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# *Falling Asleep to the Sound of Critics*

a memoir...of sorts

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## Part One

### *A Tiny Head and a Really Long Flagellum*

The very moment my father's sperm touched my mother's egg, my only thought was, "Thanks a lot; now I have to die someday!... Yippee!... Is this how you express your love for me? By giving me the gift of death?... All I wanted was a pair of reading glasses and a tie... Where did you see death in there? *Where?*... Don't tell me this is happening just 'cause they offered free shipping... I'll remember this!... *Oh, I'll remember this.*"

I immediately tried to separate the sperm part of myself from the egg part. It was my first use of the pulling out method to avoid a pregnancy.

It was also my one attempt at suicide.

Of course, it failed. My abs were just too weak to avoid existence.

I acknowledged that, yes, core strength *is* important.

I made sure to bring as much of non-existence with me as possible so it would be less of a shock when I had to return to it. If, in the years to come, I tended to stare into space, lose track of time, and sleep deeply and often, so be it.

I wondered why my parents created me. Were they worried that people four hundred years into the future would say, “Thank goodness we’re still around... No thanks to *those* two”?

Slits, like gills, formed on the sides of my body. I worried that I was to become Aquaman. I didn’t seem like the right person for the job. For one thing, I didn’t believe in cod.

I had so many questions about life in the deep blue. For instance, do fish consider air to be “the outside”? Before they jump out of the water, do they say, “I need some fresh air, damn it!”

My mother visited the obstetrician for a check-up. On her way to the car, she passed through a group of anti-abortion protesters. They were all shouting, “Everybody deserves a chance to live!” I became very pensive, thinking hard about whether I deserved it or not.

I dreamt I asked a man protesting outside an abortion clinic why he wasn’t also protesting against male masturbation, “‘cause isn’t it mass murder every time a man comes outside of a woman?”: “Masturbation’s okay,” the man said. I gave the man a fist bump and continued on my way.

As I watched the formation of my feet, I thought, “How cliché.” But as I watched the formation of my hands, I thought, “How miraculous!”

I decided to consider this whole experience an opportunity for growth.

I felt I would come out of it...well maybe not a *better* person, but a *person*.

I felt like an actor in a movie, playing a role with a lot of characteristics development.

Particularly, I felt like the actor in *The Miracle of Life*.

I dreamt I was a best actor nominee at the Oscars for my role in *The Miracle of Life*: The presenter opened the letter and said, “And the winner is...for his mature portrayal of an embryo and a fetus...” The audience erupted, drowning out the presenter. It was a standing ovulation...ovation. My mother carried me to the stage and placed me on the podium. She was so proud. She was having the time of her life (she had gotten a kick out of telling the press on the red carpet, “I’m wearing a silk gown by Armani and jewelry by Tiffany & Co.; *he’s* wearing an organic cotton diaper by Gerber.”) I removed a note card from my diaper and began my acceptance speech, “Waaa! Waaa!” I heard the people in the front row say, “Oh, how moving. He’s so overcome he can’t speak.” “After all that he hasn’t been through, to finally be recognized.”

I realized that the first woman my penis was inside of was my mother.

I wondered why, if man was made in God’s image, God needs a penis.

Heart, lungs, liver, and kidneys were all functioning. I said to myself, “These may be my vital organs, but are they necessary?”

I thought deeply about the fact that I will die someday. As will my loved ones. I couldn’t help but assume the fetal position.

I could hear my mother’s heartbeat. It was very relaxing. Years later I would get into a warm bath whenever the neighbors played gangsta rap.

I would come up with a title for a rap song (*Boom, Boom, Boom, Like It Was In the Womb*). It needed something more, so I added “*is it a girl or a boyeeee?!*”

My father put his face close to my mother’s belly and talked to me. I tried to speak but produced no more than the sound of an underwater fart. I had tried to make my voice frightfully low and say, “Hello father. This is your son, the God of hellfire.”

*She's So Pushy*

I was born on November 18th, 1980. My mother went into labor at around one o'clock in the afternoon. I held on for dear *not* life—life with its accompanying death and its endless “slings and arrows of outrageous fortune” (including the lesser ones—things like not remembering you were out of toilet paper until after the fact).

I heard somebody yell, “She’s going into labor!” I said to myself, “She’s in the process of giving birth and she picks *now* to join the union? What kind of a mother *is* this!?”

It was a long, painful delivery. After three hours, I said to myself, “She shouldn’t have gone to the hospital. She should have gone to that place beyond space and time where everyone’s born in no time at all.”

I liked that joke. It was timeless. I said to myself, “It’s all just a matter of timing.”

My mother asked for drugs. They gave them to her. I was on the inside, under covers, so I saw it go down.

Not long afterwards, I saw the light at the end of the tunnel, and I lost all hope.

I heard the doctor chatting casually with the nurse, “War, terrorism, racism, crime, alienation, disease, political corruption, economic chaos, environmental degradation...nuclear annihilation. It makes you want to think twice before bringing a baby into this world.” Followed cheerily by, “Okay honey, one last push!”

She pushed hard but it didn’t work. Then she hiccupped and, at 4:28 p.m. (2:58 a.m. Bombay time), on November 18th, 1980 (Zybnal 10001.595, 0895 on the planet Pwazex), I was born.

I was born on my side looking towards the floor. My mother was on her back looking between her legs. It amazed me how a mother and son can have such different points of view.

My mother asked if it was a boy or a girl. I took offense. I worried that my first time with a woman I would have an urge to ask, “You can tell I’m a boy, right?”

The doctor slapped me. I said to myself, “I deserved that.”

Upon further consideration, I thought, “That was a cheap shot.”

I cried like a baby.

I wondered if that was how doctors would always treat me, even when I’m an adult. As if they saw something in me that required a slap, with the expectation that I would say “thanks, I needed that”.

My mother was crying uncontrollably, clearly disappointed.

Clearly, she had been hoping to give birth to somebody else.

Clearly, there was a baby being born in the room next door that she had hoped would be hers.

Her motherly blubbering embarrassed me. I tried to make it seem like she wasn't my mother—like I wasn't connected to her in any way. "Umbilical cord? What umbilical cord?"

I wanted to mess with the doctor by flinching when he snipped the cord, but I couldn't pull it off. I had little body control in these minutes after birth. In fact, I moved my body *almost* as poorly as one trying to make the trip from the bed to the bathroom at 4:30 in the morning.

After the doctor snipped the cord, I was happy that I didn't fly around the room like a balloon with its air escaping.

How embarrassing that would have been. There wouldn't have been a dog in the room to blame that on.

I lay there, amazed to have finally gone wireless.

Just then, my father burst into the delivery room. I was afraid that when my father saw a man working feverishly between his wife's open, naked legs, he would say, "I beg your pardon! Just what the hell is goin on here?!"

As soon as I saw my father, I said to myself, "He has my nose and my ears."

As soon as my father saw *me*, he burst into tears, as my mother had done. I wondered what it was about me that had this effect on people.



Throughout my life, would everyone I meet cry at the first sight of me?

I wanted my father to begin to record my voice, so that if I ever faced a firing squad and was asked if I had any last words, I could say, “No. But I have some first ones.”

I was placed in my mother’s arms and I began to breast-feed. I felt like some sort of newborn homo sapien.

I worried that, years later, I would have to tell a psychiatrist, “When I was a baby, I sucked my mother’s nipples. I’m so ashamed.”

I noticed the nurse staring at me while I suckled. I immediately stopped, out of fear she would think I wasn’t available.

I liked the idea of older women. In my opinion, the younger ones hadn’t even been born yet.

I liked the nurse’s little, drooping breasts. It seemed she liked to role-play, what with the nurse’s uniform and everything.

But she left the room and I continued taking my milk.

As I suckled, I thought about the possibility of owning a dairy farm when I grew up—a dairy farm that made cheese from humans’ milk. A small farm with maybe twenty or thirty women of all kinds. An opportunity for college girls to make a few bucks. I didn’t think I’d run into too much trouble with women’s rights groups ‘cause all my women would be free roaming. And I would take good care of them. And make all types of delicious, artisanal cheese: humana mozzarella, parmesano humano, depressed human cheese (blue cheese). I thought it could be a big hit.

I noticed the other nurse staring at me. It seemed that, even though I was just a baby, women thought I was cute.

After a few minutes, I had my fill of milk. I was wrapped in a thick blanket and whisked away like George Foreman after a fight.

After the nurse cleaned me up, I said to myself, “Nothing like a hot shower to make one feel human for the first time.”

After that, I was placed in a crib in a room full of imposters pretending to be me.

The entire day they all just lay around and slept. Every now and then, people would look through the window and shake their heads at the sight of so much laziness.

Often, they would point at the one they thought was the laziest.

I said to myself, “We all have our whole lives ahead of us. One of us has *nine* lives. How that cat got in here, I don’t know. But I’m jealous.”

I decided on the opening line of my autobiography (“4:28 p.m., November 18th, 1980. Looking back on my life, I’d say that’s where it all started.”).

Followed by “*I wonder if, before the beginning of time, two strangers had a conversation like this: ‘Do you have the time?’ The other checks his watch, ‘It should have started five minutes ago.’*”

Followed by “*After I was finally born, everyone in the world exhaled at some point.*”

I slept like a baby that night.

Around eight o'clock a.m. I was placed in my mother's arms again. Tears formed in her eyes. She said, "I remember giving birth to you as if it was yesterday."

She whispered, "This whole experience is priceless." I wondered if she knew the hospital would send her a bill for eighteen thousand dollars.

She kept saying "(such and such) is priceless" or "how do you put a price on (such and such)?" I wanted to ask her, "How do you put a price on a million dollars?"

My father touched my chin and said, "Hey champ." And he was right. I *was* a champ. After all, the sperm that had created me came in first among hundreds of millions.

I held my head up high...until it dawned on me that the sperm that had created me probably thought it was swimming *away* from something rather than *towards* it—fear propelled it faster than the others—and I lowered my head again.

I wanted to talk to my parents about death and all the slings and arrows, but, of course, I couldn't speak. I imagined what it would be like in the future to talk to them about what was on my mind: "Is it a hat?" I would ask. "It's a hat," they would answer. "That's what I thought."

*Child 'n the 'Hood*

I was brought home the following morning during a powerful thunderstorm. I was placed in a crib in a little room off the kitchen. I fell asleep despite the wind, rain, and thunder. Two hours later, there was a big *bang!*, stars and planets moving at high speed, and then the baby mobile crashed into my face.

A gust of wind had burst open the window and blown the mobile clear off the hook.

Until my mother came in and removed the mobile, I acted as if I were the center of the universe.

Eventually, I fell back to sleep and had a dream. The dream was a replaying of the previous nine months—the memory of it—from conception to fully exiting my mother’s body. When I awoke, I said to myself, “What could it possibly mean?”

I slept all day. I loved going to sleep. It was like heading to the movies without knowing what was playing.

The coming attractions could be a pain in the ass, though. They were so loud.

And sometimes the dream could be boring. I once fell asleep in the middle of one.

And one time I had a terrible nightmare. It was two hours before my conception and I was having such a bad hair-gene day.

I spent a lot of time in my crib. Or, as I understood it, “behind bars for kid napping”.

My mother bottle-fed me. I didn’t understand women with fake milk. It was so obvious.

I wondered if babies who suckle fake breasts grow up to be adults who prefer to eat their meals on plasticware.

My relatives and friends of my parents came over to the apartment to see me. I was afraid I would miss my once in a lifetime opportunity if I allowed everyone to distract me with their funny faces and their funny sounds and their funny toys.

But it was a losing battle.

Years later I would accuse all of these people of ruining my life because they kept putting their thumbs in their ears and wiggling their fingers.

They brought me gifts. Mostly stuffed animals. I was offended. I wondered if these people also gave stuffed bottles of wine, stuffed coffee table books, and stuffed flowers.

I rarely cried, but when I did, it was usually out of happiness.

My parents were awakened at 4:30 every morning by my cries of happiness.

They would find me in my crib with tears of joy streaming down my cheeks.

I would say to myself, “You don’t understand; I’m crying because I’m happy.”

I was happy to be alive and not dead yet. Once, at a restaurant, I was so happy to be alive that the maitre’d had to ask us to leave.

Of course, a week later, at a different restaurant, I was so sad over the fact that I and my loved ones would die someday that *that* maitre’d had to ask us to leave. As I was whisked through the doors by my mother, I said to myself, “There’s no pleasing maitre’d’s; they don’t like it when you’re happy and they don’t like it when you’re sad.”

One morning, my mother placed me in the stroller and brought me to the grocery store. It was my first time out of the apartment since arriving from the hospital. As we were going in, a woman was coming out pushing a cart filled with bags of ice. I said to myself, “You’re trading me in for *that*?!”

I loved sitting in the stroller and watching the world go by as I sucked on my pacifier. It occurred to me that the answer to world peace was right there in my mouth. I imagined the organizing of a massive, worldwide airdrop of billions of pacifiers.

Women were irresistibly drawn to me. One after another accosted me to tell me how adorable I was. Some even couldn’t resist touching me. Women of all kinds reacted in this way. One night, while cradled in the arms of my father as we took a stroll around the block, a prostitute called from the shadows, “Hey baby.”

I wondered if, as a teenager, I would look back upon this period of my life with sadness at the passing of it.

I learned to run before I could walk.

I was afraid I would never get the hang of walking. What if I learned to do everything except that?

I imagined myself as an adult—business suit, expensive briefcase, shiny shoes—crawling down Lexington Avenue on my way to work.

Then, one day, I suddenly began to walk.

I had figured out the key was to take things slowly—to take baby steps towards my goal of taking baby steps.

One night, a month after I had begun to walk, during a stroll around the block with my father, I saw a man in the alley drooling on himself, mumbling gibberish, and stumbling this way and that before falling to the ground. I said to myself, “I remember that stage.”

And then, “He’s not out of it *yet?*”

My parents would let me run around the apartment naked. However, if guests were over, my parents would only let me run around emotionally naked.

People tried to teach me English, the native language. In return, I tried to teach them goo-goo-ga-ga, the naïve language.

People read to me from small, four-or-five-page cardboard books. “The boy stood under the tree. The apple fell on the boy’s head. The boy brought the apple home to his mother. The boy’s mother made applesauce. The end.” Usually, I lost patience halfway through and skipped to the last page. “Applesauce,” I said to myself. “That’s all I needed to know.”

I found that if I were by myself speaking to myself in baby talk, people responded positively, inevitably coming over to me with big smiles on their faces. I wondered if, say twenty years into the future, speaking to myself in baby talk would be a good way to make friends.

For months, I didn't say anything except "moo shoo". Then, one afternoon, I said "ma-ma" and my parents got excited. "His first word!" they exclaimed. I said to myself, "What are you talking about? I've been saying "moo shoo" every day for months. As in "moo shoo vegetables", "moo shoo pork", "moo shoo chicken"."

My parents organized a party for my second birthday. The neighbors brought their one-year-old daughter over. She kept staring at me. I said to myself, "I think she likes me. But my God, she's half my age!"

She asked me how I had liked being conceived. I said, "I didn't like it one bit. Are you kidding? It was the start of my mortality." She just nodded...and then she said, "Well, happy birthday...anyway," and then she crawled over to her father and gestured for him to pick her up, which he did. I said to myself, "Something I said?"

That Halloween, I dressed up as an exact copy of myself. I figured I must have done a good job because everyone thought I wasn't wearing a costume.

My parents brought me to the zoo. I didn't like it. I didn't like being stared at by so many animals.

Like I was some sort of animal in a zoo.



One night, during a dinner party, I heard my mother say, “You’re born; you live; you die.” I said to myself, “Why do you always have to make everything so damn complicated?”

After months and months of potty training, it finally became clear I no longer needed diapers. That first morning my parents dressed me without a diaper, I said to myself, “Lucas, if you accomplish nothing else in your life at least you accomplished this.”

I wondered if, as an old man, I would look back upon my life and consider my having stopped shitting in my pants my greatest source of pride.

Weeks later, my father had to take me to a gas station bathroom. As soon as I walked in, diapers never sounded so good.

For the first time, I understood Frank Sinatra’s nostalgia for diapers. I sang to myself, “*If I could make it there, I could make it anywhere.*”

I pictured the guy who made that mess—a man in his early forties—sitting on the toilet with his cell phone: “Hello ma? I’m ready to have my ass wiped... Exit 41, eastbound, the L.I.E.... *Three hours!?* All right, I’ll wait.” Two hours later. “Ma, how’s it look?... *You haven’t left yet?! [frustrated]* All right, I’ll have to try to do it on my own.”

All sorts of words and images had been written, drawn, and scratched on the walls. I said to myself, “This is no place for bathroom humor.”

My father asked me if I could “hold it” for another few minutes. I said, “Yes”, and we left. As we pulled away from the gas station, I said to myself, “Sixteen thousand years after the

Lascaux cave paintings, man is still drawing on walls...albeit more primitively.”

I refused to eat. I heard my parents acknowledge that this was common among toddlers. It was heartening for me to know that I was not alone in my hunger strike to end the war.

I learned to brush my teeth by myself. On one occasion, thinking about the problems people must have had with their teeth years ago, my mouth full of bubbly toothpaste, I said to myself, “That must be how the peasants won the Russian Revolution. They rushed at the White Army throwing their teeth.

The White Army dropped their weapons and ran shouting, “Retreat! Retreat!””

On another occasion, looking at my mouth in the mirror, I said to myself, “No wonder thinkers back then spent so much time thinking and writing about self-awareness; with each breath they were reminded of themselves.”

I began to wet my bed with more and more frequency. I wanted to tell my parents, “The mystery is why I do it not when I’m asleep but when I’m wide awake and happy.”

But I didn’t think they would find it very funny.

I thought about sleeping in the bathtub to avoid ruining the bed but I was afraid I would wake up around three a.m. covered in porcelain dust, a hammer in my hand, and the bathtub in pieces.

My parents would take me to the playground. I would often say to myself, “What is it about this place that makes kids act like such children?... There’s something about this place.”

I would get extremely nervous. I would have performance anxiety. For instance, I would worry that I'd get on the slide and, I don't know, forget how to use gravity or something.

Something embarrassing like that.

Or I'd try to climb the rope, lose my strength near the top, and have to yell, "Help! I'm falling! Somebody get a rope!"

Or I'd be in the sandbox moving sand from one spot to another when, faced with the futility of it all, I'd find myself in the middle of an existential crisis and everyone would gather around to laugh at me.

One time, I went over to an empty bench and sat by myself. When my parents came over and told me that I looked sad and lonely, I said to myself, "I *am* sad and lonely. But the important thing is that all of these complete strangers are having a good time."

After a few minutes of sitting there all by myself watching the kids run around the playground, I began to fear that people would think I was some sort of toddler child molester, and I forced myself to head over to the sandbox.

On my way over, I passed two boys kicking a ball back and forth near the monkey bars. One was of East Asian descent, the other of European. They were both wearing basketball shirts with their last names on them. I got a kick out of thinking about White and Wong running around playing together—about their parents worrying about White and Wong.

Especially when they were on the see-saw.

In the sandbox, two four-year-old girls were having a "my mom can beat up your mom" back and forth. I looked at their

mothers and said to myself, “Three out of four dermatologists *do* recommend oil wrestling for healthier, more youthful looking skin... Just sayin.”

I sat in the corner of the box, buried my legs in the sand, stuck a short, fat stick in my mouth like a cigar, took my shirt off, leaned back, and pretended I was a Hollywood movie producer lounging in a hot tub—the kids around me actors auditioning for roles in my latest film:

The boy on the monkey bars an actor auditioning for the part of a Navy Seal who, halfway across the underside of a bridge, on a mission to save mankind, hears the guy in front of him fart, cracks up, loses his strength, and falls to his death.

And the baby crawling across the sandbox in front of me an actor auditioning for the part of a smuggler who keeps the contraband hidden in his pants. As if no one would think to look there, the schmuck.

And the girl climbing the rope an actress auditioning for the part of a mountain climber who marries a deep-sea diver. As they say, opposites attract.

Of course, they also say like-mindedness attracts. “Opposites attract”, “like-mindedness attracts”—apparently, we’re too easily attracted to each other. It’s pathetic. Get a hold of yourselves, people.

Anyway, one time, during a nap after a visit to the playground, I dreamt I was eighteen years old: I went up to a woman outside of the Whitney Museum and asked if she wanted “to play together”. She said yes. When we arrived at the sandbox and I handed her a pail and a shovel, she looked disappointed. She

said she thought we were going to have sex. I told her she was mistaking *this* dream for the one I will have fourteen years from now. She said, “Oh”, and then took out her card and handed it to me, saying, “Call me when you’re ready.” I gave her a wink and said, “Count on it.”

One Saturday, with the help of my parents, I learned to ride a bicycle. I said to myself, “I’ll never forget this day!” Sunday, I fell off the bike, hit my head, and forgot Saturday.



If I Can Just-get-through-it-as-painlessly-as-possible There /  
I'll Just-get-through-it-as-painlessly-as-possible Anywhere

One weekend, my parents brought me to the top of the Empire State Building. Manhattan looked like a deserted island in the middle of nowhere with millions of people on it.

I couldn't get over how densely packed the island was. I imagined someone on the Circle Line boat on the East River yelling, "Attention, New Yorkers! This is the police! We have you surrounded! Now come out with your hands up!"

I looked out over the city and imagined what it was like before white men arrived, when Manhattan was inhabited by Native Americans that Native Americans in other parts of the country assumed were rude and arrogant.

I wanted to search Times Square for arrowheads. I figured triangles would stand out against the square.

After the Empire State Building, we walked up Fifth Avenue. It struck me how New York City really is a melting pot. I saw so many Asians, Africans, Middle Easterners, South Asians, Latin Americans, even Polynesians. Surprisingly, I didn't see any Canadians.

I found it tough living in Manhattan. I felt like people were always looking down at me.

Sometimes, the elevator to our apartment would be out of service for one reason or another. On one occasion, halfway up the sixteen flights of stairs, I said to myself, "It's tough going up in New York City."

*Shall We Dense?*

My parents enrolled me in a private school. It was all boys from kindergarten through eighth grade (ninth through twelfth grades were coed). It occurred to me that if my parents were truly looking out for my best interest, they would have sent me to an all-girls school.

The school taught Latin and Bible studies. I said to myself, referring to my parents, “Apparently they’re grooming me to become the Holy Roman Emperor.”

The school was Episcopalian. However, half the student body was Jewish. However, the curriculum included Greek Mythology (Zeus, Athena, Apollo, etc.). It was insane. And I was lost from day one.

In kindergarten, the only thing I excelled at was napping.



I liked doing homework for that class. I usually started it around ten o'clock at night and didn't finish until seven in the morning when my parents forced me to stop.

I would often look at the others in my class and say to myself, "What are we—in kindergarten!?"

One night, I dreamt the entire class chipped in and bought me a gift to cheer me up: With everyone watching, I unwrapped a book entitled *An Idiot's Guide to Kindergarten*. Everyone laughed, including the teacher.

Convinced it was a trick question, I once spent an entire hour trying to fit a square peg into a round hole.

My classmates preferred to draw stick figures of human beings and animals. *I* preferred to draw stick figures of sticks.

First grade was even worse than kindergarten. I wondered if, years from now, I would look back and say that kindergarten and second grade were okay but first grade sucked.

Second grade *wasn't* okay. The teachers weren't happy with my performance. My parents were concerned. One night, I dreamt they brought me to a child psychologist: I lay on my back, my hands resting on my chest, and talked. The child psychologist kneeled beside me in the sand with her thumb in her mouth. Halfway through our session the child psychologist got up and ran to the other side of the playground to observe the other kids. The ones on see-saws. Their ups and downs.

In third grade, we were taught how to play the recorder. I couldn't get the hang of it. I faked it when we were all told to stand and perform. One day, the music teacher, Ms. Karp, halted the class in the middle of *My Country 'Tis of Thee* and, to my

dismay, asked me to proceed alone. Of course, I couldn't. Of course, there was much giggling in the room. After a couple of minutes of torment, the teacher told me to practice more and then had the rest of the class finish the piece. After the last note was played, I thought about breaking into a wild Charlie Parkeresque riff, every now and then stopping to scat a bit like Dizzy Gillespie, but I thought better of it.

That summer, I went to sleep-away camp in Massachusetts. After a couple of days, I wrote a letter to my parents that read:

*Dear mom and dad,*

*I'm so homesick. So are a couple of other guys in my cabin. When they ever met you or visited our home is beyond me, but they won't stop crying.*

*Love,  
Lucas*

*P.S.—The Department of Defense in coordination with the C.I.A. and F.B.I. have cordoned off the latrine in the woods in order to gather material for a new weapon of mass destruction.*

However, not wanting to worry my parents, I never sent the letter.

In fourth grade, I was placed in the slow class. Upon entering the room, I was disappointed to find the teacher moving and speaking at regular speed. I was hoping she would be moving in extreme slow motion while saying in a voice similar to the God-of-hellfire's, "Lucas... define... Isosceles... triangle." To which I would reply, "Stop... speaking... so... slowly... You're... scaring... me."

In fifth grade, my history teacher, Ms. Roberts, paired up the students to collaborate on a fifteen-minute lecture. She said, "Neil and Lucas, you'll cover the pyramids." Though I rarely cracked a joke out loud (or even spoke), I leaned over and whispered to Neil that I thought five thousand king-sized sheets oughtta do it.

Neil didn't as much as blink. He had already started to write an outline and was concentrating deeply. Neil D'Souza was considered the second-best student in the grade. All A's. Aron Brodsky was considered *the best* student. Me? I preferred a nice, steady, well-balanced C. An even keel.

As we walked over to Neil's place after last class to work on our lecture, I kept imagining the theme song to the *Odd Couple* starring Tony Randall and Jack Klugman.

Neil was walking with the textbook open in front of his face, mumbling his thoughts about how we should approach the presentation. Although I didn't voice them, I had my own ideas concerning the presentation:

“What if we hire two Chippendale dancers dressed in scanty waiter outfits to serve hors d’oeuvres to Ms. Roberts?”

“What if we do a little song and dance number? *If you’re Blue (Nile) and you don’t know where to flow to, why don’t you flow where Pharaoh sits...Heliopolis.*”

“What if we ask the parents of each of our classmates to lend us some gold so we can re-enact the burial of Tutankhamen, and then we buy two one-way tickets to Tortola?”

As soon as we arrived at Neil’s place, Neil got to work writing the lecture. As I sat beside him, I said to myself, “I hate history. I always walk away with a sinking feeling that it was all my fault; I could have done something.”

And, ““Pyramids”, “sphinxes”, “ninety-foot statues”—human history was young; we were foolish; why keep going over it? On the contrary, let’s save ourselves the embarrassment and just pretend it didn’t happen.”

And, “I’m just glad I wasn’t a student in ancient Egypt. Can you imagine the last few seconds of a timed essay in hieroglyphics?”

And, “What if they had built gigantic spheres instead of pyramids? One powerful wind and the entire civilization would have been flattened. I wonder what the pharaoh who had ordered the building of the Great Spheres would have said to his people? ‘Sorry. My bad.’”

At one point, I asked Neil how it was going. Neil didn’t even acknowledge that I had said something. He just kept on writing. I chose to ignore the insult. However, after about thirty

minutes, my resentment built until I was on the verge of speaking up, but then I thought, “Ah, let it go. It’s ancient history.”

In sixth grade, while my History class was about to finish its fourth book (everyone seeming to keep up with no problem at all), I couldn’t get past the dedication of the very first one, struggling with the questions: “How did he meet "Linda" his wife? What are their "two wonderful children, Timothy and Catherine" like (besides wonderful)? Where are the four of them now? What are they doing?” It was a mystery that occupied my mind to no end.”

*If You Trip and Take a Little Tumble in the Forest  
and No One Is Around to Hear You Laughing Hysterically,  
Did You Actually Make a Ruckus?...  
Or Somethin' Like That*

That summer, my parents rented a cabin in upstate New York. I thought about setting up a lemonade stand but it seemed like too much work. So, I thought about setting up a “make your own lemonade” lemonade stand but it seemed like too much work. So, I thought about setting up a “bring your own lemonade” lemonade stand but it seemed like too much work. So, I thought about setting up a “reservations only” lemonade stand (a sign leaning against a tree by the side of the road that read “*lemonade stand / reservations only / 24-hour advance notice required*”) but it seemed like too much work so I bagged the whole idea of a lemonade stand.



*Assholes /*

*Meet the Assholes /*

*Have a Yabba Dabba Gay Old Time*

In seventh grade, my classmates began to pick on me mercilessly and unrelentingly. I said to myself, “If kids can be this cruel, imagine what old people can be like after a lifetime of practice.”

That night, I dreamt I was walking past a nursing home when some of the residents loitering outside in pajamas and bathrobes made fun of me: An old man in a wheelchair said, “Duh, my name is Lucas.” An old man leaning on a walker said, “Look at the shape of his head.” An old woman on a gurney said, “Lucas is going to school. How ironic.” I said to myself, “Old people can be so cruel.”

Hundreds of times every Monday through Friday many of my classmates would call me “Mucas” or “Puke” or “Pucas” or “Lucas don’t make us puke-us”, or “Pucas Pebbles” (as if trying to hurt me using my first name just wasn’t enough), et cetera, and (usually blindsiding me with a mouth close to my ear before running away (the blast of their breath against the side of my head making it all the more offensive)) they would say (often after fake coughing with a fist to the mouth, pretending to be trying to veil it) “compukers”, or “is the compuker on?”, or “fight mucas”, or “get rid of mucas once and for all”, or “Mucas No-Brain, *I mean “membrane”*”, et cetera, almost always all of this getting a laugh—hundreds of times every Monday through Friday for six years (the result, apparently, of their deciding that being a prick is a tough job but *somebody* has to do it). All the time, every day, there it was: the confounding desire to hurt—the confounding desire to inflict as much pain as possible without being physical—made manifest by facial expression, tone of voice, and body language. And, unfortunately, there wasn’t one person for me to hang out with during this, the seventh, grade, or in any of the five following (which is remarkable, considering the fact that, regardless of the level of formal education, the economic status, the race, the culture, etc., I had love for forty-three percent of humanity—more than a *third*—so you would think there would have been *someone* (by the way, today it’s *thirty-nine* percent)). “Look at Puke. Look at Puke just sitting there.” I thought about putting a sign on my back that said “*Laugh and win a million dollars!*” in order to make it easier to walk by them. Throughout the next six years I would never lash out in any way or tell a



teacher or my parents about what was happening, having decided from the get-go that, all things considered, it was best to just grit my teeth and bear it until graduation.

I went to school without a costume for Halloween. Jimmy Green, who was dressed as the Incredible Hulk, asked me who I was supposed to be. I said, "Nobody." Everyone laughed. David Mohr said, "Only Lucas would say something like that," and then they all left.

As they were walking away, Matt Gould, who was dressed as Albert Einstein, said, to building laughter by the group, "We're leaving nobody behind!" and "Nobody's not following us!" and, pointing at me, "There's nobody there!" I said to myself, "Stupid Albert Einstein."

I decided that if anyone else asks me who I'm supposed to be, I should say "God". To amuse myself, I placed my open hand a couple of inches from the door to the stairway, and said, "Open." The door immediately burst open, smashing my fingers. Marlon Bianchi, dressed as the devil, ran off down the hall while I jumped up and down in pain.

One night, I dreamt I was walking through the park with Green, Mazzullo, Spiegel, and Ackers: They were amusing themselves by tormenting me with their words. Finally, I wheeled around and yelled, "Sticks and stones may break my bones but names will never hurt me!" So they stopped calling me names, picked up sticks and stones, and began throwing them at me. Green said, "Thanks for the insight!" I said, "Don't mention it!"

One day, Green, Mazzullo, and Morrison sat behind me in chapel doing their best to torment me. Perhaps it was just a

coincidence, but after about fifteen minutes, my nose started to bleed. I ripped the last page out of the Bible (a blank page), pressed it against my nostrils, and tilted my head back just as everyone bowed their heads in prayer.

Principal Smith came over and whispered angrily, “Mr. Stone, what seems to be the problem?” I said, “My nose is bleeding.” To myself adding, “I guess God didn’t like my prayer.”

“Is that a page from the Bible!?”

“Yes. A blank one from the back”

Green, Mazzullo, and Morrison were snickering.

“Next time use your shirt. Go to the nurse.”

As I left, Green, Mazzullo, and Morrison were saying under their breath:

“Puuuke... Puke-Puke-Puke... See ya, Mucas... Hi, I’m Pucas...” Et cetera.

I said to myself, “What wonderful people they are. I mean truly. Just a great buncha guys.”

I imagined the following conversation with someone I might meet years later: He or she says, “You didn’t have *one* friend?” I say, “If you knew the cast of characters I had to spend the better part of each and every school-day with, you wouldn’t be surprised.” “Not *one*?” “No.” “Why do you think your classmates tormented you?” I wave the question away while making a fart sound with my lips, and then, “Who cares? I’m just glad high school ended and with it “Pucas”... My whole experience in school taught me a valuable lesson.” “What’s that?” “The alphabet... There are other lessons—the times table, et cetera—but I don’t want to bore you with them.”

Halfway to the nurse, the page was almost completely red. I said to myself, “What can I say? I found a lot of mistakes.”

I was happy to go to the nurse. I preferred nurses to doctors. In my opinion, doctors were all the same; they all went for a medical degree when they were younger.

The last time I had gone to the nurse was in first grade when she checked everyone’s hair for lice. I remembered that, after she confirmed that I was “fine”, I left her office happy that I had been free of lice and thus able to make a good impression on her. Twenty years or so into the future, if we should happen to meet again, the fact that I had been clean of lice might work in my favor.

On this occasion, she had me tightly pinch my nose while holding a towel full of ice against my sinus area. She said I was doing a great job. I was happy to be able to impress her with my coordination.

I was sad to leave her fifteen minutes later.

It was lunchtime when I did. As usual, I skipped the mid-day meal in order to avoid the cafeteria social scene. But this time, because that morning my mother had commented that I looked skinnier than ever and had asked if I had been eating well at lunch (to which I said “yes”), I ducked out of school and ran around the corner to Massimo’s for a slice. Sitting at the window counter, the sun making me drowsy, I rested my head on my arms and dreamt it was thirty years in the future: I was sitting on the bench out front, finishing off a slice, when I heard a familiar laugh off in the distance, looked up, and saw Green, Ackers, and all the others, heading my way. I immediately jumped up and ran around the

corner to the sound of Kirkpatrick saying, “Hey, isn’t that Puke?!” Fifteen minutes later, deep in Central Park, the group now right behind me, I finally reached the trunk of a large black oak, turned around, and howled, “Haaaaaaah!”, and they all stopped. “*I am not an animal!*” I continued: “I am not an animal!... I am...a human being.”... They all just looked at me, and I at them. After several seconds, I again said, “*I am not an animal.*” At *which* point, a squirrel scampered down the trunk to just above my shoulder, said, “Lucas, mom and grandma told me to tell you dinner’s ready,” and then shot back up...leaving me little option but to force a sheepish laugh, say “*damn* it,” and, with Green, Ackers, etc., now laughing, turn and scamper up the tree towards a hole near the top, unable to believe my bad luck. I said to myself, “They had to tell me dinner was ready right *then*?!... *Couldn’t they have just rung a bell?*” I paused at the entrance to the den, looked down from what seemed like well over a hundred feet, and said to the mob, “Of course, having *said* that, why would you want to treat an *animal* this way?!...” They laughed all the more. As loudly as I could, I said, “... *Why do so many people have to be so FUCKIN sh—?!*” I had lost my grip and begun to fall. I suppose it was the sensation of falling that made me wake up with a jolt, knocking the oil-stained paper-plate to the floor. I checked the clock, saw that I had only five minutes to get to my next class, and hustled back, hoping I could avoid an all-eyes-on-me, cough-disguised-“Puke” (“Pucas”, etc.) classroom-entrance. Little did I know, as I hurried awkwardly up the street with my book-bag, out of breath, that this was just the beginning. (*The summer before my senior year, I would find myself alone in the cabin deep in the woods, looking up at the ceiling,*

barely able to move due to back pain, saying aloud in order to assure myself that my voice still works, it having occurred to me that it might have been well over seventy-two hours since I had last used my vocal cords, my parents having been away for a full week, “Me, that dog, and that chimp.” I was referring to my social life for as long as I could remember, and to that dog the Soviets had sent into orbit, and that chimpanzee the Americans had—to their isolation. I continued, saying to myself, “What was going through that poor dog’s mind before it died suffering up there, as it looked down at the planet from that distance?... ‘My God... It’s beautiful... This is such a privilege... I must be a good dog.’... And that poor chimpanzee. Among the other reasons to have felt sorry for him, imagine how frustrating it must have been for him to literally not have the words to describe how amazing that was? Imagine to have experienced what he did and not be able to describe it to everyone—how it put everything into perspective, how small we are, how we make so many petty things important, how one’s life is changed forever—imagine how frustrating...to just be handed a banana and have no choice but to take it and just sit there eating it as if that incredible thing that just happened didn’t happen... When it was back in the room with the other chimpanzees, one of the others must have thought to themselves, ‘We ride a rocket into space in order to orbit the Earth twice in a veritable dreidel before droppin’ into the ocean like some sort of divine turd, they give us a banana; we appear on the Ed Sullivan Show wearing a tutu, they give us a banana; apparently, they put a high value on wearing a tutu!... Or else a low value on orbiting the Earth. Guess it depends on how you look at it.’... Yup, photos

*each of me, that dog, and that chimp next to “about as lonely as any relatively intelligent creature could ever be”... But, hey, at least I’m not in school.”) I entered a minute late and crossed the room to my chair. “Puke”...“Pucas”...“Muke, you’re late”.  
Laughter.*

*Woo-hoo! Yeah, baby!*  
*Let's Get This Siesta Started!*

I would spend my afternoons lying in bed. I would imagine the day when I would be able to make pillow talk. I imagined the pillows' conversation (with goodfella accents): "Ey, how ya doin?" "How *you* doin?" "Ya lookin a bit wrinkled if ya don't mind my sayin." "I was taken to the cleaners." "Launderin?" "Yeah. It's a dirty business." "That's a blanket statement." "Ey, get off my pillow case." "Wo, wo, I'm not tryin to start no pillow fight here." "Good. What do you say we just sweep this under the rug?" "Agreed."

Often, I wouldn't even bother to remove my blazer, choosing to just flop down on the bed still wearing it, my tie, and my dress-shirt—all three—and, hopefully, fall into a deep sleep. As I once told myself upon waking up and beginning to groggily remove each, the room now dark, the sun having long since set,

“It’s good that I fall asleep wearing these. They might come in handy in one of my dreams. You never know where you might get invited.”

I was loath to get out of bed to start the school day. One early morning, in early spring, at the cabin, I was lying in bed awake with the window open, when I heard the first bird of the day respond to the slightly brightened eastern sky. Within minutes dozens of birds were making themselves known. It made me wonder if human beings are the only animals that tend to resist getting up and going in the early hours of the morning. I wondered, for instance, if there wasn’t at least one bird nearby that, awakened by the racket, opened one eye a crack, saw the slightly brightened eastern sky, and mumbled, “Oh fuck.”

One evening, after my mother called me to dinner, I yelled, “I’m not hungry! I’m just gonna lie in bed until it’s time to go to bed!”

And she yelled with a fury, “Now!” Getting out of bed, I said to myself, “All right, all right, no need to yell... Shouting will do.”

One night, I dreamt I was on a horse galloping through a mountainous western landscape while wearing pajamas and clutching a pillow: After a while, I stopped the horse and said to it, “Okay, now *I’ll* wear the pajamas and clutch the pillow.” With the adjustment made, we resumed galloping. I was being chased by my parents who were absolutely determined to separate me from my pillow. I tried everything to lose them, to no avail. Finally, I separated from the horse in hopes that my parents would trail *it* instead of me. It didn’t work. They gained on me. I scampered up



a steep incline and then rolled down the other side and found myself trapped on a small cliff overlooking, far below, a roaring river. I said to the pillow, “Kid, next time I say let’s go someplace like Bolivia, let’s go someplace like Bolivia.” The pillow said, “Next time.” I looked at my fast-approaching parents and then peeked over the edge of the cliff, evaluating the long drop to the roaring river. I said to the pillow, “We’ll go over.” “Like hell we will.” “No, we’ll be okay.” “No.” “First I’ll send *you* over, aiming for the middle of the river, then *I’ll* go over.” “Nope.” “Okay, then we’ll go over together. I’ll hold onto you tightly.” “No, I said!” “What’s the matter with you?!” “I can’t swim!” I laughed my ass off. I looked at the pillow and said, “Why, you crazy!? The fall’ll probably kill ya!” Finally, the pillow, realizing there’s no other way to (perhaps) remain in my possession, began a low, motivating roar. I did the same as I grabbed it, hugged it tightly, ran, and jumped off the cliff—me and the pillow like Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid playing Paul Newman and Robert Redford. We landed safely in the water and were swept swiftly downstream towards the land of endless sleeping and lounging in bed.

Another night, I dreamt I was having a pillow fight with Larry Holmes: He was on the mat in a fetal position whimpering, his arms covering his head, the crowd going wild, as I pounded him with the pillow. Finally, the referee stopped the fight and I jumped onto the ropes and yelled, “See!? He can box but take him out of that comfort zone and he’s nothin! *Nothin!*”

Another night, I dreamt I was a contestant in the Ms. America contest: The MC asked, “If there was one thing you could

change about yourself what would it be?” I said, “My arms. I wish they were detachable. It would make finding a comfortable sleeping position so much easier.”

Another night I dreamt I was on stage in front of the mic at a slam poetry competition: I said, “This poem is entitled “Bed”...”

*When troubled  
I make this decision:  
King, queen, or double,  
The fetal position.*

*I know it's not rare—  
Twin, single, or cot,  
Feather, water, or air,  
Coils firm or not—*

*To “wish one were dead”  
(Oh, but not really)  
And require a bed.  
I believe this one's a Sealy.*

In a quick motion, I made the peace sign with one hand, kissed it, and raised it high above my head. The audience went wild, jumping to their feet. I headed back to my seat feeling invincible.

One evening, I watched a documentary about religious extremism. At one point in the documentary, they showed a brief clip of a female suspect being rushed into a police station.

Although she got out of the car completely concealed (from the top of her head to the tip of her toes) by a black burqa, police officers tried to use their jackets to shield her from the furiously flashing cameras. I thought it was one of the funniest things I had ever seen. That night, I dreamt I myself was a religious extremist. A Buddhist extremist: As a Buddhist extremist I took things one step further and just...well, fell asleep. I joined a Buddhist extremist organization. We would travel the world taking naps on buses, in planes, et cetera, in order to send a message. One day, I was apprehended and brought in for questioning. I told the interrogators, "There are many of us. And we are given aid and comfort by airlines and even some bus and train companies."

*The way he moves really turns her on. Makes her so horny.  
However, when he's standing still, she's utterly repulsed.*

I attended my first and last dance. A few all-girls schools had been invited. It took place in the cafeteria. I had dreaded going. Although I was a great dancer when alone in my room, when around others I tended to merely hop up and down like a three-year-old.

However, I made myself go. Soon after I arrived, I imagined sidling up to the girl in a short, pleated skirt and red sneakers and striking up a conversation: “Hi.” “Hi.” It feels good to share that word with her. “I don’t want to dance. I’d prefer to talk. Is that all right with you?” “Sure. What do you want to talk about?” “Us dancing. Is that all right?” She hesitates, furrows her brow, and says, “I guess.” “*Great*. So, imagine us over there: me swaying my head and my hips to the beat with my hands in my pockets, you with your arms over your head snapping your fingers,

me lifting my right knee and my hands to my chest two times before switching to my left, you...” Just then, she walks away. I watch her walk across the room to Aaron Scarborough—the best looking, best athlete, and one of the best students in my grade. She asks him to dance. He likes the idea. They find a spot and begin moving their bodies. After watching them for a bit, I say to myself, “Clearly, she doesn’t know good dancing when she hears it described.”

As it happened, an hour later, the girl and Aaron *were* dancing together.

Soon after, Green and the others began to make things too uncomfortable for me and I went home.

*Get a Holda Yourself, Lucas*

After school one day, I tried to buy a *Playboy* from the bodega around the corner. I stared at the pages of *Foreign Affairs* magazine for fifteen minutes before I had the courage to stand in front of the porn section. As soon as I did, my science teacher, Mr. Fitzgerald, walked in. I quickly grabbed the nearest newspaper, opened it, and hid my face. Mr. Fitzgerald made a purchase and was about to leave when he said, “Mr. Stone, I didn’t know you read Arabic.” Without lowering the paper, I said, “I don’t. I’m guessing.”

I went home with only a copy of *Al-Ahram*. And you know what? Not so bad.

*You Never Forget Your First*

That summer, my parents again rented that cabin in upstate New York. One morning, I was lying in bed listening to the birds vocalizing, when I heard two young, female voices. The house next door had guests for the weekend, two of whom were college-age women. I looked out the window and discovered I had a good view of two naked, female sunbathers.

After about twenty minutes, I had my first ever orgasm. It was better than an *orgasm*.

An hour or so later, I wanted to have another one. Unfortunately, the sunbathers had left. So, I scoured the house for *any* image of a woman I could find, which turned out to be a Queen of Hearts playing card under a couch cushion that, to my surprise, served my purposes quite well. There was something about the dark circles under her eyes.

An hour or so after that, I considered using the thirty-year-old issue of a bi-monthly out of Boca Raton called *Canasta!* that I had discovered in the attic, but decided it would be just so far I could take five elderly women playing cards under a fake chandelier.

So, I went back to the Queen of Hearts. Which is when I noticed a ladybug crawling up my arm and said to myself, “It’s a bug...but it’s *also* a lady.”

After dinner I grabbed the box of Lady Fingers and retired to my bedroom.



*My Pretend Dog Ate My Homework... Bad Dog*

In eighth grade I began to play hooky:

I would hide in the library, usually behind the last shelf of books, which happened to be the astronomy section. I would lie on the floor, my face beneath a book entitled *Zero Gravity*, or as I referred to it: “that book about a room full of clowns”.

Sometimes I would hide in the literature section, often lying on the floor and looking at the novels all around me. I would spend the period making up titles and opening lines:

*The Nice Guy*

“He was a nice guy,” his roommate told the local press.  
“He wouldn’t beat himself in tic-tac-toe.”

*The King*

The King, torn between preserving the past and embracing the future, had four of his palm frond waving servants strapped to the blades of a ceiling fan.

*The Co-Workers*

One day he asked her out:

“Come on, it’ll be fun.”

“But I *hate* you!”

“And I *love* me. We have me in common.”

*The Winner*

He would do anything to come out on top. When he was ten-years-old, they played hide-and-go-seek. While Aunt Gillian counted (her hand covering her eyes), he left the apartment, flew to Tajikistan, and hid in a cave.

“They’ll never find me in here,” he said to himself, holding back giggles.

He won.

*The Interrogation*

“You repeatedly say in your diary that you think our Great Leader and everyone who follows our Great Leader are maniacs.”

“How many times do I have to tell you guys? Those are just my honest, innermost thoughts and feelings written in a diary for me, and only me, to read, not what I *really* think.”

*The Funeral*

“Boy, my mother; she’ll do *anything* for a party, huh?”

Et cetera.

Sometimes I would fall asleep. One time, I searched for the lost city of Atlantis in my dreams. I found it and they made me king. Of course, seein as how those lazy bastards had already proven capable of letting their entire city sink to the bottom of the ocean—*their entire city!*—I had to rule with an iron fist.

I missed the first day of geography class. Climbing the stairs to the library, I said to myself, “I couldn’t find geography class.”

I missed a few history classes. I said to myself, “Hopefully, I won’t miss more of history in the future.”

I missed the first history test. My teacher, Mr. Whitney, told me I would have to make it up the following day. I said to myself, “You can’t make that stuff up.”

He told me that if I don’t, I would receive an “F”. I said to myself, “That’s better than a “G”.” He told me to go to room “H.” I said to myself, “Aye aye.”

I knew I’d do poorly. I said to myself, “Oh well, ten years from now history will all be in the past.”

I missed two biology classes in a row. I refused to dissect a frog. As I lay down on the floor at the back of the library, I said to myself, “As long as I’m taking a stand, I might as well do it lying down.”

I fell asleep. I dreamt I had fallen asleep in biology class: The teacher, Ms. Hart, woke me up and said, “Mr. Stone, why are you sleeping?” I said, “I don’t know. Biology?”

I missed a few math classes. I didn’t like math; there was too much math involved.

Climbing the stairs to the library the first time, I said to myself, “I don’t like math; it’s just about the numbers.”

The class was covering statistics. As I lay down on the floor behind the last shelf of books, I said to myself, “I’m trying to prove a theory of statistics that says that one out of one hundred students will cut statistics class.”

I missed a couple of Spanish classes. I dreaded Spanish class. The performing-in-public aspect to it... Not to *mention* the fact that, no matter how much I tried to suspend disbelief, I just could not buy Jimmy, Mark, Joseph, John, Edward, Peter, and William as Jaime, Marco, Jose, Juan, Eduardo, Pedro, and Guillermo. I just didn’t buy it.

Hell, I didn’t even buy Diego Rodriguez as Diego.

I missed a few religion classes. They were studying something called Deuteronomy. I didn’t like the sound of it. It made me think of some sort of surgical procedure performed by a proctologist.

I missed a couple of English classes. I decided I didn't want to learn a language that only people who knew it could understand. It seemed so cliquish.

Also, I didn't want to participate in the oral vocabulary competition. I was too far behind. I was still trying to understand the word "understand".

Also, I felt about English the way most people feel about advanced mathematics: "When am I going to use it in the future?"

Walking towards the back of the library, I came upon a book called *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language*. I skimmed the first chapter, *The Comprehensive History of the English Language*. By the end of it I was speechless.

It made me wonder, "Why is it if you ask some people "what's up" they'll tell you what's going on, but if you ask others "what's up" they'll tell you what's happening?... When all you really want to know is "what's the latest"."

The only class I never skipped out on was art. It was my favorite class. I enjoyed drawing apples, oranges, pears, bananas, et cetera. I hoped to get good enough to eventually draw fruitcake. And then fruit flavored sorbet. And then, with any luck, some fruit flavored liqueurs.

I once imagined the actors in the Fruit of the Loom commercials making some extra money by standing in the middle of the arena floor in Madison Square Garden for twenty thousand art students.

One day, the teacher showed us sketches by Leonardo da Vinci. She acted as if they were praiseworthy. I said to myself,

“How do you know he wasn’t trying to draw stick figures and failed miserably.”

*Falling Asleep to the Sound of Critics*

That summer, we were back in that cabin. July and August, I assisted our neighbor, Gary, a bartender who made extra money cleaning pools. At the end of the day, when my parents would ask me how it went, I would say: “Fascinating! And to think I’ve only skimmed the surface!”

When I wasn’t working, most of the time I was at the lake. One morning, halfway around, I came upon a large slug. I sat down next to it and wondered if I would forge a deep bond with it if we were the last two living things on Earth—if we would be friends if there were absolutely no other living things on the planet. Pretending that that was the case, and to be getting emotional, I said to the slug, “You’re such a good friend, ya know that? I love ya, man.” I gave it a fist bump and then, analyzing the mucus on my knuckles, said, ““Mucus”—I get it. Ha, ha. Wise

guy, huh?” I thought of Green and the others and said to myself, “Four more years.”

I could spend entire afternoons playing dead man’s float. It scared me how good I was at playing dead. At one point, with my lungs full of air and my face underwater, I said to myself, “What if this is the only thing I excel at? What if, when I’m dead, everyone looks at me and says, ‘He did that better when he was alive.’”

Minutes later, I said to myself, “Death isn’t so bad. In fact, it feels pretty good,” when something nibbled at my toe and I ran back to my blanket yelling, “I don’t want to die! I don’t want to die!”

When it was time to dry off, almost time to head home, I would check my watch, see how late it was, and say to myself, “Boy, time flies when you’re dead.”

I would lie on the blanket and fall asleep. One time, I dreamt I was completely buried deep under the sand (five or six feet between me and the surface): Luckily, in the dream, three or four kids were digging towards me with their little plastic shovels and pails. Adults nearby had no idea the kids were involved in a life-or-death rescue effort.

I would bike home to have lunch or dinner with my parents, depending. The dining room had a bird-clock in which every hour on the hour a bird called out. During one lunch, a bird somewhere near the open dining-room window began to call out every few seconds. I said, “*Wow*, the hours are just *zippin* by.”

Upon finishing cleaning up the kitchen after that summer’s last dinner in the cabin, the windows and doors wide



open, we turned our attention to removing the bag of garbage from the container (when too much was placed in it, something occurred having to do with heat generated by the old garbage on the bottom, pressure, and suction, to make this extremely difficult). My parents held the container down as much as possible while I pulled the bag upwards with all my might. The damn thing wouldn't budge. Straining, I said, "What are the Stones up to at this moment, on this tiny planet, in this universe, one universe among what is probably an infinite number of universes? Let's tune in to see. It's probably something fantastic."

My father, surprised and annoyed by the amount of effort required, yelled, "Jesus Christ!" I said, "Wait! Wait! It's coming! It's coming!" Slowly the bag of garbage emerged until, finally, it was free. My father said, "It's a boy!" and then took the bag of garbage, cradled it, and rocked it as if it were a baby.

My mother called it a night. My father and I went outside and looked up at the spectacular starry-night sky. After a good thirty seconds, he said, "Weird." I said, "Yeah." And then we headed back inside.

A couple of hours later, as I lay in bed, I looked at the moonlit branch of a pine tree just on the other side of the open window a foot away, and told myself to remember it—the branch—whenever I needed to transport myself during the school-year. I had wanted the summer to go on forever. Instead, it went by so fast. I said to myself, "Time flies when you're having fun... Unfortunately, it *also* flies when you're late for an appointment and *completely* stressed out. You *suck*, time! *Asshole*."

I decide to make this moment last—to try to stay awake, to live in the present, to enjoy the sound of the crickets. At *one* point, I closed my eyes. After a bit, I said to myself, “If you didn’t know better, you’d *swear* you were in Central Park.”

The following morning, on our way back to the city, we stopped at the general store to get a few things. While he rung us up, Bill, the owner, told us how the rehearsal dinner and wedding had gone in Boston from which he and Ursy, his wife, had just returned. After we got back in the car, I said, “I don’t understand. How can potentially decades of marriage be rehearsed in one dinner?... Call me crazy but that doesn’t seem like adequate preparation.”

My parents made some comments about marriage (my mother repeating the statistic that half of marriages will end in divorce). My father said, “Uh-oh.” I said, “If fifty percent of marriages on this planet end in divorce, where it’s just between two people, imagine what the percentage is on a planet, perhaps in another galaxy, that has, say, seven different sexes—seven different genders. Imagine what marriage is like there. Imagine how complicated... Especially if you could only afford a studio.”

My mother made some comments about why people aim to be in lifelong, monogamous, etc., relationships and why such relationships so often don’t succeed. My father said, “You’re making so many blanket statements.” I said, “You should use her blanket statements to keep the two of you warm at night.” My father said, “We do. They keep us toasty.” My mother said, “Fuck off.”

Three-and-a-half hours later, as we crossed the George Washington Bridge, I could make out the tops of some of the buildings near my school. As always, the fact that summer-break was over and “Pucas”, etc., was about to resume, really hit me as we started down the West Side Highway (or, as my mother once mistakenly said while giving directions: “... It’s easy. Just go down the *West Side Story*...”).

As always, the steadily building anxiety I had been experiencing the past several days jumped to the point where I felt more than a little dizzy. I had to lie down and close my eyes...

Minutes later, it went dark. We had entered the garage. Summer was over.

*Does This Shirt Make Me Look Infatuation?*

High school arrived. With it, the opposite sex. I tried not to think of the term “the opposite sex”; it sounded too close to “the opposition”.

I yearned to interact with the girls. However, as I said to myself on my way home at the end of that first day of ninth grade, referring to my shyness around girls, “Damn it, I can’t even look them in the eye... I can’t even look their *shadows* in the eye... I can’t even look *myself* in the eye... *I can’t even look my eye in the eye.*”

I got into bed and fantasized about interacting with girl after girl. About playing paddy-cake with them.

That night, I dreamt I asked my shadow out on a date. It said “yes”. We were inseparable.

Two days later, I wrote a letter to Fiona Worth that read:

*To whom it may concern,*

*Hi. My name is Lucas.*

*Sincerely,*

*Lucas*

However, I feared it revealed too much about me too soon, so I never sent it.

A few days later, I wrote another one:

*To whom it may concern,*

*Hi.*

*Sincerely.*

But it remained in my pocket.

As the weeks went by, I could only adore from afar:

Olga Jaworski's eyes, Claudia Martinez's hands, Sue Kim's ears: for me, they were the stuff that dreams were made of. And not only that, but without these things these girls would never be issued driver's licenses.

As winter break approached, I learned that Orsola Moretti was set to play the Mother Mary at the musical re-enactment of the Nativity. Orsola was a senior. I had been lusting after her since the seventh grade. Immediately, I began imagining that Ms. Wahlstrom cast *me* to play the baby Jesus instead of using the

usual plastic doll: We go into rehearsals. Every day for two weeks I get to exit Orsola's vagina. The day before the opening of the performance, Ms. Wahlstrom gets cold feet and announces that the baby Jesus will, in fact, be represented by the plastic doll. I storm out, accusing Ms. Wahlstrom of typecasting. Orsola joins me in my protest and invites me back to her place to continue rehearsals.

I could hardly bring myself to ask a girl for a sheet of paper let alone out on a date. I began to think the only way I would ever ask a girl out on a date—in fact, ever have a more than superficial conversation with one—was with the aid of a ventriloquist's dummy.

In fact, one night I dreamt I used such a technique on Carla Papp: She and the dummy went around the corner for a slice of pizza, spent the rest of the afternoon making-out at her place, and then eloped to Las Vegas, got married, and had five kids in six years. None of whom speak for themselves.

One night, upon getting into bed, I said to myself, "Someday, I'll meet the girl of my dreams... I wonder which one she'll be."

I discovered that the bedroom directly across from mine in the building across the street belonged to a girl my age. She rarely put the blinds down. I would turn my lights off, crawl across the floor in the dark, and peek at her from behind my dresser. After the first few times, just to be safe, I began doing the above wearing a Groucho Marx mask.

I would see a girl somewhere and imagine starting a conversation with her. *For instance, a girl waiting to cross the street:* "I'm sorry, could I ask you a question?" "Uh, yeah, sure."

“As a kid what was your favorite number?” “My favorite number?” “Yeah.” “I’m not sure I had one. Eight, I suppose.” “Eight is a good number. *My* favorite was one million, four hundred and twenty-six thousand, seven hundred and seven.” “Why?” “No particular reason.” “I see.” “Of course, now it’s six.” “*Of course!*” “Because think about it: if you turn it upside down it becomes a nine. A number of even *greater* value. It actually has a greater value upside down than right side up.” “That *is* impressive.” “*Yes it is.* I know if you turned *me* upside down, I would definitely not be of greater value. I would without a doubt be of lesser value. Which I suppose is the case for *most* people... Except maybe trapeze artists. The case could be made *they’re* more valuable upside down... Also, porn stars at times... Also, those people who swim down and take pearls from oysters. Which is amazing. I don’t know how they do it: free dive a hundred feet. I can barely brush my teeth without feeling like my head’s gonna explode. Hell, I once came down with a case of the bends while bobbing for apples. Imagine if they were to make bobbing for apples an Olympic sport.” *Or for instance, Anna Hyams by herself at a table in the cafeteria:* “Is this seat taken?” “Uh, no.” I sit down and start to eat. “My name’s Lucas, by the way. Lucas Stone. Aurelio Fernandez for short. Some of my friends call me Yaki Yashimoto, but they don’t know me that well... What’s *your* name, if you don’t mind my asking?” “Anna.” I point to some nearby stains on the table. “See those circles, Anna?” “Yeah.” “No one knows how they got there. Theory is: aliens.” We just eat in silence for a bit, and then I say, “Do you like food?” “Uh...yeah.” “I do too. I couldn’t live without it.” *Or for instance, Edith*

Noesille in the workout room. I found myself in the otherwise unoccupied workout-room with Edith Noesille. From what I could gather, she and her family had moved to New York from Los Angeles during the summer, having moved from Haiti to Los Angeles soon after Edith was born. I rested between sets of the lat-pulldown. Edith left the StairMaster and began to use the cables to strengthen her hips. Her left ankle was bandaged. She was just a few feet away from me. With each lifting and lowering of her leg, the old machine squeaked: “I hope that’s the machine and not your hips.” She smiles. When she finishes her set, I point to her bandaged foot and say, “Your left doesn’t look right.” “I rolled my ankle. I was racing my brother.” I had overheard her say this to Cosmina Funar earlier in the day. “Injuries are frustrating.” “Yeah.” After a bit, as she begins another set, I say, “Look at it as an opportunity to perfect your hopping on one foot. An opportunity to finally cross *that* sucker off your bucket list.” “The problem is now my right calf has been feeling really stiff and sore.” “Maybe you need a massage.” “I *have* been massaging it. Every chance I get. It feels so good to do. Have you ever massaged your own calf?” “Have I ever massaged my own calf? Uuh, no. No, I usually skip the foreplay and go right for my penis.” She begins another set of creaky leg-lifts. I get on the stationary bike next to it. “Deaths per minute?! Oh, beats per minute.” Or for instance, Lupita Prado in the stairway between classes: “Lupita, would you like to have dinner tonight?... With me, I mean. I was thinking at my place. A breakfast-for-dinner dinner. You know—pancakes... Afterwards, we could procrastinate studying together. What do you think?” “Sure. That sounds like fun.” “My name’s



Lucas, by the way.” That night, at seven o’clock, the doorbell rings. My parents had already left for the weekend. “Hi.” “Hi.” “Come on in. Can I take your coat?” “Thanks.” “Are you hungry?” “Yeah.” “Good. Let’s go in the kitchen.” We enter the kitchen. She says, “I like your cast-iron skillet.” “Cast iron is the best. Do you have cast iron at home?” “No.” “When’s your birthday?” “February 27<sup>th</sup>.” “I’m gonna give you some cast iron for your birthday... No double entendre intended with that, by the way.” “That’s good to know.” “Thank goodness we weren’t talking about piping bags.” I hand her a glass of orange juice. “Cheers.” “Cheers.” *Or for instance, a girl standing in the TV section of an electronics store. I walk over and stand near her:* “Chapter one—” “He saw her, illuminated by the glow of a cat litter commercial, and was immediately smitten.” She looks at me. “You know what one of the big problems for humanity is right now?” “What?” “The fact that more and more human beings, instead of ending their day looking through the trees and saying “the stars are so bright tonight”, end their day looking past their feet and saying “the commercials are so bright tonight”... Of course, for the past several thousand years, far too many human beings have been deranged and/or despicably brutal *despite* starry night skies, so...maybe “so much” for my theory.” “Yeah. I think so.” “Who knows, maybe cat litter, deodorant, and Jenny-Craig commercials are more humanizing than starry night skies.” “Maybe.” “Which, of course, wouldn’t be saying much, considering how low the bar was.” “No, it wouldn’t be saying much.” “Buying a TV?” “Yeah.” “Gonna use it tonight?” “I think so.” “Great! I should come over! We could watch together!” Around one in the morning, I’m resting

with my head on her chest. I say, “The continuation of these beats by a small, squishy mass is the difference between life and death. We’re all so delicate. All of us. Even the strongest man in the world. I mean, he may be the strongest man in the world, but compared to an *elephant* he’s not that strong. *[mimicking an old rabbi]* ‘Finish ahead of an *elephant* in a strongest man in the world contest and *then* I’ll be impressed.’”

*I love women—older women, younger women,  
women the exact same age as me to the day  
(this last category makes me so horny)*

One snowy afternoon, I finally purchased a pornographic magazine from the bodega around the corner. I discovered that the woman on the cover was named Cinnamon Smith. I said to myself, “Woh, that’s hot! Her last name is Smith!”

She liked to drink iced tea and eat sushi on hot, summer days. I said to myself, “She needs to drink and eat in order to survive. So do I. We have something in common.”

She enjoyed going to art galleries by herself. I said to myself, “What a coincidence. Until they get some decent stuff on the walls, I don’t enjoy going to art galleries *period*. There’s a nice symmetry here.”

After my last class, I usually went right home and played with myself. When I was done playing solitaire, I masturbated.

I always did my best to slap my hand away but it refused to take “no” for an answer.

One time, I masturbated with both hands. I did my best to slap them away with my foot but they refused to take “no” for an answer.

One time, I masturbated with both hands and both feet. At that point, there was nothing I could do except look away and shake my head and wait for it to be over with (after mumbling “I give up”).

I said to myself once, while masturbating, “I like to masturbate; it makes my hand feel good... Although I do have to say my pinky finger *does* still seem more than a little uncomfortable about the whole thing... One might look at it and assume it’s some sort of puritan, or maybe shy, or simply averse to orgies (*particularly* one that includes that disagreeable thumb...I mean “*opposable*”). *However*, one would be overlooking the fact that it acts exactly the same when I’m holding the handle of a delicate tea cup or the stem of a wine glass.”

On most occasions, when I attempted to come simultaneously with the woman in my fantasy, I succeeded.

But not always.

Once, after a particularly strong orgasm, I said to myself, referring to the woman in my fantasy, “I think she’s happy too. But you’d have to ask *her*.”

One night, I dreamt I was having intercourse with a woman when I said, “This is my first time having sex with someone other than myself”: The woman said, “How do you like

it?" I said, "It's better. You don't seem to require nearly as much affirmation."

At one point, I developed a problem with premature ejaculation when I masturbated.

I apologized to myself on numerous occasions.

One afternoon, I masturbated with my left hand. It was new and exciting.

Late one night, on TV, I watched a very athletic stripper do a pole dance. I said to myself, "That pole is one lucky man."

A couple of minutes later, I said to myself, "Wow, she's really attracted to that pole."

Then: "Maybe she would be attracted to *me*; I'm skinny and quiet also."

I was turned on by this naked woman. However, I didn't find the idea of strip clubs—of being among a bunch of men watching women remove their clothes for money—sexy. It was the dancing that made it unpalatable, I felt. Better if they did just about *anything* except dance—play ping-pong, read a book, cut their fingernails, etc., with no music. Better *still* if there was no nudity. In fact, if women of all kinds would just come out, one after the other, fully-clothed, simply sit in a chair, and allow us to stare at them for ten minutes (and then maybe we could do the same for them if they wanted)—I felt that would be best.

That night, I dreamt I walked into a strip club as a thirty-year-old man: The club was packed with men of all kinds. I wasn't in the place but ten seconds when the stripper stopped dancing and said, pointing at me, "What are *you* lookin at!?"

I rarely made it down one city block without imagining, to varying degrees of specificity, elaborateness, and duration, having some sort of a sexual encounter with this or that female that came into view. One evening, waiting for the light to change on the southeast corner of 90<sup>th</sup> and Broadway, I stood near a woman with very muscular calves who was sporting large, round, gold-colored, wire-frame reading-glasses and holding a box of pizza *that smelled delicious*. I imagined her turning her head, seeing me, seeming to read my mind, and, raising the box, saying: “Would you like some? I live right over there.” We enter her apartment. She lays the pizza on a table, sets several candles aflame, turns off the lights, puts on some choral music, walks to the middle of the room, unbuttons her  $\frac{3}{4}$ -length coat (having revealed, as she progressed, that she is not wearing anything under it), and lets it fall to the floor, so that she is standing there buck naked (save for her shoes). I gulp, and then say, “I like your outfit. I like how the shoulders match the knees.” She says, “The pizza for dessert,” and begins to masturbate. I say to myself, “I can’t believe this. I can’t believe she let her dress fall onto this dirty floor. *[I begin to remove my clothes as quickly as possible (making sure, of course, to avoid the floor while carefully placing each item on the couch)]* I’m certainly game, but can’t we have the pizza first?” She moans. I say, “Hold that thought.” She says, almost whispering, “Do you believe? Are you a believer?” I say, hopping on one leg while struggling to remove a shoe, “In God or the Knicks?” “In the all-powerful Lord.” I say, hopping on the *other* leg while struggling to remove the *other* shoe, “Well, let me just say I’m a *big, big* fan of organized religion. I don’t like it when things are disorganized. It

makes me edgy. [removing my pants] In fact, I even prefer organized crime. [removing my boxers] If we *must* have it, make it nice and tidy, *I say.*” I finally make it over to her (having kept my socks on so as not to touch the street-soiled floor with my bare feet) and we begin to have sex. It was an unwise decision to keep my socks on, for I discover, soon after the start of coitus, an inability to gain any pedal traction whatsoever. I feel like somebody who had gone to the ice rink to both learn how to skate *and* lose his virginity, *both* at the same time. Nevertheless, after a couple of minutes, she begins to say such things as “Fuck me. Fuck me, God. I am your humble servant.” This startles me. I was anticipating “Oh God, fuck me” but “Fuck me, God. I am your humble servant” threw me off. I feel uncomfortable about role-playing, particularly with the role of God. It seems like poor casting. I’m too shy and awkward to play God. No one would buy it. Whoever heard of a shy and awkward God? Sure, God tends not to show “Himself”, but no one thinks that’s because “He’s” shy and awkward. I say to myself, “Does she think *every* guy can play God? Or does she see something in me?... Yeah right. Don’t flatter yourself.” It’s clear she wants me to take control. I panic about what to do—how to position myself, what position to put ourselves into. I try to think of all the positions I know of but the only one that comes to mind is the one I was taught in grade school: single file, holding hands... She makes it clear she wants anal sex. I don’t. I say to myself, “Sorry. That’s holier than thou.” She makes it even clearer. I say to myself, “Speakin of “single-file, holding hands”: that’s the *only* way *I’m* goin in *there*. And seein as how Jacob Stein and Iván Suárez are nowhere to be seen, you’re

plumb outta luck, sweetheart.” I say, “Not right now.” “May I come? May I come, Lord?” I say, assuming she would enjoy not being granted permission, “No.” I clearly had assumed correctly, judging by her reaction. I continue, “Not until all Jews are back in Israel.” To my surprise, she clearly enjoyed hearing that stipulation. So I add, “Every single one of ’em. [*again she clearly enjoyed hearing the stipulation*] Including Pee-wee Herman.” *And again* (strangely, even more so). She says, “*Oh please, Lord. Please. Please don’t make me wait for that—for all Jews to be back in Israel—before letting me enter the kingdom of heaven. Please. Oh please, Lord. Let me enter now. Right now.*” “Nah. Sorry. I’d prefer to keep you waiting. I’m kinda kinky that way... We all have our little proclivities... Not only that but then all the fun would end. Yeah sure, there’d be a big bang, which would be fantastic ‘n all, but then I’d go back to being bored. Go back to waiting for...for things to develop again. Which might be another thirteen billion years.” She says, “Tell me a story!” It not seeming like the right time for *The Brave Little Steam Shovel*, and assuming she wants a sex story, I go for the classic pizza-delivery-guy scenario (inspired by the pizza as I am): “It’s a cold winter’s night. You order a small pizza for delivery. *Ding-dong*. You open the door. I’m standing there with a box of pizza. You take the box from me, open it, and say, ‘*Mushrooms?! I didn’t order mushrooms; I ordered funghi!*’ I say, ‘*Funghi are mushrooms.*’ You say, ‘*Wise guy, huh?*’ I say, ‘*No, not “wise guy”, “funghi”.*’ You say, ‘*Funny guy, huh?*’ I say, ‘*No, not “funny guy”, “funghi”.*’ You say, ‘*All right, that’s it,*’ put me in a headlock, and pull me inside. Five minutes later you’re—” “I meant a *sacred* story. A



sacred story as told by you, the Creator of All Things.” “*Oh, a sacred story...as told by me, the Creator of All Things... Okay, uuuuuuuuh... Okay, ya ready?*” “*Oh yes! Yes!*” “[*to myself*] Wow, this story is *definitely* not gonna meet your expectations. Apparently, I could recite the entire *Bible* and you’d *still* be disappointed... Nevertheless, here goes: (This refers to a soccer match I watched on Univision a few weeks ago. Sometimes a little *Univision* is the perfect break from my usual *Omnivision*. *Ba-dum-tss*)... Anyway, here goes... *In the beginning*, the score was zero/zero. Two and a half hours later the team I had been pulling for, freakin *lost* in a penalty shootout. If *that’s* not enough, the team I had been rooting *against actually began thanking me*. You know, kissing their hands and pointing to me, et cetera. Which was *so* aggravating. Although I knew they were being sincere, it was hard not to take it as sarcasm. I had to make sure to remind myself that that wasn’t the case lest I send them all to hell with a wrist-flick. Sometimes I worry about what will happen to humanity if I develop Tourette’s... Anyway, I was so upset that I might have gone a little overboard with my thunder and lightning. One of the bolts struck the power-line feeding the house of the Maccabee family of Jerusalem, New York, causing the whole house to go dark. Fortunately, it was two days before Christmas and the youngest Maccabee, seven-year-old Paul, had been given a little, battery-powered Rudolf the Red-Nosed Reindeer by a classmate the week prior. The elder Maccabee, Bob (an importer, along with his wife, Nancy, of [*I take my hands off of the top of her hips to make air quotes*] “premium” Mediterranean food products, and who had once sat next to basketball hall-of-famer Bob McAdoo on

a flight from Rome to New York without even knowing it, which tickled the hell out of me)—anyway, the elder Maccabee suggested using the toy reindeer for light while they sit around telling the stories of those souls that don't know what to do with all the time they have on their hands (boy I tell ya, if I have to tell those idiots one more time to quit scaring the liv...anyway, let's not get into that...the elder Maccabee suggested using the toy reindeer for light while they tell ghost stories and play the “would-you-eat/drink-this-if-it-were-such-and-such-instead-of-a-vanilla-wafer-or-grape-juice” game. Because the battery was on the verge of dead, no one expected the little red nose to remain lit for more than ten minutes. However, to everyone's amazement, it remained lit for eight whole hours (*wink, wink*)—eight hours being long enough for their neighbor, Wilbur Moses, who knew a little about electrical equipment, to arrive and restore power with the help of the instruction manual (two stone tablets with the ten steps written in English, Spanish, French, and Mandarin). Bob and Nancy insisted on paying Wilbur but he refused to accept it, quickly turning and walking away, saying that the “desert” (what Wilbur calls the strip mall that he has to pass in order to get home) is bumper-to-bumper—a truck carrying a new sign for the KFC tipped over and the red “C” was blocking traffic both ways, and he wanted to get home for the start of the Mets/Yankees game. (As did I, being interested in every game as I am. You should see my bedroom; it's like the ESPN studio in there. I only wish heaven got better reception.)... *Anyway*, the following day, as a reward for his sacrifice, Wilbur arrived home after work to find seventy-two bottles of extra virgin olive oil waiting for him. The note attached

said, simply, “Thanks for the help, Moses. Nancy and Bob”. The end.” To my immense surprise, she looks over her shoulder at me with tears streaming down her cheeks, says, “That was the most powerful thing I’ve ever heard,” and begins to wail like a baby. I slowly look at the front door, consider making a run for it, but decide against it out of fear of triggering some sort of predatory instinct (she could very well keep a ninja-star under that couch-cushion for just such an occasion). I say to myself, trying to make myself feel better, “Maybe she just really, *really* gets into these scenarios—*really* likes to lose herself in the role... In fact, maybe she’s a professional actress... Yeah, that’s probably it. She’s an actress... An actress.” I again look at the front door as if considering making a run for it. She continues wailing. I say, “Yeah, no matter how many times I tell that story, it’s hard for me not to get choked up.” Her wailing winds down, and then she says, in a bit of a whisper, “So, so powerful. [*she looks at me over her shoulder and returns to her original focus*] Oh just fuck me, God!” After a bit, she looks at me again. It seems she wants “God” to say something. The best I can come up with is, “Behold! [*she clearly likes it so I repeat it over and over again*] Behold!... Behold!... Behold!... Behold!... [*et cetera*]” “Oh God... Oh God... Oh God... Jesus!... Holy Moses!... Mother Mary!” I say to myself, “Make up your mind, would ya?! Just when I start to work on *one* character, you suggest *another*! What do I look like—*Daniel Day-Lewis*?!... Even the *Strasberg* Method doesn’t work *that* fast.” “Jesus!... Holy Moses!... Mother Mary!” I can’t help appreciating her thinking I can pull that last one off—her thinking I have it in me—that much of a feminine side... Eventually she changes position

and makes it clear she wants oral sex. I try to “perform” it as God might but it quickly becomes clear to me that there isn’t anything “*He*” could do that *I* wasn’t already doing (any sort of game-changer)—there isn’t anything that could be done (even by “*Him*”) that would make for a better “performance”—*for there are just so many options...* The word “performance” strikes me as ridiculously overblown (no pun intended). While I recognize that *some* finesse is in order, and perhaps some degree of experience required to *achieve* that finesse, to refer to what I was doing as a *performance* seems an insult to whatever would be happenin’ that night at the Vivian Beaumont Theater... And I’m proven right to feel that what I was doing was just fine, for she comes, screaming, “I’m yours!” “[*massaging my ear*] God almighty.” She clearly enjoyed hearing that, having mistakenly (or perhaps *intentionally*) taken my utterance literally rather than as a mere clichéd exclamation. We both stand in the middle of the room breathing deeply (her from the orgasm, me from the exertion). My back muscles, thighs, and glutes had been about to give out, holding that position. I had been thinking to myself, “I may be God, but I don’t think I can hold this position for another ten *seconds*, let alone *eternity*.” And then: “This is requiring more effort than my *other* Big Bang.” Finally, I say, still breathing deeply, “*Man*, I didn’t know religion could be so much fun... I wonder if God was as surprised to have caused such a big bang as *I* am.” She says, picking up the box of pizza, “Do you want ice cream with the pizza?” “Sure [*following her towards the kitchen*] ... What flavors do you have?” “Strawberry.” “That’s all you have?” “Yeah.” “You invited me over here for *that*?!” “[*as we enter the kitchen*] Was

that your first time having sex?” “[*pretending to have been offended*] “I beg your pardon.” She sets the box on the table, and then proceeds to wash her hands at the sink. “It was, wasn’t it? At least with a woman.” “Well, I have never had sex with a man. And regarding *women*, let me put it this way: the closest I had ever come to a vulva before twenty minutes ago was when my uncle wanted to show us the neighborhood-Christmas-lights and we all piled into his Volvo.” She sneezes. I say, “Bless you... I mean, [*I lower my voice*] I bless you, my child. Let no sneeze go unblessed. I meant to tell Moses to spread the word on that, but I forgot. Luckily, it caught on anyway.” “Grab a slice; it’s getting cold. [*and then, opening the freezer door*] I’m just gonna take this out to soften.” I go over to the sink and start washing my hands. I say, “No one likes cold pizza but everyone likes ice cream. Pizza must find that frustrating.” She removes a slice and takes a big bite. I do the same. “[*with my mouth full of pizza*] Are you an actress?” “[*with her mouth full of pizza*] No. An astrophysicist.” About a half hour later, we’ve had the strawberry ice cream. She puts down her bowl and, to my surprise, says, “Now it’s *my* turn to play God.” And then, while I was still holding my spoon—

And then, *darn* it, the light changed and she ran across the street and downtown and disappeared from my life...*forever*.

One afternoon, I went to the Museum of Natural History and came upon a full-size replica of a male and a female *Australopithecus africanus* walking together, the male with his arm over the shoulders of the female. My heart jumped as soon as I saw the female. I couldn’t take my eyes off of her—her hips, her ass, her breasts.

Of course, I felt guilty for lusting after my own ancestor.

But as she walked buck naked two million years ago across what I imagined was a savannah, an erupting volcano off in the distance, the sun going down, I couldn't help but love her whole devil-may-care, free-spirited, freewheeling attitude.

I looked at the male and thought, "What does he have that I don't have because of evolution."

I thought about how lucky the male was to get to go to bed with her, to wake up next to her in the morning, to have sex with her. I wondered if I would ever be like that male *Australopithecus Africanus* in the future.

I wanted so much to be there with them, walking through that primitive landscape. It looked so romantic and exciting. I imagined being there with them. I imagined the conversation we would have as we hurried to get to the trees and up into them before the sun disappeared: "So, have you guys been to the Congo yet?" "No." "I just came back." "Really?" "Yeah." "Wow. How was it?" "It was great. But I don't know why everyone refers to it as a rainforest. To me it seemed more like a jungle." "Why's that?" "I don't know. It was just a feeling I had." Suddenly, we come upon the decaying carcass of a huge buffalo. We pause to study it for a bit. Because the sun is going down and there's no meat on the carcass, we decide to return the following morning for the skin and bones. We continue on. I say, "You know, man will eventually learn to hunt animals as big as that using sticks and stones." "Really? That's unbelievable." "It's true. But before they learn to use sticks and stones to break the animals' bones, they'll try to use name-calling. They'll try to hurt the animals by simply

sneaking up behind them and yelling ‘Duh, I’m trying to blend into the brown and green surroundings with my black and white stripes! Duuh! Duuh!’ in hopes that it would just collapse to the ground and die from extreme emotional pain.” The male and female *Australopithecus Africanus* both stop walking, unable to coordinate another step due to laughter. I make it worse for them by saying, “Hey snake, why do you keep sticking out your long, thin tongue? Does the word “*redundant*” mean anything to you? *Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!* Talk about *stupid*.” And, “Hey big guy, looks like you could use some *Viagra*. *Wups*, sorry; that’s your trunk! I forgot... Must be confusing for your ladies; they can’t tell whether you’re *approaching* or *leaving* when you start to get excited! *Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!*” The male and female each fall into the grass and begin rolling around, gasping for breath. I decide not to continue with the humor since it’s getting dark and I thought I heard a lion a while back. I say, “Come on, guys. Pull yourselves together. We have to get going.” The male and female do pull themselves together and we continue on our way (with the male and female giggling every now and then at the thought of using name-calling as a method for bringing down big game). After a few minutes, the male picks up his pace and is soon out of earshot. I say to the female, “I want to have sex with you.” “I’m flattered. But I’m with him.” “I understand. Forgive me.” She senses my embarrassment and tries to make me feel okay by using the cliché popular at the time—“no worries except being eaten by an animal”. We just walk for a bit. I try to break the awkward silence by saying, “Not to mention the fact that we *are* distant relatives. As evidenced by the uncanny resemblance between all of you guys and me during the

height of my puberty.” About a half hour later, the male and female and I enter the forested area and are greeted by the rest of the clan. It’s insisted that I be naked like everyone else. I give in. A few minutes later, while talking with a couple of females who were standing close to me, I get an erection. Turning red with embarrassment, I say, “Look at that. An Erectus. And I thought that wasn’t supposed to appear for another five hundred thousand years.” Later, we’re all sitting around eating insects when I get into an argument with a male *Australopithecus Africanus* a few years younger than me. The kid says, “Shut up arrowhead!” I say, “You can’t call me that!” The kid says, “Why not?!” I say, “Cause an arrowhead hasn’t been invented yet!” Throughout dinner, others copulate, defecate, and urinate in plain view. I say to myself, “All I can say is: *thank God* we’re not using knives and forks so I don’t have to see them held wrong.” At one point, the conversation turns to rumors that a nearby clan is practicing cannibalism. I ask, “What do you think happens when a cannibal experiences self-loathing?” I follow that up by asking, “Do you think that when cannibals sit down to eat the victim, someone with authority points at the meal and says, “Take his elbows off the table?”” Everyone laughs. As soon as dinner’s over, we all climb into a tree for a good night’s sleep. After we all find our spots, I say, “Goodnight, Early Man.” The *Australopithecus Africani* say, “Later man.” I say, “See ya in the dawn of man.” There are some giggles and then everyone’s quiet, only the loud sounds of insects and animals of all sorts. The sound is deafening. After a couple of minutes, I ask, “Does anyone have a “sounds of the city” C.D. by any chance?” Just then, the clouds open up, revealing a spectacular, starry night



sky. Shortly after, that female (the one in the museum) lies down beside me, presses her lips against mine, and slips her tongue into my mouth. I say to myself, “Boy, this is the life. This really is the life.”

I imagined trying to buy a condom: I’m the only customer in the place. Embarrassed to go to the counter with only a box of prophylactics, I grab a pair of Dr. Scholl’s shoe inserts as well, in order to downplay my intentions. The cashier, an inexpressive fellow, totals the two items. It turns out I only have enough money for the condoms. I panic and say to the cashier, “I’ll keep the shoe inserts; you can keep the condoms... I don’t mean *you*; I mean *the store*... ‘Cause it’s not important. I might not even *have* sex... I don’t mean *ever*. I’m sure I’ll have sex at some point... I mean *again*. I’ve had sex before. I just meant maybe I won’t have sex with *her*. This weekend. Or maybe I will and she’ll have condoms herself. Or maybe we’ll just use our hands, right? Or maybe I’ll please her orally and then she can please me with her hand. Or maybe I’ll please her and then masturbate.” The cashier remains deadpan. I’m exasperated. “Look, why are you asking me all these questions!? You’re *relentless*. Just give me the damn shoe inserts and let me get out of here. I have a medical emergency to take care of. My arches are in dire need of support. Mostly emotional. My feet are very sensitive.” I receive my change and the arch supports from the cashier and walk away. I say to myself, “Wow, my first ever attempt to buy a condom... More importantly, *shoe inserts*. Life is coming at me fast and furious.”

*And This Year's Most Emotionally Vulnerable Player Award  
Goes to...*

I was a good athlete. Unfortunately, I tended to become nervous and tight and perform well below my abilities in an organized setting. I probably wouldn't have been able to find my nostril to pick my nose if there had been a referee policing my attempt... Definitely not if there had been a crowd, cheerleaders, and a TV audience of eighty million.

Nevertheless, I was on the freshman soccer team. Our first game was against the school's archrivals. We were down by one with one-minute left when Green intercepted the ball and broke towards the goal with no defenders between the two of us and the goalkeeper. I sprinted, suddenly speaking in fake Portuguese, pretending to be Pele, figuring that it might have a positive effect on my performance. Green passed me the ball just before the sliding goalkeeper reached it. The goal was wide open.

All I had to do was alter the path of the ball a bit with my foot in order to score the tying goal. I was an inch away from doing this when I slipped, twisted my ankle, and fell to the ground. We lost. As always, Green, Spiegel, and Nagy were merciless on the ride home as I, as usual, sat up front alone. Borschard said, “You really fucked up, Stone.” I said to myself, “I didn’t fuck up; *Pele* did. Boy, does *he* suck.”

And I was on the freshman basketball team. As I walked onto the court for the start of our first game, I said to myself, “Just don’t commit too many fouls... *Hopefully*, you won’t get called for *any*.” Five minutes later, I fouled out. Green, Ackers, and the others were merciless on the ride home. I said to myself, “Don’t worry; twenty years from now you’ll look back on this and wail like a baby.”

And in the spring, I made the junior varsity baseball team. As with freshman soccer, our first game was against the school’s archrivals. Coach Flores had me take Kwon’s place at third after Kwon sprained his ankle in the sixth. I had a chance to bat in the seventh and final inning. We were down by one, bases loaded, two outs. As I stepped into the batter’s box, I decided to pretend I was a professional. I pretended I was an orthodontist.

The first pitch was low and outside. It amused me to imagine throwing the bat to the ground, mumbling “you son of a bitch”, and rushing the mound, despite the fact that the ball was about as far away from hitting me as possible.

I stepped out of the batter’s box and looked at the third base coach. I said to myself, “What is Schwartz doing

communicating with a deaf person somewhere in the stands behind me at a time like this?”

I stepped back into the box. I fouled off the second pitch. The ball landed near a bunch of pigeons. I said to the catcher and ump, “I almost killed two fowl with one foul.”

They didn’t seem amused.

I fouled off the third pitch. It was a line drive that sailed over my team’s bench and knocked a hot dog in a bun out of a hot dog vendor’s hand just as he had finished topping it with sauerkraut and mustard and was proffering it to a customer. I imagined the vendor retrieving the ball, squirting some mustard on it, and saying to the customer, “Sphere we are.”

I fouled off the fourth pitch. It was a high foul that entered the top of a tall tree and pin-balled its way downwards through the branches until it landed on top of Isaac Kaplan’s head. I said to myself, “Too bad Isaac wasn’t eating a *Fig Newton*. That would have been great.”

I fouled off the fifth pitch. The ball landed amid a group of girls who had congregated near the backstop. One of the girls fetched the ball and threw it back in. She threw like a boy imitating a girl throwing a ball.

She looked at me and said, “Girls like to play with balls.” The other girls laughed.

I wanted to reply but the only thing I could think of to say was, “I like to play with frisbees.”

Since I had no idea what that was supposed to mean I didn’t say anything.

At that point, a man who was leaning against the backstop said, “Come on, baby! Put it over the fence like a Mexican looking for a better life for his wife and kids!”

I think it was because I was distracted by that remark (was it insensitive or sensitive?) that I watched the next pitch sail over the plate.

The ump yelled, “*Strike three! You’re out!*” Green, Mazzullo, Barnes, Kirkpatrick, and the others were merciless on the ride home. I said to myself, “What is it I’m supposed to tell myself in these situations again? Oh yeah: ‘don’t blame them; they don’t know any better.’” I imagined a couple of Jews in Auschwitz, one saying to the other just before the gas is turned on (referring to Hitler): “Don’t blame him; he doesn’t know any better.” Or: “Don’t blame him; it’s not *his* fault.” Or: “Don’t blame him; he’s doing his best. None of us is perfect you know.” Or: “Don’t blame him; blame his parents.” Or: “Don’t blame him; he’s just following orders... Unfortunately, they happen to be his own.” Or: “Don’t blame him; he can’t help it.” Et cetera.

As soon as I got home, I got into bed and fell asleep. I woke up to the sound, in the next room, of the start of the Mets game. My father and I often watched the Mets or the Yankees play. We often grabbed our mitts and played catch. After fifteen minutes or so, I would say, “This going back and forth is getting us nowhere. What do you say we just agree to disagree?”

On one occasion, after throwing the ball around, I asked my father if he wanted to practice third base coaching with me. He declined, preferring to sit on the stoop while I stood on the

sidewalk pointing emphatically at the ground or windmilling my arm wildly with an excited expression on my face.

That Fall, the Fall of my sophomore year, I thought about trying one of the individual sports:

I thought about swimming but didn't like the idea of being in the same room as someone shooting a gun straight up into the ceiling.

I thought about wrestling but, as I said to myself, "I'd prefer my first time putting my face in someone's crotch *not* to include hundreds of screaming spectators, a shouting coach, and a referee with a whistle... Although, knowing me, it'll probably feel like that's the case."

I thought about tennis. I liked tennis. Mainly because I hated fluorescent yellow and tennis gave you the opportunity to smack the shit out of that color over and over again.

However, considering my lack of a love life, hearing the word "love" every two seconds would only seem like some sort of taunt.

I thought about joining the golf club. I had never played before so I gave it a shot. My first tee-off on an actual green was a good one. The ball sailed into the air and landed almost two hundred yards away right in the middle of the fairway. Because I was the last to tee-off, the four making up the golf club and I immediately climbed into the golf cart and headed towards the balls. Three minutes later, after listening to Ben Schmidt and Andre Gold talk about the problems with their golf swings (as they had been since leaving school), and Chris Kerns and Jerry Yolevich talk about computers, I said to myself, as I disembarked

from the car, “*Man, golf is grueling!*... I mean what are we gonna talk about next: Insurance?! Money markets?! *The “Gentlemen’s Club”*?!... This sport is too hard.”

I thought about track and field. About the girls on the team. Thought about them a lot. Unfortunately, that didn’t satisfy the phys. ed requirement.

Although it probably *should* have.

In the end, I rejected interscholastic sports in favor of intramural ones like flag football. During one intramural game, I tried to put on the breaks, slipped on the wet turf, and hit the back of my head against a steel drainage grate. I was out cold for a couple of minutes. I dreamt I was a man living a lie: I was an NFL kicker who, if I had been true to myself, would have pursued being a punter instead. My whole life was a sham.

I came to with Mr. Oberhaus’ face hovering above mine. I said to myself, “There are gym teachers in heaven?... But why?”

Mr. Oberhaus asked me if I was okay. I held up three fingers and said, “I don’t know; how many fingers am I holding up?”

As I left the turf, Green, who had been throwing the baseball around with Bronner when the accident occurred, said, “You all right, Puke?”

Often, my father and I would throw the football around. I would imagine three or four NCAA cheerleaders cheering us on as we tossed the ball back and forth.

One of my sports fantasies was to be repeatedly throwing the football straight up into the sky as high as I could and then catching it before it hits the ground while three or four NCAA

cheerleaders cheer me on with pom-poms, cartwheels, splits, et cetera.

I enjoyed watching football on TV with my father. However, I hated (and still hate) the Super Bowl half-time shows. I feel they're un-patriotic in that they threaten our national security by making it easy for people around the world to hate us.

I'll never forget the first time my father took me to see a professional game. At Giants Stadium in the Meadowlands. As soon as I laid eyes on the field, I said to myself, "My *God*, it's the size of a *football* field!"

On crowded streets, I would often get right behind somebody and pretend I was a running back following a blocker up-field against a defensive onslaught. On one occasion, I chose to get behind a ninety-year-old woman pulling an old, wire cart. I quickly became disappointed with her performance and decided to use somebody else. As I passed her, I said to her, "You call that blocking?" She raised a hand at me angrily.

I enjoyed watching the Olympics—summer or winter—with my parents, whenever they rolled around. After one exciting finish to a race, upon calling it a night, while brushing my teeth, I said to myself, "The Olympics are funny. For instance, most of us have never cross-country skied, never *will* cross-country ski, and would otherwise never give the activity the least little thought, yet, every four years, we sit on the edge of our seats in front of the TV, yelling: 'Come on, Samuelson; move your ass! [*Eriksson overtakes him*] Oh *fuck!*'... Eriksson taking gold and Samuelson silver—it can ruin your whole day."



## Part Two

### *You Have to Fight for Your Right to Not Party*

I spent the summer before my senior year the same way I had spent the previous three: cleaning pools (save for the two weeks in which my bad back had made that impossible) and playing dead man's float. The day before heading back to the city for the start of my last year, during my last float of the summer, I made the decision to give a Friday or Saturday night party another try (I had, in fact, forced myself to attend a few early in my freshman year, but ended up calling it quits after it became clear that what I wanted—making a connection with any number of girls that I was attracted to—wasn't going to happen, what with Green and the others always being quick to make things too

uncomfortable for me, forcing me to leave before an opportunity *might*, despite the low odds, have presented itself—an opportunity for which I just *might* have been able to get my nerve up).

The second Friday of the schoolyear, there was a party in Murray Hill. I made the trip downtown, stood across the street looking up at and listening to the rooftop party, decided, after half-a-minute, that I just couldn't do it, walked the sixty-one blocks back home, took a shower, got into bed, fell asleep, and dreamt that I, in fact, *hadn't* bailed—that I had, in fact, made myself cross that street and enter that building: I pushed the top-floor button. Someone said, "Who is it?" Just in case Green or the others were near the intercom, and figuring the person was intoxicated and would probably buzz me in anyway, I said, "Manuel Owners." The door immediately buzzed and I entered. Finally, the tiny elevator arrived and I very slowly ascended—an anxiety-ridden calm before the storm, the *thump, thump* of music getting louder and louder. Finally (or "unfortunately"), the elevator stopped and the doors opened. I made my way through a sea of preppy substance abusers and up onto the roof, keeping a lookout for any of the girls I was particularly attracted to, and spotting a few. Upon seeing me standing near him, Mickey Calhoun, the affable stoner (who had actually graduated the previous year, and who I had bumped into a couple of times at Massimo's and shared a table with, despite my preference not to have), says with surprise, "What's up, Lucas?" "Hey Mickey." "What are *you* doin here?" "I was in the neighborhood." "Doin what?" "I was over by the river trying to commit suicide." "Guess it didn't go very well, huh?" "No, it didn't." "Sorry to hear that." "I'll live." Mickey stared

contemplatively at his lit joint before saying, “I could never get to the point where I’d commit suicide; I’d kill myself first.” “I meant to last week. But I lost my “to do” list.” “Bummer man.” “I had it written there between “trim toenails” and “do laundry.”” Seymour David, who was walking by, said, “Deliberately killing yourself is never the answer, dude.” I responded, “What if the question is: “what is suicide?”” Mickey continued his inquiry, “What method did you try to use?” “The Pilates Method. It was the only method I could think of at the time. I may not have committed suicide, but I got a real good burn in my abs.” “Cool.” Mickey invited me to take a hit. “No thanks. It’s not my thing.” “It’s good stuff, man.” “I’m sure it is. But I don’t want to spend the next three hours hearing myself give a lecture on why Picasso’s Cubism is a more natural form of government than Marx’s Communism.” “Why not? It sounds totally interesting.” “I’ve got more important things to do.” “Like what?” “I have to go commit suicide using the new method I thought of: living to be a hundred and ten years old and then dying of old age in my sleep. Imagine the look on everyone’s face when they find the suicide note in my pocket dated ninety-two years ago.” “That’ll be somethin, man.” Mickey took a hit. After finally exhaling the smoke, he said, “But why do you want to kill yourself anyway, dude?” “I have no choice. I’ve lost all sense of perspective. It’s the worst thing that’s ever happened...anywhere...ever.” “That’s the craziest thing I’ve ever heard.” “Also, I’m convinced I missed my once in a lifetime opportunity when I was a toddler. I missed it 'cause everyone was distracting me. *Damn it*: why do thumbs in ears with fingers wiggling have to be so damn entertaining?!” “Dude, I know. It gets

me every time.” “Also, I’m a failure. I fail at *everything*. Even suicide.” “It’s not you, dude. It’s the system.” “Yeah?” “Yeah.” “What system?” “The *whole* system.” “Oh yeah. That one.” “The political, educational, legal, economic. All of it, man!” “Not to mention the transportation, electrical, and digestive.” Mickey laughed a stoner laugh. Then he said, “Yeah. *Especially* the goddamn digestive.” Mickey took another hit. I continued, “Sometimes I feel life is saying to me, ‘Ey, dis is how we do dings around here. If ya don’t like it, leave’.” Mickey exhaled the smoke and said, “You mean ‘go fuck yourself’.” “Oh yeah... I wonder if, in a friendly situation, one of those guys has ever mistakenly used “go fuck yourself” instead of “leave”. For instance: ‘Hi ma. Yeah, Johnny is gonna go fuck himself to the airport at around four o’clock. The plane will go fuck itself to Rome at eight.’ Et cetera.” “Ha-ha, I wonder, dude.” “All I know is: life is impossible. It’s just impossible. I can’t help imagining black and white newsreel footage of the very moment, a few billion years ago, that the very first, living, simple-cell appeared near a vent at the bottom of the ocean: An announcer says, ‘News flash! In an instant life becomes possible and impossible!... We’ll see how this story develops.’” “Dude, imagine if we had that recording! We’d make millions!” Mickey took another hit. He said, “So, what you’re saying is: life just isn’t your cup of tea.” Just then, Green, Spiegel, Ackers, and Mazzullo showed up and started to make things too uncomfortable for me, and I decided to go home. “Thanks, Mickey. Maybe you could get a summer job talking jumpers off of ledges.” “You think so?” “Yeah... They might even tip... [*realizing the other meaning*] Let me re-phrase that.” Forty-five minutes later, I was

walking slowly up Fifth Avenue when Mickey pulled up in a jeep. He was on his way home himself. “Lucas! What are you up to, man?” “I’m watching the race between my right and left feet. It’s riveting. As soon as one establishes a lead, the other overtakes it.” “I suppose you don’t want a lift, then?” “Where’re you headed?” “Eighty Fourth and Riverside.” “Yeah? Okay. A lift would be great.” “No problem, dude. Just give me a second to get my car.” Mickey started up the engine and drove away. He didn’t get very far before he realized his mistake, put the car in reverse, and returned. “Sorry, man.” “No problem. Do you mind if I drive?” “Not at all. *Mi casa, su casa.*” Mickey scooted over. “That’s Spanish for *mi casa, su casa.*” I took the wheel. Mickey rolled another joint. Five blocks later, he suddenly said, “Do you think space and time are infinite, dude?” “Absolutely. I believe there’s no limit to this insanity.” “Do you ever try to imagine it? Infinite space and infinite time?” “Only when I can’t find my keys. It helps me not be so hard on myself.” “Some say there are an infinite number of universes.” “Maybe. But *our* universe is the most important. Why else would all the big-name celebrities choose to live here?” Mickey took a hit. After exhaling, he said, “An infinite number of universes. Think of it, dude.” Just then, a car shot out from a parking space, cutting right in front of the jeep. Mickey stood up (the jeep had no roof) and, giving the driver the finger, yelled, “Fuck you, asshole dude!” I preferred Mickey not make his feelings so clear, saying, “It wouldn’t be a shocker if that guy took out a gun and shot us, the world being the way it is.” Someone in the car yelled, “Go fuck yourself!” and then the car sped away. Mickey yelled, “*You* go fuck yourself!” I said to myself, “Oh how

nice. They're wishing each other a pleasurable experience... I admire their rising above their disagreement to tell each other to go enjoy themselves. It takes great men. 'Go fuck yourself.' 'Don't mind if I do. Thank you very much.'" After Mickey settled back down, I said, referring to the idea of an infinite number of universes, "I prefer not to think about the possibility of an infinite number of schmucks like that... Of course, being alive on this planet, it's hard not to." After Mickey took a couple of hits, he said, "They say the Earth is moving closer and closer to the sun and will eventually be swallowed up by the glowing orb." "Don't worry; they'll have a lotion for that by then." "And then, even further into the future, they say the expansion of the universe will eventually become a contraction until all matter is once again crunched into a ball tinier than the head of a needle." "They'll have a lotion for that as well." I stopped at a red light. A man carrying the windshield of a motor scooter walked in front of the car. I said, "He's walking so fast he needs a windshield." Mickey laughed hysterically. A man carrying a twin mattress walked in front of the car. I said, "That takes laziness to a whole new level. When you can't leave home without your mattress." Another wave of hysterical laughter. I shook my head. The light turned green. Fifteen minutes later, I parked in front of Mickey's building, with Mickey still giggling his stoner giggle over both the windshield and mattress lines. I thanked Mickey for the ride, jumped out, and began walking away. Mickey controlled his giggling long enough to say, "No problem... And dude, if you ever feel suicidal again, come to me; I would like to help." "Got it. If I ever want to end my life, I'll be sure to ask you for assistance." "Or call a suicide

hotline.” “Good idea; they might have some suggestions.” “I called a suicide hotline once... Of course, I had *meant* to call a *sex* hotline. Didn’t realize my mistake until twenty minutes into the conversation.” A few seconds later, Mickey called out, “Remember: suicide is a temporary solution to a permanent problem!... *I mean*: suicide is a permanent solution to a permanent problem!... *I mean*: suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary problem!” I gave a thumbs-up, and yelled, “Got it! Thanks!” A half block later, I said to myself, “Life is a temporary solution to a permanent problem.” And then I woke up. My parents had returned from a party. It was a little after midnight. The window was open, and so I could hear that familiar, ever-present hum of the city that I looked forward to being a part of someday.

As there’s bacteria at the center of an asteroid with more of a social life than I had had since the seventh grade, my parents told me, midway through my freshman year, that they wanted me to see a psychiatrist. They were concerned. I resisted at first, saying that it wasn’t necessary, but, not liking the fact that they were worrying, finally agreed to go. I wouldn’t bore you with the details of the psychiatrist’s conclusion (even if I *could* remember them); the very bottom line was that my “school” (its method, its mission, its values) was very much the wrong one for me. I should switch schools. However, choosing the devil I was familiar with over (what in *my* mind was) the one I wasn’t, *and* (among *other* reasons) knowing that Green knew people in other schools and would find it amusing to spark something wherever I would go, I argued strongly against it (saying that it wasn’t that bad, and that things would get better, and that I *really* didn’t want to do it), and

my parents relented. But then, a few weeks after the start of my senior year, my parents again brought up my seeing a psychiatrist. And again I resisted, this time saying that it not only wasn't necessary, but that, with college around the corner (yes, I was still planning on going to college), I was certain my social life (*and* my grades) were about to change for the better. And so, they dropped it.

That night, I dreamt that I, in fact, *hadn't* resisted—that I had, in fact, agreed to see a psychiatrist once again: At some point during the session, the psychiatrist says, “Okay we’re going to do a Rorschach test. I’m going to show you these inkblots one at a time. I want you to describe to me what you immediately see in each one—what you would say each image resembles.” “Okay, ready?” “Yeah.” “[*first one*] A woman’s vagina... [*second one*] A woman’s vagina... [*third one*] A woman’s vagina... [*fourth one*] A woman’s vagina... [*fifth one*] Two waiters with perfect posture holding trays while standing at opposite ends of a table, each of them wearing a high-collar and vest and...no, wait—just a woman’s vagina... [*sixth one*] A woman’s vagina... [*seventh one*] A woman’s vagina... [*eighth one*] A woman’s vagina... [*ninth one*] A woman’s vagina... [*tenth one*] A woman’s vagina.” “Ten inkblots, ten women’s vaginas.” “What can I say? It’s not surprising; the first time I saw a close-up of a woman’s vagina, I thought I was looking at a Rorschach test. I saw two butterflies kissing... *Okay, okay*, let’s do it again... [*first one*] Uuuuum, a butterfly... [*second one*] Uuuuum, two butterflies kissing... [*third one*] Uuuuum, a sunrise... [*fourth one*] Uuuuum, a sunset... [*fifth one*] Uuuuum, a lotus flower floating on a rippling pond... [*sixth*



*one]* Uuum, an orchid flower... *[seventh one]* Uuum, a conch shell... *[eighth one]* Uuum, the Aurora Borealis... *[ninth one]* Uuum, the Big Bang... *[tenth one]* Uuum, Tallulah Bankhead playing the piano.” “[*tilting his head forward and looking at me from over the top of his glasses*] Tallulah Bankhead.” “Hey, don’t ask *me*. I’m as surprised as you ‘cause I don’t even know what Tallulah Bankhead looks like. Or if she played the piano... [*lifting my shoulders, hands upturned*] What can I say?” “[*removing his glasses and rubbing his eye with the back of his hand*] Well, we’ll have to leave it there... [*under his breath*] It’s time for lunch.”

*Another DENSE?*

In November of my senior year, I took my second shot at the Scholastic Aptitude Test.

Getting dressed that morning, I said to myself, ““S.A.T.”: sounds like something a proctologist says who doesn’t want to scare his or her patient (“Nurse, get the gel. I’m gonna have to perform an S.A.T.” “Oh dear God.”)”

On my way over to the testing location I tried to make myself less worried by convincing myself I wasn’t about to take a *Scholastic* Aptitude Test but a *Fantastic* Aptitude Test. A really terrific one!

It didn’t work.

I said to myself, “It’s the cycle of existence: you come into this universe, you take the S.A.T., you go out. It’s that simple.”

I arrived at the testing location early. I sat on the stoop and opened my vocabulary book. “*Limpid: Clear*. Limpid: Clear. Limpid: Clear. Limpid: Clear. Limpid: Clear. Limpid: Clear. Limpid: Clear. Limpid: Clear. Limpid: Clear. Limpid: Clear. Limpid: Clear. Limpid: Clear. Limpid: Clear. Limpid: Clear. Limpid: Clear. Limpid: Clear. Limpid: Clear. Limpid: Clear. Limpid: Clear...” Two minutes later, I was almost in a trance—“limpid clear” acting as a mantra. After another minute, I snapped out of it and said to myself, imitating the voice of a stereotypical infomercial salesman, “Hi folks. Are unsightly limpids a problem? Well, not anymore with the patented formula in *Limpid-Clear*. Just add a bit to each limpid and watch them disappear. Add a healthier amount and your skin will immediately look as young as possible. That’s right: just add gobs of the stuff and your skin will look as slimy as a just born baby. You can’t get much younger than that! Hear your relatives, your classmates, and your co-workers say, ‘Wow, Russ, you look so young. It’s as if you just passed through your mother’s cervix.’ All for only \$9.99 plus \$8.98 plus \$7.97. So why wait? Call the toll-free number at the bottom of the screen and order your tube of *Limpid-Clear* right now... Not to be used by anyone who drinks water or sleeps.”

I chose another word. “*Perspicacious: Insightful*. You mean it doesn’t mean moisture that collects at the end of a cactus needle? Okay, if you say so... Perspicacious: Insightful. Perspicacious: Insightful. Perspicacious: Insightful. Perspicacious: Insightful. Perspicacious: Insightful. Perspicacious: Insightful. Perspicacious: Insightful. Perspicacious: Insightful...” Minutes later, my head knocked against the cement baluster. I had fallen

asleep. The test was close to starting. I ran inside, took my seat, and removed my number two pencil.

I wrote my name in the blank and hoped I got that one right.

Looking at my number two pencil, bite marks and all, I said to myself, “I wonder if there's a rivalry between the workers who make number two pencils and the ones who make number threes? I wonder if they meet every Saturday afternoon to battle it out on the softball field? I wonder if, when the workers who make number two pencils win, they yell: ‘Number two is number one!’? And if the workers who make number three pencils taunt the other team by telling them they're grown men who make number two all day with their pants on?”

I looked around at the other test-takers, each of whom I was convinced was gonna find this thing to be a piece of cake, and then at the monitor, who checked his watch. I said to myself, “I do my best thinking in the shower and when driving. If I had a convertible and could take this thing while driving, I could drive around in the rain and maybe *ace* this sucker.”

As I waited for the start of the darn thing, I imagined dealing with the first question, “*Jimmy had two pies before he gave one to Martha, how many does he have now?* How the fuck do I know? Maybe he ate the one he had left over. Or maybe he gave it to Cindy. Or maybe Cindy stole it. Maybe she has a tendency to do that. Or maybe he lost it. And maybe, once word got around the neighborhood that Jimmy had lost his pie (nobody wants a pie-less Jimmy running around the neighborhood (there could be repercussions (pies are important to Jimmy (God forbid

he would move on to the harder stuff: crack, heroin, etc.), everyone chipped in and bought him *eight more* pies. Let's see if that could be the case... *A-ha!* 8 is choice letter "D", so "D" it is... Unless of course, Martha's recently divorced mom offered Jimmy two pies to clean her pool naked, in which case the answer is "B"... "B" or "D", "B" or "D", "B" or "D"... What ever happened to the *Bee Gees*?" I sing, "*How deep is your love? How deep is your love? How deep is your love?... How deep is your love? How deep is your love? How deep is your love?*" I suddenly thought *that* was the question I was supposed to answer. "How deep is my love? We covered that in class?... Er, um, x squared divided by 3.64..." I check the time. "*Shit*, five minutes have gone by. This test is *hard*." I move on to the next question: *Is what you are sitting in, a chair, a desk, or, if one were sitting there having lunch, a table?*

The monitor announced the beginning of the test. I turned it over. To help me not take the test so seriously, I pretended I was a contestant on a Mexican game show called *The S.A.T.*. It slowed me down considerably having to wait for the women in bikinis, the midgets dressed like clowns, the toothless old man dressed in an oversized tuxedo, and the audience to stop celebrating with music and dance every time I answered a question.

I decided to try a new approach. It occurred to me that if I pretended to be someone calm, decisive, and self-assured, I might become just that. Jimmy Stewart came to mind. A minute later, I said to myself, "Well I, I, I think the correct answer is "A"... On the other hand, I, I, I suppose it could be "B" ... Now, now, now don't rush me. I, I, I, I'm almost there." Unfortunately, I had

become the *agitated, indecisive, unsure of himself* Jimmy Stewart. And three minutes after that, I became the *giddy, “I don’t give a shit about anything anymore”, life-of-the-party* down at Martini’s Jimmy Stewart. Three minutes after that, I became the *disheveled, wild-eyed, pulling at his bottom lip with the back of his hand, ready to jump off a bridge after hitting rock bottom* Jimmy Stewart. A minute after that, not having a guardian angel named Clarence to save me from jumping off a bridge, I did: I began to nonchalantly skim over the rest of the test, allowing no more than several seconds to read and come up with a guess for each question.

I finished the last section as I had all of the sections (after that first one): *way* before anyone else.

And, as I had after “finishing” each of the previous sections, I lay the pencil down, turned the test over, sat straight up in my chair, rested my hands on my lap, fingers interlaced, glanced at the clock, closed my eyes, and, with deep, slow breaths, my mind virtually blank, waited (in this case) to be dismissed. After several minutes, I slumped onto the desk (resting my head, my arms as pillows), fell asleep, and had a dream—a dream in which I was deep in the Amazon attempting to haul a gigantic, thirty-foot mustache through two hundred miles of jungle—the mustache to be a place for people from all over the world to come and make gnocchi. At one point, with the rain heavy now, the rope broke and the mustache slid down a hill into the river. I pounded the mud and yelled, “*Damn it, why does everything have to be so difficult?!*”

*This Isn't a Diploma Under My Gown;  
It's Just That I'm Happy to See You*

Upon being dismissed, I left the room and began to walk very slowly down the hall with my hands in my pockets, the other test-takers passing me—some chatting, a few laughing, everyone moving faster than me. I was certain my scholastic aptitude would be placed somewhere between a rock and a tree stump. I said to myself, “Oh well, there’s always blackmail.” And I imagined writing the following letter:

*Dear College,*

*This letter shall serve as a warning of my intention to take legal action against your institution for its discriminatory admissions policy. My grievances are twofold: First, you*

*accept only worthy students. Second, you refuse to accept unworthy students. Applicants with poor scholastic records such as myself are rejected for no good reason at all. I mean, so what if we're the type of students who refuse to take our midterms on the grounds that our professors are clearly asking questions they already know the answers to. And so what if our only extra-curricular activity for the past four years had been masturbation and suicide. (Hell, I had even tried to commit suicide via masturbation. It's amazing I'm still alive, frankly.) And so what if our idea of higher learning is wishing we could hire someone to do our homework. Did you ever stop to consider that perhaps we are not trying to live up to our potential only because it is far too great? We could only be disappointed.*

*Anyway, I could go on and on. Just be warned that I am prepared to attain the legal services of the famed Schwartz brothers. Otherwise known as the "Four Schwartzes". Not to be mistaken for the famous Motown singing group "The Four Tops" (although the Schwartz brothers have been known to play a rousing Klezmer rendition of the Motown hit*



*“You Are the Sunshine of My Life” at weddings). There is only one way a lawsuit can be averted, college. You know what it is.*

*You have one week to reply.*

*Sincerely,  
Lucas Stone*

I left the building and began to meander home. I said to myself, “Or perhaps I can trick them into thinking I was the valedictorian.” I imagined videotaping myself “giving the valedictory address”: I’m behind a podium in cap and gown. “Trustees, alumni, faculty, fellow students, family, and friends: Each of us is unique. Like fingerprints. For one, we each have epidermal ridges at the end of our fingertips that are unlike anyone else’s... We must always look towards the future. Also, we must live in the present. Also, we must never forget the past. *What the...?!...* Two of our previous speakers have said that today is about tomorrow. If that’s the case, why aren’t we having this ceremony tomorrow?... And what’s so special about tomorrow? Tomorrow’s just laundry day for me... It’s important to keep my clothes clean but I don’t think the effort deserves all of *this...* Be that as it may.” I pause to swig some water.

I thought about what to say to my parents on the day I receive my score: “I don’t know what to say. Thirty minutes into the test something happened to my brain wherein if doctors were to have taken an MRI of it they would have seen the image of a

chimpanzee on a unicycle juggling tampons.” Or: “It was the Earth. It was spinning. It made me dizzy.” Or: “I’ve *always* had a problem taking tests. I was even stumped by the question: *After visiting the moon, the astronauts returned safely to:* A) Earth B) sender C) their bad habits D) a life of crime.” Or: “I had an attack of performance anxiety and tried to calm myself by imagining a woman’s voice whispering into my ear: ‘It happens to everybody. Just relax. Relaxssssssssss.’ But then I became so aroused that I couldn’t concentrate.” Or: “The problem is that I think the answer to almost *every* question (whether on a test or not) is ‘none of the above.’” Or: “Don’t worry. I have a plan. I will put an end to the competition between God and the Devil (‘I don’t care *who* started it! You’re *both* grounded! Now go to your rooms!’), and then sell my story to Hollywood.” [*a taxi pulled over to pick up two women and a guy*] “... And if that doesn’t pan out, I’ll be a cabdriver. I mean, *hell*, women seem to go crazy over them: whistling at them, chasing them, screaming... Not to mention that it must be *so* heartwarming to have people constantly waving to you as you go by.” [*two girls passed me, both clearly happy with how the test had gone, one wearing a T-shirt that said “Papua New Guinea”*] “... And, of course, if *that* doesn’t pan out, there’s always the possibility of joining a tribe deep in the heart of New Guinea. Have shelter, plenty of food. Keep my penis well protected in a hollowed-out gourd. *Always a plus!*... *Provided*, of course, they don’t get wind of my S.A.T. score and tell me to get lost.” [*an RV pulled over not far from me*] “... If so, I’ll come back to the States and become a perpetual hitchhiker. Wherever the driver is going, that’s where I’ll go to pick up another ride.” I imagined myself in

the front passenger seat of a van heading down a highway cutting through pine-tree-covered hills under a clear, blue sky, snow-capped mountains in the far distance: We're behind a camper pulling, no more than three feet behind it, an old Saab. I say, "Man, whoever's driving that Saab should be pulled over for *tailgating*." The driver doesn't react. To myself, "Nothin'?" The driver says, "So, what's your plan for the future?" "My plan for the future is to live in the present." I add, "Right now, I'm living in the present." I further add, "I regret that I didn't live more in the present in the past." "Yeah. It's not easy to live in the present." "Ah, it's easy," I say, rejecting the idea with a wave of the hand. Then, "Damn! This exit doesn't have a bathroom! I wonder if the next one will? I should have asked you to pull over at the previous one." [*a flyer on a streetlight read "REVOLUTION!"*] "... If I ever get tired of hitchhiking, they say there's gonna be a revolution, with all this trickle-down bullshit. So I'll just buy stock in pitchforks and make a fortune." [*a man in a convertible Mercedes stopped at a red light*] "... And of course, if all else fails I'll just marry a rich, heterosexual man." [*a couple of girls my age raced past me from behind, laughing and yelling*] "... Until then, I'll make money as a babysitter. My flyer will say: *Horny, neurotic eighteen-year-old, male virgin available to babysit your eighteen-year-old daughter. Reasonable rate.*"

From behind me and far away, I heard that all-too-familiar sound: "pucas". I said to myself, "Oh great. What a gem this day is, huh? Just *dandy*." I looked over my shoulder and saw a bus heading down Columbus Avenue with the heads of Green, Ackers, and Kirkpatrick extending out of a window like fungus on

a log. They were all looking right at me with smiles. “Pucuuuus! Mucuuuus! Puke!” And then all together in a fast rhythm as the bus and their voices receded into the distance: “Puke! Puke! Puke! Puke! Puke! Puke! Puke! Puke! Puke!...” I said to myself, “What wonderful people they are. I mean truly. Just a great buncha guys. Thanks so much for being a part of my life. Really appreciate it.” I imagined that conversation I might have with someone in the future: “You didn’t have *one* friend?” “If you knew the cast of characters I had to spend the better part of each and every school-day with, you wouldn’t be surprised.” “Not *one*?” “No.” “Why do you think your classmates tormented you?” I wave the question away while making a fart sound with my lips, and then: “Who cares? I’m just glad high school ended and with it “pucas”... My whole experience in school taught me a valuable lesson.” “What’s that?” “The alphabet... There are other lessons—the times table, et cetera—but I don’t want to bore you with them... Anyway, who knows, maybe someday I’ll write an illustrated novella entitled *The Little Prick* that’ll become beloved the world over... About how *in fact*, sadly, far too many young people *don’t* change as they become adults... Maybe I’ll make the little prick become president.”

About a half-block later, at the corner, waiting for the light to change, I looked at a newborn in a cradle that reminded me of me when I was that age. I think it was the way it was just lying there with no motor skills whatsoever. I said to myself what I usually say to myself when I see a baby: “Welcome aboard! The more the merrier!” I couldn’t help but wonder if that baby was gonna end up being one of the good ones or one of the lifelong-

stupid-twelve-year-olds. As I crossed the street upon the light changing, I said to myself, “Odds are the latter...considering the percentage of human beings on this planet who are lifelong-stupid-twelve-year-olds... According to the latest Gallup poll: *fifty-seven percent*... That’s right; regardless of formal education, wealth, race, nationality, religion, etc., fifty-seven percent of human beings are lifelong-stupid-twelve-year-olds... Which is to say: incapable of doing the right thing...of truly *Caring*... Which is *frightening*, considering the fact that all of humanity can be erased from existence in less time than it takes to air an episode of *Saved By the Bell*.” I thought of racism, nationalism, religious extremism, etc., and of conformism generally. Eventually, I said to myself (as I watched a line of adorable grade-schoolers appear from around the corner, led by a teacher, the whole lot of ‘em yappin away), “The problem is people need to be part of a powerful tribe, more powerful than the other tribes (ideally the *most powerful* tribe on the planet (in the *multiverse*, if it ever comes to that)), or, at the very least, have power over just one other person, and if not that, at least an animal, in order to escape the feeling of being insignificant and lost within the infiniteness of time and space. They embrace tribalism (racism, chauvinism, nationalism, etc. (to one degree or another)) in an effort to feel “powerful” (less powerless (*not* to feel lost, insignificant, alone, etc. within infinite time and space)) by losing themselves in something “bigger” (a clique, a community, a nation, a race, etc.). They seek a sense of self-worth through that identity (an identity without which they would feel lost, disoriented, adrift, and thus powerless, and thus panicked).” I jogged across the street, as the light was about to

change, and then said to myself, “*A-ha*—a new theory! To go along with the Womb Fantasy. “*Testicle Fantasy*”. The desire to feel one of a seemingly endless number of similar others—the desire to feel part of something “big”—the urge to feel as one did when in the testicle—when part of a group 8-billion strong.” I thought of that black-and-white footage of that Nazi rally back in the 1930’s—and of stadium rallies in general—and said to myself, “Yes sir, the ultimate for those idiots... It must be an orgasmic experience for ‘em... No pun intended... Yeah, it’s like they’re in one giant cojón. I’m sure they could almost *feel* the seminal fluid.” After a few more strides, I said to myself, “I don’t know, maybe trying to figure out why these people are the way they are is a waste of time and energy. *They’re shitty people! End of story!*... We just have to hope there are enough *not* shitty people to keep them at bay...while (because it’s a nice thought) we imagine that in some parallel universe those shitty people don’t exist... Oh to live there!... On the other hand, I hear it’s all parallel parking there, so...that would be a bit of a drag.”

*[I passed a Japanese restaurant that had opened in the neighborhood a few months earlier]* I continued: “Or I could go to Tokyo. Spend the rest of my life in a “room” in one of those capsule hotels, never leaving save for my meals in a restaurant across the street.” I imagined being there: It’s ten o’clock at night. I’m watching sumo wrestling. I put my hand under my head and say, “It doesn’t get any better than this.” I imagined I’m at my high school’s twenty-fifth reunion. Everyone talks about their families (their wives and husbands and children), their houses, their careers, et cetera. When they ask about me, I say, “I’m living in a

capsule in Tokyo. And I just *love* it! Lying there in my little fiberglass cocoon watching Japanese soap operas and game shows.” They look at me quizzically while nodding. “Oh great. Good for you... Do you speak Japanese?” “No. Not a word.” I remembered having had dinner at the restaurant a couple of weeks earlier with my parents. My mother, an extremely finicky and squeamish eater, was served a whole shrimp and refused to eat it because, as she said, “I can’t eat something that’s looking up at me.” I said to my father, “She can only eat something that’s looking down on her. I think it has to do with a lack of self-esteem.” She told me about the first time she had ever had Japanese food. She said she was served “a giant fish, whole”. My father and I pictured the anus of a fish. I said, “A giant fish hole?!” And we all laughed. I said, “Actually, it was just a giant, empty plate... A big plate of fish-scented nothingness... A teriyaki-flavored dish into which one can get sucked and vanish forever... A void accompanied by wasabi and ginger... Anti-matter eaten with chopsticks... It’s like a mouthful of outer space with just a hint of the ocean... It costs zero... It’s a beautifully garnished zero. *Somebody slap me. I can’t stop.*”

— — —

Nobody was home when I arrived. I flopped down on my bed, fell into a deep sleep, and dreamt I was walking up the stairs in some old house. Halfway up, I saw a pair of eyes looking at me through a crack in the step. A raspy, breathy voice said, the words

drawn out, “I liiiive under the staaaairs.” I said, as I continued up, “Who gives a shit? What do you want, a fuckin medal?”

Over an hour later, a car alarm woke me up. I got up, closed the window, sat on the edge of the bed, and let myself cry.

After watching several tears fall onto the carpet, I decided to go to the show at the planetarium—wanting, as I did, some help in feeling like I was far away.



## Part Three

### *I Don't Want to Lose My Tan*

There was time to kill before the start of the show. I killed it in the Hall of Human Origins. There, I got another look at that female *Australopithecus africanus*. Although I found myself no longer lusting after *her* so much, the female in the *Homo ergaster* diorama was *another* story. I said to myself, as she and a male kept vultures and jackals away from a dead impala while keeping a lookout for big cats, “Maybe I’m evolving.” I liked how she looked like she could show me what’s what, if she had to. I stood there for a long time, staring at that scene—staring at *her*, and thinking about how scary to be on the ground there, no trees nearby, vulnerable to lion or leopard attack, a rock the only

weapon. Before I knew it, it was time to head over to the planetarium.

Before exiting the Hall, I once again passed the replica of the 3.6-million-year-old footprints, and heard a father say to his young daughters and son “those 3.6-million-year-old footprints prove once and for all that our ancestors became bipedal prior to their brains having become enlarged”. I said to myself, “Thus finally answering why speed-walking looks so stupid... Also, they prove once and for all that our apelike ancestors didn’t wear shoes... Polka-dotted bonnets and lace tutus, however, are still a question mark... But definitely not shoes... They ran around barefoot... Barefoot and pregnant, just how I like ‘em... Also, they prove that they didn’t tap-dance through life... Or levitate... *That* could be crossed off the list... Along with pogo sticks... Also, they prove that even 3.6 million years ago there was always some selfish idiot who couldn’t resist vandalizing some “freshly laid” cement-like material... The big debate now within the archaeological community is whether those footprints were made by someone who was coming or going... If you ask me, I would say “going”, but that would just be a guess... If archaeologists were to discover a 3.6-million-year-old walk of fame like the one outside Grauman’s Chinese Theatre in Hollywood, imagine how excited they would be... *Particularly* if they had both a foot fetish and liked older women and/or men. ‘How can you walk away at a time like this, Louis?! We’ve waited our whole *lives* for this!’ ‘I need a cold shower.’... My only concern is that the handprints would throw archaeologists off: ‘Did they walk on their hands? Or were they just showing off?... Or did they simply have feet that

looked like hands and hands that looked like feet?... If the last, did they call their feet “hands” and their hands “feet”?... And how could they have dribbled a soccer ball while playing the guitar? Wouldn’t that have been impossible?... It’s the same concern I have over archaeologists 3.6 million years from now finding a piece of cement in the area of what today is Hollywood, and thinking ‘this Lou Costello fella was no doubt a man of great power and prestige... Probably their leader’. ‘And not only that, but apparently he was quite a gymnast... Unless, of course, they simply had feet that looked like hands and hands that looked like feet... If that’s the case, did they play the piano upside down?’... Come to think of it, I think archaeologists millions of years from now will have it difficult if they find fossilized “footprints” from the late twentieth century onwards, pretty much no matter where they find them. They could only draw conclusions based on what they know of brands. ‘As you can see, this individual wore Adidas, which of course tells us everything.’... ‘A-ha! This individual wore Prada! It makes perfect sense!’... ‘Bingo! This individual wore Birkenstock! My theory is correct!’... I don’t know how a sneaker company hasn’t used that idea for an ad campaign: An archaeologist moves aside some tall grass and sees the imprint of the sole of a sneaker in some cemented volcanic ash and says, ‘A-ha, so *that’s* how we avoided extinction.’ ‘Adidas, wear them or disappear off the face of the Earth...forever.’ *‘In many different styles so as to not avoid distinction while avoiding extinction.’*

Happily, there *were*, in fact, far less people to see the show than I had ever experienced. I took my seat, leaned back, used my jacket as a pillow, and waited for the show to begin. By

the time it did, I was halfway to having fallen asleep again. A few minutes in, the Earth now the size of a sesame seed directly above me, I fell asleep and had a dream: I was in the Great Rift Valley, some two million years ago. I was standing on a long, wide limb of a very tall tree, a couple of erupting volcanoes off in the distance, a large brown vulture standing on a branch near the very top of one of the tree's neighbors. I was naked, my body densely covered with thick, inch-long, dark-brown hair. My hands and feet looked more like those of an ape. I was an adult male *Homo habilis*, the only one out of the 233, 401 on Earth who was refusing to spend a significant amount of time on the ground rather than in the trees. In fact, I was refusing to come down from the trees even for a *second*. Down below, on the ground, an adult male *Homo habilis* was standing there looking up at me. And he was determined to convince me to join everyone in taking some chances. He said, "You're gonna attract predators to this tree with all these rejected figs on the ground, Lucas! You should come down here and clean all this up!"

I said, "Nice try!"

He said, "It's *ironic*—your drawing attention to this tree with all these rejected figs! I mean, you might as well put a sign right here with the word "snack" on it and an arrow pointing up!"

I said, "Ha-ha, funny!"

"Not to mention *baboons* that might want to take over this tree, thus forcing you onto the ground!"

"*First* of all, if a cat tries somethin, *anything*, I'll hear 'em and simply move higher up! *Second* of all, if *baboons* try somethin, *anything*, I'll toot this air horn right here! *Phlaanp!!!* It

scares the *crap* out of ‘em! As it did that flock of yellow-bellied hyliota, that mole-rat, that gazelle, and—what is that; I can’t see...oh, a dik-dik.”

“It’s an unfortunate thing when something named a dik-dik is easily frightened... But, it happens... *Damn it*... But that’s a conversation for another day.”

“So you see, regarding those fig-rejects, I have nothing to worry about! Nothing at all!”

“Still, it’s ironic!”

“Glad I amuse you!”

“I’m not amused! I’m *sad*! Sad that you spend all of your time in that tree! Sad over how much you’re missing! Sad that, for instance, you’re not experiencing the pleasure of standing on the ground, completely upright, feet (no hands) planted firmly on the dirt, totally erect, as if you had just popped a blue pill to correct some sort of evolutionary dysfunction! One of life’s great pleasures!”

“*Again*, nice try!”

“It’s for *your* sake that I try!”

“I don’t care *whose* sake it’s for! You’re oversteppin your *bounds*!”

“I couldn’t *help* it! It’s such a disturbing and pitiful sight to *behold*, that I had to *try*!”

“Oh *really*! You think so, *huh*?!”

“Yeah! I *do*!”

“Yeah?!”

“Yeah!”

“Yeah?!”

“Yeah!”

“Yeah?!”

“Yeah!”

“Why *should* I get down from this tree?! Why *should* I?! So that well over two million years from now people can be doing *stand-up*?! Sorry, but I think the same jokes delivered by a *knuckle-walker* would *still* be funny!”

“Humankind has come down from the *trees*!”

“*Big deal!* Call me when humankind has come out of the *closet!* Or has gone whole-*hog!* Or has exited stage *left!* Or any number of *other* things! But “*down from the trees*”?! Please, you’re just wasting my *time!*”

“Humankind coming down from the trees was progress!”

““Human-*unkind*” is more like it!”

“Your fear of being killed and eaten by lions is a *phobia!*”

“How can you call my not wanting to be a meal for a large cat (however much I *do* hate to see *any* animal go hungry) a *phobia*?!”

“Like *this: it’s a phobia!* And the only *phobia* any of us should have is a *phobia* of *phobias!*”

“Thank you, Franklin Delano Mraagh-Mraagh, I’ll make a note of that!”

“The chances of your being eaten are relatively low!”

“Yeah, relative to a Thomson’s gazelle ‘cause *those* suckers are goin down right and *left!*”

“That’s an exaggeration!”

“Oh yeah?! Then why are they all a buncha nervous wrecks?! Have you ever seen one that can’t stop twitching?! The

least little sound or smell makes them tense up like the general exam just became all too specific, if ya know what I mean! Just last night, Humapkikakl came back from an expedition saying the Thomson's were full of tics!"

"Ticks, Lucas! As in the *insect*! Not "tics" as in..."

He mimicked a facial tic.

"Oh... You do that well, by the way."

"I'm not unfamiliar with facial tics."

"Nor am I... Well, nevertheless you get my point!"

"Yeah, that you have a *phobia*!"

"It's a reasonable concern!"

"It's a matter of *degree*, Lucas! And there's absolutely *no* reason for you to fear being killed and eaten by lions to this extent!"

"Oh yeah?! How 'bout *this*?! I'm not *suited* for it! I don't have the right *temperament*! The right *personality*! For being killed and eaten by lions! I would fail *miserably* at it! The whole thing would just be a bad experience for *everybody*—for the lion, for me, and for anybody watching! The judges would give me a 5.5 at the most!"

"You're letting your fear keep you from following your dreams!"

"What are you talking about?! I *am* following my dreams! It's a recurring one in which my fear keeps me from following my dreams!"

"Life is passing you by!"

"Because it's being chased by death!"

"It's tragic to let life pass you by!"

“I’m not letting it pass me by; it’s just not stopping!”

“You might have a hidden talent! A knack for doing something that might be appreciated by the rest of the clan! You should be discovering it and using it!”

“I’ve *already* discovered it! And even as we speak, I’m using it! It’s a talent for not tempting fate! I’m thinking about going onto *America’s Got Talent* with it! I think I can win! I’m even thinking about selling a boxed set of ten CDs teaching people how to give into their fears! Just give into it! Tap into the force! Simply put, just *do* it! Hey, that would make for a great slogan! Somebody write that down!”

“There’s work to be done, Lucas! You should be working!”

“I *am* working! I’m working to ensure that at least one of us is around to pass on our genes!”

“We don’t *need* you to do that! What we *need* are as many groomers as possible! For instance, look at Zrashayeee-eee; she’s searching for a groomer right this very second! It’s a perfect opportunity for you, Lucas!”

“*First* of all, Zrashayeee-eee already *has* a groomer! She has Plagwazum!...”

“They split up several days ago!”

I pretend I didn’t hear him say that Zrashayeee-eee and Plagwazum broke up, but it gives me hope that she and I could get together. I like Zrashayeee-eee very much. There’s something about her that I had always found very appealing. However, right then and there, I don’t feel comfortable communicating with her.



I continued, "... They've been inseparable ever since they met at the speed-date night to raise money for the slow-food movement! Where he is at this moment that Zrashayeee-eee needs him, who the hell knows?! Perhaps he tripped over a hippo, stumbled onto a good idea, tripped again trying to get over a bad experience, and fell! At which point, he felt like he was hitting his head against a wall! Which he wasn't; it was a boulder! *Second* of all, looking around I see absolutely no shortage of fingers for grooming! *Third* of all, I *tried* grooming! I hated it! No one ever left a tip! Only an offer to reciprocate! What the hell is *that*?! I wanted *money* not the same service I had just provided done to me *in return*! I mean for cryin out loud, after a meal at a restaurant you don't say to the waiter, 'Okay now I'll serve you'! Or you don't tell a bellhop after he or she just lugged your bags into your room, 'I don't have any money on me but if you turn around, I'll see if you have any fleas on your back'! Even a porn star improvising the start of a scene wouldn't say *that*!... Or let me say *this*: *that* would be *one* scene I would *pass* on!... *Probably*... Maybe... [*under my breath*] *Probably* not... *Nevertheless*, you get my point!"

"Come down then!"

"No!"

"Grooming is a *good* job! A *respectable* job! [*under his breath*] Listen to me. I'm turning into a cliché... Grooming is important, Lucas! It creates bonds, promotes well-being, and keeps us all strong and healthy!"

"What are you—a box of herbal tea?!"

"It's true what I say!"

“But it’s disgusting picking through someone’s hair like that! I don’t know where that hair has been! Its owner could have been rolling around in zebra manure for all I know! (Actually, that was a bad example since I love the smell of zebra manure. That stuff should be bottled. Rolled into balls by hand and advertised as handmade. ‘Oh, it’s handmade. Well in *that* case...’)... Where was I? Oh yeah: *Hell*, they could have been rolling around in their *own* manure! No thank you! I prefer my *current* job! That of trying to prove my theory (however outlandish) that being where lions can’t get you means that lions can’t get you!”

“You’re living in a prison! What’s so great about living that it’s worth hardly living at all in order to keep living?!”

“Shall I make a list?!”

“It’s an absurdity!”

“You know what’s an absurdity?! I’ll tell you what’s an absurdity! Being down there where there are lions! *That’s* an absurdity! I refuse to be so absurd! For what?! For the sake of evolution?! For the sake of the advancement of the genus Homo?! So that, according to Psychic Wikipedia, human beings two million years from now can sit in their gas guzzlers sipping Slurpees from dual-chambered cups?! Which, if you’re not familiar, use a plastic double straw with a switchable valve, thus allowing them to drink either of the flavors alone or both flavors simultaneously! For *that*, I should get down from this tree?! So that people two million years from now can partake of such a thing?! *While*, I might add, reading the latest celebrity gossip?! And *prior*, I might *further* add, to lighting up a cigarette and transporting what had been a long, surprisingly low-pitched, meal-

ending fart all the way home for the watching of a crime-drama re-run while eating a box of RingDings?! Is *that* why I'm supposed to get down from this tree?! *Sorry but no!*"

"No, that's *not* why!"

"No?! Hm, then it *must* be that I'm supposed to get down from this tree in order to get close to death in order to remind myself that I'm alive! Sorry but I'm not one of those people! I'm not one of those people who need to take risks in order to get close to death in order to remind themselves that they're alive! I don't need to go to the ends of the Earth to jump off a thousand-foot cliff in footie pajamas to remind myself that I'm alive! A simple Post-it note would do! A simple pinching and twisting of one of my own nipples does the trick just fine thank you very much! 'The reason I like to jump off thousand-foot cliffs wearing just this is that being so close to death reminds me that I'm alive.' You couldn't just look in the mirror and wave?! And how is it that you need reminding anyway?! That takes forgetfulness to a whole nother level! When you even need to be reminded that you're alive! I mean, I can be forgetful sometimes but never *that* forgetful! 'By the way, just as a reminder, you're alive.' 'I am?! Oh yeah, I am. Thanks for reminding me. It had completely escaped my mind. For the last ten minutes, I had completely forgotten that I won't live forever and that I could die at any moment. I had just completely forgotten.' *How do you completely forget that?!* How do you completely forget that life is temporary and fragile?! I never forget that for a second! "Fragile. Handle with care"—it's written right there between the tracking number and the Amazon logo! In fact,

that would be a great name for my boxed set of ten CDs—“Fragile Handle With Care”!”

“*First* of all, Lucas: Slurpees, double straws with a switchable valve, and a popularity of crime dramas are *definitely* symptoms of a dysfunctional society, *yes*, but that’s not a reason not to come down from that tree!...”

“Well I beg to differ!”

“... For instance, while apparently there will be a whole hell of a lotta stupid crap two million years from now, there apparently will be plenty of things that are...well, the *opposite* of all that stupid crap! Good reasons all of them to get down from that tree! To contribute to the evolution of human beings so that these things might exist two million years from now! And *second* of all, regarding why we came down from the trees: We came down from the *trees* to get the hell down from the *trees*! So as not to live as *monkeys*!”

“Hey, don’t knock monkeys! Those guys really know how to have a good time! Word has it they can even have fun in a barrel! I find that impressive!”

“What kind of life is that—a life in the trees!?”

“A damn good one! A bit old-fashioned, granted, but a damn good one! I like maintaining the old way of life! I consider it a job—a job with a simple description: stay in the trees so as to avoid being killed and eaten! Stay up here so as to take as many breaths as possible before I die! It almost feels like I was born to do it! In fact, I consider it my life’s work! And so far so good!...”

“Oy gevalt!”

“... ‘Watch out, baby, he’s on a run!’ ‘The streak continues!’ ‘Look at him go!’ [*I accompanied the following chant with a dance*] ‘Lu-cas! Lu-cas! Lu-cas!’ ‘Another breath! And the crowd goes wild!’”

“What kind of a life’s work is *that*?! One should aim *high*!”

“No, one should aim *low*! Less chance of collateral damage! Or even *worse*: *cholesterol* damage! As in ‘hey, this lion is removing my cholesterol and it doesn’t even have a medical degree’!”

“But what kind of a life is that, Lucas?!”

“My favorite kind: one unfamiliar with the smell of a lion’s breath! Surprisingly good?! Pepperminty fresh?! ‘No problem, I can drive you to exit thirty but you’ll have to ride on the roof’?! I don’t want to know!”

“We’re all gonna die sooner or later, Lucas! Some of us at the hands of lions! Or *paws* I should say! It’s just the natural order of things!”

“*First* of all, although I’m a big fan of things being in order, in *this* case if things being in order means I get killed and eaten by a *lion*, then *I* vote for a natural *disorder* of things! *Second* of all, something tells me whoever first said ‘we’re all gonna die; it’s just the natural order of things’ wasn’t seconds away from getting a shoulder massage by a lion! No, I believe the only way a person in that situation could have uttered those words is if they were having their funny-bone tickled by the big cat’s canines and they said ‘oh shit, you got my funny bone’ and the cat said ‘what does “funny” mean?’ and they said ‘well, for instance, if I were to

say right now that I'm all right with what's happening because, after all, it's just the natural order of things—that might be considered pretty funny'!"

"That doesn't change the fact that it's just the natural order of things! You have to learn to accept it!"

"I do?!"

"Yes!"

"Okay, okay, I accept it! *Scratch* that! I *love* it! I'm in fact a big fan of the natural order of things! I wouldn't want things in any other order than the one they're in right now! The sun orbiting a dolphin?! Volcanoes spewing raw eggs?! No thanks, I'll pass! That would just be too weird!... Although I do like omelettes... No, no—I pass! The current order is perfect! Absolutely perfect! Live and die, predators and prey—the whole thing couldn't be more perfect! Which is why I made the decision a while back to separate myself from the natural order of things as much as possible! So as not to ruin a perfect thing! I would hate to end up being the one flaw in the system! Better for me to stay out of the whole thing as much as possible!"

"You're avoiding life!"

"I'm avoiding *death*! Something I have a passion for! And you know what they say—follow your passion!"

"Have some courage, Lucas! For your own *sake*!"

"But I *have* courage! I'm displaying it right now! It takes a lot of courage to give into a lack of courage! It takes a lot of courage to resist the pressure to be brave! It takes a lot of courage to ignore society's disapproval of giving into one's fears! Not to mention the fact that giving into one's fears is downright

dangerous! You might run straight into a tree or somethin at full speed! You might even have a heart attack! Giving into a lack of courage is not for the faint of heart! So don't talk to me about *courage*! I'm overflowing with courage! I have more courage than I know what to do with! I have more courage [*I held up my thumb*] in this frustratingly limited thumb of mine than in the not surprisingly apelike bodies of everybody in this clan combined!"

"Damn it, Lucas, you're missing so much!"

I plugged my ears with my thumbs.

"Sorry, I can't hear you! I'm making the best use of these ridiculous thumbs of ours!"

"Just have *courage*!"

"How many times are we gonna go over this?! I *have* courage! I have so much courage it *scares* me!"

"*Please*, Lucas, if you *are* killed and eaten by lions, it would probably be the law of natural selection at work! And you shouldn't fear the law of natural selection! You should simply accept it!"

"*Hey*, I don't fear the law of natural *selection*; I fear the law of natural *rejection*! Because that's *really* what's goin on here—*rejection*! Individuals with *disadvantageous* traits are being *rejected*! And I *fear* that—*rejection*! I admit it! It's too painful! I'm very sensitive! My ego is easily bruised! And I'm pretty darn certain that evolution wants to reject me! How could I *not* be, after having been rejected by Utrapaga-Yah, Lacka-Lack-Weee, Mooglafa-Klargh, Kwick-Kwack-Kwock, Wana-Wana-Flerb!... Shall I go *on*?!"

"I got the picture."

“Wana-Wana-Flerb. I used to say to her ‘hey, ya wana Flerb?’ We used to have so much fun in this tree. But just hangin out with me up here wasn’t enough for her. She needed to mix it up. Connect with other people. See things. She wanted to do a lot of mixing and connecting and seeing, of this and that thing, ‘n all that stuff. She wanted to spend a lot of time on the ground. Where there are lions. Et cetera. She didn’t quite see things the way I do...”

“Oy gevalt.”

“... Of course, I couldn’t blame her... So...she left...”

“Oh man, this is just—.”

“... I guess you could say we had irreconcilable differences...”

“Oh, for cryin out loud.”

“... I wonder what she’s up to, today?”

“Well, why don’t you come down here and see if you can’t find her?”

“And again, nice try!”

“My intention wasn’t to trick you!”

“*Where was I?! Oh yeah:* so you’ll have to excuse me if I’m not exactly Mr. Optimistic over my chances with evolution, as there seems to be a pattern here! And *further*, what if evolution doesn’t want to reject me but natural rejection comes after me *anyway* by *mistake*, based on a vague police drawing! Or what if the one they *really* want is Grogga-Mulck’s son!—... *What’s his name again?* I can never remember. It’s a weird one.”

“Bob.”



“Oh yeah, “Bob”. What if the one they really want is *Bob*?! Or some dude eight hundred miles to the south with whom I bear a resemblance?! And further *still*, what if natural rejection isn’t natural at all! What if it’s *far* from natural?! What if it’s fake?! What if it’s one big silicone lie! That cost a fortune!...”

“We are still talkin about evolution, right?”

“... So, sorry, I can’t be at peace with the law of natural rejection! I’m going to stay right up here as far away from the law of natural rejection as possible! If that means my traits of fearfulness, anxiousness, et cetera, ultimately keep me from mating and thus my genes from persisting for millions of years to come, then so be it! (Frankly, if Psychic Wikipedia is accurate, I’m not sure I would *want* my offspring to be around two million years from now anyway, considering what will be the mentality of the majority of human beings on Earth at that time! I’m referring, of course, to the mentality of a twelve-year-old jerk! I mean, *we* have to deal with a lot of hominidiots *now*, *that’s* for sure, but at that point in the game, it’ll be off the charts!...)”

“Oh brother.”

“... *Anyway*, no doubt it would make me somewhat sad at times to think about never having had a son or a daughter, but so be it! On the *other* hand, of course, (as I said before) maybe *I’ll* be the only one to survive an attack by a pride of lions due to the traits mentioned above and thus the only one out of all of us to have his or her genes persist for millions of years to come! Or of course, maybe *none* of us will have his or her genes persist for millions of years to come, or even *days* to come, because tomorrow an asteroid will crash into the planet thereby destroying

all life on Earth! Or of course, maybe somehow we'll *all* pass on our genes, and two million years from now *my* descendants will have to put up with the descendants of *Cka-Cka-Cka, Mazgreeloomp, Yaooka-Grugh, Ya-umph-a-Blunk, Brazaka-gah, et cetera!* [*I shook my head*] Anyway, I guess we'll just have to wait and see how it all plays out."

"Perhaps it would help you, Lucas, to remember that none of us are above the law of natural selection! We're all subject to it! None of us can escape it! And if it's not the law of natural selection but pure bad luck that results in you being the one killed and eaten—well, we're all subject to that as well! We're all in the same boat! What we must do is accept these facts! Be at peace with them! By making them small, infinitesimally small, in comparison to the power of humor, the infiniteness of love, and (because why the fuck *not* believe it) the belief that it's at least *possible* that—it's *possible* that—*somehow*, in *some* way, death doesn't come between one and one's loved ones!"

"I *tried* doing that—all of that—but when that leopard six years ago jumped high into my former tree and swiped at me, actually grazing me, and I looked into its mouth as it snarled before continuing to chase me as I made my way higher up, the power of humor, the infiniteness of love, and the belief that it's at least *possible* that *somehow*, in *some* way, death doesn't come between one and one's loved ones, seemed no bigger than a flea!"

"Of course! At *that* moment! At *that* moment! But moments *later*, after gathering yourself a bit, as that leopard tried to find a way *up* to you—and even if it had gotten its jaws *into* you—you would have been able to use the infiniteness of love, and

the aforementioned faith, and maybe even humor (*well okay maybe not so much the humor at that point* (but hopefully the others)), as a source of comfort! And, to some degree, *courage!*”

“I wouldn’t know! I was too busy sucking the skin off of my not yet fully opposable thumb while curled up in the fetal position at the very top of the tree!... And while I was doing so, shaking *far* more than any of the leaves around me on that hot, still day, sweat dripping off my face into the mouth of that snarling leopard, I spent *most* of that time thinking to myself, ‘That leopard needs to eat me in order to survive. *I* need to *not* be eaten by *it* in order to survive. *It* has no choice and *I* have no choice. It’s a *helluva* predicament we find ourselves in. One neither of us asked for. Were just placed in. And now here we are. In this *helluva* goddamn predicament!’... *Predators* are gonna have to do what they need to do (I wish ‘em well), and all *you* people can do whatever the hell you want, but *I* ain’t comin down *no way, never, nohow! Never ever, ever, ever!* You’re wastin your breath!”

“Imagine what your father—a hominid of great, great courage—would say if he were alive to see this?!”

“I believe the key phrase there is “if he were alive”! I’d like to point out that he *isn’t* because he was killed and eaten by *lions!* I’d like to *further* point out that the lions were able to get him in the *first* place because, to make a long story short, he was a hominid of *great, great courage!* And *wait;* it doesn’t end *there!* I’d like to *further* point out that my *mother* isn’t alive because she was killed and eaten by *crocodiles!* And the *crocodiles* were able to get her in the *first* place because she wanted to cool off for a few

seconds *and everyone told her she had nothing to fear!* I rest my case!”

“You rest nothing! Except your life in the back of a sock drawer!”

“Sounds comfy!”

“That’s it! You need to see a psychiatrist, my friend!...”

“Here it comes.”

“Dr. Zlok Shinamafump, to be exact! He’s doing very advanced work in the treatment of phobias! *Very* advanced! He’s even developed a method for treating a phobia that, according to Psychic Wikipedia, won’t exist for two million years—the fear of flying! Now that’s *advanced*! Imagining phobias or psychological problems that won’t exist until far into the future and trying to get a jump on them! He recently published a book entitled *A History of Phobias: From the Fear of Being on the Ground to the Fear of Not Being on It!* Apparently, he believes that the fear of being on the ground is a lot like what will be the fear of flying in that they both have more to do with anxiety over a lack of control than the fear of death!”

“Um, let me make it clear right now that my extreme reluctance to get on the ground has *nothing* at all to do with anxiety over a lack of control, and *everything* to do with my very much *not* wanting the last sound I make on this Earth to be that of a lion’s fart! Or a leopard’s or a hyena’s or a wild dog’s et cetera! Although I suppose I wouldn’t mind so much if it were that of a cheetah for which I had helped set a land speed record for mammals. That might not be so bad.”

“The chances of that are miniscule, Lucas! In fact, you stand a greater chance of being killed by wasps or flesh-eating bacteria or a poisonous plant or even a terrible drought than by predatory mammals!”

“Oh yeah—WASPs. I read about those in Psychic Wikipedia. Apparently, two million years from now they’ll be particularly dangerous. Plaid pants, argyle socks: you could be made dizzy and drive straight into a lamppost or something. Very dangerous.”

“No, not *those* WASPs! The flying *insect!*”

“Oh, *those* wasps. Of course... But, flesh-eating bacteria: what the hell are those?”

“They’re bacteria that eat pasta fasul. *What do you think they are?!* We learned this morning that yesterday three members of the clan on the other side of the lake died within days of contracting some sort of flesh-eating bacteria. And three members of the clan on the other side of the valley were killed by a gigantic swarm of wasps. Over a thousand stings each, they had. And one member of the clan halfway up the hill died within hours of eating a poisonous plant. And, of course, the clan near the volcano lost three members due to a lack of water. Apparently, all their crystals and incense and stuff didn’t do the trick. And to think they had just finally gotten things somewhat back to normal after the eruption.”

“Eruption?”

“Yeah. Wiped out an entire clan. Poof—gone.”

I just stared at him for a few seconds...and then:

“That’s it! I have to get out of here!”

“Where are you gonna go, Lucas?!”

“I don’t know! I hear Vancouver is nice!”

“First of all, Vancouver won’t exist for another two million years! Second of all, how are you gonna get there?! What about the lions?!”

I looked around as if I were searching for a way out.

“I don’t know! I don’t know!”

“There’s no escape, Lucas! No way out!”

“Son of a bitch!”

“The best we can do is believe that love and humor transcend death. Transcend Everything. Including all of the mysteries that surround us. And (at least *try*) to believe that somehow, in some way, death doesn’t come between one and one’s loved ones. And with the strength, and the reassurance, that this belief provides, go forth. If, in order to do that, we must cautiously come down from the trees and cautiously be on the ground, then cautiously be on the ground we will. Because it is the best we can do. And we should do the best we can. Because we should.”

I began to breathe rapidly, and was now in a state of extreme anxiety.

“It sounds like somebody’s been hanging out with the clan near the volcano! Perhaps a little too much!”

“No, not at all. I’ve just spent a lot of time (granted, perhaps a little *too* much time) by myself thinking. So, please, please, Lucas. Come down and be with us. *Do* with us. There’s so much beauty in the world. Come down and seek it out. And perhaps even create some yourself.”

“Yeah right! You’re hilarious, Lucas! Fuckin hilarious! All I can say is: *fuck* that shit! No way! I’m not comin down! I’m not! No *freakin* way! Don’t get me wrong; I appreciate the offer. Thank you very much. Thank you very, very much. But I’m gonna stay right up here and take my chances with the wasps and the flesh-eating bacteria. By the way, what *are* my chances with the wasps and the flesh-eating bacteria? ‘Cause I don’t want to die! I don’t want to die! I don’t want to lose my tan! I worked so hard to get it! Also, the world will exist without me! And that’s just too sad of a thought—the world without me! I can’t let that happen! Thirty or forty years from now there might be a park somewhere with pigeons going hungry ‘cause I’m not around to feed them! Also, my name would be removed from the phone book, throwing the whole thing off! Also, I’m allergic to bee stings! I blow up like a balloon! Imagine the stings of a thousand wasps! I’d end up the size of King Kong! And we all know what happened to *him*! Ironically, I’m afraid of heights! Also, bullets! To have to deal with both at the same time! Holy cow!... On the *other* hand, I personally find Faye Wray to have been a surprisingly sexy movie star for that era so carrying her around wouldn’t be so bad. Although, generally speaking, I would prefer to be the one carried around by *her*... A general proclivity of mine... It really turns me on.”

He and I just stare at each other for a few seconds...and then:

“I’ve gotten way off the point, haven’t I?”

“Just a bit.”

I abruptly returned to a state of extreme anxiety.

“*The point is, the point is [my face contorted]: killer wasps, flesh-eating bacteria, poisonous plants, death [lifting my arms and looking up and around]*—who’s the sadist that conceived of all this?! Who’s the player of this mean joke?! *[now spitting with anger]* I want a name! I want to file a complaint! I want to make a citizen’s fuckin arrest!”

Despite the closest of them being about forty yards away in the woods, I could hear more than half the clan start to holler angrily, having taken offense at what they viewed as sacrilegious talk from me.

Under his breath, the dude on the ground said, “Oh great, here they go. Especially old Blar-Blar-Ah, as usual.”

I could see Blar-Blar-Ah going berserk, jumping up and down with his perfectly straight old man’s back and swinging his arms wildly. It was all quite a ruckus. Someone relatively far away, yelled, “Way to go, Lucas, ya freakin neurotic!” Others could be heard laughing.

“Hey! Cut it out!”

“... *“Neurotic”* he says! For cryin out loud, of *course* I’m neurotic! How could I *not* be?! How could *anyone* not be?! I question the hominid that *isn’t*?! It’s a freakin jungle out here on the savannah! Add to that: knowledge of our own mortality, existential anxiety, the potential for alienation, complicated interpersonal relationships, the potential for miscommunication, constant attacks big and small on our health, having to live in a world with even *one* hominidiot with a mentality like *those* ones (let alone a *majority*), the very real possibility of the sudden end of



the world, *et cetera*, and it's a freakin *wonder* that it's not a freakin *given* that everyone in the world *is* and will always *be* neurotic!"

"It's a matter of degree, Lucas."

"Yeah, well, I guess you could say this is *one* case in which I shoot for the stars!"

From relatively far away, someone yelled, "You're a loser, Lucas!"

At least half the clan now laughed.

In response, I yelled, "*Ha! Ha! Ha! I'm the loser! I'm the loser! That's hilarious! The truth is the last human being out of the trees is the last human being with any sense! You all are the crazy ones! You all are the crazy ones for not being neurotic!..."*

The dude on the ground yelled, "*Ignore them!*"

"... *You've heard of The Clan of the Cave Bear?! Well you're the bunch of wackos!*"

More than half the clan yelled, "*You're the wacko!*"

I yelled, "*No, you're the wackos! You're the wackos! You're all the freakin frackin wackos!!!*", and then I swiftly bounded high up into the tree, out of view.

The dude on the ground called after me...and then, "... *Damn it.*" He turned towards the clan and yelled, as if he had a long history with those members (or with hominids *like* them)—as if he were saying something he had wanted to say a long time ago, "This is what you do! Mock others because they care! Mock others because they're not as far along on the nihilism scale as *you* with all your extraordinary insight and superiority *think* they should be!" And then, looking at the ground in front of him, quietly: "Not

sure what that necessarily has to do with right now, if *anything*, but it felt good to say.”

Someone mockingly chants, “*‘This is what you do!’ ‘This is what you do!’ ‘This is what you do!’...’*” More than half the clan joins in. “*‘This is what you do!’ ‘This is what you do!’...’*”

The dude on the ground yells, “Hominidiots!!!” And then, quietly, “Pricks.”

Someone gets a different mocking chant going: “*‘Love and humor transcend everything!’ ‘Love and humor transcend everything!’ ‘Love and humor transcend everything!’...’*”

“You’re just a buncha stupid fuckin’ twelve-year-olds, ya know that?!!”

The chant and the laughter last for almost two minutes. Finally, it all ends with one and then the other of them yelling “loser!” or “losers!”, etc., eliciting laughter. The only sounds, once the echoing of the laughter finally stops, are those of the insects, the birds, a couple of hyraxes nearby, and the zebras and the wildebeest off in the distance.

“Lucas! Lucas, come back! Please! I’m sorry! I’m sorry, I won’t try to talk you into coming down onto the ground! I promise!... Lucas!... Lucas!”

I got onto my bed at the top of the tree. The dude on the ground just stood there for several seconds. Finally, he walked away, and soon thereafter, I fell asleep.

I woke up near midnight, a bright full moon above, replayed that dude on the ground saying that Zrashayeee-eee and Plagwazum are no longer together, thought long and hard about

what he said about love and humor and faith, etc., grabbed a piece of paper and a pen, and wrote:

Dear Zrashayeee-eee,

I was wondering if we could get together.  
Talk, maybe listen to music.

Any day, any time.

(As long as it's well before the sun goes down, of course, on account of the lions, et cetera. Oh, and as long as it's not near the watering hole or on the plain (again, on account of the lions, etc.). Oh, and not near one of the outcrops, where the leopards tend to hang out. Also, away from thick undergrowth, where we might surprise a snake. But other'n that, we're good... Pretty much... My preference, of course, is to be up in a tree, but it's up to you. Completely up to you. No pressure.)

Let me know.

Okay, bye.

Lucas

I placed the letter in an envelope, held it with my lips, and made my way down the tree. I thought long and hard before doing it, but, dizzy, my heart pounding, I finally descended the last six feet or so, let go of the trunk, took one step, and was immediately pounced upon by several lions.

I woke up with a start. Above me, seen from very far away, was our universe—a map of the universe, showing all the matter and energy in it, in the shape of a web. I noticed that, well below our universe, in an area of blackness, the word “exit” was spelled out in glowing, red letters, and I said to myself, “So there *is* a way to get out of here alive.”

And then we began the journey back to Earth... Two minutes later, we zoomed past the moon, slowed way down, and began to once again orbit the Earth...and then it was over, and the lights came back on.

Upon leaving the museum, I began to hurry uptown (to Massimo’s for a slice before going home), as it was clear it was about to pour. Halfway between Columbus and Amsterdam, it started to really come down, and I began to sprint. Nearing the crosswalk, I saw a bigger-than-usual space between two of the parked cars and, in the interest of saving time, decided to use it. As I neared the space, I thought I heard Green yell “Pucas”, and then I looked to my left to make sure no car was coming, continuing to do so as I departed the sidewalk and shot beyond the row of cars. Unfortunately, traffic was approaching from the right. A taxi going close to fifty miles per hour drove right into me.

Some thirty feet later, I came to a stop in the middle of the street, chest down, the side of my face against the asphalt, blood pouring out of my mouth.

## Part Four

*86'd on 89<sup>th</sup>*

I heard the hysteria: a man repeatedly yelling, “Oh my God! Oh my God!”, a woman yelling, “Somebody call an ambulance! Somebody call an ambulance!” The deluge stopped as abruptly as it had started. I couldn’t speak. I couldn’t make a sound. There was a ringing in my ears. I remembered that “every time a bell rings an angel gets its wings”.

I said to myself, “That a boy, Clarence. That a boy.”

A man said, “Hang on, buddy. Help is on the way.”

I said to myself, “I’m okay with this—this whole thing. “*Death*” I think they call it. *Somethin* like that... *I mean* “okay”

may not be the *best* word, but in the interest of time let's go with it."

Another man said, "Keep breathin, man! It's important to keep breathin!"

I said to myself, "'Breathing is important"; that's good to know. Somebody make a note of that for me... I wonder if, when the time comes, my whole life will flash before my eyes... With my luck, it'll be interrupted by commercials... Or breaking news of a celebrity marriage... Or it'll be dubbed in Uzbek... Or it'll be pay-per-view, and I won't have the money... Or it'll be a very low-budget production: sock puppets... Or what if *my* life doesn't flash before my eyes but *somebody else's*? Julius Caesar's, for instance. What if I discover he didn't say 'Et tu, Brute?' but 'Dude, are you serious?'... I imagine it would be difficult not to laugh hysterically if my *whole* life flashed before my eyes at what would have to be hyper speed. Particularly if *Flight of the Bumble Bee* was playing. Particularly if I had been a marathon runner all my life... I wonder if it would be rated "argh" due to graphic depictions of sexual frustration... I wonder if animals have *their* whole lives flash before *their* eyes. An impala, for instance: 'Oh yeah, look at that. That was my first time being chased by a lion. I was *so* nervous. *So* afraid of doing something ridiculous and having all the other animals laugh at me. *So* self-conscious. I hadn't learned yet to just relax and be myself when chased by a predator.' Or plants. Trees, for instance: 'Oh yeah, I remember that time. When that bear came over and raked its claws all over me. What a treat *that* was. *So* luxurious.'"

A beer bottle was resting against the curb between two parked cars. I pretended to hear the voices of a boy's church choir, and said to myself, "I see the Miller Lite!"

The puddle of blood, fed by the blood coming out of my mouth and nose, was growing at a shockingly rapid rate.

I said to myself, "I can't believe I won't be alive soon. I mean, *life*: it's the only thing I've ever known."

The sky was reflected in the puddle. The rain clouds were opening up.

I said to myself, "I love it when the sun comes out after a rain. Apparently, I won't be around to enjoy it."

The driver of the taxi was visibly upset.

I said to myself, "I hope this guy won't find himself in trouble. It wasn't *his* fault. Granted, he may have been driving a tad fast, as many of us tend to do, but it was *my* mistake that caused the accident."

The driver was covering his face and shaking his head.

I said to myself, "Some died trying to circumnavigate the globe. Some died to defeat Hitler. Me? I forgot to look both ways."

The driver was talking to the passenger he had had in his cab, a woman in short-shorts. She was very muscular. Her hair was gray.

I said to myself, "Late fifties I'd say."

She kept a hand pressed to her forehead. They were standing on the other side of the puddle looking down at me. I imagined finding myself stranded on a deserted tropical island with her: We're washed ashore and are immediately enthralled by the island's beauty. It's a veritable Eden. We make some half-



hearted attempts at rescue: spelling S.O.S. in the sand incorrectly, writing a message in a bottle that says: 'Testing: one, two, three', seeing a boat way off on the horizon and lighting a match, finally getting a fire started for a bonfire and then, in a panic, yelling 'fire!' and immediately putting it out. I ask her if she's ever had any survival training. She says, "No. The closest I've ever come to rubbing two sticks together is when I was in the gym a few days ago and I snubbed two pricks who were there together."

I imagined suddenly jumping up from the asphalt, going up to her, and saying, "I feel like we've met somewhere before.": She says, "Really?" "Yeah... Have you ever been to Lisbon?" "No. Never." "Neither have I, so that's not it. What do you say we have lunch together and see if we can't solve this mystery." "Sure." "What about right now?" "Let's do it." "Vietnamese?" "Sounds good." We walk away from the scene.

The driver, a Sikh, was repeating over and over (to the woman and to those who were gathering around), "I didn't see him... I didn't see him..."

I said to myself, "I hope he won't feel some degree of guilt about this for the rest of his life."

The driver said, "He came out of nowhere."

I said to myself, "Well you know what they say: Sikh and ye shall collide."

A girl mentioned eighty-ninth street.

I said to myself, "I was 86ed on 89<sup>th</sup>."

The taxi looked brand new.

I said to myself, "People always said 'one never knows, one could be hit by a bus and killed simply crossing the street'. If I

had only known it was to be a taxi, I would have lived my life differently.”

It had come to a skidding stop some fifteen yards away.

I said to myself, “I figure it carried me forty feet or so to this, my final destination—my final pose on the spinning globe... I guess I should pay the driver for those forty feet.”

He was out of my view at this point but continuing to say, “I didn’t see him... I didn’t see him...”

I said to myself, “I owe you ten cents.”

A man with a thick Puerto Rican accent said, “They better get here soon or he’s gonna die.”

I said to myself, “I read somewhere that dying can cause death. And in some cases, death can be fatal. Anyone hear the same thing?”

The man again said, “They better get here soon.”

I said to myself, “I suppose I won’t have time to write my autobiography, *A Brief History of a Short Life*.”

After a bit, an old woman said, “Is he alive?” Someone touched my neck and then a man said, “He’s alive.” The man repeated it louder, “He’s alive!”

I said to myself, “Dr. Frankenstein over here.”

Coincidentally, a woman in one of the buildings yelled down, “Is he alive?!” The group looked up and yelled, “He’s alive!”

I said to myself, “I may not be the most extroverted person in the world, but you don’t have to be sarcastic.”

So much blood was pouring out of me.

I said to myself, “All of a sudden I feel silly (naïve, I suppose) for not having written ‘here today, gone tomorrow’ on the calendar yesterday.”

A man with a thick New York accent said, “Nobody move him.”

I said to myself, “Yeah. No playing *Adagio for Strings*.”

A woman said, “We should live each moment as if it’s our last.”

I said to myself, “Absolutely. We should live each moment in terror. Complete and utter terror.”

The woman continued, “We should all follow our dreams.”

I said to myself, “If we all followed our dreams, we’d all be porn stars... Of course, judging by the internet, maybe that’s already the case.”

The fact that I had once had a dream in which I was hit by a fast-moving car pops into my head.

I said to myself, “Apparently, dreams *can* come true.”

The old woman who asked if I was alive was directly in my view now. She reminded me of the old woman for whom I had held open a bus door a couple of days earlier. After struggling to make it down the steps, she told me I was marvelous. I got a kick out of the word “marvelous”. I imagined coming across a gravestone that simply said: *John Smith. 1787—1821. Marvelous.*

A young woman twenty or thirty yards away was staring at me with one hand covering her mouth.

I said to myself, “For cryin out loud, can’t a man die a slow, painful death in the middle of the street after accidentally

being hit by a car without everyone thinking there's something wrong with him?"

A woman said, "There's a reason for everything."

I said to myself, "If there *is*, it better be a damn good one."

The woman said it again, "There's a reason for everything."

I said to myself, "If there *is* a reason for everything, it's damn hard to imagine it'll be something that won't make me laugh hysterically."

It was much more difficult to breathe. Someone down the block yelled, "A doctor! A doctor is coming!" I imagined the doctor arriving at full sprint only to discover the emergency doesn't fall within his realm of expertise: The doctor says, "Oh. I'm sorry; I'm a doctor of Renaissance art. But hey, if you have any questions about Lorenzo de' Medici, let me know." I imagine a second doctor arriving—a doctor of meteorology: The doctor says, "If it makes you feel any better, it's gonna be cold, rainy, and windy tomorrow." I imagine a third doctor arriving—a self-help guru: The doctor says, "Only you have the power to make your dreams come true...you and my set of twelve CD's, now for only \$19.95." I imagine a fourth doctor arriving—a dermatologist: She bends down and zaps away a tiny pimple with some sort of laser creating device. I say, "Thanks." She says, "Don't mention it. Glad I could help." I imagine a fifth doctor arriving—a dentist: The dentist says, "See? This is what happens when you don't floss." I imagine a sixth doctor arriving—a psychiatrist: The psychiatrist says, "Tell me about your mother."

Finally, the doctor someone down the block had announced the approach of, arrived. Someone asked her what kind of doctor she is. She said, “I’m a general practitioner.”

I said to myself, “General Practitioner, Lieutenant Patient at your service!”

The doctor said, “There’s nothing I can do. He has internal bleeding. He has to get to a hospital right away.” She asked what happened.

I said to myself, “I simply tripped and fell, and decided ‘fuck it’... Actually, New York’s an interesting place. I wanted to get a closer look... Actually, I suddenly decided to stage a one-man, lying-down protest for no particular reason... Actually, what happened was: I got halfway across the street when I found myself *way* too comfortable to move. Just couldn’t do it. Even with the car bearing down on me... Actually, I thought I had spotted the reason for everything. Apparently, it was a false alarm. Sorry if I got everyone’s hopes up... Actually, I thought I had spotted some bullshit from a mile away. And, *yup*, I was right. Bullshit. Complete and utter bullshit... Actually, I was run over by a deer... Actually, I was mugged by someone who looked *exactly* like Brad Pitt...if Brad Pitt were standing in front of a fun-house mirror and you were looking at the mirror. The likeness was uncanny... Actually, I’m a chef working on a dish inspired by the textures of the city... Actually, I’m worried about ants. They’re so small. I’m lookin out for ‘em... Actually, I just couldn’t resist the urge to do an impression of the earwax I found on my pillow this morning. It’s pretty good, right?... Actually, I’m listening for a heartbeat. Nothing. The Earth is dead.”

There were now twice as many onlookers.

I said to myself, “Sorry. I don’t give autographs.”

One of the newly-arrived onlookers was clearly on her way to or from a yoga class. She was wearing tights and a T-shirt. She was slender and short—very petite.

I said to myself, “Early twenties I’d say.”

I imagined suddenly jumping up from the asphalt, going up to her, and saying: “Would you be interested in getting a bite somewhere?” She says, “But I don’t know anything about you, other than that you apparently can take a lickin but keep on tickin.” “Ma’am, there are children around... But, hey, what would you like to know?” “I don’t know, tell me somethin. Anythin.” “Ummmmmm—” She puts up her hand. “No need to continue; “om”—it says everything.” “Great. Japanese?” “Sounds good.” We start to walk away from the scene. She says, “I can’t believe you’re walking away completely unscathed.” “Not “*completely*”. I think my chakras were knocked out of whack. I hate when that happens.”

A rat scurried past that Miller Lite bottle and along the curb. I imagined it saying to itself, referring to the other rats, “Oh my God, I can’t believe they were eating that!”

I said to myself, “I wonder if there’s ever been a germophobic germ—one that did everything possible to avoid other germs... Talk about a hard life.”

A priest arrived on the scene—black pants, black jacket, black shirt, clerical collar. I said to myself, “I have to say, you guys really have a spiffy outfit. With the little touch of white at the collar. Whoever it was that came up with the look did a good job.”

I imagined a priest being invited to an exclusive black-tie party: He's stopped by the guy at the door who says, "Woh, woh, woh. Where do you think *you're* goin, wise guy?... Think you're *funny*, huh?"

The priest began to say a prayer.

I said to myself, "Father, there's something I've always been wondering. Is there farting in heaven?... Or does that fall under the "heaven forbid" category?"

I imagined some sort of fart-police in heaven: "Hey! I heard that! One more outburst like that and I'll send you *all* to hell! Capiche?!... This is *heaven*. Let's have a little *respect*." I imagined the priest answering peacefully: "No, my son. There is no farting in heaven. Heaven is a fartless place." "That's too bad, 'cause farting is often good for a few laughs." "There is no laughing in heaven. Just smiles. Continual, everlasting smiles." "Oh... That sounds creepy."

As the agitated driver began to describe the incident, the siren of a fast-approaching police car could be heard.

I said to myself, "That a boy, Clarence. That a boy."

The car abruptly stopped nearby, many lights blinking.

I said to myself, "I can't decide which is more common: emergency vehicles making me think of Christmas, or Christmas making me think of an accident."

Two policemen arrived—one young, one much older.

I said to myself, "What seems to be the problem, officers?"

The older one said, "What's going on?"

I said to myself, “Isn’t it obvious? I was walking by when I just *had* to get a closer look at this tiny spot right here in the middle of the road. It’s absolutely *fascinating*. I’ll be done in a second.”

The agitated driver once again described the incident. Blood was flowing along my neck (the ear facing the sky has been badly damaged). It made me think of mountains—of rivers descending from them into the sea (in this case, the puddle of blood). I had always wanted to visit Alaska. It popped into my head that, that very morning, before I got out of bed, before turning my attention to the S.A.T., I had imagined myself in a small cabin in the wilderness of Alaska with a young woman who was attempting to prove to her friends and family that her survival skills were indeed good enough for her to be able to spend an entire winter by herself in the wilderness and remain perfectly healthy: One morning, while she was out tracking elk, I had fallen out of a plane into a deep snow bank just yards from her (why I was in a plane flying over Alaska and how I had fallen out of it, I hadn’t bothered to explain to myself). At first, the young woman was not happy that I had ruined her alone-ness (she scowled as she made a sled and dragged me back to her place and nursed my injured body), but, quickly enough, she warmed up to me and, suffice it to say, we hit it off. She would return at the end of the day with freshly killed game and/or salmon and, after dinner, would kindly warm my cold hands by rubbing her naked body all over them.

I said to myself, “*Great*, now that will *definitely* never happen.”



A man began speaking in Russian. I pretended the man escaped the Soviet Union by making like the hood ornament on the lead car of a military convoy. I said to myself, “For three days, he stood on one leg with his arms lifted like the wings of an angel. When they finally reached the Finnish border, he jumped off and ran to freedom amid a hail of bullets.”

A witness—a UPS man—confirmed to the police officers that I had been jaywalking. I imagined that it’s the young officer’s first day as a full-fledged cop: The “newbie” (carried away by doing things by the book) squats down and says, “You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be held against you...”

The other officer (the veteran) began making notes. I imagined him writing, as the cause of death: *to end life*.

There was such a variety of shoes of the growing gathering of people. I imagined the moment—the very moment—tens of thousands of years ago, when one of our ancestors fastened some leather to the bottom of his or her feet for the very first time, starting the trend that took the world by storm.

I said to myself, “To this very day, we all just *have* to have a pair.”

Fairly nearby, a driver leaned on his or her horn. Traffic had been stopped. Drivers were getting frustrated.

I said to myself, “What’s the big deal? Just play a sound-of-wind recording at high speed, turn the volume up, and pretend you’re making really good time.”

Someone revved their motorcycle a few times very loudly.

I said to myself, “It makes sense—your making those fart sounds; you’re clearly an asshole.”

A plane flying low over New Jersey appeared fleetingly in a break in the clouds.

I said to myself, “Airplanes make me nervous. Especially paper airplanes. My heart stops whenever I see a kid throw one. And sure enough they always crash.”

A subway train rumbled.

I said to myself, “I hope that’s not Santa coming for me... I mean Satan. Easy mistake to make. They both wear red.”

The rumbling became much louder.

I said to myself, “I will likely no longer be alive by the time the people in that train who had descended into the subway at 125<sup>th</sup> street ascend at 42<sup>nd</sup> street.”

It popped into my head how, over the years, I would pretend that the subway is, in fact, an incredible time machine that can actually transport one a few minutes into the future but, sadly, always about a dozen or more blocks away from where one had started (a minor glitch that needed fixing). I would ascend the stairs to street level, check my watch, look around, and say, “Oh well, nothing’s perfect.” The distant memory popped into my head of being in the subway with my father and a colleague of his when a panhandler with no legs—his torso on a wooden dolly, his arms his source of locomotion—came by asking for money: My father gave the panhandler some change. The panhandler rolled away. The colleague said, “He does all right. His legs are working the “A” train.”

The rumbling began to fade away.

I said to myself, “I wonder if people who work the night-shift in Times Square relax when they return home by turning on and staring at an unblinking lightbulb.”

The far side of the puddle of blood was getting close to the yellow traffic lines.

I said to myself, “Who painted them? Where are they now? I wonder if any of them has ever had fun with the question of what they do for a living by saying: ‘I’m a painter. I show in New York. I’ve shown all over the city: SoHo, the Lower East Side, Madison Avenue, you name it.’”

I imagined the team approaching a gallery in Chelsea for an exhibition of their work: The gallery loves the idea. A month later is the opening: music, the usual suspects standing around sipping wine, large sections of road (asphalt, yellow lines) on the walls. A man and a woman stare at one of the pieces. Finally, he says to her, “I liked the “okay to pass” series but these double, no passing lines really excite me.” She agrees, “Yeah, what they say about shampoo, Nostradamus, and the Winter Olympics is truly startling.” At that point, a voice yells, “The artists! They have arrived!” and six street-maintenance workers wearing fluorescent-orange vests and hard hats enter to much applause.

Thanksgiving decorations were on a laundromat window.

I said to myself, “Thanksgiving: the day in which we drag Snoopy’s dead body through the streets of New York after shooting down his airplane. I mean really: what kind of message does that send our kids?”

I pictured the parade: the crowds, the hubbub, the floats, and then said to myself, “I wonder if the floats’ rope handlers ever

look at old photos of themselves when they were a little kid holding a balloon and wonder about the lack of progress they seem to be making in their lives... I wonder if there's a union for that work. And if they strike. If they ever threaten to let go of the ropes if their demands aren't met. 'Give us more money or you can kiss Spongebob Squarepants goodbye on the count of three. One, two...two and a half...'... I wonder if, early Thanksgiving morning, each of the leaders of the teams of rope handlers, with tears in his or her eyes, gives a speech like: 'You guys are amazing. The best bunch ever. I'll never forget you. *Any* of you... Now let's go get Woody Woodpecker and show the world what we can do!'... I wonder if a rope handler ever quit after realizing he or she was helping to promote a kid's cartoon character with a name containing both the words "wood" and "pecker". 'Sorry, I just can't be a part of this. Good luck, though.'... I wonder if a couple of rope handlers who had also been activists together in the sixties ever reminisced after too many glasses of wine and got mixed up: 'Do you remember the time we marched from the Museum of Natural History all the way down to Macy's?' 'I sure do. It was so great to see Babar and Bullwinkle showing solidarity.' 'Yeah, I knew Mighty Mouse had a social conscience *but Bugs Bunny?*'"

A man in a business suit obviously hadn't sheltered himself at all from the brief deluge. He was soaking wet. I imagined him arriving home: His wife jokingly accuses him of having an affair with a goldfish. He looks down and says, "I'm sorry, Pauline. I don't know what came over me. I had gone to the botanical garden to clear my head after work and there she was.

Next thing I knew I was diving in: trench coat, shoes, briefcase, and all.” She laughs, assuming he’s joking. But he isn’t.

A father and his roughly ten-year-old son turned and began to walk away. I imagined the boy asking his father questions about death, existence, et cetera: Eventually, the boy asks, “Dad, why did you and mom decide to create a human being?” His father puts him in a headlock, gives him a knuckle-rub, and says, “What human being?! You’re an animal! An animal!”

A girl, perhaps twelve-years-old, was holding a transparent case in which, I assume, somewhere among the shredded newspaper, was a gerbil.

I said to myself, “It must be hard only getting snippets of information, never the whole story.”

The young woman my age with whom I had crossed paths in the neighborhood several times over the past few years was looking at me.

I said to myself, “She’s always wearing a hat.”

I imagined going up to her and saying, “You’re always wearing a hat. Even the first time I saw you, a few weeks after you were born. You were wearing a bonnet. I can’t say you looked cute because, frankly, I don’t find babies to be cute... I don’t know what all the fuss is about regarding ‘em. To me, human babies lack that certain *je ne sais quois* that other newly born mammals have... Also, I don’t want to be one of those people who looked at the baby Hitler and said, ‘Oh how adorable. *Hi. Hello there.* So cute. *Look at you with your little mustache and trendy haircut. I’m just so adorable. Yes I am. Yes I am.*’”

I said to myself, “I wonder if—*despite* one side of my head in a puddle of blood, blood coming out of my nose and mouth, and blood flowing out of a mangled ear in streams over my face—she recognizes me. I think she does.”

She was holding a newly-bought box of toothpaste. I imagined suddenly jumping up from the asphalt, going up to her, and saying: “Why do you think tartar is controlled and plaque removed? Why aren’t they either both controlled or both removed?” She says, “I don’t know.” “Do you floss?” “I’ve begun to make a habit of it.” “Me too. We have so much in common. We should go out.” “Okay. How ‘bout now? How ‘bout lunch? How ‘bout Ethiopian?” “Sounds good.” We start to walk away from the scene. She says, “I can’t believe you’re walking away completely unscathed.” “Not “completely”. I suddenly have this itch on my back. You wouldn’t mind taking care of it for me, would ya?” “No, not at all.” “Great. Thanks.” I lean against a building. “And then I’ll do you. I promise.” “You like having your back scratched, don’t you?” “I’m not sure. Keep scratching and after an hour or two I might be able to decide.” “You’re like a dog.” “I *do* have a third nipple.” “You’re joking.” “No. I’m serious. I’ll show it to you in half an hour. After this back-scratching.”

The window-washers who, the day before, I had watched at work at the upper floors of a tall building, were no longer there. Perhaps because of the stormy weather.

I said to myself, “I wonder if someone has ever showed up for an interview to be a window-washer, and said, ‘I don’t do windows... Other’n that, *bring it on!*’”

Movement at a nearby second-story window caught my attention. A woman who looked genuinely sad to see the situation I was in and I made contact. Her hands were pressed to her chest and she was shaking her head. A sense of camaraderie with everyone around me came over me.

I said to myself, “You will die too. We’re *all* gonna die.”

I imagined everyone in their respective beds that very night—the lights out, their head on a pillow—remembering, however briefly, the sight of me, and thinking about, however briefly, their own mortality.

The blood kept pouring out of my mouth. A slightly raised bit of asphalt (about one inch by a half inch) around which the puddle had formed caught my attention. It was like an island. I pictured the zooplankton and algae in some lake or ocean that, three hundred million years ago, became the oil that’s in that bit of asphalt. I pictured the dude who made the most money off of that oil. I pictured that bit of asphalt being set in place by a worker.

I said to myself, “Where is he or she now? Is he or she still alive? I wonder if it’s a common workplace joke among those dudes to say, referring to the smell of the hot blacktop: ‘Is that the asphalt or your ass’ fault?’... Who was the last person to step right there? And who will be the next person after I die? Probably whoever cleans up the blood... What does the future hold for that bit of matter right there?”

I imagined, a few years into the future, the entire street being demolished and the chunks of it being tossed into the back of a truck: A couple of days later, that bit of asphalt falls off the truck as it’s crossing the Verrazano Bridge and sinks to the bottom

of New York Bay. Eighty years later, it washes up on a beach near the tip of Long Island. A twelve-year-old boy finds it and, from more than a hundred feet away, pitches it towards a narrow, wooden pole at the edge of an empty parking lot, hits it smack in the middle, and walks away disappointed that no one had seen it... I imagined the blood being cleaned up about an hour later, after my dead body had been removed—my blood being mopped up, soaked up, bagged, and thrown away—and the street being disinfected.

I said to myself, “I wonder if any of my blood—of my DNA—would survive the process.”

I imagined that some does: A small bug feeds on it as soon as everyone’s left the scene and the street goes back to normal. The well-fed bug flies away, lands on a wet, newly discarded wad of chewing gum, becomes stuck, and, hours later, is stepped on, killed, and encased. Several months later, a superintendent scrapes up the now hard gum and throws it away. Days later, the bag becomes buried within a mountainous landfill. Hundreds of years after that, a flood carries the gum deep into the woods where it becomes covered in sap. Millions of years more, the gum is encased in amber. Tens of millions of years more, the bag is buried deep within the Earth. Hundreds of millions of years more, the forces of nature—tectonic shifts, volcanic eruptions, floods, wind—transport the gum to the edge of a geyser where his DNA mixes with the chemical soup there and starts a process that creates the very first single-cell life-form the Earth has seen since the apocalypse hundreds of millions of years earlier. A couple of billion years after that, a couple of microbiologists decide to call



these microorganisms “I Give Up cells” due to their method of locomotion involving raising two arm-like structures in a surrendering, “what are you gonna do?” motion (à la me) for moving backward, or lowering the “arms” in a resigned, “ah, forget about it” motion (à la me) for moving forward. None of the other microbiologists like the name I Give Up. As soon as the name had finally been announced, every scientist in the field worldwide raised their hands and said, “You can’t win; you can’t fuckin win.”

The hard effort my lungs were making to breathe increased dramatically. My breathing was very deep as well as rapid, with the sound of an extreme case of bronchitis.

I said to myself, “I’ll be dead within a minute for sure... I feel like a fly that’s been swatted... They die so easily. You just touch a fly with a flimsy piece of plastic and it dies. It’s ridiculous. It’s as if they say upon being merely touched by a swatter: ‘*Finally!* Woo-hoo! This charade is *over!* I am *done!*’ Drop.”

The hard effort my heart was making to pump blood to the brain—to pump oxygen to the brain—increased dramatically. An awful pain, like the pricks of a thousand pins, accompanied each violent beat of my heart. The beats were so violent that my torso was visibly lifted with each one. Someone, a woman, yelled, “Oh my God! He’s dying! He’s dying!” I heard “Jesus Christ” and “Oh God” ripple through the gathering. The taxi driver closed his eyes and pressed the palms of his hands together and mumbled in a foreign language. A man behind me with a low, rough voice and a Boston accent said, “Life is short; live it to the fullest.”

I said to myself, “I better get started: *Yippee! Yeah! Woo hoooo! Woo hoooo!*... ‘Life is short; enjoy every moment of it.’ *Oooooo yaaaaah. Yaaaah baby. This is scrumptious. Absolutely scrumptious...* I’d prefer a maxim more along the lines of: ‘all things considered—including death (you could be dead)—it’s kind of ridiculous to get too down in the dumps if you can avoid doing so...which, granted, isn’t always easy.’” However, I didn’t see that catching on any time soon.

The ringing in my ears increased so that that was the only sound. Also, everything in my sight was terribly out of focus. My vision began pulsating (dim, bright, dim, bright, et cetera) in a rapid, steady rhythm. My mouth felt completely dry and I had a terrible thirst. There was an awful pain in my head, as if my brain was being pricked by a thousand needles. The old woman—the one who had asked if I was alive—turned and began to walk away.

I said to myself, referring to my parents, “I hope they don’t write an obituary for me... I wonder if the editor of the obituary section of *The New York Times* ever said to someone who had handed them a three-sentence obituary, ‘I don’t have time to read that right now. Just give me a summary’... I wonder if an obituary writer can ever read a biography and not think ‘yada yada yada’.”

I imagined I was at my desk, starting to write my memoir: “I was born on November 18th, 1980..... *Eh*, I’m sure you can imagine the rest.” I start over: “I was born on November 18th, 1980..... Ah nevermind.” I start over: “I was born on November 18th, 1980... One morning, trillions of years later, something *else* was born. Trillions of years after *that*... Et cetera.” I give up.

I returned to my parents: “I hope they won’t wonder if I threw myself in front of this cab on purpose... But they might. They might point to that evening, over dinner, a couple of months ago, when I told them how I would want them to be if I were to die—when I talked about death, *my* death, and love, et cetera. They might point to the fact that I had spent the summer with my nose in that S.A.T. book (or so it seemed)—that perhaps I was putting far more importance on the test than they had thought. They might point to when I said how very much I was looking forward to leaving high school behind and getting a fresh start. They might point to two weeks earlier when I came back from that walk around the lake by myself with my eyes red and moist from tears, having heard for the first time, on the way back, *Adagio For Strings*. They might point to the sad case of that young man who had jumped off that bridge. They might point to my lack of a social life, how I was always alone, how I must have been lonely. They might point to how, from the start, I had always been quiet and shy. They might even point to how I played dead man’s float all the time.”... And then I added, “They don’t know that if I *were* ever to throw myself in front of a car, it would be a *parked* one... That if, on purpose, I were to drive eighty miles an hour, no seatbelt, into a tree, it would be a bonsai tree... That if I were to drive over a cliff, it would be at a golf range where the kid retrieving the balls was named Cliff... That if I were to try to hang myself using a leash attached to a choke collar, the neighbor’s Rottweiler and I would begin to laugh so hard at my efforts to squeeze my head between the chain and his neck that we would finally fall to the floor out of breath, and I would have to give up...

That if I were to perform the highly ritualized, traditional Japanese ceremony of suicide known as hari-kari, I would use chopsticks instead of a knife... That if I were to try to drown myself, it would be by going to Sheep's Meadow on a slightly rainy day and lying in the grass with my mouth open... That if I were to try to kill myself by no longer breathing, I would inevitably fail to resist the urge for one more breath and then one more after that and then one more after that, et cetera—demonstrating that I clearly had a breathing problem and might want to consider joining AA (Airoholics Anonymous)... I wonder if an alcoholic has ever sat across from a sexaholic and thought to himself or herself, with a slap to the forehead: '*Sex!* Why didn't I think of that?!'... That if I were to start typing out a suicide note, my goal would be nine hundred and ninety-eight trillion pages, single spaced, three-point font... That rather than stick my head in an oven, I would try to stick it in a slotted toaster... I mean, I *do* have a narrow head, but they would have nothing to worry about... That if they were to receive a phone call from a police officer saying something about me and suicide, it would be because I had tried to turn myself in for attempting to murder myself in hopes of receiving some reward money... That no matter how much I might want to kill myself, I wouldn't out of concern for my cholesterol... That if I were to try to kill myself by swimming straight out into the ocean as far as I could, I would get as far as the edge of the water and then think to myself: 'The dollar's so weak right now. What if I make it to Europe? Perhaps this isn't a good idea.'... That if I were to try to kill myself by taking an entire bottle of pills, it would be one entirely of placebos. I might die, but it would just be the placebo

effect... That if I were to go to the beach and sit atop the dunes whimpering with a gun in my mouth, it would be a water-gun filled with Perrier with a squeeze of lime... That if I were to use a noose to try to hang myself, it would be by tying a fifty-foot rope to a branch of a newly planted sapling, putting the noose around my neck, and waiting... That if I were to try to kill myself using a blade, it would be at the skating rink with the blade of an ice-skate. They'd just have to drive a zamboni over my forearm and I'd go home good as new."

My already furiously beating heart ramped up (in both speed and force) to a startling degree.

I said to myself, referring to the fact that I had never wanted to kill myself, "Of course, not to say that that couldn't have changed at some point... It's not impossible to imagine."

The side of my face moved against the asphalt, shaken by my heart's desperate effort. The blood flowed more rapidly out of my mouth and nose. It was warm against the roof of my mouth and, for the first time, it seemed I could taste it. There was quite an awful pain in my chest. My heart stopped. And then my lungs. My face stopped moving against the asphalt. An ambulance approached. A punk-style young woman said, "Oh God." The driver, particularly distraught now, squatted down, covered his face with his hands, and moaned. It looked like he was beginning to sob.

I said to myself, "Poor guy."

I imagined the front page of the following day's *New York Post*: a large image of the driver's black-and-white photo ID—the driver looking blankly into the camera, dastar on his head,

long black beard and mustache, dark skin—that image overlapped by a smaller one of the driver trying to hide from the photographers and American-flag wavers who had gathered in front of his Queens building the night before to chant “kick him out” (among other things), motivated as they had been by certain “news” outlets focusing on the fact that I was an eighth-generation American and he was a resident, until this past January, of the West African nation of Nigeria, and that witnesses say the cab had been going very fast, and that an investigation is ongoing, all with a headline of “HIDIN’ SIKH”.

I said to myself, “Stupid-twelve-year-olds.”

The driver lifted his face from his hands, his eyes and cheeks wet.

I said to myself, “He’s probably gonna think about this for the rest of his life... As will my parents... On the *up* side, at least now they won’t have to worry about me dying in a car accident.”

And then all went completely black. No lingering visual impressions. Just immediate blackness.

I said to myself, “Guess I won’t get to write that novel that uses death as a metaphor for death.”

The words “he’s survived by”, as if read in an obituary, popped into my head.

I said to myself, ““Survived”? That doesn’t seem like the right word. It makes it sound like: ‘*He* died, but his *loved ones*, so-and-so and so-and-so, continue to struggle to avoid losing *their* lives—continue to try, in a panic, to escape being taken down—continue to try to survive for as long as they can this catastrophic

event known as existence—as they and all living things do from the moment they come into it.’... It doesn’t seem quite right.”

All went completely silent. No sounds from outside, no ringing in my ears. Nothing.

I said to myself, “On the other hand, maybe it *is* right to say “survived by”. Maybe it’s perfect. Maybe it’s right on the money to say that from the moment we’re born, we’re essentially survivors—survivors of the previous moment—the previous second—and then the next second, and then the next, and the next after that, and so on and so on and so on...until we have failed to reach the next second...and are survivors no more.”

It felt as if I were falling—truly falling, tumbling into the silent darkness.

Another maxim popped into my head: “It’s not the number of breaths you take; it’s the number of times you had your breath taken away”.

I said to myself, “Really? I’m not so sure about that... ‘Excellent choice, madame. And for you, monsieur—the number of breaths you take, or the number of times you had your breath taken away?’ ‘I’m gonna go with the number of breaths. Right now, that seems more desirable than watching Trent Tucker hit a three with less than a second left.’ ‘And to follow?’ ‘The butternut squash soup and the chopped salad.’ ‘Très bien.’”

There was a tingling, a tingling that kept accelerating—the millions and millions of brain cells dying, perhaps.

I said to myself, “‘It’s not the number of breaths you take, it’s the number of times you had your breath taken away’: either I heard that on TV from some guru stroking his long, gray beard, or

I read it on the back of a box of amaranth flakes. There's no tellin', these days."

The tingling continued to accelerate. The exhortation "live each moment with passion and drive" popped into my head.

I said to myself, "With all due respect, how 'bout you go *fuck* yourself with passion and drive?... Interesting, although I'm close to death, my assessment of ideas such as "live each moment with passion and drive" hasn't changed. In fact, it might have deepened."

A bumper-sticker on one of the parked cars caught my attention. It said: *GO GLOBAL*. I imagined a homeless man noticing the bumper-sticker as he's walking past the car at three in the morning: He stops and says, deadpan, "Okay. If you insist." And then, resuming shuffling along, "Carpe diem."

The tingling continued to accelerate until, suddenly, there was an intense, pleasurable feeling akin to a strong orgasm.

I said to myself, "In a matter of days, my body will be transformed into a fine, grey powder contained within a small vessel... It's funny: lying here thinking about my dead body being incinerated, "cremated" sounds unpleasant; however, if I were sitting at a table in a good restaurant, "cremated" could sound absolutely *delicious*."

I imagined a mischievous French chef describing, to a group of American tourists fresh off the bus, a dish inspired by his grandmother: He pretends to struggle with English, although he speaks it quite well and knows exactly what he's saying: "...and then...on top...my grandmother...[*he makes an ambiguous movement with his arm and hand that could mean either sprinkling*



or stirring]...cremated... Sound good to everybody? Yes?" It sounds good to everybody: a round of mashed potatoes with his grandmother's ashes sprinkled on top.

I felt high, very high. Relaxed and floating. Floating in the silent blackness. Floating in warm, black water. At peace and floating. Ready and waiting for the end. Until, suddenly, it was as if I could see. As if I could see the cells of my brain dying. They looked like millions of little dots of light. It was as if I were floating high above New York City at night, watching lights all over the city go out, go out so quickly. And it was a beautiful sight. Gorgeous. The glittering effect. And I was floating. I was high.

I said to myself, "It's actually here: that which has always been on my mind to one degree or another."

I imagined an infinite past behind me and an infinite future in front of me.

I said to myself, "Funny, I feel like I just ran across a spotlight in a room endlessly dark in all directions... Much of what I saw was awful. But, luckily for me, much was not so bad. Some was so beautiful it hurt... Of course, maybe I'm wrong to imagine an infinite past and an infinite future; maybe it's closer to the truth to imagine an eternal present in which matter infinitely changes. In which the only matter that *never* changes is the matter in the question 'what's the *matter* with these people!'"

The not-infrequently-made assertion that "nothing matters" popped into my head.

I said to myself, “*Of course* nothing matters, you idiots—*of course*—but it’s *because* “nothing matters” that some things matter!...—that *love* matters... Idiots.”

I continued to watch the millions of little lights go out.

I said to myself, “Wow... So strange... And I thought your typical American suburban cul-de-sac was a weird dead end.”

And then, suddenly, with not many of those lights left, most of the tingling concentrated deep in the center of my brain, a terrible sadness swept over me. I suddenly no longer felt okay (for lack of a better word) about dying. I felt horror. And panic. And I began to wail. Or, rather, it *felt* as if I were wailing—wailing like a newborn baby; its legs and arms thrusting; its hands fruitlessly grasping. I looked at the lights—the lights going out. They were no longer beautiful; they were awful—*so very awful*. I wanted to yell at them “Stop! Stop it! Please! Please stop it!” but, of course, I couldn’t speak. And, of course, *nothing* could make them stop. I hated this feeling—this horror, this panic. I wanted to get back to the high, the wonderful floating, the gorgeous lights—the being okay (for lack of a better word) with dying. I realized I was losing in my effort towards that goal.

I said to myself, “Damn it, I faltered. But I can get back. There’s still time. There’s still time.”

And I focused on the symbol—the image—I had settled on early in the seventh grade: That of an absolutely perfect sphere—a perfect gray “pearl”—floating in infinite nothingness, the sphere containing Everything—*absolutely everything*—all the chaos, all the noise, all moral dilemmas, all conflicts, all knowledge, all of history, all of the future, all of the time and

space and matter of the infinite number of universes, God, all Gods, any God that has ever been and that will ever be—*Everything*...except love and humor.

And I did return to being okay (for lack of a better term) with dying. I relaxed. The effect of the lights going out was once again a gorgeous, glittering one. The floating sensation was once again wonderful. I imagined telling the onlookers about this symbol, this image, this idea—telling them that it's helping—helping me be “okay”: ... Upon my finishing, there was a pause, and then, all at once, they burst out with “man, you need help!” and “holy shit!” and “this dude is *crazy!*” and “*man*, you are *crazy!*” and “you're crazy, bro” and “dat's a whole nutta *level* ‘a nuts right *dehr!*”, et cetera.

And then I reflected on the fact that, all things considered, I had been a decent person. This thought seemed to help in some way—seemed to connect me with all other decent people, past, present, and future (in fact, it seemed to connect me with “love” *period*, with all the love in the world, including love *for* the world, and nature, and the universe).

Drowsily, as if with heavy eyelids half-closed, as if with deep, relaxed breaths, I focused on this connection.

Three quarters of the lights were gone now. They were disappearing at an astonishing rate, most of the tingling concentrated deep in the center of my brain... And then there were less than a hundred lights left.

Then fifty...

Then twenty-five...

Then ten

nine  
eight  
seven  
six  
five  
four  
three  
two  
one

And then all was black.

And then Average White Band's *Pick Up the Pieces*  
began to play. And end credits started to roll.

I know—*weird*, right?