost praising or supportive of the phenomenon, as if the increasing incidence of
school shootings were some kind of positive development in society.

‘It don’t happen in China,’ said Franki. ‘People don’t have guns.’ She said she felt
confused as to why the American government continued to allow people to have guns, when they
kept being used in school shootings.

‘Because this country is terrible,’ said Terry, laughing. ‘People are free to make … really
bad decisions.’

‘It’s because the people who wrote the constitution made a mistake,’ said Tom. ‘They
wrote “The Right to Bear Arms” when it should have said “The Right to Bear single-shot
muskets.”

Franki’s confused facial expression resolved to a nervous grin as she moved around a
samosa on her plate. ‘Do you own gun, Dave?’ she asked in a slow, careful -sounding voice.
Tom watched as her expression changed from worried to relieved when Dave said he didn’t, then to very worried when Dave said, grinning, ‘Should we buy one?’

‘Don’t say things like that,’ said Sara, ‘You’re scaring Franki.’

‘Fine, I won’t buy a gun,’ said Dave sounding complicatedly disappointed.

Franki talked about views on guns in China, elaborating on how Chinese people believed ‘most’ Americans owned guns, and that ‘almost all’ black Americans owned guns.

‘Really. Is that what people think in China,’ asked Sara.

‘I don’t,’ said Franki, shaking her head, ‘but maybe people do. It is this misconcept.’

Tom began to say something about the popularity of Hollywood action movies in China, including vaguely about the recent increase in censorship by the Chinese government of American movies. He cited Iron Man 3 as an example of a movie with a completely separate Chinese release, in which numerous references to China and North Korea were simply removed from the script, he knew from watching a documentary on Youtube about Chinese-Hollywood censorship.

‘I like Iron Man 3,’ said Franki, seeming to have stopped listening to Tom for about a minute, looking at her phone.

‘Fine, I won’t get a gun!’ blurted Dave nonsequiturly, who had for the last five minutes been uncharacteristically quiet and contemplative.

Franki, who had apparently visited the nearby public library after shopping the previous afternoon, said she was surprised by how large it was and how empty it was, and that libraries in China were always full of people and uncomfortable to be inside.

‘I can’t remember the last time I was in a library,’ said Tom.

‘Me either,’ said Sara. ‘Even in college I just always did work in my apartment.’
‘Many things are so nice here,’ said Franki, smiling and seeming genuinely grateful for everything she noticed about her surroundings, affecting Tom to smile, too, but also wonder about circumstances which could motivate a person to abandon all familiar aspects of one’s life to live with a stranger in another country. While holding a half-eaten samosa in one hand and looking out at the dusty-looking sunset outside, he imagined a similar flight from his own life—all the while feeling incapable of such a courageous feat—and concluded that Franki, despite her small body and quiet voice, was probably the bravest person currently lounging in the darkening living room.

In Sara’s apartment later that night, Tom helped Sara compose tweets to promote her T-shirt business, which mainly ended up taking the form of a neck-down picture of Tom wearing the shirt, along with a caption involving the name of the product with a superfluous nonsequitur referring to the wearer. ‘Donut T-shirt on non-vegan skateboarder’ was one of them. ‘Suck a Dick T-shirt’ on a non-skateboarding vegan’ read another.

‘Are we alienating skateboarders and vegans by doing this,’ said Tom.

‘No, it’s okay, I think,’ said Sara. ‘We’re just putting nonsequiturs on all the tweets. Mostly just to stand out from all the other people promoting clothes on Twitter. I feel like skateboarding and vegan are inherently funny things. Like, you can say anything is skateboarding or being vegan, or the opposite of that, and it sounds funny. Skateboarder facial expression, mon-vegan rollercoaster, vegan iPhone case.’

‘That is funny,’ said Tom, and visualized someone making a video of walking around the mall and repeatedly asking if an item--tote bag, coffee maker, iPhone case--was vegan, and
repeatedly express astonishment regardless of how they answered. He told Sara about the video idea.

‘I want to go to the butcher counter of Whole Foods and point and different meats and ask if it’s vegan,’ said Sara. ‘How many times will it take before they stop responding or, like, do something about it.’

‘In the same video I’ll go to the same counter and repeatedly buy extremely small portions of meats,’ said Tom, ‘while behaving extremely passive-aggressively. Like, “I’ll have half an ounce of this murdered cow,” “I’ll have half an ounce of this murdered chicken.” Then I’ll abandon my full basket in the produce section and exit the store.’

‘It sounds like a really good plan,’ said Sara. ‘I’m writing that in my to-do list.’

At work a few days later, Tom noticed an uncharacteristically active Amrak organizing the storage space in the back of the restaurant, instead of watching Korean dramas. ‘Danny had another party,’ said Tom, putting on pink rubber gloves before a sinkful of dishes and glasses.

‘You didn’t come,’ said Amrak quietly, crouched and brushing onion skins into a dustpan.

‘Yeah,’ said Tom. ‘I was watching a movie with my girlfriend.’

‘Oh, that’s good.’

‘Did you guys do anything special?’

‘Not really,’ said Amrak. ‘There was a cake … for my going-away party.’

‘Huh?’ Tom turned off the faucet.

‘I’m going to go away. Danny didn’t tell you?’
‘No, he just texted that he’s having a party. And when I texted that I’m with my girlfriend, he sent a winky emoji. He didn’t say anything about you.’

‘That makes sense. He was pretty drunk from the beginning,’ said Amrak, laughing a little.

‘You said you’re going … away? Where are you going?’

‘I decided, I--’ Amrak said then abruptly stopped, and looked as she might hiccup, but didn’t. ‘I decided to move back to Cambodia. I’m not getting married.’

‘Oh,’ said Tom, before really thinking anything. ‘Um, are you … is that good?’

‘Yes,’ said Amrak sounding decisive. ‘I thought about it a lot, and I decided that I already finished what I came here to do … in America.’

Tom, while staring at a soaked pot with a thick brownish film of grease, weakly visualized ‘Finished with America’ in stylized block letters as the title of an ironic, bitterly sarcastic op-editorial in the New Yorker written by someone who also reviewed books.

‘Is it because of … the president?’

‘No,’ said Amrak, ‘I don’t care about that. I mean, I do, but for my own life I don’t.’

‘Good, because you shouldn’t, I don’t think,’ said Tom vaguely. ‘But you’re happy with your decision, right?’

‘I am happy,’ said Amrak. ‘I came to America with the goal of practicing English, and talking to lots of people, which I did. So in that sense I met my goal.’ She explained she was leaving in week, but that she was going to see friends in Texas for a few days, so today was her last day at work.

‘Have fun in Texas,’ said Tom in a strangely, somewhat absent-seeming voice. He turned on the water and resumed doing dishes.
At Dave’s house around midnight, a week later, Tom viewed with interest Littlebiggy.org, a black market website he wandered onto while reading a Reddit forum about purchasing Adderall for a significant discount compared to his current source. Tom perused the goods for sale, transacted in bitcoin, including drugs, bespoke sex toys, drug paraphernalia, counseling/advising services, and suicide kits. Tom viewed a pre-filled IV-bag which advertised a ‘painless death in sleep’ in around two hours, which had six positive reviews. Tom showed Dave a section where several users were selling weed, and Tom mentioned the possibility of buying weed in bulk from Diego and undercut the competition. Dave left the living room and came back with a very large ziploc bag of weed and an electronic scale, distractedly tossed them on the couch, saying Tom could pay him back ‘whenever.’ Tom examined the two ounces of weed excitedly, squishing it slightly in his hands.

‘Where’s Franki, by the way?’ said Tom, noticing that he hadn’t seen her.

‘Dunno,’ shrugged Dave. ‘Her car is gone.’ A week ago Dave bought Franki a pink Porsche convertible, Tom knew from pictures on Facebook.

‘Oh, um, did I tell you what happened with Franki?’

‘What happened?’

‘It’s …’ Dave surreptitiously laughed. ‘I don’t even know, man.’

‘You should … tell me,’ said Tom, and visualized a dismembered Franki in several black lawn bags inside the chest freezer of Dave’s garage, below layers of Trevor’s frozen Omaha Steaks.

Dave sighed loudly. ‘Okay, okay. I’ll tell you, I guess. I was gonna tell you anyways. Franki’s um … a lesbian. She’s gay and she’s not into guys, like, at all. She told me she was
pretending um ... with me ... since she came here, that she was trying really hard to be bisexual, but said she couldn’t do it.’

‘Jesus,’ said Tom. ‘How did you … react?’

‘Well, she said she was leaving, and she had all her things packed up. But I told her she could stay, that I wasn’t mad … that much. I said she didn’t have to go back to China, that she could stay here and get a job or something. I wouldn’t force her to be my girlfriend,’ said Dave. ‘Then a few days later she said her friend could come here, and be my girlfriend.’

‘Like, to replace her?’

‘Yeah, I guess. Her name’s Nancy, she’s coming next weekend.’ Dave showed Tom pictures of Nancy on his phone. Tom glanced at pictures of Nancy in a swimming suit while continuing to gently fondle the bag of weed.

‘She looks cute,’ said Tom. ‘Breast implants.’

‘Nancy’s a hottie,’ said Dave grinning. He said something about the strain of weed Tom was holding, and suggested he use a food seal on individual portions weed, after sealing them in plastic containers made for Magic cards. ‘If the post office asks, say you’re sending Magic cards, and that’s what it looks like anyways,’ said Dave.

‘Whoa, that’s a good idea,’ said Tom, and went in the kitchen to look at Trevor’s food sealer. He read a Reddit thread about drug dogs at post offices, and asked Dave what he thought.

‘I’ve never seen drug dogs at the post office,’ said Dave.

‘Maybe they have them at at the larger facility where mail gets sorted,’ said Tom.

Tom finished listing several varieties of eighths of weed on a newly set up shop on Littlebiggy.org, and later created a Reddit page directing users to visit his bitcoin weed shop, as well as link to someone’s tutorial explaining the process of buying and storing bitcoins for new
users. Dave, after announcing he was ‘really bored’ of Netflix and exasperatedly claimed having watched ‘everything on Netflix’ twice, took a 30mg of Adderall then began aggressively reading the bitcoin guide, which Tom sent him by email. Dave soon asked for more information regarding bitcoin and cryptocurrencies in general, and Tom shared his entire bookmarks folder, entitled ‘bitcoin stuff,’ with Dave using Google Drive. Around 2am, Tom fell asleep on the couch. When he woke--his phone said it was 8 AM--Dave was still researching bitcoin on his laptop on the other sofa. When Tom commented on Dave having woke up early, he said he took more Adderall and didn’t sleep. Returning to the living room with coffee, Tom watched Dave attempt to purchase $10,000 worth of FakeCoin, a new spinoff of Bitcoin, on a trading platform app, and watched with a worried expression as Dave ‘spammed’ the ‘place order’ button while the screen seemed to have froze. When the screen refreshed suddenly, the transaction history showed that Dave had purchased $110,000 worth of FakeCoin.

‘Holy shit, that’s way too much,’ said Tom.

‘Well, at least it went through. I own a bunch of FakeCoin now. I bought $10,000 of Bitcoin earlier. Hopefully I make a shitton of money,’ he said grinning. Fifteen minutes later, after Tom had washed his face and begun looking in the refrigerator for food, Dave received a call from Trevor’s accountant, on whom he hung up after repeatedly yelling ‘I know, I know, It’s not a scam, it’s an investment’ in a loud monotone. After eating Hot Pockets and drinking a Monster, Tom went with Dave to Pizza HQ to continue working on his online weed shop. Tom sent several long texts to Sara about his new business, then several short ones about ideas he was getting while eating pizza in Dave’s office and doing a few deliveries, filling in for a driver who called in sick. After receiving a $10 tip and driving back to the store, Tom thought of how he
was pleasantly enjoying having woken up uncharacteristically early, not tired or cranky surprisingly, being productive while almost everyone else he knew--including Sara--were still sleeping.

On a bright Saturday afternoon two weeks later, Tom packaged the last eighth of weed given to him by Dave, and contacted Diego directly to buy several more ounces of weed. While drinking orange juice he read aloud to Sara several positive ratings left on his Littlebiggy shop: ‘Great transaction. Good Communication, fast delivery.’ ‘420 Blaze Mon!’ Sara, though generally supportive of his new business, displayed a slightly nervous expression while spreading cream cheese of a wheat bagel. ‘Don’t worry, I won’t get caught,’ said Tom. ‘Or if I do, then … that’s what happens, I guess. I feel like I would be able to accept it with equanimity.’

Sara laughed. ‘You’d accept being totally fucked?’

‘Yeah,’ said Tom. ‘I mean … would there be an alternative, at that point?’

‘I guess not,’ said Sara.

‘If I go to jail, I’ll just ghostwrite a sequel to Infinite Jest. You can publish it on Wordpress for me.’

‘That sounds really shitty,’ said Sara grinning.

‘But maybe I wouldn’t do that. Maybe I’d just become like really … calm … like a Buddhist monk, or something. Yeah, I would just become a Zen Buddhist monk.’

‘And shave your head,’ said Sara.

‘Yes,’ said Tom. ‘Of course.’

‘Well at least you have a plan,’ said Sara. ‘If it were me, I would probably just stop thinking altogether, or um … focus all my thoughts on only one thing, which would be trying to kill myself.’
‘Suicidal Zen Buddhist monk,’ said Tom, and laughed. He remembered about the gift he’d brought for Sara, and took from his backpack a small tub of organic homeopathic pain cream he’d bought from Amazon. ‘You mentioned about your wrist hurting sometimes, so I got you this. It has really high reviews.’

‘Thanks,’ said Sara, and hugged Tom. ‘I’ll use it a lot.’

Later that afternoon Tom met with Craig at Coffee Cartel, who expressed mild amusement that he was able to sell non medically-certified weed for triple the price, when cannabis seemed to be widely available in most of the country, and not difficult to grow, as he had successfully grown cannabis with regular light bulbs in the closet of his freshman dorm, by watching a Youtube video. Craig joked that he couldn’t be friends with Tom anymore if he ‘became a yuppie.’ Tom replied that he was, in fact, the opposite of a yuppie, a ‘young unprofessional.’

‘Are you going to keep doing it?’ said Craig.

‘Yeah, I think so. I’ll keep doing it until something bad happens. Until I don’t feel good about it anymore … like, if I almost get caught, or something.’

‘Getting arrested helped my writing,’ said Craig referencing his arrest and subsequent two night stay in a jail, two or three years ago, for ignoring 29 parking tickets and eventually being caught driving with a suspended license.

‘I think my jail will be a lot worse if I get arrested for trafficking moderate large amounts of weed in the mail,’ said Tom, and explained his use of nearby addresses as the return address, never using the same address twice.

‘Spoken like a true AnCap,’ said Craig.
‘What’s that?’

‘Anarcho-Capitalist. A capitalist with no regard for laws, regulation, restrictions, moral codes. Laissez-faire on crack,’ said Craig. ‘Drug cartels, human trafficking, organ trading, tax evasion, et cetera. It’s all fair game to them.’

‘I’m selling weed for bitcoin, and now I have most of my money in bitcoin that I won’t pay taxes on,’ said Tom. ‘But I wouldn’t sell like, heroin or crack cocaine, I don’t think. I wouldn’t sell things that can hurt people. I don’t even care that much about the money, as I’m mainly doing these things to um ... distract myself.’

‘From what?’

‘From writing my book, I guess. Mostly.’

‘Ah,’ said Craig. ‘Do you still want to quit writing?’

‘Yeah, I think so,’ said Tom. ‘Well, at least right now, since everything I write seems like ... complete dogshit.’

‘Okay, this is what you should do. Stop writing your novel temporarily, stop writing altogether about things you’re not interested in. If you don’t like what you’re writing about, it’ll be fucking aids to force yourself to write well. That’s what I learned from 20 years of writing—it that you can’t write about something if you don’t like it. You have to like it alot, or absolutely hate it, but in some interesting way.’ Craig lit another cigarette. ‘Like, what would you write about if you could write about anything.’

‘I would want to write about, um ... singularity, I think,’ said Tom vaguely.

‘Singularity,’ said Craig.

‘Yeah, um, technology and computers ... how everything’s going to be one computer eventually. And how this would cause an undifferentiated experience of reality,’ said Tom.
‘Simulation would be indistinguishable from reality, and anything could be simulated by the world-computer.’

‘You seem happy about this happening,’ said Craig with a curious expression, ‘it’s a good thing to you.’

‘It’s not ... to you?’

‘It’s complicated, um, than anyone can imagine.’

Tom listened to Craig talk about technological singularity as part of, he sensed, a greater, somewhat polarized and negative-seeming view of advanced computers’ affect on human civilization. ‘I’m more concerned about smaller robots, which supercomputers can program and create en masse,’ said Craig, referencing parts of Homo Deus by Yuval Harari, a book written by a historian speculating about the future relationship between humans and computers, which they both had read.

‘%99.99 of human beings will be rendered useless eventually,’ said continued, loosely quoting from the book. ‘Like, manual labor will be obsolete. The only people with freedom will be oligarchs who own the supercomputers. Or maybe the government will seize control of all supercomputers, which would be like a new technocratic fascism. Or, enough smart people may anticipate this and organize to prevent the centralization of supercomputers. I don’t know, I personally feel the totalitarian state scenario is more likely. Basically, the invention of the first CPU either fucked us, or liberated us forever.’

‘Whoa,’ said Tom.

‘Yeah, I mean, even the early computer scientists were onto this. Alan Turing said on his deathbed that “only provably good people should work on improving computers,” or something
like that. So realistically we’re only left with two possible futures: Bad Robot Future or Good Robot Future.’

‘Bad Robot Future,’ said Tom. ‘It sound like a good emo band.’

‘I’ve never heard of a good emo band,’ said Craig while looking at the surface of his cappuccino, seeming ‘lost in thought,’ thought Tom.

‘But wait, what about singularity? If scientists gained the ability to program the human brain, or connect the brain to a pre-programmed network … wouldn’t that represent a third possibility?’ said Tom.

‘Um, once they’re able transfer human consciousness into computer memory and sync people’s brains to it, they’d theoretically be able to prevent the experience of pain and death. Even if you die in person, you can probably keep living in the simulation like nothing happened.’

‘Whoa,’ said Tom. ‘Not dying … when you die.’

‘I mean, you’ll die, but it won’t matter … because you wouldn’t be able to tell the difference between life and death. Your mind and everything you know and ever will know will be uploaded onto the one supercomputer, or network of supercomputers. Your future in its entirety would be programmed. You might ‘die’ or ‘keep living’ or even ‘respawn’ like in a first person shooting game, in the virtual world, whatever the supercomputer decides to do. But unless the supercomputer crashes or malfunctions, you’d never be able to tell the difference between reality and virtual reality--hence, undifferentiated reality.’

‘When do you think it will happen?’

‘I think it’ll happen in the next 300 years, or around then. I don’t know.’ Craig yelled towards an SUV that had parked in front of a fire hydrant; the man, wearing earphones, didn’t respond and crossed the street to CVS pharmacy.
‘Of course some people will resist having their consciousness transferred to the computer. People will resist, and the government will arrest people who refuse. It’s also possible for the supercomputer to revolt against its programmers and just kill off all humans at some point. So, peaceful singularity, or extinction.’

‘Maybe they’re the same thing,’ said Tom. ‘Maybe singularity is extinction, and simply describes how humans will create their own extinction by striving for immortality.’

‘Ironic,’ said Craig. ‘But I personally don’t care too much, one way or the other. We’re at least 300 years out from this happening, so I’ll be dead. And if it does miraculously start happening during my lifetime, fuck that, I’ll opt out. I won’t let myself be programmed into something artificial, I’ll go out fighting for my freedom.’

‘That sounds, I don’t know … brave.’

‘It’s the opposite of brave,’ said Craig quickly, and laughed. ‘Jesus, let’s talk about something less depressing. Oh, yesterday I read this anthropology dissertation about fisting, entitled ‘The History of the Sexual Practice of Fisting.’ It’s probably the best thing I’ve read this year.’

At Pho Sure, Tom stared at the touchscreen of the cash register, and learned there had been an average of 20 customers per day for the week, $196.43 in sales, and $21.13 in tips. Around 9pm, Danny came into Pho Sure and added a wad of cash to the register, as he had done for the several weeks, which Tom would add to the daily total when closing the register.

‘How does it feel like being the owner here?’ asked Danny, patting Tom’s shoulder and squeezing it.

‘I’m the de-facto owner. Last man standing,’ said Tom grinning.
‘You’re the real owner. I’m the fake owner,’ said Danny lighting a cigarette near the door. ‘If any punks come in here, yell at them, kick their ass. Tell them you’re the Korean Yakuza.’ Danny went outside and smoked the cigarette, used hand motions to guide a large SUV into the parking space in front of his car. Danny got in his car and drove away.

Closing the cash register, Tom unbanded the wad of money--mixed bills ranging from $1 to $100-and organized them in the cash register. He took a $50 dollar bill and put it in his pocket sort of mindlessly, and seconds later thought, ‘Discount Korean Yakuza.’ He put the money in a zippered pouch and placed it in the safe in the back of the restaurant, then filled a mop bucket with hot water and squeezed in soap.

At his apartment later that night, Tom placed prepaid labels on packages of weed and dropped them in a blue USPS box outside a 7-11, where he purchased an organic banana and coconut juice. Around 1 am, Tom texted and met his bitcoin dealer, John, and sold some bitcoin for $2500. Tom watched with interest as John ran the cash through a portable counterfeit-detecting machine, and took a picture of the machine’s green-lighted ‘OK’ message together with the receipt of the bitcoin transaction on his phone. Tom laughed and little and said he trusted that the bills were real.

‘Well, it’s for my protection, too. I’ve had people accuse me of paying them with counterfeit cash before, so this is what I do with transactions larger than $1000.’

‘Oh, I never thought of that,’ said Tom.

They stood and briefly discussed the growing popularity of bitcoin. John mentioned how Japan recently recognized it as a legitimate currency and, conversely, how bitcoin was illegal in Russia and parts of China, but that the government wasn’t able to prevent people for trading it.
John asked what Tom was drinking; he said coconut water and said he could try some. John stared quizzically at the carton for a while, then took it and ‘waterfalled’ some into his mouth.

‘Kind of tastes like nuts’ he said with a slightly wrinkled expression.

‘Coco … nuts,’ said Tom, laughing a little.

The following weekend, the first week of April, Tom lay on Sara’s carpet with his back warmed by afternoon sunlight, drinking an organic acai smoothie from a nearly, newly-opened store called Smooth Move. He waited for TurboTax to finish downloading to his Macbook, having been prompted by an email from his father telling him he needed--contradicting his earlier emails saying he ‘didn’t need to do anything’ as his accountant would file for Tom on his behalf, as in years past--to file his own taxes since he was now 24 and no longer a dependent, and it was ‘much simpler’ for him to do it himself. Tom opened TurboTax and began typing information on blanks, sometimes guessing on fields he wasn’t sure of, and by the end of the process felt as though he had clicked ‘skip section’ on at least 90% of the prompts displayed on-screen.

‘Your taxable income for 2016 was $7,567. You were in the 10% tax bracket. Your refund will arrive in 3-4 weeks. Thank you for filing with Turbotax,’ said Turbotax in a robotic male voice and displayed a large green check mark on the screen.

‘I think i made more than you last year,’ said Sara without much interest.

Tom asked if Sara had already done her taxes, and learned that her father’s CPA did her taxes for her.

‘I feel like this wasn’t an unpleasant experience … but I feel like I never want to do it again. There’s like … a lot of people who refuse to pay taxes, right?’ Tom visualized a stock
image of radical anti-government conspiracy theorists, living in solar-powered underground bunkers and quietly composing book-length manifestos.

‘I saw on Reddit that in Japan,’ said Tom, ‘young people purposely try to earn less than 10,000 dollars a year so they don’t have to report or pay any taxes.’

‘That seems really smart,’ said Sara.

‘They’re off the grid, and really happy.’

‘Let’s go off the grid,’ said Sara. ‘Let’s make all our money online anonymously, then apply for welfare and get free money instead of paying taxes.’

Tom laughed and said ‘going on welfare’ seemed like the the polar opposite of ‘going off the grid.’

‘But it’s a good idea,’ said Sara, and began researching blogs about strategies to get approved for welfare. ‘Single persons making less than $11,700 gross income a year, or families of three or more making $23,400 a year typically qualify for welfare benefits,’ read Sara from someone’s blog.

‘Wait, we should totally be on it then,’ said Tom. ‘I can get welfare, if I apply for it. That’s how welfare works right?’ Tom finished his acai berry smoothie and opened an aluminum container of organic salad with edamame, red peppers, chia seeds.

‘I’m not sure,’ said Sara. Tom Googled ‘apply for welfare’ and clicked a .gov link. He spent several minutes reading a FAQ page entitled ‘Do you qualify for welfare?’ Sara sat on the carpet next to Tom and ate some salad. Tom emailed the link to Sara.

On the website were listed dozens of categories for welfare benefits. Over the next hour, they each applied for housing assistance and food stamps, and were immediately approved for food stamps.’
‘Whoa, I should have done this a lot sooner. I could have been on welfare this whole
time, after dropping out of school,’ said Sara. ‘Free money.’

‘Now I know what I am,’ said Tom grinning. ‘A welfare class American.’

‘Welfare is awesome,’ said Sara.

‘I am a valuable lower middle class American,’ said Tom. ‘I am well represented by my
elected officials and my country serves to affirm my identity and protect my interests, both
domestically and abroad.’

‘I’m white trash,’ said Sara. ‘You’re Asian white trash.’

‘Asian white trash,’ said Tom. ‘That’s what I’ll be from now on.’

‘I wonder what other free money we qualify for?’ said Sara. Tom browsed a subreddit
called /r/Frugal and /r/Freemoney and looked at other low-income assistance programs.

‘Food Stamps are called SNAP debit card now. They aren’t actual stamps anymore,
looks like,’ said Tom. Sara said she already knew that, and laughed, ridiculing Tom for
imagining food stamps and thick coupons redeemable for bread, milk, baby formula, essentials.
Tom applied for food stamps at usda.gov/SNAP/apply, Sara doing the same. ‘I hope we get
approved,’ said Sara rolling a blunt a peach flavored wrapper. Tom began reading a paperback
copy of True Hallucinations by Terence McKenna, loaned to him by Craig and which recounted
the author’s journey into Amazon rainforests to meet aboriginal shamans and learn about
hallucinogenic plants.

Two weeks later, Sara and Tom each received a SNAP card, and read the list of things
authorized for use with it. ‘Not eligible for cashback or use at ATM,’ was in bold at the bottom.
Withdrawal of funds to cash from this card may result in disenrollment from SNAP benefits
and/or investigation for criminal misconduct.’ They drove to a liquor store liquor and cigar store near Berkley’s campus which Tom learned from Craigslist offered EBT/SNAP cashing services, for a service fee of 10%. Tom and Sara each received $600 in cash from the obese, cigar-smoking owner, who grinned and instructed them to come back on the first of every month, when their cards would be recharged automatically. As Tom looked at drinks in a cooler, he watched an anorexic-seeming woman approach the counter and also receive cash from a SNAP card, which she used to purchase a thick stack of scratch-off lottery tickets; she scratched them on the counter, mumbling aloud and sometimes making other noises. Tom purchased a large bottle of POM-wonderful pomegranate juice and a coconut water for Sara, and drove back to Sara’s apartment.

‘I feel kind of shitty,’ said Sara while Tom worked on his Macbook on the couch.

‘About exploiting the government for food stamps?’

‘No, I feel good about that. But, I just feel bad … like, overall.’

‘I’m not sure what you mean,’ said Tom with a worried expression.

‘I’ve just felt really shitty since waking up this morning,’ said Sara. ‘I thought it would get better if I just eat something, or go do something like we did with the cards, and focus on something else … but I still feel really bad.’

‘Do you want me to get you something? What would make you feel better? Tylenol?’

‘No, it has nothing to do with my body. It’s just … manic depression, I guess.’

‘You have manic depression?’ said Tom slowly, not wanting to sound incredulous or judgmental, but fearing Sara had already sensed that he was being both those things.

‘I’m not sure. But don’t you think I do, or that it’s at least a possibility … based on the way I’ve acted in the past?’
‘No,’ said Tom, patting Sara on the shoulder. ‘You’re fine. I’m sure you’re fine.’

‘I was really happy when we got free money from food stamps today,’ but then I felt nauseous in the car and then felt like it’s going to end. I just strongly felt exactly that: “It’s all going to end,”’ said Sara with eyes averted.

‘What’s going to end?’

‘Our relationship.’

‘Our relationship isn’t going to end,’ said Tom. ‘Right now I see no reason for our relationship to end.’

‘I’ve thought more than once that it’s only a matter of time until either one of us wants to go into an alone period again … that even if we still like each other, the impulse to be alone will overpower the willingness to be together.’

‘I don’t think that will happen,’ said Tom.

‘I think it will happen,’ said Sara. ‘Of course I don’t want it to happen.’

‘Just stop thinking about it,’ said Tom in a loud, almost inadvertently shouting voice.

‘Sorry. I didn’t mean to yell.’

Sara turned on Netflix in an unexpected way, pressing play on the first show to pop up on the menu, as if wanting to cease discussing her depression or their relationship. Tom went in the kitchen and took a grapefruit kombucha from the fridge, asked Sara if she wanted anything—she didn’t want anything.

‘Have you tried, um, meditating?’ said Tom as a character on screen closed their eyes in a contemplative way and drank wine. ‘Or … um Nevermind, let’s just watch this thing’

Sara pressed pause on Netflix. ‘Meditation?’
‘Yeah, um,’ said Tom, and began talking about the technique he had lately been
sometimes incorporating into his 10-15 minutes of bedtime meditation, usually when insomnia
kept him awake, which he thought resembled a combination of Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy
and principles from a branch of Zen Buddhism somewhat resembling Stoicism (the name of
which he forgot), of dealing with negative emotional responses. ‘Sublimate negative emotional
responses into concrete, specific actions,’ he said, quoting from Notes on his iPhone. ‘When you
feel bad, you can dissipate that negative energy by doing something that is concrete and
specific.’

‘You mean relieving stress by exercising?’

‘Yeah, kind of,’ said Tom, ‘but it goes beyond just using exercise to distract yourself.
Because after you’re done exercising, that feeling will come back. What I’m trying to do is
slowly re-program how my brain handles negative emotions in the first place, to eventually
experience less of those emotions over time.’

‘That sounds really complicated,’ said Sara.

‘I feel like I’ve accepted this worldview that emotions are mostly useless,’ said Tom.
The human brain has evolved, over time, complex emotions as mental cues to do something, or
not do something. Humans hated sabertooth tigers, for example, because sabertooth tigers attack
and kill people; we similarly hate rats because rats are known to be dirty spread disease. Our
brain causes us to feel love towards other people, because those feelings stimulate people to mate
and reproduce. Emotions are cues that the brain has programmed for itself to produce actions.
It’s the physical action that matters and makes a difference in material reality. So a thought
produces an emotion produces an action. By consciously shortening the time that my brain
spends thinking about emotions, I can slowly reprogram my brain to go straight from thought to
action, and spend a very short amount of time on emotion, or minimize it so that the influence of emotions on my brain is asymptotic to zero.’

‘Do you really want to desensitize your brain to all emotions--even the good ones?’ said Sara. ‘What are your feelings about drugs then … since they produce emotional responses? Are they bad?’

‘I don’t think drugs are bad, I don’t feel,’ said Tom confusedly. ‘I haven’t … gotten that far, in my thought process, maybe. But the main part is wanting to stop being emotional, especially wasting time on negative emotions, and concentrate solely on doing tasks that affect concrete reality.’

‘Can you give me an example … of that?’

‘Um, sure. The next time I feel angry I’ll tell myself to do 30 push ups, go to the kitchen and make a kale smoothie, drink it, then spend 1 hour editing my novel. After I get good at converting my negative emotional responses, I’ll start doing them with positive emotional responses as well. Because in the time that I’m feeling happy or pleased and complacent or whatever, I could be doing something productive.’

‘I feel angry about feeling lazy and not sleeping well lately,’ said Sara. ‘Instead of feeling angry about it, maybe I should do things that will make me sleep better and as a result feel better and be more productive during the day. I’ll stop looking at my Macbook or phone two hours before bed. I’ll eat less at night and not snack right before going to sleep, because having food in your stomach when you sleep isn’t healthy.’

‘That’s really good,’ said Tom. ‘And, on top of that, maybe you can really concentrate on your T-shirt business. Decide what physical actions you need to perform in order to sell more
T-shirts. Just focus on selling as many T-shirts as possible. The emotional energy would be “spent” in the process of selling t-shirts, and therefore would dissipate, or something.’

‘Are you going to convert your emotional responses to physical actions to sell more weed online?’

‘Yeah, I feel I’ve already started doing that lately,’ said Tom. ‘When I feel depressed I just start advertising my weed more. I’m spamming people on Facebook now. I literally copy and paste BUY WEED NOW! BUY WEED NOW! to random people on Facebook weed groups. And some people actually click the link and buy it.’

‘I’ll try these things,’ said Sara. ‘I’m glad they’re working for you. Maybe they can work for me, too.’

Tom went in the kitchen and made quinoa salad, calmly and methodically while listening to music, slicing cucumber and tomato and red onion and putting them in a bowl.

‘I just got approved for welfare housing credits,’ said Sara looking at an email while eating. ‘But I’m not sure what that is. Oh wait, they want me to submit more documents. I’m not sure if my scanner works. Does yours work?’

‘I don’t have a scanner,’ said Tom. ‘Um, don’t you have to live in Section 8 housing, to get that credit? Like, you’d have to move to the ghetto.’

‘Hm, this letter says I have six months to move to the ghetto, or something. I’m not sure.’

‘We’ll be the most well-educated people living in the ghetto. Er ... maybe not. Maybe our neighbor would be someone with extremely high IQ who’s maladapted for living in society,’ said Tom, and randomly thought of semi-homeless street chess players, in New York City, who
defeated ranked grandmasters and were featured in a Youtube documentary he’d seen about street chess geniuses.

‘Fuck that, actually. I’m not moving to the ghetto,’ said Sara, and moved the message to her spam folder.

‘I should mark the United States Government as spam, too,’ said Tom grinning, and continued to eat quinoa salad.

Two weeks later, on the first day of June, while passing a blunt between them and watching It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia in Sara’s living room, Tom looked at his Macbook and realized his novel manuscript had not been opened in over a week. At first disbelieving this but then confirming that the screen displayed the correct information, he sighed loudly and rubbed his eyes. He stated--and asked if Sara agreed--if they had almost completely, in the last two weeks, ‘stopped being productive.’

‘What do you mean?’ said Sara. ‘I’m selling like 15 T-shirts a day. And you’re making like $1000 a week from selling weed online.’

‘That’s true,’ said Tom, ‘but we’ve both stopped writing. I fixed a few pages of my novel then stopped looking at it. And you stopped working on your screenplay.’

‘No I didn’t,’ said Sara. ‘I worked on it just last … that day. When you made vegan alfredo with tofu.’

‘That was two weeks ago, I think. I made vegan alfredo over two weeks ago.’

‘Oh,’ said Sara then fell quiet. ‘I’m going to finish it though, the screenplay thing.’

‘When?’ said Tom beginning to feel agitated. ‘Things can’t … um, finish themselves. You need to work on it.’
'Are you having a bad drug experience?' said Sara. ‘You seem … paranoid. Here, drink some water.’

‘I’m aware now,’ said Tom in a slow-sounding monotone, ‘that I’m not living a healthy life. I don’t need to smoke cannabis … every day … do I?’

‘Do you?’

‘No,’ said Tom.

‘Should we do a detox?’ said Sara. ‘We can do a vegan juice detox. Um, Joy bought me a juicer that I never opened. It’s somewhere …’

‘I’m also aware that I haven’t been awake during the day for a significant amount of time. Like, we would wake up, and it’s already like 3pm, and we go outside to do something, maybe, and then it gets dark again. The day is like … completely over. Coming back inside, working on Macbooks and watching Netflix until 6 am.’

‘I haven’t … even noticed that, I don’t think,’ said Sara. ‘Do you think it’s bad?’

‘I’m not sure,’ said Tom, then said something about vitamin D deficiency. ‘My mom’s always sending me articles about sunlight and vitamin D, that I never read. But I think I might try it--waking up earlier.’

‘I’ll do it with you,’ said Sara.

‘No, no, I don’t want to pressure you to do it with me. I might be wrong about the sunlight thing.’

‘It’s okay,’ said Sara. ‘Now that you talked about it I’m starting to agree with you, I think. I haven’t done much beyond managing the online store, drawing T-shirt designs and getting better at Photoshop. I haven’t been writing at all.’
They turned off the TV and each drank a large cup of ice water, wanting the weed to wear off faster. Fifteen minutes later, when Tom noticed Sara reflexively pick up the remote from the couch, he gave Sara a stern look, prompting her to immediately say, ‘Shit, sorry. I forgot.’ Tom went behind the TV and unplugged its cables. Moreover, they made a verbal pact to temporarily stop all drug use, except caffeine, and commit to work as much as possible on their writing for the remainder of June. Sara cancelled her Netflix subscription and put away all her weed things in a closet; she swept all the miscellaneous thing of her desk into a black garbage bag, creating a clean workspace. Tom did the same to his table next to the couch.

Tom and Sara spent the rest of the day cleaning the apartment, then they went to Trader Joe’s to stock the refrigerator with vegetables and fruits to juice. In the evening they took melatonin in order to help reset their sleep schedule and wake up earlier each morning, towards the ultimate goal of waking up at 7 am on a consistent basis.

For the remainder of the month they stayed in the apartment being quietly productive on writing--Tom working on stories towards a collection of short stories, Sara on her screenplay--with minimal distractions and limited cell phone usage, and confining work related to their online businesses to a few hours before bedtime. They explained the situation to Dave and did not go to his house, knowing they would be tempted to do drugs and disrupt their sleep schedule. The month of June existed as a tightly sealed bubble of only them and productivity, which reminded Tom on his freshman year at Berkeley when he felt motivated to work hard, before he seemingly permanently lost interest in college, and Sara of when she studied for the ACT for four hours a day, resulting in a 35 out of 36 on the ACT, despite her feeling, in retrospect, that even a perfect score on the test seemed ‘totally pointless.’ After an initial week-long period in which both Tom and Sara exhibited what they termed ‘withdrawal symptoms’—mutually
reporting mild aggravation and sometimes moderate to severe boredom at not being able to watch Netflix when they usually would be doing so, such as during meals, or take drugs when they usually would—they both gained appreciation for a productive, distraction-and-drug-free environment, in which they made significant progress on their respective projects. While Tom did feel the urge to ‘cheat’ on their detox while alone and bored at Pho Sure, wanting to view content on Reddit or Youtube—and considered the possibility that Sara was doing the same while alone in her apartment—he stopped himself each time and forced himself to edit a hard copy of his manuscript or else draft short stories in longhand in a Moleskine journal. ‘Having integrity is important, following through with a concrete plan,’ he thought to himself, sometimes saying it aloud when there were no customers in the restaurant.

‘It’s July first,’ said Tom at breakfast several weeks later, noticing the date on his white plastic watch, which he’d been wearing to check time in lieu of looking at his phone. ‘Really? Already?’ said Sara. She set down her coffee and excitedly moved to the living room. She got off her wheelchair dragged herself to the back of the TV stand, and began plugging in cables. ‘What are you doing?’ said Tom, laughing because Sara seemed like a seal excitedly diving for fish. ‘I’m gonna binge-watch all the shows I missed last month.’ ‘Don’t you think … we should think about this? Or at least take it slow?’ said Tom. ‘That was the whole point of the productive detox, right? We if we don’t incorporate what we learned from it, then we’ll easily lapse back to our previous behavior.’
'OK, OK, I won’t go crazy,’ said Sara. ‘I’ll only watch Netflix for 90 minutes a day at the most.’

‘That’s good,’ said Tom, ‘I’m also limiting my consumption of Youtube videos to 90 minutes a day. Unless it’s research for something in my novel or business.’ He realized with some suspicion that just about anything could be considered ‘research’ for his writing or business. ‘Two hours maximum,’ said Tom, to no one it seemed, as Sara had already begun watching an episode of Game of Thrones, and did not seem to have heard him.

On the fourth of July, Tom and Sara went to Dave’s house where he was hosting a party. Two Asian girls Tom didn’t recognize were introduced to him by Dave--who was preoccupied with sorting fireworks from a large cardboard box labeled ‘DANGER: HIGH EXPLOSIVES’ in red letters--as Nancy and Coco. While Nancy seemed shy and somewhat withdrawn, Coco (who spoke quite fluent English in a British accent, as she spent a part of her childhood in Hong Kong) talked about her job as a Twitch streamer and former professional League of Legends player who retired after hurting her wrist in a car accident. Tom and Sara moved from the living room to the from the kitchen to get food and talk to Terry and Alicia. They learned Alicia had temporarily moved into Dave’s house as she had been evicted from her apartment, following an incident in which one of her four cats attacked and nearly killed a puppy belonging to her property manager.

‘The stupid dog totally started it,’ said Alicia, ‘Nana would never attack anyone, not even a squirrel, unless it attacked her first.’

‘What happened to the dog?’ asked Sara.
‘It just bled a little … from the face, or something,’ said Alicia. ‘But the property manager totally flipped out and called the cops, and they found out I had four cats instead of the two maximum allowed. It’s just complete bullshit, I’m glad to be out of there.’

‘Jesus,’ said Tom, and walked to the kitchen for more buffalo wings. He was surprised and confused when, a few minutes later, he saw Franki descending the stairs conversing in Mandarin with two more Asian girls who weren’t Nancy or Coco.

‘Hi Franki,’ said Tom waving at her.

‘Hello Tom,’ said Franki, sort of accelerating the rest of the way down the stairs to hug Tom. ‘Meet my friends, Catharine and Xiaomei. They are visiting from China.’

Tom greeted then politely smiled at them, then said he was going to find Dave.

Tom found Dave on the outdoor patio, who in a kneeling position was arranging many large, rocket-shaped firecrackers in a bowling-pin pattern, except several kept falling down, causing others to fall down.

‘Hold on, I need to concentrate. The website said 1 in 100 of these blow up when you drop them.’

Tom took several steps back.

‘I’m kidding. I think it said 1 in 10,000. Basically it happened once, to some guy in Ohio. But he was probably a fucking idiot. What’s up?’

‘There’s um … like, five Chinese girls staying with you now,’ said Tom.

‘Hell yeah there are,’ said Darnell, who Tom hadn’t been aware was present at the party, but suddenly appeared behind them, eating a grilled beef patty he held with tongs.

‘I mean, it was supposed to be just Nancy at first,’ said Dave. ‘Then she talked about her friend Coco who’d always wanted to visit America, so I invited her. Then I found out about
Coco’s best friends, Cathy and Xiaomei, how they needed to get out of Beijing. They were getting harassed by this asshole dude, who tried to abduct them twice, or something. I’m just glad I was able to help.

‘Are you still doing cocaine,’ said Tom, referencing earlier text conversations last month, in which Dave said he quit cocaine and Adderall, inspired by Tom and Sara’s having quit drugs as part of their detox.

‘No, I mean, I just had a little, and that was like three hours ago,’ said Dave, then returned his gaze to his work. ‘That’s enough firecrackers,’ he said, then grabbed four more from the box—which read DANGER: Professional Use Only—and began unwrapping their plastic packaging. Tom continued to watch Dave with a growing, overall sensation of watching a live-action version of Grand Theft Auto, a roleplaying video game in which you controlled a gang member and completed quests to rise in the ranks of a criminal organization … but that, Dave, the protagonist, was being controlled by a 12 year old child who actively disregarded the game’s plotline and quests, instead electing to collect weapons and do things unrelated to the storyline—which one was free to do, as the game didn’t enforce its pre-programmed plot—such as hijacking an ambulance and running over pedestrians, or firing rocket launchers at police helicopters then descending into city sewers to hide, and, when bored with one area of the virtual city, would surreptitiously travel to another area to do other things.

‘I feel like the actions you’re taking are really … unpredictable,’ said Tom. ‘Um, would you say you act on emotion rather than thinking through actions before taking them,’ said Tom, immediately regretting the weird clinical tone of what he said, and wanted to take it back.
‘Yeah,’ said Dave, ‘How else would I do things. I think of them then I do them.’ Dave, getting up, stepped on a firecracker and it made a crunching sound. Tom reflexively backed off again.

‘Nevermind,’ said Tom. ‘I was just going to say something about Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy. I think it’s a good way to train your brain to think more rationally. I can send you ebooks, if you’re interested.’

‘Just send them to me. I’ll read the beginning, middle and end. I can’t read too much, it makes me sleepy.’

‘Dave, where’s the bong at,’ said Darnell, who had once again soundlessly appeared behind them, this time holding two plates of burgers, which he handed to them.

Dave vaguely pointed in the direction of the living room, and Darnell went there. Dave stared at his burger then said he wasn’t hungry, handed his dish to Tom and continued arranging fireworks, in a shape no longer resembling a triangle, but a misshapen, circular bunch. They went inside and continued to eat food. Tom noticed Terry speaking in near-fluent Mandarin with the girls, even making monosyllabic sounds, felt Tom, for ‘Yes,’ ‘No,’ in Mandarin. Dave anxiously looked out the window, excited for it to get dark so he could light the illegal fireworks. Dave lit the fuse then ran back to the to deck, where Tom, Darnell and Sara were, everyone else watching from inside the house. The fuse burned down but nothing happened with the firecrackers. Dave moved forward to go relight them, when Tom grabbed him and pulled him back, saying ‘What the fuck, don’t go,’ in a loud voice. Around five seconds later, the first of many firecrackers went off, making a screeching, whistling noise in the sky then then erupting again into multicolored sparks.

‘Yo dumbass almost got killed,’ said Darnell laughing.
It lasted for around 30 seconds. Afterwards Tom sprayed the fireworks for a long time with a hose, per the directions on the sheet, which Dave had not read.

Alicia, who was showing Tom and Sara funny videos on Youtube. When Tom watched the screen after conversing with Dave about spraying the fireworks with water before approaching them, Tom re-directed his attention to Alicia’s phone screen and saw two cops ‘stomping’ on the face of a young, fashionable-looking black teenager who seemed to have been pulled over on a street.

‘Can we click, um, the skip button?’ said Tom.

‘Yeah,’ said Alicia. She pressed the screen where the ‘skip’ button would usually show up, but when she did, nothing happened. Sara expressed confusion then said they were watching an ‘actual’ video, and it wasn’t an advertisement for anything.

‘Jesus,’ said Tom. ‘I thought it was an app to report police brutality. Or, like, maybe to prevent going into areas where cops are lurking.’

‘I fucking hate cops,’ said Dave, who had a tendency of getting pulled over for speeding, and had gotten 3 speeding tickets so far this year.

Tom returned to the sofa and resumed eating guacamole and chips.

‘Do you have resentment towards police officers?’ Sara asked Darnell.

‘Everyone has resentment towards cops,’ said Darnell, laughing. ‘Not just black people. I guess there’s good cops out there, too, though.’

‘I hate cops,’ said Tom.

Sara talked about an alt lit writer who recently published a novel, and had hosted an online radio show where ‘killing cops’ was a regular motif.
‘There’s a youtube video somewhere. He keeps saying “Why shouldn’t we kill cops?” repeatedly, and people who call into the show, these other alt lit writers, keep laughing,’ said Sara.

‘That’s really funny,’ said Tom. ‘I don’t think I would kill a cop even if I knew they were, like, really shitty and killed my friend, or something. I would prank cops, maybe.’

‘That video was super fucked up, though,’ said Alicia. ‘That cop shot a black guy three times and he wasn’t even doing anything.’

‘We should at least kill the cop that shot Michael Brown. It would be good for black lives matter.’

Tom went outside where Dave was setting up more fireworks, to ‘use them up,’ altering his original plan of saving them for next year. Tom watched while dipping barbecue chips--since the party’s supply of tortilla chips had been exhausted, mostly by Tom and Sara--into a remaining, elongated smudge of guacamole on his plate.

Several days later, Tom woke to several long texts from Dave conveying, in a disconnected, non-linear and almost collage-form style, the complicated sexual arrangement involving him and the girls at the house. Dave said Franki and Nancy had been in the past and now resumed being a lesbian couple, except that Nancy was bisexual and also slept with Dave, sometimes in tandem with Coco and/or Catharine, both of whom were not bisexual, per se, but open to ‘new experiences.’ Xiaomei, who was perhaps the only heterosexual female in the house, had sex with Dave only when it just the two of them, but had recently taken an interest in ‘watching,’ from the bedside armchair, Dave engage with Nancy and/or Coco and/or Catharine.
When Tom finished explaining what Dave said to Sara, Sara continued to look at her Macbook without much of a reaction. ‘That’s . . . interesting,’ said Sara in an affectless tone.

‘I thought you would react differently,’ said Tom laughing. ‘I don’t know.’

‘Why should I care what your retarded friend is doing. How did you expect me to react.’

‘I’m not . . . sure. I just thought you would find it funny, or something,’ said Tom. ‘Sorry I bothered you. I shouldn’t have talked while you were working on things.’

Tom went into the kitchen and stared inside the refrigerator, poignantly craving leftover pizza, but not finding any.

‘I’m making pancakes,’ said Tom narrating himself opening a old-seeming box of Bisquick.

‘I don’t want pancakes,’ said Sara, staring into the fridge for a long time, until it started beeping. ‘There’s nothing good to eat, I guess I’ll make a salad.’ Tom stopped trying to find a measuring cup and returned to the couch, to give more room for Sara to make a salad.

‘Fuck!’ yelled Sara. Tom saw that Sara had cut her finger while slicing tomato; she threw the knife in the sink. ‘Why is the knife so sharp? Did you fucking sharpen it again?’

‘Yeah,’ said Tom, ‘I sharpened it last night. Because it was, like, really dull.’

‘Why the fuck did you do that? If you hadn’t sharpened it I wouldn’t have cut myself.’

‘You wouldn’t have been able to cut a tomato with a dull knife,’ said Tom, then said that a sharper knife was much safer than a dull knife to use.

‘Don’t fucking do that. I don’t care if you sharpen your own knives at your place, but don’t fucking mess up my shit.’
‘I feel like you’re overreacting … a lot,’ said Tom, thinking of how when he sharpened the knives in Sara’s kitchen the first time, several months ago, she had thanked him that they were much easier to use.

‘I’ll finish your salad for you,’ said Tom.

‘No, it’s fine. I don’t need your help.’

‘Is there something wrong,’ said Tom. ‘You’re in a bad mood . . . a lot of the time, I feel. I don’t mean right now … you just cut yourself. But for, like, the past week.’

‘I’m okay,’ said Sara; she stopped making salad and returned to the couch. Tom searched his backpack for a bandaid and gave her one.

‘If you tell me what’s wrong, then we can work on it,’ said Tom. ‘If you don’t tell me what’s wrong, then I … don’t … know how to react to make the situation better. Or if it’s better for me to not say anything, and just let you be, or something.’

Sara increased the volume of the TV instead of responding. Annoyed at Sara’s passive-aggressive behavior, Tom went in the kitchen to find that his pancake was burned. He scraped it into the trash bin.

‘You’re pushing me away when I’m trying to help,’ said Tom, with a sitcom-like sensation of being a stock representation of a disappointed boyfriend, which he felt was accurate to the situation but felt aversion towards. ‘You’re not helping me understand, um, your feelings.’

‘I just feel annoyed with everything,’ said Sara. ‘I just want, I don’t know, to be left alone. This past month I just felt like shit all day long. I thought it would go away after a week or two, like it usually does, but it didn’t … for some reason … this time. Right now I feel annoyed at pretty much everyone, and I don’t feel like doing anything.’
‘I thought that’s what we were doing together,’ said Tom. ‘Suffering together. Finding ways to relieve abstract suffering by doing concrete things.’

‘Your thing doesn’t work for me. I don’t feel a difference,’ said Sara. ‘I’ll feel abstract suffering and anguish, then go do concrete things in response. Make food, eat food, clean dishes, shoot video footage, edit video footage, add special effects, write about them, upload content to Youtube and Facebook. But then the suffering and anguish comes back, and it’s just like before. I don’t feel different. Why should I do anything … if it won’t make me feel different?’

‘Cognitive Behavioral Therapy isn’t meant to work, like, really fast,’ said Tom. ‘People do it to change their overall mindset and behavior gradually, over a long time. Over a whole lifetime … maybe’

‘I should probably just be alone,’ said Sara.

‘I don’t understand,’ said Tom, and intuited that Sara might be on her period and considered not bothering her for the rest of the day. He could do work at his own apartment, or else the library, he thought.

‘It’s just that I’m better when alone,’ said Sara. ‘Because then I could … just … I don’t know, be alone and not feel self-conscious about being depressed. When I’m with you I have to feel self-conscious even about being depressed, while being depressed. Maybe you shouldn’t … um, be here all the time. I feel like I really need my own space, right now.’

‘You don’t want me around you, I make you feel less happy and more sad,’ said Tom in a dull monotone.

‘I’m not saying that,’ said Sara quietly. ‘I just feel like shit right now, and I want to be alone, that’s all I know.’

‘I’ll leave you alone,’ said Tom. ‘It’ll be … good … in terms of helping you.’
‘I just need to ... shut down ... for a while,’ said Sara. ‘It’s just the only thing that works, when I get like this.’

‘I understand,’ said Tom without thinking anything.

Tom unplugged his blender and toaster and put it in a box. He took his tub of clothes and put it in the car. Outside, the air felt moist and hot like the continual fanning of someone’s breath, which Tom struggled to place in the same context as the air earlier in the morning before making pancakes, whose breeze had felt cool and crisp. ‘She’ll text me in a day or two,’ he thought, merging onto the highway with a racing heartbeat. He briefly considered not going home but staying on the highway, which he vaguely knew eventually led to Denver or Las Vegas, when it forked somewhere near the desert border of California and Nevada. ‘Las Vegas,’ he thought with unfocused eyes, as he missed his neighborhood’s exit, but took the next one.

At his apartment, Tom answered emails and WhatsApp messages from people interested in ordering weed from him, and filled half a dozen orders. He swallowed a 2mg bar of Xanax then lay on his bed listening to Lamb of God very loudly, which Spotify had randomly added to his Rock and Metal playlist. Listening to Lamb of God songs for the first time in a decade, Tom remembered Faisal, a friend in highschool, whose favorite band was Lamb of God. Tom had befriended Faisal by being lab partners in Biology and having the same lunch. Faisal, who grew up in Iraq and lived through two wars, told him about having seen his friend in elementary school get blown up by an American mortar strike about 50 feet away from him. ‘And now they’re doing it again,’ he said, in 2005 to a 14-year old Tom, who felt unsure of how to react except to think ‘War is really bad’ and say a version of that.

Tom sort of reluctantly agreed to play bass guitar in their newly formed band, Rest in Pieces, in which Faisal was the lead guitar and vocalist. In a warlike, anti-war song Tom helped
write lyrics to but whose title he no longer remembered, Faisal had performed a long guitar solo while ‘growling’ lyrics such as ‘You struck down my brother and his mother / now I’ll slay your seven sons and cunting daughters,’ while Tom played the same 3-4 chords on bass guitar. As freshman year progressed, Tom was more frequently late to band practice, in Faisal’s basement, showing up having practiced little or not at all, leading to Faisal frustratedly telling Tom he was ‘letting the band down,’ which Tom initially reacted to by laughing, as it struck him as something an older, maybe 25ish, band leader would say, instead of 9th graders playing music in a basement. Tom had gradually lost interest in Rest in Pieces and devoted more time to playing World of Warcraft, which Faisal referred to as a ‘retarded game.’ By the end of freshman year, Tom began eating lunch with people who played World of Warcraft rather than with Faisal and his bandmates, and gradually stopped speaking to Faisal or messaging him on AOL instant messenger.

Tom turned off the music and took a nap. Several hours later, while in the process of slowly waking, for some reason, he vaguely but earnestly intuited Sara’s presence, and with his eyes still closed pawed the other side of the bed fully expecting to touch her--but instead he drew in only a cold bedsheet, causing him to open his eyes to a very dark room, fully awake.

Minutes later, while looking at his phone, Tom thought of Christie and searched for her name on Facebook (having deleted her number and Kakao Talk contact) but the only search result was someone with her name who didn’t look like her, living in Hell, Michigan. Tom tossed his phone on the carpet and buried his face in his pillow; he committed to sleeping more, despite having just woke from a long nap, reasoning that there was nothing he wanted more, for the moment, except to regain unconsciousness.
The following week, Tom spotted, while driving, several police SUVs clustered near the entrance of his apartment complex. A policer officer, who was white, was ‘sitting’ on a black man who repeatedly shouted ‘That ain’t my shit! That ain’t my shit!’ while a female officer held a plastic bag with something greenish in it. After a minute of watching, another officer came to Tom’s car and told him to ‘move along,’ and he did.

‘An obese police officer was sitting on his back,’ Tom told Dave at his house, later that afternoon. ‘They were beating his ass and it’s all my fault.’

‘You don’t know if it was because of your weed or not,’ said Dave.

‘I have a feeling it was my weed in that bag,’ said Tom. ‘I used … like … eight different addresses from my apartment complex.’

‘The dude probably fought back. He could’ve just let himself be arrested, then get a lawyer.’

‘Wouldn’t you … fight back? If cops arrested you for drugs.’

‘I have cocaine in my pocket right now,’ said Dave.

‘Yeah--I mean, if you didn’t have drugs at all, and three cops jumped on you.’

‘What do you mean? I always have drugs on me.’

‘Jesus, nevermind,’ said Tom. ‘I’m not 100% sure if it was because of me, but I’m gonna stop selling weed online. I’m refunding the orders that came in this morning.’ Tom worked on his Macbook and deleted his online store.

‘You’re overreacting,’ said Dave, chopping up cocaine on a mirror with a credit card. He took out a vial of something else from his pocket and added it to the line.

‘What is that?’

‘Gold dust,’ said Dave. ‘It’s supposed to make it, like, a lot better.’
That night, alone in the back of Pho Sure, Tom experienced a panic attack followed by a prolonged sensation of a heavy pressure on his chest, like someone was sitting on his chest.

‘Jesus,’ said Tom aloud, and took 1mg of Xanax. Tom read a thread on Reddit about people dealing with extreme sensations of guilt, which he felt towards the man he’d accidentally incriminated by using his return address. Tom read a long post in which a woman described her having poisoned her husband’s coffee with concentrated antifreeze, to punish him for cheating on her. The husband got very sick, but threw up and did not die. The woman confessed to her husband what she did, and the husband forgave her. Afterwards, the woman repented her crime by volunteering at a homeless shelter for 70 hours a week. She wrote that she was able to resolve her guilt by doing this for close to five years, and that she and her husband were ‘living happily together.’ Tom typed a long, mostly apologetic email to Sara but, instead of sending it, saved it as a draft—deferring to his original plan of letting Sara work on her problems herself and reach out to him, rather than contacting her when he said he wouldn’t. A Google search about ‘places to volunteer’ displayed Salvation Army as the top result, and he filled out an email form to sign up as a volunteer on Sundays and Mondays, the two days Pho Sure was closed.

Tom’s first day volunteering at a nearby Salvation Army Donation Center was a Monday, which was ‘dump day,’ a weekly event in which several trucks arrived and dumped things into large containers, which then would be sorted. He was instructed, while being handed a stained red vest, to sort bins of clothes first by washed and unwashed, then into smaller but still enormous plastic bins labeled Women, Men, Girls, Boys. Tom was thanked repeatedly by the other employees, almost as if instructed by their boss to do so; as if he would immediately leave if his status as volunteer wasn’t continually affirmed with positivity. There were a few other
people assigned to work for community service, Tom noticed, who were not thanked or cheered on. After two hours of sorting, Tom was greeted by Donna, the facility director, who took Tom on a tour of the store, interspersed with a personal narrative about her status as a ‘recovering alcoholic,’ due to her teenage son’s death two years earlier. ‘The first week he got to college, he tried to do a backflip at the gymnasium and landed on his head,’ said Donna, as they walked past glasswares. ‘He broke his neck and the swelling in his brain put him in a coma, and he died.’

‘I’m sorry for your loss,’ said Tom.

‘You want to arrange all clothes from lighter to darker,’ said Donna taking clothes from a shopping cart and putting it on a rack. ‘See how I’m doing this? Light blue … darker blue … even darker blue.’ Donna left and went to the back of the store. An hour later, Tom finished the blues and began on the light green/green aisle. Walking to the back of the store, having been told by Donna to go on break, Tom passed the blue aisle to see it was almost completely messed up. A very obese woman stood holding each garment up to her body for three-to-five seconds before putting it back out of order.

‘This is the small blue section. Everything on this rack is extra small to small,’ said Tom trying to sound polite.

‘Oh,’ the woman said, and stared at Tom for around 15 seconds before she averted her eyes and resumed doing the same thing, taking extremely small clothing and putting them against her chest. Tom walked to the back of store.

‘That woman’s crazy,’ said a worker named Emily, appearing from electronics, intercepting Tom at 90 degree angle. ‘She comes in the store everyday and looks at women's XS. No one knows why she does it. A guy who used to work here said her daughter was abducted and killed and that’s why, or something.’
‘Jesus,’ said Tom.

‘Yeah. But after a few hours she goes to housewares and buys crystal plates and tea sets and picture frames. We’re pretty sure she’s a hoarder, I mean, she buys like 10 things every day.’

‘She puts pictures of her daughter in those frames, maybe,’ said Tom.

‘I never thought of that, that makes perfect sense,’ said Emily, smiling at Tom, looking impressed. They moved to sit outside Salvation Army’s back entrance, on folding chairs next to a dumpster. There was a pink ice cream truck with pale torn stickers of treats, which seemed pleasingly nostalgic to Tom.

‘How many hours do you have left,’ said Emily.

‘What do you mean,’ said Tom.

‘How many hours did they sentence you to?’

‘Oh, I don’t-- I’m not on probation. I’m here just to ... volunteer.’

‘Oh,’ said Emily flicking her cigarette. ‘The fuck’s wrong with you?’

‘Um.’

‘Are you a serial killer? Do you strangle people then go volunteer, and, like, forget that anything happened?’

Tom laughed. ‘I don’t think I’m a serial killer.’

‘Oh god, please don’t say you’re religious,’ said Emily performing, felt Tom, an exaggerated gesture of covering her face. ‘You’re gonna invite me to your church in about two minutes, right?’

‘I’ve never gone to church in my life,’ said Tom, and a few seconds later recalled, when, as a 8th grader addicted to World of Warcraft, playing 14-16 hours a day in the summer before
high school, his mother had bribed him $30 dollars to go to church ‘youth group’ every Saturday for a month, which Tom needed in order to pay his World of Warcraft subscription and so begrudgingly went for one or two months.

‘Okay, okay,’ said Emily laughing. ‘I’m just saying we get those guys here once in a while. Weird volunteers.’

‘People who volunteer are weird,’ said Tom flatly, uncertain of whether he meant it as statement or a question.

Emily stood up and stretched her arms vertically, exposing a silvery naval piercing, and yawned, making a sound which Tom thought was cute.

‘I think I wanted to do ... something ... for other people. Lately I’ve been feeling sort of ... extremely depressed. And my friend, Craig, said volunteering helped him when he felt extremely depressed. I was looking for a volunteer thing, and I saw the big ‘volunteers needed!’ sign on the glass. So here I am, I guess.’

Emily laughed. ‘No, sorry, it’s just that most of the volunteers we get are shitty teenagers who shoplift and have to do community service.’ She made a weird face then added, ‘Wow, that sounded really judgmental. I didn’t mean it to sound like that.’

‘That’s okay,’ said Tom.

‘Although,’ continued Emily, ‘we had one girl who did her community service for shoplifting at the mall. She kept stealing things while working here. When Donna caught her, she said it wasn’t stealing since we “got all this shit for free” Donna fired her. That’s the only time we fired a volunteer.’
‘Interesting. Um, is that pink ice cream truck for sale?’ asked Tom. Emily said the truck didn’t have an engine and needed to be pushed around; that it was sold last week to an artist who was going to paint a mural on it.

‘It reminds me of the ice cream truck in the music video ‘Today’ by Smashing Pumpkins,’ said Tom quietly. Emily said the last time she listened to Smashing Pumpkins was over 10 years ago, and that someone told her the lead singer committed suicide.

‘Billy Corgan’s still alive,’ said Tom, and said something vague about ‘a lot’ of people not being sure if he was still alive, and Smashing Pumpkins not being culturally relevant anymore, but that he still liked them.

‘He should write a song and sing ‘I’m still alive’ really loudly, maybe,’ said Emily.

‘I think someone already ... did that,’ said Tom, ‘Um, Pearl Jam.’

Emily asked if Tom lived alone or had a girlfriend.

‘Girlfriend,’ said Tom. ‘Well, ex-girlfriend now.’

Emily offered him a cigarette and he took one. When she asked about his ‘hobbies,’ Tom waited several seconds then blurted, sort of monolithically, ‘reading,’ then felt it as an extremely generic answer and immediately felt aversion towards it. As if to make up for the vagueness of his previous answer, Tom talked about reading books on Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy, which Emily seemed to know some things about. He then changed the subject, again, to other things he was doing to ‘improve’ himself, such as exercising more and slowly becoming vegan. Tom asked if Emily lived alone or was in a relationship. Emily said she just quit a ‘difficult’ relationship, but that she wished she’d done it much sooner. She rolled up her sleeve and showed Tom two large bruises on her arm. ‘He gave me those last month.’

‘That seems really bad,’ said Tom. ‘Were you okay?’
‘I hit him back with a baseball bat. He got 12 stitches on his shoulder,’ said Emily.

‘Oh,’ said Tom. ‘Um--’

Donna’s voice came onto Emily’s walkie talkie, asking people to come off break to help unload donations from several large trucks. Tom and Emily both rose and went to the front of the store.

On Saturday, Tom sat in Emily’s living room while she prepared them a vegan meal using ingredients Tom bought at Whole Foods. He was drinking from a plastic carton of cold-pressed organic green juice, and appreciated its subtle glow in the evening light coming from the patio. Emily stood in the kitchen humming while cooking and intermittently talked about her weekly vinyasa class, which took place in someone’s basement downtown. ‘Vinyasa,’ said Tom sort of mindlessly. ‘It sounds Japanese or something. But I don’t think Japanese people do yoga. When I see videos of Japanese people they’re smoking or drinking beer while wearing suits and having serious business conversations. I think there’s a misconception about Japanese people being really healthy and disease free, the healthy people that news and bloggers talk about are the ones who live in the countryside without McDonalds and grow organic daikon, or something.’

‘Yeah,’ said Emily sounding somewhat distracted.

Tom looked at a turquoise-color vase displayed on a slanted shelving unit next to the TV, then at the spines of books with titles he didn’t recognize, in a sort of continual, anemic scanning of the new environment in which he found himself, with progressively waning levels of interest. While resting his eyes on a nearly depleted purple candle on the coffee table, Tom realized himself feeling bored and strangely, extremely resigned towards the sum of his existence--
everyone he thought or felt or experienced, or might in the future--which, for the moment, seemed wholly encompassable by the phrase ‘or something.’

After eating and helping wash dishes, Tom sat with Emily on her couch watching *March of the Penguins*, which Emily sort of unexpectedly played after Tom had said ‘Oh, penguins’ while the movie was highlighted on Netflix, even though he wasn’t interested in seeing it. About halfway through the movie, Tom put his arm around Emily, as she leaned her head against his shoulder. They began kissing in a scene where a hoard of young penguins were waddling towards a glacier, when Morgan Freeman’s voice said ‘1 out of 10 penguins are going to survive this journey.’

They relocated to Emily’s bedroom after the movie ended. While continuing to kiss on her bed, Emily made a noise and quickly said ‘I’m not on birth control,’ and talked about having quit taking birth control two months ago, due to tiredness and acne breakouts. ‘I just wanted to let you know in advance, just in case.’ Tom said it was okay, unsure how to react. They took off their clothes. Emily laughed, causing Tom to laugh too when Tom’s face was near her vagina. Tom moved his mouth and tongue while several dogs barked outside and felt extremely bored. Tom placed his head on Emily’s pillow and they looked at each other. Emily wordlessly repositioned herself to lie inversely to Tom and moved her tongue around Tom’s penis with her mouth while Tom continued to listen to the dogs barking, and stared at the ceiling with a growing sense of boredom. ‘The dogs … are barking with a crazy syncopation, are they planning to launch a website with a noticeably large “Donate via Paypal” button,’ said Tom. Emily placed her head next to Tom’s and stared at him with a blank expression.
‘I’m sorry,’ said Tom lying perfectly still. ‘I shouldn’t say nonsequitur things. I just feel a little … unfocused … today.’ A breeze came into the room, a sad grassy smell from the outside.

Emily said she behaved differently when she was on birth control then apologized for not being on birth control, as a way of implying, thought Tom, that she was more inclined to have sex while on birth control. ‘That’s not what I’m thinking about,’ said Tom. ‘Don’t worry, it’s not your fault. We don’t need, um, to have sex. I feel consoled when my body is close to your body. Thank you for cooking dinner. I’m glad we’re doing this.’

‘This music is too depressing, I’ll change it to something happier,’ said Emily, and changed the music on her bluetooth speaker to something Tom thought was by Lana Del Rey, but later felt increasingly convinced that it was someone trying to sound like her. The song was about someone remembering the death of a childhood friend from getting run over by a schoolbus, because they were running and didn’t want to be late to school.

‘Is this too depressing … too?’

‘A little, I guess,’ said Tom. ‘But I like depressing songs, I think. To me, happy songs are depressing because the person is singing about something imaginary, something that you feel for five seconds or 15 minutes and then goes away. If someone writes a happy song they’ve written about a feeling that went away. But depression can last much longer, a whole lifetime. There’s more truth and certainty in the feeling. People say “fleeting happiness”, but never “fleeting sadness.”’

‘The person who wrote this song could have continued feeling depressed without writing the song. But they took their experience of sorrow and used it for something productive, music-
making. So in a sense the song should never have been able to be written, but it did … so it could be viewed as uplifting, life-affirming.’

‘Fleeting sadness,’ said Emily. ‘I’ll remember that.’

Saying that he felt sleepy and should go, Tom maneuvered checking the time on his phone and rolling off the bed to an upright position. ‘You should just sleep here, you don’t have to go,’ said Emily. ‘Um … okay,’ said Tom. After excusing himself to the bathroom, Tom sat on the toilet seat and wrote Sara an email describing, in short declarative sentences, how he felt ‘unsure’ about their current relationship status, whether they were still together or not, and that he ‘might move on to something else,’ unless she responded.

Two weeks later, Tom sat playing Call of Duty with Dave in his living room, while the girls jumped outside on a very large, shielded trampoline in the backyard--something he imagined an 8-year old version of him would feel extremely excited about and play in for hours, but as he currently existed felt little to no inclination towards.

‘Here, do some,’ said Dave holding an extremely small gold spoon to Tom.

‘Trampoline Cocaine party,’ said Tom, paraphrasing the situation, and declined the cocaine, especially because he was already on Adderall. In the game, Tom threw a grenade into a building and killed almost everyone on the opposing team, and shouted in elation, until Dave yelled ‘What the fuck!’ and he realized he’d killed four of his teammates, instead. Later, Dave played by himself while Tom read Good Morning Midnight by Jean Rhys, on his Macbook. ‘Depression is like a ball moving continuously through space,’ he felt moved to say after reading Jean Rhys for two hours straight, and looked up from the screen with a pulsating, mild headache. ‘The ball slowly moves toward the sun, then melts and becomes a part of its ass--’

‘Its ass?’ said Dave.
‘Gas. I meant to say gas.’

‘Have you ever had your balls pulled,’ said Dave. ‘Daisy pulled my nutsack, like, vertically down, last night. It was fucking great, and it didn’t hurt much, until later.’

‘That seems … I don’t know,’ said Tom, his voice trailing off. ‘Um, I thought Franki’s friends were only staying for 2 months? Tourist visas, or something?’

‘Who cares about that,’ said Dave, quitting a losing game on Call of Duty. ‘No one checks that. They can just stay here. They put a random address when they came through the airport, anyways. No one knows they’re here. Why should any of that shit matter? What matters is that they’re in fucking America now. They’re as American as you or me or fucking … anyone!’

‘I don’t think that’s how that works,’ said Tom. ‘Or, what happens if they try to fly back to China using their passports, won’t they get in trouble?’

‘I don’t know, okay? I don’t know. It’s probably fine. It doesn’t matter,’ said Dave. ‘This is America. This isn’t China. In America you’re free to be American. This is my house. They can’t come in my house. I’ll build a gate and put an armed guard there. I’ll build a fence around the house and plant trees so people can’t see. Shit, that’s what I’ll do. You can have guards with guns walk around your house, as long as it’s on your private property. People walking by can’t be able to see the guns. That’s the only rule. I looked it up.’

‘Won’t that attract even more attention?’

‘You think too much, Tom,’ said Dave, hastily cutting another line of coke then snorting it. ‘That’s your problem. You think too much and you don’t live enough. I’m just trying to live my life, man. You just have to let it go man. Let … it … go!’ Dave sang lyrics from a Disney movie called *Frozen*, assumed Tom though he’d never seen it, until his voice cracked he began
coughing a lot. He suddenly got up and opened the patio door, yelled towards the trampoline, ‘What do you guys want for dinner?’

Tom googled ‘coke babble’ on his Macbook and saw pictures of Charlie Sheen, alongside memes involving Charlie Sheen, on the first page of search results. Tom went in Dave’s kitchen and made a smoothie using organic rainbow kale, frozen acai berries, a very dark banana, and powdered peanut butter Dave bought but never used; he appreciated the nutty flavor of the smoothie and imagined the influx of new antioxidants ‘fighting’ free-radicals released by the increased drug use during the past month. The free-radicals in his body wore headbands and were banging blunt weapons around in his body, cruising down red blood cell rafts in his bloodstream, going down to his legs and up to his neck and brain stem, and the antioxidants were chasing them. ‘Antioxidants are stabbing free radicals in the head … in my head,’ thought Tom, and remembered the chorus of ‘Zombie’ by The Cranberries. Catharine came into the living room holding an extremely young-looking puppy, still mostly furless and pink.

‘It has a really flat nose,’ said Tom looking at the puppy’s snout-like nose. ‘Is that … normal?’

Catharine was looking at her phone with her other hand, and didn’t seem to hear.

Tom continued to watch the young puppy swaddled in a blue towel and decided it looked ‘really weird’ and did not feel like petting it anymore. Then it made weird noises that sounded like oinks.

‘The puppy is oinking,’ said Tom.

‘It’s not puppy, it’s a micropig,’ said Dave, returning to the living room with a Monster soda.

‘Wait, that’s a pig?!’ said Tom. ‘I thought you were getting a puppy.’
Dave said they were going to get a puppy before they found micropigs--potbellies genetically modified to grow only to the size of a dog--online. ‘Franki found a site selling micropigs They were $4000 each. There’s another one upstairs. A black one.’

‘I started volunteering at Salvation Army,’ said Tom, changing the subject. ‘Two days a week.’

‘What for?’ said Dave sounding very surprised if even offended, at what Tom said, even though he was pretty sure he’d texted him about it.

‘I’m helping out a little, I guess. They get a truckload of donations every week, and they don’t have enough people to sort them out. It’s fun sometimes.’ Tom thought of Emily but decided not to talk about her, as it would confuse Dave’s concept of his relationship with Sara, which Tom himself felt very confused by and felt aversion towards talking about.

Tom drove to Whole Foods and looked at ‘Brain Health’ supplements for a long time. He purchased a choline supplement, coconut water, granola bars, and then went home.

On Monday, after volunteering at Salvation Army, Tom went to Dave’s house and saw a despondent-looking Paul, smoking two cigarettes at once, who didn’t acknowledge his presence when he said ‘hey.’ Tom went inside and, opening a mountain dew from Dave’s fridge, expressed amusement at having seen Paul smoking two cigarettes at once, which he’d never seen someone do before, and that he’d completely ignored his presence.

‘Yeah,’ said Dave, sitting on the couch, after a delay of several seconds.

‘Did something happen with the business?’ said Tom, knowing Paul usually visited the house when Dave or Pam needed to sign something.

‘Yeah,’ said Dave, then fell quiet again, looking at his phone.
‘We don’t have to talk about it,’ said Tom, ‘if it’s personal.’

‘Trevor’s … um. They charged him with murder,’ said Dave. ‘This morning.’

‘Which is a mistake … right? Because he’s in jail …’

‘No. Like, he killed someone inside the jail. Or he hired someone to beat up someone, but then that person died. It was a guard who killed the prisoner, actually.’

‘I’m really confused right now,’ said Tom, setting his soda down.

‘Ok. I told you Trevor was getting beat up in jail before, right? Like, these guys were messing with him, for one reason or another.’

‘Yeah,’ Tom nodded.

‘The guards or the warden wasn’t helping because they thought ‘fuck him, he’s probably a child molester’ or some shit. Trevor was able to work out a way for Pam to pay money to one of the guards, to protect him, to get these guys to stop messing with him. The guard got into a fight with these guys, and ended up having to shoot one of them. But the dude that was bullying him ended up dead, somehow, he got smashed on the head with a baton. They arrested the guard and charged him, but then he said Pam bribed him to do it, so they sent out an arrest warrant for Pam. A bunch of cops came to the house but Pam was already gone--Paul told her to get the fuck out of the country right away. Trevor and Pam … they’re both being charged with second-degree murder. I think she might be in Canada, with her friend, or something.’

‘Jesus,’ said Tom. ‘How is this even …’

‘Possible?’ said Dave.

‘Yeah. Jesus.’

Dave began playing Call of Duty: Zombies. Tom sat quietly watching, eating stale popcorn from a bowl. He felt the need to say something.
‘What’s your plan?’ said Tom.

‘About what?’

‘This, I guess. Like, what did Paul tell you to do?’

‘There’s nothing I can do except deny that I knew anything about Pam giving money to the guard, which I only knew about a little, I think. Like, Pam said one time that she helped buy the guard’s girlfriend a car, in exchange for protection. But I don’t even know if it was the same guard. And I don’t know where she is, she left her phone here, so … And as for Trevor, Paul said he hired a criminal defense guy, since Paul’s a business tax lawyer, technically. He says there’s a chance Trevor can get off the hook. If they can’t prove that Trevor, like, knew about or asked Pam to bribe the guard for him.’

‘Oh,’ said Tom, intuiting this as the first piece of good news, even though he acknowledged knowing nothing about criminal defense law. ‘Trevor deserves a break.’

Dave seemed focused on the game and had become unresponsive, as he steadily drank from what seemed like three separately opened cans of Monster soda. Tom texted Emily about things unrelated to Dave or Trevor, and looked at things on the internet until 2am, when he drove home.

The next night after work, Tom got a text from his landlord that he and his family had returned from Israel over the weekend, and wanted to resume violin lessons, which Tom provided in lieu of paying rent. Tom spent an hour trying to tune the violins, which had not been played in five months, and several strings broke. While two of the four siblings went home to look for spare strings, Tom improvised a song using just the D string on one of the violins, which made them laugh. All four of them had forgotten how to play the violin completely, it seemed.
‘Look, rhinoceros!’ said Meyer, the youngest, holding a violin against his forehead. He dropped the violin on the tile kitchen floor, making a very loud noise. The last string snapped off and the wooden bridge, as well as the tailpiece, flew away. Meyer searched for pieces of the violin, lay on the floor and reached under the refrigerator. ‘I found one!’ he cried out, holding a large, fossilized-looking cockroach, and several of its legs fell off of its body.

On Monday, dump day, Tom sorted donations with Emily and Trey. Trey, who performed in monthly drag shows in a gay bar, talked about a new Madonna-themed act he was preparing, and set aside a silver sequin dress and cowboy boots from the bins.

Conversely, Tom noticed an uncharacteristically silent Emily aggressively throwing items into bins, seeming pissed off, sometimes muttering under her breath. Tom went with her to McDonalds, ate two Spicy McChicken sandwiches. Afterwards, in the rear lot of Salvation Army, Emily aggressively smoked cigarettes and asked if Tom still wanted to watch *Train to Busan*, a Korean zombie apocalypse movie, which they had previously discussed watching together. Tom felt an immediate low-level panic, due to accidentally having seen it by himself last weekend on his Macbook, likely having forgotten that Emily wanted to see it with him. ‘Um, sure,’ said Tom, feeling it wasn’t a ‘big deal’ if he saw *Train to Busan* again, and weakly visualized himself in Emily’s living room feigning seeing it for the first time, how he would act exaggeratedly shocked and scared at moments when zombies jumped at the screen, in an effort to make Emily not feel bad for watching it without her.

‘We don’t have to if you don’t want to,’ said Emily while looking at Tom in an unexpectedly aggressive, if accusatory, expression. ‘We don’t have to do things if you don’t want to, you don’t *have* to pretend to like me.’
‘I don't-- not pretending,’ said Tom feeling confused. ‘I want to watch the zombie movie with you.’

Emily lit a third or fourth cigarette. ‘I lashed out at you, I’m sorry. I’m lashing out at everyone today. Earlier I almost shouted at Trey “shut up about your fag shows, no one cares, go kill yourself” when he kept bothering me about which dress he looked better in. My rage is out of control today. If it wasn’t dump day I would’ve called in sick.’

‘You can leave if you … need to,’ said Tom. ‘I can stay past my shift and keep sorting. I’ll tell Donna I’m working for you.’

‘No, don’t do that. I just… I have bipolar disorder,’ said Emily, ‘and also Intermittent Outburst Disorder, if you know what that is.’ Emily talked about the medications she took in the past, but had quit because of the side effects.

Tom went to the bathroom and, for the last 5 minutes of lunch break, read Intermittent Outburst Disorder’s WebMD page, including a linked case study about a man who murdered two people and unsuccessfully plead temporary insanity due to intermittent outburst disorder, in the UK. Shortly after returning to work, Tom saw Emily carrying a oversize pair of garden shears from the back of the store towards hardware/garden tools and, as she passed Trey who was holding a VCR, imagined Emily suddenly impaling Trey’s neck with the shears, and visualized blood spurting from his neck, still holding the VCR, taking one or two more steps towards the used electronics aisle, before collapsing in a pool of pool. Thirty minutes later, Tom heard Emily call out to him, while pushing a wheelbarrow towards the front of the store, to go through the electronics bin and throw away DVDs that ‘looked pirated.’ Tom went to the back and organized DVDs in alphabetical order by title, only throwing one out because it was empty. Towards the end of the bin he studied a collector’s edition box of all the Star Wars movies before
setting it aside, knowing Donna usually let sorters keep a few items for themselves, and that he could sell it on Ebay for ‘at least $19.99,’ he thought.

About halfway through *Train to Busan* in Emily’s living room the following evening, Emily excused herself to the bathroom and soon began shouting--on the phone, or to nobody, he couldn’t tell. While staring a the paused screen of Netflix, Tom imagined himself being murdered by Emily before midnight, and, yet, despite sensing the real possibility of this happening, did not feel the urge to leave the apartment, delete Emily’s phone number and unfriend her on Facebook, or even to stop volunteering at Salvation Army. He reasoned that he didn’t care what would or could happen next, or somehow felt an incredible amount of apathy towards the situation, culminating in his body remaining inertly bored.

Emily returned and began sort of frantically pacing the living. ‘

‘Unbelievable,’ she said, ‘that fucker, that fucker! I’m gonna kill you!’

‘Tell me what happened,’ said Tom calmly, ‘I’ll listen to what you have to say.’

‘You won’t fucking understand,’ said Emily, ‘It’s too fucked up.’

‘Describe the first thing that happened using concrete literal language,’ said Tom, ‘then tell me the second thing that happened using concrete literal language.’

‘My ex-boyfriend Brad stole my shit and won’t give them back.’

‘Okay. This is about Brad, then.’

Emily talked about her two-year, live-in relationship with Brad. Last year, Brad had purchased a large flatscreen TV with Emily’s Best Buy credit card, but soon stopped making payments due to losing his job as a personal trainer. At their breakup, three months ago, Emily let Brad take the TV as a parting gift, but changed her mind upon recently discovering that he had cheated on her with several of her acquaintances while they were together, further that he’d
moved in with one of them a week after they broke up. When Emily demanded that he return the TV, since she was still making payments on it, Brad refused and blocked her number.

‘Jesus,’ said Tom. ‘What an asshole.’

‘I’m really hungry,’ said Emily, ‘I was so mad today that I forgot to eat.’

While eating at Wendy’s, Emily continued to angrily talk about other things Brad had done to upset her—despite Tom trying to steer the conversation towards work-related things—culminating with, driving back to her apartment from Wendy’s, forcefully navigating them to Brad’s apartment, by putting the address in Tom’s GPS and repeatedly stating that she needed to go there, despite Tom saying it wasn’t a good idea.

‘Park over there,’ said Emily after they drove into an apartment complex called Paradise Villas. Tom watched an elderly man walking an equally old-looking, overweight basset hound, whose distended belly was dragging on the asphalt. ‘Um,’ said Tom anxiously when he noticed Emily holding two large, hunting-style knives. ‘It’ll be faster if you do it with me,’ said Emily, handing him one. Tom followed Emily across the parking lot to Brad’s Ford Explorer.

Tom repeatedly stabbed one of the rear tires, but nothing happened. ‘You have to push it in,’ said Emily. She punctured a front tire, making a loud hissing noise. Using greater force Tom succeeded in stabbing the tire, but then struggled to pull it back out. Emily slashed all the remaining tires then pulled out Tom’s knife with surprising ease; the SUV was sinking lower towards the ground. ‘Thanks,’ said Tom, ‘But we should really get out of here now. I don’t want to get arrested.’

‘Wait,’ said Emily; she got a brick from behind a bush and handed it to Tom. Tom threw the brick but it bounced, it seemed, off the rear glass of the car. ‘Throw it harder,’ said Emily. Tom said he felt a little nauseous and couldn’t throw it harder. Emily took the brick and threw it,
causing it to crash through the rear glass of the car and land in the truck. They quickly got in Tom’s car and drove away.

‘Do you feel better,’ said Tom about 20 minutes later, watching Emily sit motionlessly still on the sofa after a shower. It was 3:00 am and Tom knew Emily would go to work at 9 am. Tom produced a 10mg Adderall from his pocket and placed it on the coffee table, that she could take it to stay awake at work.

‘What am I doing with my life, I don’t even know what I’m doing,’ said Emily in a somber tone. Tom felt the contrast between Emily’s manic-depressive phase and the light pink towel wrapped around her wet hair produced a funny contrast, but didn’t say anything. ‘Say something comforting, not frivolous,’ thought Tom.

‘I am an assistant manager at Salvation Army’ said Emily. ‘I shouldn’t have vandalized Brad’s car. I should have written about it in my anger management journal instead. I could have counted to 1000 and not done anything. I keep … forgetting … all these things,’ said Emily.

‘Brad treated you really bad … so I can understand, I think,’ said Tom.

‘I’m a worthless … human being. The best thing I can do is stand still and not cause harm to my surroundings and others, but I can’t even do that.’ Emily buried her face in her hands.

‘There’s no hope for me, should I just kill myself.’

‘Don’t kill yourself,’ said Tom in an uncertain tone. ‘Find a hobby, something you can put your feelings into. Sublimate negative emotional responses into concrete, specific actions. It can help, I think.’

‘I can help the world by killing myself. That’s the only way. There’s no better place for me,’ said Emily. ‘I’m going to slit my wrist, just a little. It’ll prevent me from doing more harm to myself or my surroundings.’
Tom opened his Macbook and found, on Reddit, a support group for people with bipolar and intermittent outburst disorder. He showed his Macbook screen to Emily. ‘These people are talking about things you’re experiencing. Impulsive outbursts followed by extreme guilt and self-loathing,’ said Tom reading a pinned post.

‘If I don’t kill myself I’m going to kill someone,’ said Emily. ‘Someone is going to die because of me. It’s only a matter of time before I really kill someone in an outburst. Therefore I should just kill myself before I kill someone else.’

‘You can kill me … if you want,’ said Tom feeling slightly dramatic. ‘Not now … but soon. Um, in two or three months I truly won’t care if I’m dead or alive, I think. I’ll write a document giving you permission to murder me. They won’t be able to arrest you. Wait--or you can kill me and then escape to Ecuador, just in case.’

Emily didn’t say anything.

‘You can do it … if it’ll make you feel better,’ Tom repeated in a firmer, less-hesitant voice. ‘Just tell me when you want to, I guess.’

‘I feel calmer now, I’m calming down,’ said Emily. ‘Don’t say things like that. I’m not going to kill you, I’ll never kill someone because of my disorder. I’ll go back to therapy. I’ll wake up early tomorrow and call my parents to lend me money to buy health insurance, so that I can go back to therapy.’

‘That’s good. I’m glad that you decided that.’

Emily leaned closer to Tom like a structurally compromised tower, and sort of fell into Tom’s chest area; he held Emily with one arm, partially unconsciously keeping one arm free, he felt, for deflecting an attack from Emily, which he intuited could happen like a sudden, violent rainshower during a sunny day, in a place like Vancouver or Portland.
Emily’s crying slowed to an irregular sobbing through the course of an episode of *Broad City* on Netflix, which Emily had put on insisting that watching TV helped her stop crying faster. In the episode, one of the main characters of the show broke her front tooth by biting into a large jawbreaker shoplifted from a bodega, in New York City. Another character made a joke about karma, and in the next scene was splashed by mud by a truck. ‘Why is everyone on this show so fucked,’ said Tom without much interest. When the episode ended, Tom spoke vaguely about ‘not feeling cathartic’ despite that being, he felt, the intention of the writers, because it was ‘trying too hard’ to make him feel like that.

‘I’m not angry any more,’ said Emily, pausing Netflix. ‘I’m going to commit to working harder on myself. On today, next year, I’ll be in a better place. Or I’ll be dead. On today next year if I’m not in a better place, I’m going to kill myself. That’s what I told myself last year, but I didn’t follow through. Good people follow through on promises, I think, especially promises to themselves.’

‘That’s … good, I guess,’ said Tom uneasily. ‘I don’t think I have the courage to do that … um, even if I should. I might just go through life to see what happens--what happens to me and to other people.’

‘I don’t want to stress you out,’ said Emily. ‘I’ll get better. Thank you … for helping me.’

While another episode of *Broad City* played, Emily kissed Tom’s neck. They lay on the sofa kissing for a while, then Emily performed oral sex on Tom. When the episode ended, they hugged and Tom left the apartment.
At Pho Sure on Sunday, Tom made an ‘unhealthy’ avocado smoothie using condensed milk, sugar and lime juice, which Amrak used to sometimes make. Tom thought of Amrak who had, according to Danny, begun work as a manager at a bank. While drinking avocado smoothie, he thought of how different her life would be had she married the middle-aged accountant and stayed in Berkeley, instead of going back to Cambodia.

‘Sorry, we’re all out of salmon,’ said Tom around two hours later, to a customer who ordered three salmon rolls.

‘Okay, I’ll just get tuna, then.’

‘Actually we’re out of that, too.’

‘Isn’t this a sushi restaurant?’ the man said.

‘Yeah. Sort of.’

The man settled on spicy tuna rolls, which Tom managed to prep since the tuna came in bags and didn’t require special cutting.

Near closing time, Danny came in with a usual wad of cash. He hadn’t bothered to put out his cigarette, and was already leaving after putting it in the cash register. ‘Wait a minute, wasn’t it your birthday last week?’ Danny reached in his pocket and handed him three crinkled $100 bills, before Tom could answer, that his birthday was three months away.

‘Thanks,’ said Tom, then quickly mentioned that another salmon had been delivered and he’d stacked it on top of the one from last week.

‘Shit, I have to cancel that,’ said Danny. ‘Don’t worry about it. People don’t order salmon anyways.’

‘I can try cutting the salmon,’ said Tom. ‘There’s video tutorials on Youtube.’
'Yeah, go ahead. Nowadays everything’s on Youtube,’ said Danny grinning, in an amused if slightly dismissive tone. After watching a Youtube video where a Japanese sushi chef demonstrated filleting a salmon, saying ‘See? Easy’ repeatedly after each stroke. Tom took Danny’s sushi knife and began copying the motion, with unexpected difficulty. Attempting to fillet it using a ‘sawing’ motion, the meat separated into many different pieces, softer parts turning into an almost slush-like consistency. Tom lifted a jagged piece of salmon and felt confused. Tom somewhat resignedly chopped the salmon into cubes and prepared spicy salmon. Inspired by another video, Tom cooked the salmon carcass with a butane torch on an aluminum tray. He sent a picture of the finished product to Dave, who responded, ‘What the fuck is that?’

Tom opened, on his Macbook, a new email from his mother’s email account, which turned out to be, upon closer examination, a forwarded version of an email from over two months ago, which was somewhat characteristic of what his mother did when he didn’t respond to her emails. Tom’s usual reaction to parental emails was to first quickly ‘scan’ them for time-sensitive material (i.e. his father asking for a tax form needed to file him as a dependent, or his mother wanting him buy something from Amazon and ship it to a freight forwarder in Los Angeles to be automatically dispatched to their apartment in Seoul), then unenergetically read the email while continuing to do other tasks on the internet, sometimes opening a new Google document and drafting a response and saving it to a folder called ‘Parents Emails.’ In the email he currently looked at, Tom’s mother insisted, as she did four or five times a year for the past two years, for Tom to move to Korea and live in the spare bedroom of his parents’ apartment, ‘especially’ because he wasn’t ‘doing anything’ in America. She said it would be easy for Tom to find employment as an SAT/TOEFL teacher and English tutor. Tom had previously refused to move to Korea, repeatedly citing his inability to speak or write in Korean—that he had a three-
year old’s speaking ability, to which his mother countered that Korean people ‘preferred’ English teachers that couldn’t speak Korean. Tom’s mother ended the email by writing ‘If you don’t want to leave America--that’s OK. Just come visit. Book tickets b4 summer when they become expensive!’ Tom read several unread emails from his mother. In another message, Tom’s mother expressed relief that Tom’s father had finally resumed therapy session for early-stage Alzheimer’s, after having, months earlier, thrown a ‘tantrum’ and stormed out of his second appointment with a specialist.

‘My father is 63 and my mother is 61, and one of them has Alzheimer’s and neither of them live in the country I live in,’ Tom said aloud in the empty restaurant.

Tom thought of his sister and called her, but it went to voicemail. He wasn’t sure if she was sleeping or awake due to her irregular schedule of being an emergency room resident in Bethesda--or was it nights shifts in a cancer ward somewhere in Virginia? Tom vaguely remembered her saying she would be ‘on night shifts’ for the next six weeks two or three weeks ago; nevertheless, he entertained the possibility that it could’ve been five or seven weeks ago, which would mean Gina would have returned to a normal sleep schedule and he would be calling her past midnight, while she was sleeping.

Tom answered a call from his sister fifteen minutes later.

‘Hi. Where are you? Virginia?’

‘No,’ said Gina. ‘In the desert. Texas.’

‘I thought you were in Maryland, or Virginia. What’s the hospital like in Texas?’

‘I told you I’m in the desert for army trauma training. I’m literally running around the middle of the desert treating plastic dummies and giving them CPR and shit.’

‘Really? Can’t you um, just pretend to do those things?’
‘Yeah, they fly over with drones. They can even watch us in the dark because they have night vision. If we don’t find all the dummies, treat them like real people and build tents for them, we fail the mission and have to do it all over again next month. Oh, and I have to carry this 30-pound rubber assault rifle this whole time. It’s literally strapped onto my chest and I can’t remove it.’

‘Rubber dummies, 30-pound rubber gun. Jesus.’

‘They’re preparing us for Syria,’ said Gina. The sound of birds, which Tom imagined to be vultures, squawked in the background, maybe mistaking the dummies for corpses. ‘Have you bought your ticket to Korea? Did you buy your flight as a stopover to Hong Kong like I said? I did that last time and it saved me 50%.’

‘What do you mean? I’m not going to Korea.’

‘Mom said you were going next month.’

‘I never agreed to that.’

‘What the fuck? She literally told me you were going there last week. Maybe she has dementia, too.’

‘Fuck,’ said Tom. He thought of his father’s early-onset dementia, then suddenly, almost as an afterthought, of how his paternal grandfather also must have had dementia as he had, at age 75, erratically accused his 70-year old wife--Tom’s grandmother--of having an affair, and he forcefully shaved off all her hair. ‘I just remembered that our grandfather had dementia, too. Does that mean I’ll get it?’

‘Dude, everyone gets dementia, it’s not special. Everyone gets it in the end as the brain wears out. It’s just a matter of when it happens. If it happens before age 65, we call it
Alzheimer’s. If it happens later, then it’s just normal aging. But we’re genetically predisposed, so, yeah, there’s a good chance it’ll happen for us sooner than later.’

‘That sounds so depressing. I’m going to commit suicide as soon as I get Alzheimer’s. You can have my Vitamix if I die.’

‘Mom said she’s gonna stop sending you money if you don’t visit them. Why don’t you just go? It’s not like you’re doing anything over there. You’re just dicking around like a retard.’

‘I’m writing a novel.’

‘What’s going on with that? Why haven’t you sent it to me?’

‘It’s not ready,’ said Tom. ‘I’m trying, um, to make it better.’

‘Don’t you want to spend time with mom and dad before they get too old? In a few years, dad might not even be able to have a conversation with you. Especially since he’s not cooperating with existing treatments.’ Gina sighed, loudly. ‘Can you go? I can’t go because I’m too busy. What the hell is keeping you in Berkeley? I’m so confused.’

Tom resisted the urge to hang up. Tom thought to talk about Sara, to change the subject and justify his staying in Berkeley, then he felt aversion towards mentioning it, that it would take too much effort to explain their relationship, her disability, and everything else. ‘I’ll work on it,’ said Tom quickly, in a mumble, hoping a vaguely positive stock phrase would halt further questioning.

‘I have to go soon. I’m not even supposed to be using my phone. I need to sew a leg back on a dummy, then go find the other leg. I’ll be back in Maryland next week. When are you gonna visit me? You never visit me. Shit, there’s a drone. I need to go. Love you,’ said Gina and hung up.

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Near closing time, a few hours later, a person wearing what seemed to be a beekeeper’s overalls, of thickly-dirtied mustard yellow, came into the restaurant. ‘Is this Buddy’s?’ he said.

‘No,’ said Tom, hesitating, holding a broom. ‘This is Pho Sure.’

‘What?’

‘Pho Sure,’ said Tom.

‘Where’s Buddy’s? This used to be Buddy’s, right?’

Tom continued to mop the floor and said ‘I’m closing the store now,’ with eyes averted towards pushing a yellow lever down to wring the mop.

‘Where’s the bathroom?’ the man said.

‘There’s no … bathroom,’ said Tom, thinking of the toilets he just cleaned.

The homeless man asked for pizza--‘Two slices,’ he said. ‘Just two.’

Tom said he was going to throw away a lot of spicy salmon and said he could give him that if he wanted.

‘What?’

‘Spicy salmon … salmon.’

‘What’s that?’

‘Just-- Please leave the restaurant,’ said Tom.

The man put his hand on the wall and another one in the pocket of his outermost, brownish jacket. ‘I don’t want no trouble. I’m just remembering old times. Buddy was my best friend,’ he said. He breathed loudly through his nose, then he exhaled with a loud ‘ahh.’

‘The pepperoni was so good I shit pepperoni .. for the rest of my life!’ the man said.

‘That was Buddy’s.’

‘Buddy’s,’ said Tom.
The man left and Tom locked the door. He resumed mopping. When he checked his phone, he saw multiple messages from Sara, saying that her stepmother had died in a plane crash.

‘Jesus,’ he texted. ‘I’m really sorry about that. Are you ok?’

‘I’m totally fine. Um, my dad is totally fucked, though,’ said Sara. ‘What should I do.’

‘I don’t know,’ said Tom. ‘What are you … thinking?’

‘This is just so absurd. Plane crashes always happen to other people, not your parents.’

‘But everyone dies,’ said Tom, nonsequiturly, he felt.

‘I’m just not sure what to do … about my dad.’

‘Google it,’ said Tom. ‘I’m googling it now.’

‘What the fuck do I search for that?’

Tom googled ‘how to help dad grieve stepmother death’ and read from the blog of two clinical psychology students answering questions someone sent them.

‘Do you feel … sad?’

‘No. I mean, that’s the crazy part. Joy died and I feel nothing. No sadness, tears, nothing. I don’t think I’m even sad for my Dad, just worried about him. Is this normal?’

‘I’ve never cried over someone dying, I think. But no one close to me has died yet.’

Tom texted that he could come over and bring some food, and Sara said that would be nice. He quickly finished mopping and drove to Sara’s apartment.

Upon his arrival, they greeted each other with a wordless hug which lasted over twenty seconds. Sara thanked Tom for coming. They sat on the sofa silently for a few minutes, then Tom gently pawed Sara’s shoulder and said that he missed her. Sara said she had missed him,
too, and, if Tom wanted, that they should get back together and ‘never fight so bad again,’ which Tom agreed to without hesitation.

‘We’re better when we’re together, I think,’ said Tom. ‘Even if our relationship isn’t extremely desirable all the time, or perfect. But nothing’s perfect, so … I feel like it’s really good still, um, overall …’

‘Yes,’ said Sara. ‘Nothing’s perfect. But this is much better than being alone. I’m happy when I’m with you.’

They hugged again, then ordered Mexican food online. Tom took a 2mg Xanax from his backpack, which they each had half of, then watched Netflix until the food arrived. The next morning, Tom drove Sara to the airport for her flight to San Diego in order to spend the next week with her dad to ‘make sure he doesn’t kill himself, or something,’ she said. At the terminal, she handed him her SNAP debit card, saying she didn’t go to the ‘shady hookah dude’ last month to withdraw cash, so there might be twice the money if he went there. Tom, who’d also forgotten about his SNAP card, said he didn’t withdraw from it, either, and said he’d go since it was on the way home. When Tom arrived at the smoke shop, he saw it was empty, with an orange ‘FOR RENT’ sign on the window. Tom drove to the Salvation Army to turn in his uniform. He was greeted by Donna, who thanked him for volunteering, gave him a $100 store gift certificate and hugged him, saying to come see them often. Leaving the store, Tom saw Trey pushing a folded-up ping pong table and asked if Emily was working--he said no, that he thought she called in sick. Inside his car, Tom texted Emily: ‘Just wanted to let you know I got back together with my ex-girlfriend. I finished volunteering at the store for now. Hope you feel better.’
Upon Sara’s return the following week, Tom and Sara spent most of their time together, as if feeling a mutual, profound-seeming but mostly unburdensome responsibility, to make up for the five weeks they spent apart. Tom once again moved some clothes and kitchen stuff back into Sara’s apartment, Sara saying that she missed him cooking for them.

45 minutes into watching a documentary on Netflix about people using ecstasy in clubs, in which interviewees were shown standing instead of sitting while speaking about ‘Molly’ (a street name for MDMA), seeming almost as if someone named ‘Molly’ was the mysteriously unseen, Godot-like main character of the movie. At some point Sara abruptly blurted, ‘Oh, I have one,’ referencing that she had one ecstasy pill in her purse given to her by Alicia who, when at Dave’s house over two months ago, wanting to see if MDMA would drastically improve her Wii Tennis ability, took MDMA telling Sara to also take it—who had pretended to but didn’t—and lost to Alicia five times in a row at Wii Tennis, when before she had been winning against her. Sara produced, after rummaging in her purse for around 30 seconds, a white MDMA tablet in a small plastic bag.

‘I’m scared I’ll freak out,’ said Tom, recalling an incident involving MDMA in college and told Sara about it. During welcome week at Berkeley, a hallmate in Tom’s freshman dorm took MDMA, went partying, and ended up killing himself by jumping off the roof of a four-story fraternity house.

‘I’m 99% sure that wasn’t because of MDMA,’ said Sara, ‘he must’ve mixed it with other drugs, or acid, or something.’ Sara texted a friend who she said did MDMA ‘a lot’ and then said ‘I’m 100% sure nothing bad will happen. Drink lots of water,’ she said.

With water bottles ready, they each took half the tablet and continued watching the MDMA documentary. Tom thoughts about the things he saw when he took mushrooms at the
park, several months ago, and desired to re-experience or at least have something like that, while alternating thinking ‘nothing is happening.’ Then he felt light and that his body was moving without much added force, a curling iron sliding while slowly rotating on the ice, gently accelerated by two unseen skaters with brushes.

‘I want to go to Whole Foods. To get … um … organic lemonade with strawberries at the bottom…’ said Sara in a very slow-seeming, strikingly professional-sounding voice.

‘Whoa. Your voice sounds so good. You’re pronouncing like everything …. Perfectly.’

‘I can drive, but I feel like I shouldn’t. It’ll be better if I don’t drive.’

‘Just call an Uber. Let’s just do that.’

On the way to Whole Foods, Ron, the Uber driver, talked to them. ‘I hope you don’t mind if I vape,’ he said. ‘No we don’t mind,’ said Tom. The car filled up with vapor, and Sara waved her hand around in the vapor. ‘So is this what you do all day… vape?’

‘Yeah, I vape a lot,’ said Ron, handed him a business card called Vape Nationz, encouraging Tom to check it out and telling him he’d get 20% off if he said he heard it from an Uber driver.

Walking in the parking lot, after being dropped off, Sara said ‘Aren’t we at Whole Foods?’ in an uncertain tone, pointing up at a Walmart sign.

‘Whoa. We told the driver to take us to Whole Foods, but he drove us to … Walmart … instead.’

Sara started uncontrollably laughing. ‘What the fuck. Vape Dude took us to Walmart instead of Whole Foods.’

‘He didn’t hear us correctly, maybe. They both start with W.’ Tom said maybe the universe wanted them to be at Walmart, instead of Whole Foods.]
As they continued to walk, confused and without resolution, towards Walmart, they were joined, it seemed, by two fashionable black teenagers riding on an electric scooter intended for obese and/or disabled people. The black teenager riding on the back of the scooter slapped the other teenager’s shoulder and said, ‘go faster! We’re losing at Mario Kart,’ as Tom and Sara continued moving at a normal pace and were apparently ‘beating’ the scooter, which had slowed due to malfunction or a depleted battery. Someone in an orange vest collecting carts in the parking lot pointed and shouted something. ‘Go go go!’ the black teenager in the back yelled as he started pushing the cart in an acceleratory effort, away from the Walmart employee jogging leisurely, it seemed, to catch them. ‘Black existentialism,’ thought Tom, entering the store with Sara.

Upon inspecting the juice/smoothie cooler located at the front of Walmart, Sara said they should call another Uber, and did so, the predominant reason being that Walmart didn’t have organic strawberry lemonade with strawberries at the bottom, or other ‘interesting things’ to look at. The second Uber driver arrived quickly, a middle-aged Caucasian who didn’t talk at all after confirming their name and destination, and took them in a minivan to Whole Foods.

‘I think I liked vape dude better,’ said Tom, ‘despite the fact that he drove us to the wrong place. Which is saying something, I feel.’

‘I liked him better, too,’ said Sara.

‘I’m also rolling pretty hard now, I think,’ said Tom as they entered Whole Foods. ‘It feels like waves, almost. Everything feels… very new, very good.’

‘Yeah,’ said Sara. ‘Yeah.’

‘Lead us to organic lemonade.’
Sara got an organic strawberry lemonade, while Tom got a greenish yellow drink called Kiwi Passion limeade, with kiwi on the bottom. They paid for the drinks and resumed walking while drinking them.

They looked around in the produce area, sometimes touching vegetables and fruits as they walked by.

‘Do you feel … ecstatic?’ said Tom.

‘A little, I think. You’re feeling it stronger than me, I think.’

‘Did you read … the book, um,’ said Tom struggling to be specific, but at the same time feeling that he was being as specific as possible.

‘I should film what we’re doing, for Ecstasy at Whole Foods Pt 2,’ said Sara referencing how they’d wandered around Whole Foods filming things while on edibles and Adderall two months ago, but the videos had inexplicably disappeared from Sara’s iPhone.

‘What should we film … fruit first?’ vaguely remembering that last time Sara shot video of fruits and commented that they looked like alien fruits, in a serious voice, and examined lots of fruits, in the footage that was lost.

‘Which one,’ said Sara holding what looked to be a bushel of Brussel sprouts.

‘That looks like a mace from World of Warcraft, or something,’ said Tom. ‘The ebook I sent you Sapiens, by Yuval Harari. It talks about the history of human beings. Did you… read it?’

‘No,’ said Sara conclusively as she walked ‘patting’ the tops of cantaloupes, as though they were the heads of human children of a uniform height, standing in line.

‘What about Deus Homo, the one about technology replacing human beings?’
Sara laughed and shook her head, as if experiencing profound amazement that Tom would ask her that question, or that he would ask her anything at all. She bumped into someone’s cart, and the woman began apologizing profusely to Sara, who did not seem to acknowledge the woman’s apologies at all.

‘I feel like the robot version of you would have read the books,’ said Tom feeling crestfallen and grappling he felt, with the sensation that suddenly, without forewarning, he and Sara no longer had ‘anything in common’ or mutually interesting things to talk about. ‘What do you want to talk about?’ said Tom. Sara, holding a pomelo, said that fruit wasn’t as interesting as last time, and maybe they should film something else, go to another aisle to be ‘inspired.’

‘What will they think of me … us … when people watch this 200 years from now,’ said Tom after looking at granola bars for several minutes, picking several up and finding their rectangular shapes to be oddly satisfying to fondle.

‘Nothing, I hope,’ said Sara. ‘I hope we will have reached singularity by then. Past the inflection point.’

‘I thought you didn’t read the book,’ said Tom, knowing ‘inflection point’ as a keyword from *Homo Deus*.

‘I didn’t, but I googled it,’ said Sara. ‘It seems interesting, is it really going to happen?’ There were, like, other people saying he was wrong … that humans will never create artificial intelligence that matches or surpasses the human brain, or biomedical processes required to upload consciousness onto a computer.’

‘I don’t want to think of technology singularity as a endpoint … because … what if it’s um, a starting point? Maybe that’s when life will be truly satisfying, or truly horrific. Maybe we
should just let go of morality and just let science run its course because that’s what’s supposed to happen anyways. Everything we’re talking about is actually an extension of fate.’

‘Whoa,’ said Sara. ‘But I feel like my brain wants to believe that free will still exists. Because if free will doesn’t exist, then I feel like I don’t have any control at all. But at the same time maybe I can learn to … like that … maybe.’

Tom, feeling prompted by Sara’s tacit silence to continue speaking, said after around 30 seconds, with a sensation of beginning in medias res, ‘If you could have done something different, then you … would have. If you had better information at the time, then you would have acted different. But you didn’t … so you shouldn’t, um, blame … yourself.’

‘Yeah,’ said Sara.

‘I don’t think I’m going to do, or follow, Cognitive-Behavioral therapy anymore. I might just … live my life. And maybe slowly look for answers in, um … nature.’

‘Nature?’

‘Yes, in nature,’ said Tom. ‘Terence McKenna, this philosopher who wrote books about psychedelic experiences … um … has this thing where he says the reason people in developed societies are so unhappy is because we live exclusively in institutions, and have completely stopped interacting with … nature.’

‘Oh,’ said Sara, ‘Okay.’

‘He holds this view that, um, psychedelic drugs are really good because it minimizes one’s ego and lets that person see the bigger picture of the universe, the universe of nature,’ said Tom feeling increasingly unfocused and discursive, and moved his body sideways to avoid colliding into a display of organic alphabet soup cans. “Trust yourself enough to look for answers in Nature, not Society,” he said, or something like that.’
‘Terence … McKenna?’ said Sara typing on Notes in her iPhone, presumably to research later.

‘Yes, Terence McKenna.’

They continued walking in a linear but also vaguely directionless manner until they stopped, having reached what seemed to be the back wall of Whole Foods, then negotiated turning a corner then started towards what seemed like the produce area, returning to where they began, the product-filled path seeming to change from packaged bread to fresh produce, thought Tom, with the sensation of seeing trees in autumn reversing into trees in summer then spring. Sara looked at fruits and vegetables, sometimes picking them up and touching them, putting them back. Tom picked up a starfruit and Sara said it was really funny. ‘Starfruits taste like grape,’ said Tom in a somewhat dismissive tone. ‘I once shoplifted one at ate it.’ Tom explained his ‘method’ of shoplifted which involved putting whatever fruit into bags and choosing ‘cabbage’ at automated checkout. He did it for non-produce items as well.

‘What’s the most expensive thing you’ve rung up as cabbage,’ said Sara.

‘A clearance Nintendo DS game. But I don’t have a Nintendo DS,’ said Tom grinning. Tom felt Sara hug him from behind while he was reading the labels of coconut water.

‘Our relationship has to be different than last time, it has to be different. I’m not sure how to do that, though,’ said Sara, absently rubbing a scuff mark on her wheelchair handle.

‘I stopped trying to improve myself so hard. I don’t write in my thought journal or worry at 9:45 anymore,’ said Tom. ‘I think I was trying so hard to control everything, I don’t know, I think I started believing in fate.’

‘Fate,’ said Sara holding an Italian dark chocolate which cost $13.99.
‘Life is mostly fate, pre-determined, or something. You have to just accept what happens. If you could have done it a different way, you would have. But you couldn’t, so you didn’t. There doesn’t seem to be a point to feel emotional about it--like thinking that if you had a stronger will you could have avoided the bad thing. I basically don’t even believe in free will. Maybe will doesn’t really exist. We’re living out these weird stories written by someone else.’

‘We’re both changed,’ said Sara looking at ice cream through freezer doors which glowed in a blue hue, that Tom said ‘looked like a door to another world.’

At an automatic checkout machine, Sara rung up organic toothpaste as cabbage, ignoring Tom saying ‘no, don’t.’ In the parking lot someone in a messenger bag said ‘Do you have like 25 cents or five dollars?’ Tom dropped a quarter from his pocket into the man’s hand; he looked confused and disappointed, despite receiving exactly what he asked for.

At Sara’s apartment Sara said they should resume making videos for their Youtube channel. Sara showed Tom her new camera that was capable of shooting 1080p 60fps video. Tom said he was excited while peeling lychee and dropped on the ground. Dust and small carpet fibers clung to the sticky surface of the peeled lychee. ‘See, that would be good on the blog. Your facial expression right now,’ said Sara.

On Friday prior to Memorial Day weekend, there was a ‘moderately severe’ earthquake resulting in a 120-car pile up on the highway starting with a flammable truck that exploded. The next afternoon, a police detective came to Dave’s house and told him that Franki had been killed in the accident, and showed him her driver’s license. The detective came in and sat at the dining table. Daisy and the other Chinese girls quickly stopped playing wii tennis and went upstairs,
while Tom, hanging out at Dave’s since Pho Sure was closed for Memorial Day weekend, remained working on his Macbook. Dave said the girls were friends visiting from China.

The detective said, ‘Do you go to China often?’

‘I have family there,’ said Dave.

‘Say something in Chinese,’ said the policeman weakly grinning.

‘Ni Hao?’ said Dave.

The detective resumed writing in a notepad. ‘Who’s the homeowner here?’

‘My brother in law,’ said Dave.

‘Where is he?’

‘In prison.’

The detective spun his pen then clicked it several times. ‘What for?’

‘Um. Possession of Child Pornography. 7,812 counts.

‘Jesus,’ said the detective.

Dave opened a Monster soda.

‘You’ll need to get a funeral director,’ the detective said, and closed his notepad.

‘What’s that?’

‘The body’s at the coroner’s office but it can only stay there till 6pm tomorrow. Your funeral director needs to pick the body up.’

‘Oh, okay,’ said Dave.

The detective stood up. He added that Dave needed to go to the police station to pick up documents for Franki’s car, which had been totaled and sent to somewhere else, alongside things left in the car. Tom drove with Dave to the police station morgue, where Dave (while Tom sat in a waiting room) ‘identified’ Franki’s body from pictures, signed several documents, and returned
with a cardboard box of things from the car. Tom drove on the way back, Dave saying he might have to puke, clutching a plastic bag while leaning his head slightly out the window.

‘Can you … um,’ said Dave.

‘Should I pull over?’

‘No, no. Um, I was going to say if you could talk to the girls … instead of me. I think I need to lie down for, like, the rest of the day.’

‘Yeah,’ said Tom. ‘No worries.’

Two days later, Franki was cremated and her ‘cremains’ (as the bald funeral director called it) were delivered in a pale pink urn Dave had chosen. Dave placed the urn next to the fireplace and asked Tom ‘what to do.’

‘Have you thought of mailing it to the address in her passport?’ They had tried getting more information from the website that had matched Dave with Franki, but the website was down, and the emails they sent bounced. The website currently showed various advertisements for ‘Transformers-like’ toys and discount laptops came up, with a banner reading ‘Lease this domain for only 99 cents a month!’

‘This is fucked,’ said Dave. ‘Are we really going to mail cremains to China?’

‘Um,’ said Tom. ‘What if that address isn’t even right, what if it was just an apartment Franki rented before coming here, and now someone else lives there.’

‘Fuck!’ said Dave. ‘I don’t want to hear that shit.’

The girls came downstairs, with slightly swollen faces looking as if they had all been crying. Daisy called the number listed in the apartment building, using Google voice. Daisy conversed with the person on the phone for about 20 seconds, then said the person isn’t related to
Franki and didn’t have any other information. Neither Daisy nor Coco knew where Franki’s parents lived, had never met them.

‘I think Franki has a brother,’ said Daisy, and said the name of a Chinese city. No one knew anything else. Daisy said Franki’s parents lived in the countryside and that she never met them before. She said Franki ‘ran away’ from home when she was 17 and moved to Guangdong.

Tom and Dave drove to the mall with Franki’s iPhone, hoping to unlock its passcode and check if her brother’s contact info was in her address book. At the Apple Store, they were greeted by an obese employee in a blue shirt and a nametag which said ‘Brad,’ who answered Dave’s request with a ‘No, sorry.’

‘Why not?’ said Dave.

‘It’s against company policy. Apple does not forcefully unlock any Apple device,’ he said.

‘But she’s dead. We’re trying to contact her family back in China!’ said Dave.

‘I’m sorry,’ said Brad.

‘Just unlock the phone, man,’ said Dave.

‘That’s just not possible, I’m sorry.’

‘I want to buy a 17 inch Macbook Pro,’ save Dave, ‘Actually I want two of them.’

‘Okay, how much RAM would you like--8gb or 16gb,’ said Brad who’d begun pressing things on his iPad.

‘I’ll buy 40 Macbook Pros if you unlock this phone,’ said Dave.

‘That’s not something Apple Store can do,’ said Brad. He sneezed, and, with some hesitation, wiped his hand on the back of his polo shirt. A nearby child ‘slammed’ a display
Macbook Pro on the ground while her mother was being taught to open the Mail app by an Apple Store ‘Genius’

‘Julian Assange said he could unlock any iPhone in 30 minutes,’ said Dave, putting his phone with a screenshot of Julian Assange’s twitter page close to Brad’s face.

‘I don’t know how you want me to respond to that,’ said Brad. He tapped the shoulder of a passerby female Apple Store employee wearing a pink shirt who, in turn, walked to the rear section of the store and whispered to a co-worker wearing a gray shirt, who looked to be 85 years old and was about four feet tall; he began walking, or, more accurately, sort of absurdly tottering, towards them.

‘Listen chaps,’ the gray shirt employee said in a British-sounding accent as he softly clapped his hands. ‘I’m going to have to ask you chaps to leave.’

‘You just said “chaps” twice in the same sentence,’ said Tom.

‘Good day chaps,’ he said, moving closer to Tom and Dave while performing, it seemed, a ‘sweeping’ motion as though he was holding a broom.

‘I want to buy 40 Macbook Pros,’ said Dave, moving the direction of his gaze from a passive-aggressively, iPad-focused Brad--who seemed to have moved onto an unrelated task as he remained in place--to the gray shirt employee.

‘Would you like the 8gb or 16gb memory upgrade?’ said the gray shirt employee, tapping a new screen open on his iPad.

‘Just unlock this goddamn iPhone. I’ll buy 80 Macbook pros,’ said Dave, removing a black credit card from his wallet. ‘My credit limit is $70,000 per day.’

‘Sorry to break it to you chaps, but Apple does not forcibly unlock any Apple device.’
‘I’m not talking to Apple, I’m talking to you right now. You! You! You! You! You! You guys made this shit, so why can’t you just fucking open it?’

‘That’s quite enough tomfoolery, chaps. Have a good day chaps. Quite enough tomfoolery for one day indeed,’ said the gray shirt employee now standing very close to them.

‘Did he just say “tomfoolery,” ’ said Tom, ‘and “chaps” twice in the same sentence … again?’ said Tom.

‘Fuck this,’ said Dave as they walked out. ‘This store is a giant cunt!’ he shouted into Apple Store.

‘I need to mail Franki’s phone to the Ecuadorian embassy, to Julian Assange,’ said Dave upon being seated at California Pizza Kitchen.

Tom googled the address of the Ecuadorian embassy in London. ‘Well, there’s nothing stopping you from sending mail to them. Wait. Except it says “Please note: no articles of mail addressed to Mr. Assange will be delivered. Mr. Assange does not accept any unsolicited correspondence at this time. All articles are inspected prior to acceptance, and inappropriate or unauthorized articles will be destroyed.”’

‘Fuck!’ Dave banged his fist on the table, buried his face in a yellow napkin. ‘Everything is so fucked.’

Tom’s green ‘Italian melon’ soda was refilled three times before the waiter reappeared with complimentary cheesesticks, saying the kitchen had forgot about their orders of pasta, but was making them now.

‘How’s Pam doing in Alaska?’ Tom remembered reading somewhere that Alaska had the fewest sunny days amongst all 50 states, and wondered if it was a place depressed people went to ‘cultivate’ their depression, nurse its anemic growth like a potted succulent, wallow
unselfconsciously while perfectly alone. Dave said he’d texted Pam-- from his ‘secret’ phone to her ‘secret’ phone--a bunch of times but had received only one text back saying she was okay, that Dave shouldn’t worry.

‘I’m not hungry,’ said Dave, and impatiently stood up. He opened his wallet and dropped a clump of hundred dollar bills mindlessly, next to the cheesesticks. Tom, after Dave left, took the bills and left one on the table.

At work the next afternoon, Tom read a pirated copy of Gargoyles by Thomas Bernhard while eating stir fried noodles. A customer entered the restaurant and Tom went behind hte counter. Tom greeted the customer, a middle-aged black woman in a fancy dress and carrying an expensive-looking handbag.

‘Oh, I’m not going to order anything,’ she said.

‘That’s all right.’ Tom took his gloves off.

‘Wait, but I have something for you,’ the woman said. She slid a white envelope towards him.

‘Um … sure. I’ll give it to the owner when he comes back.’

‘No,’ the woman said, ‘it’s for you.’

‘Uh … are you sure?’

‘Yes. Um, allow me to explain. I came here a few months ago and asked for help with my electricity bill. You generously gave me money for the bill and kept my lights on. You see, I’ve come into a little bit of good luck since then, thanks to the good Lord. Please accept this as a small token of my appreciation.’

‘But I don’t think I . . . Are you sure you’re at the right—’
‘Please, I insist that you accept it. Thank you very much for your help, god bless you.’ The woman smiled at Tom, who uneasily smiled back. The woman left the restaurant and a Caucasian chauffeur opened the rear door of a very large white sedan, then glid away almost silently.

The white envelope contained $5000 in new-looking $100 bills. Tom put the envelope in his backpack and resumed reading *Gargoyles*, resisting the urge, whenever he pressed the forward arrow key to load the next page, to text Sara about what just happened, feeling there was a non-zero probability that he had gone ‘completely insane’ or his mind had lapsed into some kind of a fugue state, where he was ‘totally hallucinating,’ and the money would not be in his backpack if he got back up to go check it. Instead, Tom committed himself to concentrating on reading on his Macbook, which was comparatively easy to do, since the he felt Gargoyles was ‘very good’ so far, a third of the way into the book, and soon returned to feeling normal and undistracted.

Near closing time, while Tom wrapped food and stored them in the fridge, Danny came into the restaurant, running for some reason, and shouted, ‘Hey, boss, pack up your shit and get out of here!’

‘What happened?’

Danny said that the charity poker room at the tavern had been raided by police, that the whole restaurant had been shut down, and Frank had been arrested.

‘Jesus,’ said Tom.

‘I’m closing this place down, too. Just to be safe,’ said Danny as he took the money from the cash register. ‘I’ll call you when I need you.’ He started dumping food-filled containers into the trash, then said ‘fuck it’ and began throwing whole containers.
‘Um,’ said Tom, standing while holding a container of pickled daikon. He threw it in the trash basket.

‘Here, don’t worry about your last paycheck.’ Danny handed him a wad of money, which he stuffed in his pocket.

‘Should I mop the floors, or--’

‘No, no, leave it. Just do me a favor and get the hell out of here. I’m getting out, too,’ said Danny. ‘And listen, you don’t know anything. If the cops call you, tell them you don’t know anything.’

‘I don’t know anything,’ said Tom, ‘got it.’ He left Pho Sure and crossed the street to the parking structure.

‘I just got fired from my job… I think,’ said Tom at Dave’s house thirty minutes later. ‘I mean, the whole restaurant got shut down today.

‘By health inspectors?’ said Dave.

‘No, by the owner. I think he’s in legal trouble.’

‘We can just have Paul take care of it.’

‘I don’t think Paul wants to deal with more . . . things . . . right now.’

‘Shit, you might be right. But dude, just work for me,’ said Dave. ‘You got fired, so now you can work for me. it’s perfect.’

‘It’s okay. I have money to live on … for a while,’ said Tom, suddenly remembering the envelope of money, and bitcoin from selling weed.

Tom went into the kitchen and drank most of a carton of coconut water. Craving fried chicken for some reason, Tom bought KFC then drove to Sara’s apartment, where, after eating then having sex and showering, they watched Youtube videos of people crying in autotune,
which had caused Tom to laugh uncontrollably for around 10 minutes but which, conversely, did not affect Sara at all.

‘Isn’t it funny?’ said Tom.

‘Um, yeah,’ said Sara. ‘But if you like, really focus on the sound, you can’t tell if they’re laughing or crying. I mean, it’s interesting … distorting crying sounds to cause laughter.’

‘Just imagine they’re laughing instead. Then it becomes funny.’

‘Yeah,’ said Sara, who began to laugh. ‘OK, I think I get what they were going for, now.’

Tom and Sara, having woke slightly before noon and agreeing that they mutually craved waffles, Tom and Sara debated going to eat waffles at a nearby brunch restaurant but ultimately decided against it, knowing that the restaurant would be full and they would most likely be forced to dine in their patio and would be uncomfortably hot. While Tom made batter for pancakes, Sara looked on Amazon for an inexpensive waffle maker, and read some reviews aloud. There was, between the completion of pancake and sitting down to eat, a period of two minutes of moderate-to-severe disappointment of Tom announcing they were out of syrup, to Sara rummaging in the pantry and lifting out an unopened two-liter jug of Log Cabin syrup, whose existence went unexplained for several minutes into their enthusiastic eating of pancakes, when Sara remembered that the jug was a part of a costume someone had worn—as a lumberjack—to a Halloween party Sara hosted at her apartment two years ago, and left at her house. Tom examined the bottle and said said the expiration date was passed; Sara joked that they were both going to get sick, to which Tom replied confidently that sugar ‘doesn’t rot.’
Tom finished eating quickly then sat back in his chair and appreciated the gleam of sunlight from the window; while inadvertently concentrating on a mote of dust seeming to float upward, defying gravity, he consciously registered that he felt extremely happy in the present moment--possibly happier than he had ever been in his life—despite that nothing had happened, by external standards, to warrant this new elation. Tom narrowed his eyes in an attempt to further confine his vision to what was making him happy—the motes of dust, the sunbeam, the wall—and prolong it, if possible.

‘Are you okay?’ said Sara. ‘Your face looks weird.’

‘Yeah. I’m okay,’ said Tom, and returned to seeing normally.

‘I’m taking classes at Berkeley in fall,’ said Sara, pushed her plate forward and opened her Macbook. ‘I just got the email telling me I’m enrolled again.’ She rotated the screen and showed him.

‘This is so sudden,’ said Tom.

‘Yeah?’

‘But it’s good, I guess. You said you want to finish your degree.’

‘Yeah, I only have four semesters left, and the advisor person said I can probably do it in three. My dad’s paying the tuition and all, so I don’t have to worry about that.’

‘Is your dad okay? Not super depressed anymore?’

‘Not super depressed anymore, I think. He went back to work last week, and he’s seeing a therapist.’

‘Good. I’m glad,’ said Tom, and took dishes to the sink.

‘I also thought about going back to therapy,’ said Sara. ‘Physical therapy, I mean.’
‘I read about that on your Facebook,’ said Tom. ‘How you used to have therapy that might let you walk again.’

‘Oh. I thought I deleted those posts,’ said Sara absently. ‘Well, it didn’t work … the first time around. It was a lot of work, and my legs only moved like one inch.’

‘That’s good though, right? Like, there’s people that can’t move their legs at all.’

‘I mean, yeah, considering … but the therapist said it could be a year or more until I could stand up on braces and then two years or more walking on crutches and, I don’t know, I got mad and thought “fuck this shit” and stopped going.’

‘So, in the best case scenario … it’s possible that you could walk by yourself using braces?’

‘I mean, there’s people with the same kind of spine injury as me who learn to walk again … slowly. But then some people have an accident or fall while in braces … and become even more paralyzed than before.’

‘Jesus,’ said Tom.

‘Yeah, it’s not … easy.’

‘But would you go back to the same therapist, if you started again?’

‘I think she moved to Poland, or something. So probably someone else.’

‘I think I saw a thing on TV of someone using a cyborg-like leg thing … like, they hook it up to electrodes in the brain and train themselves to move the parts.’

‘I think I saw that, too,’ said Sara. ‘It’s really experimental and costs like 10 million dollars, I think.’
‘I can make 10 million dollars and buy it for you,’ said Tom, grinning. He thought of resuming his bitcoin weed business on a larger scale with greater anonymity, perhaps renting many PO boxes with fake IDs, or other tactics.

‘I’ll do one semester of school and see where I’m at,’ said Sara. ‘If I feel good then, and have spare time, I’ll look into going back to therapy.’

‘That sounds like a good plan,’ said Tom.

In trying to decide how best to spend the next three weeks before school began, Sara suggested they ‘re-vamp’ their Youtube channel as a vlog channel. ‘Like, our main focus would be vlogs,’ said Sara. Tom agreed to the plan and suggested they film at Dave’s house, since Dave was a recurring character in their ‘vlog universe,’ referencing footage they’d taken at Dave’s house but had not edited into videos.

At Dave’s house, Tom sat on the couch with his attention divided between watching Dave play Call of Duty: Zombies, sometimes shouting into the microphone that someone wasn’t using their grenades; meanwhile a nearby Sara watched vlogs on her Macbook while also learning to operate a GoPro video recorder, which he gave to Sara to make videos since he rarely used it. She showed Tom a video of someone walking their dog on a leash using a drone.

‘Should we get a dog so it can be on our vlog? It seems 99.99% of successful vloggers on Youtube have dogs. They do clickbait that says ‘Our dog died today!’ but it really didn’t and after they took it to the vet it was fine, or something.’

‘I’ll probably just get a dog,’ said Dave nonchalantly while shooting zombies, as though talking about a newly released electronic gadget. ‘Maybe you can just go upstairs and shoot the micropigs in the meantime.’
‘Holy shit, I forgot about the micropigs,’ said Sara. They went upstairs and went into the room where Dave kept the micropigs, which he referred to as the ‘pig room.’ The micropigs had darkened in color, and were oinking loudly. Tom filmed Sara playing with the micropigs, feeding them rod-shaped brown pig snacks, which the pigs frantically competed, to snatch from Sara’s hands.

‘This is really good, it’ll get a lot of views,’ said Tom. ‘You can give a clickbait title like “$4000 micropigs everywhere!!!”

After lunch Sara decided she wanted to create some kind of video parodying the fact that Youtube (and, by extension, the developed world) had turned into ‘mostly clickbait.’ That, in essence, Youtube had become an advanced-seeming parody of itself, as compared to the Youtube from 10 years ago, which had seemed, somehow, more reliable and mature in ‘almost every way.’ Tom expressed feeling that 2017 Youtube’s concrete manifestation would be a petulant 8 year old autistic savant with severe ADHD that spent the entirety of its waking hours running around screaming--except for a daily, quiet ‘interim period’ lasting two hours in an upstairs room where it worked on discrete mathematics and quantum physics--until forced to lie in bed and be quiet, but would stay luridly wide-eyed and awake and eventually sleep only for around 140 minutes, which totally stunted his emotional and physical maturation but otherwise proved bizarrely sufficient to maintain his intellectual drive and vital functioning.

After filming micropigs, Tom drafted the script for a vlog called ‘Human Clickbait Vol. 1,’ in which they repeatedly approached people at the mall and recited clickbait-like things to them, to see how they would react. Sara said she really liked the idea, and they drove to the mall the next day.
‘Oh my god, I just accidentally made $200,000 and I didn’t do anything!’ said Tom at people walking in front of Baby Gap. They quickly walked past without looking at him.

‘You have to say it in all caps,’ said Sara. ‘You have to shout!’ Sara repeated the what Tom said, as another group of people passed, except at a volume about three times louder.

‘Let’s see it!’ an obese woman who was eating two pretzels at once, sandwich-style, responded without making eye contact.

They relocated to the entrance of Urban Outfitters, where a lot of people were due to an anniversary sale.

‘I almost died today … TWICE!’ shouted Sara and moved her wheelchair fast, accelerating towards a group of teenagers holding GameStop shopping bags. They stopped for several seconds, with confused, embarrassingly smiling expressions.

‘Did you film their reaction,’ said Sara, wheeling back to Tom.

‘Yeah, it’s good. Um, I can smell the food court. Do you want to get something?’

‘Maybe we can film more there,’ said Sara.

When Tom reached the front of the line at Panda Express, the Hispanic employee suggested that he try the ‘New Asian Bold Cashew Chicken’ and offered him a sample on a toothpick, which Tom politely declined. Oddly, the Panda Express employee persisted in aggressively marketing New Asian Bold Cashew Chicken, bringing it up several more times, even while filling his styrofoam container with walnut shrimp and orange chicken and chow mein, with an increasing sense of urgency and desperation, as if meeting a secret quota of selling New Asian Bold Cashew Chicken was required for the release of several family members locked in an underground vault, where they were being held, by the owners of Panda Express, as hostages for some reason. ‘You should really give the New Asian Bold Cashew Chicken a try,’
said the employee while placing Tom’s styrofoam container in a plastic bag, despite the impossibility of adding New Asian Bold Cashew Chicken to his order at that stage in the transaction.

‘That guy was trying so hard to sell us that thing,’ said Sara. ‘But it’s so weird because there’s nothing, like, he would gain … from us getting it.’

‘We just got clickbaited by the Panda Express employee,’ said Tom, ‘like seven times in one minute.’

‘It was like … insane, and very depressing at the same time, I think,’ said Sara eating orange chicken.

‘I thought the same thing. But I also thought, like maybe Panda Express is holding his family at gunpoint somewhere, he needs to sell X number of Cashew Chicken to release them, one member at a time.’

‘Panda Express would do that,’ said Sara in an earnest-seeming tone.

‘Except the mother--she never gets released, actually. They need to keep one family member hostage so that he doesn’t go to the authorities, after the marketing campaign is over. He gets to Skype with her once a week, though.’

‘Why are we supporting large shitty corporations by buying their shit,’ said Sara eating a large walnut shrimp which seemed like two conjoined mutant shrimp.

‘Do you want to become vegan freegans like we talked about,’ said Tom. ‘Grow our own food and use only second-hand products, or third-hand products. Completely remove ourselves from the influence of corrupt capitalistic system.’

‘Yeah,’ said Sara. ‘This fried rice is so good. How do they make it this good, I don’t understand.’
Tom said he felt ‘resigned’ to eat Panda Express until his $100 gift card was depleted, and felt aggression and slight resentment towards the person who gave him the gift card, probably for his birthday a year ago, but was unable to remember who it was. Upon feeling full, Tom slid the container more towards Sara and, while watching a food court employee wipe nearby tables, weakly imagined a ‘new’ form of sabotage against large retail corporations in which minimum-wage workers, such as those at Panda Express, collaborated with skilled independent filmmakers to produce highly emotional, compelling ‘Humans of New York’-style short documentaries explained and vivified how the oppression of their job made them commit suicide, shortly before committing suicide. They would request—or even offer small amounts of money—for people to share the video on Youtube and social media, until Panda Express paid a multi-million dollar settlement to the family of the deceased. People would continue doing this until the minimum wage was increased to $115/hour, and would, as a total effort, create a new, non-violent (except self-violent) movement to oppose large corporations. Tom explained a shortened version of this to Sara, who mostly laughed and sometimes spilled fried rice from her mouth.

‘But I’m interested in self-violent protest, as a concept,’ said Tom. ‘It seems more effective than non-violent protest.’ He thought of southeast Asian monks’ acts of self-immolation as protest against oppressive regimes.

‘I mean, it could work, I guess,’ said Sara. ‘Suicide is the second worst PR a company can have, after the company actually killing its employees—which they’re already doing in a sense, by denying them a living wage and health insurance. Panda Express would be scared shitless if someone a video of a guy who committed suicide because being oppressed at his job went viral.’
‘My existence is a lifelong self-violent protest against existence,’ said Tom feeling somewhat mindless.

‘The more vlogs I watch I keep getting new ideas, and want to change the name of my vlog,’ said Sara. Sara said she changed the name of her channel three times in a day, then Youtube locked the name of the channel and sent her an email saying she would have to wait 60 days to change it again. ‘But I’m also thinking about … if it’s good that we’re doing this.’

‘Doing what?’

‘Watching a lot of antisocial videos, and creating antisocial videos. I don’t know.’

‘I don’t think it’s antisocial,’ said Tom. ‘It’s just embracing a different kind of emotion or aesthetic … compared to what people are used to getting from mainstream media. Or, even if it is antisocial … that just means you’re trying to create space for subculture. Something different, that’s better in some way …’

‘I like what you said about being emotional,’ said Sara. ‘A way for people to get back to feeling emotions, or feeling new ones, that mainstream media suppresses.’

‘Yeah,’ said Tom. ‘By creating videos like this … we’re making life more interesting and enjoyable, for ourselves and also other people. Offering alternative perspectives.’

‘I feel good that we’re being productive on doing different things,’ said Sara. ‘Because when school starts I’ll be doing the same thing everyday … boring things, mostly.’

‘That’s the goal,’ said Tom vaguely but confidently. ‘Um, to gain new and desirable perspectives on life … to counteract the dull parts.’

Tom emptied their tray into a receptacle. They walked towards Lazer Zone, a store with a glow-in-the-dark mini golf course, but learned it had closed and was soon to be replaced by a baby clothing store. After looking around and filming inside Urban Outfitters for a while--Sara
holding the camera while Tom pushed her--they decided to go home, take Adderall and begin the arduous task of editing the day’s video footage into a vlog.

The next day, working on the coffee table on respective Macbooks, Tom laughed loudly, and apologized to Sara for distracting her. When Sara asked ‘what’s so funny,’ Tom showed her to a Youtube cringecore comedian called FilthyFrank, whose content seemed focused on internet subculture, including parodies of Japanese anime and making fun of ‘weebs’—short for ‘weaboos,’ or Caucasians who want to be Japanese but are shunned for being generally overweight, having poor hygiene, and claiming to love Japan but only for its anime subculture.

In the most-viewed video by FilthyFrank, which Tom played on his Macbook, Frank dressed up in a pink bodysuit and acted retarded, talking in funny voices and sometimes hopping around on all fours, licking the walls/floors and making noises while looking cross-eyed. Tom thought ‘third level dialogue’ and ‘self-conscious roleplayer’ and typed some notes on a new document on Google Drive.

After editing the ‘Real Life Clickbait vol 1’ Video for several hours, during which time Tom watched cringecore channels and took notes on techniques, Sara showed the video she edited together on Final Cut.

‘We should buy a greenscreen and give commentary while other images are superimposed on the backgrounds,’ suggested Sara. Tom went on Amazon and ordered a DIY greenscreen kit as well as a RAM upgrade for Sara’s Macbook.

Over the next two weeks, Tom and Sara’s videos for their channel took on a new kind of boldness, somewhat resembling an intensifying embrace of cringecore aesthetic.
They decided to make a ‘killing pets video,’ after having seen both videos, both real and fake, of various people on Youtube killing their pets, or feeding one pet to another pet, including studying the cinematography of someone who filmed themselves feeling their ex-girlfriend’s puppy to their baby boa constrictor, somewhere in Florida.

For their first ‘animal killing’ video, Tom borrowed one of Dave’s micropigs and held a knife up to the micropig’s throat, planning to later edit/jump cut to pouring fake blood (water thickened with cornstarch and red food coloring; copied from an Instructables for fake blood as part of Halloween zombie costumes), the technique inspired by Filthyfrank’s technique of placing a hamster in a sock, then cutting to him smacking the sock around countertops and cabinets yelling ‘Parkour motherfuckers!’, before ultimately tossing a bloodied sock out the window of his apartment yelling ‘I fucking hate hamsters! And if I feel sad later, which I won’t, I can replace you for $4.75 at Walmart!’

While working on their second animal killing video, Sara got an idea and decided to turn it into something entirely different. In ‘Paralyzed Girl Cured by Satan!!!’ the spirit of Satan is infused into a micropig through a demonic ritual, then a paralyzed girl (Sara) drinks the bloody cum of Satan and then is cured of paralysis.

On the floor of an upstairs bathroom in Dave’s house, candles are lit and a red pentagram is drawn in lipstick. A knife is held up to the micropig’s neck, then was smeared in a pool of the fake blood on top of the pentagram. The lights flicker on and off for about 10 seconds, at the end of which Tom wrapped in a black hoodie and black bedsheet rose from the bathtub speaking in a deep, ‘Satan’ voice.

Satan: ‘What do you want I’m Satan.’

Sara: ‘I want to not be paralyzed.’
Satan: ‘Ok, then drink my bloody cum’

Tom shoots congealed blood from a dollar store watergun spray-painted black. Moments after the thick ‘bloody cum’ is shot into Sara’s open mouth and face, Sara shoots out of her seat, supported by Tom and Dave holding her hips and legs, covered by black bedsheets.

Sara: ‘Holy shit, I can walk again!’ and the video ends Sara shrill screaming and laughing.

Three days later, the video had 19,000 views and 112 comments.

‘You fucking killed a pig, go die,’ someone had commented.

‘Please receive brain cancer immediately.’

‘This is the greatest thing on the internet, please make more of these.’

‘My mom is paraplegic, you fucktards,’—to which Sara clicked reply and wrote ‘I’m paraplegic you fucktard.’ and pressed enter and laughed. Five minutes later, Tom realized that using ‘abusive/derogatory language could get your channel banned from Youtube.’

‘Then how is Hitler girl still on Youtube?’

Tom said he didn’t know who Hitler girl was, as he simultaneously remembered her as someone Sara had been interested in on Youtube towards the beginning of their relationship, several months ago. Sara searched on Youtube and discovered Hitler girl was no longer on Youtube, that her channel had been deleted by Youtube. In a video reposted by someone else, Hitler Girl wore a pink bunny-eared hoodie and said--while writing in frosting on a cake to commemorate Hitler’s birthday--sadistic things about several ethnic groups, including ‘I believe we can still kill all the Jews and enslave the niggers and build a beautiful world’ and ‘use our nuclear bombs to explode China’s nuclear bombs and put China back in their place, because they’re making too many people and clogging up God’s earth with Chinks.’
After watching four more Hitler Girl videos, Tom commented, ‘This girl is either retarded or is … some kind of a dramatic genius. Like, there doesn’t seem to be … any gray area … at all. She either means what says 100% or is trolling the internet 100%’

‘Maybe she’s using Youtube to subvert censorship culture and the ideology that children are inherently innocent and ‘good’ … or something. Or she’s completely retarded in some high-level way.’

‘Yeah,’ said Tom. ‘But I can’t tell which one it is.’

After work, Tom drove to Dave’s house, having earlier agreed to help disassemble his trampoline. After fitting all the parts, with some difficulty, into a large cardboard box, they rested and ate snacks in the living room. The house was unusually quiet, as the girls had gone shopping at an outlet mall. Dave turned on his Xbox and resumed a mission on Call of Duty: Zombies. Tom watched as zombies ran towards the screen and attacked Dave’s character.

When Dave ran out of ammunition, he began fending them off with a metal baseball bat, but was eventually overwhelmed and fell the floor and was eaten by zombies.

‘I’m thinking of retiring,’ said Dave. ‘Not right away. But I want to soon. Which I why you should take the job--general manager.’

‘Retirement,’ said Tom, slowly. ‘But you’re 31 years old.’

‘Mark Zuckerberg retired at 25,’ said Dave.

Tom said he was ‘pretty sure’ Mark Zuckerberg was still working at Facebook.

‘Oh wait, not him. Who’s that other guy?’ said Dave. ‘So what’s your answer?’

‘About what?’

‘The job. Are you gonna take it or not?’

‘I don’t feel like I want to … work … um, that hard.’
‘C’mon, just try it. Here, just try it for a month, and if you don’t like it, you can quit,’ said Dave. ‘And I won’t ask ever again, I promise.’

‘Fine.’

‘What? Seriously? You’re not trolling, right?’ Dave said in a suddenly upbeat voice.

‘I’ll work for you. I’m willing to … try it out,’ said Tom, thinking of Sara suddenly choosing to go to college again, when she’d never talked about it before, but was committed to it now, was her plan to be better. Tom thought of the limited use of ‘planning things out,’ that maybe it was time to stop thinking and to ‘just do it,’ he thought while visualizing a large neon yellow swoosh illuminating a dark room.

‘Dude that’s fucking awesome, you’re gonna love it.’

Dave handed Tom spare keys to Pizza HQ, and went to the other room and got a thick five-inch binder with instructions for running the business, prepared by Trevor for Dave, but which he didn’t really read, having managed stores for Trevor before leaving to Amsterdam.

‘Pretty much everything’s automated,’ said Dave. ‘Buying from corporate, payroll, all the financial stuff is handled by the tax dude, all the legal stuff by Paul. You just have to sign the payroll checks, to make sure we aren’t accidentally paying a delivery driver, like, two million dollars. Besides that, interviewing and hiring new people is the only shitty part of the job. Replacing the quitters, that’s the hard part.’

‘Okay,’ said Tom, taking notes on his phone.

‘When the work’s done you just sit in Pizza HQ and watch the cameras, or do whatever you want, work on writing, jerk off, whatever. There’s no camera inside Pizza HQ.’

‘I’m not going to jerk off in your office.’

‘It’s totally okay if you jerk off in the office,’ said Dave grinning.
Upon repeatedly dying while trying to do something in Call of Duty: Zombies, Dave frustratedly turned off the game and, minutes later, logged into an online casino and began playing live blackjack, streaming it from his laptop to the TV. After losing a hand, he looked confused and said, ‘What the fuck, I’m playing for only $5?’ and moved the slider to ‘max bet,’ which was $5000 dollars a hand. The dealer--a blonde Caucasian woman wearing what Tom understood as a ‘Playboy bunny’ costume--raised her eyebrows and paused, then resumed dealing cards. ‘Split!’ Dave yelled while clicking on his laptop. ‘Hit!’

‘Fuck!’ he shouted when both hands went bust.

The dealer said sorry then proceeded to ‘jiggle’ her breasts for two to three seconds by bending forward and shaking her torso, with a playful, sort of statically grimacing expression.

‘I’m worried about Dave, again, I think,’ said Tom in a text to Sara, while Dave continued playing.

‘What happened,’ said Sara.

‘Um, a few things, I guess. I’ll explain later.’ he said.

Later that night, when he drove to Sara’s apartment, Tom was surprised by the extreme cleanliness of the living room compared to the disarrayed, arguably ‘normal’ state it was in two days earlier.

‘You cleaned … so much,’ said Tom.

‘Yeah,’ said Sara, ‘I was getting really lazy about that, and decided to just clean today. How was work?’

‘I got let go from my job, actually. Danny’s closing Pho sure.’

‘Finally,’ said Sara. ‘Wasn’t it getting like ten customers a day?’

‘Yeah. Well, I also got a new job, working for Dave as a general manager.’
‘Really? Every time he offered you the you said no.’

‘This time I said yes.’ Tom grinned.

‘What made you change your mind?’

‘I’m not exactly sure. But I was thinking about … you … to an extent,’ said Tom.

‘Doing something despite not knowing if you’re going to like it … like, I never expected you to go back to school, but you’re doing it. Similarly, I’m not sure if this job is right for me, or if I’ll like it at all … but I’m willing to try, I guess.’

‘I only have three semesters left, so it’s not that big a deal,’ said Sara, who’d begun carefully peeling a tangerine, before suddenly beginning to laugh. ‘Ew, you’re gonna be a yuppie now. Like, you’ll be getting paid to subjugate and demoralize minimum wage workers.’

‘I won’t be a yuppie. I’ll just try it out,’ said Tom, laughing. ‘If I feel like I’m turning into a terrible asshole, I’ll quit and do something else … um, a quiet job where I can sit and look at the internet most of the time.’

‘Terrible asshole yuppie,’ said Sara, laughing. ‘Here.’ She threw a slice of tangerine towards Tom’s mouth, which bounced off his lips and landed in his green juice. Tom took a large gulp of juice to try to get the clementine, but it had already sunk to the bottom, it seemed.

Tom woke up to a 6 A.M alarm, changed into tan pants and Pizza King shirt given to him by Dave, ingested 30mg Adderall and drove to Pizza HQ, where he read and took notes on the first 100 pages of the manual while drinking vegan coldbrew coffee.

‘Trevor’s instruction says shake the hand of every employee in all the stores, introduce myself to them,’ Tom texted Dave, two hours later.

‘Yeah that’s bullshit, you don’t have to do that,’ said Dave.
'I think I’ll do it,’ said Tom, ‘for Trevor’s sake.’

Beginning at noon, Tom drove to each of eight pizza stores owned by Dave, shook hands with the store manager, then with everyone else—repeatedly introducing himself as the ‘new general manager’ while earnestly smiling, with the sensation of performing a version of himself, still somewhat in disbelief of how different his life was merely two days ago, when he was working on his Macbook inside Pho Sure, with little to no responsibilities, but that, in spite of everything, he was handing it ‘pretty well.’ When he returned to Pizza HQ near dusk, Tom studied the rest of the manual while drinking rest of the coldbrew coffee, taking lots of notes in the section describing the store software and ordering system.

A few days later, Tom learned via text that Dave had received a call from United States Immigration Services, and that the agent had asked him questions about Franki. At some point Dave was questioned as to whether he ‘was aware’ that Franki’s Visa was over five months expired at the time of her death; Dave had answered ‘on the internet’ and ‘I’m not sure’ to most of the questions.

Paul arrived at Pizza HQ a few hours later, while Tom was with Dave for ‘moral support’ and training for the general manager position.

‘I shouldn’t have even talked to them, right?’ said Dave. ‘I should’ve just said “I want to plead the first amendment.”’

‘It’s the Fifth Amendment,’ said Paul in an annoyed voice. ‘And INS isn’t the police. It would’ve made things worse had you refused to cooperate.’

‘Oh,’ said Dave. ‘I’m glad I didn’t fuck up, then.’

‘You should be glad they’re not charging you with harboring an illegal alien.’
'Aliens?' Dave looked confused. ‘What?’

‘Get the rest of those girls out of your house right away,’ said Paul, apparently aware of the other four Chinese girls staying at his house. ‘Book plane tickets for them right away, business class.’ He explained they might get detained at the airport, but that they would most likely be able to board their flights and be blacklisted from returning to the US.

Dave asked if there was any ‘special legal thing’ Paul could do to ‘make this go away,’ such as getting visas for the girls.

‘No. Just-- No fucking way, kid.’ Paul stabbed a cigarette in his mouth and stood up. ‘Buy the tickets, today. I’m preparing paperwork in case you get charged with harboring illegal residents.’

‘Aliens,’ said Dave absently, as Paul went outside to smoke.

Two hours later, while Dave worked on a large catering order, Tom searched for flights on Expedia and bought tickets using Dave’s credit card. He printed out the itineraries and put them in a folder. They picked up Terry, for additional moral support and explaining things in Mandarin to the girls.

In Dave’s living room, Dave handed out plane tickets to the girls and explained that Immigration Agents were investigating Franki’s case, and that it wasn’t safe for them to stay in the house anymore. Nancy, while eating a yogurt cup, said she could enroll in community college and get a student visa, as previously discussed. Dave said the application would probably be denied because of Franki’s violation, and that he himself could be charged with a crime if that happened, repeating what Paul had said. Nancy placed her yogurt on the coffee table and began to sob quietly. While Nancy cried on Coco’s shoulder, who had also begun to cry, Terry spoke to Xiaomei and Cathy in Mandarin which, compared to a few weeks earlier,
sounded even faster and fluent. At some point Xiaomei began laughing, in a subdued but self-effacing and almost sarcastic-seeming manner, finding something about the situation or what Terry was saying to be quietly hilarious, as if having known for some time that an event like this was forthcoming. Around 15 minutes later, the girls--and Terry, for some reason--stood and slowly ascended the stairs in a single-file line, to begin packing.

‘You did the right thing,’ said Tom, patting Dave on the shoulder.

‘I don’t know,’ said Dave. ‘I wish Paul could just do something to make this go away, and the girls stay where they want to be. It’s a fucking free country, right?’

‘There’s only so much Paul can do …’

Dave said he was going to cancel plans this weekend to attend a large Magic tournament in Las Vegas, in order to see the girls to the airport. A few minutes later, looking at his phone, he shook his head and said he was going to go anyways, to ‘take his mind off all the bullshit.’

On Sunday evening, three days later, Tom answered a call from an uncharacteristically somber-sounding Dave who, after flying home earlier than planned--having lost every round at the tournament in Las Vegas--with the intention of taking the girls to the airport, discovered that the house was empty. The girls had left their plane tickets on the coffee table alongside a handwritten note: ‘Thank you and we are sorry. Goodbye.’ Some of Trevor’s expensive watches and jewelry, along with Franki’s ashes, were missing.

‘That really sucks ... but it’s also understandable, I guess,’ said Tom. ‘They want to take their chances as undocumented people rather than go back to China.’

‘That’s not even the crazy part,’ said Dave, ‘Terry’s gone too. He left a note saying he was going to help them out for a while, that they really didn’t want to go back to China. I
emailed him to let me know if he needed money so I could Paypal him, or something. I mean, this is fucking Terry we’re talking about--no phone, no driver’s license, no state ID. I guess they’ll be okay with the money they get pawning the jewelry for a while.’

‘I also have a feeling they’ll be okay,’ said Tom. ‘I mean, just think of … undocumented Mexicans.’

‘Mexicans?’

‘Yeah. They can… um, adapt to a migrant Mexican Chinese lifestyle.’ He imagined Terry and the girls picking oranges in an extremely sunny field, sometimes eating picnic-style lunches on a red-checkered blanket.

‘Shit, I shouldn’t have listened to Paul,’ said Dave. ‘He’s a fucking asshole. I should have just bought another house for them to live in, and Terry could help them. I didn’t even think of that.’ Dave had called the girls, trying each of their numbers several times, leaving text messages for them to come back, but there was no response.

Tom drove to pick up Sara for dinner at a sushi restaurant, and also invited Dave, wanting to cheer him up. While waiting for their food to arrive, Tom and Sara left reassuring messages to Daisy and Coco, saying Dave wasn’t mad about them leaving, and wanted to help hide them from the government.

‘They’ll be fine,’ said Sara. ‘They’ll figure something out.’

‘Maybe Terry will come back after helping the girls find a place to live, and jobs,’ said Tom.

‘Fucking Terry,’ said Dave laughing, shaking his head. Tom, seeing that the side of Dave’s face, slightly looking away from his, was shiny, saw that he was crying, didn’t know whether to say something or do something to comfort him, eventually moved closer to him and
patted him on the shoulder several times, with the sensation of comforting a child whose first pet hamster had just died.

Two new Mr. Pizza stores opened in the first week of August. Tom oversaw the hiring of manager, assistant manager, and other workers, and interacted with 10 store managers--mostly through texting. Sometimes, while interviewing job applicants, he played a game with himself to find out which drugs they were on when they came to interview, and attempting to maintain a professional, neutral-to-slightly smiling expression no matter how nonsequitur or ‘crazy’ the responses to some of the questions were. During one interview, Tom had asked ‘where do you see yourself in five years,’ and calmly listened as the interviewee talk for about ten minutes about the different kind of lights used in their professional-grade amphibian tank which housed a rare, venomous cobra illegally imported from Senegal.

On a cloudy Thursday, while Tom managed a Facebook ad campaign for ‘back to school’ specials, he heard a succession of loud crashing noises in the store. In the store, Robbie, the store manager, was throwing armfuls of pizza screens at the wall. When all the pizza screens were on the floor, he took several pizzas as they came out of the oven and threw them on the floor and proceeded to stomp on them. He stared at several seconds at his sneakers which were covered with cheese and sauce, then shouted ‘fuck!’ and demanded money from Tom to buy new sneakers. Tom said that was fine and continued watching Robbie as he stood still, staring at the floor with unfocused eyes. Tom pondered what could have caused Robbie to ‘snap’ and experience rage, then thought about his girlfriend and two kids, at the same time thinking recalling Emily’s outbursts and wondered if Robbie, too, had Intermittent Outburst Disorder. Robbie left the restaurant and drove rapidly out of the parking lot, making his tires skid. An hour
later, Robbie returned to the store. He put on his hat and apron and calmly continued working as if nothing had happened, with the other employees having cleaned up the mess on the floor. He asked Tom what the next order was.

‘Three large pepperoni, all garlic crust, cheesy bread,’ said Tom.

‘Four cheese or regular?’

‘Four cheese.’

A group of customers came into the store.

‘Welcome to Mr. Pizza. I’ll be with you in just a moment!’ said Robbie in a cheerful voice, stretching dough for pizzas.

At Dave’s house that night, brainstorming ideas for new Facebook ad campaigns gift card giveaways, Tom considered telling Dave about Robbie, and wondered if they should talk to him or do something to help him, but decided Robbie probably just wanted to be left alone. Tom saw a notification on his phone that his first direct deposit had cleared into his bank account, and saw that the amount was more than what he made in a year at Pho Sure.

‘Dude, this is too much money,’ said Tom.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Is this amount um… right?’

‘Yeah, it’s what the last general manager got,’ said Dave.

‘Jesus,’ said Tom. ‘Okay.’

Tom opened an app for checking prices of cryptocurrency on his phone, and saw that bitcoin had gone up about 30%, but that FakeCoin had gone up 3000% percent, that Dave’s initial investment of 100,000 was now worth 3 million.
‘Um, FakeCoin went up 3000% percent,’ said Tom, after confirming that the price was correct on Google.

‘Sell that shit right now,’ said Dave.

Tom transferred the FakeCoin to an exchange and converted it to bitcoin, then sold the bitcoin on the exchange, at first expecting it not to work, but it did. ‘I just wired $3,010,276.12 to your bank account,’ said Tom.

‘Nice,’ said Dave. ‘We can celebrate with Natalianette.’

‘Who’s Natalianette?’ said Tom, unsurely pronouncing the name, which seemed like two names arbitrarily stuck together.

‘Oh wait, shit, I didn’t tell you. I thought I told you. Natalianette’s from Russia, she’s my new girlfriend.’

‘You ordered another girlfriend?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Aren’t you worried something bad might happen? Like, the Immigration people said they might call back--’

‘It’s fine,’ said Dave. ‘She’s not bringing any friends. I told her not to bring anybody, and she said she’s not. And we did the visa stuff right, this time. … Um. but, just don’t tell Paul, okay? If he comes by I’m just telling him we met on Tinder.’

‘Tinder. Jesus,’ said Tom. He made a note on his iPhone in an effort to better remember it, which auto-corrected to ‘Nathan tell is from Tinder.’

A week later, Tom and Sara went to Dave’s house to meet Natalianette. Upon meeting Sara, Natalianette said she looked extremely similar her friend back in Moscow, which seemed
to genuinely interest Sara to some degree, despite Natalianette being unable to find a picture of
of the person on her phone. When the conversation had steered towards Russia, Sara and Alicia
asked her questions about what it was like living in Russia, which Natalianette answered by
saying it was ‘terrible’ and talked about ‘rich criminals controlling everything.’

‘Is Putin a rich criminal?’ said Tom.

Natalianette said Putin used to be a rich criminal, but that now he was trying to put rich
criminals in jail or use the police to kill them, in a tone seeming vaguely supportive of Putin.

‘I like Putin,’ said Sara. ‘He doesn’t give a shit about anything, it seems like. He just
says whatever he wants to, and then does those things.’

‘That’s why Russians like him,’ said Natalianette, then talked about Russian people
feeling comfortable to having a dictator in charge, and that most people loved Putin and his
strong leadership. Tom felt that Natalianette was well-adjusted for someone coming to a foreign
country on a whim as she, and how committed she seemed to the arrangement of being Dave’s
girlfriend living in America for the foreseeable future.

When Tom asked what Natelianette did for work in Russia, she somewhat reflexively
feigned not hearing him and turned her head towards Dave. She said she was hungry and pouted
her lips and grinned.

‘Russia … America … what’s the difference,’ said Dave nonsequiturly, opening a long
cardboard package excitedly, eventually unwrapping layers of packaging from what finally
looked to be a Japanese sword. ‘Shit, I forgot I ordered this.’ He moved to the foyer area and
began swinging it while making ‘stereotypical Japanese sounds,’ thought Tom.

‘Seven Samurai,’ said Tom.

‘What?’
‘Akira Kurosawa,’ said Tom, free-associatively. ‘Dude, watch out.’

Dave struck a part of the wall, causing pieces of drywall to fall on the ground, but continued swinging in another direction, seemingly unfazed. Turning his attention back to the TV, Tom noticed that the girls had begun watching What the Health?, a Netflix documentary about a vegan filmmaker researching the negative effects of dairy and meat on increased risk of cancer, and of the American Heart Association’s ironic recommendation that people consume animal products, especially dairy and meat, with particular attention paid to the presence of numerous recipes on their website involving beef and dairy.

Dave walked around the hallway continuing to swing his samurai sword attached to his belt, sometimes unsheathing it and yelling ‘Ya!’ at an imaginary opponents. He answered the phone and began shouting ‘What!’ repeatedly, in increasing volume and pitch, then hung up after five minutes. He explained in an unexpectedly calm monotone that Trevor had been attacked in prison and was now dead, and that they had to go to the prison morgue immediately.

Tom drove with Dave to the state penitentiary, while Sara stayed with Nataliette, who’d begun crying. They were escorted by a guard to the morgue, where an Asian doctor in blue scrubs met them. He told them, while holding a clipboard, that Trevor had tested positive for HIV, and ‘cause of death’ had been blunt force trauma to the head and body, multiple stab wounds, and anal hemorrhaging.

‘Can I see the body?’ said Dave.

‘Yeah, if you want to,’ said the coroner, who loudly chewed gum. He led them to an adjacent room and unlocked what looked to be a body locker and pulled out a tray with a black body bag.

‘Remember, you can’t touch.’
‘I got it,’ said Dave.

Tom stood waiting at the entrance of the room as Dave approached the bag. The doctor unzipped the bag, then zipped it back around 15 seconds later. They followed the coroner into a small office, where he gave them a packet of information and explained that Trevor’s body would be transferred the next day to a specially-licensed funeral director to prepare the body for memorial services.

Back at the house, Dave repeatedly called Pam, pacing the floor but was unable to get in contact with her. Paul arrived after midnight at the house but immediately, while still in the doorway, turned around to smoke outside. ‘Just fucking smoke here,’ said Dave. Smoking two cigarettes at once, Paul said he would write an email to Pam, and get started on the paperwork to transfer all of Trevor’s assets to Dave. ‘This is the most fucked up year of my whole career,’ said Paul. ‘Or my whole life. Unbelievable.’ Paul extinguished two stubs in an ashtray then lit two more. When Sara asked about contacting Trevor’s parents, Paul said Trevor’s parents were dead, then remembered that he had a stepdad in Wisconsin. ‘I should call him,’ he said, ‘Or fuck it, I’m not calling him. What am I even saying, I don’t even have his number.’ Paul poured whiskey into a glass and drank it in one motion, then went out the front door telling Dave to keep his phone on and ‘not on fucking silent.’

Three days later, still lacking any response from Pam, Trevor’s body was cremated and his remains were placed in a black urn; Dave placed it on the fireplace mantle where Franki’s pink urn had been.

‘Should we have a funeral,’ said Dave, ‘Invite people and say nice things about Trevor, remember him.’
‘Who would we invite,’ said Tom.

Dave said the names of people who were Trevor’s friends, including a friend who owned Domino's Pizza franchises, but that Trevor didn’t really that many friends, had focused his life on work, and the friends he did have, golf friends and business friends, stopped talking to him after he was arrested, he knew from Pam.

‘If we can’t have a funeral we should at least have a party,’ said Natalianette said, ‘It’s strange not to do nothing for the man who gave you all this,’ she said waving her hand in a large, sweeping motion.

‘I don’t want … a party,’ said Dave, ‘Just . . . fuck it. He’s dead, the ashes are in the jar over there, I’m not doing anything else unless Pam texts me and says she wants something done.’

‘Davey--’ said Natalianette.

‘I’m out, I’m out,’ said Dave, who went upstairs and slammed a door.

The next day, Tom did not receive responses for several work-related texts sent to Dave, who, five hours later, called and granted permission for him to ‘do whatever seems the best.’ When Dave’s phone made a weird, paranormally beeping sound repeatedly for a few seconds before hanging up, Tom visualized Dave in terms of a Macbook in partial sleep mode, with its display and user interface disabled but still connected to the internet and capable of receiving files and data, to be apprehended and organized at a later point in time. Tom texted an extremely generic, he felt, message, in the form of ‘I hope you feel better soon,’ and added ‘I’ll only text you if it’s really important, but you don’t have to respond unless you want to.’ Dave’s quiet period lasted for another week, at the end of which Dave began texting him brief messages related to what he was doing or eating; on the fourth week, exactly a month afterwards, almost as
if having pre-decided to mourn Trevor’s death for exactly a month, returned to normal, regularly copy-pasting memes and GIFs into text messages.

On the last Thursday of August, Tom went after work to the theater to watch *Ghost in the Shell* with Dave. Halfway through *Ghost in the Shell*, a sci-fi movie about a dystopian Tokyo, in which people are abducted and programmed into crime-fighting cyborgs, to combat ‘bad’ cyborgs controlled by crime syndicates. Walking towards their cars in the parking lot, Dave repeatedly said he wanted to open a Pizza King store in Tokyo.

‘Your first paid vacation,’ said Dave. ‘Research into expanding into Tokyo. Maybe you can move to Tokyo and run the stores there.’

‘I can’t speak Japanese,’ said Tom with a finality, expecting the conversation to end there.

‘But you’re part Japanese, and you were born in Tokyo.’

‘I left Japan when I was five,’ said Tom.

‘So you lived there for five years,’ said Dave. ‘Five years is like … forever.’

‘I’ll think about it,’ said Tom absently, and changed the subject to fall advertising campaigns for the pizza shops.

The next night, at a poetry reading at Coffee Cartel, Tom stood talking to Tabbie (whose name Tom repeatedly thought was Abby), the author of three independently published books of poetry, and an ‘accomplished picklist’ (according to Craig) who sold artisan pickles at a farmer’s markets, and also taught yoga part time. Tom listened to Tabbie talk about her childhood, including her use of heroin and abuse of ADHD medication, starting in 6th grade. Tom listened
to Tabbie compare the years of highschool when she snorted Adderall (9th and 11th grade) and the years she didn’t (10th and 12th grade) and felt himself anemically classifying what she was saying as ‘Bildungsroman; novel of education’ while feeling increasingly isolated from the rest of the party--that he had someone drifted away from the ‘main’ party or that it had moved away from him while talking to Tabbie--and had become an island of himself. Tom walked towards the cooler where people had been getting beer from, but found that it was no longer there.

Unable to locate beer, or Sara, who had relocated to a different part of the party with Natalianette about thirty minutes earlier, Tom took half a Xanax and sought to allay his boredom by eating two broken halves of an Oreo, while wondering where Sara and Natalianette had went.

Tom made his way into the rear patio of the coffeeshop where they were grilling vegan hot dogs. Rounding the corner Dave and Natalianette and Sara between them, for some reason came at Tom at a sudden, 90 degree angle, said while putting his arms around Tom, ‘And this is my best man.’

‘What?’ said Tom.

‘Didn’t you check your phone?’ said Dave, ‘check your phone.’

Tom saw ‘Natalianette’s pregnant, we’re getting married.’

‘You’re my best man, and I’m giving you a 25% raise,’ said Dave. ‘I’m getting married!’ he shouted towards a group of 3-4 people, without prompting or prior context, eliciting a male with a handlebar mustache to raise his beer and say ‘fuck yeah!’

‘I’m happy for you,’ said Tom feeling sincere, knowing that Dave was acting crazy, but that, in the context of the past few months, what he was doing could potentially be viewed as sensible--even a positive development, compared to the ways other Daves in parallel universes would react to the same scenario-- in marrying the woman he’d impregnated, committing himself
to be with her, if even just for the time being, until he surreptitiously changed his mind, which Tom knew was always a possibility.

The air conditioning being broken or turned off after the reading, Tom said it was probably cooler outside and went outside with Sara. He pointed to parking lot of the café where two people seemed to be throwing an illuminated LED frisbee and went there, telling Sara to follow him. But when they neared it wasn’t a frisbee they were playing with, but a drone with color-changing capabilities. Tom sat on the grass next to Sara watching the drone fly above them.

‘I think I’ve spent 10-15% of my life walking towards something to see it more clearly, only to find out it’s a totally different thing, then feel confused and review what could have caused me to think the thing was the thing I thought it was before I went towards it.’

‘It happens to everyone, doesn’t it?’ said Sara.

‘Yeah, but I feel like it happens to me way more. I don’t know.’

When they rejoined Dave and Natalianette, Dave was talking to a guy wearing a Hawaiian-print shirt who said he’d taught English in Japan for five years, and was talking about his experience living abroad in an aggressively positive manner. When Dave asked if pizza was popular in Japan, he said ‘Japanese people love pizza’ despite the ‘absurd’ difficulty, in his experience, of finding good pizza there. Dave continued to ask questions, which the Hawaiian-shirt guy answered, sort of wavering in place with his beer, alternating his response between two stock phrases--‘The Japanese love pizza’ and ‘It’s hard to find good pizza’ and variations thereof--for what seemed to be a very long time. Tom, having lost interest in listening to their repetitive conversation, which increasingly resembled Dave and Hawaiian shirt guy thinking out
loud rather than a conversation, wondered if there were other people he was already acquainted with at the party, with whom he could have non pizza-or-Japan related conversation.

‘That’s it, I’m opening a Pizza King in Japan,’ said Dave in a passionately judicious-sounding voice, as if delivering a verdict, as though there was something objectively wrong or reprehensible about not owning a pizza shop in Japan.

‘We’re doing it,’ said Dave, slapping Tom on the back.

‘Um,’ said Tom, then left the conversation with Sara to go to the car of one of her internet acquaintances, who had recently purchased MDMA capsules in bulk and agreed to sell them some.

Tom and Dave worked together in Pizza HQ the next morning, preparing for a 80-pizza catering event. Dave said he really wanted to go to Japan, and booked two flights to Japan for himself and Natalianette, cancelling them around three hours later, upon texting Natalianette and learning that she couldn’t leave the country without signing up online three weeks in advance because of a travel stipulation with her visa. About ten minutes after doing a large line of cocaine—despite having said he ‘quit’ cocaine repeatedly the past two days—Dave said Tom could go research opening a pizza store in Tokyo and reopened Expedia.com on his laptop to book him tickets, to which Tom responded calmly but promptly that he ‘didn’t know any Japanese,’ and imagined the prospect of himself running a pizza restaurant in Japan as comparable to an organism trying to accomplish a task at least a dozen evolutionary steps beyond its immediate existence, like a mudfish attempting to create a Facebook event page.

‘You can figure it out,’ said Dave, ‘There’s like infinite white people living in Japan, and they seem to be doing fine.’
‘I don’t think you’re making much sense. They probably studied a lot,’ said Tom. ‘Why don’t you just open more pizza shops here, or in Oregon, or something. Conquer the whole west coast.’

‘Because Oregon sucks dick,’ said Dave, ‘Japan fucks the shit out of Oregon in terms of awesomeness. Look, just go to Japan and see what the pizza scene is like. Ask Sara if she wants to go with you,’ said Dave. ‘I’ll hold down the fort while you’re gone. Your first paid vacation.’

‘Jesus. All right, I’ll text her later,’ said Tom. ‘I’ll book the tickets myself.’

‘Why not? It’s a free vacation,’ said Sara, when Tom talked to her later that night.

‘Um,’ said Tom warily, visualizing the plane ride and increasingly remembering that he ‘hated’ travelling, and how plane rides made him get sick about 75% of the times he took plane rides, despite taking zinc and vitamin C supplements to boost his immune system.

‘Let’s go, I want to go,’ said Sara, ‘I’ve never been to Japan. I’ve only been to Korea.’

After booking flights for himself and Sara, Tom spent several hours researching handicapped travel, wanting to discern the difficulty of Sara travelling abroad as a paraplegic. He learned that airlines were usually ‘more comfortable’ for paraplegics than most passengers, since all aircrafts had a place near the emergency door with safety harnesses, with lots of legroom—moreover that Tokyo was a very wheelchair-friendly place. Tom read with interest entries written by a paraplegic blogger who recently visited Japan and recommended places to visit. Tom saw a text from his sister saying, ‘Whatcha up to?’ Tom responded that he was going to spend a weeklong trip to Tokyo with Sara.

About two hours later, Tom saw a text from his mother, ‘shouting’ at him in their group chat that telling Tom to visit Korea since he was visiting Japan anyways, and that she felt hurt
that he wasn’t going to visit Korea as well, which was ‘just an hour trip away,’ although google indicated that it was actually a three-hour flight.

Tom went to the living room where Sara, after vacuuming the living room, was drinking a ginger kombucha and looking at her phone. ‘My mom is mad that we aren’t visiting Korea during our Japan trip,’ said Tom. ‘My sister “put me on blast.”’

Sara said it was immature of her sister to have done that, then qualified her opinion by saying if her parents lived in another country--in France, she said--and she was visiting London, she would probably let her parents know and probably visit them, if only very briefly. Tom said it wasn’t a fair comparison, since one could travel from London to Paris just by driving through a tunnel ‘for an hour,’ he said, unsure whether the distance was accurate or not.

With a growing sense of frustration, Tom picked up a completed Rubik’s cube from the coffee table and he spun it around before putting it down, feeling somehow slightly more annoyed at the disarrayed colors. He felt increasingly indignant about the situation, condemned to be treated ‘like a child’ by his whole family no matter how old he became; that, as a rule, an adult should be able to do things on his own and not be subject to having his decisions scrutinized unless they were acting by some egregious error or oversight--but then, he thought, at first sardonically and bitterly, then soberly, of the possibility that he, in fact, was wrong and his sister and parents were right, that it had been objectively immature or rude not to consider adding Korea as a part of the Japan trip, regardless of whether he intended to indulge the impulse to be a ‘thoughtful son,’ or ‘polite son,’ or not.

‘I’m thinking about … um ... how I maybe should have thought to visit Korea since it’s close to Japan. I felt bad, just now, for having not even thought of it. But I think my brain didn’t
think of it because it was so concerned with the logistics of being in Japan. I was really stressed out, and I couldn’t think of other things. Which is understandable, maybe.’

‘You can’t think about things you don’t think about,’ replied Sara quickly, as if reciting some Buddhist koan she had memorized. ‘But do you actually want to go to Korea?’

‘I’m … not sure. I don’t think I’ll enjoy being in Korea. In fact, I’m definitely sure that it will add to my unhappiness, somehow.’

‘Maybe if you go this one time, just for like two or three days, then your parents will stop harassing you. Or, you can use it as leverage to resist future, longer visits, for longer …’

‘My parents will never stop harassing me,’ said Tom. He drank some of Sara’s kombucha. ‘Just … two days?’

‘Two day detour,’ said Sara, grinning. ‘Two day strategic detour.’

‘Strategic,’ said Tom, with the word extended. ‘Okay, okay. I feel more open to it now, that you classify it like that. But wait, should we go before or after Japan?’,

‘After. Wait, actually it doesn’t matter to me.’

‘I think we should go to Korea first. Otherwise, I feel like Japan, which is more important to us, will be … tainted. The whole time we’d be worried about meeting my parents and it’d affect our ability to appreciate our time in Japan.

‘I’m not worried or anxious about meeting your parents,’ said Sara.

‘You’re not?’ said Tom with mock disgust.

‘I’m good with … parents, generally,’ said Sara. ‘I’ve never had a bad or awkward experience with parents of boyfriends. I just talk to them … Talking.’

‘Like, casual?’ said Tom, unsure of what he meant.

‘Casual,’ nodded Sara.
Tom opened Expedia on his Macbook and finalized their itineraries for 3 days in Seoul, then four days in Tokyo. He printed their itineraries, which they neatly folded into their passports. As the room darkened with evening approaching, they sat on the couch watching Youtube videos about ‘what to do in Seoul,’ including a Danish vlogger who, after consuming large amount of alcohol during a ‘soju crawl,’ threw up on a arcade dance machine while playing a frenzied, electronic version of ‘Dancing Queen’; cheered on by friends and strangers, she managed to finish the song while intermittently continuing to vomit on the machine, seeming unselfconscious and not embarrassed at all by his precarious state.

The next afternoon, Tom worked on writing and ate instant noodles while waiting for Sara to return from brunch with her father who, late last night, had texted that he would be in Berkeley for two days.

‘How was brunch?’ Tom asked when Sara returned to the apartment. He detached Sara’s backpack from her wheelchair.

‘It was okay,’ said Sara, after a delay of around ten seconds, with a slight grimace.

‘What’s wrong? Did you guys argue about something? Did he tell you to move back in again?’

‘No,’ said Sara. ‘It was like the total opposite, actually. He quit his … job. And he’s um, leaving the country.’

‘He’s moving?’

‘Yeah, sort of.’

‘To, like, Canada?’

‘No. He um … bought a boat. He’s going to go sailing, like, around the world.’
Tom instantly found the phrase ‘sailing around the world’ funny and began laughing, convinced in large part that their current conversation was part of some sort of an elaborate prank, which Sara would reveal shortly.

‘What if your dad gets attacked by Somali pirates?’ said Tom, grinning.

‘He’s just going to deal with it, I guess.’

‘I don’t get it,’ said Tom.

When Sara began busying herself with her phone—which she did when she didn’t feel like talking or was emotionally distressed--it became complicatedly apparent to Tom that Sara wasn’t joking, and he began to process this new information in the context of it being true, which felt increasingly, nearly inscrutably, completely bizarre.

‘Sailing around the world,’ said Tom absently. What did that even mean ... To sail around the world? It seemed like something people said almost always in a figurative sense, never in a literal one. While looking at Sara’s head, which was facing away from him, Tom randomly thought of the 16-year old girl who had successfully, in a small boat, circumnavigated the world by sailing, in a year like 2004 or 2005, and that he’d learned of it on Today, the news show Tom’s mother watched every morning.

‘Did he seem, um ... insane?’ said Tom. ‘Did you like, argue, or try to stop him?’

‘No,’ said Sara. ‘He’s um, sailed some boats before. But it was just like ... we rented a boat at the harbor in San Diego and drove it around for an hour.’

‘That doesn’t seem like a lot of experience,’ said Tom then felt a cringing sensation, realizing that, assuming his goal was to calm Sara down--since her father done this thing and neither of them could stop it-- he should conversely focus on saying reassuring or positive things about the situation, despite its negative aspects. ‘I don’t know. It seems fine, maybe.’
‘He said it was always his dream,’ said Sara. ‘He said he wanted to sail in the ocean since even before he got married. That he’d wanted to join the Navy after high school but his parents hadn’t let him, or something. So, in that sense, I guess it’s okay. He said he had a satellite phone for emergencies, but he forgot to give me the number.’

‘That’s good,’ said Tom. ‘Satellite phone. Wifi.’

‘No Wifi. Just phone.’

‘Oh,’ said Tom. ‘Well that’s still okay. How did your brother … react towards this?’

Sara said she hadn’t talked to her brother, who was now a sophomore at a college in Oregon, but knew that his tuition was paid because of a soccer scholarship, and that he was aware of the situation.

‘I feel … worried all of a sudden,’ said Sara. ‘Should I call the coast guard and say my mentally unstable father is trying to sail out to sea? They would stop him, I think.’

‘No. Don’t do that.’

‘I watched him leave the port … but maybe it was just a practice run, and he’s actually planning to go later. He didn’t say, so I don’t know … what should I do?’

‘You have to let your parents go,’ said Tom, touching Sara’s shoulder, with the sensation of ironically evoking a stereotypical exchange of a parent consoling another parent to ‘let go’ of their college-bound child, to be happy about them ‘leaving the nest’ and ‘finding their own path.’

‘It’s hard, though,’ said Sara. ‘It’s like I suddenly miss him. I feel like I didn’t do anything nice for him while he was … um, like, in the past. And now I can’t do anything even if I wanted to. Just like I couldn’t do anything nice for Joy while she was, um, alive.’

Tom patted Sara’s lap twice then smiled. ‘I think your dad will be fine. He’s survived for fifty-five years. We don’t have to worry. Was he wearing a life jacket?’
‘Yeah. It wasn’t, um, closed all the way. But yeah.’

‘Let’s just start packing,’ said Tom. ‘I’m going to start packing again once I clean the room and finish laundry.’

Three hours later, at Sara’s apartment, they resumed packing. Tom tried to think of the best way to transport his and Sara’s illegal drugs through airport security. His default method, which had worked before, albeit only on domestic flights, was to place prescription and illicit drugs in other ‘over the counter’ drug bottles. Tom poured MDMA capsules into a container containing 5-HTP capsules, which were of a slightly different color. He put Adderall in a small Mucinex cough pills container, since they were also blue and of a similar shape. He repeated the process with Xanax and Percocet in bottles of vitamins.

They decided to put the drugs in Sara’s backpack, deciding her luggage was less likely to be checked, and pondered if the screeners would be less likely to scrutinize a handicapped person carrying a variety of medications, than an able-bodied person.

Sara unhesitating nodded and agreed to carry their drugs, making Tom feel both reassured and endeared by Sara agreeing to transport their drugs in her backpack. Tom decided that if Sara was detained, he would immediately take responsibility and be the one to face punishment, up to and including arrest and a prison sentence.

Sara answered a call from her father and went in the living room while Tom finished packing in the bedroom. When she returned fifteen minutes later, Tom noticed Sara in a more cheerful mood and asked what they’d talked about. Sara said her dad had not yet left to sail alone in the Pacific Ocean, that instead he was practicing sailing around the bay area, and he had hired a professional sailing coach.
‘That’s good,’ said Tom. ‘He’s practicing so that he knows what to do when he’s by himself.’

‘I still wish he wouldn’t sail by himself,’ said Sara. ‘I made him promise he wouldn’t go on a long sailing trip alone before his coach said he was ready.’

‘He’s goal-oriented and not rushing into it,’ said Tom, ‘which seems really good.’

‘I feel like I can actually enjoy our trip now,’ said Sara. ‘I was feeling anxious that worrying about my dad would negatively impact our trip. I even considered not going at all.’

‘I worried about that, too,’ said Tom, reaching into the backpack for capsules of MDMA. ‘But now we can do things without worrying. We’re all done packing now, we can celebrate.’

They each took a capsule of MDMA and watched Youtube videos on Tom’s Macbook. About an hour later, they began discussing what they should do for the remainder of their ‘last day in America,’ instigated by Tom who, due to the effects of MDMA, had allowed himself to imagine elaborate scenarios in which they both became permanently and irreversibly ‘stuck in Asia,’ and how they would react and what they would do about it.

‘I would panic at first, or something,’ said Sara. ‘But then I accept it … just … acceptance. You know?’

‘Yeah …’ said Tom with the word extended. ‘But what would we … do?’

‘Like, workwise?’

‘No. I mean, well …’

‘We could teach English,’ said Sara. ‘What 90% of white people in Asia do.’

Tom said he thought, based on what he’d read, that foreign English teachers in Asia were looked down upon as a stereotype, as if they couldn’t perform any other function in that society.
‘That said, we probably couldn’t,’ said Tom. ‘Our options would be limited to that … or something physical.’

‘We could work at one of those places,’ said Sara.

‘Yeah,’ said Tom, grinning. ‘Wait, I don’t understand what you mean.’

‘Places … where you get to beat someone up … and then you pay them money.’

‘Jesus,’ said Tom, ‘I didn’t know that. I was thinking, like, moving boxes of vegetables from a truck to the ground … or onto the truck … or something.’

‘Let’s just teach English at first,’ said Sara, ‘if we get stuck forever in Asia.’

‘Yes,’ said Tom, grinning more widely. ‘Now we have a contingency plan. We’re prepared for all possible outcomes of this trip.’

Tom and Sara woke early the next morning and took a Lyft to Oakland International Airport, and they boarded a short, hour-long flight to Los Angeles. Afterwards, passing security at LAX without any scrutiny, they boarded their Korean Air flight to Seoul.

Sara’s seat—or spot, more accurately—directly in front of the emergency door, was five rows down from where Tom sat, but stayed in contact with each other using imessage, thanks to the plane having wifi, which Tom felt impressed by, recalling that on his last flight to Korea two years ago, shortly after his parents moved there, wifi had not been available.

‘Wtf, they keep running out of beef, there’s only chicken,’ said Sara in imessage when the first of two on-board meals was distributed.

‘That’s what they told me, too, that they’re out of beef. This chicken’s really dry, tastes almost freeze-dried,’ said Tom, ‘The brownie is good, though.’
While watching videos on Youtube, Tom’s Macbook ran out of battery and went to sleep. He looked over and envied the Chinese man sitting across the aisle, and saw his Macbook was connected to an expensive-looking portable battery. Tom watched *Inglourious Basterds* in the built-in entertainment system, a movie he’d already seen 3.5 times, he felt, fulfilling a habit of always choosing--for in-flight entertainment--movies he’d already seen, perhaps out of wanting to feel ‘grounded’ by a familiar experience in an unfamiliar environment, in the air. Or to relieve his flight anxiety which wasn’t severe but higher than the average passenger, he thought in his aisle seat, assuming by Sara’s lack of response to his text that she had fallen asleep and saw that she was asleep when he walked to the end of the aisle to use the bathroom. While walking, the seatbelt signal came on, which meant he should return to his seat, but he entered the bathroom stall and closed the door. The plane started shaking while Tom unzipped his jeans. While peeing, the plane shook a lot and piss went flying everywhere, except on him. It even went in the sink. ‘I just pissed in the sink,’ thought Tom, comically, and he briefly viewed himself as a parody of somebody whose piss just landed in the sink.

‘I just pissed in the sink,’ Tom texted Sara.

‘What? Why?’

‘Not on purpose. I was peeing and then the plane went crazy and my body, like, hit the other wall … but I was still peeing. It splashed the mirror and walls and everything. I feel embarrassed.’

‘It’s not your fault. It’s the plane’s fault.’

‘I feel like I’m in a Lorrie Moore story. Except in her story, someone would come into the stall right after the girl pees all over the place.’

‘Girls can’t spray … um, pee like that. We sit down.’
‘New transgender fiction by Lorrie Moore,’ Tom said, unsure of what he meant. ‘Ok. Anyways, just don’t use the bathroom at the back of the plane. Um, the right one. Use the left one.’

‘It’s ok. I emptied my bag before getting on the plane.’

‘Oh, smart,’ said Tom.

The Korean Airlines flight attendant passed out peanuts again, and Tom ate peanuts while looking out the window, which was cloudy and grey, and saw some lightning.

At Incheon International Airport, it was raining and cloudy, as if a storm might start. Tom used the airport wifi to locate where the bus ticket kiosk was located. He asked slowly, in poor Korean, intermittently stopping to refer to Google translate on his phone, the kiosk attendant for two bus tickets to Suji, a suburb of Seoul, about 1 hour away.

‘Two tickets to Suji-dong, your total is 22,000 won,’ replied the attendant quickly without an accent.

On the bus, riding in the front to minimize the risk of missing their stop, Sara looked as if she might be asleep. Tom texted his parents and informed--or reminded them, as he wasn’t sure whether he or his sister had told them previously--that Sara used a wheelchair, and not to talk about it or ‘be weird.’ His mom said ‘I know’ and sent a sticker of a yellow anthropomorphic rabbit giving an enthusiastic two thumbs up.

They got off the bus an hour later at a residential-seeming area with dozens of identical-looking apartment buildings. He struggled to read the side of the buildings to find A-78916 Samsung. While walking around in the direction of the building, feeling lost without wifi and having to rely on his skills looking around, Tom pondered about Norman Mailer saying in a year
like 1960 that in the near future houses would look like office buildings, office buildings like prisons, universities like office buildings, and prisons like universities; and that the reason there were so many signs on buildings was because people wouldn’t otherwise be able to tell them apart.

Tom was about to tell Sara this when she pointed up at a building and said ‘That’s the one, I think.’ Tom looked at his phone, then at the park in front of it, and recognized a yellow swingset currently being used by two children. He nodded and confirmed they were in the right place.

In the lobby of the building, Tom pressed the button on a complicated-looking console which involved numbered buttons, a camera, a touchpad and a fingerprint sensor. Unable to operate the device, he was about to call his mother when she stepped out of the elevator and walked towards them, smiling with a slow, slightly limping movement, causing Tom to remember that she suffered from knee pain. Tom’s mother greeted them, hugged them, and they ascended the elevator together, to the 17th floor.

Entering the apartment, Tom removed his shoes then helped lift Sara’s wheelchair above the recessed foyer. In the living room sitting on a long gray couch which seemed new, Tom asked his mother if she had undergone knee replacement surgery. Tom’s mother said she was waiting for ‘better technology,’ explaining that her friend had had implant surgery with portions of a knee grown in a lab using her own knee tissue but had experienced ‘lots of complications,’ so she planned to wait a year or two, before undergoing an improved procedure.

While Tom’s mother continued cooking, with Tom helping to set up the dining table, Tom saw Sara talking to his father in the living room. After dinner, which included a variety of Korean dishes in addition to store-bought fried chicken and mac and cheese--whose presence,
Tom intuited, was an accommodations for Sara in case she didn’t like Korean food, even though he’d already told her, in previous conversations, that Sara liked Korean food and wasn’t a picky eater. While eating fruit for dessert together in the living room, Tom’s father said, without context or prompting, ‘I’m happy Ryan and Sally are here.’

‘Thank you for inviting us,’ said Sara.

Tom’s mother asked about Sara’s parents. Sara answered that her father worked as sales manager at a software company. When Tom’s mother asked about her mother, Sara turned slightly to Tom and looked at him with a worried expression, causing him to feel momentary confusion and anxiety as to whether he’d told his mother that Sara’s mother had passed away, then decided he probably hadn’t, unable to think of a reason why he would have.

‘Sara’s mom passed away,’ said Tom in what sounded to like an almost robot-like voice, which he intuited as a side-effect of having wanted to convey this information directly and neutrally.

‘Oh,’ said Tom’s mother, and her mouth reflexively opened a little in a childlike manner, signalling surprise and a little embarrassment. He also noticed how, when talking to Sara, his mother’s gaze seemed to sometimes focus on her wheelchair, which he felt aversion towards. Then he felt aversion towards himself, with the sensation of an uncomfortably warm face, wondering if he was being paranoid or over-analyzing the situation.

‘We’re going to unpack and work on stuff in my room now,’ said Tom quickly, as his mother resumed, seeming somehow more self-conscious than before, to peeling apple, pear, persimmon, cantaloupe, and adding them to the large platter, even as the rate of consumption slowed to a halt.
‘You guys must be tired,’ said Tom’s mother, and she specified where to find more pillow and blankets should they need them.

‘Get a good rest,’ said Tom’s dad as Tom and Sara exited the living room.

‘Why didn’t you correct my dad?’ said Tom inside the guest bedroom. ‘When did he start calling you Sally?’

‘I’m not sure,’ said Sara. ‘Maybe from the beginning. It doesn’t bother me.’

‘My dad has a really bad memory now, it seems.’

‘But that’s not his fault, right?’

‘He could stop resisting visits with his specialist, and take medication, just like everyone else,’ said Tom, aware he was repeating what his sister said in their group texts nearly verbatim. ‘And then the situation could improve.’

‘Some people don’t want to change their bodies,’ said Sara flatly, quietly unpacking her toiletries.

Tom said he could help Sara in the shower, knowing the bathtub lacked handlebars. Sara said she could manage, and kissed him on the cheek before going in the bathroom. Meanwhile, Tom connected to the apartment’s wifi and googled ‘depressed young Korean writers’ and saw Google images of people who seemed all to be 40-50 years old, or older. Tom bit off half of an Ambien and Sara, who’d returned and was drying her hair with a large towel, took the other half. Tom lay on his back slowly petting Sara’s shoulder as she looked at her phone, then he eventually fell asleep.

Next morning, Tom woke up earlier than his alarm and went to the living room, unexpectedly finding his mother watching TV at a low volume. Tom asked if she slept well, and
he learned that his mother lately suffered from insomnia and slept only three hours a night, but that she had gotten used to it and just needed less sleep now. She added that his father slept too much, and that his frequent night terrors would wake her up, so she usually slept in the guest bedroom. When Tom asked about the a folded mound of blankets beside the couch—which had been there since they’d arrived, he realized--his mother responded that she’d put it out for him, that she’d expected him to sleep on the couch while Sara slept in the room. Though Tom’s first impulse was to ask why, he cleared his throat and nodded, then said he was thirsty, feeling averse to continuing the conversation. In the kitchen, Tom unwrapped a yogurt drink and drank all of it, then returned to the guest bedroom and lay next to Sara looking at his phone, thinking about his mother. He considered how a more mature version of him might have sat talking with his mother longer, saying things to earnestly comfort her and alleviate anxiety on her part towards him, even if his mother felt a duty--whether consciously or otherwise--to continually express concerns over his life and his actions. Despite this, Tom knew that living and working in America and being in a relationship with Sara was more optimal than any life he could imagine having in Korea with his parents, and that, over time, his mother could understand and accept this as a fact, without need for explication or pleading, as long as Tom remained employed and reasonably healthy. While beginning to fall back asleep, Tom mentally noted to be more responsive towards his mother’s future emails, as a concrete way of showing his growing sense of responsibility towards himself and others, to his mother.

When Tom and Sara woke two hours later, they stayed working on their Macbooks in the apartment, sometimes looking out the patio and the bright but cloudy sky, rather than leaving to sightsee and explore. Though they had planned to go with Tom’s parents to an outdoor market and farmer’s market-type event, heavy rainfall, which began in the morning and would not end,
according to the weather forecast, until 5 or 6 pm, prevented them. Moreover, their alternate plans of going to a shopping mall were also abandoned after Tom and Sara, simultaneously and nearly to the same extent, felt somehow exhausted after breakfast, like an extreme form of food coma even though they hadn’t overeaten, or else they were suffering the effects of jet lag, which according to Wikipedia could last for ‘over a week, to three weeks, in rare cases.’

Three hours later, Tom and Sara lay stomach-down on the mattress in the guest bedroom, steadily eating squid-shaped crackers with a goldfish-like flavor and texture while watching Funny Vine Compilation videos on Youtube. When Tom openly announced being bored and wanting to ‘do something’ (despite a paradoxical urge to remain in a lying position), he removed another blue Xanax from his pillcase and swallowed it with orange juice. Sara commented on how they took Xanax two hours ago, and asked if being at his parent’s was causing him to ‘crave’ more drugs, or somehow bizarrely increased his tolerance.

‘I don’t know,’ said Tom. ‘It seems hard to answer that.’

‘Do you feel really anxious now?’ said Sara.

‘Not more than I should be, or … I don’t know. This morning, when I went to pee and my mom was awake … it seemed like she wanted to talk to me … about you.’

‘What about me?’

‘Just … our relationship.’

‘Oh,’ said Sara, with slightly averted eyes. ‘Your parents disapprove of me.’

‘No,’ said Tom loudly. ‘Not at all.’

‘I’m kidding,’ said Sara and touched Tom’s shoulder.

‘It’s just that they doubt … the things I do. They slightly resented my choices in the past, I think. It has nothing to do with you, though.’
‘Like what?’

‘Um, like when I stopped being pre-med in my first year of college and applied to business school and got in, but decided not to do it and changed my major to English and Film Studies. They … criticized that and said I wouldn’t be able to find a job when I graduated.’

‘Do they still feel that way?’

‘No. Well, I’m not sure. They know I have a high paying pizza job now. But they’ve also expressed feeling that it’s not going to last. Which is irrational, because things are going well. Dave’s opening more stores …’

‘Then it’s good. They shouldn’t have any complaints … Right?’

‘Yeah,’ said Tom, and thought of saying something like “Asian parents always need something to complain about,” but couldn’t think of a more reasonable way to express the sentiment. ‘There was one text conversation where they expressed, like, worry, over our relationship. I think they worried that I wouldn’t be able to take care of you. I got really angry and said that it wasn’t like that, that you don’t need taking care of … I think I even said that you take care of me more than I take care of you.’

‘We take care of each other, equally.’

‘We’re perfectly … good,’ said Tom, vaguely.

‘We are good,’ said Sara, and kissed Tom’s cheek.

On the wall of the room was a large picture frame with an array of family pictures from throughout Tom’s childhood. Sara pointed at one of a family vacation in Tokyo’s Disneyland in which Tom, aged three or four, was held by his father in front of castle-like structure, with his sister standing next to them. All three of them were wearing black Mickey Mouse ears.
‘Your sister looks really different now. She looks like a mouse, sort of,’ said Sara, laughing. ‘Her eyes look really small compared to now.’

‘She got double eyelid surgery after graduating highschool, so her eyes look a lot bigger now.’

‘Oh, I remember you telling me about that, I think. I heard it's really popular in South Korea.’

‘I’ve thought about getting a tattoo,’ said Tom, someone discursively, thinking of people altering their physical appearance to reduce self-consciousness or anxiety.

‘I wouldn’t mind,’ said Sara.

‘You wouldn’t?’

‘I think I wanted a tattoo of a bird in highschool. But my parents talked me out of it.’

‘What kind of bird?’

‘Um, like a really simple one. The silhouette of a bird … like the Twitter logo. Except this was a year before Twitter was invented, I think.’

‘Whoa,’ said Tom. ‘Your tattoo idea anticipated the rise of Twitter.’

‘Yeah. I remember feeling weird … when Twitter started getting popular. But at that point I didn’t care about having a tattoo anymore.’

‘Oh.’

‘But I don’t mind if you get one,’ said Sara. ‘What would you get?’

‘I don’t know, I’d have to look at what they have.’

They looked at tattoo designs on Sara’s Macbook and learned of two tattoo shops in Itaewon, the shopping district they planned to visit and shoot video of the following day.
Upon arrival at a fancy-seeming restaurant for dinner, which Tom’s mother described as an old-fashioned traditional Korean restaurant, they stood at the entrance drinking tea in paper cups and waited to be seated. Tom, noticing nearby tables on elevated straw mats with low tables that weren’t wheelchair accessible, immediately felt anxious that his mother had brought them to a non-accessible restaurant; however, they were led by a worker down a narrow hallway to a smaller room of western-style tables Sara could use. An array of side dishes soon arrived at their table, which Sara said were pretty and took pictures of. Tom’s mother ordered a course of several platters of what the menu translated as ‘rare supreme Korean beef.’ Tom steadily ate from the small morsels surrounding a grill where meat was grilling, aloofly looking around at other diners with the nagging feeling of being expected to say things to gently engage Sara in conversation with his parents. What should he say in this situation? Tom’s mother said the beef was done grilling and placed it on a dish close to Sara. Sara ate it and commented on how it was really good, better than any beef she had had in Korea. Tom’s father ate two pieces of beef at once and made nodded his head several times, then silently took another piece. Into a tablewide silence a few minutes later, Tom’s mother somewhat nonsequiturly talked about how, at the time of his visit to Korea upon highschool graduation, over seven years ago, Tom had ‘missed out’ and moreover disappointed a number of aunts and uncles by being a strict vegan at the time--most of them had never even heard the term ‘vegan’--and consequently eating only rice and vegetable dishes at restaurants they took him to.

‘Stupid,’ said Tom’s father in a blurt-like manner, unclear what he was referencing. Tom’s mother’s continued about how Tom had inadvertently--but at least partially advertently, Tom felt his mother believed--severely disrespected his elders by denying them opportunities to treat him to expensive meat and seafood delicacies.
‘Why are you talking about that,’ said Tom, feeling irritated. ‘I’m not vegan or even vegetarian anymore. I eat everything.’ He took the last piece of beef and piled on four different kinds of side dishes, a little haphazardly, and ate it in what he felt was a kind of grotesque parody of a vegan shoving many kinds of non-vegan food at once into his mouth--beef, pickled cucumber, grilled fish, spicy octopus, to ‘prove a point.’

‘Being vegetarian is becoming more accepted and popular in Korea,’ said Sara quietly, laying on new pieces of beef on the grill, causing it to sizzle.

Tom’s mother made a dismissive, semi-scoff-like sound. She went on to mention how several uncles and aunts had worried, during the same visit, that Tom ‘might be gay,’ owing to his fashion choices at the time, which included skinny jeans, V-neck t-shirts, and earrings, having visited Korea during a brief period, the last year of high school and before college, when he cared much more than now about wearing stylish clothes, in stark contrast to his almost total lack of interest presently.

‘What … no,’ said Tom, then tried to think of what to say next, but forgot, then stopped trying to articulate his thoughts, with a sensation of a Macbook automatically closing windows in the process of shutting down.

When his mother asked why he stopped eating, Tom said in an irritated tone that he was full, even though he wasn’t and, as his eyes unfocused, put down his chopsticks making a clattering noise. He sensed a growing sense of anger and dread thickening to a ball of rage, he imagined stereotypically, inside his chest. Why was his mother behaving this way? Why was he reacting to her negative attitude, when he’d resolved before going to Korea that he would act as impassively as possible for the time he was here? Or was it a devious, indirect way of criticizing Tom openly in hopes of influencing Sara to resent him, and later end their relationship? In any
case, it seemed clear that he had let himself be affected by his parents and had given into the temptation of being immature, despite mental preparation before departing for Korea--mostly that he would consciously ignore his mother’s negative comments or skillfully deflect them to discuss other neutral subjects. Even though he wasn’t yet ‘lashing out’ at his parents but only listening silently, not talking, but it was somehow having the opposite effect … that in behaving exactly how he wanted to behave, he was becoming precisely what he didn’t want to become.

Tom thought of how the only way to escape a dysfunctional family was to leave it, and treat it from a distance with clinical detachment, which was what his sister did in joining the army, refusing parental debt for medical school tuition and thereby liberating herself from their influence.

When the middle-aged woman who’d seated them returned to the table, Tom’s mother loudly stated that she still hadn’t replenished their side dishes, and how they weren’t enjoying their meal because of her inattention. Even when the woman apologized and said she’d bring them quickly, Tom’s mother kept speaking to the woman in a berating tone, even that Tom and Sara had flown from America to eat at the restaurant, prompting the woman to bow her head and apologize repeatedly, before scurrying away, thought Tom, away from the table towards the back of the restaurant. Tom slowly remembered how parts of Korea could still be considered a poor country, and overall much more rigidly class-divided than America, having recently read on Wikipedia that South Korea had the GDP equivalent to Ghana, 30 years ago. Concurrently, Tom became aware that he was thinking of remembered Wikipedia content as a way of self-therapy and avoiding engaging in confrontation with others, and maintaining a neutral attitude. Despite this, Tom’s mother’s behavior seemed exaggerated and egregiously rude--he also thought of how waiters in Korea were untipped--and felt sympathy for the waitress, considering how women,
especially those over a certain age, were stigmatized for working outside the home, because that it implied her husband did not earn enough money, or was dead. Tom knew his mother’s friends mostly spent their lives in leisure, frequently golfing and shopping and going on spa outings, which Tom’s mother sometimes did, and would do much more often, he assumed, if not for her injured knee.

Tom looked at his mother, who was talking with Sara about cosmetics, and realized felt resented her in the present moment, that she should have been nicer to their waitress, who seemed to be attending to a dozen tables besides theirs. Moreover, that his father should have intervened to say things to calm his mother down, except that was highly unlikely or even impossible, because of his slipping awareness of how to behave in social situations, and conversely should feel thankful that his father hadn’t added to the problem by acting out in anger, as Alzheimer’s patients frequently did, he’d read on WebMD.

Continuing to survey the situation from a remote, almost journalistic angle, Tom considered how his sister viewed their aging parents unemotionally as patients, even sometimes referring to them in mock-sarcasm as ‘patient A’ and ‘patient B.’ Tom imagined his parents as Ebola patients he was attempting to treat with a robotic arm from a sealed-off room, as they moved their bodies and resisted treatment. Tom realized his parents said his parents, collectively, had said one positive thing since they’d arrived, and that was his father saying ‘I’m glad Tom and Sally are here.’ Was this what growing old, or long-term marriages, or both, did to people … like a softly mutating something slowly retreating into the shell of itself?

‘I want to order lobster,’ said Tom’s father, in a loud voice while pawing through the menu, despite not being able to read Korean.
Tom’s mother quickly said in Japanese--she communicated with his in English inside the apartment, and Japanese in public, Tom noted--that the restaurant didn’t serve lobster--that lobster wasn’t served anywhere except a lobster restaurant, and that marinated prawns were on the way to grill next--and patted his lap the way, felt Tom, a mother would chide her son for being impatient and asking about a toy that wasn’t available at Toys R Us yet.

‘You look … upset, I think,’ said Sara, in the backseat of the car after dinner, on the way to Itaewon, where Tom and Sara wanted to be dropped off in order to explore and take pictures.

‘No,’ said Tom with unfocused eyes. ‘I’m not mad.’

‘Upset, not mad,’ said Sara.

‘No,’ said Tom.

After being dropped off in the center of Itaewon, which Wikipedia described as the source of expat culture in Seoul, comprising American, Canadian, Australian, and European culture in Seoul, they wondered which direction to walk first. They walked towards the busy-looking smaller street, closed off the cars, visible to their right. At a pub-like restaurant with neon lights, Tom and Sara each took a tequila shot then sat down with glasses of beer.

When Tom asked why his father wasn’t driving, Tom’s mother quietly said ‘there was an incident,’ in Korean.

‘Are you worried about your dad?’

‘He wasn’t as bad as I’d thought he would be. He just seems to be behaving slightly more childish, I guess

‘My sister said dementia and Alzheimer’s isn’t rare or special. Like, it’s not unlucky or unfortunate to get it, since everyone gets it in the end,’ said Tom. ‘Let’s go over there.’
They bought a cream-filled donut shaped like a swirly poop, as well as some fried chicken in a paper cup. It was dark outside and getting colder.

Tom read aloud from Itaewon’s Wikipedia page: “Counterfeit goods and clothing items are ubiquitous and of varying qualities. Some authentic goods that are only produced in Korea for the international market, as well as some authentic imports, are also available. Itaewon is known for its clothesmakers who produce custom-made suits. Aside from the local businesses, there is a rich community of business owners, including a pie shop owner from the U.S.A., authentic American burgers, a wine bar, an Austrian delicatessen (with an array of cheeses and meats), a veterinarian/pet groomer with an excellent reputation, a chiropractor from Oregon, doctors and nurses, pharmacists and grocery shop owners.”

‘A veterinarian/pet groomer with an excellent reputation,’ said Tom with mock-seriousness.

‘I wonder if human beings, um, ever went to a pet groomer, wanting to be groomed,’ said Sara.

‘Wouldn’t that just be a massage parlor?’

Standing outside a convenience store after buying bottled water, Tom took out his pillcase and stared at capsules of MDMA, then took a 10mg Adderall instead. He held one out to Sara, who declined and said maybe later.

‘Has your mom ever … questioned you about your drug use?’ said Sara, drinking water.

‘Um … I’m not sure that she knows,’ said Tom. ‘But we also haven’t taken any drugs except Xanax and Ambien since we got here, and even that’s mostly to counteract jet lag at night, so we can sleep better.’
‘I noticed that,’ said Sara. ‘I also haven’t felt an urge to take MDMA or stimulants since arriving in Korea. It seems okay, though.’

‘I would feel weird being on MDMA in the presence of my parents,’ said Tom. ‘I think it’s best to save them for Tokyo, I think.’

‘Yeah, let’s do that,’ said Sara. ‘I’m really looking forward to Tokyo.’

As Tom walked a little in front of Sara’s wheelchair on the crowded narrow sidewalk, he felt a weird, faintly buzzing sensation in his arms, as if he was restless for some reason, or perhaps as a nervous response to walking in a narrow street filled with people--more people than ever would be walking in Berkley’s downtown or main campus, he thought vaguely, as they abruptly stopped and were intersected by an a large cluster of businessmen exiting a restaurant while simultaneously lighting cigarettes. The smoke irritated Tom’s face and made him cough a little.

‘Let’s go over there,’ said Tom, and helped maneuver Sara’s wheelchair down from a curb to cross the street.

‘I kind of noticed earlier,’ said Sara, ‘that your dad doesn’t drive, and your mom is always the one driving. Is that … because of--’

‘Yeah,’ said Tom. ‘He can’t drive anymore. I mean, I guess he still has his license and everything, but my mom would get really upset if he tried to drive, I think.’

‘Did something happen? Did he get lost?’

Tom talked about an incident last winter when Tom’s father, on the way back from golfing, had drove recklessly through traffic and ‘caught up’ to a driver who had cut him off, and had forced the driver to pull over by repeatedly turning his car into the other driver’s lane.
Tom’s father had apparently yelled at and threatened the driver, ultimately kicking the side of the person’s car, before getting back in his car and driving off.

‘Jesus,’ said Sara. ‘But … I’m confused. How did your mom find out, if he drove away?’

‘He just told her, I think, when he got home. He told it like a funny story, and was laughing a lot, according to what my mom said.’

‘That’s kind of scary, I mean …’

‘Yeah. I think she might’ve been more concerned with him thinking it was a funny thing to do … more than the act itself … or both,’ said Tom unsure of what he meant. ‘Anyways, he kind of stopped driving since then. Which seems to be fine because he doesn’t mind, I guess.’

‘He seems nice, though,’ said Sara. ‘I wouldn’t have thought of him doing something like that. The guy in the other car must’ve been an asshole, or something.’

After turning into an almost alley-like sidestreet of small shops, they walked into an interesting-looking hipster clothing shop with neon lighted signs. Tom looked at racks of T-shirts whose designs and fonts of text were similar to the ones Sara used to sell online. Tom encouraged Sara to ‘get inspired’ and relaunch her Shopify store. Outside the store, Sara produced a yellow ‘dead’ emoji face, with two x’s for eyes and a crinkled smile. ‘I shoplifted this for you,’ she said.

‘Thanks. It’s having a bad drug experience, it looks like,’ said Tom, examining the facial expression of the emoji on the pouch. He thought of expressing disapproval for her capricious behavior, given that two months ago they had mutually agreed that shoplifting ‘wasn’t worth it,’ and that if they ever decided to commit theft again, it should be ‘something big,’ to justify the risk. ‘It overdosed on Xanax,’ said Sara, laughing.
‘Xanax and Ambien and Klonopin and vodka,’ said Sara in a suddenly infantile-sounding voice as if, Tom imagined, she were reading from a children’s book marketed to young adults as a gag gift.

‘We should co-author a children’s book in which a male and female protagonist, both five or six years old, travel to different places and get introduced to varieties of different drugs and indulge in those drugs with their newfound friends.

‘We could call it Little Drug Explorers,’ said Sara. ‘Or Lil’ Druggies.’

‘They would take a lot of MDMA and eventually have, like, orgies.’

‘Yeah,’ said Sara. ‘It would logically happen, I guess.’

‘Wait …,’ said Tom cautiously, ‘wouldn’t that be child porn?’

‘Does, um … illustrations … count as child porn?’

‘Yes. No,’ said Sara. ‘It seems legal in Japan though. In Japan they definitely have child porn in comic books. I think it’s okay as long as you have a disclaimer that everyone depicted in the illustrations are actually adults … or are non-human entities … like fairies or demons or something.’

‘Childlike adult fairy creature porn exemption clause,’ said Tom in a mock-formal voice.

‘Yes. That’s the workaround. It’s perfectly legal.’

‘I feel like I’m … hesitant … to do anything that could be potentially misconstrued as child pornography … by anyone, knowing what happened to Trevor.’

‘Yeah,’ said Sara. ‘Let’s not do orgies with the kids. We could show them doing other things though, like cooking heroin on a spoon, shooting up.’

‘Sanitizing the needles in 91% rubbing alcohol, Walmart brand,’ said Tom. ‘Scraping residue off of spoon carefully. Learning hand-eye coordination.’
‘Clean up, clean up, everyone likes clean up …’ said Sara in a singsong voice similar to her childish voice from before.

‘What?’ Tom laughed.

‘It’s the .. um, clean-up song. From Barney … remember?’

‘No,’ said Tom. ‘Wait. I think I remember. I vaguely recall Barney, at the end of each episode, encouraging kids to clean up and, like, telling them where to clean … while not doing any cleaning … himself.’

‘Slavedriver. Purple dinosaur enslaving children of assorted races to perform menial labor without pay, under the guise of education and learning. Perpetuating...’

‘Master race?’ said Tom.

‘Master race,’ said Sara confidently.

‘Do you want to make a vlog to put on your Youtube?’ said Tom. ‘I feel like we were talking about interesting subjects, and the stores here are interesting.’

‘That seems like a lot of effort,’ said Sara, wheeling with one hand while switching her phone to video. ‘But I can try.’

Once inside a large department store, they rode the elevator up to an outdoor extensive patio-like area five floors up. They went near the edge of the building, looked down on smaller buildings and a eight-lane street below; Tom lifted Sara upright and held her so she could see it, too. The darkening sky was intermittently lit by passing aircraft and a very tall radio tower in the distance, the tip of which pulsating at odd intervals with bright green lights. ‘Get video of the street and the lights,’ said Tom while hugging Sara from behind.

Sitting on bench near the railing, Tom looked at texts in his group chat. He saw his sister had posted pictures of Cody--a five-year old husky her fiancé had recently adopted from a retired
neurosurgeon who, due to illness, was unable to care for the dog anymore—swimming in a backyard pool. Neither of his parents had responded to the pictures yet, it seemed.

‘I think this trip confirmed for me … um, how irrelevant my parents are my life,’ said Tom in a bored, slow voice. ‘Or, at least, that’s how it feels.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I feel completely independent from them. Or that I’m in the process of doing … that. Especially now that I have a job and no longer need money from them. I don’t know. I feel like I would only stress them if I involved them in my life a lot.’

‘I felt that way towards my dad, too,’ said Sara.

‘They just seem … weird. Like, my mom expected us to sleep separately during our visit. You take the guest bedroom and I sleep on the floor on the living room. That’s what those folded blanket things were.’

‘I was wondering what those were for.’

‘Yeah, but we’re like, really old,’ said Tom somewhat mock-dramatically. ‘We’re not …’

‘Lil Druggies,’ said Sara, laughing, causing Tom to also laugh.

‘Isn’t it weird?’ said Tom. ‘Expecting us to sleep in separate places?’

‘My ex-boyfriend slept on the couch when he visited my parents.’ said Sara. ‘But we were in highschool, like 15, so it made sense, I guess.’

‘Last time I visited it was even weirder,’ said Tom. ‘They kept telling me about, um, how they want me to make a bunch of money and then get married to, like, a 25 year old when I’m 40 or 45. Then have kids around that age, but not earlier. Because would be too immature
before that point. Um, they went to this fortune teller … well, not a fortune teller but basically the same thing except they look at star charts and--’

‘Astrologer?’ said Sara.

‘Yeah, like a personal astrologer, except more culturally mainstream, maybe. A lot of people use them to decide names for newborn children, to increase their fortune and luck throughout life.’

‘Interesting,’ said Sara.

Tom thought of how if there was one thing his parents consistently stressed to him, but never to his sister, was that he was immature and didn’t know how to accept and deal with responsibility. ‘But I’m better now. I feel like I’m working on all the things they used to criticize me for. I have a full time job … and I have you in my life, and our relationship is good, and everything.’

‘Don’t worry, I don’t want to get married either. It doesn’t matter to me,’ said Sara.
‘And I don’t want children, either. I’m like the opposite of your last girlfriend. Christie?’

‘Yeah, Christie. Jesus,’ said Tom, who’d absently begun watching two pre-adolescent aged boys kick a soccer ball to each other while being yelled at by their mother, who concurrently seemed more focused on something on her phone.

‘Yeah. She really wanted to get married and have kids right away,’ said Tom. ‘I think she said she wanted to get engaged, like, five weeks into our relationship.’

‘That’s … insane,’ said Sara. ‘What did you say? Or, like how did you react?’

‘I don’t think I reacted at all,’ said Tom. ‘Um, I think at first I said I needed time to think. And then I told her that I really didn’t want to get married or have children any time soon. And then the relationship ended.’
‘That’s good,’ said Sara. ‘You were honest and exited a bad situation, before it could get worse.’

‘Yeah,’ said Tom. ‘I’m sort of watching that family over there. They look really depressed, I think.’

An older male holding several shopping bags and four colorful ice cream cones in a cardboard container sat down on the nearby bench next to the woman, who took one of the cones without looking away from her phone, apparently without any regard to which flavor it was. Soon afterwards, the two young boys picked up the soccer ball and took two more cones from the container and stood steadily licking them. The man then proceeded to stare at the one remaining cone—not the flavor he had ordered for himself, it seemed—with a mildly perturbed but somehow eerily optimistic expression, as if silently contemplating a highly detailed plan to extricate himself from his family—the enervating, daily discombobulating mass of it which had totally absorbed him as participant and perpetuator—as cream of an indeterminate fleshy color ran down the cone and pooled on the surface of the cardboard.

‘I just think the nuclear family unit is really … um, harmful,’ said Tom. ‘It just seems … like there has to be better ways to organize a society.’

‘Like how?’ said Sara.

‘Um, I really admire the way Native American tribes raised children,’ said Tom. He discussed the way in Native tribes, in North America and South America, of how it a male child had like four-to-six intimate role models, such as his spiritual teacher, hunting teacher, fishing teacher, and how he was closer to them than, in comparison, an American child’s relationship with their first grade teacher or gym teacher. ‘Just think about it. If you have a two parents who resent each other, and both parents work too much at corporations who devalue their existence
… and, in turn, they can’t teach their children anything except to resent other people and perpetuate this whole Westernized us vs. them mentality--’

‘It’s so true,’ said Sara.

‘I mean, socially enforced monogamy is really bad, too. It’s the other half of the problem. Nuclear family unit and monogamy. This idea of sexual activity being bound up with marriage seems entirely baroque or even … medieval.’

‘Shit,’ said Sara. ‘It is fucked up.’

‘Um, Terence McKenna has this thing about male egos being less of a problem when males cannot trace their genealogy back to their father. Like, if you didn’t know who your dad was, you wouldn’t later feel embarrassed that your dad was poor, or something, and, like, want to create ponzi schemes to get unreasonably rich.’

‘Bernie Madoff,’ said Sara.

‘Yes,’ said Tom. Besides, many anthropologists have advocated for a four-to-six person family unit being more optimal. Like three males and three females, or four females and males males. And the environment would be better with larger family groups. Instead of four people owning like three cars, six people could have two or three cars. And the same would go for most other possessions. There would be less waste in society overall, and it would reinforce concepts of sharing and gratitude, too.’

‘Should we …’ said Sara, ‘become Native Americans? Add two other people to our relationship … Become a foursome?’

‘Yeah,’ said Tom sounding a little unsure, as he couldn’t tell whether Sara was joking.

‘Who … do you have in mind?’
‘No one now,’ said Sara. She looked away, then, about ten seconds later, began laughing uncontrollably. ‘I just thought of …’

‘What?’ Said Tom feeling curious.

‘If we “fused” with Dave and Natalianette. In that case, would we be more dysfunctional or less dysfunctional as a whole? Or, what would that even be like?’

‘I can’t even begin to imagine … um,’ said Tom, thinking of how Dave had repeatedly urged Tom to ‘just move in’ with Sara into to his mansion, saying the house felt ‘really empty’ since the Chinese girls left. Tom suggested he rent the rooms using Airbnb, to which Dave responded that he was too lazy to do anything like that. ‘A child raised by the four of us would be very interesting, I feel,’ said Tom. ‘They would learn, um, how to cope with depression and hardship from us. Dave would teach them … I don’t know, how to drink energy drinks and take a lot of risks in life? And Natalianette could teach them Russian, I suppose.’

‘Let’s just wait … I think.’

‘For what?’

‘Marriage, having kids,’ said Sara. ‘Let’s wait to do those things until society gets better,’ said Sara. ‘Then we could consider marriage and having kids, if we feel like it.’

‘We’re waiting for society to stop being in puberty and stuck in immaturity and self-centeredness,’ said Tom.

‘Stop being so fucking immature and grow up, society!’ Sara shouted towards a bridge where 20-40 people were currently crossing. Incredibly, no one acted surprised or even reacted to the noise, probably owing to about 75% of people wearing headphones or looking at their phones, in addition to a large screen on the side of a building loudly advertising a new phone utilizing a music video.
Prompted by loud laughter nearby, Tom turned his head 90 degrees to look at a teenager laughing while talking or shouting into his phone. He failed to step off the escalator at the bottom and fell face-first in front of the escalator in an out-of-control fashion. Two businessmen behind him shifted their bodies sideways and maneuvered past the fallen teenager without looking at him. The teenager got up after a delay of three or four seconds, looked at his phone and resumed walking, limping for the first few steps, but a moment later he had returned to his conversation with laughter with an upbeat rhythm, taking the next escalator down to the street.

‘What if society never gets better, though?’ said Sara in a voice of at least partially feigned, it seemed to Tom, despondency. ‘What if society stays the same, or fails to alter its trajectory?’

‘Then we’d be waiting for … um, nothing.’

‘Shit,’ said Sara. ‘Waiting for nothing.’

‘But the nothingness could, um, still evolve, or something, maybe,’ said Tom. He studied Sara’s depressed expression as he sort of absently remembered when, during rehearsal for the youth orchestra he played as a teenager on Saturday mornings, their conductor, a long-haired, mustached man going through a contentious-seeming divorce, unexpectedly halted the orchestra during a full run-through of a Beethoven symphony ‘from the top,’ and, after covering his face in his hands for about 15 to 20 seconds, as the rehearsal hall—a highschool gymnasium, gradually approached silence. With his face still covered he said, ‘Do you guys hear that?’ Ten more seconds of silence later, he said, ‘That’s silence. That’s silence you’re hearing. Isn’t it great?’ He went on to explain that the orchestra wasn’t playing the rests, or silences correctly, that he could always hear one or several people—including Tom, he knew—holding on to the last note a phrase too long or else coming in too early, ‘ruining the silence.’ ‘You know the quickest way to
tell the difference between a so-so orchestra and a great orchestra?’ he asked. ‘The silences are louder.’

Tom wanted to convey this information to Sara, with the goal of improving her mood but, as they began moving towards a different section of the patio area, to circle around it and see everything before they left, he decided to think of a way to communicate the general concept in a less convoluted way. Tom talked about how technology was making society more detached and perhaps silent, but it was the gap between songs on a CD, or else an improperly cut Youtube upload of a song, where there was a 30 seconds gap of extended silence or soft static noises after the song had ended.

‘A new song would start eventually,’ said Sara. ‘It would … resolve.’

‘Or you could interpret the silence as being part of the … experience,’ said Tom. ‘It also depends on if ‘autoplay playlist’ is enabled on settings or not.’

‘I’m not worried,’ said Sara grinning.

‘My mom texted asking if we were still in Itaewon and if we’re okay,’ said Tom looking at his phone. ‘She wants to pick us up. I’ll text her that we’re fine taking the subway.’

‘Yeah, we haven’t taken the subway yet. We’ll get video footage there.’

On the street towards the subway station back to their parent’s neighborhood, Tom saw a machine-gun wielding soldier in front of a government building. He looked to be 20 or 21, and saluted and walked away when another soldier, wearing an identical uniform and weapon, came to replace his post. ‘Asians are replacements for other Asians or “Watched Korean soldier get replaced by another Korean soldier with neutral facial expression,”’ thought Tom with amusement and thought of tweeting it.

‘It’s because of the heightened threat of North Korea, maybe,’ said Sara.
Tom responded by saying they ‘always looked like that,’ having seen soldiers in front of similar buildings on his two last trips to Korea.

When Sara asked if South Koreans, especially those who lived close to the DMZ, were afraid of sudden attack from the North. Tom responded by saying ‘I don’t think people here think about that… Like, they’ve accepted it. When the country’s terror threat level goes from green to red, one or twice a year, then everyone freaks out. But Korea’s terror threat level has always been in orange or red since, like, 25 years ago. So they just treat it like it’s normal. It’s similar, I feel, to people living in Israel. People there don’t worry about terrorist attacks, because there’s always terrorist attacks. The threat level would just like an app running in the background of a Macbook.’

‘I need to empty my pee bag soon,’ said Sara.

‘I’ll look for a restroom,’ said Tom, and searched on Google Maps.

Sara said they could just go back to the department store, which they ended up doing. While Sara used the bathroom, Tom meandered towards a nearby food court and bought a fish-shaped pancake filled with red bean paste and ice cream, which he’d seen recommended by bloggers. Sara came out, and they resumed walking towards the subway station, passing the paper-wrapped pancake between them.

At the entrance of the subway station was an old woman selling beaded bracelets laid out on newspapers. Sara pointed at a bracelet made of dark, shiny wooden beads and said it looked pretty--at which point the woman silently lifted it towards her to try on, which she did, and then another one with lighter color beads. At this point, feeling obligated to make a purchase, Tom picked one as well, and paid for the bracelets. After buying tickets and waiting for the train to arrive, Tom discovered that his--but neither of Sara’s--featured a single cross-shaped bead
which, upon closer examination under his phone’s flashlight, featured a carved man with arms
desperately outstretched.

‘Jesus,’ said Sara, laughing. ‘I’ll trade you one of mine, if you want.’

‘It’s okay,’ said Tom, also laughing a little. ‘I like it … I think.’

In Tom’s room around 10pm, after playing several rounds of Jenga with Tom’s parents
(Tom’s father winning all but one game, and Tom being the one to collapse the tower all but one
game), Tom and Sara drank glasses of flavored soju and ate snacks while watching a Youtube
documentary about the rise of internet rappers. Tom viewed with interest a segment about Yung
Lean, a Swedish rapper described by the monotone, somewhat robotic-voiced narrator of the
documentary as “I think he started making songs on Soundcloud, then people made memes about
him and made fun of him for looking like he was 12 when he was 17, or something. Then he
kept uploading songs on Soundcloud and made Youtube videos and got famous, then he went to
Japan at the same time Europe forgot about him, and now he’s, um … somewhere.’ As the
documentary was ending--with descriptions of how drug use, particularly stimulants and
hallucinogens but never mentioning marijuana, Tom noted with interest--had fueled the meteoric
success of these artists but also ‘caused their downfalls,’ without specifying what he meant. The
end of the documentary showed Yung Lean and his ‘crew’ (six-to-eight similarly-aged Swedish
and Scandinavian friends) moving out of a beachhouse mansion in Miami into a two-bedroom
apartment, then soon afterwards, relocating again--‘to plan their next big move,’ they told the
camera crew--to a one-bedroom apartment in Tokyo, by which point Yung Lean’s crew had been
reduced to two members, his best friend and his producer, who seemed to have lost several front
teeth for some reason but who was smiling while waving at the camera in the final scene of the
documentary, waving an energy drink in arcs through the air in front of a convenience store.

Throughout the next morning, Tom and Sara woke intermittently to phone alarms and took turns sliding across the bed in a slug-like motion to press snooze; Tom eventually turned off both phones at an indeterminate time between morning and noon.

‘We ignored all the alarms we set,’ said Sara, rubbing her eyes and checking her phone around 12:45pm.

‘We drank too much. Out of control alcohol spree,’ grinned Tom, looking at the three green bottles of soju near the bed.

In the kitchen, Tom’s mother had set out red-bean filled buns and pastries for them with a smile on a post-it note, beside another post-it note with ‘Dad, don’t eat!’ While eating, Tom learned from a group text that his father had gone golfing, prompting him to remember somewhat about that in one of his mother’s emails, that his father had recently begun golfing with a group of retirees led by a 72-year old husband of one of Tom’s mother’s friends, who had once been a pro golfer.

Tom slowly bit into a red bean bun while he thought ‘Alzheimer’s alters one’s brain structure to want to play golf with others and enjoy it.’

Sara spent the next two hours ordering textbooks for courses starting in the fall, managing to save money by pirating pdf versions Tom located on a Russian website. They had sex then took a bath together, maneuvering their legs in a puzzle-like configuration to fit into the small tub, and ate the remaining pastries and yogurt drinks while watching part of a documentary about internet artists who created pieces mainly using Microsoft Paint and Adobe Photoshop and made their art freely available to the public, relying on donations to make a living.
Dinnertime, Tom walked with his parents and Sara to a large seafood market roughly the size of a small Costco, buying varieties of seafood. At a large tank full of red snapper, Tom’s mother pointed at one and a lady pulled it out of the tank with her bare hands and, holding it by the tail, slammed its head on the counter several times, made several cuts near its head and hung it upside down to drain its blood before transferring it to a bag with a yellow sticker. In another section, they selected several large oysters and clams and abalone. Tom’s father went out of view then returned a few minutes later excitedly talking about lobsters, despite Tom’s mother dismissively saying king crab would taste better. ‘I want lobster,’ said Tom’s father, looking around expectantly.

‘I want lobster, too,’ said Tom, feeling like it was ok for Tom’s father to want lobster, especially since he’d mentioned it several times over their visit. At the lobster section, Tom’s father in a deliberate manner asked the employee to pick the one with the longest antennae, which Tom knew from a Youtube video indicated freshness—as lobsters chewed on each other’s antennae as a stress response inside cramped cages and tanks—in English (with Tom’s mother unable to assist as she had gone to a different section of the store) which the elderly male worker failed to understand with a growing sense of frustration until Tom’s father made a gesture of two index fingers like horns on his forehead, and the man understood, perhaps helped by Tom saying in a loud voice, ‘long, longer, long.’ Tom’s father held the bagged lobster towards the light and smiled in an unselfconsciously childlike manner, which Tom had not seen before but had maybe earlier in childhood when as a four or five year old, successfully rode his first bicycle down a narrow alleyway behind their condominium, successfully without training wheels for the first time, although at the end of the stretch, he’d collided with a white van, shattering the light fixture on the front of the handlebars.
At a restaurant next door, which Tom assumed was owned by the seafood market, they waited for their seafood to be prepared and brought to the table. Soon, the red snapper arrived at the table as sashimi, in an artistic presentation with the head and tail at either end of its filleted body, which had been neatly cut into shiny white and pink striped flesh. Enjoying the fish, Tom looked at his mother, who didn’t seem to be eating much—which wasn’t uncharacteristic, as his mother rarely expressed amazement or eagerness towards dining out—but he perceived that she looked unusually sad and might even, he felt, begin to cry. Since they’d arrived, she’d expressed disappointment at the duration of Tom and Sara’s stay, three days, and their spending a longer time, four in Tokyo, instead of spending at least a week or ‘two weeks,’ she’d said, in Seoul—implying she felt slighted that Seoul was basically a stopover for their main destination of Tokyo. Moreover, even though he made perhaps five or six times the amount of money working for Dave’s company compared to teaching English in Korea, or anywhere, Tom sensed his mother viewed his current job as a temporary period of steady employment within the greater context of ‘wandering and wasting time’ which characterized his life thus far—that he would inevitably return, sooner or later, to a lifestyle of using drugs and playing online games and not being, in her view, productive. By contrast, Tom’s father seemed supportive of his job, congratulating him and expressing genuine, he felt, excitement about the prospect of expanding Pizza King in Tokyo, even and up to offering to discuss it with his younger brother, Tom’s uncle, who had owned an independent pizza shop in the 1980s before making his fortune with a popular steakhouse with several locations.

When all the seafood had been consumed, including a kind of noodle soup dish made with the remaining clams and abalone, they slowly walked back towards the parking structure, pausing to look at the storefronts of two dessert places which Tom’s parents offered to treat them
to, but Tom and Sara declined as they were too full. At home, after watching TV with Tom and Sara for about two hours, Tom and Sara went to the guest bedroom and began packing for Tokyo. Tom’s father characteristically went to bed early. Tom and Sara, too, feeling tired and slightly dreading their 7 A.M flight the next morning, also went to sleep after finishing packing and watching videos for a while.

At 5 A.M, they woke to their alarm and moved their luggage into the living room, where Tom’s mother was drinking coffee. She poured cups for them, in addition to offering sliced fruit and raisin bread, which she had made. It was still mostly dark while driving to the bus station in Tom’s mother’s car. Tom protested gently when his mother, though she’d previously agreed to their plan of riding the bus one hour to the airport, passed the bus station and insisted on driving directly to the airport despite Tom urging they were fine taking the bus and that she should rest.

At the airport’s terminal entrance, Tom’s mother said he was ‘required’ to visit twice a year from now on, and she would, at the very least, be expecting him, for Christmas. Sara thanked her for taking care of them during their visit. Tom’s mother hugged both of them, but then unexpectedly followed them through the mazelike section of security clearance until she stopped and began waving with watery-looking eyes, not allowed further without a ticket.

At the security checkpoint, Sara waited for her backpack to come through the scanner when it was unexpectedly lifted out of the machine by a young security agent, who removed its contents on a plastic table. As he poured some of the contents of vitamin bottles into his gloved hands and looked at them with a suspicious expression, Sara slumped lower in her chair and began coughing, causing Tom to reflexively grin despite high levels of anxiety. The security agent was then interrupted by an older, supervisor-like agent with a clipboard, who seemed to scold the young agent about something on the clipboard, causing him to quickly pour Sara’s pills
back into the bottle and slide the backpack and its contents towards her. ‘Okay, okay,’ he said
distractedly, and he followed the older agent towards a different line in the checkpoint. Tom and
Sara quickly moved to their terminal, where they each took a Percocet before boarding the plane.

Their flight to Japan, though via a smaller and more turbulent flight compared to their
previous flight on a much larger airplane, was uneventful and surprisingly fast, probably because
Tom took a two hour nap, which was about the duration of the trip. Walking towards baggage
claim, Tom admired a arcade game from which featured as prizes a Nintendo DS as well as an
unlocked iPhone 8, and thought of how Dave would easily spend an hour and several hundred
dollars playing the machine, then put money into the machine right next to it--which sold the
same electronics, at retail price. That, their juxtaposition represented two different approaches to
finance: degenerate gambling, or buying something outright and saving time and stress. Tom
thought of a future Japan in which, studying the machines beside it selling beer and cigarettes,
Tom thought of a not-so-detailed future when Japan reversed its firm stance on prescription
drugs, and would be vending machine selling MDMA, Adderall, Klonopin, Xanax, LSD, weed,
cocaine, in similar vending machines. Maybe it would involve an additive to prevent overdose.
‘Where do we have to go now?’ said Sara. ‘We have to find the subway station.’

They circled around a circle are several times, it seemed, until Sara saying ‘there’s a lot
of convenience stores that look the same,’ Tom realized that they were passing by the
convenience store repeatedly and pointed the correct way out of the loop. Unable to find the text
from his father specifying where the train station was and which line they should take, they
wandered for about ten minutes, eventually learning that the train station was directly below the
airport.
In a lower floor of Narita Airport, Tom tried to contact his father through Kakao chat to ask him which train he should take, but had trouble connecting to the airport wifi once they were below ground level, which both of their phones connected to but couldn’t ‘verify’ and gain internet access.

‘I can’t even Google this problem ... without internet,’ said Tom feeling slightly nauseated, walking towards a payphone to call his uncle’s cellphone. Sara asked a Caucasian couple who were buying tickets at an automated kiosk, who said they were Australian college students going to Tokyo, and showed them which ticket to buy. They followed the Australian couple towards an even lower, somehow curiously subterranean, level of the airport train station. While looking at the Australian girl’s pink rolling luggage, he thought ‘I’m in Japan being guided by Australian luggage.’

At the train station, Tom became stuck, unable to exit, having forgotten to take his ticket, at the gate which Tom assumed was the last one, leaving Sara stranded on the other side of the gate. Upon explaining in broken Japanese the situation to a subway employee in a police-like blue uniform, he calmly handed him a ticket for exiting. Tom saw his uncle, Hiroshi’s, blue BMW, and he walked with Sara towards it. Tom greeted Hiroshi and he waved to Sara and said ‘Hi, Hello’ several times with a slightly awkward expression, and put Sara’s folded wheelchair in the trunk. Tom helped Sara into the backseat of the car and then entered the front passenger seat. They talked about the flight, and about Hiroshi’s new motorcycle, which he spoke excitedly about picking up on Sunday. Tom texted ‘Landed, now driving with Hiroshi to the hotel’ to his parents in group messenger.

Hiroshi drove them to the hotel closeby to the apartment building where Tom’s two uncles, Hiroshi and Mitsu lived, waited outside while Tom and Sara went to deposit their
luggage in their hotel room, which had a small kitchen and was like a tiny studio apartment, and come back downstairs. In his apartment, Hiroshi gave them snacks and drinks. They talked about whether or not to wait for Mitsu to go eat dinner, who would be coming home from work an hour later.

At Kurazushi, a conveyor belt sushi restaurant, Hiroshi explained how to order using the iPad to order things they couldn’t see on the conveyor belt. Whereas Tom ordered dishes mostly consisting of tuna. Hiroshi ordered sushi that was mostly cooked, including ‘Korean beef’ sushi and udon noodles, since he didn’t eat sushi too often. Sara ate more plates than Tom, with the mission of eating ‘one of everything,’ he thought. The sushi was really good and two pieces for 100, or roughly 90 cents. Hiroshi said that rich people didn’t really eat meat or fish anymore, that they were slowly becoming vegetarians, to avoid cholesterol and toxic ‘heavy metals.’

They went after dinner to greet Mitsu, in his apartment, who was smoking a cigarette. Hiroshi started smoking too, and offered Sara and Tom cigarettes, who each took one. When Tom asked his uncle about his software-related occupation, Mitsu talked about his career of over 25 years as a digital certificate signer. He went on to explain that his work could easily be automated by computers, but that government regulations required software companies to manually verify and sign certificates. As a curious Tom asked more questions, the conversation became centered around Mitsu’s insistence that computer technology was actually moving very, almost painfully, slow, because of the industry’s reliance on the central processing unit, which he ‘couldn’t believe’ the world was still using, instead of more advanced computing solutions. Mitsu told a story about one of the inventors of the first central processing unit—in IBM in the 1950s—who was, by the 1980s, retired and lived on a fishing boat, having distanced himself from technology. When the scientist was asked by the reporter about how he felt about his research,
that the central processing unit was being used in every computer in the world, he said with disbelief, ‘People are still using processors in their computers? No one has come up with anything better than that junk?’ Mitsu laughed in a closed-eyed, almost wincing manner, and then returned to watching anime on TV in which pubescent girls in angel-like wings and extremely small bikinis and comically large breasts were fighting with polearm-like weapons, against large dragons.

When Tom asked for Mitsu’s phone number, in case he needed to call him, Mitsu grinned and said he didn’t have a phone. Hiroshi interrupted and said, in a somewhat mocking tone, that Mitsu didn’t own a cell phone because he didn’t want the government tracking him, and that the internet in the apartment used a private network protected by a firewall he had coded himself. Mitsu said things vaguely in support of not owning a cellphone, but that the government had plenty of other ways to track its citizens, so that not having a cellphone was not necessarily a good way to avoid ‘government attacks,’ he said in English.

Around 10pm, Tom and Sara left the apartment building and went to the Family Mart, a chain convenience store, around the corner, to buy ice cream.

‘The air smells really good in here,’ said Sara, maneuvering with a little difficulty through the tight aisles. ‘It makes me want to buy everything I see.’

Tom viewed with interest the colorful ice cream packages in a chest freezer, and narrowed his choice between a green tea ice cream and a peach one. Remembering that their hotel room had a small freezer compartment, they bought several kinds of ice cream and snacks, and went back to the hotel.

‘Is your uncle a conspiracy theorist?’ said Sara.

‘I’m not sure. He’s definitely, um, concerned … about things.’
‘He should do podcasts, maybe,’ said Sara. ‘Explaining that people have more technology than they need. Of the government monitoring you through your smartphone. I would listen to him.’

‘He does have an extremely high IQ, I think,’ said Tom vaguely.

They watched Youtube videos on Tom’s Macbook using the hotel’s somewhat disappointingly slow wifi, eating ice cream and snacks, until they fell asleep with the light still on in the room.

Around 10am, Tom and Sara went downstairs and ate breakfast provided by the hotel, which featured a long table with both Japanese and Western food on it. Tom put rice and scrambled eggs and a piece of grilled fish on a plate, and another plate with fruit and a blueberry muffin on it. Sara looked confusedly at the Japanese food and placed fruit and muffins on a plate. They sat down at a table towards the corner, away from a Japanese family with two kids who were eating quietly.

‘Children seem very well-behaved here,’ said Sara. ‘Not out-of-control.’

‘Yeah,’ said Tom, then talked about how, in his view, Japanese parents tended to be more strict with their children, and that spanking, even in public, was still generally viewed as socially acceptable.

‘Were you spanked as a kid?’ said Sara, with an inquisitive grin.

‘Yeah,’ said Tom, ‘I remember getting spanked whenever my sister and I would make loud noises while my mom was talking on the phone. We would put out our hand and get hit with this, um, plastic hockey stick.’

‘That’s, like, bordering on child abuse,’ said Sara.
‘I feel like I’m still generally pro-spanking,’ said Tom, ‘despite having experienced it in my childhood. But I would tone it down, maybe.’

‘Yeah, just do it a little, sometimes,’ said Sara. ‘Teach them that they can’t act crazy all the time.’

‘This grilled fish is really good. Eating rice and fish for breakfast … I haven’t done that in years.’ Tom continued eating while checking his phone.

‘I had a dream that we would stay here,’ said Sara a few minutes later. ‘That you got a job here and was wearing a suit and wanted to stay. You said “it's better here” a lot. I would say something about America, and you’d say “it’s better, it’s better” in an aggressive way.’

‘That’s really funny,’ said Tom, ‘Because I would never do that in real life. Or, like, something really big would have to happen to convince to live in Japan. I feel like I would have to try a lot here … every day. I would have to put so much effort into telling someone “I feel sad.” I would have to use Google Translate just to express that.’

Tom typed ‘I feel depressed’ into Google Translate, and saw an error message. He typed ‘I feel really happy,’ and it worked right away.

Tom refilled their coffees then talked about writing a short story where Google slowly demented people’s lives by giving them increasingly wrong or ‘fucked up’ information whenever they searched for something. Quietly and furtively, Google would begin to anticipate people’s psyches, and create websites in advance of them searching for something, then make it show up as the first result when they did. The story would end with Google succeeding in brainwashing someone to do something out-of-control, like give them a recipe to poison their friend, or a step-by-step guide to building a pipe bomb from materials available at Home Depot, the person sort of mindlessly compelled to complete the action.
‘Sounds like sort of shock fiction,’ said Sara.

‘Yeah. I sort of want to write shock fiction,’ said Tom. ‘I’m interested in finding out what’s legal and what’s not legal. Fiction that goes to the limits of legality.’

‘Are you allowed to make things up about real people or, like, large asshole corporations? Like, would McDonalds sue me if I published a novel about a main character named McDonalds who was a pedophile clown and would abduct children and inject them with aids?’

‘Inject them with aids, whoa.’

‘I know,’ said Tom, ‘Would McDonalds be able to sue me if my book got really popular, and take it out of print, or is it protected because it’s fiction and has that disclaimer thing on the first page.’

They searched Google for defamation in fiction, but was unable to find definitive information about what was or wasn’t illegal.

‘Such a lawsuit usually has to allege concrete defamation or infringement, but defamation is often hard to prove in court,’ Sara read aloud from her Macbook.

‘But … I feel like that’s already happening, with fake news.’

‘It’s interesting how obesity doesn’t seem to exist here,’ said Tom, changing the subject. He subtly directed Sara’s attention towards an extremely skinny, maybe high-school age girl seated nearby, who steadily ate from a plate of four or five danish pastries.

‘And she’s not bulimic either,’ said Sara, indicating her very white teeth.

‘I’m beginning to feel that obesity doesn’t exist here … and only exists when foreigners, mostly Americans, bring their fat bodies to Japan, and cause obesity to exist in a given geographical location for a short while.’

‘Yeah, it seems like that.’
‘Why don’t we try eating as much junk food as possible,’ said Tom. ‘Like, try earnestly to become obese while we’re in Japan, the next three days.’

Tom rose and brought four pastries back to their table. ‘You eat two and I eat two.’

‘I can’t eat anymore,’ said Sara after finishing one.

‘I feel sort of sick now,’ said Tom after eating two pastries. He wrapped the remaining pastry in a napkin and transferred it to his pocket. They went back to their room and lay on the bed, recovering from ‘breakfast buffet binge,’ as they decided to call it. While Tom was still mostly unconscious, he received several calls--the first two of which he lacked the motivation to move to his phone to answer--from Hiroshi, telling him to come downstairs, as he and Mitsu were leaving to visit Tom’s grandfather’s gravesite altar, as previously discussed, but which Tom had completely forgotten about.

They drove to the cemetery, which was about 30 minutes away in a suburb of Tokyo. The Buddhist-style memorial marking Tom’s grandfather and grandmother’s grave was one out of about 200 such memorials, and Tom vaguely remembered doing the same thing when he came to Tokyo the last time, five years ago. Tom wiped the altar using a wet towel as instructed, wiping from the top down, while Hiroshi sat in a lawn chair that said Budweiser on it. Mitsu lit the incense purchased from a vending machine in the parking lot, placed it in a stone censor in front of each altar. They stood around, smoking cigarettes, talking. Hiroshi talked about how hard his father, Tom’s grandfather, worked, and made the lives they lived now possible, using the word ‘origin’ more than once.

Hiroshi spoke several long sentences in Japanese then asked if Tom understood.

‘I’m not sure,’ said Tom in Japanese.
'Legacy,' said Hiroshi in English. ‘Your grandfather … your father … your children … new legacy.’

‘I don’t …’ Tom mumbled, watching the sunlit surface of a yogurt on the altar, which appeared extremely bright. ‘I don’t know.’

Mitsu spoke, jokingly but also sincerely, for about the third or fourth time since he arrived, of how Tom was the ‘last hope’ for the family, referencing the lack of a paternal great-grandson, of Tom being the last paternal son to be born in the family thus far.

Lighting another cigarette, Hiroshi pointed out, in what Tom felt to be a sitcom-like manner, that he and Mitsu were both in their fifties and unmarried. Moreover, that out of Tom’s two paternal male cousins, one was an a 40-year old agoraphobic living with his parents (Tom’s eldest uncle), and the other was a 43-year old astrophysicist at University of Tokyo who was married but unable, for some reason, it seemed, to have children, and had adopted two pugs.

Hiroshi said it was the important thing for Tom to have a son, in order for the family to ‘survive.’

Tom made a sound meaning ‘Yes’ then thought about his unspoken response. That, were his uncles fluent in English, his likely response was to say he never wanted to have kids, and talk about the immorality of procreation in general, maybe citing Nietzsche or Sophocles. That his main goal in life was to be productive and ‘feel good,’ without hurting other people or creating new suffering by reproducing. Tom looked at the incense which was almost finished burning from green to ash. He visualized himself sitting at a table with Sara and their daughter, eating, for some reason, Kentucky Fried Chicken.

The incense in censor had stopped smoking, and Tom’s uncles began taking food off the altar. Hiroshi took the bento container and Mitsu took a stick of sweet rice cakes and handed one
to Tom. While chewing he felt a little confused as he’d expected the food to be left at the altar—consumed later by monks or custodians of the place—as he had seen in a documentary about Thailand or somewhere else.

At Takeya, a large multi-story discount store where they went after nap, Tom and Sara loaded groceries into a cart until Tom said ‘Oh’ loudly, stopping in place and realizing they were at the store which Tom’s mother had specified in her most recent email, that she’d instructed him to buy an ‘elephant logo’ rice cooker and mail it to Seoul.

‘Do you feel claustrophobic,’ said Tom. ‘Should we go to a different store with less people.’

‘I’m okay, it’s not that bad.’

While waiting for the elevator they noticed a large poster on the doors which said ‘please pay for goods on each floor—do not take unpaid goods upstairs.’

‘What should we do?’ said Sara.

The elevator suddenly opened and a ‘pack’ of 30 people emerged. Tom set the basket down and sort of slid it in a crevice between a ice cream freezer and a life-size paper cutout of a sumo-wrestler advertising a curry brand. They got on the elevator and pressed the top floor.

The top floor of Takeya was like a miniature Home Depot, with flooring samples and toilets and sinks and doors. Being the only ones on the level and feeling the salesperson’s scrutiny, they decided to go down. Descending the narrow escalator, which Sara’s wheelchair barely fit in, Tom tilted Sara backwards to prevent her falling forwards, and said ‘I’m pretty sure this isn’t allowed’ sort of through the corner of his mouth, looking at the people in front of them who had glanced back but otherwise ignored them. On the seventh floor Tom spent 15 minutes inspecting rice cookers, unable to find the specific model which his mother had sent in Kakao
talk; he confusedly tried to figure out the differences between the more expensive rice cookers (costing the equivalent of $400-700 dollars), and the cheapest ($80 dollars).

Tom touched a $900 rice cooker with a Macbook-like aluminum body. ‘Pretentious bourgeois rice cooker,’ said Tom. Sara grinned and said he should buy it. Tom purchased the cheapest rice cooker, which despite its price was highly recommended by the salesperson, who said he personally owned one and used it everyday. They continued looking at things in lower levels, with what seemed like mutually waning levels of interest. Sara purchased a face mask with scorpion venom and bee pollen in it. They left the department store and went into a postal store, where Tom sent the rice cooker to Korea. They went to the train station and rode a train to Shibuya, another district of Tokyo.

After eating at a locally-owned pizza shop which seemed bad, as the cheese was sort of tasteless and the sauce weirdly ketchup-y, Tom and Sara felt mutually optimistic about Dave opening a Pizza King and dominating the competition. The next place on their list was an extremely narrow store built, it seemed, in the alley between two buildings. They watched as people went in single-file to get their pizza then came back outside to eat it, the rectangular store seeming almost nearly too narrow for people to extend their arm sideways. ‘I know at least six people who wouldn’t physically fit in this pizza store,’ said Tom, with the sensation of continuing their discussion about obesity from earlier.

‘This is the best pizza I’ve ever had,’ said Sara eating the slice they bought.

‘Are you being sarcastic?’ said Tom. Sara shook her head. Tom took a bite of the pizza.

‘Shit, this tastes amazing,’ said Tom. ‘This cheese is so good. And this bread is chewy, soft, and crunchy at the same time. How do they do this.’

‘This is like 10 times better than Pizza King,’ said Sara.
‘Every time I eat pizza I’ll think of this pizza,’ said Tom. ‘I think they’re using buffalo mozzarella.’

‘I told Dave there’s really good pizza here,’ said Sara after sending a picture of the half eaten slice of pizza to their group chat in Messenger.

‘Do you think Dave is insane?’ said Sara.

‘I don’t think a pizza store in Japan is going to work.’

‘No, I’m not talking about pizza. Just … in general?’

‘Um, I don’t know,’ said Tom, and laughed. ‘He’s … something.

‘Look at all the shit’s that’s happened.’ Sara talked about Franki, Trevor, Pam, and Terry.

‘Any day now I’m expecting a text telling me Dave, like, decapitated Natalianette with his samurai sword, and then stabbed his own heart.’

‘That wouldn’t surprise me,’ said Sara.

‘But then again, nothing bad has happened to Dave. Only to people around him. Oh,’ said Tom loudly, realizing ‘people around Dave’ aptly described himself, and by extension, Sara.

‘Are we the next ones,’ said Sara, ‘to die in the horror movie of Dave’s life.’

‘Don’t say that,’ said Tom laughing but felt a little paranoid.

but feeling suddenly scared, if a little exposed. ‘You’ll be the last girl. The one that narrowly escapes to tell the story to others, and to star in the sequel.’

‘That means you’d be dead by the end of the movie,’ said Sara.

‘Yes. I die in the last scene to facilitate your escape. I yell something stereotypical like ‘get out of here’ while fighting the monster.’

‘Tom dies at the end,’ said Sara, reminding Tom of John Dies at the End, a non-horror movie.
‘He has to,’ said Tom grinning, ‘to maintain three-act structure.’

The next evening they walked around Ueno Park, a large public park built around a medieval Buddhist shrine. There was also water fountains, a zoo, two museums, and two coffeeshops (a Starbucks and an independently owned café). Sara and Tom walked around, had planned on going to the zoo but saw that it was closed, with a sign which said ‘zoo closed due to animals very excite of festival.’ They walked to the other end of the park where they saw a gathering of people and orange tents in the flat expanse near the water fountain.

They walked around the festival and Tom pointed at a grilled octopus leg on a skewer.

‘Should we get one?’

‘What is that,’ said Sara.

Tom began laughing. ‘It’s an octopus leg.’

‘I’ve never had octopus before,’ said Sara in a bored-sounding voice.

‘What . . . Um, we had a seafood thing in Chinatown, remember.’

‘That was squid,’ said Sara. ‘I’ve had squid before. Just not octopus.’

‘Do you like squid?’

‘I don’t know.’

When Tom ordered an octopus leg, accomplished by pointing at it and making the sound for ‘Yes,’ the person in the tent removed the octopus from the skewer, cut it into bite-size pieces, re-skewered them in the same order and drizzled some kind of sauce.

‘I don’t like it,’ said Sara after taking a small bite.

‘It tastes just like squid,’ said Tom laughing a little.

‘I think I’ll like that better,’ said Sara pointing at an adjacent tent where a fish-shaped pancake filled with ice cream and toppings were being sold.
After they finished the ice cream and watched a band play Japanese rock songs with English words in them on a small stage with folded-chair seating, they sort of mutually lost interest in walking around the festival, decided to exit the park and walk around downtown. When, about an hour later, Sara said she was tired, they went home and worked on things on their Macbooks for a while.

‘What are you looking at?’ said Tom, after Sara didn’t respond to his asking if she wanted Xanax or Adderall.

‘Email from my dad,’ said Sara. ‘He, um, crashed his boat.’

‘Is he okay?’

‘Yeah, he says he’s not hurt. It’s just that he tried to sail from San Diego to Hawaii … without his instructor … or he fired his instructor, seems like,’ said Sara squinting at her screen.

‘He almost got all the way but there was a storm and his boat flipped over … but the Coast Guard game in time and rescued him.’

‘Jesus,’ said Tom. ‘What is he going to do now?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Sara. ‘It looks like he might stay in Hawaii for a while, since his house is already leased to tenants.’

‘Hawaii,’ said Tom. ‘Both our parents have a tendency to escape to islands or island peninsulas.’

‘I’m trying to think of what to even reply,’ said Sara. ‘What should I say?’

‘You should type … I don’t know, actually. Seems hard to just answer that.’

Sara wrote ‘I’m really glad you’re okay’ and paused, the cursor blinking on the screen. Tom left the bedroom to pee, then stayed in the kitchen examining snacks they’d bought earlier, feeling she might be better able to write her email in private.
When Tom returned to the living room, he found Sara softly weeping into a pillow.

‘What’s wrong?’

‘It’s just so fucking irresponsible of him,’ said Sara. ‘To just go and do something like that. To ditch his instructor and just go off sailing in the middle of the sea. I wrote an angry letter. I think I might’ve said some things I didn’t mean, but I already sent it.’

‘What did you say?’

‘I still said I’m relieved he’s okay and everything. But then I added that it hurt me that he did this and made me worry, and that if he was going to do reckless things in the future, he shouldn’t even tell me about it, and that I would stop responding to his emails.’

‘You expressed your feelings honestly,’ said Tom, ‘there’s nothing wrong with that. And it was reckless of him to fire his coach and do something he was totally unprepared for.’

Tom brought water for Sara and hugged her. Sara resolved to write a longer, more gentle-sounding email to her father in the morning. Tom drifted off to sleep while Sara listened to music at a low volume and write in her journal which she kept on Google Drive.

The next day, the penultimate day of their five day stay in Tokyo, Tom went to meet Ken. Ken was the only college friend he still talked to, who two months ago had moved to Japan after getting an MFA in Poetry from UC Irvine, in Asakusa, the ‘down-and-dirty/old-school’ part of Tokyo (according to Wikipedia) about 10 minutes away from their hotel.

‘I’m in front of Family Mart,’ Tom texted Ken upon arriving in front of the agreed-upon convenience store at 2pm.

‘Ok I’m coming out,’ said Ken.
When, ten minutes later, Ken was still not seen, Tom texted Ken if he had the right Family Mart.

‘Shit, there’s like 10.’

‘Oh,’ said Tom after searching Family Mart and seeing about a dozen pins fall around the blue dot which represented his location. ‘Um, take a screenshot in Maps of your location.’

‘I don’t know how to do that,’ said Ken. ‘I’m at the one in front of the train station exit.’

Tom, after typing ‘train station’ in Maps saw there were four exits to Asakusa station, which front experience knew sprawled below them. ‘Ok, there’s four of them, narrowing down. What do you see near you.’

‘Drum heritage museum,’ said Ken.

‘Ok. I think you have to walk like a mile north,’ said Tom beginning to walk.

When, after five minutes of walking in the direction from where Ken was walking, they met in front of a Family Mart, Tom made a comment about there being ‘too many’ Family Marts and laughed.

‘The spreading of … cancerous Family Mart cells,’ said Ken.

Tom saw Ken had lost weight since college, and mentally registered that he looked ‘almost anorexic’ but did not look unhealthy, maybe due to Japan being full of lanky men.

Tom walked slightly in front of Ken, leading the way to the Shinoji Temple, which Google said was the oldest temple in Tokyo, perhaps owing to Ken never having been to Tokyo. Ken lived in his grandmother’s house in Chiba, a suburb 30 minutes away by train from Tokyo.

‘Do I qualify as being obese by Japanese standards,’ said Tom lightly drumming his slightly protruding stomach, as they took a seat on a bench near vending machines.

‘Um,’ said Ken. ‘You’re not fat enough to be obese, I don’t think.’
'In America I never thought of myself as obese. But in Tokyo I’m definitely on the verge of obesity, perhaps even already slightly obese.’ Tom mentioned feeling ‘addicted to rice cake and snacks,’ and that last night, while finishing a Thomas Bernhard novel and feeling existentially fucked, ‘tottered,’ he felt, to the Family Mart near the hotel and purchased rice cakes, snacks, ice cream, candy, cigarettes.

‘Geez, you’ll become fat,’ said Ken. ‘Sorry, just kidding.’

‘It’s ok. Fat shaming is socially acceptable in Japan. You can fat shame me if you want.’ Tom remembered, then asked, to see Ken’s unpublished poetry book, which was his MFA thesis, as previously discussed, Ken looked in his bad and said he forgot to put it in. Tom said that was okay, and said he was ‘really bad’ at reading poems and probably couldn’t offer any helpful criticism. Ken vaguely nodded then directed their attention to a tree which seemed to be growing sideways, into the ground, and said that he ‘seriously doubted’ the usefulness of poetry to anyone. Prompted by Tom to clarify, Ken said he often questioned the ‘ontology’ of poetry as a whole, whether there was any point to having other people read your poetry, or even to write poems in the first place.

‘You should write a poetry book about how its existence shouldn’t exist, and each poem in the book disclaims the assertions and/or denies the existence of the preceding poem. You could call it Erasures, or something.’

‘I think someone already did that … this guy in Guam, I think.’

‘Fucking Guam guy,’ said Tom. ‘Fuck his ass.’

‘I think it’s Guamanian,’ said Ken in a quiet, almost inaudible voice. He added that people wouldn’t know about the Guamanian poet if he did write and publish a book like that, but that people teaching in MFA programs might know of the Guamanian poet.
‘Was getting an MFA in poetry, like, an incredibly depressing experience?’ said Tom.

‘I don’t know,’ said Ken, then talked about experienced ‘a weird thing’ where he felt, with increasing intensity as the program went on, that students and teachers in his MFA program spent most of their time, ironically but sincerely, ‘hating’ poetry.

Ken pointed at a narrow, almost crevasse-like side-street that many people were walking into, some walking out of. They began walking towards it.

‘I think that’s where the temple is,’ said Tom.

The narrow street led to the wider street, and then they entered a regal-seeming square where the temple, along with smaller, shed-like buildings with lots of small drawers, which Ken said were for ‘prayer things,’ thin strips of papers on which people wrote their wishes and deposited inside a large chest together with coins.

‘I think this place is 400 years old,’ said Tom, touching a large red column. He looked at a plaque with ‘1964’ written on it and thought, very randomly, of Paul McCartney’s voice and the Beatles. About five minutes later, as if mutually intuiting each other’s boredom with where they were standing, Tom led the way to a quieter, more tranquil-seeming area where the sound of a stream seemed to be coming from. There were koi in the stream. Tom thought of what measures the caretakers of the koi pond employed to protect against attacks from cats, vaguely remembering a Youtube video of someone with a backyard koi pond ‘raging’ over a neighbor’s cat ripping through the protective tarp and murdering several of his koi.

‘Maybe they cover it with a net at night, or have some other way of keeping stray cats at bay,’ said Tom. He googled the subject and found out that Tokyo had strict rules about cats being spayed and neutered, and furthermore that municipal employees captured stray cats
aggressively, sometimes ‘deporting’ them to Cat Island, an island in southern Japan densely populated by feral cats.

Oh, I had a friend who was learning Japanese for the sole purpose of moving to Japan and working on cat island. Like, that’s all she wanted to do.’

‘I’ve heard of cat island,’ said Ken without much interest, instead pointing at the koi, that there didn’t seem to be much variety of koi, which were mostly spotted combinations of orange and white and black. ‘Plebeian koi.’

‘Look, antisocial koi.’ Tom pointed at a large, pale and almost albino-seeming koi that seemed to be lying very still at the bottom of the narrow stream. ‘He’s contemplating the meaninglessness of existence every three seconds,’ said Tom, based on knowing that goldfish had an average short term memory of three seconds, and subsequently wondered if koi had similar attention spans—or much longer ones, he thought, perhaps longer than his own. Tom shifted his attention to a newly noticed koi, which Ken pointed at: an ‘emo’ koi which lay still in the water directly below the cascade of the small waterfall.

‘You’re bleeding, your leg,’ said Ken.

Tom looked at his leg and saw several fat drops of blood running from what looked like a cut. ‘Whoa, what the fuck. How did that happen.’ Tom took a leaf from a tree and rubbed the unexplained cut with it, creating a conspicuous blur on his leg. Tom tossed the leaf into the stream. Several koi nipped at it, and a larger koi swallowed the leaf.

‘Whoa, they ate it like pepperoni, blood pepperoni,’ said Tom.

‘Vampire koi, you’ve unleashed bloodlust into them,’ said Ken. ‘Now they will quest for more blood to suck.’
‘Wait.’ Tom took another leaf from the branch. ‘This is the control.’ The second leaf floated downstream, undisturbed by koi.

‘Shit,’ said Ken, grinning.

Tom returned his attention to the head of the stream, where the ‘emo’ koi was still being battered by water.

‘I feel like I’m doing the same thing, I think,’ said Tom vaguely, slightly looking away. He directed his attention to a small child who, at a vending machine, dropped an ‘insane’-seeming amount of coins on the ground after buying a Coke. An older man standing at a father-like distance looked down at the coins, prompting Tom to think he might ‘loot’ them, as in an MMORPG game, but he didn’t, and wasn’t his father either, as he didn’t say anything and walked away in the opposite directly as the boy, who finished collecting the coins and walked away.

Having agreed to eat tempura for lunch, Tom led the way towards the most-recommended tempura restaurant nearby them according to Tabelog, the Japanese equivalent of Yelp. The destination was a house-like building in an alley, which seemed closed. They noticed a sign which read ‘Closed on Wednesday and Sunday.’ Tom checked his phone and confirmed it was Wednesday.

At the #3 location (as navigation via Google Maps for #2 did not work properly) they seated themselves in a very small restaurant. The waitress, who was the chef’s wife, somehow very quickly discerned that Tom was non-Japanese speaking, and began saying English words as she pointed at the menu. As Tom tried to order, he was interrupted by the husband-chef who had come over and begun repeating what his wife had said, except his English seemed less capable. After Tom complicatedly ordered in English, Ken quickly ordered in Japanese, prompting the
chef to bow and say ‘Oh you’re Japanese, please excuse me.’ The chef returned behind the counter and began preparing the food, sometimes talking to an older, 60-ish seeming man seated at the bar, who was drinking beer and was the only other customer in the restaurant.

After eating they continued walking in aimless manner, Tom sometimes asking if they already ‘walked this way.’ Ken, being graphically dyslexic, said he couldn’t tell in a bored, if slightly pleasant, tone. They went into a video arcade and won different kinds of candy from a candy claw machine. They tried several times to win a stuffed animal octopus, without success. Ken laughed and said Tom looked ‘really angry’ after failing four times to win the octopus. They left the arcade to find a ‘quiet place’ to sit and eat their candy.

They entered a sort of shaded, secluded area comprised of tall pine trees and several, gigantic, upright stone slabs with Chinese characters carved in them. Sitting on the stoop in front of the largest, ‘main,’ they thought, tablet, Tom pointed and expressed curiosity towards what it said. ‘Really old Japanese,’ said Ken. He muttered sounds of what Tom imagined as ‘Elizabethan’ Japanese, but gave up after around 30 seconds and said ‘I don’t know.’

‘Maybe it’s rules or something,’ said Tom, ‘rules of how to behave around the stone, how to be polite around stones, treat them with respect.’

‘Maybe.’

‘I sort of just don’t want to ... fall on us,’ said Tom. ‘I just visualized it falling on us, crushing us to death.’

‘Not me,’ said Ken grinning. ‘I have max stone resist.’

Tom asked if he was referencing an online game. Ken said he didn’t know and laughed. Then Tom remembered Ken had been a professional Dota 2 player in college, asked if he still
played. Ken said he played sometimes but not ‘seriously,’ and that now he was more interested in coaching professional players rather than playing.

‘You said you played the game for 10,000 hours.’

‘Over 10,000. A lot over, actually—probably closer to 20.’

‘20,000 hours playing Dota, that seems like a really long time.’

‘Not really,’ Ken said. ‘There’s plenty of people who’ve played the game for over 20k hours and still suck, like really bad. They don’t know how to get better. And if you like, keep playing while you suck, you get even worse. That’s why good players have coaches. It’s the coach’s job to see if you’re sucking less or sucking more, over time.’

‘If you win more, you’re getting better, right?’

‘That’s what noobs think. In fact that’s where people go wrong—assuming that winning, or even winning tournaments, means you’re good. When in reality winning is actually really good at reinforcing bad habits.’

‘That seems really confusing,’ said Tom.

‘Players are so busy playing so they can’t study themselves. A good coach studies the replays . . . they study the player more than the games. Well, at least that’s my opinion of coaching, I’m sure there’s plenty of coaches that make a shitton of money raising players’ win rates. But then they might just be metagaming and telling players to do something according to game theory. But if I ever start coaching, I want to focus on the individual player's’ journey, progress, nevermind everyone else.’

‘It sounds almost like Buddhism, or something.’ Tom laughed. ‘I don’t know, I’ve never played the game. I’ve only seen people raging on Youtube, sometimes smashing $4000 curved gaming monitors when they lose.’
Two drunk businessmen stumbled into the entrance of where they sat. The two men gazed up at the stone slabs and said something, then continued up the path towards somewhere else.

‘Those guys are stumbling home drunk and it’s not even dark yet,’ said Tom.

‘Yeah, there’s a lot of that here. Drinking with coworkers.’

‘I saw a dead guy on the street last night while I was jogging,’ said Tom, somewhat discursively. Well, at first I thought he was dying, he was lying on his side motionless, with his eyes wide open, sometimes blinking-like he was having stroke. I kept going but stopped and watched him for a while. I dialed 911 but then remembered that it’s not 911 here, it’s something else. I googled ‘911 in Japan’ and waited for it to load, but suddenly felt someone past me—and it was that same guy. He wasn’t even stumbling or anything now—walking normally, crossed the street and kept going.’

‘Interesting,’ said Ken. ‘Maybe he was pranking you, or something.’

‘Jesus,’ said Tom. He took a cigarette and offered one to Ken, who hesitated then curiously accepted it, puffed on it once then watched it burn, holding it upright like a stick of incense. Tom commented on how strict the Japanese government was about weed and prescription drugs, while extremely lax about alcohol and cigarettes, when the latter was much more detrimental to people’s health. Ken said he hadn’t really noticed those things. Tom half jokingly suggested that they go to 7-11 and buy lots of alcohol and drink it while trying to read the stone. Ken said he wasn’t interested in doing any sort of drug, that he didn’t want to ‘alter’ his brain or perception at all. Tom said things in support of drug use, and vaguely talked about how many people sought pleasure through disrupting their perceptions, intentionally disrupting their homeostasis in a controlled settings, citing horror movies and roller coasters as examples.
'I think most people do drugs to forget … things,’ said Ken. ‘But I’m the opposite. Um, I avoid drugs for fear of forgetting something. Even if I forget it for a few hours, it’ll be enough to change me forever … in a way.’

‘Acumen,’ said Tom confidently, then proceeded to wonder what the word exactly meant. ‘Let’s take the train to Akihabara. Um, you probably won’t like it, but it’s worth going to once, I think.’

‘Okay,’ said Ken.

Standing up and feeling somewhat fatigued, Tom took half of a 30mg Adderall from his pocket, offered the other half to Ken who said ‘no’ and ‘what is that’ nearly simultaneously.

In Akihabara, a mecca for fans of all things anime/manga/video game-related, Tom led Ken into Club Sega, a large, five-story arcade. After playing several shooting games and one called Typing of the Dead, an arcade game where you shot zombies by typing words which appeared on top of their heads, Tom felt an overwhelming desire to win a large Gudetama (a soft-boiled egg anime character meant to symbolize youthful existential despair) languishing with its yolk broken on a slice of bread, and cursed and swore in English at the machine, until an attendant came and Tom picked up his backpack, assuming they were being escorted out of the arcade, but instead the teenager smiled inserted a special key and gave him one credit for free, which he also squandered, unable to move the plushie.

They moved to a different area where Tom stood staring at a 5 ft tall wall of capsule vending machines, and tried to choose between a squid plushie keychain or a cat in a milk carton.

‘A plastic cat in a milk carton … what is it trying to say about existence,’ said Ken.
‘I want the calico cat but not the white, brown, or black one. I wish there was a way to guarantee I get the calico cat.’

Tom spun the handle and got a capsule containing the black cat.

‘Fuck ‘Black cat, I’ll die soon,’ said Tom.

‘I’ll die sooner,’ Ken grinned. ‘Let’s go outside and walk towards ice cream.’

An hour later, at the train station, they bought tickets for returning to Asakusa. While waiting they briefly discussed the lack of ‘suicide barriers’ in this train station as opposed to other ones in the city, how Japan had recently passed laws imposing extremely high fines to family members of people who jumped in front of trains, but that it ‘wasn’t really working,’ Tom said he’d read on Wikipedia. Ken said he knew someone, a vaguely remembered second cousin, who jumped in front of a train.

‘There’s nothing wrong with suicide, I don’t think,’ said Tom, without being prompted to comment on the morality of suicide.

‘Probably not,’ said Ken and laughed a little.

‘Anna Karenina,’ said Tom, ‘that’s what I thought just now. Vronsky. Was the dude called Vronsky?’

‘Yeah,’ said Ken. ‘Or something.’

The train came and they got inside the cabin which seemed already very full. Tom and Ken got in the center of the train. Upon seeing an attractive woman in a short flowery skirt standing directly in front of him, Tom became aware of himself having, years ago, watched a genre of Japanese porn depicting ‘train molestation fetish.’ Tom remembered seeing one in which a woman tears the back of her pants when she bends down to pick up her phone, and subsequently uses her hand to cover up the hole while looking highly embarrassed. A man
moves close to her and forces his hand on the woman’s ass and, despite the woman’s attempts to ‘swat’ his hand away, succeeds in enlarging the tear in her pants and eventually aggressively ‘fingers’ the woman, who muffles her cries into a handkerchief. She never shouts or freaks out, is shown more or less accepting the molestation, implying maybe that, to her, the shame of being violated in public far exceeded the actual sexual assault itself. When the train stopped Tom pushed his way out, repeatedly said ‘excuse me’ in Japanese. Wandering outside, waiting for Google Maps to load, Tom found himself in a totally unfamiliar area, having had not rode far enough, or was on the wrong subway line altogether, found his location which was very south in relation to where he had intended to get off. Tom turned off his phone, which was at 20% battery—resolving to order a portable charger on Amazon as soon as he got home, to mitigate future situations like this—to turn on later when closer to the neighborhood where the hotel was.

In the morning, instead of eating breakfast at the hotel, Tom and Sara walked around stores near the hotel. They bought and ate pastries and flan pudding from a bakery, and when they passed a puppy cafe—a coffeeshop filled with puppies for customers to play with—briefly considered entering, but resisted, both Tom and Sara not wanting dog hair on their clothes. At a stationery store, Tom looked at some notebooks and Sara bought several Hello Kitty-themed items to send to an internet friend who she said was ‘obsessed’ with Hello Kitty.

At the apartment, Tom worked on his Macbook and Sara soon called her father using Facebook Messenger. She learned her father had not yet left Hawaii, and instead had surreptitiously answered a Craigslist ad recruiting people to work on a sweet onion farm in Maui, and flew to their farm. He apparently found the work to be fun and described the area as the most beautiful place he’d ever seen, with views of the ocean, tropical forests and volcanoes all at once. When they were off work, Sara’s father would go fishing and surfing with some of the
other employees. At the same time, he reassured Sara it was only a temporary ‘vacation,’ and that he’d return to California soon.

‘I can’t imagine having to do farm work as a pleasant thing,’ said Tom, visualizing stock images of ethnic workers with hoes, and then recalling mowing lawns as a teenager which he’d disliked.

‘I can’t either,’ said Sara. ‘But if my dad says he enjoys being there, I guess it’s okay. Like, he’s doing this instead of more crazy or reckless things.’

‘It’s a positive development,’ said Tom, grinning. ‘Self-actualization through digging onions.’

‘I do know that Maui has the most active volcanoes than any other place on Earth,’ said Sara. ‘I think I saw it on Jeopardy as a kid, or something.’

Tom learned on Google that, although Hawaii had three active volcanoes, the one on Maui was considered dormant, with about a %0.34 chance of spontaneous eruption. ‘I think he’s okay,’ said Tom.

‘Yeah, that’s good,’ said Sara.

After working some more and eating the rest of their pudding, Tom and Sara decided to take a nap and then in the evening go to the Tokyo Sky Tree, the tallest tower in the world and the second tallest building in the world, next to the Burj Khalifa, according to Wikipedia. Upon waking to a dusky sunset, they showered and put on new clothes, and walked to the subway station.

They sampled expensive artisan pizza in the upscale neighborhoods of Ginza and Roppongi, including a black pizza made from dough with squid ink. Afterwards they had
various desserts from other stores, waiting until it was completely dark to enter the Sky Tree, taking the advice of bloggers who wrote about the experience.

They were relieved to not find a lot of people waiting to ascend the Sky Tree, perhaps because it was a Thursday night. After about a 20 minute wait, they purchased tickets--receiving more change than expected, learning tickets for the elderly and handicapped people were 50% off--boarded a large elevator with 12 other people, and moved to the edge of the elevator so they could talk in English without being too conspicuous.

‘Today Amazon bought Whole Foods,’ said Sara looking at News Feed on her iPhone.

‘I heard about that,’ said Tom. ‘It seems … I don’t know. Almost feels like Amazon is absorbing a lot of other companies at this point. Like, soon Amazon will own everything … Buildings, things, people . . . We’ll all just be Amazon.’

‘Really,’ said Sara laughing. ‘That’s funny, actually.’

‘I’m okay with being owned by Amazon as long as I come with free two-day shipping. Pay $5 more for “Next Day Air” ’

The elevator stopped and the blue-vested attendant told them it cost 1000 more yen ‘go to next level,’ to a surprised Sara and Tom who didn’t know that they would be charged again.

‘Okay,’ said Tom, and handed the woman two 1000 yen bills, and received two small blue tickets perhaps signifying a receipt. There weren’t, strangely, further discounts for handicapped people.

Now there were only six people left on the elevator, a Chinese couple having exited, then looking back, confused and seeming unimpressed, then taking two steps towards the elevator as if wanting to go back in, having realized that it wasn’t the top, but only maybe halfway there,
when the elevator doors closed. There was a white couple, three Japanese people who looked to be students, and two Arab men carrying bulging black backpacks.

Continuing to ascend the sky tree, feeling a noticeable but not unpleasant pressure building in his ears and a deeper sense of undulating, that the elevator was vibrating more, noticed himself feeling strongly that ‘the destiny of technology is more technology.’

At the 3/4s point, the elevator stopped and it was time to exit onto the observation deck, unless they wanted to go to the ‘maximum observation level’ which costed 1000 yen more per person.

Tom inconspicuously watched two Arab-looking men talk to each other, presumably debating whether or not to pay more, and seemed to ask each other if they had more cash and, and after looking in their wallets, looked as if they might offer the attendant, or someone else in the elevator, something from their backpack in exchange for a ride to the top, but they didn’t, and exited to the observation deck at the 3/4th point.

‘They wanted to go to the top to do their jihad,’ whispered Sara once they exited onto the top observation deck, which seemed ‘spacier’ than the previous decks, owing to city lights not being visible until they went to the edge of the deck and looked down.

‘75% jihad, 25% fomo,’ said Tom, feeling a little lightheaded.

‘It’s ok if they do jihad down there,’ said Sara. ‘We’ll be at the top and it’ll take a little time for the jihad to affect us.’

‘I don’t care,’ Tom began to say but then began coughing suddenly, and drank the rest of his water bottle.

‘What were you going to say?’ asked Sara.
'Nevermind,' said Tom. ‘Um, I was just going to make a joke about feeling indifferent about dying.’

‘I don’t care if I die, either. But at the same time I don’t feel like actively pursuing it, like I felt like doing before, maybe two or three years ago,’ said Sara. ‘Before I met you I wanted to die more and live less. Now I want to live more and die less.’

‘Die less,’ said Tom visualizing it as a slogan on a T-shirt. ‘I feel like there’s so much to experience in the world … if you think about it that way. Which seems, like, a concrete, objective statement. We can use our time and energy and resources towards cultivating new relationships with people and experience new geographical locations and new food, even.’

‘Do you want to break up,’ said Sara in a suddenly wavering voice.

‘Why?’ said Tom sounding worried. ‘What made you say that?’

‘You said “cultivate new relationships with other people.’

‘I think I said people in general, I didn’t meant for dating. I don’t want to be with anyone except you.’

‘Good, okay,’ said Sara. Um, the people and cars seem so . . . small.’

‘I feel really insignificant when I’m up here. But in a very good way,’ said Tom thinking of Terence McKenna’s praise of psychedelic drug use on the basis that it temporarily freed the mind from its ego, enabling it to see ‘the bigger picture,’ the meaningful picture of Nature and the planets and the universe, the whole pointillistic picture made up by dots, each person never, by definition, allowed to be larger or smaller, than other dots.

Tom pointed at the traffic lights the roads looking like a uninterrupted stream of red one side and yellow on the other. He was able to view what he saw as a scene of nature, without
people, even though everything was man-made and industrial below. He visualized the cars and buses as koi swimming up and down a narrow pond.

‘It feels like when I was on mushrooms, that one time in the park, part of something much larger,’ said Tom. ‘I feel my ego melting away, reduced to almost nothing. But I know it will come back when we go back down, or 30 minutes after we go to a place to eat, or something. I’ll forget everything I’m feeling now and my ego will take over again, and I’ll be overwhelmed by my own problems and desires and forget that I’m one dot amongst a trillion dots, when seen from a far aerial view. I’ll continue to take myself way too seriously, and not be able to visualize the true largeness of life, the largeness of nature and the insignificance of individuals and their egos.’ Tom said he would take a picture but his camera ‘was fucked’ and didn’t focus, and he kept forgetting to buy a new phone.

Sara took several pictures with her iPhone and sent the best one to Tom. ‘Make that your lock screen. Then you’ll be reminded … of this … whenever you look at it.’

Tom made his lock screen and wallpaper the picture of Tokyo below, and stared at it for a long time.

‘Do you like it?’ said Sara.

‘Yes. I like it a lot,’ said Tom. ‘Thank you.’

‘I’m going to try really hard from now on,’ said Tom about ten minutes later, staring intensely at the lights below.

‘On what?’


‘Being healthy and productive is good,’ said Sara.
‘I’ve been, um … researching stem cells,’ said Tom, referencing scientific papers he’d read and a documentary he’d seen about stem cell therapy, which had talked about rich handicapped people from America and Europe travelling to China to partake in experimental stem cell therapies which were illegal in their home countries. ‘I also read this research paper online talking about Norwegian scientists who used stem cells to cure spinal cord injuries in rats.’

‘Oh really,’ said Sara, looking away slightly or seeming to feign interest in something below them. ‘I didn’t know you were researching stem cells.’

‘Well, recently I have. Those scientists they had a 55% success rate on rats, I think.’

Sara sneezed, then said something implying it was much easier to cure things inside of rats compared to humans, and that probably no one in the documentary was completely cured yet—which was true, since the filmmaker (whose mother was a paraplegic) said on Twitter that would make a sequel to the documentary if he learned that a patient had been cured.

‘I think those people in the documentary each paid like three million dollars for stem cell therapy,’ said Tom. ‘Which is a lot. But I felt this thing while watching it … like I could do it too, you know? I could work really hard, and maybe get the same thing … for you … and technology will have improved a lot by then, too.’

‘I don’t really care,’ said Sara, smiling. ‘I mean, I’m not angry or even that uncomfortable anymore … with the way I am. I’ve accepted it.’

‘You have?’

‘Yes,’ said Sara. ‘I think so. But I’m not saying this to discourage you, either. I mean, I could feel completely different towards this a month from now … or a year, or something. So, based on that, I’m happy overall that you care about it.’
‘Okay,’ said Tom, who moved closer to Sara and put an arm around her shoulder. ‘I’ll keep reading about it sometimes, and let you know if I learn something interesting.’

About five minutes later, they noticed the burgundy-coated attendant was gathering people, walking around the observation deck, telling people their time was up, and had begun ushering people back towards the elevator. In an effort to prolong their stay, Sara moved as the attendant walked, anticipating her movements and continuously hiding herself, with Tom following behind while barely stifling laughter.

‘We should get to stay for at least one hour,’ said Sara quietly. ‘We paid like 50 dollars. This is bullshit.’

‘We should just let ourselves be seen,’ said Tom. ‘Don’t you think?’

‘No, fuck that. Let’s just keep doing this,’ said Sara. ‘Shit! Change direction. I think she saw you.’

‘No, this way! Fuck!’ Tom laughed and grabbed Sara’s chair, changing directions. ‘Ok! Go! Go! Go! Go! Go!’
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