

KillToParty

ARCHIVE

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An archive of the blog **KillToParty**, as held by TheRedArchive: 63 posts published between April 2015 and February 2025.

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Best regards,

[/u/dream-hunter](#)

Founder of TheRedArchive
July 28, 2026

“All vaginas are the same size~!!11” and the Unequal Nature of Equality

Billy Pratt · 6 April 2015 · Archived copy · Original

Men are universally able to separate all female acquaintances into two categories: women we want to fuck, and the rest.

The more of a beta-doofus you are the more likely it is that you want to fuck everyone you know, but for any man with a shred of dignity there will typically be a line drawn between potential fucks and “the rest.”

A female not being on our literal “to do” list doesn’t mean we want them to fall off the face of the planet or die in a fire, and it certainly doesn’t mean we wouldn’t lend a hand if they were falling off a cliff- *it quite literally means that we don’t want to have sex with them*. And it is this distinguishing detail that opens up the rather new, from a generational standpoint, possibility of becoming *just friends* with a woman.

“None of these girls want to be your girlfriend...”

It’s twenty years later and I still remember the uncomfortable feeling my Dad’s blunt assessment produced.

I had just gotten off the phone with *my friend* Christine (or was it Laura?)- a multi-hour gab session about music, high school, TV, and love interests (girls I liked from afar, boys she had been fooling around with).

My Father sat me down for a heart-to-heart; “They just want attention from you but *they don’t want to date you...*”

It struck a nerve for sure, but my teenaged self didn’t pay much attention to my father’s *old timey* advice. Sure, maybe that’s how *his generation* was with girls... but this was the punk rock, *social equality* generation! Boys and girls could be friends, share traditional gender roles equally, and respect one another fully!

So take that DAD- back in your box you go, and take your attempt at giving time-tested advice to your teenaged son, who sorely needed it, with you!

To understand how it was possible that my sixteen-year-old self had his head buried so deeply up his asshole, we need to look at how boys and girls are raised.

While boys and girls each hear the same message of *equality*, it is interpreted in two completely different ways, and these separate interpretations create the foundation for the social programming men and women operate on for the duration of their plugged-in lives.

When boys are taught equality *they are made to understand that boys and men are not inherently better, more skilled, or more capable than women*.

Equality means that when your Grandfather demanded a male doctor *you rolled your eyes*; or when your Dad questioned why you bothered maintaining female friendships, you wondered why *he didn’t get it*.

Boys are taught equality with a diminutive undercurrent; *they are to know their place and stay there*.

Girls are taught equality with the *omnipresent fallacy that female oppression dominated most of history* – it’s a goof, it’s a lie, it’s a power grab- and most importantly it is the basis for the biased approach to how girls are taught equality.

If the idea is prevalent that females were oppressed until ~~the early twentieth century the bra-burning 1960s the girl-power 1990s the social-justice 2000s~~ *now forever*, little girls are able to be granted full access to entitled chauvinism.

You'd never see a little boy running around in a "Boys rule" t-shirt; the idea seems fucking absurd.

So if little girls are raised to be permissibly chauvinistic; that equality means "YES YOU CAN" (and if you can't, *don't worry*, everyone will help you along anyway); that all women are inherently as-capable as the most capable of men...

How are these little girls being raised to view men?

—

It couldn't have been more than ten years ago when Christine and I- yes, the same Christine, decided to split a bottle of Jack Daniels and shoot the breeze.

We had a lot to catch up on, a few years out from graduating college, and finally pursuing our "real lives."

There weren't any sexual intentions... gone was High School's wistful hoping that maybe something would develop between us...

We were definite chums and Christine had settled quite comfortably into the "and the rest" category; I saw her as a friend who was equal to the rest of my doofus male friends at that time.

So as the night progressed we decided to have the kind of conversation that a man and woman can only engage in if they *aren't* involved with one another: Intergender Real Talk about Sex...

And, of course, PENIS SIZE COMES UP HARD AND FAST and Christine is first to share her thoughts...

"It matters... Girls who say it doesn't matter, they're lying... of course it matters, *but it isn't everything*, you know?"

Translation: *"It matters at my discretion."*

If an interested man is Alpha-enough or a beta-man is wealthy enough... she can swallow the vomit she choked-up in her mouth at the suggestion of sticking his pathetic wang in her golden-vagina long enough for him to cum.

I remember finding this interesting and saying something like, "Guys are too hung up on penis size anyway... If a guy feels insecure over his dick size he can date a shorter, smaller girl, who has a smaller vagina!"

The conversation halted dead in its tracks. Her eyes sunk-in, her hair askew, her breath reeking of cheap whiskey; she angrily retorts: **"All vaginas are the same size!"**

This didn't quite jive with me. Nothing about girls' bodies were uniform: their hands and feet were all different sizes; they had different sized breasts and hips; bone structure and muscle density- all different! Why *wouldn't* girls have different sized vaginas?!

Now try to imagine if I had suggested that "all men have the same sized wankers," like, you know, it's been smoke and mirrors this whole time. I would have been laughed out of the fucking building!

So I kept my mouth shut... I saw the rage in her blood-shot eyes.

If this scenario had played out in modern times, you might even say she was *ragey*. Maybe she would have posted to Tumblr about it. But the sentiment would have been the same... the sentiment is always the same...

Christine viewed me as a beta-male, and as a beta-male I was not permitted to have any unapproved opinions— and these opinions must be approved by all women at all times.

Yes, someone opinions are irrelevant to this new breed of female- like whether I prefer bologna or salami, what sports teams I like, or what video games I want to play... but when it comes to sex, gender, women, or politics a beta-male's opinions are to be strictly monitored and controlled by any and all women. Dissent is cause for furious anger or immediate disposal.

Men and women can't be friends in the way men understand friendship- the free and honest expression of ideas with mutual respect and tolerance for conflict because men and women were never raised to be equal.

After everything, my Dad was right on the money with what he had told me when I was in High School, wasting countless hours gossiping on the phone with these girls, only I didn't fully understand what he meant at the time; **not only did these girls not want to be my girlfriend, *they didn't respect me.***

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Sally Rapehoax and Fake Rape

Billy Pratt · 22 May 2015 · Archived copy · Original

It was third period lunch- a bit early in the day, yes, but if that's when you were given a lunch period, you were kind of fucked. So it's 10:15am and I'm dipping french fries in mayonnaise, because that was "so European," sitting with my friend Sally Rapehoax.

Sally was a boring and plain kind of girl, but in High School sometimes you're stuck with the people you befriend in ninth grade. Fine, whatever, but my jaw dropped when Sally casually mentioned, "yeah, I've been raped before," almost as if she's telling me about her homework, or her favorite Nirvana song, or how profoundly connected she felt to "The Craft." It all seemed the same to Sally, but my world slowed down just a bit...

My mind began racing. This was horrible. She was confessing something deeply personal to me- maybe she was reaching out to me, maybe she needed my help. I felt paralyzed with anxiety, a low-level panic attack; after all, this was the most intense, real world situation my sixteen-year-old self had ever encountered.

Life had stopped being polite; life was getting real.

And then Sally causally mentioned the second time she was raped; different person, different situation... and then the third, and I was flooded with an immediate sense of relief: **Sally Rapehoax was full of shit.**

So by the time I was twenty-two, sitting at a diner while smoking cigarettes and drinking coffee, I was unfazed when Amanda Rapehoax casually mentioned her rape... and not to be outdone, Jennifer Rapehoax enthusiastically chimed in, "oh, I was raped too!"

In the late-1990s, before rape accusations were able to "go viral," the *casual rape confession* was the equivalent of hashtags, and status updates, and media grandstanding.

But why might a girl lie about being raped? I mean, I wouldn't lie about getting beaten up or having my car stolen. Why lie about being the victim of a crime?

- **Claiming rape gives a girl immediate evidence for her unwitting ability to sexually attract and charm a man.** Every girl wants to appear sexy and convince those around her of her sexually credibility, and claiming rape implies that she was so incredibly desirable that a man was driven mad by lust and insatiability over her sexual presence. He was so overwhelmed that he was willing to commit a crime just to have her.
- **Claiming rape gives a girl immediate depth and life-experience.** Think she's just an empty headed dolt, watching "Dawson's Creek," and re-writing her name a thousand times over in cursive? Guess again, asshole.
- **Claiming rape gives a girl an undeniable victim status.** As a victim her shortcomings can be over-looked, her emotional breakdowns now have gravitas and meaning, and her accomplishments can be magnified and endlessly applauded.

And the thing about Fake Rape is... it's socially despicable to cast doubt upon the accusation, and the accuser is aware of this.

So when you have college student Emma Sulkowicz dragging around a mattress that she bought on the Internet as a self-professed *art project*, even after being outed as a liar, the media will still label her a victim and a **survivor**—despite the stunt serving as an obvious career move for Sulkowicz, majoring in "professional victim."

The use of Fake Rape by Sulkowicz to gain publicity, following the Rolling Stone scandal and Lena Dunham's clumsy blubbing (Dunham, a Fake Rape expert, has offered **support** to Sulkowicz), consequently pushed the public rape accusation past the reaction threshold of detrimental insanity.

The rape accusation thrives on the empathy of a public-identity defined by the protection of victims, and the Fake Rape accuser takes advantage of that identity to the extent where it will be impossible to extend someone blind protection in the face of a accusation.

Shots were fired in the first pubic display of animosity toward Fake Rape; a rebel art project outing **Sulkowicz** (and **Dunham**) as liars... No longer is Fake Rape only decried on anonymous Internet message boards and in hushed whispers; Fake Rape is making it's way into the forefront of public consciousness.

As public grandstanding becomes the norm for rape accusations... as the accused are outed before an investigation into the legitimacy of the claim, as young men's lives are ruined even after the truth emerges, as the importance of the **narrative** supersedes factual reality... the bubble is going to burst, and when it does, reaction to all rape accusations will be scorn and disbelief- and the true victims of rape will suffer.

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Casey Anthony and Cocoa Puffs

Billy Pratt · 10 August 2015 · Archived copy · Original

Casey Anthony epitomized something that I couldn't quite put my finger on as I sat on my couch, eating Cocoa Puffs and smoking a bong, watching the coverage of her trial during a comfortably warm evening in the Summer of 2011.

There was something missing from my life at the time... I wasn't conscious of it, but felt its weight all the same. It wasn't that I was *unhappy*, I was certainly comfortable; I had a passionless career with the faux-achievement of a master's degree, I had a fat girlfriend who was *a crazy bitch* but *I loved her anyway*, and I spent my free time *feeling good*... after all, life was about maximizing consumption while sleep-walking through minimal responsibility. The idea of ambition beyond this baseline, or the contribution of value to a community, were equally foreign and laughable to me.

But even still... alternating between video games, television, pornography, processed food, whimpering oxytocin, and marijuana left a fuzzy feeling on my brain that something wasn't quite right, but I wasn't quite ready to see it yet...

Casey's story would never have worked as a piece of fiction, it wouldn't have been believable. A pretty **brunette** gets knocked-up by a stranger on the Florida house party circuit and decides to keep the baby... and ends up missing the party lifestyle so much that she murders her own two-and-a-half year-old daughter to hit-up the **party scene** even harder than before.

A true story of dopamine addiction gone mad.

And as if to drive it into the realm of the surreal, in the month before her arrest she was so thrilled she had gotten away with the murder of her child that she got a tattoo to commemorate it.



A mother killing her child wasn't something new- Andrea Yates carefully drowned each of her five children in a **bathtub** (and was acquitted by reason of insanity)- but what struck a chord was the frivolity of Casey's motive.

Casey couldn't give up the decisively post-modern *college girl lifestyle* of bingeing on drugs, alcohol, and promiscuity to the point where she murdered her own daughter when faced with motherly responsibility.

She killed to party.

The media coverage would have tried to convince you that **Casey** was an anomaly worthy of social crucifixion, that her story may have been filled with *sound and fury* but it ultimately *signified nothing*; Casey was merely a *bad apple*.

But what if Casey Anthony exemplified the first fully-realized post-modern woman; a woman so determined to *break the shackles* of civic duty, gender rigidity, and social expectation that she *violently rebelled* against the system... Yes, there was blood, but this is rebellion; this was a *Feminist statement*, and in ten-years young girls

may look back at the *courageous* Casey Anthony as a forerunner of *after-birth abortion* (toddlercide?)... after all, she didn't *feel* like being a mother anymore so she *changed her mind*; she *wasn't happy*.

Casey Anthony's story is symptomatic of a broken society. A culture which has cast aside duty and responsibility, replacing it with petty pleasure and obsessive narcissism. Individual experience over collective prosperity. And even if the average woman isn't going to murder a child to preserve her college girl lifestyle, certainly meaning has been lost in a culture that only teaches consumption.

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Primer (2004) and Masculine Identity

Billy Pratt · 5 December 2015 · Archived copy · Original

Part of the beauty of Shane Carruth's *Primer* lies in its alienating density. Carruth doesn't care if you don't get it; nothing about *Primer* is inviting or accessible. You will not understand *Primer* the first time through, repeated viewings are necessary. Even with a **timeline** walk through, *Primer* is conceptually intimidating.

Unlike most films, the thematics of *Primer* are hiding in plain sight. The challenge of *Primer* is following the details of the plot.

When I sat down to watch *Primer* again with the idea in mind of writing about it, I decided to ignore the time-travel elements. Chuck Klosterman had already written an excellent **essay** on *Primer*'s time-travel and I'm unsure if there's anything left to be said on the topic.

So, this time around, I pushed through the fantastically constructed physics and focused the characters.

I was shocked to find an entirely new movie emerge.

If you haven't seen *Primer*, it's the story of two engineers who unwittingly invent a working time machine.

Overnight they go from middle class anonymity to being the most powerful and historically-significant humans of all time. Immediately our protagonists put aside the relatively modest achievement of public recognition through publication and concentrate on something more basic: using their invention to produce infinite wealth.

Theoretically, *Primer* could end there. What is there to want beyond infinite wealth?

It was only upon this recent viewing that something which felt urgent became apparent: Abe and Aaron never physically see any of the phantom money they acquire as bits of data attached to their names, nor do they enjoy the benefits.

You'd think it would only take a day or two of day trading to accumulate enough money to be sitting on a yacht in the south pacific with six dozen sorority girls, yet instead Abe and Aaron dwell in the life they're accustomed to-sitting on a dingy couch in suburban Texas and drinking cheap beer. Almost as if there was something too easy about using the Biff Tannen blueprint from *Back to the Future 2*.

If wealth can be understood as a barometer for power, their time machine trumps wealth as a means of holding power.

The time machine sets Aaron and Abe apart from every other person who has ever existed; the time machine represents an evolution, their very own shrieking **monolith**. Even if wealth is the first place the mind goes upon the suggestion of time travel, there is something that feels plebeian about such a modest goal.

Overnight Abe and Aaron manage to enter the realm the omnipotent... or so they think.

When Abe wonders what to do with life as a bored billionaire, Aaron suggests assaulting a former business partner who got one over on them.... thus bringing them back to Earth. Abe and Aaron aren't Gods after all, they only happened to stumble upon acquiring the power of one.

But what did we learn about desire? Identity trumps all else.

Wealth is pedestrian when you have a time machine which allows for infinite possibility.

Aaron doesn't get around to throwing fists with his ex-business partner, but instead sets his sights on a different goal entirely. Over the course of the few days which the events of *Primer* take place, Aaron attends a birthday party where a man rushes in with a shotgun and threatens a girl.

Aaron sees the party as an opportunity to look heroic- to bravely disarm a gunman and save a woman's life. This

becomes Aaron's sole ambition for using the time-machine; a moment of Alpha male adulation for enacting our highest social priority- saving a woman, and more impressively, risking his life to do so.

Aaron's highest priority isn't wealth or comfort, or even sex, it's the rush of possessing an authentic masculine identity and the social respect which comes as part of the package.

This places the value of having a genuine masculine identity above possessing wealth. Would you rather be the bartender with an easy sense of confidence or the insecure, weakling millionaire?

Although Aaron first suggests asserting his masculinity through street-justice, getting revenge on his former business partner, the prospect of white knighting for a woman takes its place.

Beta-male Aaron believes that embodying the White Knight is the end-game of authentic masculinity and the foundation for male-identity.

Masculinity has become a demonized lost-art and a dirty word, yet its necessity remains. Men understand the value in cultivating a positive male-identity, but the methodology of building that identity has become esoteric. Men will search endlessly for guidance, for advice that works, and for a foundation to understand why some men happily succeed while others fail by merely doing what they thought was right.

It comes as no surprise that my blog dissecting the foundation of **masculinity** is my most read; men are desperate for guidance.

Aaron begins the Primer timeline as a highly-intelligent engineer with a family, ends up acquiring the power of a God, and is still most drawn to the good-feelings associated with having a masculine-identity. When everything becomes available to Aaron, he gravitates toward developing this identity in favor of infinite wealth or women.

However, Aaron's self-image as man has become so diminished that his deepest desire- this revealed inadequacy- is the public recognition of masculinity, and chasing this wish tears Aaron's life apart.

Now don't let anyone tell you that Primer is about time-travel.

Haven't seen Primer? It's fucking beautiful. Buy the HD digital copy at the [official website](#).

Totally confused by Primer? I am too, every single time I watch it... it's part of the fun; check out this absolutely fantastic fanmade audio [commentary](#) track.

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Single Jewish Women

Billy Pratt · 9 January 2016 · Archived copy · Original

Even if the dire unavailability of parking in Jeanette's neighborhood had made the task of meeting her at her apartment for sex seem daunting, only minimally rewarding, I always had a thing for girls who looked like the nerdy Chipette and this fact added a feeling of urgency to a situation marred with inevitable difficulty.

Parking matters; inadequate parking is as off-putting as a bridge or a toll, and I distinctly remember cursing the wind on an early August morning in 2006, drunk out of my skull, taking the parkway home because I was forced by law to relinquish my hard-fought spot, as per alternate side rules, and couldn't find a new one anywhere.

How would I have explained this to a dutiful officer of the law? Would he have been kind enough to understand the inadequacies of parking in that god forsaken, asshole neighborhood?

Luckily my intoxicated journey home was cunningly executed without police intervention, but the scars remained, and while I would have thought that no amount of implied sex was worth dealing with this asshole neighborhood again, she looked like the godamn chipmunk, so I felt compelled to piss in the wind and live out every Saturday morning fantasy I had clumsily composed in 1986.

Parking wasn't as arduous as imagined, and when I got to her apartment, I had immediately picked up on her game; she bamboozled me.

She met me at the door and suggested we get dinner. Yeah, that's cute. It was only twelve hours before that I had the chipmunk squealing like a pig over the phone. Phone sex is a lost art.

"You simply must come over and watch the fireworks." It was the forth of July. People would be out in the country having the kind of picnics that you only read about in books. Maybe at public parks with rusty, foil-covered grills.

If there was ever a time to find parking, this was it.

But it was a serious case of bamboozlement. I declined the dinner suggestion, which was certainly the correct course of action. You don't negotiate with a terrorist.

I should have found a way out then, really, but the perceived effort in parking lent a contrived gravitas to the situation. Even still, staying was the wrong move to make.

We go for drinks. I pay. She wants this to be transactional; I concede. What a shit reality we're left with when gender interaction is so adversarial. Pay for pussy. No price posted. How are your negotiating skills? Put in a bid and pay what you feel.

One drink.

Rejected. She wants a table. She wants dinner. I just have to try their Yoshi Tatsu spring rolls, she says. An appetizer, of course. Her drinks keep coming. Hayabusa's Exploding Anus for dessert.

When the bills comes I have her pay for what she ordered.

She's shocked. She's livid. She's having a low-key, passive aggressive fit.

Her attempt at a sexual bait-and-switch had failed. Turns out her pussy wasn't worth a hundred dollar tab at the Samurai King. Back to reality. Maybe next time I'll be invited up, she says through her teeth. Pulling a bait-and-switch didn't make the evening worth my time, really, but it still was gratifying.

Single Jewish Women. Not a big deal, but I should have known. Domineering and aggressive. An inflated sense of self. Procedural. *Transactional.*

When I kept seeing the letters "SJW" pop-up all over the internet, I thought I had gotten the joke. I mean, I didn't

think it was such a thing, *Single Jewish Women*, but the internet seemed quite taken by it.

And when it got to the point where everyone was shitting on lonely Jewish women, I had to look it up.

Oh.

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The Cool Girl and the White Knight: Sexual Strategy and Identity

Billy Pratt · 16 February 2016 · Archived copy · Original

“Those other girls aren’t *real*.”

Christine went to great lengths to convince you that she wasn’t like *those other girls*. Her experiences had greater depth, her thoughts were more developed, her interests were more artistic, and her feelings were more genuine. Christine had esoteric qualities that made her special and unique, while those other girls were basic and shallow. Christine also had a bigger waist and fatter thighs.

She wasn’t fat, but **Christine** was conscious of her limitations and adjusted accordingly. If she couldn’t compete with *those other girls*, Christine would attempt to hijack and redefine what it meant to win and then try to convince men that what they thought they wanted was all wrong.

The blonde cheerleader with the big chest wasn’t cool like Christine. She didn’t like indie music, nor artsy movies, she didn’t read interesting novels, she didn’t have an ironic taste in fashion, nor would she be happy having a night-in drinking beers and playing Mario Kart. She wasn’t *real*, and Christine was; real is what you should want.

The results weren’t very interesting. Christine was able to be promiscuous with high-value men who probably would have fucked her anyway regardless of her advertised depth. She had beta-orbiters who masturbated her unique identity, but probably would have orbited her anyway. And, she had doofus boyfriends who respected her esoteric thoughts and opinions, but probably would have liked her regardless.

Christine thought she needed to leverage authenticity, in the form of a meticulously sculpted identity, to compensate for not being as aesthetically competitive as higher-value women. Christine thought that with enough salesmanship and authenticity she could land a rockstar boyfriend.

We are primarily animals who want to fuck and this is sexual strategy.

Traditional sexual strategy for women involves those cursed beauty standards which keep feminists up at night. Girly hair and make-up, a charming feminine demeanor, and a sexually alluring body-type; trips to the gym and a reasonably controlled diet. Not foul-language, not cigarette smoking, not beer swilling, nor an ego-obsessed girl bent on proving how cool and smart she is.

When women aren’t aesthetically gifted enough to organically attract the men which they feel entitled to, they attempt to change the parameters by-which men are attracted to women through trickery and sophistry. They redefine attraction and attempt to sell the redefinition. Women assume that since authenticity and identity are important qualities which attract them to men, in the name of universal equality, these things are at the forefront of what will attract a man to a woman- if only she can convince him that bikini-model measurements are embarrassing and unsophisticated.

Sex-positive women, or *sexperts*, attempt to swing their promiscuous behavior into the realm of intellectual savvy. The difference between a *dumb slut* and a sex-positive *sexpert* is defined by the latter; a man should not want the unintelligent, unsophisticated dumb slut. Her promiscuity is inauthentic, she probably has self-esteem problems, or *daddy issues*; therefore the sex she provides is undesirable. Wait, what?

The increased emphasis on identity is intended to garner committed interest from desirable men, but will ultimately serve to coddle the woman’s ego and feelings- she’ll still have the same sex with attractive men, the same beta-male orbiters, and date men who exist somewhere between the two.

The white knight is the male equivalent of the cool girl, using a meticulously sculpted identity in an attempt to garner sexual interest. The white knight will rightfully understand that authenticity and identity are necessary for what will attract women, and like the cool girl, is conscious of his limitations and so he’ll attempt to redefine the

parameters of what women find desirable.

The difference between the cool girl and the white knight is that the white knight has to keep a keener eye toward what he understands as reality while the cool girl could dictate what she wants reality to be. The cool girl can say outright that a high-value male *should* want an authentic girl with admirable interests, regardless of what actually interests him. She's able to do this because she'll always garner the same results regardless- as long as she's just attractive enough, she'll receive some degree of sexual attention from desirable men while rationalizing their lack of sustained interest (ie: "he was a jerk"), all while her beta-male orbiters console her (ie: "he was a jerk... but I'm not" [crickets]).

The white knight doesn't have this luxury. While female sexual strategy is meant to capture the highest-value man, male sexual strategy is meant to capture the greatest number of women.

The white knight is a white knight because he cannot be competitive using traditional male sexual strategy- embracing masculinity, exuding confidence, exuding success, looking good, and understanding female nature; this is the way of high-value men. Since the white knight cannot compete on this playing field, he must attempt to redefine male value as the converse of these attributes.

While it isn't entirely his fault, trying to win by disqualifying the competition is certainly not honorable. The white knight is listening to the complaints of the cool girl who is upset that the masculine man only used her for sex. Since she isn't able to emasculate him to his face (and likely wouldn't if she had his attention again), she blows off steam to the white knight. The white knight hears her complaints and takes them seriously, and without a foundational knowledge of female nature, will come to the conclusion that what she really wants is the opposite of the masculine man ("he was a jerk, but I'm not!").

The white knight knows enough about women to understand the need to entirely buy-in to his persona as white knight- "authenticity" is necessary for a woman- so it may seem curious that men will white knight to one-another when there are no women present. Like [Christine](#) would use her cool-girl persona to coddle her self-esteem, the white knight will define himself, and derive positive self feelings, through his white knighting.

The white knight is a misguided and failed attempt at sexual strategy. Like the cool girl, it is sexual strategy by-way of disqualification. Unlike the cool girl who is able to leverage her youth and sexuality to garner interest, the white knight can only derive satisfaction from having the identity as white knight; he'll then reach a crossroads where he'll either angrily white knight even harder, like the broken gambler looking for that elusive big-score, or he'll pursue a different sexual strategy entirely.

Sexual strategy is like that scene at the end of [Wargames](#) where Joshua the computer tries to launch nuclear weapons and start World War 3; the computer [cycles-through](#) launch codes quickly while keeping the bits of code that are a positive match. Most people unconsciously allow their brain to do this work, matching behaviors with their positive outcomes, and bookmarking those behaviors while discarding the ineffective.

The cool girl and the white knight mirror the [end](#) of the movie, where Joshua learns the futility of nuclear war as a zero-sum game through playing itself in tic-tac-toe, a similarly [unwinnable game](#). Sadly, the cool girl will never learn this lesson by misunderstanding her sexual success as a consequence of her identity, and the white knight is likely too far gone to ever figure it out.

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Sexual Selection and MTV's "Teen Mom" (2009)

Billy Pratt · 28 April 2016 · Archived copy · Original

While I haven't seen Christine in years, every time we catch up the conversation ends with her saying something like, "well, as long as you're happy..." She doesn't understand why I've never left the **suburbs**, nor have I had any real desire to do so. Even more troubling to Christine, the idea that I may be happy with this.

For a conscious man wading through the muck of modern treachery, yes, I am fairly happy. Living in the city never appealed to me; there is nothing better than a quiet summer night. Everything I need is a car ride away, and since I was never really much of a drinker, I rarely had to face the quandary of getting home from a bar.

But, like always, there was more at stake than what Christine could understand. We may as well have been playing out roles on a reality TV show- not exactly scripted, but *loosely scripted*. It was hardly a genuine conversation. Even if neither party felt the overt grasp of invisible puppet strings guiding our interaction- our thoughts, our feelings, our desires, our identity- they are deeply present regardless of our being conscious of them.

Understanding the presence of these puppet strings is what separates the conscious man from the unconscious man. Understanding the depth of their control dictates the level of consciousness. And understanding the true power of these influences can make a man omniscient.

Let's start at the beginning: we are animals who want to fuck.

When I was younger, sex seemed like something compartmentalized to me. Thinking back to an even younger age, "playing outside" had this same compartmentalization. "Playing outside" was an item on a list of possible things to do with free time; it wasn't something that took precedence over anything else. You could play Nintendo, you could watch WWF tapes, you could play outside, you could play with your He-Man toys, you could watch a movie. There was no greater depth of reality or separation between what was artificial and what was real; similarly, for years I thought the phrase *connecting with nature* was just bullshit hippy talk.

And when I got a little older, my initial understanding of sexuality had the same kind of compartmentalization. It was an item on a menu of ways an adult can spend his time; albeit, a not always readily accessible item. Adults got together because they liked each other- be it some kind of mutual interest, or maybe they got along real well like buddies, or they decided that having a relationship would be a *darn good fit*- and they had sex *because* they got together. I knew sometimes women were promiscuous and had one-night-stands, but, they said those were *mistakes*. I understood mistakes.

I'll never forget the morning this all changed. I was standing in front of her locker, before first period. This girl... I had liked her for weeks, but had recently said *fuck it*. Every other time I had liked a girl I found a way to mess it up. So I was just gonna keep to myself... read, work-out, have fun... and forget about girls, because I was unlikable and that's just what it was. This girl... just fucking beautiful. Big blue anime eyes, and an awkward smile... tiny waist but big hips and a full chest, just screaming with teenage fertility.

And before first period, our eyes met... and the whole world seemed to slow down a bit. I couldn't really tell you how long we stood there, but it felt like a lifetime. My heart raced, and I got a throbbing fucking hard-on. I don't know if I've ever felt anything so real again; certainly not recently- there is a diminishing return on stuff like that. You only get so many tickets to scratch off.

Connecting with nature. This was *connecting with nature*. We are animals who want to fuck, and civilization was structured by using this primal truth to its greatest end.

I fucking love "Teen Mom." If you ever hit a lull in conversation on a date, ask her about TV; all women love TV. So when I told the **Single Jewish Woman** that I fucking love "Teen Mom," she rationalized it away by saying it was my "*guilty pleasure* TV show," which would be the case if I were guilty.

But I fucking love “Teen Mom.” I think the goddamn show is genius. If you want to talk reality, take a look at Amber’s desperation as Gary attempts to erase her from her daughter’s life, and the absolute delight he shows in manipulating her instability; there is a major case for sympathizing with Amber, but to what extent is she to blame for her own problems? Or how about the tremendous insecurity that Catelynn clumsily attempts to cover as she continues to gain weight despite getting diabetes! Watching Tyler become a fucking man with having to deal with his retarded family, his obese wife, and his recovering addict Dad... Butch’s struggle with recovery, knowing the devastation it’s caused his son. Maci, the Feminist Alpha Widow, still clearly in love with Ryan while exploiting cucks in his place and raising her son to be the cuckiest cuck of all time... and Farrah, the awful product of a beta-man with money mating with an aging beauty; she’s half-pretty, half-goofy, calls her dickless father by his first name, and is a fucking train wreck to deal with... but as a faithful viewer of Teen Mom, you have enough distance to revel in her misfortune and certain doom- God bless the Teen Mom producers, they are always sure to show the bitch get hers in the end.

“Teen Mom” is slick enough to operate on three levels. On the surface, you’re supposed to empathize with the *hard working single moms* who are doing *everything they can* in order to *make ends meet* and raise their kid. This is the typical “single mom narrative” that Hollywood started to push in the 90s, and was across the board in saturation (ie: Mrs. Doubtfire, Terminator 2). This is how an MTV executive would describe the show to you.

The subtext of this is making fun of white trash. The cast of “Teen Mom” was chosen deliberately, ranging on the far end of white trash- Honey Boo Boo territory- with Catelynn and Tyler, to mid-range white trash with Amber and Gary, to the least offensive bit of white trash with Maci and Ryan, which makes sense as Maci is meant to be the “hero character” for the show- or, in other words, she exists so you theoretically can’t accuse of MTV of exploitation. Farrah, while not exactly white trash, is the show’s villain- but, of course, still on a subtextual level.

The third layer of “Teen Mom” is synthesis and social conditioning: white trash people have kids young.

The takeaway of “Teen Mom” is for the viewer to understand that young people aren’t meant to have children; having children will get in the way of college, and career, and **partying**, and dating. Having children young will force a girl to relinquish freedom in favor of responsibility; and giving up freedom will get in the way of her desire to maximize selection.

I never felt that kind of emotional intensity again like I had with Jessica that morning by her locker before first period. We’re meant to mate young; evolution doesn’t care about college and partying. Teenage love is a brain trip to get us out of our clothes and fucking like animals; sympathetic love is so that a man doesn’t let his bloated and pregnant wife get eaten by mountain lions, and marriage is meant to keep us together after the intensity of youth becomes irritability and resentment.

We aren’t these special unique portraits; we’re more like paint-by-numbers. It’s your job to find contentment within that paradigm.

Females desire the maximization of selection, and men compete with one-another to be selected.

Take that sentence and write it on your hand. Repeat it every night before you go to bed. Keep it in the back of your head when you talk to someone. This is the foundation for understanding people.

In this regard, “Teen Mom” functions as a cautionary tale where women unwittingly diminish their ability to be selective; stay away from kids, and commitment, and responsibility, says MTV, or you’ll be like these icky white trash girls...

Christine liked living in a city because it maximized her ability to be selective. Her **cool girl** gimmick was a tool meant to disqualify the competition, and beyond that all Christine had to do was show up somewhere and stand there. Men would approach and she could either reject or accept their advances. This is sexual selection, and sexual selection is a woman’s primary strategy for mating. This is why women love living in a big city; the greatest possible

potential for selection met with the fantasy of the most desirable men to choose from.

When taken to its logical end, this is why women love globalism. Globalism represents the greatest maximization of sexual selection, even beyond city living; where the world becomes one big city, and all Christine has to do is stand there looking cool.

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“Ghostbusters” (2016) and the Myth of the Disposable Woman

Billy Pratt · 19 May 2016 · Archived copy · Original

Someone working deep inside the Clinton campaign must really fucking hate her guts. Old Hillary is gearing up for an **appearance** on the Ellen show alongside the entire cast of the smelly-like-farts “Ghostbusters” (2016) re-make. I am praying to Jesus that she comes out with the stupid uniform on, personalized with CLINTON across the left breast; she can have her own proton pack, maybe some impromptu CG will be employed. Please God, make her the honorary fifth Ghostbuster.

Don’t just finger me, God; I want it all the way in.

This stupid movie has the stink of death, and for Clinton to attach herself to it almost certainly means that someone working for her is either certifiably retarded or absolutely insane... but why is this movie so particularly hated?

After all, “Ghostbusters” is a movie and movies are bad.

After Hollywood dissolved the girl movie/boy movie **formula** and no one really seemed to notice, they got greedy and pushed so hard that the same internet nerds who cheered wildly for two-hours of a girl beating up Storm Troopers helped give “Ghostbusters” a historic million billion YouTube downvotes.

There was something different about “Ghostbusters,” and whether people had the language to verbalize it or not, the trailer managed to create a kind of subconscious irritation so profound that the same body which developed a heavy tolerance for trash and bullshit was able to successfully reject the damaged organ.

While this may happen automatically for the average person, someone who obsesses over bullshit- as I do- can pinpoint where this transition in the trailer occurs; when the body decides *no mas*, and a mind eager to move past the whole wretched thing forces an angry downvote.

It was when the fat one casually mentions how the girls had “dedicated [their] whole lives to **studying** the paranormal,” that we go off the rails.

Dedicated their whole lives, implying to the exclusion of everything else; the exclusion of socialization or romantic entanglement; the exclusion of comfort and fun.

Their whole lives, implying that women are as disposable as men... And I’d put a hefty sum of peanuts on this being the point where people check out of the trailer and click the misogynistic “thumbs down.”

And as the girls in grey go on to slug it out with pesky poltergeists it only feels increasingly ridiculous seeing women with laser guns risking their lives on the front line of a paranormal war; because women *aren’t* disposable. What kind of men inhabit this fictional New York City, anyway, letting women fight their battles?

Women aren’t forgoing social lives in the pursuit of science, nor are they acting as the first line of defense when shit gets real. These are **masculine** traits, and men realize both positive benefits and negative consequences of this reality.

We understand the inherent value of women and the disposability of men as cultural memes.

The disposability of men dictates that a man must either prove his value or understand he’ll be cast aside in favor of the more valuable; this idea is what maintains the stability of Civilization.

In a world full of animals who want to fuck, men are worthless monkeys dying to stick it in practically anything, and women are coveted **selectors** who only allow the most valuable monkeys to get their dicks wet; this is ultimately the reason why you have an iPhone, or really anything else for that matter.

Existing with inherent value creates an environment of entitlement and expectation, where a woman doesn't have to work as hard to meet her needs. Women receive effortless attention and perpetual praise; with this foundation a woman may exert effort to further create an identity for herself- a doctor or lawyer- but it seems as though *scientist* has a quality of diminishing return; the amount of effort required exceeds the net high-fives received for even bothering. A scientist may spend their entire career as an anonymous link in a chain; hard work and long hours for results only other scientists might appreciate- this is hardly sexy, glamorous, or as effective a tool for identity building as the immediately recognizable Dr. Female Pediatrician would create.

Beyond existing as an unnecessary movie filled with awful comedy, this memetic rejection is why the majority audience will have an inherent distaste for "Ghostbusters," while a small minority will angrily see it with frozen smiles painted on their faces.

Hillary Clinton catering to this hardcore Social Justice crowd is a misstep for someone already so easy to dislike. She senses this, and is responding by hedging all bets on the idea that voters will feel obligated to vote for a woman. While this is probably her best bet right now, using "Ghostbusters" as a vehicle for this pronouncement is the same kind of detached arrogance that Hollywood had in thinking that an all-girl "Ghostbusters" would work in the first place.

And this will be Hillary's **tank** moment; the one misstep that sinks the Clinton bid for 2016.

All hail President Trump.

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Authenticity and “The Cable Guy” (1996)

Billy Pratt · 9 June 2016 · Archived copy · Original

There was a gleam in her eye when “Ghostbusters” (2016) came up in the group’s discussion. She corrected the speaker, a male, who didn’t make an elaborate point to reference the movie’s notorious gender component- “the new Ghostbusters” he offhandedly called it, but this was “girl Ghostbusters,” she said with pride. After all, she was a high school Science teacher and this was a victory with which she could attach herself.

This attachment was the point, existing independently of the movie. She may not see it, nor should she have to- her attachment to “girl Ghostbusters” had served to bolster her identity. The actual film is an afterthought- a big budget leftist talking point. Beyond all the fuss, “Ghostbusters” is a pile of crap with regurgitated jokes, so who really cares?

The modern addiction is identity. The impulse to create a large inventory of bullet points which can be used to detail an image of unique superiority. A strong and intelligent woman should like a movie about female vigilante scientists, that’s easy- a real no brainer, and then it’s on to the next talking point in a never ending continuum. And that’s why “girl Ghostbusters” will be dead in the water by the time it hits theaters- the audience has already cannibalized it and moved on.

All identities are not created equal. The game isn’t mutual acceptance, the game is superiority, and when the stakes are high there must be standards; judgment necessitates regulation. As the race toward becoming the smartest and most unique grows increasingly rigorous, so does our sensitivity toward the potential inauthenticity of the identity being crafted.

I went to a foodie kind of restaurant with a date. Date knew the chef. Afterwards, chef asked what our least favorite dish was. I was unaware, at the time, that this was a loaded question not meant to be answered. I told him I didn’t love the dark chocolate liver pate. Everyone around me got nervous. I got nervous. I said, maybe it was just me. They agreed.

I didn’t understand, at the time, that this was more than just a meal at a restaurant- an enjoyable intermission between one activity and the next- but, rather, I was an attendant to an experience.

My reaction to this experience said a lot about my depth of sophistication. The chef was testing the authenticity of that depth- was I *really* one of them? My answer suggested that I wasn’t. My date got nervous; I had potentially embarrassed her. The vibe became uncomfortable, and I recovered by outing myself as a tourist in an unfamiliar world; having a least favorite dish was *my own issue*- an issue hopefully born out of inexperience and not a lack of sophistication entirely, a mortal sin in this landscape.

Authenticity testing is the natural consequence to “identity as accessory” becoming part of the mainstream consciousness. To understand this shift, we can look to “Fight Club” (1999), when Edward Norton explains that he seeks to express self-definition through his consumer habits, asking “what kind of dining set defines me as a person?” Rather than starting at self-knowledge and moving forward, like Norton would have you believe, he’s instead thinking about how *he’d like to* define himself as a person; the assumption he casually makes is that the authenticity of these choices is inherent.

This observation would no-longer seem clever for a 2016 audience; we understand that our choices serve to define who we *want to be* rather than expressing who we are, and this has created a paranoid feeling pop-culture where authenticity is always suspect.

There is a decadence to this obsession with authenticity. Our culture fosters a kind of Holden Caulfield-like suspended adolescence where wearing the Metallica shirt isn’t enough, nor is it immediately permissible, but only after an undefined quantity of experience is your ownership of the shirt acceptable. Are you sophisticated enough to understand *why you should* enjoy chocolate liver pate, regardless of personal taste? Are you watching Mrs.

Doubtfire *the right way*, ironically and detached, or following the film's narrative as intended?

If the obsession with authenticity is a luxury, indicative of a culture so problem-free that it's boring itself to death, to what degree is the expectation of authenticity reasonable?

Like Edward Norton in "Fight Club," Jim Carrey's lonely, television obsessed cable guy in "The Cable Guy" (1996) is never given a proper name, and like in "Fight Club," this is to imply that Carrey is both everyman and no-man simultaneously; a cultural composite and a blank slate. Carrey is useful to Matthew Brodrick's character of Steven Kovacs, an average-joe beta-male, throughout the course of the film; initially as an underhanded cable installer ready to work his magic and give Kovacs free cable- something of a 1990s urban legend- and later as a crucial element in Kovacs' ailing relationship. Throughout the film their motivations are always clear: the cable guy wants Kovacs' friendship and Kovacs wants to get rid of the cable guy- despite begrudgingly enjoying the cable guy's quirky offerings.

Kovacs immediately recognizes the cable guy's usefulness beyond free cable- when the cable guy tells him to "thirst for knowledge" of his ex-girlfriend's "complicated spender," Kovacs finds it "incredibly insightful" and implements it the following day, even after learning it came from an episode of Jerry Springer. The cable guy suggests Kovacs invite her over for dinner, "Sleepless in Seattle" was showing on HBO- Steven follows along here too and is met with a surprisingly positive reception from Robin, the frigid ex.

Although grossly overused, there is something to a woman's accusation of a man being a "creeper." Follow around a beautiful woman and you'll see awkward men fumble about while attempting horrifyingly contrived small talk- or so I've heard. Say what you will about female privilege in the western world, but this shit is fucking uncomfortable. These men stand out because their interactions are so boldly unnatural and *inauthentic* that their agenda is entirely evident- it isn't about connecting with the woman at all, and even if she's just an attractive sexual vessel for the more nondescript men she interacts with, they are able to hide their intentions and seem authentic while the creeper fails in this regard and stands out as icky.

Human's are wired with a social radar that rejects awkward or unnatural behavior that makes us uncomfortable. We require that our interactions seem natural. The audience is presented with Carrey as a social creeper; the cable guy is anything but natural. When he crashes Steven's pick-up basketball game his desire to be included seems too *pre-planned* for pick-up basketball which is meant to be spontaneous. This is like how the girl at the bar going home with the pick-up artist doesn't want to believe their interaction was set-up by a man looking for sex- she wants to think it was something special that *just happened*.

When the cable guy is included in the game his social inadequacies become glaring. If we dissect Carrey's thought process here it seems logically sound: the guys are playing basketball so he shows up in what he considers to be serious athletic gear, he plays harder than everyone- misunderstanding the term friendly competition, and since Kovacs is his target for friendship he demands to be on Steven's team. To someone who doesn't understand the natural dance of socialization this would seem like how you'd ingratiate yourself into a new group, by proving your value and loyalty. When the cable guy shatters the backboard on a slam dunk, a scene straight out of the climax of a movie, he expects to be met with high-fives... but, of course, that isn't how real life works. Embarrassed, Steven makes it clear that the two aren't friends.

Until the next scene when Steven's television service is disrupted, without "Sleepless in Seattle" he seems lost with Robin, and he's happy to use his friend the cable guy to fix things. Throughout the rest of the film, Steven and Robin's relationship only progresses with Carrey's intervention which begs the question: what do these two really have in common? If a hollow soundbyte from the Jerry Springer show is enough to mend their relationship, what does it say about the relationship's authenticity?

And suddenly it seems as though Steven is the more inauthentic social creeper than the awkward and lonely cable guy. While Steven knows what to say and how to act in order to fit in socially, he lacks true depth- which speaks to his inability to maintain Robin's interest on his own. The cable guy may be inauthentic on this surface level, but he

displays a raw emotion that the viewer can relate to.

A comedy is considered dark when it cuts too close to reality. The characters in a dark comedy are more complex; there is often a sadness beyond the laughter. A dark comedy can produce feelings of guilt- what does it say about us if we find Jim Carrey's portrayal of lonely desperation funny? And, what might be more troubling, how much of the cable guy do we see in ourselves?

How you view the scene at Medieval Times may answer this question. Are you like Steven, and find Medieval Times inherently embarrassing or would you be able to lose yourself in the moment and have a good time? And, if not, what would you think of the people around you who are there to have fun? In the war of identity superiority, our greatest weapon is judgment.

So what did we learn about authenticity? Get good at being cool, and people will like you- act socially retarded, and you'll be treated like a buffoon.

Oh, and always remember to like the dark chocolate liver pate.

The Narrative of Heartbreak and “Big” (1988)

Billy Pratt · 4 September 2016 · Archived copy · Original

In a flash Fake Winehouse was able to transform our hetero-normative experience back into something she was more comfortable with, her own safe space of gender neutrality, with the magic words: “get this shit off me.” Tossing her the tissue box, I chastised her for *breaking the narrative*, something usually reserved for slightly longer than fifteen seconds after **sex**.

Winehouse may have rolled her eyes, but the fact of the matter remains: sex is the *narrative of attraction*. For the red-hot 20 minutes I spent with Amy, she behaved like the ideal submissive- what she wanted in the moment. After, when her big girl brain came back, the feminist became disgusted with herself, and, “get this shit off me,” was her way of re-framing the mess she’d made by treating me like an alpha male.

Sex is like editing together a documentary film. Everything is based in reality, but it’s up to you to put together the story. Initial attraction may be there, but if you don’t string things together the right way, you’re not getting laid.

Both sexes have their role in building this narrative. It’s too easy to reduce the female’s role to that of a movie goer or theater attendee; “just start the damn show and hope I don’t walk out.” Although there is truth to that dynamic, the woman has her part in showing up *fit for the performance*.

If she’s had the bad luck of being out with a beta-doofus, only minimal effort is required. The slightest exertion of feminine prowess will allow her total control of the situation. These aesthetic stakes will rise along-side the value of the man interested. By the time she shows up to the date, he’ll already know if he wants to fuck her or not- from there, as long as she doesn’t commit an egregious, narrative disrupting crime of anti-sexuality, her job is mostly done- any further action on her part is for sport.

As a man falls under the aesthetic spell of a woman, he’ll construct the rest of the narrative on his own with very little input from her. Did she try to make a joke? It’s hysterical! Did she make a rather obvious observation? She’s so smart! Is there any kind of minor nuance to her behavior that can be focused on and doted over? She’s adorable!

His misguided interpretation of her qualities will remain until his attraction for her has been extinguished, which may be accompanied by feelings of sadness, guilt, shame, or even disgust, depending on the particulars of the situation.

Since anything beyond her aesthetic may be his narrative imposing on reality, there isn’t a lingering question of *authenticity*. Ironically, the authenticity of her beauty is actually debatable- women have an entire arsenal of weapons to deceive the gullible- however, most men are only looking for surface level approval.

Conversely, authenticity is a central question for her- an on-going issue to which her attraction to him is contingent upon.

She will also see what she wants and lie to herself, but rather than constructing a false narrative based on his aesthetic, she magnifies the fragments of his personality that she finds attractive and comes to the conclusion that he “must always be like that.”

This is as much a naive fantasy as his personifying her beauty into the idealized girlfriend. While he’s putting his *best foot forward* on their date in an attempt to have a sex worthy alpha male performance, she’s going along for the ride believing that he’s *being himself* and this decisive, assertive, cool and confident guy is *just who he is*.

Only it isn’t so easy- women are savvier in this department than men. She’ll subconsciously match his behavior to what he *looks like* while trying to determine if he *should be* entitled to acting so decisive, assertive, cool and confident. And if this scan turns up negative, she’ll think he’s faking his swagger and aggressively test the depth of

his **authenticity**.

If he's able to hold this frame together for long enough, he'll get laid.

All human relationships contain a degree of narrative, requiring effort and social pruning, because we're really just animals on a dirty rock floating in space. But, yes, we have the capacity of forming intimate relationships with one another, and that can be a great experience... or a devastatingly disappointing experience... or something so torturous that it becomes mentally crippling. Even the bonds of family are held together by narrative- and if this seems inaccurate to you, you likely don't know the pain of a distant mother or an absent father... or, even a **murderous** mother.

There is no greater emotional pain than of a narrative dissolving. Death, of course, is the ultimate narrative dissolution... but short of an ending so dramatic, there is an element of innocence lost for good when a relationship falls into disrepair. When you can take a step back and recognize the true peak, the trust and good feelings that went with it, and even if you're not conscious of the narrative elements that engendered the connection, you're highly aware of your new status as strangers.

If we can crystallize heartbreak to a single moment, it would be the intersection between confidant and stranger.

I find this moment to be the most pivotal scene in Penny Marshall's masterpiece "Big" (1988), where the adolescent-in-an-adult-body Josh is with girlfriend Susan at Sea Point Park after having just crossed the metaphorical point-of-no-return, using the magical Zoltar machine to wish away his adult life.

Upon watching "Big" for the first time in years, this scene carried a tremendous emotional weight which I hadn't remembered, nor prepared for, to the point where I found myself re-watching the scene so many times consecutively that I had to turn the whole thing off and compose myself.

This silly 1980's Tom Hanks comedy had hit a raw nerve, unexpectedly, and I needed distance from it.

The moment, perfectly composed, between Hanks and Perkins manages to use the fantasy elements of "Big" as a means to convey an accurate portrayal of the most heartbreaking moment of a break-up; the moment where it's finally acknowledged that the point-of-no-return has been crossed; the narrative has been destroyed.

When the normalcy of yesterday becomes the reality of today.

We were in her car getting pizza. Her car, because mine was in the shop. Things didn't feel strained as we waited for our pie to be made, but the ride home got heavy. After three years, the days blend together and it's easy to get too comfortable. Although it wasn't spoken of explicitly, we knew what was coming, but like a terminally ill patient hoping for *just another day*, it was easy to put off the inevitable... But something happened on the way home. I can't recall exactly what was said, but something triggered a long conversation, with a hot pizza box on my lap, in the passenger seat of her car. And after saying our **goodbyes**, I tossed the cold pizza in the garbage on the way into my apartment and went to bed.

The fantasy element of "Big" allows for a rarely seen big-screen adaptation of the terminally ill break-up scenario- which is usually a bit too low action for Hollywood, but provides the opportunity for tremendous emotional depth.

Josh and Susan were forced by powers greater than themselves to end their relationship in a manner entirely irrevocable- Josh was living in a world that he didn't belong in and was unsuited for; a thirteen year old can only fake his way through the corporate world for so long... and while this moment was sad for Josh, he liked dating Susan and screwing Elizabeth Perkins, there was certainly the tremendous upside of returning to his family and his comfortable adolescent life, more likely the better man for his brief glimpse into adulthood.

But like all good literature and cinema, the experience of watching "Big" will vary according to the age of the viewer... a child watching "Big" will understand the story as Josh's journey into the esoteric adult world, with all

adult characters in this journey acting as elaborate props, or accessories to aid Josh in his experience. With this framework, Susan serves as the “girlfriend accessory” for Josh to have a truly thorough experience.

However, an adult watching “Big” will understand the story as equally owned by Susan as a fully-realized character, and by the end of the film may be more in-tune with her character arc as Josh walks back home in his over-sized suit.

While their break-up may have been sad for Josh, it's absolutely devastating for Susan.

To fully appreciate this, it feels important to understand exactly who Susan is. Susan is an unmarried woman in her early thirties who begrudgingly works in corporate America, a job which, like Josh, she isn't well-suited for. Susan has had a string of failed relationships with co-workers, and is currently involved with a man whom she doesn't particularly seem to like, but it's alluded that Susan is drawn to the most successful men at MacMillan Toys... ideals that Susan was raised to believe: become the strong independent woman and date the most successful Alpha male. If Susan wasn't raised in Manhattan- something impossible to know- she certainly came to the big city with these goals in mind.

And with these goals in-mind, Susan meets Josh- first as an invisible data entry clerk making less than two-hundred dollars weekly. No matter how quirky and charming Josh could have been in this capacity, Susan would have never noticed him. It's only when Josh raises his profile at MacMillan, becoming Vice President in name-only, that Susan takes notice, and throws herself at him solely due to his corporate success.

But Josh, as a thirteen year old, doesn't *get it*. Josh inadvertently rejects Susan's sexual advances, while tapping into something much greater. For Susan, Josh has proven his alpha male credibility by falling ass-backwards into corporate success. But unlike what Susan has become accustomed to with the typical corporate sharks she dates, Josh has an easy presence and an obvious sincerity; Josh is genuine because that's all Josh knows.

Susan falls in love with Josh because he meets her minimum standard for a man whom she'd consider dating- career success- while not coming attached with all the baggage that career success usually brings: a boring, stressed out, alcoholic asshole. This was likely something Susan hadn't considered as possible as she's gotten older and more romantically jaded, and Josh manages to be so refreshingly different- while also necessarily the same- that Susan is able to take the qualities she likes about Josh and impose her own narrative to fill-in the gaps... almost as if aging Susan is intentionally ignoring the more childlike behavior which Josh exhibits, something comically obvious to the audience, in a desperate attempt to hold the whole thing together.

A similar dynamic exists between Josh and corporate boss MacMillan, a toy company veteran who is sick of working with joyless and ineffective corporate drones. MacMillan appreciates Josh's childlike sincerity and enthusiasm, promoting him to the top of the company, while willfully ignoring the rather obvious red flags of Josh's immaturity... imposing his own narrative on Josh.

The moment Susan acknowledges the impossible, that Josh is actually a thirteen year old body-switched into an adult, the “point-of-no-return” for a break-up has been crossed, and in this case, it feels like a strange combination of Josh's death, and the idea that Josh never actually existed.



When Susan reaches out to hug Josh one last time- the kind of hug where you don't want to let go- it serves as the transition point between the romanticized yesterday and the reality of today. Susan realizes that Josh only existed as her narrative, that she magnified the fragments of his personality which she found attractive, while willfully ignoring what she didn't want to see...but the strength of reality intervened, destroying her narrative entirely.

And “Big” feels like Susan’s story when she laments how Josh won’t remember her, revealing the sad truth of the matter. While Josh’s experience with Susan was significant, it wasn’t significant in the *same way* as the experience was to Susan.

Like a child watching “Big,” Susan existed as an accessory for Josh- a gateway into a different world; the esoteric experiences of adulthood. For Susan, the narrative of Josh represented relief and salvation from that very same world; a world which couldn’t deliver on the promises it made to a younger, more innocent Susan. For Susan, Josh felt like her last chance to make good.

The Human Animal and “Of Mice and Men” (1937)

Billy Pratt · 4 December 2016 · Archived copy · Original

“You give me a good whole house every time. A guy can go in an’ get drunk and get ever’thing outa his system all at once, an’ no messes”- George Milton, *Of Mice and Men*

Compared to male sexuality, female sexuality is surprisingly linear. While it’s true that men enjoy the typical signs of youthful fertility- large breasts, curvaceous hips, clear skin- a man’s attraction to a woman must be tempered by a sense of realistic accessibility. “The girl next door” archetype is sexy because she isn’t intimidating; she’s unaware of how sexy she truly is and this makes her accessible.

Female sexuality is more linear because women don’t feel indebted to accessibility as a component of attraction; for a woman, this would be like going to a movie and wondering, “do I deserve to be here watching this movie?” Since women don’t have this concern, a woman can feel entirely unencumbered with whom she’s most attracted to- which inevitably is the highest-quality male in any scenario.

However, defining *highest quality male* isn’t always what it seems.

People are primarily motivated by sex. Mostly in their fertile years, but try telling the old man renting the 25 porn VHS tapes that. Biologically, you have a single purpose- do what it takes to get laid. Men want to fuck the highest *quantity* of women, because his silly genetics haven’t caught on to the idea that he won’t be popping out two dozen kids, and women want the highest *quality* male to screw them for the same reason.

The solution, as it would seem for the male-end of the equation, is to become the *highest quality male*.

If you get anything at all out of this blog post, I’d like your takeaway to be not going to graduate school for anything outside of Science and Math. If the undergraduate experience can be crystallized as an introduction to leftist ideology, you can look to graduate school as the difference between Kindergarten and High School- in grad school, you’re not a kid anymore and you’re supposed to *know better*.

So, if you sign up for a graduate program ignorant to this idea, as I did, while thinking that an advanced level course load will provide more opportunity for nuanced discussion and outside ideas- after all, you’re a big kid now- you’re going to have a miserable time. You should *know better*, and have had any dissenting ideas bleached away by the angry cat ladies of your initial university experience.

Like everything, I learned this the hard way and unintentionally made every one of my useless geek grad school professors hate me for mistaking one-way ideology for discussion... and this was ten-years before I was more fully reality conscious.

But, when I realized this- that the ideology of graduate school was essentially the memes of a Disney movie deconstructed and taught to classrooms of idiots for the price of a luxury car- I couldn’t help but wonder: why I was doing it at all?

A friend was in a similar situation at the time, locked down deep in a terrible graduate program being force-fed the same mickey mouse bullshit, and we’d joke about how great it would have been to work in one of those old mom-and-pop video stores of the 1980s instead.

Sitting behind the counter in the corner of a strip mall, handing out copies of “*Ghostbusters 2*” and NES games with *Wrestlemania V* on the in-house big screen; your biggest decision of the day would have been whether you wanted pizza, chinese, or deli for lunch. And you’d go home that night with a fresh copy of “License to Drive” and *Bad Dudes*, and there’s your life- no fuss, no muss. Maybe you even sold a beeper that day and your boss will give you a validating high-five.

A totally bullshit free existence.

Only these kinds of video stores were extinct during the culturally deadened 2000s, and what girl was gonna date a video store clerk anyway? We were young virile men; we wanted to get laid.

And the myth we were fed was that a respectable, civilized man with admirable ambition and a professional career was attractive to young women- and so, we pushed forward.

To the uninitiated, those who buy-into this myth hard and are inevitably burned by it, the growing phenomena of a young female teacher screwing one of her twelve-year-old students is a real pickle of a problem, and is ultimately swept under the carpet with the label of *pedophilia*. If she's crazy- if she's *mentally ill*— this stupid motherfucker can get to sleep at night with his myth still in-tact.

But, what if it's not pedophilia at all- what if this speaks to the much larger reality of female attraction that contradicts everything we're taught to believe?

There is nothing inherently attractive about the civilized good-boy who sips his tea, speaks politely, and has an adorable little career with amassed resources. Any drug-addled bartender will tell you that, straight up- no graduate degree required.

When a woman scans her surroundings for the highest-quality male, the civilized man with the admirable career isn't on her list of priorities. Whether she's aware of it or not, her criteria is set to finding the highest-quality *human animal*.

The human animal embodies power; power is needless.

Take a young, fertile woman in her mid-20s. The men available to her are predictably boring good-boys with their silly beards and leftist talking points. She understands that she's supposed to like them, but something she can't quite verbalize is missing. And she has that one little asshole in her third-period English class who never wants to listen, has a bad attitude, and openly mocks her to her face; he doesn't *take her seriously* like her bearded good-boys and she can't help but feel attracted to his entirely authentic showing of natural, budding Alpha male masculinity. Even at a young age this boy embodies the power of the human animal.

The same confusion is sure to arise within the wimpy heart of the bearded boy-man when he realizes that Curley's Wife- described as a 1930's budget Hollywood starlet- becomes attracted to the lovably retarded Lennie Small in Steinbeck's dustbowl classic "**Of Mice and Men**" (1937).

Although the novella primarily reads as George and Lennie's journey toward tragedy, the character of Curley's Wife is the key in understanding why these pieces are in-place to begin with.

If you haven't read "Of Mice and Men" (you should), don't worry- I've got you covered:

George Milton and Lennie Small are traveling from one town in California to another where they plan to work on a ranch as low-paid farmhands. Lennie is retarded, and George is not. The idea is to save enough money in-order to buy their own ranch and not work as wage-cucks for rich landowners.

When they get to the new ranch they meet the rich landowner's son Curley, who immediately picks Lennie for an easy target to bully. We later find out that Curley is a beta-cuck to his new wife, and is convinced the other men on the farm are all screwing her. Curley's Wife is described as being heavily flirtatious, showing off her body to the other men, and it's implied that she's having an affair with the Alpha male of the ranch, Slim. Since Curley is intimidated by Alpha-male Slim, he decides to beat up retarded Lennie... who uses his size and power to crush Curley's hand.

When Curley's Wife learns that Lennie stood up to Curley, she becomes flirtatious with Lennie... who ends up accidentally killing her.

A far too basic reading of “Of Mice and Men” would be to consider Lennie nothing more than a large, clumsy, asexual child; this is typically how women teach the novella. While Lennie is certainly childlike- he’s mostly incapable of following a conversation, looks to George as a father-figure, and has a passion for touching soft things- it’s too simplistic to think that he doesn’t have a fully realized sex drive; after all, the reality of Lennie is that he’s an adult male. And so, when Lennie first encounters Curley’s Wife he takes immediate notice of her beauty, commenting: “Gosh, she was purty” (32).

And when Lennie crushes her husband’s hand with raw power, Curley’s Wife is intrigued. Even if Lennie doesn’t have the social acuity of the highest quality male at the ranch, Slim, Lennie has certainly proven himself to be the most powerful- and this, alone, is enough to attract Curley’s Wife.

It’s something the beta-cuck is incapable of understanding. Lennie is low-IQ, uncivilized, probably beardless, and devoid of leftist talking points... and yet, Curley’s Wife is attracted to his unwitting display of human animal dominance.

And this is where Curley’s Wife makes the fatal mistake of misunderstanding nature.

“Just because you forget about nature does not mean that nature forgets about you”- Stefan Molyneux

Women are sheltered from nature, and thus will inherently misunderstand it. Historically, this was a privilege. Nature is cruel and dangerous; uncompromising, nature is the ultimate fascist. The responsibility of dealing with nature falls to the hands of men, who exist on the front lines of risk when shit goes down and man must protect his tribe. Man, as hunter, understands the unpredictable nature of the *wild animal*; woman as caretaker will only understand the cute and cuddly, cartoonish domesticated animal.

In modern terms, even if hunting isn’t our primary method of sustainment, men are still tasked with the responsibility of understanding reality while women favor a socially acceptable, cute and cuddly, cartoonish worldview; of course, this is problematic in an egalitarian **democracy**.

But when women decide to venture out into nature and poke a few bears, blind to the reality that nature is not something within their sphere of control, things can get ugly.

Steinbeck deliberately compares Lennie to an animal, describing him as walking “heavily, dragging his feel a little, the way a bear drags his paws” (2). With a severely limited cognitive ability and low impulse control, Lennie is quite literally a human animal. Throughout the novella it’s noted that Lennie accidentally kills any pets he takes on, although it doesn’t really matter so much to him as he only wants a pet for the tactile stimulation of its soft fur. This is important to note; the relationship between Lennie and the animal is entirely one-sided, as Lennie is using the animal- much like a wild animal uses its prey for nourishment.

Curley’s Wife is shielded from the reality of Lennie as something dangerous; she is only able to comprehend Lennie as cute and cuddly, assessing him as “jus’ like a big baby” (90). And while Lennie is certainly adorable and childlike, misunderstanding the fact that he’s still an adult male, only plagued with tragic limitations, is just like thinking the adorable brown bear at Yellowstone is just dying to be canoodled.

Curley’s Wife had been used to situations entirely within her control; where she can taste a bit of danger by flirting and teasing the men on the ranch- albeit rugged but ultimately domesticated men- while relying on the dependable safety of the situation. Even if there were less than honorable men working there, they would understand that Curley’s Wife was married to Curley, the boss’s son, and would have them fired if they crossed any lines with the wife.

Only Lennie doesn’t have the impulse control, nor the full comprehension of the situation, to understand where to draw any lines. And when Curley’s Wife pokes the bear, having Lennie touch and stroke her hair, she isn’t able to

control the situation as she can with the other men at the ranch. Lennie won't let go when she asks, and when she demands he let go, Lennie becomes frightened and thrashes her about until he kills her- just like the asshole feeding bears at Yellowstone; nature gives no fucks.

Thinking about my video store fantasy now, I feel a lot like George Milton dreaming of a little ranch to call his own. Although we don't know much about George's history before the start of the story, we can surmise that he hasn't had a lot of luck with women... and we can also surmise that he has a deeper understanding of female nature than he lets on. When he first meets Curley's Wife he immediately get the deal with her, saying "I seen 'em poison before, but I never seen no piece of jail bait worse than her" (32).

George's dream is a little ranch to call his own, but not for the benefit of a woman nor to start a family, but to live out the rest of his years comfortably with Lennie.

George understands the reality of female nature and chose to go his own way.

And in semi-modern terms, this would have been like saying fuck-it-all and taking up a stake at the local video store, getting chinese for lunch, and taking home a bag full of NES games and VHS smut at the end of the day. It should be noted that graduate school wouldn't have been something available to George, and that due to the poverty of the Great Depression, women were looking for wealth as a primary qualification to marriage- so, George as a homeless, migrant farm worker was left out of the conversation entirely.

But even if resources were the primary for a woman's long-term interest in men, resources still weren't something *attractive* to the female animal. Remember, nature isn't something that changes; nature is the ultimate fascist.

Steinbeck understood this too, evident when Curley's Wife reveals why she's married to Curley in the moments before her death. Throughout the story it's obvious that the relationship between the two is one-sided; Curley desperately wants her acceptance, even to the extent of wearing a glove full of vaseline on his left hand to keep it "soft for his wife" (27), while Curley's Wife does everything she can to avoid Curley.

And in her final moments, Curley's Wife explains that she met a man from Hollywood who gamed her into believing that he could get her into the movie business and that she should wait for a letter from him inviting her to the studio. When the letter never arrives, Curley's Wife blames her mother for stealing it and keeping it from her. Was there ever a letter? Was he really someone from Hollywood? Or was he a sharp, 1930s style pick-up-artist looking for a cheap lay? I'll let you decide.

That same night she met beta-man Curley, and they eventually married as Curley was heir to a wealthy ranch and her ticket out of poverty. It should stand as no surprise that Curley's Wife finally reveals that she doesn't like Curley at all... because resources aren't inherently attractive to women, as every beta-cuck marrying a washed-up thirty-two year old will eventually find out; female attraction is reserved for the *highest quality* human animal, and everyone else serves as pawns in the game- a fact that George Milton implicitly understood, and maybe even what the guy renting you "**Weird Science**" knew a little something about.

It Used to be Better: The Death of Masculinity in Professional Wrestling

Billy Pratt · 27 February 2017 · Archived copy · Original

“If you take a thing apart or modify it, there are certain aspects which must remain intact for it to retain its identity. Without certain parts, it becomes something else.”

So it's a lazy Sunday night, I did my dishes, tidied up, and I've got some time to kill. Time to hunker down in front of my TV and let the clown and puppet show melt my brain when it occurs to me- it's a pay-per-view Sunday, brother!

The pro-wrestling pay-per-view Sunday was a highlight of my childhood. Months of intricate story lines, peppered with plot twists, met with my own, personal, *mental preparation* for the big day which would ultimately culminate in.... nothing. My parents weren't going pay for a play-fighting television show (“pay for TV!?”).

But those times when I carefully wore away their resolve with begging and pleading- usually with highly detailed explanations of all the moments that led to this *happening*, where on this particular Sunday night *everything* would be coming to a head, and *nothing* would ever be the same in the entire world (wrestling federation).

I needed to be in front of my aging 27” to take it all in... and those times where they yielded to my lust for staged grappling were fucking beautiful.

But you have to grow up sometime. I stopped watching fake sports in my mid-20s; things just felt *different*. Main event play-fighting didn't hold my interest anymore... and it wasn't until the introduction of the beautifully nostalgic WWE Network that I gave the whole thing a second thought.

The WWE Network, where I could relive those childhood memories thought to be lost to the ages; a place where Hulkamania could truly live forever. Of course, at first, I told myself that it'd just be for the free starter month. I only really wanted to check out a few old Saturday Night's Main Events- maybe the time where Hogan suplexed the Big Boss Man off the top of the cage, the equivalent to Foley's dive off the cell for its time...

But then I realized it was *November*... why not check out Survivor Series '89, one of the few shows that my parents did, in fact, pay for TV and allow me to watch live. And, before long, I was waist deep in the build to The Black Scorpion vs. Sting at Starrcade 1990- a show that I had been so captivated by as a ten-year-old that I tuned-in to watch scrambled (after all, how could I have gotten to sleep that night without knowing who the dastardly Scorpion was?!).

It didn't take long for them to get me; I was back, in front of the TV once again, watching drug addict grifters stealing from children. And while I had joined the Network, to re-experience the warmth of my childhood, I had no intentions of checking out the current product.

I mean, right?

Until a cold Sunday in March- a pay-per-view night, indeed- but this wasn't any old ham-and-egger show... it was Wrestlemania; the true *Colossal Tussle*- the showcase of the immortal play-fighters. This was a big deal, and I knew it.

Just the word *Wrestlemania* produced a warm feeling unparalleled to others- conjuring memories of the intense paranoia felt in the weeks leading to the show, scrambling for a venue to soak-in the spectacle while acknowledging the horrifying possibility that none of my friends' parents may be dumb enough to buy it.

Truth be told, it was mere hours before the start of Wrestlemania VI that I was able to secure a proper viewing location... I'll leave it to you, the reader, to imagine the whirlwind of emotions I faced that day.

But now, as an adult, scrambling to secure my spot in viewing scripted-history was a thing of the past: Wrestlemania came free with my Network subscription, and since I still felt some attachment to the mental images it drew, I felt a bit of excitement- it was pay-per-view Sunday once again, brother!

And when it was all over, I felt only confusion. Yes, the show was boring- but even during pro-wrestling's hottest periods there were bad shows too. I remember getting a loose hand-job during the midcard of Wrestlemania XV- a sure sign that something was amiss.

But this was different- this was confusion. What the heck did I just sit through?

On the surface, it looked the same. I mean, it was called Wrestlemania- the name on the marquee still says *sports entertainment*. There was a ring, and there were men pretending to grapple for fictional reasons- this much was certain. Even some of the names were the same; there was the Undertaker, and HHH .

If you were watching from across the room, half looking at your phone, half paying attention, maybe you'd have been convinced... but, not me. Unfortunately, I had made the ugly mistake of taking the fake-event *too seriously*, watching *too closely*; expecting *to be* entertained.

Watching closely, you see the little differences. Like how the steel guard rail has been replaced with pillows. Gone were the natural promos given by the likes of Jake "The Snake" Roberts and Dusty Rhodes, replaced with stilted, awful monologues. The fake grappling looked faker than ever; closer to a collaborative stunt show than an actual representation of two men pretending to fight.

There were no badass heels like "Ravishing" Rick Rude making the audience feel badly about their bodies. And, worst of all, everything on-screen was delivered with a wink-and-nudge- just in case anyone dare take the clown show too seriously.

It was almost as if you recreated an entire movie, shot-for-shot, using non-actors. Everything kind of looked the same while also looking horribly weird and different.

Which begs the question: how much of something can you change without entirely making it something else?

It was only after getting a look at the members of the audience, the "WWE Universe" (I'm throwing up), that something urgent and terrible had occurred to me. There were grown men wearing unicorn horns and holding up signs about hugging. Wrestling fans were never known for their *own* masculinity, but part of the allure of professional wrestling was being *drawn to the display* of masculinity.

When "Ravishing" Rick Rude comes out to the ring looking greased and ripped, as if he just fucked every girlfriend in a twenty-five mile radius, while calling you a sweat hog, you were powerless against his heavy verbiage. You were forced into taking the only action available: booing and hurling insults. When The Ultimate Warrior hits the ring as a paragon of positive masculinity, you're naturally on his side. If Rude cheats to win, it's intrinsically understood that his decision was based on the idea that cheating was a last resort.

Despite Rude being more masculine than the audience, Warrior had proven himself more masculine than Rude, forcing Rude to exploit Warrior's honor (and the naivete) to garner a cheap victory. So even if the audience is deficient in their own masculinity and unable to compete with Rude, they can feel both satisfaction and anger in how Rude was unable to defeat the Warrior without cheating. And when the Warrior finally gets his revenge, the victory is even more rewarding.

This is the basis of the emotional roller-coaster that is professional wrestling.

Professional wrestling fans are looking for a dramatization of combat where larger-than-life figures play out different masculine archetypes which the wrestling fan can attach himself to and interact with. This is why the hardcore wrestling fan will dress like, mimic, and act out the machismo of their favorite wrestler; they

want to see themselves in the charisma of Ric Flair or the irresistible force of Hulk Hogan.

It's easy to compare bad guy wrestlers with the alpha male bullies the wrestling fan has encountered throughout his life; the quarterback who screws the cheerleaders, or the asshole boss who gives everyone a hard time. The undeserving characters who cheat to win and always manage to find a way to come out on top, like the Honky Tonk Man, are infuriating because we've all known someone like that. Professional wrestling can present these archetypes and also manage to end the story with the honorable wrestler triumphing.

“Men seek out substitutes for fighting...men ritualize play fighting with sport.”

In Jack Donovan's meditation on authentic masculinity, “The Way of **Men**,” Donovan defines masculinity as being composed of strength, courage, mastery, and honor. In looking to the archetypes of classic professional wrestlers, we can see where these qualities are either represented or deficient depending on the desired effect.

A wrestler may have strength as their signature quality, something surely masculine, but lack honor- making him the typical *monster heel* like Big Van Vader or Sid. He may have strength but lack courage, like “Hollywood” Hulk Hogan, or even strength without mastery- with which the Ultimate Warrior certainly comes to mind.

Courage is defined by the “will to act in the face of adversity” and is the hallmark of the good guy, babyface wrestler. When you see blood in professional wrestling, the idea is typically to make the babyface seem more courageous. We feel sympathy for bleeding “Stone Cold” Steve Austin as he battles through Bret Hart's sharpshooter at Wrestlemania 13 due to the depths of his courage.

When a babyface fights through the odds of entering the Royal Rumble at number one, we love him even more when he shows the courage to persevere- a storyline used again and again because it's just that effective. And when a heel exploits the courageousness of a babyface wrestler, like HHH leaving Mick Foley laying in a pool of blood, we hate them even more. Courage without strength is, of course, another hallmark of wrestling storytelling- the hapless geek who refuses to quit- and we've seen that play out in pathetic old Mankind before transforming into his badass alter ego Cactus Jack.

Having mastery over anything- be it a subject, skill, or art- is something which is revered in the masculine realm. This is why professional wrestling has a *World Champion*- and the wrestling fan will either respect (or fear) the champion who conquered the competition using legitimate (fake legitimate?) means to the title... or despise the cowardly villain who cheated to win. The modern fan can even look to the all-star ring technicians like Ric Flair or Bryan Danielson and respect them for their mastery of the carnival.

Another hallmark of the professional wrestler is their sense of honor, or lack of honor. Where they fall on the barometer of honor is what ultimately decides their fate as either hero or villain.

For these archetypes to be effective, and for the emotional component of wrestling to resonate, the wrestling fan must be given the chance to become invested in taking the show seriously. The current product lacks this depth, almost to the point of making fun of the viewer for bothering to try. Even if the classic characters of the old era had cartoonish personas, they were still believably human. Modern wrestlers do not feel like three-dimensional characters or *actual human beings*. Even if someone like Kamala had a silly gimmick, I was still able to believe that he was a Ugandan savage- and there was a sense of danger to that. I was able to believe that Mr. Perfect was really that smug, or that Macho Man genuinely had a screw loose. I was able to get emotionally invested in wins and losses, dramatic triumphs and devastating disappointments, because the characters ultimately felt human.

Maybe the overt masculinity of classic wrestling has become too venomous for a modern audience. Maybe advertisers need a softer product to sell. Or maybe times have changed, and all forms of entertainment are being

stripped of masculinity as our cultural testosterone whimpers along on life support- while men dressed as unicorns try to capture the greatness of what has since faded.

When it used to be better.

From the Arcade to the Girlfriend Experience

Billy Pratt · 1 June 2017 · Archived copy · Original

If the months between high school and college represent a budding sunrise of emerging freedom, the summer between graduate school and real life becomes your last chance at tasting it; time to get sick on Halloween candy because tomorrow is the start of winter. I spent these months on a friend's couch playing "Mario Baseball" (2005)- I regret nothing.

Video games are meant to be played socially. The long extinct shopping mall arcades of the 1980s were social hotspots buzzing with life as teenagers would crowd around machines watching the cool kids do their thing amongst the flashing lights and buzzing sounds of games like Q*Bert and Centipede, telling their own kind big fish tales of forgotten high scores; "...if only they'd left the Frogger machine plugged in, then you'd see..."

Consoles were originally packaged with two controllers for this very reason- video games were meant to be played together. In fact, a two-player mode was so important to the **programmer** who ported "Pac-Man" (1982) to the Atari 2600 that he mistakenly sacrificed game quality and playability to accommodate the game's social aspect, producing an atrocious home-version and ultimately killing the market until the rise of the Nintendo Entertainment System in 1985- a console which also came packed with two controllers.

It wasn't until the Nintendo 64 (1996) that packing a new console with two controllers became a needless expense. The rise of the single-player gaming adventure wasn't necessarily a bad move- longer, more intricate stories were able to be told and players were rewarded with franchise games like "The Legend of Zelda" and "Final Fantasy," which took the genre to places unfathomable to those shopping mall arcade heroes. Experiencing the kind of dread and solitude a game like "Metroid" offers wouldn't be as effective with a second player- some quests are meant to be taken alone.

None of this would matter if the larger story wasn't so fucking sad. We aren't just playing video games alone- we're doing practically everything **alone**. To the point where normies are even red pilled on the topic. In September of 2015, "Scholastic Scope"- a leftist propaganda rag published for middle school kids- ran a **story** titled "Is Technology Killing our Friendships," citing the uniquely modern paradox of being more connected than ever through smart phones and social media all while feeling horrifically lonely.

You know it's a thing if normies are picking up on it; the rarely seen "woke af normie," who'd love nothing more than to sit you down over a root beer and tell you a thing or two about a thing or two. Fucking kill me.

While the larger story of the N64 became its beloved multiplayer games like "Mario Kart"- anyone who had the system surely has tales of all-night, code red fueled "Goldeneye" sessions (no **OddJob!**)- but this became the last gasp of true social gaming. The rise of the monstrous PlayStation 2 and X-Box consoles in the early twenty-first century placed the in-person multi-player game as a lower-priority in favor of the solitary experience. And when high-speed internet became affordable, the idea of social gaming was relegated to playing online- which is every bit as satisfying as using Facebook.

Along with gloriously dingy mall arcades, and all-night multiplayer gaming marathons, the gritty slasher movie had its heyday in the 1980s and was all but dead by the mid-1990s. As much as they'll try to revise the formula, go back to the drawing board, put a group of teenagers in the woods and have them hunted down by a madman, it doesn't work. The audience is too smart for a straight slasher movie, and the characters behave like they know they're in a movie; the modern slasher can't help but be tinged with an awful irony. You won't have that "what the hell are these things?" moment in a modern zombie movie because it's assumed that the characters have actually *seen zombie movies*.

Something like "**Friday the 13th: Part 2**" (1981) works because you don't get the sense that the movie is embarrassed to be *Friday the 13th: Part 2*; the characters aren't acting like they're *too hip* to be in Friday the 13th:

Part 2. The movie isn't self-aware, and that's part of its charm- there was an earnest kind of innocence to it.

But even if I won't get another classic slasher movie in cinematic form, it's still possible as a video game. Given the mechanics of a video game, and how what we take for granted in a movie can suddenly become a selling point, like a spooky atmosphere, you can present the basics of what made the classic slasher great without seeming dated. The non-ironic, straight up slasher movie can live on as a video game- and it does exactly that with the newly released [Friday the 13th game](#).

While I haven't touched a video game in years, I was super excited for the Friday the 13th game! It looked like everything I'd ever want in a Friday the 13th game; you are a counselor in the woods at Camp Crystal Lake, Jason is on the loose hunting you down, what the fuck do you do? It couldn't get more straight to the point.

And I was so excited for the game that I wanted to see some real gameplay footage in the days leading to its release, so I jumped on YouTube and found people playing it live! "Video game streamers," apparently that's a thing, where you kick back and have all the fun of watching [other](#) people play video games.

I clicked on a stream of a rather cute [girl](#), doing her cute girl thing, while trying to evade Jason- and when he'd get too close, she'd squeal "don't do it! I'm a good girl!" and isn't that adorable? Admittedly this was entertaining, and I certainly got a look at the game... when something kind of funny happened. Someone tipped her \$10- for what, I wasn't quite sure- and she enthusiastically squealed "ten dolla holla," and then reminded viewers that for \$20 she'd write their name on a post-it note and put it on her wall. If you subscribe to her channel, your name even pops up on the screen! And would you believe, in the same stream, someone tipped her \$100?

Tits. I was certain it had something to do with tits, but as time ticked by and more money came in, there wasn't a single mention of tits *nor ass*. Not one. I had to investigate.

So why are people throwing money at a girl for playing video games on the internet? If you go to her [website](#), she says:

YouTube allows me to combine all of my **passions**: people, gaming, and making videos. But I believe I'm *different* from most YouTubers out there. I have been given a platform and I want to use that platform to **change** people's lives for the better. I want people to know that whenever they click on one of my videos, that they'll **laugh**, they'll feel **encouraged**, and they'll feel like part of a **family**. I want to inspire people.

And suddenly we take the giant leap from "video game streamer" to cult leader.

Lets closely examine the language she uses. She starts by stating that this is a *passion*, which is a stab at claiming authenticity. To further drive this to the point of absurdity, she says she's "*different* from most YouTubers out there," despite being pretty much exactly the same. This type of claim is not unlike the [cool girl](#) who has "esoteric qualities that made her special and unique, while those other girls are basic and shallow."

But not only will One_Shot_Gurl let you watch her play video games, she'll also change your life for the better! By watching her play video games! You'll laugh, and feel *encouraged*, and feel like you're part of a family.

Feel like you're part of a fucking family.

What she doesn't need to mention- it's as self-evident as a vagina- is that she's really selling lonely men the *girlfriend experience*.

The girlfriend experience is a uniquely male desire; there is no female equivalent, or *boyfriend experience*, as most women are able to garner beta-male orbiters to effectively serve that purpose (or gay men for the fat ones). Think of the girlfriend experience as the x-factor that separates a good stripper from a bad stripper- it isn't her body, or her dancing skill- it's if she can make you *believe* the fantasy is real. That her flirtation with you is genuine, her desire matches your own, and the fleeting moments you spend with her are *different* and special.

It's a lot easier to sell sex than it is to sell a fantasy, and while One_Shot_Gurl is keeping her clothes on she's selling you the fantasy of friendship, family, and the idea of having an adorable gamer girlfriend who makes you feel special for \$10 \$20 (you want your name on a post-it note stuck to her wall, right?).

When asked during her show why she likes being a streamer, she said it's because she can "set her own hours." After all, this is her job. And while she isn't a stripper or a prostitute, she's selling the same fundamentals, only dishonestly.

For the record, One_Shot_Gurl does seem quite genuine and really very nice, and I felt a slight tinge of guilt writing this post being critical of her... that maybe I'm wrong, and maybe her streaming really does come from a place of sincerity and passion and maybe, just maybe, that stripper really did want a piece of old "Bad" Billy.

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Forgiving Your Father and “Return of the Jedi” (1983)

Billy Pratt · 12 August 2017 · Archived copy · Original

“All the times that I cried, keeping all the things I knew inside. It’s hard, but it’s harder to ignore it.”

Re-watching “Return of the Jedi” (1983) as an adult makes the scene where Luke burns the body of his father stand out as the true climax of the original trilogy- the culmination of Luke’s journey. While it may seem tragic that sister Leia wasn’t there beside him, this was something Luke had to do alone. After all, it was only Luke who saw the human face of his father and felt his humanity- and aside from the situational limitations of the movie’s plot, only Luke would have ever been able to understand his father on that level. Luke delivering his father’s funeral was his final rite of passage into manhood, and the true return of the Jedi.

Every man will have to bury his father, but will every man have understood his father when the time comes? The evolution of a man’s relationship with his father mirrors Luke’s struggle with Vader throughout the course of Star Wars- from not truly knowing him through the inevitable conflict of a young man’s teenage years. If you’re lucky you’ll have a moment where the pieces come together and you see your father as a part of yourself- but not everyone gets there... and, unlike a Hollywood movie, the story may end first.

Luke learning his father was Darth Vader, galactic overlord, was shocking enough to cause a suicide attempt. The perceived failing of his father was more important to Luke than Vader’s *identity* as father. Culturally we understand men primarily through the contributions which they offer- only women are bestowed with inherent social value. Vader failed Luke by virtue of running the Empire- to silly Luke, this was the antithesis of value- and thus invalidated Vader’s status as a father to him.

Of course you would have jumped at the chance to “rule the galaxy together as father and son,” but Luke was a stupid motherfucker.

Our modern conception of fatherhood may be less dramatic, but it’s not very different. When a respect for fatherhood *isn’t* something institutionalized- ours is a world where *Father Knows Best* is treated like a bad joke- we default to a father only being worth what he’s able to contribute. Problematically, this contribution is judged by those who may not be old enough to understand the bigger picture- the reason why unpopular decisions are necessary.

Women raise children, men raise adults.

The connection a child has to their mother is drastically different than the relationship *developed* with their father. Like a woman’s social value, the relationship she has with her children is inherent- bestowed by nature. Biologically, a man is a sperm donar- fatherhood is a social construct.

So it follows that a boy will first get to know his father through the lens of his mother. The purpose of the patriarchy as a familial structure wasn’t male dominance through brute force, having women relegated to a role somewhere between sex slave and house keeper, but rather a way to guarantee that fathers wouldn’t be excluded.

The expectation for a wife was to respect her husband- “for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health”- in our modern world it even seems appropriate, and rather pressing, to add “in times of alpha” and “moments of beta.”

The father you knew wasn’t the man who attracted your mother- attracting a woman is the easy part. You put your best foot forward- you accentuate the positives and hide the negatives; you do everything in your power to embody the fantasy she has of the *perfect man*. It isn’t an act- this man is someone you’d like to be, and her attraction makes you feel confident in that identity- you strive to be her rock.

But life is hard, and every man will stumble; he'll feel defeated, he'll question himself- and he'll find it increasingly difficult to hide these feelings from his wife. When respect was her responsibility it may have encouraged him to fight, but in the wild west of a post-patriarchy, she'll more likely resent this weakness. In the dance of mating and courtship, women are those who *select*, and she'll be irritated that she chose a buffoon. In a world where divorce is an easy escape, she'll wonder *what if*.

I remember standing next to the eggs, at the supermarket with my mom, when I was twelve. We ran into my best friend's mom. She was buying eggs too. They got to chatting, and within a minute or so, she tells my mom that she never wanted to marry my friend's dad- he was a good guy, but he was *boring*- he was her back-up plan. Her main choice wasn't interested, but now she wonders *what if*. Then we picked out our eggs and went to the check-out.

In all fairness, the guy was seriously boring.

The father you met was a man who had been through a lot- was the mother you had the type to respect him through his struggles, or wonder *what if*?

Maybe I'm a cynic, but the latter seems more likely- in which case, a son's perception of his father will be initially tainted by his mother's disappointment. As a teenager, and the inevitable conflict those years contain, a poor foundation for this relationship will only worsen. If you think your father is a weak loser, suddenly a weak loser is telling you what you can and can't do- for reasons that aren't immediately apparent to you.

And that's if your father was strong enough to not mentally check-out of an unwinnable situation.

Shaping the image of your father through the eyes of your mother created a man only worth what he could do for you. His failings became magnified; you defined him through his shortcomings. As implicit as these feelings may have been, they seeped into the cracks of your relationship and weakened it. This may have further damaged a man already struggling to be the father and husband he needed to be.

You surely had a moment, as a young adult, where you saw parts of him in yourself and were horrified; like Luke in "The Empire Strikes Back" (1980), when he sees his own face in Vader's mask- the *fear* of becoming your father. This was something you wanted to fight against. Your father was a weak man, your father was the villain.

I remember when I first saw things in my father that my mother couldn't see- maybe things my father, himself, couldn't understand. As I got older, I became more in touch with not only my feelings, by what was under the surface of particular emotions- *why* I felt the way I felt. The insecurities, the sadness, the self-doubt. A marker for adulthood can be understanding the true challenge of adulthood- understanding that a man's life is defined by struggle.

Take a moment to recognize that your father was alone in that struggle. He didn't have the connectivity and resources of modern technology which has served to foster a re-emergence of masculinity and an understanding of gender dynamics. He was taught that his generation embodied a better way of thinking, and a good man was one who embraced this progression. Gone was the responsibility to lead a relationship- his generation would *listen* to their women and treat them as *equal partners*. A good man was a compassionate man who respected his wife's strength and independence, and in-turn she would forgive his moments of failure and weakness.

Just like you, all your father wanted was to be a good man.

And as this way of thinking slowly destroyed him, it was all he knew.

When Luke looks down at his robotic hand, reminiscent of his robotic father, after striking him down as the Emperor cackles, he finally gets it. Life is hard, and Vader was only a man- not an impossible ideal to embody, nor a man only worth the sum of his contributions. Vader was a man, like Luke, and a man only Luke could understand- if not for Luke's empathy and compassion, Vader was alone in the galaxy.

It may not be as dramatic, but it's just as heroic- your father only has you.

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The Entitled Boomer and “Vacation” (1983)

Billy Pratt · 11 November 2017 · Archived copy · Original

“I found out long ago, it’s a long way down the holiday road”

Believe it or not, Clark W. Griswold was pretty fucking masculine. Sure, “Vacation” (1983) featured a kind of proto-idiot Dad, a trope that would become the standard by 1990- but Clark was a different kind of idiot Dad.

Clark was a masculine idiot Dad.

“Vacation” relied on one-joke with Clark, but luckily it was a good one. When Clark would do something stupid, royally screwing things up or putting his family in danger, he would say “I meant to do that” and move on.

This took many different forms. When Clark goes to trade in his car for a new station wagon before the trip- one he surely researched meticulously (my own Dad has a “Consumer Reports” subscription to this day)- he gets the old “bait and switch,” being forced into buying an ugly **clunker** after his own car is ~~traded in~~ destroyed. To dispute this by waiting for the car he ordered to come in would ruin his family’s vacation- so what does Clark do?

He sells his wife on the ugly clunker by using the same line that the scam-artist car salesman used on him: “*You may think you hate it now, honey, but wait until you drive it.*” Or, in other words, “I meant to do that.” He isn’t apologetic, he doesn’t admit defeat- he takes inventory of the situation and moves forward. This is the masculine approach- yes, even if you’re an idiot.

A masculine man makes the best of every situation. He doesn’t whine, or complain, or wish things had turned out differently- he understands his surroundings and takes things from there. A man need not admit his mistakes when he’s ready to deal with their consequences. That was five minutes ago, get over it, and let’s figure things out.

Using this formula, Clark manages to get the family from Chicago to California. The traditional family odyssey to a big, ostentatious, tourist trap theme park- a vacation staple for the Boomer. If you had two weeks off from work, you took the clan to Wally World. It’s just what you did.

Only for the Griswolds, things go south when they find Wally World closed for repairs- and this is where Clark goes off script, breaking his implicit philosophy of the glass being half-full. Instead of making the best of a bad situation, Clark buys a gun, takes the park security guard hostage, and leads a rogue tour of the park.

Because Clark is not only a masculine idiot, Clark is also an entitled boomer.

Boomers were the first generation to be told that their feelings mattered- and, of course, that they mattered a lot. Their parents weren’t just *their parents*, but rather a subject of critique and derision. See, the Boomer was sore that their parents weren’t quite the parents that they would have liked. Instead of moving on and making the best of it, they bitched and stewed because of *feelings*.

The consequence to this became the burden of consciously beating their parents at everything. While Mom and Dad may have been working class, the Boomer went to college and got a prestigious office job. While Mom and Dad may have let gender roles dictate their marriage, the Boomer’s relationship was an *equal partnership*. While Mom and Dad may have been distant and authoritative, the Boomer parent was flexible and accommodating.

Boomer parents understood that part of growing up involves access to a variety of experiences- experiences which their own parents may have overlooked or denied. Childhood shouldn’t be disciplined- childhood is about fun, and letting “kids be kids.” Teenage years are about expressing individuality, and “finding yourself.” Sending your kid away to college isn’t about classes, but rather *experience*.

If Boomers understand anything, they understand entitlement.

Boomers found out the hard way that it's all much easier said than actually done. They were more like their parents than they wanted to admit, but unlike their parents they became a bastardized mixture of tradition and progression- often retaining the worst of each paradigm.

To support the suburban mansion, both Boomer parents worked long hours at their prestigious office jobs. MTV handled their parenting duties, and to their befuddlement, their kids matured into detached and apathetic jerks. Despite their encouraging individuality, it was expressed in ways that horrified and confused them. And, on top of everything, their kids even had gripes with their progressive parenting and feelings of their own- and they mattered *a lot*.

Boomers quickly learned that despite trying to embody the polar opposite of their own up-bringing, what they created for themselves was a hot mess. The Boomer expected to "have it all" at bargain prices- the lucrative career, the gorgeous house, the successful children- and ended up with miserable chaos.

If day-to-day life was a losing battle in creating the perfect home life, they scaled their expectations back. If they couldn't have it all, they were willing to settle. A few days strewn throughout the year, the hapless Boomer would put the pieces together in an attempt to experience blissful perfection: holidays and vacations.

And this is what Clark Griswold- Boomer dad extraordinaire- had in mind with the doomed journey to Wally World. When wife Ellen laments the decision to drive, Clark remains insistent on the road trip. This wasn't about convenience- this was tradition.

Clark wasn't going to be a travel cuck.

There was more at stake with the trip than family time. For Clark, the vacation was about validating his identity as a father, and his identity as a *man*.

Clark wanted to feel like the true patriarch of his family- a feeling that had almost certainly evaded him to that point. Clark wanted to be the kind of man who drove his family cross-country; captain of the ship and architect of memories. He wanted to bask in the glory of bringing the ideal vacation to life on the highways of America. Clark was searching for his masculine identity; a feeling which Clark felt *entitled* to having.

When I was growing up, my friends and I would talk about the future as if it were paint-by-numbers: *when* you're married, *when* you have a house and a family, what life would be like *when* you have kids. There wasn't any talk of *how* one would arrive at the destination because there didn't seem like there had to be- these things just happen on their own. They have to happen; they're *supposed* to happen. Like Clark's own belief that a family road trip had to be perfect, we felt entitled to a comfortable life unfolding gradually as we enjoyed the ride.

And here I am, on a Saturday night, in an empty apartment, writing an essay on a thirty-year-old comedy. You think Boomers are bad? Gen-X is just starting to feel the sting of disappointment, and this shit is gonna get ugly.

Celia Shits: Pre-Modern Portraits of Men and Women

Billy Pratt · 26 November 2017 · Archived copy · Original

Oh, poor Tim the ostler! The humble stable buck hopelessly in love with his boss's gorgeous, red lipped daughter. Like that was ever gonna happen, and she's in love with the bad boy Highwayman anyway, a dapper thief with a taste for the high-life; the ostler never had a chance. So, what does our scorned, low-born, beta-male do? The only thing he can- Tim calls the police, another group of men more masculine than he, to properly dispose of the Highwayman.

Thus is the premise of Alfred Noyes's narrative poem "**The Highwayman**" (1906). You may have guessed that our poor, law-abiding ostler isn't quite the hero of the story- that role is more closely filled by the titular scoundrel, with the lesson being that we don't judge the morality of actions as much as we judge the value of those committing them.

And Tim, as a poor stable-hand, doesn't have much in the way of value- he's disposable and invisible. In modern terminology, which is ironically also Old English terminology, Tim is a *cuck*- and if you want any chance at sexual success, you can't be a cuck.

A common misconception for those newly introduced to the reality of how men and women interact is thinking that this understanding is a product of modernity- perhaps an outgrowth of psychology, or an unintended side-effect of the social sciences. While the internet certainly provides a forum for discussion, the basics of what we know as *the red pill* have been spread in hushed whispers and over chilled ale at men's clubs throughout the course of western civilization. And while there was certainly a higher tolerance for discussing the reality of the world the way it really is, as opposed to our hilariously heavy-handed modern tropes painting women as *brilliant warriors* and *benevolent scientists*, it still wasn't considered polite conversation. Even if you were treating women like children in the Eighteenth Century, you probably still wanted to pretend like you weren't.

These lessons were peppered through our history and literature- as long as you know what to look for, as I do. Take Curley, son of a wealthy land-owner, in John Steinbeck's dustbowl classic "**Of Mice and Men**" (1937). To the uninitiated, or the majority of high school English teachers, it's easy to write Curley off as a one-dimensional antagonist- an entitled bully lording his privilege over the wage-cuck farm hands. While that isn't exactly untrue, *why* Curley has such a nasty attitude is never addressed, which becomes a lesson onto itself. Culturally, we don't allow disposable men to have such depth, we don't rationalize their actions, with the belief that being an asshole is an end in itself. Hitler was *just an asshole*- nothing more to see here, folks.

But Curley's problem was the same thing types like Harvey Weinstein and Louie C.K. are finding out the hard way (okay, maybe not *exactly* the same)- money and power aren't a substitute for *being attractive*, a quality which can't be bought. Sure Curley was able to snatch up a budget starlet for marriage, his kind of wealth was a rare find in the depression, but that still didn't mean she wanted to fuck him. That privilege, true privilege- the genetic kind- was reserved for resident alpha-male cowboy Slim. And while that pissed off poor, old, beta-boy Curley- just like Tim the ostler- he was rather impotent in his ability to take on the ranch's dominant male. And, so, he was a prick to everyone else. As the Manosphere saying goes, "alpha fucks, beta bucks"; the poor bastard was sexually frustrated.

"Of Mice and **Men**" is littered with red pill realities, from alpha-male Slim getting sexual access to Curley's Wife, as cucked Curley foots the bill, to proto-MGTOW George Milton who thinks women are more trouble than they're worth; "You give me a good whore house every time. A guy can go in an' get drunk and get ever'thing outa his system all at once, an' no messes."

Modern black magic is understanding human nature. In a world of unreality where people are unconscious of the invisible currents that guide them, having the ability to identify these forces can allow you to tell a tremendous amount about someone from a few scant details. Street hustlers and psychics have exploited this idea for years, because it works; we are not unique snow-flakes, we are predictable animals.

As you develop a greater understanding for the quirks of human nature, you end up feeling more connected to our shared history of being rather nasty human animals. TLDR: Men want to fuck, and women want to get fucked by someone better than you. Your best bet is hoping she'll settle.

While it's tempting to believe that modern women are wildly off the mark- pouting at their iPhones in Snapchat selfies- compared to their Victorian counterparts, it's really more or less all the same. Women take what they were given genetically, and make up for any deficiencies with manipulation. Reality is only the foundation, the rest is *smoke and mirrors*. And just like professional wrestling, only the most naive are clapping wildly thinking it's all real.

But what would we have done before the internet? How could we have spread the word most effectively?! By writing a poem, obviously, and Jonathan Swift did just that with "[The Lady's Dressing Room](#)" (1732)- reminding us that women wear tons of make-up, and take big smelly dumps.

The naive Stephron bumbles his way into his girlfriend's bathroom and is shocked to find that it's fucking disgusting, a fact that any man who's cohabited with a woman can certainly attest. Tons of make-up, and Stephron thought she was a natural beauty, dirty towels soaked in sweat, and a chamber pot filled with shit- a revelation indeed: "Oh! Celia, Celia, Celia shits!"

So, quite a day for Stephron. Swift takes us home at the poem's end by reminding us that even tulips can grow in dung- and what a feat that is. Even if it's deceptive, it isn't malicious- despite late night Manosphere message board conspiracy theories. A woman's role is to attract the highest quality of man to ensure the best genetics for the continuation of our species. Men want the big show, they want the smoke and mirrors- they want to clap wildly for the unrealistic, partial reality of female beauty. It's such beauty that push men to be their best, and build civilizations- just don't get too caught up in thinking it's all real, or you'll look like an asshole.

Underachievers: Nirvana, Green Day, and Generation-X

Billy Pratt · 10 May 2018 · Archived copy · Original

Toward the end of 1990, you couldn't get away from Simpsons merchandise- from posters, to pajama sets, to pencil toppers- mostly featuring Generation-X's very first mainstream media icon, Bart Simpson. You see, before "The Simpsons" became obsessed with Homer's gradual decline into retardation, the show's initial protagonist was skateboarding prankster Bart- the country's first take on their next generation.

And those savvy Simpsons writers seemed to have nailed it. While Bart's driving characteristic was apathy, it was a kind of *self-aware* apathy. Bart wasn't stupid, he was an "underachiever"- he was capable of more but consciously chose less. This hyper-aware apathy would become the generation's defining trait.

The following year Kurt Cobain was hailed as the "voice of Generation-X," releasing Nirvana's seminal "Nevermind" record. The stand out single, "Smells Like Teen Spirit," served to define the generation with the very same Bart Simpson-like feeling of self-aware apathy: "I feel stupid and contagious; here we are now, entertain us."

Generation-X was most proud of the *understanding* they had that they were disappointing. Not only did this understanding negate the negative implications of being so disappointing, according to them- if you know you're a loser, you're not really a loser- but it was also the foundation of their identity. Generation-X was too cool for their own good.

And even if that line in "[Teen Spirit](#)" seemed to sum up the zeitgeist of the generation quite nicely, it turned out that Cobain wasn't actually their spokesman after all. You wouldn't know it if you didn't live through it, but Nirvana took on a *mythology* after Cobain's [suicide](#) in the middle of 1994. This was understandable- as grim as it may be, is there anything more authentic than suicide? And authenticity was the holy grail for the detail-obsessed, Holden Caulfield-like Gen-Xer; Cobain offing himself put Nirvana miles ahead of their peers, and gave their music an added dimension of reality.

But the truth is that Nirvana had already begun to fall apart in the months leading up to the suicide. Their third studio album, "In Utero," was met with a disappointing reception- partially by design. Cobain had become obsessed with the type of person who would buy a Nirvana record. Never before had *audience* been a consideration for a rock star, who usually only cared about pushing enough records to sell out suburban ice-hockey arenas. No one stopped to consider who was actually *buying* the records, because, why would any sane person care?

This type of anxiety was unique to Generation-X; success in itself wasn't enough, it had to be the *right kind* of success- just as unconscious apathy may be losery, but self-aware apathy suddenly takes on a sheen of hip irony. Since Cobain wasn't selling records to the *right kind* of Nirvana fan- something he had already cried about in the liner [notes](#) to "Incesticide"- Cobain would consciously write a shitty, off-putting record with vocals infamously "low in the mix" in order to whittle the band's audience down to a personality type Cobain was more comfortable with.

Maybe Cobain earned Nirvana's place in the rock-and-roll pantheon by sheer will and determination- he was authentically obsessed with authenticity. It was around this time that old man Axl Rose tried to compete with this updated- albeit neurotic- conception of cool by covering a Charles Manson song on his band's rather terrible cover album, "The Spaghetti Incident?" Poor Boomer Axl was out of his depth, although it's tough to compete with someone who has nothing to lose... as if you'd want to. Kurt Cobain was too cool for his own good.



Green Day will go down historically as the less regarded rags-to-riches alternative rock Cinderella story of the 1990s. Emerging from the shadow of Cobain's suicide, Green Day shot to stardom over the Summer of 1994 and by the end of the year were selling out suburban ice-hockey arenas. So popular were the Berkeley trio that they single-handedly resurrected punk rock, transformed it into something commercially viable, and gave an entire generation of misfit teenagers their first job at Hot Topic. Even old Johnny Rotten owes a debt to Green Day- in the wake of punk rock's anything-but-chaotic return, the Sex Pistols cashed in on a glitzy, establishment-approved, MTV-promoted reunion tour. God save the Queen indeed, only this time they really meant it.

Thematically, Green Day had a lot in common with Nirvana. Both were fascinated with nihilism, melancholy, and angst- a hallmark of the generation. However, unlike Cobain who felt a sense of loss and betrayal when confronting what he considered the meaninglessness of modernity, Green Day reveled in disaster. Imagining them both as teenagers at a house party- Nirvana is sulking alone, smoking cigarettes and Green Day is taking hits of canned air and giggling wildly.

So suicide wasn't in the cards, an idea that must have thrilled their record company. However, it wasn't all giggles and huffing; despite signing to a corporate record label, filming music **videos** for MTV, and booking an arena tour- surprise, surprise- like Cobain, Green Day suddenly had a problem with the kind of person buying their records. On their first arena tour, to punish those in attendance, the band booked the aggressively homosexual, "queercore" group Pansy Division to open for them and taunt the audience with songs like "The Butt Fuckers of Rock and Roll," and "Smells Like Queer Spirit."

Like the bratty teenager who didn't get the right kind of Corvette for their "Super Sweet Sixteen," despite their quick and easy ascendance to the top of the alt-rock mountain, it wasn't the *right kind* of success. And just like Nirvana, Green Day penned their very own audience shedding record. Released a year after "Dookie," "Insomniac" did its job rather well- it wasn't great, didn't have a hit single, and ultimately turned their audience against them.

Despite all the nihilistic posturing, it's important to remember that Generation-X wasn't the one with all the school shootings. To an extent, the murky attitude was as shallow as the cuts on their wrists- it was a fashion accessory, it was an act, it was LARPing. Even if they didn't become noteworthy go-getters, Gen-X eventually had to grow up into lame adults.

A few years after Green Day did everything they could to torture their audience, they had a song featured on the finale of “Seinfeld” which was viewed by over seventy million people. If selling out is inevitable, you may as well cut the best deal you can and get on with it. Just like Gen-X, Green Day were growing up into lame adults- turns out they weren’t very cool after all.

Green Day continued to be the voice of the generation as they all hurdled toward taking center stage as the world’s grown-ups. When Generation-X thought making fun of George W. was the height of woke political awareness while rolling their eyes at Fox News, Green Day released “American Idiot.” Gen-X was still bent on thinking they were the coolest person in the room, only now with a different definition of cool to keep up with.

Generation-X became the first generation to be obsessed their own identity. Whether wanting to be perceived as self-aware, ironic losers or “woke” political analysts, thinking they were the *right kind* of cool was very important to them. And if aging Gen-X wanted to see a gaudy Broadway musical, as all lame adults inevitably do, Green Day was there for them again- “American Idiot” was transformed into a musical and had a run on Broadway for the Gen-Xer who thought they were too cool for “Guys and Dolls.”

There will never be a Generation-X president. They weren’t a generation interested in changing the world- as long as they have the right emoji reaction to this week’s tragedy on their Facebook profile, that’s good enough for them. Gen-X is neither the hero nor the villain of the story; they didn’t do as much damage as their big-brother the Boomer, nor are they on the front line of the culture war like their sister, the Millennial- they’re much too cool for that, anyway.



Horror and Fairy Tales: “Halloween” (1978) and “Wes Craven’s New Nightmare” (1994)

Billy Pratt · 24 November 2018 · Archived copy · Original

Perhaps the most important lesson for a young girl is on her emerging sexuality- like death and taxes, the biological clock cares not if one is ready for it to strike. When a girl goes through puberty, suddenly making her sexually viable for adult men, not only does her body change but as does the way the world reacts to her. It becomes possible that the same man who had treated her with genuine care and empathy now has his own biologically-driven agenda- complete with duplicitous intentions. Watch a clumsy man talk confidently to a child but fumble nervously with a sexually mature woman- also with puberty comes power.

However, not every lesson can be taught. One learns to be patient only through experience- patience is a lesson that *cannot* be taught. While you can try to tell a little girl on the cusp of puberty that her world is about to change, drastically, and that this new world comes with its share of dangers, it may be easier for her to process this through the subconscious language of the fairy tale.

Fairy Tales are written to speak to the emotional language of children- to present a problem that is both vague and foreign on the surface, but highly relatable to the child’s subconscious fears, and then to provide the child with practical, cautionary advice for problems yet to come or coping strategies for problems which have no solution.

In John Carpenter’s horror masterpiece “Halloween” (1978), Laurie Strode may not be ready for male sexuality, but it’s certainly ready for her.

Unlike movies that came after “Halloween,” Carpenter wasn’t trying to moralize sexuality- Laurie’s friends aren’t killed *because* they have sex, but they have sex to draw a contrast between teenage girls who are sexually realized and the virginal, pre-sexual Laurie. At seventeen years old, it’s possible that a *late-bloomer* may have only just become biologically mature while her friends had gone through puberty much sooner-thus having more time to mentally process the shift from girl to woman.

While Laurie is interested in boys, she doesn’t yet possess the sexual confidence to interact with them *as men*. When she learns that friend Annie told Ben Tramer of the crush Laurie has on him, she makes Annie promise to tell Tramer that it was all a big joke- despite Tramer’s interest in her. It isn’t that Laurie fears rejection- it’s the interaction itself, and all that comes with it, that makes her uncomfortable.

Michael Myers serves as a stand-in for male sexuality. Unlike the inescapable dread of Freddy Krueger, or the force-of-nature that is Jason Voorhees, Myers is a voyeuristic stalker as much as he’s a murderer. Before attempting to kill the girls, he follows them around Haddonfield and watches them from afar- always with exaggerated heavy breathing, as if he’s sexually aroused. The act of murder is Myers’ replacement for rape- he penetrates his victims with a butcher knife.

“**Halloween II**” (1981) slickly makes reference to the original’s dynamic of a virgin being stalked by a rapist with its ironic use of “Mr. Sandman” as the movie opens:

Mr. Sandman, bring me a dream
 Make him the cutest that I’ve ever seen
 Give him the word that I’m not a rover
 Then tell him that his lonesome nights are over
 Sandman, I’m so alone
 Don’t have nobody to call my own
 Please turn on your magic beam
 Mr. Sandman, bring me a dream

In a perfect world, Laurie would have been matched-up with an equally inexperienced Ben Tramer, going on ice cream socials and movie dates, as Laurie slowly grows comfortable with male interaction. However, our world is too often *imperfect*- and Mr. Sandman brings her Michael Myers instead.

“Little Red Riding Hood” also serves as a cautionary tale for pre-pubescent girls warning against the dangers of the adult world. On the way to her grandmother’s cottage, Little Red Riding Hood encounters the Big Bad Wolf- her first experience with danger- and curiously tells him where she’s going. By the time she gets there, the Wolf has already eaten her grandmother and dressed-up in the grandmother’s clothing to trick her.

Although the wolf could have immediately eaten the little girl too, he doesn’t, and instead begins a kind of flirtation with her as she gradually discovers that it isn’t her grandmother at all:

“Oh, grandmother, what big ears you have!”

“All the better to hear you with.”

“Oh, grandmother, what big eyes you have!”

“All the better to see you with.”

“Oh, grandmother, what big hands you have!”

“All the better to grab you with!”

“Oh, grandmother, what a horribly big mouth you have!”

“All the better to eat you with!”

Like all children, Little Red Riding Hood has a complex relationship with the adult world. Equally afraid and intrigued, she invites the wolf to pursue her. Similarly, there is a *fascination* in her fear as she realizes that it’s not her grandmother- the caregiver- at the cottage. Little Red Riding Hood subconsciously wants to break away from the safety of her life as a child, but is unaware of the new dangers present in womanhood- the adult world- which time is pulling closer, and like Laurie Strode, doesn’t care whether she’s ready or not.

While some fairy tales function as cautionary advice for the pre-pubescent child as they grow toward adulthood, others serve as coping strategies to manage a child’s emotions. Speaking to a girl’s unconscious emotional state, “Cinderella” is meant to diminish a younger sister’s anxiety in seeing her older sisters blossom sexually and attract mates before she has her own chance to do so- *before* the biological clock has a chance to strike.

“Cinderella” still resonates with girls because it’s written in their own emotional language. What girl *doesn’t* feel like Cinderella- unfairly put upon and abused- even in-spite of typical living conditions? “Cinderella” can be translated into a far more realistic story once the emotional language is decoded:

Cinderella, the youngest of three sisters, feels alienated from the women in her family due to their fully-realized womanhood- a journey which she is only just beginning. To Cinderella, this feels unfair, at best, and cruel and abusive, at worst. In looking at her older, sexually-realized sisters, Cinderella has anxiety over the possibility that she won’t grow into womanhood and thus will never have the chance to attract a husband.

As time progresses, Cinderella eventually goes through puberty and is allowed to attend local mixers. However, since she is between childhood and adulthood, there are limitations on her freedom- Cinderella has a curfew. Like all teenagers, she hates this and is sure things are “just getting good” by the time she has to go home. No matter, though- despite everything, her Prince still finds her, and like most women, Cinderella gets married and lives “happily ever after.”

For young girls, whom everything will very likely work out well for just by virtue of their own existence, the story of “Cinderella” serves to sooth their emotional state and diminish anxieties over their future. While not every young

girl will meet a literal prince, or even a princely young man, it's best she view her husband like one anyway- "Cinderella" was not written with a divorce-culture in mind.

The take-away of "Cinderella" is for a girl to realize that everything good will come in due time, that a quality man will find her interesting and unique, and their wedding will cause bells to "ring throughout the land."

The deeper end of emotional trauma for children is a fear of death and of the loss of a parent. While there doesn't exist an easy way to bring these fears to manageable terms- even for adults- a child can begin to internalize the reality of death and loss through story.

The modern world has made no room for death- and thus, leaves little space for the modern human to understand and internalize death as a part of life. Death doesn't fit the consumer narrative or the modern aesthetic, and as such, we are ill-prepared to handle notions of our own eventual death or the deaths of our parents.

When Don Bluth made animated movies for children, he would intentionally write an emotionally draining second-act. When I saw "[An American Tale](#)" (1986) as a kid, there wasn't a dry eye in the theater when the little mouse is lead to believe his parents abandoned him. Parental abandonment, of course, is every child's greatest fear- in addition to being a difficult eventuality. While things work out for the mouse, dealing with the sadness and dread this issue demands, even in the short-term, is ultimately healthy for a child developing emotional resiliency. Compare this to the modern children's movie where the anthropomorphized airplane who's ill-suited for racing wins races, or the little bunny ill-suited for police work becomes a police officer- gone is the idea of using the ninety-minutes to aid in developing an emotional tool-kit, replaced by monetizable self-esteem infomercials.

Horror movies can give a child space to deal with their fears in the realm of fantasy while they subconsciously work on bringing the eventual reality of those fears to manageable terms.

In Wes Craven's forgotten masterpiece "[Wes Craven's New Nightmare](#)" (1994), the hidden-narrative presents a child who is able to move toward coming to terms with the loss of his father through the use of story and fantasy.

A forerunner to the meta-horror trend that Craven would help launch with "Scream" (1996), and serving as one of the era's last slashers (if it could even truly be considered a slasher), "Wes Craven's New Nightmare" takes place in a world where Craven, Robert Englund, and Heather Langenkamp- looking absolutely stunning- are playing themselves; a world where "A Nightmare on Elm Street" is just a horror movie franchise. Heather begins having Freddy nightmares when it's revealed that her husband, a movie effects artist, is helping design a new glove for a Freddy sequel that Craven is writing.

Things take a dark turn when husband Chase dies in a car accident. Heather believes he was murdered by Freddy, who is coming for her son, Dylan, next.

Certain that Freddy Krueger is going to kill her son, she goes to Wes Craven for help. Craven explains that Krueger is an ancient supernatural entity that was drawn to the "Nightmare" films because he liked the raw evil of the Freddy Krueger character- which served to contain it. The entity was content existing in a treacherous, frightening fantasy realm- but this fantasy was watered down and became too familiar and not very scary, so the entity escaped to reality.

If it sounds like Craven is taking shots at the Looney Tunes-inspired "Freddy's Dead: The Final Nightmare" (1991), that's because he is- Freddy had gradually become a joke. What had began as a truly frightening modern monster had become sanitized for commercialization- Freddy Krueger squirt guns and stuffies, waving to an audience of toddlers, with a knife-glove meant for molesting them to death, at the Universal Street Parade- imagine a bumbling Wicked Witch of the West taking pratfalls; it doesn't work.

Because Freddy wasn't contained in fantasy meant to scare us, he's become unleashed in reality able to harm us.

Craven is again pointing to the efficacy of horror as a modern means of dealing with the anxieties connected to our fear of death- and modernity's refusal to acknowledge the reality of death. When Dylan begins having bizarre psychotic episodes, the doctor's chief concern is if Heather is showing Dylan her horror movies- not the obvious source of trauma.

The ending of "A Nightmare on Elm Street" (1984) has Nancy turning her back on Freddy, taking away the power Freddy had over her, acknowledging that Freddy only ever existed as a dream. And Nancy was right, if you didn't already know- "A Nightmare on Elm Street" in its entirety is Nancy's nightmare. Like a fairy tale, Craven had a simple lesson at the core of the movie- don't let your fears control you.

And, if you didn't know, Craven plays the same hand with "New Nightmare." The bulk of the movie is Nancy's nightmare as she grapples with the death of her husband- something so overwhelming that it's easier to initially deal with by framing it in terms of fantasy, and creating an evil puppet-master for her and her son to come together and defeat.

Life without story could be broken down into a series of bullet point instructions, which may seem efficient but would prove ineffective- people need the space and distance that that fantasy can provide. That same space and distance can afford someone the time to mentally process the fears, anxieties, and grief which are overwhelming and incomprehensible. Stories for children need to be more than losers winning despite being losers- stories for children need to begin helping them develop their emotional tool-kit or else there will one day be a world of adults unable to cope with everything that is inevitable.

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On Writing and “The Pussy” (2016)

Billy Pratt · 8 December 2018 · Archived copy · Original

When asked for writing advice, Delicious Tacos likes to keep things simple: get up early every morning and write. And there is something to that- the foundation of writing is interpreting the disorganization of the writer’s internal world through language and bringing those ideas to a place of external organization- coming to terms with what is initially termless. This is why keeping a journal is often recommended as a form of therapy.

However, this only explains the *process* of writing- the easiest and most direct way to *become a writer*- rather than explaining what the goal of a writer really is, something that warrants equal examination.

A good writer is tasked with splitting his veins open with a razor blade and covering his keyboard in blood- a prolonged and terrible ritual. You’ll know a piece is finished when your face is numb, eyes unfocused, and body trembling.

You’d think Delicious Tacos would have mentioned something like that- the horrible reality of being on the writing grind- considering I learned it from reading his work.

The only writer worth reading is an honest writer. How close can he cut things to actual reality? *Actual reality* may seem like hyperbole to those who read garbage, but anyone worth being a member of your audience understands that reality is layered and access takes teeth-gnashing grit. How long can you keep your face in a bee’s nest? How long can you last underwater- acknowledging that loneliness and despair are part of the toxic cocktail of progress. You’re a fat woman eating ice-cream in front of her bathroom mirror. Look away and you lose.

You need to understand yourself. You must come to grips with your genuine intentions- burning away the lies you tell yourself to make it past midnight. Understanding who you really are, unless you’re awesome, is going to be fucking awful. Chances are that most of what you know about yourself and your relationships have been total bullshit- fanciful stories and forced narrations which have little relevance to *actual reality*. An honest writer is brutally familiar with the awful person he really is and the meaningless relationships he’s forged.

Once you’re ready to move beyond *the self*, an honest writer must maintain a consistent and accurate understanding of the *outside world*. “You must become a master of human **nature**,” says Robert Greene, and he’s right. However, understanding this really sucks- long story short, it’s all horrifying and uncomfortable. People are massively flawed, entirely selfish, and have very little autonomy- this includes you (remember, you’re awful), but it also includes everyone you’ve ever loved or respected.

You can now fully diagnose your father’s insecurities, and trace their root to when your mother began chipping away at his sense of masculinity and self-worth. You can understand how your mother was toxified by elements that have nothing to do with your family or community, and were thought up by people whom you’ll never know.

You’ll understand what your ex-girlfriend really thinks of you, even if you remember your time with her “fondly,” and still believe you “had something special.”

You’ll come to know the duplicitous nature of everyone around you. You are the only one in-touch with reality and everyone else is to be studied, criticized, and written about.

Being an *honest writer* comes in two parts- both of which must be mastered. Self-knowledge and a firm grip on the way things work are non-negotiable- these are items on the *front-end*. They often exist in fragments within the mind of the writer. Writing is about bringing these fragments to proper form through language- the job of the writer is doing this with elegance and authenticity.

Writing with authenticity, or writing with a *distinct voice*, is what separates the adequate from the potentially great.

Having good *content*- having the dibs on how shit really goes down and blasting your audience with hard doses of heavy truth- is cool and all, but doing it with a form so beautiful that the words sound like they're singing to you when read aloud is breath-taking. An authenticity so earthy and visceral that the truth held within seems tangible and so intimate that it feels as though the writer directed the piece to you personally; a truth you can almost hold in your hands.

I'm sure I fuck a ton of girls with herpes. But I punish the good ones for not lying. For doing the right thing. Not only are they cool, always. Not only are they the exact sort of bohemian libertine I want to date. But they do the right thing and they take the hit for it. That's *balls*. A person who suffers for honesty— that's what "hero" means.

I don't remember her name, but I know that she had herpes. No, that isn't the title of a *Japanese porn*, it's real! It's true! I swear it happened, and it was serendipitous. It was beautiful. Beyond coincidence. As if God knew that I had to interact with this sexually compromised woman so I could fully tune into the high-frequency signal that Delicious Tacos was quietly broadcasting- real, genuine truth. Total authenticity. No bullshit veneer between the reader and his words.

You have this moment when you meet a woman with herpes where you think you've really lucked out. Before the big reveal, of course. Where you think you've found this super down to Earth girl who could just shoot the shit with you- no games.

Where you feel comfortable *being yourself* yet still feel as though you're respected as a man. Who has the same sexual proclivities as you; who seemed to have a thing for being humiliated- a shame fetish, I suspected. You think to yourself, *could this be what it means to find a soulmate?* Could this have been my "one and only someone"?

No, stupid, she just has herpes- and much like the burning and irritation it causes her genitals, such is the guilt she feels when she meets someone new.

So, she tells you. She confides in you. You've already built a rapport. She's shown you that she's *different*. She's cool. No pretensions. She thinks it's interesting that you'd get turned on by watching her cry- this is new ground for her. Yes, you could verbally demean her. She's hated herself for so long that it's become intertwined with her sexual identity. Then she tells you about her herpes because she thinks she's built up some kind of equity with you.

She tells you that you probably already have it- "most people have it," if you didn't know. And if you (somehow) don't already have it, you definitely won't get it from her- she "hardly ever has an outbreak," and when she does it's "barely noticeable."

She tells you these things because she can't bear to lie anymore. The countless men she's spread her leprosy to through silence and omission haunt her dreams. So she's cultivated the *perfect girlfriend* personality type. Had she only done so before infection, maybe she'd be married with children, but she won the unlucky lottery and here we are.

The perfect girlfriend. Everything you've ever wanted in a woman, with one little defect, but how about it? You had your Mom buy you that pair of Air Jordan's in 1992 with the tiny red dot on them, that you'd hope your sixth grade class would never notice, and that worked out okay, so isn't this the same?

Sorry. Fuck no.

A few days later I found the Delicious Tacos blog-post "Girls with Herpes," and it was all there- everything she had said, presciently described by Tacos, written years before I had met her, as if he had peered into my future and told my fortune. Tacos was in touch with the kind of reality that typically falls through the cracks and goes unforeseen- the horror that lies between the lines. This was a deeper reach into *actual reality* than I had ever experienced. Tacos

wasn't afraid to find these depths and exploit them.

Delicious Tacos is more than a dating blogger- he's a modern prophet.

Writing a "fuck blog" is a clever cover for a heady examination of reality- and Delicious Tacos is a master of reality. He's come to terms with himself and his own intentions and he's integrated his self-knowledge into the foundational truth of all writing that follows: men are primarily horny.

And since society has stigmatized male sexuality as something inherently evil, the average man will jump through hoops to prove that *he's different*- that he's cool, that he's the perfect boyfriend, he's *not primarily horny*- unlike the others.

How you respond to this will reveal level of delusion.

Take, for instance, his "Lunch Break Diary: What's on Your Mind" piece (available in "[The Pussy](#)"), where Tacos describes his platonic friendships with women:

I would like you to stop talking and come into my bedroom and have unprotected sex with me immediately, every girl I have ever known. I have jerked off to the thought of date raping you many times, and making you pregnant against your will, girl who thinks of me as a close and trusted friend. ... If I could date rape you and get away with it- if some genie said go ahead, I guarantee you won't get in trouble- I'm not saying it's a "yes," but it's not quite a one hundred per cent "no," girl who thinks nothing of being alone around me while drunk. When the bombs fall and we all turn into Mad Max, don't think you're gonna get my clean drinking water for free.

Where you stand on the idea of "wanting sex with every female friend and acquaintance you've ever had" has everything to do with how honest you're willing to be with yourself. The mainstream idea of platonic inter-gender relationships is like a never-ending episode of *Friends*- just sitting around a coffee shop, dishing gossip with your gal-pals, who are dating men more successful, handsome, and masculine than you- but that's okay, you're just dying to hear about it.

No! Bullshit! You lie in wait, carefully biding your time like Montresor in "The Cask of Amontillado."

If you dare say that isn't you, half-crazed, ranting to yourself as she tells you about how her boyfriend only *seems like* an abusive asshole, but *really* has a "sweet sensitive side," you're a liar- and reading "[The Pussy](#)" will make you feel like an asshole.

You're a horny monster and Delicious Tacos knows it.

Purchase Delicious Taco's beautiful, convenient, and affordable anthology- "[The Pussy](#)"- on Amazon and get used to the idea that you're awful.

Oh, and "get up early every morning and write"- maybe then you can be a writer too.

Defiance on the Road to Decay

Billy Pratt · 16 December 2018 · Archived copy · Original

“Old elephants limp off to the hills to die; old Americans go out to the highway and drive themselves to death with huge cars.”

“I’m not dead, and I’m not for sale.”

The waning days of August. After midnight; 2AM about to roll around as inconspicuously as the 80,000th mile on the odometer of an old girl who won’t quit. “Not quite ready to bring it down just yet.” Miles of quiet. Last man standing. Watching the tide roll in. Everything leading to this feels weighted and opaque- a dull ache only noticeable in moments of stillness.

When you’re young, there’s a timelessness to the hours before dawn. They dissipate in the moonlight. The keys to your dad’s old beater open up the world around you like never before- possibilities expand beyond the infinite. Everything takes on a veneer of significance. Sitting at a diner and only ordering coffee. Telling ghost stories on old country roads. Hopping fences and exploring graveyards.

Once this is lost, it’s gone for good. You get to an age where late nights just feel late. But you search for little bits and pieces of it. Maybe you drink to forget that the clock is always watching; a grim, invasive specter.

I like teaching because it affords me summers off to do as I please- so I can have moments where the clock is less relevant. Even still, you never manage to forget that your time is almost up.

If you have anything left to give- any mark left to make- you’re coming up on “now or never.” This is something an adult can never forget- no matter how many drinks he’s had.

But on the beach at 2AM, I can dip my toes into the realm of the timeless. Close my eyes and for a scant moment feel at one with the world around me. If you’ve never felt it, even if just for a moment, you’ll think I’m selling you on some bullshit- but it’s true and it’s beautiful. And it’s only for a scant moment until I’m reminded of why I’m at the beach at 2AM, as electricity pulses down my spine and my legs anxiously fumble about the sand.

I’m at the beach at 2AM because I’ve been awake for the past forty-eight hours.

If masculinity is power, there is a defiance in masculinity. The masculine man lives on his own terms, resisting the world’s inertia insisting he conform. He assesses risk and reward, and takes pride in making his own decisions.

No better a glimpse of defiant masculinity than the combat sports fighter. He understands the game- he evaluates the risk, he visualizes the reward. Even the losing fighter garners the respect of *participation*- the only participation trophy that matters- and walks away with a warrior’s honor and the gorgeous women who find that irresistible.

The feminized world cannot come to grips with the defiance of masculinity. It misunderstands the high-risk/high-reward dichotomy and believes the participants are *unaware* of the risks or else they wouldn’t hunt for rewards. The feminized worldview is steeped in consumerism- the proverbial activity punch-card at summer camp; the bucket-list life- where the longer life is understood as the better life. If not for a long life, how else will you enjoy food, wine, and travel?

This worldview is ideal for women, who are natural consumers. Western civilization has always been arranged for female comfort, and without the constraints of expectation- modern women are no longer expected to be... much of anything- life becomes an endless summer camp.

The bugman exists as an infection of consumerism. To the bugman, there is no higher degree of satisfaction than money and women- not wicked in their own right, but neither should be ends in themselves. The masculine man will demand a deeper experience, spitting in the face of risk to attain something which transcends what the bug can

understand. When a bug's goal is money and women they'll settle for achieving either with the least amount of energy exerted- leaving them enslaved to a master both at home and at work.

When Robert Frost wrote “A Time To Talk,” a reminder that there is more to life than working, the perspective was masculine. It is the masculine inclination to use the time you have for productivity. The masculine inclination is not to consume but to *produce*, so much that Frost felt as though a reminder was needed that there is *value in moments of rest*– that a man entirely consumed with productivity is a man living in isolation. There exists both a time to work and a time to talk. The bugman, as infected by consumerism, does not understand life this way- always looking to minimize effort and maximize pleasure- the bugman cannot stop talking.

“A Time to Talk” is critical for the masculine man- a necessary reminder that productivity can be an abyss.

I have this moment when a co-worker asks me what I did over the summer, and inevitably tells me of some week-long cruise or trip to Wally **World**, where I think of loperamide hydrochloride. If you didn't know, loperamide hydrochloride is more commonly sold as Imodium AD- an over-the-counter diarrhea remedy. And I have this moment, where I think of 3AM, lying in bed, and reading about the **dangers** of taking Imodium to treat opiate withdrawal.

It's a funny story, I swear.

When a man transcends the feminine, summer camp, bucket-list life and becomes attune to looking at his time on Earth as productivity maximization- pure creative output, total content-mindset- he looks for ways to squeeze the most blood from a stone. How can I sleep best, when it's time to sleep, and work hardest when it's time to work- risks, be damned. It was toward the waning days of Spring when I discovered Kratom.

Kratom is the darling, miracle drug of the self-improvement community. “I credit Kratom for helping me to accomplish just about everything I've achieved in the past six years,” explains a popular internet guru, “unlike many natural dietary supplements that do nothing, Kratom can seriously help anxiety, depression, addiction, motivation, sleep, etc.”

Wow, all of that and *etcetera* too?

“Kratom works by stimulating your opiate receptors. It has ‘opiate-like’ effects. However – Kratom is NOT an opiate... This is what makes Kratom far safer than all other ‘opiates’ that are addicting and subject to overdose... Less “lethal” than alcohol and even Tylenol – which kills almost 1000 people a year.”

Less lethal than *Tylenol*? What's the worst that could happen? I mean, it's not an opiate- it's *opiate-like*. It's not a drug, it's a *supplement*.

What the anti-drug crowd never mentions is the difference between drug use and drug abuse.

Conceptually, these are separate and distinct- however difficult it may be for the drug user to *avoid* abuse. The masculine man, captain of his own ship, can assess the risk and visualize the reward.

There are upsides to drug use for the masculine man, looking beyond the depth of consumption, to maximize his productivity and creativity. There's a reason writers are alcoholics, opiate and cocaine addicts- because it works. Snort a few lines and open up your word processor; get into a flow state, feel your own presence, laugh like a maniac at your own jokes, enrich your mind-body connection- pure creative output, total content mindset. The masculine drug user isn't looking to masturbate his emotions with an artificial light show- the masculine drug user is obsessed with squeezing blood from a stone.

Arguably the best Stone Temple Pilots album is “Purple” (1994). Maligned for being a few months late to the

grunge party, and maybe edging too close to parody with their debut, “Purple” redefined STP’s sound by replacing the darker, grungy riffs with trippy, psychedelic rock. More was possible with this lighter, experimental version of the band- gone was the joyless sludge of “Dead and Bloated,” replaced by the radio friendly “Interstate Love Song.” Gone was the histrionic “Wet my Bed,” replaced with the understated “**Vaseline**.” The Pilots no longer had to explicitly sell you on their dark intentions- they would allow the music to convey it organically, as with the subtly haunting “Kitchenware and Candybars.”

The cover art to “Purple”- a smiling baby, riding a dragon through the clouds while a group of angelic ladies look on with wonder- was found printed on the first bag of heroin Scott Weiland ever bought. In fact, a lot of “Purple” is about Weiland’s heroin use which began on their first tour; “Unglued” hits on the manic height of experimentation while “Vaseline” confronts the sobering reality of addiction.

According to his own [account](#), *Purple* was recorded “outside of time and space.” With heroin, Weiland was able to tap into the *timeless space* of youth- a place of pure creativity. Maximum possibilities- pushing things *beyond the infinite*.

“Moderation is masturbation”

Finding my sweet spot with Kratom took a bit of clumsy trial-and-error. The powder tastes like dog shit, so the flavor needs to be masked. I fell into a groove of taking it toward the late-afternoon into evening; this quickly became, very precisely, 5:15pm. I would time my after-work gym session to finish around 5pm, so I could be home by 5:15, mix my fifteen grams of Kratom with almond milk and flavored protein powder (a bolder flavor, like chocolate-malt or rocky road worked best), and get to work.

Kratom was fantastic for productivity. I’d sit down to write and let the words take on a life of their own- outside of time and space- pure creative output, total content mindset. I was happier on Kratom and more social. Soon I was taking Kratom before social obligations and dates with women (something I did at this time).

I was better with girls on Kratom; I felt one with body and mind. Moderation is masturbation; I went from “once-in-a-while,” to *every other day*, to every day. As addictive as Tylenol and as safe as coffee. I had found a way to squeeze blood from a stone.

A concrete, static timeline is inherent to drug use- heroin is not known for its generosity. After producing a fantastic third album with Stone Temple Pilots, Weiland had hit his creative peak and came tumbling down. Within months of releasing the wonderfully bizarre “Tiny Music... Songs from the Vatican Gift Shop” (1996), the Pilots had to cancel their supporting tour, pulling out of a coveted spot opening for the KISS reunion, and would soon disband entirely.

Weiland had traded long-term stability for short-term creative mania, like finding the invincibility star in Super Mario Brothers, and was saddled with a debt to repay.

I began feeling awful so gradually that it wasn’t immediately noticeable- it felt more like a new normal.

Kratom isn’t heroin. The decline isn’t sharp- it’s subtle. I noticed that I was losing my trademark, high-energy morning enthusiasm; getting to work was becoming a drag. A symptom of getting older, I thought.

I was more irritable, more prone to frustration, more prone to insomnia, more prone to constipation- getting older *sure is weird*. My legs began to constantly ache- was my leg-day really that strenuous? I found myself counting down the hours until 5:15... and when summer rolled around, I figured that I’d dose earlier and then hit a second batch after-five.

Double the dose, double the productivity. Total content... something or other? Actually, I was shitposting on Twitter more than I was doing any real writing- I wanted that hard, immediate dopamine hit. I was distracted and

aimless.

I had gotten what I could from Kratom and it was time for a break. No problem, I had thought- a few weeks off to clean-up and recharge the old system- then I could get back on and get back to work.

Pacing my tiny kitchen at 10pm- heart racing, legs aching- dealing with denial over the heavy dose of reality that was overwhelming me. The worst case, I had assumed, was some kind of psychological attachment-addiction for the weak- something that I could push through with sheer will. I had quit smoking earlier in the year, and yes, I had spent the week compensating with pizza and ice cream, but I took care of the fucker. Will and determination- I could push through anything. But I was never expecting a *physical addiction*. Fuck, I'd never been physically addicted to anything- I didn't know *what* to expect.

Kratom came with a debt to be paid.

Turns out Kratom is highly addictive- funny, right? It's not a supplement, it's a *drug*. It may come on slowly but it ends up mimicking genuine opiates- *opiate-like*, indeed.

It was the beginning of July and it suddenly became clear exactly how I would be spending my summer vacation.

Scott Weiland would fall between relapse and recovery for the rest of his life. His work would never again reach the height of the mid-nineties. Each relapse took a little more out of Weiland, chipping away at him so gradually that it was hardly noticeable at first. He would re-unite with the Pilots only to be fired a few years later- he began losing his voice and wouldn't be able to get through an entire show.

Compensating for his failing body, Weiland doubled-down on his drug use- but what had worked in the past to push him to his spiritual limits had only served to destroy what was left. Weiland died a shell of himself, a walking **corpse**- he had pushed things as far as they could go, he had ran out of content; he passed-on with nothing left to give.

The moral of the story is that there is no moral. Real life doesn't work that way, Charlie Rose. Two-thousand words later, and I don't have some grand conclusion or massive realization. Know the rules of the game and decide how you want to play- a long life of potential mediocrity or a creative energy that burns with the fire of one-thousand suns. The defiant man can make this decision for himself and deal with the consequences of his actions- both short and long-term. Dip your toes in the water of creative-mania and maybe you can get out alive- fully immerse yourself and watch it kill you.

“Today I saw the sea. I'm no longer **afraid**.”

Suburbia

Billy Pratt · 13 January 2019 · Archived copy · Original

“Whatever happened to all this season’s losers of the year?
Every time I got to thinking, where’d they disappear?”

There is no place I’d rather be than walking beside a well-groomed front-lawn on a suburban street in mid-August. Late afternoon, when the sun is just beginning to set- tired from a long day’s work- making its march toward a warm hue that feels like a soft blanket enveloping your soul. The sound of distant lawn-mowers, and the scent of cut grass- really, to properly maintain the admiration and respect of your neighbors, twice per week is ideal for lawn-care. American flags next to empty mailboxes. Dogs barking beside hamburgers on propane grills.

When you’re in eighth grade, suburbia is your canvas. You burn things in the woods and throw eggs at houses. Hop fences and explore backyards. Stand atop a hill overlooking the town below and throw-up a double middle-finger. You let the girls hang out and you act like it’s this *big deal* and if they’re not cool enough they’ll have to go home. You probably could have seen their tits had you been more socially adept. You’d be star gazing had there been stars to see.

There’s a beautiful quiet to suburbia at night. I never wanted to live anywhere with a *nightlife*- I want the late-night streets to be cold and lifeless. I want to hear crickets, between faint sounds of traffic imposing from the highway. I want to sit on the baseball bleachers of the local high school and look out into the vacant soccer field. I want to walk down Main Street, past the charming specialty shops who are closed for the night. The little hardware store that you visit to make a statement against big name retail. The model train shop that you know stays open as a passion-project rather than a money-maker. “Art by Alison” with the ever-present sign on the door advertising *open classes, starting soon*— where good vibes are taught in equal proportion to artistic technique.

First time I had heard from Christine in a long time. She knew I’d be somewhere close to the old neighborhood- a fact that I always felt needed defending when I saw her. Seeing Christine meant she was in a place between the panels of her comic book adventure- coming home was only transitional. It was between teaching English in Brazil and working at an orphanage in China. She considered working at a school in some African country, but then found out it was being set up by missionaries, and felt that was *too imposing* on “organic African culture.” Home was never a destination, it was stopgap for gift-cards and praise.

She’d always ask if I were happy with how things turned out. What a question. Where do you begin? “Well, not because I stuck around... not because I didn’t go on these inauthentic, *pretentious* adventures...” Where do you begin explaining the sexual marketplace and its awful implications? That to a highly-trained eye, which I possess, there are major differences in the singles-market of 2013 compared to the cursed singles-market of 2018. How modern men are more disposable than ever... Where you like your little fucking town and you never wanted to leave. Has she seen the little fucking art studio and the toy train shop? Does she not get that it’s all so fucking charming?

Christine was pregnant. She was getting married. They were looking for a house. You’d think that, in a fair world, the country-hopping was at the price of long term stability. That there would be a *cost to the experience*— this is what felt fair. Every time we’d catch up, there was a new story; the guy in the indie rock band out in Austin, the soccer player in Rio. But, of course, this was not the case- she had met a lovely boy in Portland, where she ended up after the work-visa expired in China- a “crazy story,” I was assured- and now her next adventure was having a family. It sounded like a movie trailer.

You have these defensive moments, but they pass, and it's back to the empty soccer field at midnight- with your notebook, making words into art.

My favorite movie, as a kid, was “Clue” (1985)- so much that my parents got me a real-life singing-telegram for my 7th birthday. No, I didn't get to kill him. Yes, I'm still unsure how to properly respond to an adult singing to me. There was a line in the song about how much I loved watching the singing-telegram get **shot**. I wonder how that made him feel.

I was obsessed with the “Clue” mansion- a gorgeous, authentic looking Tudor with a classic black-and-white tiled kitchen. A study to provide the feeling of quiet solitude, even in a house brimming with life. A billiards room to swill brandy and smoke cigars while entertaining colleagues. A conservatory to enjoy the picturesque garden, leading to the partially cultivated acreage of which your home overlooks. Secret passages and hidden rooms; candle sticks and daggers.

When you're a kid, you think anything's possible- even if your future is genetically etched into the hollows of time- but you're sold the lie of life as a big slot machine and everyone getting a turn. Line up three cherries and get a model wife and a million dollar home. It could happen to *you*, as if life is a movie that unfolds and branches out with a will of its own.

There's a premium to suburban authenticity. The most you'll ever get is to enjoy it from afar. Close your eyes and take in the cold December air; the taste of midnight. They say it's best to ignore what you can't have- to *hold it in disdain*. You'll never get the Lamborghini- bitcoin was a plebeian fantasy. A day late and a dollar short on that too- what else is new?

But walking past an old Tudor home, you can close your eyes for just a moment, and pretend that it's your life- that it *could be* your life. Another round, another hand of cards- play it right this time. By the fireplace, under the arching roof, watching the wintry mix fall from the wooden framed windows. The light switch on the wall is the kind with the two-buttons- true “pre-World War II” architecture.

Don't feel too badly, it was never gonna happen. You were never going to transcend the working class, even if yours is a job only made possible with several college degrees. There are comfortable dwellings for your type, but the architecture is different for reasons I refuse to accept. Middle class homes are “standard-issue life-boxes” set on small plots of land. There is no personality to a middle class home in modern suburbia. If you want something unique and authentic, you'd better know that it comes with a hefty price tag attached. When you get back home, after taking in the crisp December air, and admiring what you'll never have, you can sit by your electric fireplace and listen to “March of the Wooden Soldiers” on FM radio.

Sweet Jane's out with some other asshole, if you didn't already know- everyone becomes interchangeable eventually. Young love is the only true love- a fact you learn long after the wave's crashed and the tide's receded. You found tons of petty reasons to avoid a relationship with her, anyway. Too many buyers on the line when your phone still rang. Little things to nitpick. You leached off of her like a vampire and now you sleep alone.

Growing up in suburbia engenders an obsession with minutia. The tendency toward authoring your own experiences with an iron fist- molding things until they're photogenic, often by sheer will. This desire has superseded what's practical and comfortable- all that matters is *perception control*.

When Alex moved to the city after graduate school, what you'd think was undesirable suddenly became *shabby chic*. The railroad style apartment with few windows and impossibly hot summers was a self-imposed hardship to fondly remember. The stench of the street, awful at face value, carried with it a kind of *otherness* that was vacant in the sterile suburbs. Teenagers on bikes smoking pot and blasting music- this was *authentic*.

The engineers of suburbia would have thought he was fucking retarded. The

suburbs were designed as an *escape* from the filth of the city- and only for the highly privileged.

The idea was for suburbia to look as though a sprawling, well-groomed public park had sprouted beautiful homes. The transition between park and home was to be seamless- country living within reach of city convenience- a scenic middle-ground between wilderness and civilization. The suburban zoning laws would be strictly enforced- front lawns exist today due to laws preventing a homeowner from extending their home to the property line. The suburbs were meant to have a quiet dignity. Even the nicest areas of the city were *close enough* to slums- the suburbs could be beautifully segregated. Clean streets and quiet nights. Barking dogs and charcoal grills. American beauty.

She wasn't sure if she was ready for any of this, she tearfully confessed. I knew Christine better than she could fake it. The cool girl thing was a pose to get fucked by cool boys- the country hopping was for Facebook. I can close my eyes and remember the awkward girl on the transfer bus with the lisp and torn stockings. There was a comfort in my knowing who she really was- even if it was hard for her to remember. There was a reality below the surface and now she was afraid. She was afraid of what she was giving up. She was afraid of committing to the normalcy of family life- something she would inevitably view as defeat. Even if she had enough "crazy stories" for a lifetime, she'd be settling into what she railed against. She was back for good so her parents could help take care of the kid- along with their gift-cards and praise.

The joke about growing up in suburbia is that there's nothing to do.

If you weren't part of some highly-structured after-school activity, like being on a sports team or writing for the school newspaper or taking piano lessons, there was a kind of inertia pulling you toward destruction- like a suburban black hole. Interacting with the world as an emerging adolescent became a pissing contest in who could be the biggest prick. And once you figure out that girls like assholes, if you wanted any chance at getting a hand-job, you'd better be the biggest punk in your neighborhood. "Dennis the Menace" (1959) was shockingly prescient- suburbia breeds assholes.

Kurt Cobain was the poster boy for growing up in suburbia. When touted as the voice of his generation, the implication was that he spoke for *suburban youth*. His music reflected the directionless feeling familiar with any kid not on a sports team or taking piano lessons- the empty spaces of suburbia. You could buy a CD single of "Smells Like Teen Spirit" a few aisles away from Teen Spirit deodorant- there was a kind of murky egalitarianism of symbols rendering everything meaningless. Suburban youth only understood consumption- "here we are now, entertain us," Cobain snarled- and destruction.

Nirvana liked to destroy their equipment at the end of their set- a serious issue in their early days which gradually became more symbolic. The takeaway was an intense focus on the present- there would be no tomorrow- but only as a consequence of having lost hope for the future. There was only today and today was to end in destruction- something every kid growing up in suburbia could understand.

"When I woke up, mom and dad are rolling on the couch.
Rolling numbers, rock and rolling, got my KISS records out."

Christine moved into a small apartment with her boyfriend and child not too far from where she grew up- a new adventure indeed. The final iteration of our *cool girl* is a fat Kindergarten teacher at a private school tiny enough to hire help without the appropriate degrees. Now she posts awful Facebook memes like, "I'm a Teacher... So What's Your Superpower?" This is how things were always going to end up for her- etched into the hollows of time. Ride the bus until the wheels come off and then hit the emergency exit. When your culture never promised you a future, you take what you can get from the present and destroy the evidence.

Elizabeth Warren and the Death of MTV

Billy Pratt · 10 February 2019 · Archived copy · Original

You smile like a cartoon, tooth for tooth
You said that irony was the “shackles of youth”

If you’re someone who likes getting the ending up front, I’ll spare you the details: the hero of the story is Bill Berry. I had gotten a copy of R.E.M.’s “Automatic for the People” the week of its release- the cassette was yellow- and immediately fell in love with the record. While it would be years before I could appreciate the clever writing of singer Michael Stipe, the album served as a welcome departure from what I understood as music in the early 1990s.

While Axl Rose and Metallica were producing work of equal measure, R.E.M. was my first exposure to the idea that things didn’t always need to rock- R.E.M. wasn’t afraid to give a moment space and allow a song to breath- this gave “Drive” room to brood ominously and “Everybody Hurts” time to emotionally settle. “Nightswimming” is still one of my favorite songs and always manages to make me cry.

As much as I loved the record, at twelve years old, I had this awful hunch that I was being duped. I had thought of myself as a kind of emerging rock critic, a junior Robert Christgau, compiling my own Consumers Guide to Rock; I knew what *rocked* and what *sucked*.

But there was something fishy about 1992- everything rocked.

Metallica put out their classic self-titled the year prior. Guns and Roses had their epic “Use Your Illusion” double-shot. Nirvana and Nine Inch Nails were changing the rules of the game by the minute and getting anyone still using hairspray hooked on Xanax. Tori Amos released her beautiful debut, “Little Earthquakes,” and further expanded what I thought of as music. Blind Melon had a hit single that was loved by all. Stone Temple Pilots and Pearl Jam had incredible records. In every direction there seemed to be the future of classic rock etching its name into the hollows of time.

But it all seemed too good to be true. Maybe I was too young to understand music- maybe the promotional forces behind the commercial success of the rock groups I loved were so strong and savvy that I wouldn’t know the difference between rocking and sucking.

What if there really wasn’t anything special about any of this?

MTV was able to marry music and image in a way that wasn’t possible before. Even if they didn’t *invent* the music video, they presented it with *aggression*. In the channel’s purest form, MTV was an assault on the senses. They kept their stars in heavy rotation- you’d lose count of how many times “Smells Like Teen Spirit” was shown in a single day.

It was television programming without a beginning or end, that didn’t necessitate undivided attention. It was something you’d be inclined to keep on all day- running in the background, feeding you a constant hum of subconscious messaging. The brand itself became a part of your identity- in 1992 it was cool to like MTV.

Every rock group I liked in 1992 existed as a star of MTV.

The old-timers, your friend’s dad with his collection of Zeppelin and Sabbath vinyl, would take shots at our beloved, monotheistic rock culture as being *too commercial*- a shot that stung, especially to a twelve-year-old bent on scraping through the commercial sheen of modern rock to access the reality underneath- increasingly worried there wasn’t a reality to access. There was cross-talk, of course; we loved spinning his old Sabbath records- Iommi’s guitar had an earthier crunch on vinyl- and he loved Alice in Chains and Metallica.

Still, the presence of MTV- its watchful, deadened eye humming along in the background- had to be reckoned with.

To what extent did what I like reflect how I wanted to be perceived? Even if projecting an image wasn't the primary concern, it certainly existed as a welcome consequence. You wanted your choice in music to shape who you were. You followed the admirable qualities of the rock star in order to mold your swagger.

MTV served as a starter kit in building an identity from the ground up.

As she daydreams, Elizabeth can't help but imagine her face tear-stained and her eyes bloodshot. She never bought into being the hero of her own story. Only in fantasy can she come to terms with what she's desperate to hide.

I get it. I used to have a reoccurring nightmare where I'd show up to elementary school in my underwear. I'd realize it mid-way through the day, horrified, glimpsing at my bare legs under the desk. Once I noticed, I knew others would too.

I had a professor who encouraged us to share our nightmares- undoubtedly to farm masturbation material under the guise of something Freudian, something that became apparent after a girl in our class revealed that she often dreams of an aggressive man preventing her from urinating- I relayed my *underwear at school* story, and he made a lame joke about "body shame."

This was likely done, in retrospect, to curry favor with the pee girl- the college professor equivalent of giving me a wedgie and stuffing me in a locker.

But he was wrong, it was never about body-shame, it was tied to a subconscious fear that my ineptitude will eventually catch up with me- it felt hauntingly inevitable. When a problem begins as something that's easily ignored and grows into something encompassing and destructive.

Elizabeth was never invited to the cool kids' table. While she tried to get on the wavelength of the hip, she could never find the right frequency- a craft that should have been honed in her college days, when a young girl looking foolish comes off as adorable, and any misunderstanding could be forgiven with a blushing giggle.

But that ship had sailed long ago for Elizabeth, and she knew it- now finding her only solace in imagining herself sitting on the chest of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, stifling her breath, and dropping heavy fists into the bridge of her nose. Her sobbing cries alternating between "I never understood" and "don't fuck with me."

AOC understands that the new era of politician must seem relatable in a highly specific way. Young voters want to see themselves reflected in their politicians. They want their political representatives to participate in social media image-management, which compromises the bulk of a millennial's daily activities. The authenticity put forth must be carefully crafted and controlled- a concept that AOC intrinsically understands and a language that Warren doesn't speak.

The transition from MTV to YouTube was ultimately a by-product of Martin Luther's "Ninety-five Theses." This should have been something obvious to Warren, still trying to cater a heroic image to an MTV audience gone extinct. When Luther granted the average person a direct line to the Divine, his intent was to destroy the hierarchy of the church. It was here that hierarchy took a negative connotation- a ripple effect that we're still experiencing today.

The purpose of MTV was to define what was cool and sell you accessibility to it. The rock star sat at the top of the pop-culture hierarchy. This relationship was one-sided: you were meant to emulate the rock star who considered you a peasant. Arena rock culture was the modern day King's speech- where you were given commands, dressed down for not executing them to the King's liking, and, finally, given token bits of hollow praise. Paul Stanley tells you when to sit and stand, chastises you for being "too tired," taunts you with possibly ending the performance, and finally sends you off telling you that he loves your town.

Warren is still running on the old MTV arena rock formula- she wants to tell you the story and she expects you to believe it.

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez understands that the path to power is no longer linear- something that now comes across as alienating and fascist. Millennials don't want a rock star, they want an *anti-rock star*. They don't want someone to admire- they want someone who will make them feel comfortable. They want a politician who will wear sweatpants, admit that "adulting is hard," and eat processed food. The groupie fucking, hotel room destroying, controlled chaos of Axl Rose would only upset them.

The new authenticity is in selling you an admirable **loser**.

It's ironic that liking an R.E.M. record led to me questioning the authenticity of the entire system. They were probably the least likely rock group to skew inauthentic- in 2011 they quietly disbanded, believing that they didn't have it in them to make another great album.

And this is where we circle back to Bill Berry- R.E.M.'s original drummer, who left the band in 1997 to become a farmer. Berry did not have a falling out with the other members, nor does he carry any ill-will- he only wanted a career change. He was able to stand at the core of the machine and back away by choice, the ultimate in authenticity- an authenticity without the consciousness of managing perception; an authenticity without an ulterior motive. Something foreign to Elizabeth Warren, Bill Berry just needed some time alone (and he feels fine).

Success (tfw)

Billy Pratt · 18 February 2019 · Archived copy · Original

“Offer me solutions, offer me alternatives, and I decline.”

I had this incredible moment of content while kissing Sarah in the backseat of my car. “Heroin” was playing on the radio. She had asked me if her breasts were as big as I was expecting- that perhaps her nudes were deceptively angled, the old MySpace trick. She was so nervous I wouldn’t like her that she needed to hold her wine glass with both hands, to prevent spillage.

This worsened when I told her to cut the shit with the sterile, first date, *getting to you know* chit-chat- the last bold move I’d ever make. She had to put the glass down entirely.

Once in my car, she sat up straight, arched her back, and asked again- somewhere between seductive and genuinely worried. I told her that I’d need a closer look and took the straps of her dress off her shoulders.

And I had this moment, in the back seat, of true connection. I liked her- dark hair, large breasts. Insecure and she didn’t bother to hide it. A kindred spirit left behind by the dating market, looking for something real. This felt different. This felt special.

The day after Christmas, 2016, was the last time any of this were possible.

Even then, we were late in the game. Any semblance of success had passed for the well-intentioned, common man. Meeting Sarah was catching a shooting star on your camcorder- standing in the right place at the right time and having the prescience to hit *record* on gut-instinct alone. It could have been anyone, but it was you on the evening news, proudly showing your footage.

Success is hollow in a world without sex. You become a kid selling candy bars for a shot at a 13” color TV in the prize catalog. If you take the idea of having nice kitchen appliances purchased to impress women out of the equation, it turns out, you don’t need very much. A notebook and a pen. A freezer full of steak and heavy things to push around. A car with enough gas in the tank to drive yourself to death when the time comes.

Dark thoughts. A text from Amazon cuts the tension. Your package is nine stops away- a blu-ray copy of “Ghostbusters 2.” How could you have lived with this hole in your collection?

You get through another day.

The trick is to recalibrate- *redefine* success. Make money less relevant. Work for sustenance. Bitcoin was a psy-op to keep your type in line, you’re sure. False hope for those ready to unplug and get off the grid. A hundred acres in Montana with your Bitcoin wife, starting a Bitcoin family, watching your net-worth skyrocket effortlessly. “I think they call it *passive income*,” you tell your no-coin friends who wouldn’t listen. Entire notebooks of writing to be found when you’re gone- to be cherished or burned, you’ll never know.

It wasn’t meant to work out. There’s a power structure in-place so deeply invested in the prevention of a new world order that any deviation would be the equivalent of breaking a law of nature- as much a fantasy as comic book superheros. Believing in anything but an inevitable status-quo path to destruction is like standing in an arcade pumping quarters into Donkey Kong- no way to win the game, but stand there long enough and you’ll make it to the kill screen.

So you redefine success. You work within the system. You rearrange things quietly, when the warden isn’t looking. Removing women as the end-goal presents such a radical freedom that it’s shamed by the mainstream culture- men aren’t meant to be free. You don’t understand this because everything you’ve ever done was in the interest of getting laid. True freedom is to excise this tumor and see what’s left. Committing to this fully is the only way you’ll have

sex again, so it's win-win.

Letting go is the foundation, expression is the goal.

Not success.

Artists shouldn't be successful and success is antithetical to art- is what you tell yourself. As you grind away, producing your best work to a "modest audience of dedicated readers," sacrificing sleep and sex. I'd pass on getting laid to write an essay on Elizabeth Warren- a string of words no one has put together before in human history. Madness by any other measure, but an artist must be obsessed with the creation of art.

Success only muddies the waters, becoming a barrier between artist and work.

Success is toxic and must be avoided, says the unsuccessful.

Metallica was never the same after selling a billion copies of the black album. They were burdened by expectation- to replicate what worked and magnify those elements times infinity.

The self-conscious artist is doomed to fail, betraying the instincts that led to their success. After the follow-up was met with a fraction of the sales, the band flailed wildly- chasing approval like desperate drunkards- culminating in a documentary where they all cry.

Modern men have no war to fight so modernity has taken arms against us.

The herd must be thinned. There are deep, esoteric reasons for why even fat women won't reply to your messages now on Plenty of Fish. Men have become weak and nature hit the emergency brakes. Now only the most genetically fit will get easy sex- for everyone else, the long-game has gotten so long that it's no longer worth playing. To think that clever banter could have gotten you laid five years ago is astounding- to think that ambitious nerds had girlfriends in high school twenty years ago is the stuff of legend.

In 1992, schlock-rock metal band GWAR put out their relative masterpiece, "America Must Be Destroyed," but they were right for the *wrong reasons*. They argued that the country was naturally heading toward a wonderful, degenerate utopia but getting stifled by a gate-keeping Christian majority- a laughable take in hindsight.

Now when Tom likes Mindy at the office, he doesn't sidle up to her at the water cooler angling for Friday night drinks, but instead navigates to her premium Snapchat- his only hesitation in potential budgetary constraint. Maybe then, through private message- her response enticed by gifts purchased from her Amazon wishlist- can he offer drinks? No, he decides this sounds too pedestrian. She already has rogue millionaires- those who got into Bitcoin when you were too lazy to scan your driver's license into an exchange (yes, really)- offering her weekends in Vegas. He needs to go *big budget*, if only he could after all the high-end kitchen appliances he purchased to impress her.

Impossible to talk to her at work, he concedes, as he settles for gawking at her tits for \$25/month under the pseudonym *SneakyTim*- a necessary complication is his long-con courting game-plan. There must be a slow reveal, the bandages must be removed with patience- any haste in the reveal that Tom is, in fact, a loyal subscriber with a commendable accumulation of gifts purchased anonymously would result in a swift "#MeToo" accusation, and the loss of all present and future employment. Moves must be made with gentle and conscientious precision, thinks SneakyTim, as he sends Mindy the requisite \$30 for her long-form masturbation video- for *fans only*, of course.

The problem isn't a prudish morality, but I can't blame GWAR for being wrong. They acknowledged the problem- that the modern world is diseased beyond salvation. All valid modern art must stem from this foundation.

The cocaine addled *brat pack* of young, hip authors couldn't get past the nihilism of 1980's party culture. The excess of sex and drugs- the tail end of the KISS concert with its fireworks and confetti- was the pay-off for what was built by the Boomers; its spectacular finale. They were overfed hamsters, rolling around in their own filth.

The modern writer was sold the promise of decadence and pays the debt of decay.

The silence felt awkward. I knew my mistake the moment I had made it- it sat cold and moist on the upper part of my thigh. We were getting to know each other now as if what we had was in the past-tense, like a post-game show on ESPN. She spoke without the constraint of keeping in-character, telling me about the time she dated a rock star and her abusive ex-boyfriend.

Women don't respect condom use. Even if you're still fucking her, it's the shareware version of the full-product. Limited functionality. They'll always hesitate before conceding- you must anticipate this and remain strong in your resolve. I had a good run before Sarah, but like an aging fighter, I got caught in a moment of weakness.

"Sorry I'm such a slut," read her text the next day. Her way of tying things up. You're left wondering what the best case scenario would have been, or if this was it.

So you redefine success. You realize the value in dwelling at the epicenter. You retch at the idea of becoming complacent, spouting naivete like you're handing out recipe-cards to the secret sauce. You're resigned to staring at the sun.

You create art with a high degree of authenticity. You put integrity before all else. You never write with consideration for audience, and you find even the promotion of your own work to have minor hints of insincerity, just like the minor hints of dark chocolate and citrus in your favorite cold-brew coffee blend- not pronounced, but palpable.

People find this approach refreshing. Your work effortlessly find an audience. You've come to a beautiful intersection between honesty and success- something you didn't think possible. Those in the mainstream take notice and become upset by your defiant take on modern life.

Your popularity continues to grow. You appear on podcasts; people analyze your material. Your follower count on Twitter makes panties wet. Hundreds of retweets for a few throw-away words. You title an essay "The Modern Rock Star," but are never quite brazen enough to publish. You feel bulletproof.

And then, one day, your tweets are blown-up on a poster board in front of Congress. The Huffington Post publishes your most unflattering pictures. "Ashamed" is the key-word most repeated in your mother's interview with *The New Yorker*.

Success.

Chasing Ghosts

Billy Pratt · 22 March 2019 · Archived copy · Original

When you're gone, here's a song, I'll be thinking about you

I've never experienced anything more ethereal than when our eyes met before homeroom. It couldn't have lasted more than a few seconds, but it hung in the air like an eternal sunrise. Nothing I've experienced since has matched this feeling- for only a moment, I stood before the face of God. Drug people lament the way it *used to be*, before things were cut with laxatives. The first semester at college, and you're popping pills at a party- throbbing waves of intensity.

And you think you'll take it with you, like you finally won the ring-toss at a carnival. This is your big pink elephant. You think it's going to feel that way every time, but every time you go back, there are more pieces missing. The fifth time you've gone through the haunted house and the foam skeleton doesn't have the same resonance. You become the old pothead, rolling your eyes at kids and their stoner stories.

Our first movie date and I get her a yellow, plastic ring out of the quarter machine. Someday, Jessica, *someday*. It's not that it wasn't meant to be ironic, but that its irony was so genuine that it'd never work today. The world has moved beyond sincerity.

In another life we'd be married now- two kids, in a house with a two-car garage. Yard work on the weekends while she shuffles the kids between soccer practice and kung-foo classes. At night we laugh over Chardonnay, remembering how Sister Eileen would catch us making-out in the hallway and then try to embarrass me about it during math class. You don't realize how much that means until you can never have it again.

Pressing her against the wall when no one's looking, biting her neck and grabbing a breast. We never lost it, did we?

No one expected me to break up with her. She was gorgeous, but we drifted apart. The sun had finally set. Seeing her would only feel empty. And she got really annoying.

It was an integrity move. I didn't have another girl lined up- I wouldn't have even known how to do that. I didn't like her anymore, and isn't that why people break-up?

Paint the house to burn it down. Allow the perfect to get in the way of the good. I'm the captain who's playing by the rules if shit happens in the middle of the Atlantic. A modern, suburban Samurai with an unbreakable will to do *what's right*, even to my own detriment.

In my mind, I'm Lou Reed. Life is performance art, and you never settle for less than authentic. When Reed walked away from The Velvet Underground, having produced some of the best music of the decade that no one gave a shit about, he took a job picking up garbage on the beach. "Lou fucking Reed, collecting trash," is what David Bowie must have thought when he offered to produce a solo-record, the incredible "Transformer" (1972), which provided his only mainstream hit, "Walk on the Wild Side."

With unprecedented career momentum, Lou cashed-in with "Sally Can't Dance" (1974)- a terrible record that hit commercially. This rather common dichotomy, an awful record that awful people with awful taste seem to like- something that wouldn't have registered with a band like KISS- tortured Reed.

Feeling compromised, thinking his career couldn't be salvaged, he did what anyone with autism would do- he burned it all down. Releasing an album of pure noise, Reed attempted career suicide.

"Metal Machine Music" (1975) is nothing but guitar feedback- there is no melody, there is **nothing** enjoyable. Anyone who's said they've listened to the whole thing is either lying or retarded. Not only did putting out a self-destructive record take balls, but Lou even had the balls to make it a *double album*. If you're going down with the

ship, you may as well sink the Titanic.

Lou didn't like his career anymore, so he broke up with it. It was an integrity move.

Even if she were gorgeous. Even if we were hitting our sexual stride- where Friday nights were pizza and root beer, and fucking her on the floor of her living room. Even if she loved me with a teenage intensity they all say is bullshit, "you don't know what love is"- but like everything they've ever said, the polar opposite is true. The only real love is teenage love, and even if she were the only girl who would ever love me.

She got really annoying. So I called her one night and broke up with her.

I ran into her at a club after our first year of college- she was in black fishnets. There was a dumb luck to her growing up in the salad days of Hot Topic. A slender frame where the biggest things on her were either her eyes or her tits, Jessica was the goth girlfriend you've always wanted.

Back on the floor of her living room- her parents were on vacation. We never lost it, did we?

She tells me she loves me with a hopeful insecurity. I say nothing. She starts to cry. I'm too drunk to leave but it's time to go. Hands around the wheel; ten and two. Keep your eyes open and try to look straight. A half-hour home. Choke the vomit down, this train's not stopping.

The few times we've spoken since would end with her cursing at me. She liked calling me a "bastard," language I'm certain copied from her mother- she never liked me. I'd resist the urge to point out the inaccuracies of this accusation and assume she was pointing to something more colloquial. I'd sit and take it because I thought I deserved it.

Dawn of the Dead

Billy Pratt · 22 July 2019 · Archived copy · Original

“We are the end of the world. Goodnight, farewell.”

She told me that she never likes the ones who call her pretty. A mistake made in earnest, a fleeting desire for something real- not playing teenage costume party with another aging woman over cheap drinks. When the fantasy is all that's left, the impulse is to get lost in it. You want to forget that you're an arm above the water and your legs are giving out.

You want this to be what it isn't- it's been too long, and you're too far from the shore. You want to pretend that you've lucked out and the prom queen agreed to a Saturday night at the drive-in. That isn't what this is, and you know it, but it's more satisfying to spend time pretending rather than going through the motions where you say the right words at the right times like you're punching in a Nintendo code, to skip to the end and pump rockets into Mother Brain.

Better get out before the whole thing explodes.

She doesn't want you to think she's pretty. That's not part of her fantasy and her fantasy is all that matters. This is your first date, and you're a sucker if she thinks you like her. She wants to feel your contempt. She wants to think you were busy with a girl ten years younger the night before and that she'd be lucky to suck your dick. She wants to work for it. She wants someone who hates her. This was your shot and you blew it.

This is what you get for being single over thirty-five. Meaning dies the further you get from your teenage years until you're whisked off into the middle of the ocean to drown. Middle-aged women read books about being brave while starting inspirational instagram pages- men learn the right words to say, in the right order, to get to the end of the game.

If you're looking for meaning in any of this, you lose.

Teenage love is only real for you to stick around long enough to make sure the girl you knocked up isn't eaten by bears. It's evolutionary. You're a tool for the survival of your people, and you're dropped like a rock when you're too old to be useful.

You're the walking dead- a vampire- and if you dare look for meaning you'll be starved out of existence. Only the savvy get laid here, bucko, so get with the program or learn to go hungry.

A genuine moment of breathless eye-contact feels like a lifetime ago. Now everything has the sheen of production. You know exactly how long to wait before looking away, the right pauses to take, how to use your breath- you're ten times sexier, but even the moments you want to come off as genuine are only performative.

Once you sell your integrity, it's gone for good.

The rock band reunion is a misnomer. Their legacy is cemented in time- anything else is something new and different. The reunion *matters less*- people get old, things get muddled. You can't capture the innocence of the original- you can only exploit it.

You take what you've learned about women and you use it to fuck them. That's the game, Vlad. You've become a cannibal in a world where you either learn the rules of the dead or sit on your hands thinking you're pious. Guess what, no one cares.

You had your shot at a story and you blew it. In another time, in another life, you'd have that two-car **garage**. Where are the kids, kung-foo soccer? She keeps her phone face down because she spends her nights *reconnecting* with

friends from High School on Facebook. Kevin's married now too, but she doesn't want you to get the "wrong idea."

You had your shot at a story and you blew it- the best you can do is latch onto another disaster, where you tell people that you found each other "*later in life*" and nod as they tie it together with "*everything happens for a reason.*"

You're not Scott Weiland, you're Jeff Gutt. The real singer O.D.'d and you're just the replacement, so shut up and sing "Plush." Gutt knew it too and penned "**Meadow**" for the Pilot's comeback record- a clever song about *survivor's guilt*- where Gutt promises old, dead Scott that he's "*just killing time and having fun.*" Nothing to worry about, even for a corpse- Stone Temple Pilots was Weiland's story, Gutt's just "*holding the wheel.*"

Pretty like an aging Barbie doll, is what you tell her. You've realized your misstep and all you've got left is a hail mary neg, but the damage's been done. You called her pretty and now you're not going to fuck her. This will bother you for the rest of your life- you'll lie in bed, jacking off to the idea. Because you couldn't fuck her, she's ten times hotter than any girl you've ever fucked, and you'll be chasing that ghost forever.

You're Dave Mustaine and what could have been will always matter more than what was. Nothing you have will ever compare to the ones who got away. You can't tolerate hearing "no." You have inexplicable confidence. You're incredibly entitled. You think everyone should be kissing your ass.

Even if you have a sold out club with people chanting your name, you spot the one guy in the "Delicious Tacos" t-shirt and have security kick him out- Tacos is playing the hockey arena down the street, buddy. "Better to reign in hell than serve in heaven," is what you tell yourself to justify your fragile ego. Say no to me and it's a lifetime of masturbation, dream girl- hope you can deal with that.

She'll never know, and she'll never think of you again because you called her pretty instead of making her feel like dog shit.

Never Called Me Back

Billy Pratt · 31 August 2019 · Archived copy · Original

“Some wine, some wine, she’ll never decline some wine. She sees her ship is sinking so she’s drinking all the time.”

Things just didn’t go as planned, she told me, her face stained with tears. I knew she was talking about me. She was naked and crying- something that would’ve turned me on, but I wanted to be there for her.

It just wasn’t in your cards, baby. I thought this was comforting. Confront reality like a stoic- always have a love of fate. The stars brought us together, baby. Your life crushed from divorce, my eternal adolescence- if that isn’t a love story, what is?

She swore she didn’t drink at work, but she called this her *downward spiral*, so I always wondered. She’d get nervous when it was closing time at the liquor store and she was running out of wine. By three in the morning, she’d tell me she loved me.

I dismissed this as *drunk talk*. I knew she’d never remember. It felt vapid. This wasn’t love, this was *mind-blowing chemistry*, code that girls on dating sites use for “hot sex”- her face would blush with orgasm. This was a momentary connection so deep that the coalescence of energy between us felt tangible. Even if it were only temporary, the reality of it carried a gravity so strong it held us to the bed.

And even if she were only a year older than me, she was tuned into a frequency that I didn’t yet understand.

We were together because her husband left her. She had “daddy issues,” he was twenty years older. You’d think that would buy loyalty but not this time. When I wasn’t with her, she’d get drunk and watch her wedding video.

You end up with people because their trajectory matches your own. Her line going down the graph to the left met with mine going up to the right. We are not parallel lines- we intersect.

I was good enough to meet a recently divorced, alcoholic lawyer bent on self-destruction.

In my “unemployed and laughing about it” phase- a designation sadly not available on dating site profiles- my options were wide open. Women love the unemployed asshole. Everything in hell is the opposite of what you think it should be. If you want to get laid, quit your job and message thirty women at 2AM- you’ll be surprised at what you find.

I liked Abigail. She was cute and Irish- dark hair, large breasts. Vulnerable and she didn’t bother to hide it. Men like vulnerability because it reinforces their identity as masculine. No one wants a *strong woman*.

I romanticize broken women to make sense of my own choices. Their failures bring comfort to my own. We are the same- trying to make due in a toxic world, like when your character in Final Fantasy gets infected and every step kills a little bit of your health.

It makes for a better story, anyway. Years later, you can have a blog where you share these stories as a way to craft a narrative about your own life. You need this because these stories are all you have.

She’d say, “it’s an escape from mistakes that we make,” with a sly smile and finish her glass. She was talking about me again. Maybe Abigail was my crazy summer fling- where we’d wander the streets of her neighborhood at midnight and make-out under the stars, laughing at anyone who didn’t get the joke- but I was something different to her. I was part of her *downward spiral*.

“Oh Billy, if and only if...” she’d say with wistful regret. Lawyers tell jokes rooted in symbolic logic- a class we’d both taken in college. *If and only if* because it was never meant to be- it was doomed from the beginning. We were

on borrowed time- the eye of the storm before our lines on the graph separated for good. Our trajectories were never destiny.

She'd get drunk and tell me she loved me because she understood that love didn't exist outside of momentary glimpses and flashes. When you're sold love as a verbal contract, you'll have learned your lesson by the fire sale. You can marry your high school sweetheart and never know the difference or meet a vampire and get taken over the coals. In a cold world, people take what they can get and move on. People are flawed, people are selfish.

He wasn't the man she thought she was marrying- he turned out to be something different. He sucked her blood until there was nothing left and then disappeared into the night. He left her dead inside.

But during those moments, I existed as her salvation and she loved me for it. This was love without expectation- love without narrative. We didn't need to pretend that it was something more than it was. Love is a precious moment where the energy in the room is so urgent that it can't help but be labeled. If you think love is anything more, I'll meet you at the fire sale.

She'd get drunk and tell me to cum inside her. I never would- which was only the right answer depending on your perspective. Days later, she'd have her kitchen table lined with over-the-counter pregnancy tests. I couldn't tell if she was disappointed by the results. It just wasn't in our cards, baby.

Every summer has to end, even if you don't want to let it go. The end of August, lying naked in her bed- we never could escape its gravitational pull. She gets a phone call and excuses herself. Twenty minutes later, she's crying in the kitchen. It's the guy she's seeing when she isn't with me. He's on his way to her place to kick my ass. She's sorry, she tells me. Downward spiral, I say. We share a smile. I give her a hug.

I'd never hear from her again.

Chubby Set of Bones

Billy Pratt · 5 October 2019 · Archived copy · Original

“These words: you will be mine, all the time.”

Like buying bitcoin for pennies, the peak time to meet a girl on the internet came and went before you ever knew what you were losing. Before anyone would have thought to use a term like *early adopter*— a time so raw that it couldn’t have been confined to language. Before they called it the “wild west.” A time without shape or form.

Forget selfies, rewind past digital cameras- when scanners were still *exotic technology*, the most pressing question after “ASL” became asking what she looked like. The description of her body would ignite the imagination. You’d never have guessed that this primitive fumbling would yield more honesty than digital pictures, twenty years later.

I knew I was in over my head when I heard Kristen’s voice. She spoke with the easy confidence of beauty. I always came out of left field. The outsider art of trying to get laid. A punchers chance, but give me enough time and I’ll land a clean left hook. There was a crazy charm to this and Kristen picked up on it. She didn’t know what to make of me, but she knew I was unlike anyone she’d ever met. I spoke with the easy confidence of insanity.

We met on the cusp of Autumn turning cool- where the air feels heavy and frames the night for romance. Parked under the tracks, we made out to the sound of passing trains. She was the prettiest girl I’d ever kiss- when I thought that kissing the girl meant riding off into the sunset.

You thought that was the end of the movie.

Our drama would only last a few weeks. Kristen was the first girl I’d kiss after Jessica. She was the kind of girl who had every guy in the room gawking at her wherever we went- dark hair, large breasts. She was the hottest girl in the club out with a kid in a Misfits t-shirt.

She’d never had known I existed without the internet.

I was too invested emotionally to compete with her game playing, but like the drug dealer in an after school special- she gave me a taste and I was instantly hooked on the kind of emotional warfare that would define all of my future relationships.

I did my best to keep up with her. I wrote taunting poems accusing her of being emotionally dead and kind of fat (she wasn’t) while implying that I was fucking another girl in her absence. This bought me a few more hook-ups, but I was ultimately out of my depth. Still, she’d remember the poems years later.

When you start down a road of emotional manipulation, you end up an addict. You get hot for the process. Coming up with jabs and tuning into the subtle reactions that she thinks are hidden. When you find a sore, you pick at it. You’ll end up getting off on this harder than you get off on sex.

Later, I’d tell Abigail that she had cute knees. And she did- petite in stature, she had the thighs of a woman who had not yet borne children and the knees of a teenager- untouched by time. But when you play these games with a smart girl, you get called out on your bullshit- something that would always make me smile. If you’re smart enough to pick up on it, you deserve to win.

You like to break women down so that you could rebuild them in your own image, she’d tell me. Your compliments are backhanded- insults by omission. You want her confidence dependent on you; reliant on your permission.

You want to own her.

Cannibalism and “Joker” (2019)

Billy Pratt · 20 October 2019 · Archived copy · Original

Reality struck Matt Kennedy Gould in a flash as every cast member of the show created for his destruction revealed themselves as an actor hired to manipulate him. Every cast member but one, Brian Keith Etheridge- cast as Gould’s *best friend*, tasked with staying close to him throughout filming and becoming his confidant- remained cautiously silent.

When Gould turns to him, able to digest that the rest of the cast were maybe a lot of Hollywood phonies, out of work actors lowering the bar for a reality gig, he asks Etheridge, with genuine hope, if he’s as much of a liar as the rest.

And you’ll never find a more genuine moment of terror on reality television than the look on Brian Etheridge’s face, as he struggles to explain to his new best friend that he’s just as full of shit as anyone else- that he’s of the elite, Hollywood caste getting paid to make poor, working class Matt look pathetic.

This is where the Joker would pull out a gun and shoot Etheridge in the head- something Etheridge, with emotions and adrenaline running high, feared was possible.

The producers of “The Joe Schmo Show” (2003) were looking for a loser to crucify when they met Matt Kennedy Gould playing basketball on a weekday afternoon at a community center in Pittsburgh. Gould, a law school drop out, had a job delivering pizza and was living with his parents- depressed and directionless, he auditioned for a cable television reality competition he thought was called “Lap of Luxury.”

Tricking people on television wasn’t a new concept- hidden camera shows had been around for decades- but a series modeled after “The Truman Show” (1998) hadn’t been attempted, at a time when reality TV was an exciting concept ripe for experimentation. While there existed reality TV before, MTV’s “The Real World” (1992) modernized the concept, it was the breakout popularity of “Survivor” (1997) that cemented it in the public’s consciousness.

And while other reality television shows existed to humiliate their contestants, never before was there a single series created to humiliate a single person- something the New York Times called “wickedly funny.”

“The Joe Schmo Show” must have been the greatest reality pitch of all time. A series created for the destruction of a single person- building to a climactic reveal in the series finale, where we find out just how much of a Joker was cast as the lead- a finale which did gangbuster ratings for host network SpikeTV as their highest rated (non-wrestling) telecast in their otherwise uneventful history.

The cast of actors were made up of reality TV tropes, like *the asshole* modeled off reality’s most infamous asshole, Puck from the third season of *The Real World*. There was the wacky, over-the-top gay guy Kip, the *rich bitch* Ashley, the *virgin* Molly (whom I suspect was modeled after *Real World 2*’s country boy, Jon Brennan), the old guy, the schemer... and, the buddy, Brian Keith Etheridge, who existed to keep everything grounded in some semblance of normalcy for Gould as he got lost in the show’s drama.

So it was fitting for Etheridge to feel a tinge of fright as the truth was revealed to Gould that all of his new friends were assholes- if he was going to lose it and attack anyone, it would have been Etheridge... but that isn’t what happened. Gould got caught up in being the center of attention, and before he had time to process any of it, the smarmy host pulled him aside to explain the cash and prizes he had won for being a good sport. Moments later, a highlight reel is played for sad sack Matt where each cast member verbally masturbates him- the hack actress playing hot blond Molly laying it on so thick as to imply she had some kind of subtle sexual attraction to him. Matt weeps at the flattery, and any negativity in the unspoken reveal that he was actually exploited and humiliated by a faceless television network washes away in a haze of balloons and confetti.

A year after filming, Matt Kennedy Gould would be holed up in a cheap apartment in Santa Monica, blowing his show earnings on drugs.

It's too easy to dismiss Gould's cautionary tale with jaded nonchalance. Big Hollywood has always been run by a cult of demonic cannibals. You could hardly blame the middle management producers directly responsible for knowing goddamn well what they were doing to Gould- they had to eat in a system that has no use for those without a human to sacrifice... but there remained a feeling of unique filth to "The Joe Schmo Show" that I wasn't able to shake.

In what was the first *found footage* movie- the film genre closest to reality television- director Ruggero Deodato examined the nature of exploitation in his epic "Cannibal Holocaust" (1980). With a tagline the uninitiated would assume was the typical hyperbole, "Cannibal Holocaust" is arguably *the most controversial film of all time*. Gut wrenching and realistic, ten days after its premiere Deodato was arrested for obscenity and investigated for murder- the violence is brutal and unrelenting. Muddying the waters was Deodato's insistence on actually killing animals on screen- deliberately blurring the line between reality and fiction.

The movie follows a group of documentary film makers into the South American rain forest- dubbed the *Green Inferno*- to get footage on the more esoteric cannibal tribes. They act like dicks, antagonizing the cannibals until they're raped and murdered. Play stupid games, gets eaten by cannibals. Their footage is found by Professor Harold Monroe, played by porn actor Robert Kerman- whose other bit of notoriety was getting to fuck Bambi Woods in "Debbie Does Dallas" (1978) before having a tiny cameo in "Spider-Man" (2002)- who comes to the realization that the film makers were dicks who got what they deserved.

Kerman's left wondering who the *real cannibals* were.

Tony Soprano would boast that mob morality dictated that *only soldiers kill soldiers*- civilians were meant to be left unharmed in gangland violence. Anyone knowingly climbing into the dirty bathwater of Hollywood gets what they deserve- an incestuous, demonic, exploitative system always ready to tear the flesh off your bones when you become too weak to survive- ready to make you a murderous whore to keep from being eaten.

This was not Matt Kennedy Gould- he was a civilian. "The Joe Schmo Show" is uncomfortable because it pulled the curtain back just a bit too far- it revealed to us explicitly what we've always known but have never said: that the people curating the content fed to the screens invasive in every room of our homes, lighting up the insides of our pockets, lurking on our wrists... the screen I'm watching now, typing this... are all horrible, amoral ghouls. This was the first time the television existed as a reminder that it would eat us too if given the chance- we are all Matt Kennedy Gould, only he was unlucky enough to be chosen.

It may help Tony Soprano get to sleep at night thinking the mob only goes after their own, but he's as deluded as anyone- the entire infrastructure of the mob relies on the exploitation of the ignorant. The mob is a symptom of capitalism, a system designed for the strong to feed on the weak. We're encouraged to deny the humanity of the less capable, to become Ed Gein at a blood and guts clearance sale- never let anything useful go to waste.

To deny the inertia of this system is to allow the hungry to pick your bones. Refuse to comply on the basis of morality, and you're only letting blood in the water. Getting caught up in the philosophical entanglement of thinking anything is sacred in a profane world is time spent letting your guard down- a luxury only for those who can afford walled gardens. The rest of us must act swift and viscous- selfish in a selfish world.

A lesson learned by Arthur Fleck at the end of "Joker" (2019). No longer existing as meat for the grinder, Fleck joins the game by competing using the only means he has- a loaded gun. After killing his mentally ill mother for abusing him by proxy, he whines about the lack of social empathy for the mentally ill. If that sounds like hypocrisy on the part of Fleck, it is- only Fleck doesn't care, reminding the viewer that he "doesn't believe in anything."

He's fully bought into an awful system where you either take what you want or have everything taken from you- you're either on the right side of a smoking gun or getting eyed over by a pack of Ed Geins.

Who are the real cannibals? We all are. And everything must go.

Adolescence and “1979” (1995)

Billy Pratt · 7 March 2020 · Archived copy · Original

“Faster than the speed of sound. Faster than we thought we’d go, beneath the sound of hope.”

For the bulk of the past year, I enjoyed getting to work an hour before everyone else. Often, I’d be the first in the building- the motion lights of the hallways clicking to life upon my arrival. It felt important to settle into work. Wake myself up fully from the shit sleep I had gotten the night before. As I age, my brain seems to take longer and longer to heat up- like one of those old IBM computers, with the turbo button on the yellowing plastic shell, that would only display green type on a black screen. Back when computers held mysteries and nerds were the only priestly caste who could access them. Now computers are vehicles for advertisements and nerds are the consumers happiest about it.

I enjoyed getting to work early because the roads were empty and I could speed. The highway I’d choose was wonderfully twisted, lined with trees, and toward the end of the school year my backdrop would become a gorgeous sunrise. It felt like playing Outrun, and just the idea that a wrong move could flip my Honda Accord (I chose the “sports model”) and send it bouncing across the road made me feel *alive*.

What was the only risk embedded in my daily routine was cut short by a speeding ticket. The officer was polite and reduced my seventy-eight in a fifty-five to a seventy-five- citing major differences in consequence. I appreciated that. I plead guilty by mail, and got a reasonably prompt reply that my guilty plea was rejected. A court date was *to be determined*.

But I wouldn’t get to work early to do actual work- it was genuinely about swimming through lanes to cut-off the guy doing sixty-five in the left. Send him a message about my *superiority*. Maybe an intervention of sorts, a message that he needs to up his game to the point of being fucking competitive in a world that will eat anything less than alive. Feel the torque of your goddamn pick-up and become who you are.

I’d get to work and watch old MTV videos on YouTube. Stuff you couldn’t have appreciated upon initial airing. When I got around to “1979,” I found myself watching it on repeat, as my eyes would well with tears, for the rest of the year.

There’s a complexity to adolescence that becomes forgotten in adulthood. Like the ability to truly fall in love, once it’s lost, it’s gone forever. People who shit on adolescence- who mock those who miss high school the most, who swear they’d never go back while laughing at the cynicism they’ve developed over the years like mold on forgotten jelly- are completely dead inside and are to be avoided, because, if you’re so far gone that you can’t remember a time more lofty and wistful... you may as well give yourself over to the system entirely, work your bullshit job until you’re dead, and, if you’re a woman, get pounded out by every shithead with a decent opener on Plenty of Fish until you’re too old for that too. Most men don’t have that luxury.

If you do have fond memories of adolescence, you’ll end up doing all that just the same, but at least you’re not an asshole.

Adolescence is the intersection of childhood and adulthood. Childhood isn’t terribly interesting, even when romanticized, and adulthood is like a sitcom that’s been running for infinite seasons too long- every year becomes a rehash of the same- everything devolved to parody, where Kramer and George are building a rocket ship out of couch cushions because George got caught masturbating at the library.

The manifestation of sexuality is what makes the human experience interesting, but too much sexuality gets old quickly. There is nothing romantic about a twenty-two year old trying to fuck everything that moves- in another time, in another place, that energy could have been harnessed to build bridges and craft beauty, but in hell we spill

fluid on hormonally altered women and consider that **success**.

But there's a beauty to the emerging sexuality of adolescence. Taking a closer look at the pool scene in the "1979" video, we find the play and exploration of childhood, as a boy and girl leave a house-party to hop the fence of a neighbor and swim in their in-ground pool with freedom and ease, before a fleeting moment of eye-contact becomes a welcome kiss- we have a moment where the girl smiles with elation- and, as if this was too much, too soon- the characters are next seen throwing patio furniture into the pool; the kind of aimless destruction associated with the boredom of **suburbia**.

There's a greater depth of meaning and reality to that kiss than every OkCupid date you've ever been on. In a perfect world, they'll marry and share variations of that first kiss for the rest of their lives- taking the form of spending the first night in their new house, giving the first bath to their newborn daughter, the disastrous first Thanksgiving they host- everything will carry the newness of that kiss, and for a lifetime, they'll never fully step out of that moment.

And I'd be lying to you if I told you that my eyes weren't welling with tears just now, dear reader, as I type this, because I know we live in hell- and the reality is more likely that they'll be **chasing ghosts** forever.

Adventureland

Billy Pratt · 10 March 2020 · Archived copy · Original

“If you’re gonna scream, scream with me. Moments like these never last.”

I ended up with the plaid button-down because I needed a nice shirt to go on dates– I was single again and recently set up a new OkCupid profile. I had found success on that platform in the past, although it felt like a thousand lifetimes ago when I was dating the daughter of a colleague in my English department while screwing her best friend on the side. All through the magic of online dating, but stay in a lecherous, testosterone sapping relationship long enough and all you’ve learned gets lost to time- too many diet Cokes in BPA laden plastic cups at Friday’s, too much time in front of network television, an unwilling prisoner of your girlfriend’s viewing habits. Why are women obsessed with TV? Modern relationships are inherently toxic.

Women like preppy men, a friends girlfriend had told me. Read their profiles and find something you have in common. “Mutual interests.” Perhaps our values will coalesce. Women in their thirties are different, she told me- you can’t talk to them like everything is just sex. They want a caring, intelligent man. They’re over their *asshole phase*.

Years later, I had the same plaid shirt laid out on my bed. Three months into dating Jennifer and suddenly I was on the losing end- playing catch up, trying to stitch things together. I needed her to see me again. One date would change things- a real date. Something we hadn’t done. You could have convinced her that I didn’t exist outside of my apartment because she had never seen me anywhere else. From Plenty of Fish to my front door- a short stop for phone calls in between; I guess I’m old-fashioned.

Plenty of Fish because OkCupid has too many pseudo-intellecs- a serious misalignment between the lies we tell ourselves and reality. Girls who believe they are what they’re not. Expectations derived from fantasy. Women on Plenty of Fish have experienced life’s bitter winter. They know disappointment. They’re looking for a man with a car and a job- the latter, of course, is optional.

Do it long enough and you get hot for the process like a junkie with a head buzz just looking at the bag. She’ll tell you that she doesn’t send *those kinds of pictures* but this is never true. Getting her older nudes is a victory, but having her take new pictures is a conquest. Big tits look their best in white tank tops (spaghetti straps, *not a wifebeater*), braless with hard, poking nipples. You want her in a thong, but specifically a g-string- strings on the side that press into her hips. This is important.

The pictures are less important than the fact that she did what you asked. The high comes from control. You don’t bother jacking off to them but you keep them to fluff your ego. Like her enough and you invite her to your place- another bit of compliance that’s hotter than the sex you’re going to end up having.

Only that wasn’t the case with Jennifer. Every girl will tell you she gives the best head- an adorable white lie that you appreciate for the intentions, but Jennifer wasn’t kidding. Sex with her became addictive. She got off on your control. No one had pushed her like you had- you enjoyed watching her squirm. When you play the game long enough, you can pick apart exactly what you find attractive- reality and control.

In a world of performance, you get off on the genuine. You want her to drop her guard. Destroy her ego. Show you who she really is beyond the false-self she projects. This is true submission- not the silly role playing that people take for dominance. You don’t wait for a woman to tell you that she loves you, you look her in the eye and make her say it.

Jennifer played these games with me, skating such a fine line between fantasy and reality that it was easy to get lost. Make her tell you she loves you for long enough and one of you is going to start believing it. Then one night, I

maybe pushed too hard and she told me about the other guy she was seeing. Check.

If you aren't exclusive, she's seeing someone else too. That's the reality of living in hell. She had gotten me. This is the kind of blowback you get from making a woman say, "I'm just a fat slut" during sex. Try it and you'll cum harder than you ever have before, but don't let her change the verbiage- *just* is important because it's reductionist. She needs to know that she's nothing more, at least in that moment- the moment your values coalesce. If she adds words like *I guess* or *kind of*, this means you hit a nerve, like striking gold, and suddenly getting her to say it becomes ten times hotter.

But this is a dangerous game- and even if she cums just as hard as you in the moment, she's going to hate you a little bit later on, no matter how many times you get her to say otherwise. Jennifer was fucking someone else, some guy she went to high school with, and used this as a jab at my ego- something which was unwittingly welcome. No false-self here; I pushed her to reveal the reality of modern womanhood- a perpetual 1970's key party- and we wouldn't need to pretend otherwise.

She had gotten me, this was true, so I told her about Alison. She didn't like that. Check.

I didn't meet Alison on Plenty of Fish, I met her on Craigslist. Before they stopped hosting personal ads, a secret of the universe was that you could find much hotter girls on Craigslist, with a well-written ad, than any of the online dating apps. Leave your ad up and watch the replies slowly roll in- this was the passive income of internet dating. Alison was a decade younger than Jennifer, with blond hair and a modest bust- not necessarily my type, but with a girl under twenty-five, who really cares?

The irony is that I liked Jennifer more, of course- after all, this isn't about Alison, but like hell I wasn't gonna use her as collateral. When Jennifer tried to ratchet the game by daring mention details, I pushed harder by leaving Alison's hair-clip and necklace, left at my apartment, on an end-table for Jennifer to find... and I won that round too.

Like all victories, though, this was short-lived. The empire eventually strikes back. The true loser in a modern relationship is the one who takes it too seriously- an inherent falsehood, they're parody at best. My mistake was deciding that I wanted to do things right with Jennifer.

You don't politely ask to step off a runaway train. It's not for you to decide when the game is over. In one of those Alanis Morissette moments, the day I cut things off with Alison- seeing her had gotten stale anyway- to get serious with Jennifer- because I was falling for her- was the day she told me that she had met up with one of her Tinder matches. Tall with a big dick. Worked at a gym- she met him there and fucked on the massage table. More blow back from the hair-clip. Maybe overdid it with that one. Isn't it ironic, dontcha think?

Like a wounded animal ready to die fighting, I didn't chose *flight*. I spent the next week berating her over text- telling her eternal truths that have become obscured by a world too happy to lie. Men don't think much of women who are *easy sex*. If she didn't already know that, she got to hear it three-thousand times.

And it made me hot. I get off on being mean. The angry voicemails, cursing me for not picking up, followed by long messages of crying and begging. Her pleas for forgiveness. Her perfuse apologies- she'd do anything to fix things. I'd get a head rush just seeing her name pop on my phone at work. This was a million times sexier than the world's hottest porn.

I'd like to think she planned the rest- clinch her victory and ride off into the sunset knowing she beat the asshole; just a fat slut? Not this time... but I know that isn't how it happened. Women as less calculated than people think- they follow the tide and drift with the wind. Your actions rarely dictate their behavior- they'll either put up with you, or they've found a better deal.

A week later we had the hottest sex of our entire run. All of the tension had led to a crescendo that exploded like a lightning bolt striking an earthquake- a thousand atomic bombs imploding on my broken, black leather couch.

Two weeks later, she's on the phone and I'm begging to see her. Let's meet at the beach. Find a bench and watch the

tide roll in. Make out like it's our first kiss. No, she told me. She met someone else. Another guy from high school- one she'd never have considered dating when she was gorgeous and young, but like incubating in a pod, he emerged at thirty-five, maybe not any better looking, but a doctor with a sports car- and someone who wouldn't make her "feel like shit about herself."

But we were in love, I told her... before realizing that I was alone in that sentiment. Say it enough and one of you is going to start believing it. Our values did not coalesce.

Checkmate.

Don't Fear the Reaper

Billy Pratt · 13 March 2020 · Archived copy · Original

“Baby, I’m your man.”

Nothing ends well. I hate to be the one to tell you, but if you didn’t already know, romantic endings are for Hollywood. Real life is dull with a shit ending. I’ve never watched someone die, and my hands carry the softness of a man with intellectual savvy- I’ve never known hard labor, and this is something I appreciate. After I scrub diligently for twenty-seconds and dry thoroughly, I enjoy the soft touch of my fingertips on my reasonably ageless face. People are shocked that I’m forty- and with a baseball cap turned just slightly askew, I can still fuck reasonably young women.

But this isn’t going anywhere. The joke is that once you hammer out the formula, in your Henry Frankenstein fuck laboratory, you’re already halfway bored by the results. They say the journey is more satisfying than the destination, but once you slipped into the realm of hindsight, you wonder if that’s just another bit of Hollywood bullshit.

You have so many of the same interactions that it all blurs together and becomes part of your muscle memory- like realizing Punch-Out is a rhythm game- you could do it blindfolded. You thought you were Tony Soprano, a playboy with a dark side, but you’re really Livia- “it’s all a big nothing,” something you understand now more than you ever thought you would.

So you resign yourself to wanting something real. You think you’ve finally come up with the right equation for it, and even if you understand the immutable fact that *genuine relationships don’t exist in hell*, you’re still going out to slay demons with your spear and armor until you get the girl- even if you have to play through the game twice.

But nothing ends well. Hollywood endings are called that for a reason. I never took my dog for the walk I was too busy for before his liver failed. You won’t say the right things to resolve the years of tension you’ve had with your parents before they die, even if you come close. You won’t find the right girl to ride off into the sunset with- “all a big nothing.”

When she told me that she wasn’t sure how she felt, I knew it was time to go. You never want to get jobbed out of a territory- the idea is to leave on your own accord. It was time to go, and I told her I wasn’t going to stay the night- something that struck a nerve with her. She felt comfortable sussing out her feelings in language that could hang in the air and be arranged and rearranged like refrigerator magnets- this was the kind of control she expected; her decision and her terms. But the ultimate sin in a relationship is forgetting that it’s a perpetual game of chess- even when it feels like it isn’t, there’s no rest for the wicked.

I was sincere in leaving- it wasn’t a game to sway her feelings. I collected my things and she walked me to the door, where I took one last look at her. I thought she was beautiful, another sin when you’re living in hell- and took a second to linger. I wanted to feel something. You want to *feel* a goodbye. It may be the last time you ever feel anything remotely close to love for a woman, even if this were only in bit-sized pieces with artificial flavoring- *love adjacent*, maybe.

You wait to feel something, but what you want is acknowledgment that she’s there with you in the moment. You want a look of presence in her eyes. Only men are fools enough to get caught up in nostalgia- romanticizing the past- women are too pragmatic for that. Like hungry wolves, they understand picking bones and moving on. Cut out at the right time, and she’ll still care- you’ll get that look in her eyes, and you’ll feel your goodbye.

I told her I’d see her around- saying goodbye felt too real. She had a moment of fluster, a minor stutter when she’d get too nervous, then smiled and said ‘maybe at Target,’ a joke we shared, that I was always running into ex-girlfriends at Target. I took another pause, touched her face, returned her smile, and left.

So perfect an ending to tidy-up a good-enough six-months that I would have been able to reflect fondly on it for years; so perfect that it couldn't have really been the end. If endings seem too emotionally charged, you end up going back to them. Things only truly die in cancer ravaged hospital beds- black and stinking, shit and piss.

That is reality, not storybooks; not Hollywood. The zombie invasion end-of-the-world meme, where we go out defending civilization with homemade weapons and combat cars, was never going to happen. Coronavirus is the reality we deserve- death by the neo-liberal, consumer hellscape we created- death by Amazon Prime, death by Travelocity- death by *wanderlust*, death by modern sin- holed up in our homes, being lied to by our governments, while our lungs collapse. There is no perfect goodbye.

We saw each other until that look in her eyes was gone. This is reality- you drive a relationship into the ground trying to make it work, trying to play catch-up, and you go out counting the lights. You realize it's over two weeks too late, and your last memory of her is only coldness- all a big nothing, and you'd better get used to it.

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Dating and Reality (picnic, lightning)

Billy Pratt · 16 March 2020 · Archived copy · Original

“The only convincing love story of our century.”

Like getting a glimpse of a video game’s final boss before your own destruction, unless you’re a real stud, you never get much experience having threesomes. Those who romanticize it have either never done it, or done it so many times that listening to them in the first place would be like taking financial advice from a trust fund kid. It’s nice to be rich.

But outside of a resume piece that only comes up in the screening interviews you have with new women you’re trying to fuck, who’ll assume you’re lying anyway, or a sexual bucket list that you only understand as meaningless once it’s all checked off, threesomes are mostly silly.

This is the reality that every internet guru, selling you thousands of dollars of bullshit and filming those ridiculous looking three-way kisses at foam parties in Cancun, will gladly lie about.

Her name was Candace. We met her on Craigslist. I wrote the ad for my girlfriend to post- I had her screen the replies, and she’d have the decent ones text me. We had a good cop/bad cop dynamic- she was friendly with these women, I was demanding.

Candace had a boyfriend but he was *too nice*- he lacked grit. She liked that I was in my thirties dating a nineteen year old. This is what women say they hate, and maybe they do on some level, but they’re lying if they say they don’t find it intriguing. After all, what kind of thirty-four year old asshole is dating a teenager? The kind they want to fuck.

As much as the girlfriend tells you that she’s okay with everything, seducing another girl in front of her is going to feel strange. Don’t forget to take mental pictures because this will be the best part of the evening. You watch them make out, and you feel accomplished- I created this, and *it is good*- but anything after is an awkward mesh of bodies. I defy anyone to find a good way to do this- a queen sized bed isn’t meant to contain this level of idiocy.

I came on her face thinking about how fucking awful it all was- sending her home to her boyfriend after she met some dipshit on Craigslist. The hot shower she’d have to take before getting in bed with him and acting like it was ladies’ night at *Barnes and Noble*- just coffee and chitchat with the girls, that’s all. I couldn’t decide whether I wanted her to be masturbating in the shower or crying- but one of the two seemed inevitable, maybe both.

And when she finally leaves to take that shower, you feel a tinge of existential horror. You take a beat to wonder why you did it in the first place- what were you looking to get out of fucking a stranger in front of your girlfriend? *Threesome* is a misnomer- it isn’t chaotic like *Final Fight*, it’s slower and turn-based like *Final Fantasy*. Did you really just do it to say you did it? This thought haunts you.

You all shared in the experience, but you each saw something different. You were bent on validation, having something to prove after hitting rock bottom several years prior, breaking your engagement, and returning to the world of the living- but now your victory lap felt flat. Candace was rebelling against a boring boyfriend with the most scandalous and pornographic scenario she could find. Your kid girlfriend was dipping her toes in what she presumed the adult world should be- maybe after too much time on the internet, too much time watching cable TV.

We were all there for different reasons, and none of them were genuine- we did it just to say we did it. We were objects to one another, and each used the other to reach their own end. The sex was necessary but ultimately perfunctory. This bothered me for a few moments before I jacked off and went to bed.

If you couldn’t guess, having a kid girlfriend is fucking hilarious. If you’re riding a wave of indignation, where

you suddenly feel righteous flipping a double-bird to the world around you, there is no better way to do it. People will stare and if you're not ready to play to it like a bad guy pro-wrestler, this type of social norm bucking isn't for you- and maybe you're the guy waiting while she's doing "girls' night at the book store." The married couple with the stroller will shoot dirty looks, but you'll catch hubby stealing a glimpse of her ass every time. The blue-haired checkout girl at Target won't hide her disgust; the lonely boy working the deli counter at the grocery store will stare longingly- another dagger through his heart.

She was here on loan from down south. Got a gig as a live-in babysitter. The dad would try to get with her when the mom wasn't around- the perks of having a live-in babysitter, I guess. She moved in after she quit and we spent two weeks bouncing around Mexico to celebrate. Guys would try to hit on her thinking I was her father. We'd drink liquor in the ocean by moonlight and laugh at anyone who didn't get the joke. We were living in our own world and writing the rules for it as we went along.

Once you realize that men are the only ones held to a social standard, and women are given a pass for morally gray behavior, you're happy to tell the system to fuck off entirely. When your fiance's father sits you down and gives you a speech about *male responsibility*, which translates strictly as *paying my daughter's bills*, and the open-ended question that hangs in the air, never to be addressed, is "what should the man expect out of the deal?" What you can expect to hear are crickets.

So men on the street suckered in by lecherous wives, blue-haired retail employees emboldened by a system happy to endlessly masturbate them- I invite you to stare at a man who's found freedom in not giving a fuck.

A month later we took off to rural Washington state, on a hiking trip where I rented the biggest truck I could find and we climbed mountains and picked blue-berries in deep solitude. Marijuana had just been legalized, so we loaded up on pre-rolled joints and spent our evenings getting high in the jacuzzi tub- and I've never felt more alone in my life.

So far out in sticks that the nearest fast food place was staffed by happy people and your meal looked like the picture on the poster. Hundreds of miles from civilization; thousands from home. Far enough away that you didn't have any rules left to defy.

Far enough away to realize that you were two different people with absolutely nothing in common. She couldn't hope to understand you, and you never bothered to try to understand her- the *real her*, the genuine her; beyond what you wanted her to represent. She was an object to you, and now, in total isolation, it became pressing and urgent.

You're so high that you confide in her the horror you feel watching your parents get old- you've always known what was inevitable, but you've only recently began to *feel* it. This angers her- you aren't supposed to have feelings; you were never supposed to be a fully-realized person. You were always the embodiment of a fantasy- the older man- as a sex object and father figure. She wanted you to stay that way.

We never saw each other as people- we only served as flat images to one other; characterchters on a page, reduced to our defining features; exaggerated and cartoonish. We never saw each other as people- we only saw what we wanted.

Steal Away the Night

Billy Pratt · 20 March 2020 · Archived copy · Original

“Runaway with me tonight, dream the dream and light the light.”

Maybe it's just part of growing up, feeling the depth of responsibility which that role entails- or the side effect of a tendency to lean toward narcissism- but I've never been able to let go of guilt. Lying in bed at night, thinking, *how could I have been better* or *what could I have done differently*. You put pressure on yourself to live up to an arbitrary ideal, and when you don't, you never let yourself forget it. Maybe this is why I can't sleep at night.

And when I'm lying in bed restless, I'll often think about Christmas 1983. I don't think I have coherent memories earlier than 1983, and if I take a moment to really focus, I can remember the feeling of newness and exploration I felt at that age- almost as if I were conscious of it at the time, but I know this is probably only how I see things in retrospect. I was obsessed with *Masters of the Universe*- captivated by the cartoon, and there were no better days than going to *Toys R Us* and getting to pick out one of the figures to take home. Of course, I preferred Skeletor to He-Man; even at three-years-old, I wanted to be the bad guy.

It's amazing how quickly kids understand the concept of Christmas as an orgasm of consumption- like a beagle who's found his way to the top of an unattended breakfast table; I felt entitled to a massive bounty of molded plastic just for being me. Still a few years out from when the holiday would take a sharp turn to video games, 1983 was the year for He-Man toys- and I knew that Christmas would be my only chance to pick-up elusive, top-shelf items like the awesome Castle Greyskull or the Battle Cat. If you've seen the commercials, you'd know that the only proper way to play He-Man was to have more figures than you'd be able to play with at one time, so come December, my expectations were high.

And on Christmas morning, I threw a fit. My parents were hard-up for money by the end of '83- my father had gone from a lucrative managerial position at a prestigious company to unemployed; my mother was recovering from cancer treatments, and I think he folded under the stress. You wish you could go back and tell yourself these things- act as the embodiment of why your parents wanted to have children. A symbol of hope, to light their way during dark times.

As an adult, it's difficult to separate the role you've taken on for them- as caregiver- from the role you left behind as a child- and it's easy to blame yourself for what you should have done *had you known*. Thinking about it for long enough, on those sleepless nights, you can't help but cry. You could have saved them.

I threw a fit because I didn't get what I wanted. I'm sure every bit of He-Man paraphernalia in my Sears Christmas Wish Book- consumerist pornography for children- had been circled and re-circled. There was no way my mother didn't know what I wanted, but she hedged her bets on thinking a three-year-old doesn't know what the fuck's going on and went with Remco's knock-off line, The Warlords.

On its face, this wasn't a terrible idea. Notorious for being cheap toys for budget conscious shoppers, and having a keen-eye for ripping off trends, Remco secured the Warlords license from DC Comics in order to compete with the early-80's hot property, *The Masters of the Universe*. On its face, this made sense- even if He-Man had the backing of a cheaply made Saturday morning cartoon, which functioned more as an infomercial for the toy line, the Warlords had the support of a comic book- and kids love comic books. Each figure line was mostly indistinguishable from the other- had the same scale and points of articulation, the same heavily muscled physiques, and the same lot of eccentric character designs- instead of a yellow skeleton in a purple hood, you had an anatomically correct, hoodless white skeleton. To an adult looking to give their only child a memorable Christmas, while cutting costs, The Warlords seemed like a smart buy.

But if you were a child in the first half of a decade defined by consumption, you'd surely understand the horror and

disappointment I felt waking up on Christmas morning to find thematically similar characters whom I had never seen on television.

Even if imagination could have bridged the gap between sets of similar toys, the television exposure of one made the other insignificant. A lifeless comic book, even if I had heard of it at the time, could never compete with fully animated images- forcing characterization and directing play. You didn't want to create your own fantasy adventure, you wanted to re-enact what you had seen on TV.

After ruining Christmas in what was surely a barrage of tears and screaming, my mother returned the toys and learned what would ultimately define my generation: we take our cues from marketing and media- a trend that would follow us through adulthood. We wanted to experience the ebb and flow of romance and heartbreak alongside John Cusack and Matthew Broderick, one crazy night like in *License to Drive*, college hijinks while evading the crusty old dean- our adult lives would be like *Friends* or *Seinfeld*, perpetual dormitory living, purposeless dating and meaningless sex. Television created these expectations for us, and certainly life wouldn't turn out anything like Christmas 1983.

How could you have saved your parents when you couldn't save yourself- a thought that doesn't provide comfort as much as resolution; it helps you get to sleep for another night. There were intrusive forces set against us- at least one part of which was maybe even purchased at Sears, set in the living room, and used voluntarily. The rest was a combination of bad luck and human weakness, but you can't help but dissect how things could have been different- like Bruce Wayne replaying that night at the Opera again and again, obsessed with action that he couldn't have taken.

You say it shouldn't haunt you, but it will- and maybe the only thing you have left is to protect them from accountability- and maybe that's what will absolve you from your own sins.

Back to the Future

Billy Pratt · 24 March 2020 · Archived copy · Original

“On Marty’s right was dear old Mom, who was once very attractive and bright. Now, at forty-seven, she was overweight, drank more than was good for her and had more food on her plate than anyone else.”

I wasn’t trying to have sex with Christine, but I wasn’t opposed to it. She was in town visiting from some far off country where she had gotten a job teaching English, picked up a relationship, burnt through it, and came back to her hometown to regroup before doing it all again. She’d come back home for gift cards and praise, for being courageous and a *free spirit*, to have a few parties in her honor- maybe hook up with some old flames- and leave before it starting feeling too familiar. I never left our hometown; I was neither courageous nor a free spirit.

We were the first generation to explore our late twenties as unmarried. As it turns out, this only extends adolescence, creates expectations that life won’t likely meet, and will give you a handful of addictions to grapple with for the next ten years. If you’re lucky, you’ll have your head screwed on by forty, and then spend the rest of your life playing catch-up like you’re running out of time on a level of *Super Mario Brothers*– the background music obnoxiously fast so you don’t forget.

The first generation where men and women have friendships with one-another- where the sexes aren’t diametrically opposed, constantly playing out like Biff Tannen chasing Lorraine; the perpetual antagonist meeting the perpetually antagonized- until one is stubborn enough to win. Christine was coming over for drinks, and I knew, sometimes, that men and women had sex- even as friends, even if I hadn’t ever experienced that myself.

I’d had girlfriends, and I’d had dates- I’d had dates that turned into girlfriends, and dates that turned into sex, but never a friend with supposed *benefits*. While I knew what these benefits were, I wasn’t sure how they were secured- nothing about a friendship screamed sex, that kind of dangerous, animalistic tension; this was more like a cockerspained playdate.

But friends had sex- I was sure there was a precedent for this- and I wasn’t opposed to having sex with Christine. Men don’t waste time with women they don’t vaguely want sex with- and this was probably the bulk of guys lining up to make plans with Christine.

It’s not that she was ugly, she was just painfully average. Never the prettiest in any group photo she’s taken, she had a kind of toothy smile and uncharacteristically flat nose for an Irish girl. Perpetually twenty-pounds overweight, but it usually “went to her chest”- a luxury men don’t have. We went to the same high school, and in another world, it wouldn’t be such a far-off idea that we’d have married- the same kind of unremarkable, though not necessarily undesirable, aesthetics would’ve produced some equally average kids, who’d have gone to the same school as us, played on sports teams we were too cool to join, and gotten eventual office jobs, meeting their own unremarkable mates, and starting the process over again. Not bad at all, just *unremarkable*.

Of course, Christine and I thought we were too special for that trajectory. It wasn’t cool to marry young, and certainly not to have kids before *experiencing life*– as if having children was a death sentence. How else would you have these drunken nights, anyway?

We didn’t have sex, that notion died fairly early in the evening, and it shocked me when she told me about the kind of guys who *were* having sex with her. Cool guys, athletic guys, rock band guys, frat guys- guys whom I’d have thought wouldn’t waste their time on Christine- someone who was a vague, “I guess if it *just happens*” type of notion for me. She’d spend more time talking about the ones who must’ve gotten her goat- they were always *little boys* with *small dicks*.

I didn’t know it then, but I’d made the mistake of thinking men and women could be friends in the first

place. Just like I was only hanging out with her because *you never know*, she wasn't sitting in my apartment looking to have a genuine conversation. Just like when she first gave me her phone number ten years prior- and my father had sat me down, after overhearing one of my long telephone calls with her, to tell me that none of these girls would want to be my *girlfriend*, and I still feel guilt over reacting like a total shit to what must have been a difficult conversation for him because I was fucking embarrassed... Just like all of our interactions, she was using me as an audience to complain about boys who'd fuck her but not want to date her, while not wanting either with me. My father was right.

But, even if sex would have been vaguely welcome, it wasn't pressing- I genuinely thought we were old friends first and, as single friends in their mid-twenties, we were talking shop about the complex sport of male & female relations. She brought up *small dicks*, so I had mentioned in passing that guy's with small dicks should just match up with *smaller women* who have *smaller vaginas*.

Her face turned red, and she shouted "all vaginas are the same size!"

Which became the very first **post** on Kill to Party- started five years ago, when I wasn't sure what this space should be or where it should go, but I knew that night in 2006 would need to be the starting point- where I wasn't sure what the implications of it were at the time, or how deep the rabbit hole would go, but I understood that men and women could never be friends.

Christine didn't end up marrying one of her Biffs. Just a few years ago she met her George McFly, an Asian boy with a nice smile, gained thirty pounds and started having kids. Her last *great adventure*, she told me, the last time I'd probably ever talk to her- and I let her words settle into the atmosphere- I didn't want to screw Christine anymore, so there wasn't much reason to keep up the conversation.

Zenith (the low hum of a blank screen)

Billy Pratt · 1 April 2020 · Archived copy · Original

“This is a warning: here comes the morning.”

She had done her part by having a kid. Something anyone could point to as making her *accomplished enough*— anything on top of that is a victory lap. No one would fault her for keeping things quiet- drinks on the weekends, maybe a date, vacation time over the summer. This is how she eased into her forties, and there was nothing terribly wrong with it- even if her only wish were to politely color within the lines and walk away with a terrifically neat and tidy picture of a life well lived.

First time I had dated someone so incredibly *settled*— she even had a house to go along with the kid. Only a few years older than me, but it felt like decades. With my baseball cap turned slightly askew, I still think I’m a twenty-five year-old rock star with a full road ahead of me. This is the fantasy you indulge in when you’ve never chosen a path- you pretend that you still have choices, and that you could be smug about those boring types with their suburban homes and vacation clubs.

Only a few years older than me, but I called her my *old lady girlfriend*— for reasons that are more clear in retrospect. Maybe I needed a feeling of distance from how quiet things were for her- maybe I felt a degree of insecurity about how *unsettled* my own life was, as if dating her made me confront my own *reality*; sideways cap and rock star fantasy be damned.

Maybe I felt the need for distance because this wasn’t my life and it never could be- I was just filling in. Her Scott Weiland had checked out years ago- I was only a hired gun, her Jeff Gutt; let’s do an album and a tour, and call it a day. This wasn’t my story- and the space between us made that fact immutable. This wasn’t my story, something one of her friends explained to me on a drunken bar night- as if to skew my expectations- “she cares about you as a person, but you’re not the love of her life.”

This wasn’t my story- and we had no reason to pretend it was. There was a comfort in understanding that it was *good enough*. It was functional. We got along. We had incredible sex. What else could one hope for in the land of the *dead*?

I didn’t choose a path, so one was chosen for me- like I let the menu screen run for too long, and the game booted up on its own. *Unsettled* is my path, and it ran diametrically opposed to hers. We were different people with different lives. She was a good kisser; we spent most of our time in the orbit of her bedroom- after, she would talk about whatever cruise she had planned, and I’d talk about my writing.

She’d tell me that she didn’t understand why I liked writing. She didn’t understand why I bothered or what I was looking to get out of it- why I took it seriously; why I’d be so hard on myself over it, why I never thought it was good enough. I’d talk about the ideas I’d have for pieces- the frustration I felt in my attempts to bring them to the proper terms- and she’d stare blankly and tell me that she didn’t *get it*, which I suppose was slightly more polite than telling me to shut the fuck up.

She didn’t see the value in any of this because it wasn’t part of her world- a very tangible world of cause and effect. You work for long enough to cash in your tokens for a week in Florida. A localized world where you meet with friends at a pub and order an Uber for the way home. A world where you can rest easy at night knowing that you had a kid, created meaning in what is inherently meaningless, and can enjoy the blank spaces that life will offer.

I don’t sleep well at night, and I haven’t for a long time. I’ll often wake up with feelings of an unidentifiable, shapeless dread- a subtle haunting- which I can’t immediately suss out the origins of, that will cause me to stand in my kitchen for several minutes, long after midnight, composing myself. These feelings were stronger when my life

was a disaster- after my engagement and career blew up at the same time, when I had given up on *long-term planning*, when I had suicide as a potential endgame, where I'd go out with two middle-fingers up to the world that betrayed me. This felt like being on fire, which had since been extinguished, and now the remaining embers caused a dull burn.

Writing is the pursuit of truth- this is what I'll say when asked why I write. Not all writers are genuinely pursuing truth, but they think they are, and that counts too. One can either pursue family or pursue truth. While it isn't necessary for those who pursue family to also pursue truth, the option is available- however, for one to eschew family, one *must* pursue truth. Nothing else matters, and every little bit of consumption distracts from this pursuit.

This is why you spend your time grinding away- this is why productivity is all that matters to you. This is why bouts of creative impotence keep you up at night. This is why you can't picture yourself settling in to a week aboard a cruise-ship or hidden away in some resort hotel in Mexico- the anxiety of spending time doing anything but turning eternal truth into art, like an intellectual alchemist- Henry fucking Frankenstein, half-mad, looking at your best work and swearing you know what it feels like *to be God*- nauseates you.

Greatness lies just beyond your reach, but it's there and you can feel it. Even starting with nothing, you can take what's needed from your surroundings and make from it something more. On your best days, you might even feel justified in being called *clever*.

You can make up for mistakes made along the way; time lost; hearts broken. You can stitch things together- make sense of what went wrong- bring meaning to what is inherently meaningless, and condense things to their proper terms- where those around you can look past the mess you've made, and only see how you've come to frame it- in terms that are brilliant, clever, and meaningful. You create beauty in meeting dead-end girls, and having dead-end sex, in dead-end relationships- this wasn't time wasted, this was time *making art*. This is what you tell yourself, in your kitchen, in the middle of the night, as the clock ticks away- and this is the part you leave out when asked why you write.

Nightcrawling

Billy Pratt · 11 April 2020 · Archived copy · Original

“I’ll be the last to say, don’t follow your heart, but there’s more to what it takes to be a man.”

There were others before her, but she was the first. I found her on MySpace. She liked taking pictures; she was an early adopter of *digital photography*. Specialized in self-portraits- different angles, tight zoom.

You thought she was beautiful. A carbon copy of every girl-next-door you ever wanted in high school. This was your moment. You spent a year in the gym- miles on the treadmill, throwing around dumbbells- training for this like Rocky Balboa looking for a comeback. You had girlfriends before- but this was your moment; experience, swagger, and fitness- you finally felt like a complete package. If out-of-shape guys date average girls, then fit guys have their pick; it’s a logically valid equation.

It had been a year since Kasie- and there wasn’t anything terribly wrong with her outside of her being terribly average. Friends teased about dating a chubby girl; fishnet stockings squeezing thighs with a *maybe too-short* plaid skirt. She’d have meltdowns when she drank too much. There was one night at a club that anyone close to her nuclear epicenter will never forget- even fifteen years later.

But that wasn’t the problem- you just thought you could do better.

People don’t marry young anymore- before us lay a world where our value could be tested; refined and maximized. We had time- we didn’t need to *settle*.

You thought she was crazy for showing up to your door the way she did. You thought she was fat. A modest waistline met with a big ass stuffed in *maybe too-tight* jeans. The prior decade’s aesthetic of thin-with-large-breasts still hung in the air as ideal and Nikki existed as the polar opposite. You didn’t know if she was intentionally deceptive with her pictures or if you were fool enough to deceive yourself.

She wanted sex, and we watched a movie. She was sweet. We’d keep in touch- *just friends*, because I was fit, and charming, and swagger, and all that shit. I was too good to stick it in a fat girl- our values did not coalesce; our lines on the graph did not intersect. And even if I hadn’t been with anyone since Kasie, a fat girl certainly wasn’t going to be my starting point.

After a few months of nothing, I sent her a text. Since we weren’t ever gonna be *a thing*, she loosened the veil- I was the only one she’d met who didn’t fuck her. This shocked me- what desperate losers she must be meeting! Poor girl.

Kathryn wasn’t ideal, but she was available and younger than Nikki- straight out of college and with an English literature degree. I worked with her father, which was something she loved, getting off on the vaguely scandalous overtones of it all. Only a few years older but to her it was dating the teacher. Kathryn was average and Kathryn was boring, but meeting Kelly wasn’t.

Kathryn introduced me to Kelly on a night at the pool hall. Recently dumped and needing to get out of the house, she tagged along. When Kathryn hit the bar for another dogshit cocktail, I joked with Kelly that we were all gonna end up in the backseat of my car- a physical impossibility that didn’t seem to bother her when she told me that she’d be down but Kathryn *would never*.

Which was probably true- so we didn’t bother asking. Kelly scribbled her address on a tiny piece of paper and snuck it into my hand as we said our goodbyes with the words “fifteen minutes” written above. Twenty minutes later we were in my backseat.

Kelly had a charming spunk to her. She was going to school to be a librarian and told me that her grandmother would buy her a new winter coat if she managed to lose twenty pounds. Seeing her was exciting at first but had

diminishing returns as we drifted from forbidden to routine.

We couldn't date because Kathryn's father was a colleague in my English department, and even if Kathryn and I fizzled amicably, it would still be detrimental to date her best friend- is what I told Kelly. But I didn't want to be tied down; long term relationships leave post-traumatic scars. Three years in the clink. Like getting home from war and thinking you should re-enlist. Even if it makes sense, your body won't *let you*- is what I told myself.

I didn't date Kelly because I thought I could do better- and I wasn't gonna wait around for her to get a new coat.

The gambler doubles down because he thinks the win streak will never end. Ace Frehley never stopped spending- why, when there's always another hit record? There isn't room to lose when you know how to win. So, the long months of nothing will be confusing at first- an adjustment period. Quiet reflection. You try to get used to rejection, but you never quite get there, like stepping into a cold shower- Wolverine and the claws coming out, puncturing his knuckles, blood on his hands; it hurts every time. You text Nikki and get no answer.

You become the hungry coyote hoping to eat out of a dumpster. Lou Bloom stealing manhole covers to sell at thirty-cents per pound. Your next meal isn't guaranteed- entirely possible you'll never eat again.

I met Lizzy a few months before she skipped town- a pallette swap in place of something truly new; a different cast of characters but the same old problems. Instead of the purple-and-black ninja, now they're red-and-blue; she wanted a husband, but only met wolves- well fed, but when is anything ever enough?

Women are more pragmatic than men. They understand value. They'll cash-in for a good enough deal. Left to their own devices, men get caught-up at the blackjack table- drunk on the possibility for more. Female charm is an evolutionary strategy to get men away from the casino- take the needle out of their fucking arm. Left to their own devices, men will run this lifestyle into the ground- and this is why we have women.

She lucked out when she met a big fat motherfucker who invented [REDACTED] and was filthy rich. Suddenly, her way of talking about relationships changed entirely. No longer framing things in terms of passion and chemistry, Lizzy had now "found her best friend," and "discovered what love really was," which I supposed sounded better than "he's fucking disgusting, but he's a multi-millionaire."

It was around this time that I met Marisa. I wasn't rich, and she wasn't Lindsay Lohan, but a close enough approximation- the budget version- made it a love story. She was smart enough to get her claws in, like the raccoon who manages to open up the old pizza box while the others just stare. She got what she deserved. We both did.

It didn't work out with the fat motherfucker- maybe was a little too good to be true; maybe he was just another wolf, but one who had come up with his own way to get it. Back to the drawing board; ground zero- she started reading books on being *brave*, just in case.

Years later, she managed to meet someone in-between hungry coyote and master wolf; tall and weathered, overweight with high school sports achievements close-enough in the rearview for a few stories on a Friday night. If things were different, this is who she'd have married out of high school- two kids, a two-car garage; yard work, soccer practice, kung-foo classes, and all that shit.

She took the long way around, but she didn't time the market right. She had to catch a falling knife, and this is where she ended up- knuckles punctured, hands bloody. For Valentine's Day, he bought her designer shoes with a note attached: "a reminder to never settle for anything less than what you're worth ..."

As if she didn't already know.

This Space Between Us

Billy Pratt · 13 April 2020 · Archived copy · Original

“Look boy, either Michael Jackson is some guy working in a recording studio in L.A. or he’s here with you willing to work on this song. It’s your choice.”

It used to bother me thinking I didn’t exist outside of how others perceived me. The moments I spent alone, while significant to me, felt shapeless- as if what’s experienced in solitude existed on a plane between dream and fiction. The inner world can only be represented in close approximation- and that representation is all that exists; you are who others perceive you to be. No one is interested in *you* beyond the value of your public face.

You are nothing.

The coldness of deep space.

In “Videodrome” they had the homeless watch television- the most pragmatic form of charity- food and shelter would only be a temporary fix. The socially discarded- those without a public face, who *no longer exist*- can only be brought back to life learning the etiquette of public existence. Erase the lunacy of authenticity- speaking without a veil is feral behavior- your personality needs a high-degree of digestibility. Good morning, America, *Coke is it*. Like that.

Only that isn’t it- it’s a starting point. The difference between something and nothing- being “patched back into the world’s mixing board” and existing as a walking corpse. Social intelligence is acting within the scope of acceptability while pretending as though you aren’t- that you’re the brand, the influencer, and the genesis of memes.

Even if the counter-culture is where you find yourself settling- the alternative, Pepsi instead of Coke, or *RC-fucking-Cola* for the real crazies- there is still a mixing board to find, and a set of unspoken rules to follow with only a small allowance for authenticity.

The greater degree to which you’re able to find originality within the narrow band of acceptability, the higher degree of social intelligence you’ll be regarded with. Making a Borat joke at a party in 2020 isn’t exactly a faux pas, but would serve as a dog whistle to anyone hipper than you that you aren’t part of the club- making an Austin Powers reference, even worse. When aging content creators don’t understand how they were left behind, it’s that the unspoken language of the mixing board changed without their notice.

“We are who we choose to be,” is what the Green Goblin tells Spider-Man. The reoccurring theme of “Master of Puppets” is how little control we have over these choices- manipulated by forces from both outside and within. Tyler Durden thought it better to be defined by destruction if the only other choice is consumption. To Shane Carruth, our identity is shaped in ways that are so distant- so far *upstream*- that they’re unknowable.

When Laura Loomer was kicked-off the internet she was pulled away from the only reality she had come to know. A bag of guts resembling *Laura Loomer* cried and screamed on talk shows, threatened suicide, and hand-cuffed herself to an office building- but none of this mattered, because Loomer was already dead. If the self is meaningless when not translated to a language that can be understood by the other, then Laura Loomer was erased. She’ll survive, but she’ll need to become someone new- a different mixing board, a new set of social rules- but one without all the Twitter followers and attention. Only she can answer whether that’s a life worth living.

The decade of peak American excess pushed with vigor the idea that all people should be photogenic while simultaneously eating a diet of processed foods- this is what was considered *progress*; beauty and convenience. Of course, these ideas existed at odds with one another, which brought the diet industry to the forefront of American life. No longer were already trim girls chasing an ideal and a husband- now obese Americans were playing catch-up, and late-night infomercials promising beauty and convenience were there to exploit them- this is where Richard

Simmons enters the story.

Simmons may have sold different products over the years, from *Deal-a-Meal* to *Sweatin' to the Oldies*, but really, Simmons *himself* was the product. Simmons had tremendous charisma that popped off the screen- a ball of kinetic energy who was constantly screaming with joy, or breaking down in tears, depending on what the situation called for. Most of all, Simmons conveyed an incredible sense of *authenticity*- when he cried, relaying his own struggles with self-image, you knew he'd understand you- when he shouted that *you too* could do it, you believed him.

It's easy to think that Simmons was the ultimate used-car salesman, but the curve-ball to the story is the friendships he formed with clients along the way. Simmons would meet obese women, desperate and depressed, and provide free personal coaching- which turned into soft-therapy- which often became late-night phone-calls with Simmons having his own emotional breakdowns; needing his own support- these relationships went both ways. Similarly, Simmons would use his exercise studio- *Slimmons*, where he would personally lead classes for twelve dollars per session- as a form of group therapy. His breakdowns, and the resulting sweaty hugs, became a part of the experience.

And then one day, Richard Simmons disappeared.

He stopped making talk show appearances. He stopped teaching at Slimmons. He stopped coaching obese women over the phone. He stopped talking to friends. He stopped leaving his house.

Richard Simmons stopped being Richard **Simmons**.

It's easy to think that this serves as proof that Simmons was a fraud- a late night, infomercial hustler- using the perception of authenticity to make millions. Maybe he needed the ego fluffing of obese women in middle America being dependent on his phone calls and his friendship. Maybe he felt safe using them for his own therapy, late-at-night, when there was no one around to perform for.

What seems more likely is that Richard Simmons *couldn't be* Richard Simmons anymore. The animating spirit that embodied the bag of guts that became known as Richard Simmons had left the body- and this public face had become so strong, that Simmons is effectively dead without it. All that existed was the public face, and now there is nothing left.

There's a feeling to things slipping away with someone. It happens so gradually that the bits of progression toward the end, taken individually, are mostly invisible- only at the end does it all comes together like an Agatha Christie novel- but, if you close your eyes and *reach out with your feelings*, it's all there; certainly in retrospect. She doesn't respond to you like she did; she doesn't have the same look in her eyes. These were things so strong and immediate at the beginning that you could have almost touched them.

Sex with her had felt choreographed. I guess they call that chemistry. The way our mouths would move in-synch; the way our bodies would entwine. Flowing from the bed to having her pressed against the wall in what felt like a single motion- the softness in her eyes during the pauses we'd take from kissing.

Your act will turn parody by the third month. You become Bob Crane flubbing his lines while doing dinner theater. To you, it's all the same, but the audience will notice. By the time she was mirroring my pout, repeating my signature "baby..." with exaggerated emphasis, I should have known it was over. Dates went from fucking all night while forgetting about dinner, to fucking before dinner dates because who wants sex after? All deliberate clues that the attentive reader would catch on a second go-through, but indistinguishable the first time around.

I made up for my Christmas gag of only getting her gifts that were actually for me- the plaid mini-skirt, the perfume I wanted her to wear- by making Valentine's Day *selfless*. A hand-written love letter and a movie gift card for her and her daughter- where they could, "talk about how great I am," I joked in the letter. When she took the envelope she had a minor look of terror as she felt it thoroughly for the outline of a ring. Another bit of foreshadowing- now you know why Mrs. White had the candlestick in the study.

The last time I saw her I asked her to see me again. One last time would change things. "Why," she asked, "what ____

would that do?"

And, with that, we were strangers again. Slowly, over time, the person she had known disappeared. I had become a bag of guts wasting her time on a Wednesday night. I discarded the script we were using and started to ad-lib my own. I unplugged from our mixing board and fell too deeply into the lunacy of authenticity.

I had stopped being me.

Some Time Alone

Billy Pratt · 24 April 2020 · Archived copy · Original

“And I’m in so deep- you know I’m such a fool for you. You’ve got me wrapped around your finger.”

She kissed my cheek and excused herself to the bathroom. Alone in her bedroom, I walked over to the shelf with her wedding picture. My peripheral vision had picked up on this when I entered the room- my eyes developed the keenness of a hunter. Her husband finally moved out that morning, she told me. Time to party.

Two weeks since I’d sent a text that read “no one fucking breaks up with me,” a few days after which I was sitting in the backseat of my car with a brand new girl on my lap, hunched over with her arms around my neck and the small of her back pressed against the driver’s seat; my hands in her hair and her breath on my cheek, as she sang along to “Pretty Good Year” while quietly crying. Puzzle pieces that would’ve seemed foreign to anyone who walked in late- who didn’t see her response to things I’d written that resonated with her, who didn’t see the video she took of herself singing “Linger” with the word *fucking* inserted in the chorus- a little something I always thought would intensify the emotional impact of the song- just to impress me.

She texted me to meet her in a coffee shop where she was working on her graduate thesis. Before the world ended, this made sense. She asked about different pieces I’d written- she was fascinated. This is what you get for writing things that aren’t repulsive to women- something, I guess, every other writer instinctively understands. Why do anything that doesn’t get you sex? I’ve always been a slow learner.

I wanted to know about her life. This was the wrong move if I wanted sex, but I guess I’d rather write than get laid after all. Slow learner. She told me that she met a guy on Ashley Madison, and after a few of months of talking, she left her husband. Turns out the guy was a liar, but her husband was still a pussy, so this is where I entered the story. She’d been married since her early twenties- never cheated until she met the new guy, and never experienced heartbreak either. Her lips were cold when we kissed. She cried about being abandoned as she silently plotted to find her way back.

She thought she was tricked into falling in love, but this is as real as it gets in hell. You experience a few perfect moments that you want to keep, but they always manage to sneak away as you’re settling in. Love is allowing these moments to pass. Acknowledge that you have nothing and it won’t be such a shock to find out that you don’t get to keep anything.

Her husband moved out that morning, and she didn’t want to spend the night alone. She texted me to meet at her house where she had spent the day drinking. I was settling into my own evening- the sun had gone down and my dinner was almost ready- but these are *opportunities* you’ve learned to *never turn down*. Be positive; come from a “place of yes.” It didn’t feel as adventurous as it would have just a few years prior, but you weren’t going to let the world’s inertia drop any hints. You still felt young, and young men don’t turn down sex- they go on adventures.

After a few minutes of the kind of small-talk that Japanese business men make before trying to slit each other’s throats, she kissed me in her kitchen before leading me to her bedroom and excusing herself to the bathroom.

No one fucking breaks up with me, is what I texted her. I don’t do well when situations spiral out of my control. Axl Rose wrote “One in a Million” when he bought the idea that rock stars were bullet-proof and wanted to test this theory- and when the results came back negative, with a media backlash, he tanked his own band. A control freak won’t play the game when he can’t make the rules. Rose emerged twenty years later with an album examining the limits of control- *Chinese Democracy* was only a metaphor.

No one fucking breaks up with me, and when they do, you escalate with napalm. Time alone is for suckers- you don’t mourn what’s dead, you watch the corpse burn in the rear-view. You meet girls that fucking weekend; *that*

fucking night— as many as you can- and use every bit of charm that she took for granted, that you know she's going to miss, and you make every girl you meet pay for her letting you go. You drink at night and write about it- examining it from all angles. You were too good to her; you made things too easy for her, she didn't know what she had and she threw it all away. Axl Rose spent twenty years writing about being taken for granted, abandoned- no one fucking breaks up with him.

No one fucking breaks up with me, and you don't care, because you did. Now I'm waiting for a stranger to finish pissing, to have sex with, to spite you, and looking at her wedding picture, on the shelf in her bedroom, I wonder if she's meeting me for the very same reason.

KILL TO PARTY

Billy Pratt · 3 May 2020 · Archived copy · Original

“Cause we came here to set this party off right, let’s bounce tonight. And if they don’t let us in through the front, we’ll come through the side.”

She had me drive her to her mother’s apartment so she could steal money; behavior I never endorsed outright, but I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t complacent; an accomplice, if we ever got arrested, which we wouldn’t, her mother was a dingbat. She’d keep loose cash in the drawer next to her bed, and every few weeks Marisa would dip into it like a broken ATM. Hundreds of dollars missing; thousands over time. Her mother had alimony coming in from Marisa’s lawyer father- when shit hits the fan, everyone’s a thief.

She’d take enough to get a half-ounce from our dealer and have some left over to go out to dinner with. Sitting next to a Family Dollar listening to “Waiting for the Man.” He’d text you that he was “just pulling in to the parking lot” and show up an hour later- he knew you weren’t going anywhere. *First thing you learn is that you always have to wait...*

Brought a bagel sandwich and bag of chips back with me- the indie label, kettle-cooked kind that you pay a dollar more for but is more heavily saturated in a higher quality oil- saffron, which is less likely to cause heart disease; something I can only appreciate in retrospect.

We’d get high and watch the Casey Anthony trial.

Casey had a luminous screen presence. She had an emotional range that Hollywood starlets had to envy- that corporate types spent late nights trying to come up with ways to exploit for the millions she’d be worth if only the public found their method semi-palatable. They knew there’d be backlash, but *some amount* of that is a good thing. With too much, heads roll and jobs are lost. Finding a way to use Casey was like dismantling an atomic bomb, but with rewards high enough to make solving the riddle worth the risk.

She had an understated sexuality that was ever-present. Casey was beautiful- dark hair and large breasts- with the disheveled look of a woman in need. Part of you wanted to save her- part wanted to punish her; emotions that somehow co-existed in an intoxicating swirl. She killed her daughter for cheap sex- she was lost, she was overwhelmed, she was scared- but you’d feel comfortable pulling her hair until she cried; until she begged for forgiveness, which you’d reluctantly grant and she’d be grateful. She’d love you.

Her story existed at the intersection between moral condemnation and empathy. How could a progressive culture rightfully find outrage in any of this while using “health care” as an awful nomenclature for abortion, something that even the most ardent baby-killers roll their eyes at behind closed doors... but you were still able to get that fuzzy feeling in the back of your skull as Nancy Grace barked about the monstrous Casey Anthony, with her dark hair and big tits, as you finished your blunt just past noon and fucked your hormonally-altered fiancée on your broken, black couch.

Another wonder of the modern world- she couldn’t get pregnant. Nature disrupted by science; sex detached from meaning. She’d let you look at bikini pictures of her old sorority sisters posted in private Facebook groups on her MacBook Pro as you fucked her, which you thought was hot. Take every situation to its peak- push every sensory experience to its breaking point with drugs and tech and food. This was the future we deserved- the organic tension of our first kiss felt distant and obsolete. Everything escalating to parody- she’s blowing you as you talk to cam-girls, you’re watching Carmella Bing get fucked while she uses her industrial-grade Hitachi *magic wand* to get off- next she’ll need a chainsaw. This was life’s purpose- you kill to party.

After things fell apart, I’d tell people that I only *thought* I was in love with Marisa. That I was clearly wrong-

that somehow *love* is this objective truth, that we haven't quite developed a blood test for yet, and is something that only exists in eternal form, written in all-caps and bold type.

But there were these momentary flashes, like feeling the tingles of an acid trip peaking, where things couldn't be described with anything less than capital letters and bold type. Sitting on my couch, well past midnight; emotions swirling with the force of a Gravitron spinning at a local church carnival- dangerous enough rattling where you could rightfully close your eyes and believe you'd take off into outer-space; suspension of disbelief not needed. Yes, I want to marry you. Her tears came harder than a chainsaw induced orgasm. This was our moment- private and meaningful. Let's keep this our secret. Let's build toward it and earn it. No ring; not yet- just know that I'm in love with you, and I want this more than anything, and I'm serious.

But she was engaged now. She had to tell her parents. Just her parents- who wanted to know why she didn't have a ring. They didn't understand *private* and *meaningful*, words seemingly not in their vocabulary. *If he wants to marry you, he needs to pay your bills*, this was more their speed. I picked out ebay's finest- a hundred-forty-nine, postage paid. A token- which her mother rejected, and if I wasn't going to *do the right thing*, she'd take Marisa ring-shopping herself and send me the bill. Opening non-stick cookware at the engagement party- how thoughtful, thank you. My parents, or anyone else even remotely related to me? Well, they couldn't make it...

If there were luck in any of this, it was that it all fell apart before I could render the first payment. Marisa has lost her job too- something about a boy with an emotional disability getting loose on her watch, running through the neighborhood shirtless, found urinating on an herb garden- which wasn't exactly her fault but it didn't matter. You're staring at the chess board, and you don't want to concede defeat, but you don't see an apparent *next move*, so the trick is to take as much time as you can between turns.

I'll never forget the night we met. The moment I noticed her. The kind of full-body electricity you feel when you first get a look at someone you're inexplicably drawn to- as if you've found a way to tap directly into a hidden wavelength making you extremely physically attuned to something you don't immediately understand, but if you close your eyes and let the current take you, you'll end up being carried by invisible forces in the direction of all that is beautiful and true.

I thought she was beautiful- the only girl I've dated that I consistently jacked-off to throughout the entire relationship. The actress who played Punky Brewster grew-up to look nothing like Punky Brewster, but if she had, she'd have looked like Marisa. Freckles and big brown eyes. A childlike naivete that bordered on stupidity- a mystery that never needed closer examination; one that could just be. Like everything she did that was pushed to its breaking-point, she was always on the far-end of any emotion- always emoting with screeching intensity. Up all night on ecstasy, navigating bouts of crying, fending-off bouts of screaming- intense bouts of sexuality.

There wasn't a next move to make- only moments where I knew things had to end. Moments that I wanted to soak-in and crystallize- that I wanted to hang in suspended animation and expand far out into the galaxy. My parents were healthy. My dog was alive. If I got stoned enough, I wouldn't have to think about the mess I'd made- and at my weakest, I'd rather have ridden the flaming balloon down to a fiery heap rather than figure out how to pull myself out of the grave I dug.

And one Sunday morning, I woke up and told her it was over.

Graduating College and “In the Bedroom” (2002)

Billy Pratt · 15 May 2020 · Archived copy · Original

It was my last semester in college, and I wanted to re-take “Intro to Creative Writing” because I had gotten a C- in it the first time and I couldn’t allow that on my *permanent record*. It’s hard to imagine caring about such things in retrospect, but in the early aughts I had it in mind to go all the way to my English PhD, and what kind of *doctor of literature* would have gotten a C- in a fucking beginners creative writing class- where the girls write about boys they’re fucking who don’t want to date them and the boys write about girls they like from afar- who are sometimes sitting in the very same class.

It was this very same class that I met Kasie, who had written very adorable stories about her boyfriend not calling her on Easter Sunday and an entire five-pages as a thinly veiled excuse to bitch about one of her girlfriends- *whom I knew*, even if she had changed her name to something innocuous, she included enough catty details that made it obvious. I leaned over to her desk and said, “I know who this is about...” and watched her turn beet red- our meet **cute**.

I wanted “In the Bedroom” to be the opening to a long and ambitious, post-modernist, suburban fantasy novel- think Pynchon meets Ellis meets Final Fantasy. Where the story would begin as something very narrow and contained- a single character, lost in thought, in a small room with a few friends watching television- and somehow end up large and sprawling- encompassing the entire world and beyond; all while maintaining the minimalism of Ellis and the close attention to language of Pynchon.

The piece focused on growing up- the place in-between adolescence and adulthood- where people become who they are and relationships change. This was my world at the time. The irony to the protagonist’s refusal to let go was that it mirrored my own- and while writing this, I had no idea how difficult the next decade would become; heartbreak, depression- it would be ten years before I didn’t feel metaphorically confined to my own bedroom.

“In the Bedroom”

Ten looked at the table with an almost lively gleam, and after taking a second or so to thoroughly inspect the situation he blurted out the word “Titleist.” With a slight sense of apathy, I slid a synthetic colored tablet under my tongue. Ten took the appropriate amount of off-white scrabble pieces scattered on top of the muggy bridge table and formed the word. Kristen looked at the new formation suspiciously, like a curious puppy. After seconds, or even minutes, of inspecting and reinspectng, she exclaimed “that’s not a word, Ten,” with the enthusiasm of uncovering a fantastic mystery. Ten fired back, “It is so! Titleist... Triple fucking word score”.

“Well, use it in a sentence”

“Titleist... Like, Arnold Palmer is a *Titleist*”

With that, Ten ended the argument. Kristen was satisfied. It was July. It was humid enough to be July, at least. Even in Kat’s bedroom I could feel it blanketing me. My first summer vacation from college was about to end, spent with the people I grew up with. While physically the same, their roles had transformed. Kat was my dealer, Drew joined a band and became Ten, and Kristen became his pet. Time bound us together. It felt awkward but seemed right. The tablet fizzled under my tongue.

Kat’s room smelled like dirt. The crickets were so loud that I wondered if there were a few under her bed. We always seemed to be waiting. Last week it was for Kitty’s music video. Last month we waited for the “Real World” marathon, and tonight we’re sitting anxiously for the new Pepsi commercial.

The spot stars Kitty America, the latest pop singing sensation. Kitty was electronically rendered by some of the top computer engineers across the country. She could change with the times but she couldn’t grow old. She couldn’t get sick, and she couldn’t run away. She could be a logo forever. Kat and Kristen envied her beauty, and Ten was

surely in love. The room swayed and tilted. Under my feet sat the broken up scrabble board Ten had destroyed weeks ago. For a moment I contemplated researching the validity of his “triple word score,” but I let it pass. The bridge table was littered with different words created with scrabble pieces, most of which involved or stood for products available at Wal*Mart.

Kat lied motionless on the couch behind us. She wasn’t saying much, but she never really did. The walls of her room were decorated with different posters and pin-ups of MTV stars. Her most prized decoration was on the wall directly behind her couch, a poster for the film that launched Hollywood’s fascination with eastern religion, “Dude Where’s My Moksha.” After its release, Hinduism was everywhere. Bands wrote songs about it, families celebrated its holy days. Cartoonish looking deity novelties were sold back to back with Santa accessories. Kat treated the film as if it were enlightenment in itself. The television buzzed, at which Kristen and Ten stared blankly.

A surge came over the group. Immediately it was certain that this was what we were waiting for. The television flickered distinctively. With reborn awareness we watched the screen as it lead us, all in the room together singing: “bada, ba ba ba – bada, ba ba ba.” As one, Kristen, Ten, and I all said the words along with Kitty: “The joy of cola.” Our attention suddenly turned to Kat, as she was motioning to speak. Words began to curl off her lips, “The Freshmaker.” We laughed.

I went along with the others; I said the words. It didn’t have the same effect on me as it did on them. There was no reassurance or joy. I felt no connection with the television, or Kitty’s lips and eyes. The lights danced. The only thing clear was the door to the room, its knob, and me. Ace Frehley’s solo to a KISS song I didn’t remember pulsed and shot straight through my head. On a rocket ride.

The top was down, the air was cool, and the highway was empty. In the middle of August dusk begins so late. We would drive around the east end for hours, and end up parking right up on the water. Kristen would play with the radio. We sat on the hood of my car, and threw rocks into the Sound. When our eyes met, it would feel like the night could never end. We wondered where the purple sand came from. We wondered how sand always got in food at the beach. We spoke about the future as if we could write it. She tugged and tugged the sleeve of my sweatshirt until I was close enough. She kissed me. We could feel the wind, we could feel the night. We slept in my car.

There was just me now. Kat was asleep on the couch. Ten and Kristen were fucking while Kristen kept her eyes fixed on Ten and Ten watched MTV. A video from a band called “The Unnecessaries” glared off the set. Their song was loud and obliterating. Ten followed every motion lead from the screen. I felt dizzy and sick.

There were about three motions separating me from the outside of the room. Probably hundreds of individual movements just getting to the door. I wasn’t sure what it mattered anyway. The street would be dark, and I would be alone. It could be filled with people. I would see their faces. They could reach out to me; for me.

Everything blurred and colors ran together; iridescent. Kat’s room, my future, Ten’s motions, and Kristen. Sometimes things change before you can even take notice. My head hit the floor. I could feel Kat’s florescent white lights as they blended into darkness.

Stoned at Wal*Mart and “Being Johnny Tangle” (2006)

Billy Pratt · 16 May 2020 · Archived copy · Original

A few years after graduating college, with the idea in mind to become a literature professor, I found myself going to graduate school for a degree to teach high school English. Not a terrible idea entirely, but I was entirely unaware of what made it terrible; I was expecting it to be something that it never was- genuine- and this slight misunderstanding would set me back years.

At the time, I really liked getting stoned and going to Wal*Mart- in a way where, if I let my mind wander, I have fond memories of it like people will of past vacations. It was equally surreal and it was comforting- handfuls of snack food and clearance DVDs; the horror of walking through the heart of consumer culture while acknowledging that you're enjoying it just as much as anyone else. Like how people try to posture that they *don't like fast food*- you're a liar if part of you doesn't enjoy the spectacle, even if the relationship is *complicated*.

“Being Johnny Tangle” (2006) was born out of this complicated, love & hate, relationship with nostalgia and consumer culture- and is a spiritual prequel to “In the [Bedroom](#).”

“Being Johnny Tangle”

“But Mom, seriously, you promised,” cried a bewildered Johnny Tangle. Mrs. Tangle gazed into her web of stringbeans, “Not tonight, Johnny, you know better... Tonight is stringbeans and meatloaf night. It has *been* stringbeans and meatloaf night for weeks now! You should know this, Johnny, really... and when did I ever promise McDonalds?”

His mother's words shot through Johnny like a spear impaling a lightning bolt. When did she promise McDonalds? He was sure she did, as Dally provided a callous glance from his muted television and MTV. But maybe, possibly, could Johnny Tangle, in a fit of derangement, have imagined that his loving mother of eight (mostly) wonderful years had promised to buy him three happy meals?

Three happy meals were an absolute necessity in this situation, as Mcdonalds had finally began giving away Hot Wheels in their happy meal combination, and there were three variations of the miniaturized model car. Johnny knew there would be three different paint schemes, three different sets of tiny plastic tires, and three different character decals on the hood. How could little Johnny Tangle be expected to choose between Ronald Mcdonald, Grimace, and the eccentric Hamburgerler? It was a choice Johnny knew he wasn't prepared to make.

And then there was the food, the glorious food. Since the first time his mother took him to Mcdonalds, over the summer for a birthday party, Johnny has craved Ronand's unique blend of sugar and fat. Johnny sat close to Dally, watching his silenced television with ear-muff headphones on and a cord extending all the way to his room down the hall. Dally would sit watching MTV with the sound turned down for as long as he could while listening to records playing down the hall.

“You know, Dally, your father is gonna break his neck one of these days on this freakin' cord,” Mrs. Tangle said mostly to herself. She knew Dally couldn't hear her, and Johnny only cared about Mcdonald's. She returned, defeated, to her stringbeans.

Dally started collecting dust, as Mrs. Tangle put it, when he asked for and received, his ear-muff headphone cord-extension set for Christmas 1983. With this special item, Dally would be able to sit in front of the television while listening to his record player running in his room. He rarely moved, and if you watched closely, he rarely blinked. Johnny never understood why Dally wanted such a boring gift, as Christmas was a time for action figures and mystery-goo, and when he asked his father, Mr. Tangle offered, “Son, when you grow up you'll find that a lot of guys want cord extensions.” Mr. Tangle's explanation, which may have been the result of too many rum-zingers, didn't serve to clear up Johnny's bewilderment.

And bewilderment was an emotion that Johnny was becoming too familiar with on that unusually cold September evening. Johnny scanned the television for the time, finding only flashing lights and blinking colors. “We have to act fast, Dally,” Johnny said with unnecessary anxiety, “Mom is almost done with the meatloaf! And then I’m going to have to set the table. And I don’t wanna set the table for meatloaf, which should really be called *grossloaf*, and I don’t want grossloaf.” Dally seemed unfazed, even by his brother’s accusation of the night’s meal being “gross.”

“Someone is calling my hard work gross,” Mrs. Tangle said hotly. Johnny peered into the kitchen, as his mother slumped down in Mr. Tangle’s seat at the head of the table with her head in her hands. Johnny watched as she sat in silence and plotted his next move. He considered a casual suggestion, to the effect of something like, “say, I wonder if Mcdonald’s would be any good tonight,” or maybe more along the lines of, “I wonder what’s going on at Mcdonald’s?” Johnny figured a question would warrant an answer, and the only way to answer such a question would be to pick up and go to Mcdonalds. Before he could make his move the door slammed and Mr. Tangle entered the kitchen sweaty and smelling like Old-Spice.

“Meatloaf tonight,” said Mr. Tangle said with defeat, “gross.” Mrs. Tangle’s head sank further into her hands, “...you could always come home and make dinner if you don’t like my cooking.” Mr. Tangle laughed, and Johnny wondered if he didn’t get the joke. Now was his chance, and he knew it. He began by straining for indifference, “Guys... we all know the meatloaf’s gross, so why don’t we go to...” Johnny stopped as his mother’s face began turning red. The room fell silent. Johnny could almost hear the KISS solo to a song he didn’t know pumping through his brother’s ear-muff headset.

“Go to your goddamn room, Johnny Tangle. Go to your room and stay there!”

Johnny couldn’t help but wonder what he had done wrong. His own father had even agreed that the grossloaf was really, really gross! Johnny kicked the door to his room closed. Behind the door was his brother’s old KISS poster, which Johnny never took down when he changed rooms on the account of how neat the guys in their superhero costumes and makeup looked.

His eyes fixed on the bunch of “old junk” (Mrs. Tangle’s words) that Dally had left in Johnny’s new closet. As he gazed, Johnny felt his vision come in and out of focus. What a bunch of junk Dally left behind; the closet was filled with outdated toys, partially completed crossword puzzles, and the golden arches. Johnny repeated the last part to himself again, this time slowly: “...and the golden arches.” What were those beautiful, yellow, curvy arches doing in his closet, in his room, where he sat on Bernard Street, blocks and blocks from McDonald’s? With a new hope, Johnny Tangle reached into his closet and pulled out an old dusty box which read, “The McDonalds Brand® Play-Doh Food Factory™.” With reborn awareness, Johnny Tangle had a solution.

As he assembled the old factory, he smiled to himself. This was quite the educational experience- so, this is how they make McDonald’s. They must have tons of these suckers in the back, just pumping out food. Johnny opened up the old canister, shocked that McDonald’s was actually made out of Play-Doh. This was much more interesting than science class ever could be.

For the first time in his life, Johnny felt a sense of control as he put the Play-Doh through the factory. His mother didn’t matter, Dally’s indifference didn’t matter, and the grossloaf certainly didn’t matter. Johnny had a secret weapon buried right in his closet. Whenever he wanted McDonalds he could have it.

The purple french fries didn’t smell like McDonald’s. Johnny feverishly checked over the box. There was Ronald, there were the arches, and even old Grimace was hanging out. It wasn’t hot and greasy like Mcdonald’s either, and Johnny certainly didn’t feel inclined to mindlessly devour it like he would if he were actually *at* Mcdonald’s. The difference, however, is that this was *his* creation. Johnny wanted Mcdonald’s and, Johnny found a way to deliver. He held his Play-Doh hamburger carefully in his hand, with the attention a parent would bestow upon a newborn. This was his and it was beautiful.

Although Johnny quickly had produced his Play-Doh food, he felt hesitant to eat it. Down stairs he could hear his parents fighting over something, loud and cursing. It could be dinner, it could be Johnny. What he wanted, more

than anything, was to show his parents the food he made. Maybe he could be making dinner every night? No more grossloaf, no more fighting. Johnny gripped his Play-Doh tightly, waiting to see his parents again, as he drifted off to sleep.

Better to Reign in Hell

Billy Pratt · 2 June 2020 · Archived copy · Original

“I dressed up in scarecrow, she dressed up in white.”

She told me that she likes “fuck boys”- a terrible, disingenuous cope of a nomenclature; a way for women to *reclaim power* in an otherwise powerless situation, thinking that, in our modern landscape of gender equality, a slur designed for a man who has too much sex will have the same sting as one made to shame women- *fuck boys*, she said, because she likes the way they talk to her. She was almost forty with three kids; when she ditched the hubby, she got herself a personal trainer and breast implants- which was probably the most sensible thing to do. Ride the midnight train out as far as it will go- better to have your pick of *fuck boys* than to get a look at the kind of loser who’d take you seriously.

She had fake tits so I felt compelled to continue the conversation. Breast implants are sexy for everything but their aesthetic value- they rarely look good, with the exception being implants that look so good you’d never know they were fake, surely a secret taken to the grave, but typically they’re closer to bad 90’s porn. There’s an unspoken symbolic value to fake tits- signaling an intense vanity combined with a deep comfort in promiscuity, where even if her tits are fake, her willingness to exist as a sex doll is more real than any woman with “*no hook-ups, not looking for a one-night-stand*” at the bottom of her profile. There’s a refreshing purity to this approach- only a woman with fake tits will tell you that she likes fuck boys.

People rather hear bullshit than anything genuine. KISS floundered in obscurity, bankrupting their record label with their most sincere and artistic work, that all bombed commercially until they released a *live record* that hit big and made them celebrities. Since their live shows were packed and their studio albums were duds, why not go into the studio to record a live album- a total fake, disconnected from the performances that made their act a success. *Alive!* bore little difference from their already recorded studio material- the same songs but now with a bed of crowd noise ripped from a Monday Night Football game. This is what people want- people want you to lie.

If you want to know her number- her *real* number- you need to approach the conversation delicately. If you lead with how you’re “sick of the sluts on Plenty of Fish”- land of the washed-up party girl- she’s going to throw you a number impossibly low for an eternally single girl edging forty. You could take a beat, close your eyes, and allow yourself to believe the lie- you could let this narrative form the foundation of a relationship, your own personal mythology; two crazy kids who *finally found love*- the fair maiden waiting for her white knight- the jaded bachelor who never believed in romance, but her incredible inertia and inexplicable energy *proved him wrong*. You could let yourself believe you’ve found something more valuable than all the money in the world- life’s reset-button, a chance to start over.

The best way to sell anything is by giving it a deep and engaging origin story. “Star Wars” (1977) was a successful, stand-alone movie with a beginning, middle, and clearly defined end- successful enough to warrant a sequel, that George Lucas smartly spread over two additional movies. When it came time for Lucas to make even more Star Wars movies, he understood that an origin mythology *outside of the story* was just as important, if not more so, than the actual contents of the story itself.

The idea that Lucas had all six Star Wars episodes written prior to making the first one gave the stories a sense of biblical grandiose- ancient texts being rediscovered. No longer was Star Wars the coming-of-age tale of a farm boy turned war hero, but the fall-and-redemption arc of Anakin Skywalker. When it came time to sell the prequels, Lucas repurposed the franchise as *the story of Darth Vader*, a political drama with laser-swords. The mythology eclipsed the product, infused it with a kind of *historical value*, and carried the films to monetary success when the actual product being sold was a critical failure- the lie shaped our perception of the truth.

But you're too far gone to let yourself believe her. If you want the real number, you'll need to speak her language- a *non-judgmental* perspective. You're hip enough to have your own crazy stories, you're on the warm side of the pool, sitting at the cool kid's table- this is the only way she'll feel comfortable telling you something more closely resembling the truth. Knowing this will ruin any prospect you had of having a relationship with her- at best, you'll be another notch- and if you liked her enough, you'll have wish she lied- people want you to lie.

She asked me why I write and I liked that she really wanted to know. I explained the *intrinsic satisfaction* of creating art- how this comes before all else; how audience is *irrelevant*; how there's a purity to this approach. You'd rather a small handful of dedicated readers invested in your work than a wider, *disingenuous audience*. She called bullshit on that. She said I write because I like attention- this is how a woman with breast implants will understand the world; feedback as the only currency that matters. You're taking time to study the *rules of verse* and she's rolling her eyes. You'd sooner fill a thousand marble notebooks and bury them all if they contained the right words in the right order. This is why you write- the intrinsic satisfaction of *creating art*. These are the lies we tell ourselves.

The lies we tell ourselves. No one fucking breaks up with me, and the ones who do will never find anyone that comes even close. This was your shot and you blew it. I was too nice and you didn't appreciate it. You were only the handful of qualities I projected on to you- you could have been anyone, and I can replace you in a heartbeat. You were an empty vessel when we met- you were nothing- *you were roadkill, baby, 'till I held you in my arms*.

It's better to reign in hell than serve in heaven. You were never the relationship type anyway- walking through the Strawberry Festival, holding hands, in your pink polo and khakis. Big smile for the selfies she's taking for Instagram. An overpriced engagement ring to show the world that you're the sucker who thinks he finally found the right castle, and saved the right princess, when how many assholes has there been? Big wedding with a gaudy DJ who put wacky sunglasses on grandma. She'll hate your guts in two years. The lies we tell ourselves to justify a lifetime of nothing working out.

She told me that she likes "fuck boys," and I thought I'd finally connected with someone- that we shared a *mutual understanding* of things. That maybe a woman needs to go as far as getting breast implants to finally be able to access truth- a strange condition to meet, falsify the body enough and free the mind, perhaps. I told her that it's curious how we all prefer to be lied to. Not her, she objected- dishonesty is a *big turn off*, she explained- and if I wanted a date, I'd better take her to the Strawberry Festival.

Purity and Mayhem

Billy Pratt · 18 July 2020 · Archived copy · Original

“Money, like, there’s an unlimited amount of capital in the world, you know?” Anna said to me at one point.
“But there’s limited amounts of people who are talented.”

She said she wanted a fairy tale. Not something fairy tale-like, or fairy tale-adjacent; not the kind they sell at Target, or the Magic Kingdom version with the anxious college girl sweating to death in her ballroom gown while telling you about all the books she read before the gnarly beast swept her away. Something where you’d never dream of compromising things with the words *good enough* to control expectations while still acknowledging the positive. She wanted the real deal.

Where it wasn’t good enough to spend your nights together laughing at jokes that only you’d both understand, between bouts of incredible sex, and looking into her eyes and telling her that she was beautiful and really meaning it. This wasn’t a fairy tale- this was something else- and if this weren’t a fairy tale, what was?

Too much of this and you’re burning churches. Nothing is real until you’re willing to destroy everything and sift through the ashes. Cut the throat of your father because he couldn’t be what you needed. Never let the lie settle; walk away from the inauthentic.

Tony Iommi didn’t understand why Rob Zombie never changed out of his stage clothes- *stage clothes*, a foreign concept for Zombie who knew you either lived your act as performance art or that it doesn’t mean shit. Venom didn’t understand why every Black Sabbath song wasn’t about the devil- what kind of *black sabbath* was that? Mayhem didn’t think you could write dark music without making it a lifestyle and burnt churches along the Norwegian country side- there was a purity to this.

You aren’t a real writer if you consider what the reception of your writing might look like; a writer must disregard the idea of audience; there is no audience, there is only art. If you write for an audience, you may be writing words, but you aren’t *making art*. Art can only manifest from the artist’s subconscious, in a flow-state, containing subtle and unintended nuances which even the artist may be ignorant of. This is why those who create art consider themselves conduits for God, or vessels for fairies and muses- art can only come out of the unconscious mind as a performance of self-expression. It may be cleaned up and stitched together later, but the foundation must be unconscious. If any space is surrendered to enhance the experience for an audience, you’ve already lost.

Black metal originated as a response to heavy metal gaining mainstream attention with artists suddenly wanting to write songs for radio airplay. Grit was lost and turned to gloss in million dollar recording studios with smooth repeating choruses and non-threatening lyrics. Norwegian black metal artists rejected this as *inauthentic*. Heavy metal shouldn’t be polished- it should conjure primal images of being alone in the woods, in late November, after midnight, with only a battery powered cassette deck, naked and covered in animal blood... or is it your own? It should sound cold and **dark**.

The barrier to entry is high- Norwegian black metal is purposely abrasive. Songs cut in and out with drums loudly blasting in the **foreground**— there is often no discernible song structure. Vocals are sometimes used as an additional layer of sound- not its driving force- and are typically buried in the **mix**. They don’t care if you get it or if you like it; artistic integrity devoid of concern for audience. Kurt Cobain wishes he had their balls.

The best writing should be complex. Complicated and unrelenting. No *easy reads*; no bits of light fiction, nor should there be books meant to be read on the beach. Writing should challenge the reader to meet the author on his terms only. Meaning for entire pieces- entire novels- contingent on obscure references woven so seamlessly into the larger narrative that only a small percentage of readers will notice and understand. Thomas Pynchon includes a scene in “Inherent Vice” (2009) where stoner protagonist Doc Sportello charts the novel’s 130 characters, and their complex

relationships, on the wall of his apartment with a marker- Pynchon's way of mocking the reader. What, you can't keep up?

This girl, she lived in a house on the beach, where she hid herself away from the nasty virus. So close you could see the water from her window, in a town that seemed perpetually alive, chatter in every corner, all hours of the night. Beach houses built on the corpses of hippies, with signage proclaiming an eternal summertime and promises of *living easy* hanging in manicured, million dollar love shacks. A never-ending Halloween party with ghouls coming from their humble abodes, costumed as *beach bums*, looking for jolts from electrodes. Symbols disconnected from meaning. Only the wealthy can afford the fairy tale of pretending to be poor.

Her fairy tale followed a trail of breadcrumbs into the witch's oven. You only get one Weiland. Effort can't change the immutable. When Selina Kyle tells Batman that he doesn't owe the people anything, that he's already given them everything- he replies, "not everything; *not yet*," which is more rousing a moment for men than even the hottest pornography. Men want an excuse to give every last bit of themselves away; a destructive purity; pure mayhem- something Catwoman couldn't possibly understand.

Even if the sadness in her eyes, that maybe only you could see, weren't enough it was the way she spoke of the past- how when she said "it was a long time ago," the inflection in her voice betrayed her.

You thought you could storm in and start tearing down statues. Inexplicable confidence. Recreate the world in your own image. *Talent*. But no one can compete with the idealized dead. The past has been decided- fairy tales written. Welcome to hell- there's a purity to this.

Eternal September

Billy Pratt · 19 September 2020 · Archived copy · Original

“A week without you, thought I’d forget. Two weeks without you and I still haven’t gotten over you yet.”

She didn’t like it when I teased her about her house. Put politely, it was unfinished. What was meant to be the baby’s room, with its careful design of overlapping squares hand-painted on the walls, had become a storage-space; miscellaneous items suffering a slow transition to the garbage. Her hardwood floors had stains. Light bulbs dangling from fixtures. Things in the yard that hadn’t been moved since they were put down fifteen years prior. A storm destroyed the fence, with only the posts a reminder that her yard had once been enclosed. The front lawn with crab grass and mushrooms.

Not that one needed to be tremendously perceptive to realize that the house, more or less, had ceased any major evolutionary activity- the kind where the first time homeowner is gifted a Time-Life “Home Repair & Improvement” book set, with plans made that foresaw holiday duties on the path to grandchildren.

She wanted me to love the beach like she did. Reminders of this- some purchased at home furnishing stores, some given as gifts- served as the main source of decor; reminding me that the beach is her *happy place* while encouraging me to *keep calm and sit by the ocean*.

If there’s anything certain left to believe, it’s that we’re living in hell. She didn’t understand why I went on about this- falling short of obsessive but with serious overtones of urgency. The greatest misconception about hell is the fire. People think hell is alive, molecules buzzing anxiously. There may be a cinematic quality to this but it isn’t accurate- it isn’t hell. Hell is cold and dead. Hell is subtle enough for you to doubt that it’s surrounding you.

I liked the beach, but I didn’t love it like she did. I’d meet women there for first dates, where we’d find a bench and watch the sunset as the crashing waves create an ambient soundtrack. I can’t spend my days sitting on a beach, it makes me nervous to not use my time productively- a horrible consequence of too much time wasted- but at night I like listening to the stories of women.

Typically divorced, but not always- the ones who were married are usually the more mentally stable- they’ll cite a dead bedroom and an unmotivated husband as their chief concern for initiating the separation. There will usually be a pang of regret over disrupting the lives of their children, and the inconvenience of sharing custody, although this is understood as collateral damage. They had all heard of Tinder and were “excited to try it,” with the initial burst of male interest serving as enthusiastic confirmation that they had made the right decision. You’ll know how long a woman has been on her own by the way she talks about meeting men.

A woman new on the scene will be enamored by the attention- so many *options*, often exceeding her wildest fantasies. A gym-rat in his early-thirties, looking to relieve a bit of stress after leaving the office; the twenty-four year old bartender; the frat guy cheating on his teenage girlfriend- all chasing a woman over forty. She always knew she could do better than her husband- and with the maturity of age, she’s now comfortable enough with her sexuality to indulge without regret.

And even if she had more fun than she ever thought were possible on those lonely nights, sitting under the glow of her television, with an open bottle of wine, playing and replaying the eventual conversation she’d need to have with her husband; even if she had gotten to live out the female version of every man’s fantasy, with the only limit being a time predestined by her own genetic code, a threshold causing the attention to taper-she’ll one day realize the coldness that had always surrounded her.

The beach became her happy place when she found her high school sweetheart overdosed in their bathroom- the beginning of her eternal September. She took their infant daughter and wouldn’t return to the house

for three years, where she sat in her decaying castle and did the best she could. No one could blame her for any decision she had made there after. This is how she eased into the rest of her days, and there was nothing terribly wrong with it- even if her only wish were to politely color within the lines and walk away with a terrifically neat and tidy picture of a life well lived.

The King of Hell

Billy Pratt · 7 November 2020 · Archived copy · Original

“And the world spreads its legs, and the world spreads its legs for another fucking star...”

She wouldn't let me fuck her before she went on dates. Losers she'd meet from pay-to-play dating apps- ones that supposedly offered a more serious assortment of romantic candidate. The kind she'd want to bring home to mom, assuming mom were still alive. Maybe, more accurately, the kind she'd introduce to her children- on a day trip to Adventureland, where he'd spend big money on faux-artisan iced cream and carnival games skewed against the player.

Big smiles while riding bumper boats. This could be something real- like they advertise on TV, where aging singles find their *second chance*; the one *that counts* as insinuated by the complex smiles on the faces of couples in their forties, sipping cocoa in cozy, female-owned coffee shops; discussing *life after marriage*.

This is the one that counts. His kids are with the ex-wife, and he's booked himself an audition for a new family. He's taken her on thoughtful afternoon dates- the kind that involve pedal boats and wineries.

I wanted to fuck her before these dates, when just fucking her didn't seem like enough. I wanted my cum dripping down the inside of her thigh while she's holding hands at the strawberry festival. Getting laid's not enough- you need to snort a line of pure ego alongside your serving of pussy. Only decadence gets you hot. You get off on chaos. You're Bob Crane on a cooking show. You want to push things until they explode.

She called me crying when she found out that her ex-husband was getting married. She didn't know where she went wrong. Let me fuck her on the first date without a condom. Girls think that's a deal breaker- that it's *why* they can't get a steady boyfriend; that the relinquishment of the completely unnatural and counter-intuitive modern notion of *safe sex* signals a moral deficiency so alarming it frightens away potential mates. Make things too easy and no one sticks around.

She doesn't realize that she's Alice in Wonderland, alone in the candy store, grabbing at tonsil ticklers with both hands. Men would kill for this experience- alone in the woods with a whittled tree branch. Covered in animal blood, or is it your own? Wit, adrenaline, and moxie- you'll need all three if you're ever getting laid again. Her ex took home the first boar he speared. Low expectations and zero confidence. The meek shall inherit the earth.

She didn't understand why he's getting married and she's getting fucked. I ruined her, she told me. Now she needs a man who makes her call him Daddy. She's *further exploring* her submissive side. She's getting “very anal.” She got a purchase confirmation for an engagement ring sent to her phone. Either their accounts are still linked, or her ex has a nasty sense of humor. Guy she's seeing calls her a *fuck buddy*.

Lungs have felt like shit for a while now. Years of abuse. Catches up to you. Now's as good a time as any. Can work around it at the gym. Pace myself differently. Compensate with caffeine. Wit, adrenaline, and moxie. Pulmonary says it's asthma- have always had it, but now it's *more pronounced*. Probably being polite. Too hard to explain it as a time-stamp: the remaining years are now spelled out explicitly. Timer winding down. Music intensifies, and you still haven't found the secret door out of the Forest of Illusion.

Hack garbage; too many video game references. Everything falls apart; becomes parody. Write what you know- pop-culture and easy women. Married men go out on weekends with their ring in their pockets and their fingers crossed; fall asleep at night wishing they could do what you do. Wishing they were the king of shreds and patches.

The King of Hell.

Handful of pills to get to sleep- *not for daily use* but it's been years. Enough coffee in the morning to kill a small animal; gradually heading toward a heart attack. Kidneys raw and irritated. Years of abuse. Right ear feels off- a warning sign. Agonizing stillness of early morning with screaming tinnitus. Too much time in headphones, at the gym, teeth-grinding black metal- but how else will you feel *good enough* about yourself to exude the kind of immediate confidence on first dates that you've come to get off on? Body held together with tape and glue. Push things until they explode.

Where were you when I was still good? Dating your high school sweetheart; college romance; first husband. Lines on the graph inching their way to the right; on the ascent. New house; thirty-year mortgage. Fixed rate. We can do it, baby, *us against the world*. Time-Life "Home Repair & Improvement" book set- gut the house, make it our own. Grandchildren and holidays; a *life well lived*.

She wants her daughter to make her ashes into a gemstone. They do that now, she told me. On a necklace, passed down generationally. I'll end up in a dumpster. Possessions trashed. My death as a bit of afternoon gossip. I can be made into a tree, she told me. They do that now, she said. Maybe that will be nice?

At my best now, even with the wheels coming off. A circumstance of modernity- as unnatural as anything else. You shouldn't have gotten so many chances- game resets, save spots. You would have been killed in a war; fallen off the girder of a high-rise; hunting accident- torn apart by wolves; hanged for stupidity. You hardly deserve to have made it this far, forget soccer practice and kung-foo classes.

You were never going to be the Heartbreak Kid; you were always Cactus Jack. Spend years tearing your body apart to get to the big show, but only once you've made it do you realize that it always had to be this way. There's no winning- only consolation; scraps cobbled together. The King of Hell.

You need a tour rider to spend a night with a girl. Cold room for sex. If the room's too hot, show's over. Won't perform. White noise for sleeping- preferably an air filter, but a loud fan will do. I don't like "white noise machines"- be it dedicated or through Alexa. I can hear where the track loops, and will subconsciously internalize it- wake-up every time. Need a full stock of zero-sugar late-night snacks. Need my own pillows and sleep-mask. Need to pick the side of the bed. If I don't like the comforter, I'm walking. I sleep on a diagonal- this is important. The girl must compensate for this.

When they do, you realize that maybe everything has been for the sake of this moment. Maybe this wasn't your back-up plan, maybe this was by design. Maybe you wanted desperate women looking to you for their last chance.

Wait long enough, and their line on the graph drops low enough for you to be their savior. The king of terrified women. Terrified of aging; of smile-lines and crows feet; of sagging breasts and tight jeans. Terrified of being alone. The King of Hell.

She did all the right things this time around. She went through a phase where she'd have men from hook-up dating apps meet at her house- a kind of *post-divorce mania*. She'd be drinking, of course- she couldn't meet strangers for sex otherwise.

Not this time, she told me. She wanted to take things slowly; go on *real dates*, pedal boats and wineries. The strawberry festival. Long conversations in female-owned coffee shops about travel. This was how to get a boyfriend. This was how to fall in love.

And once enough flowers were gifted, enough day-trips to the country were taken; walks in the park and train station county fairs. Once there was enough for it not to seem cheap, she had him over for sex. Text the next day,

like clockwork- likely pre-written, copied and pasted; he doesn't feel a *strong enough connection*. They don't have the *kind of chemistry* he's looking for. He wishes her *luck*.

He knew what was needed to get sex- money to spend, expectations to meet. He's NASA developing the astronaut pen because he doesn't have the balls to be a Soviet, alone with a pencil. Cost of doing business. Rats on a sinking ship- grabbing at what we can, both hands, blood everywhere. She learned her lesson this time, she tells me. Come by and fuck me early, she texts. She had a date that night.

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Set it and Forget it

Billy Pratt · 26 November 2020 · Archived copy · Original

“Row like a felon, drown like a captain’s son. But say, how long can this go on?”

The goal is a clear stretch of highway long enough to keep your cruise control set at seventy-eight. Detach from the minutia of traffic while feeling connected to the reality of *journey*— wheels groping pavement, cutting through morning air. Not only does your attention to speed management ultimately save on gas mileage, but more importantly it provides space to sharpen the mind/body connection that’s crucial for when you walk into work at 6am- each motion light clicking to life as you pass- to sit at your desk and write in a spiral-bound notebook for twenty-five minutes before starting work for the day.

Cafeteria duty has become dedicated to reading and tuning out co-worker chatter about meals past and upcoming- Steve pursuing the perfect combination of pizza toppings, Larry the Security Guard having meatloaf *again* but it’s *okay* because Larry *loves meatloaf*. You can’t ask them to stop talking, but you’d like to, as if only to emphasize the importance of finding time to read every day.

Reading is like the leg-day of writing- it’s easy to skip a few times, and then walk away all together thinking you don’t really need it, which is when your writing turns to shit. You could read things you enjoy, but you’re better off finding something that helps organize your thoughts into stronger prose- if what you’re reading doesn’t strengthen your voice as a writer, sorry bucko, put the comic book down and find something better suited to maximize productivity. Idiot thought reading was supposed to be enjoyable?

Lunch isn’t about eating lunch- actually eating lunch is for suckers. People with their lavish, restaurant style meals- plates getting heated in microwaves, an army of Tupperware coming out of satchels, menus and take-out. You don’t need any of this- you need a pen and a printed copy of what will be your first book; reading print and editing by hand has a different feel than sitting in front of a desk top- a different perspective. Both necessary to end up with a product that will make sense of an otherwise wasted forty years. There is nothing more important than this.

You try to get all of your actual work- the work you get paid for; the work you disregard as bullshit- done in one shot. You’ve front loaded your school year with large, time-consuming projects so you can spend the rest of your time writing- work you will never get paid for; work you consider with dire importance. Writing gives you a sense of relief when feeling anxious- purpose when feeling like you’ve ruined your life and wasted your time- meaning when thinking about the meaningless of your death.

I killed my teacher, she told me. She was excited. Her math teacher died after sending her father an email about how *disappointed* she was in the kid’s lack of participation in class- supposedly she died, like, within an hour of sending the email. Last thing she did. Maybe the last thing she thought about. Class participation. A funny story for the **kid** to tell people. No one cares and you’ll end up in a dumpster with some asshole laughing at you. That’s your life.

After work, you rush home to get your gym gear on. You’ve settled on a two days on-one day off-three days on-two days off lifting schedule, with your days set at chest and shoulders, legs and abs, back and arms. You learned the virtue of rest days during quarantine. You also learned that a weighted vest maximizes your time spent walking after the gym, which is anywhere between four-and-a-half to ten miles per day.

Dinner is your *one meal per day*, and is usually some combination of steak, eggs, pork, and chicken. You feel guilty

indulging in Quest cookies before bed, which have become the bane of your weekday existence but also what you most look forward to- the gift and the curse; the sacred and the profane. You spend a lot of time thinking about processed, low-sugar protein cookies. This is your life.

Don't message me for fitness advice, because now you know everything I know. That's the only way I know to do it. I only know the hard way, every time. I've been fat- women treat you like a leering retard and people at work talk down to you. I'd rather drop dead from my awful schedule than deal with another second of that ever again.

You actually tell people you go to bed at 8 o'clock, she enquired. Earnestly. She thought this made me *look crazy*- that I don't spend my free time watching streaming TV shows that remind me of the inherent badass nature of white suburban women; drinking wine; *enjoying my time* in a kind of free-floating, unscheduled manner. Unproductive. Repulsive. Enjoy your time off the work farm, plebs- I'll be here grinding myself to death.

I have nothing in common with people who don't understand the urgency of getting to bed early; sleeping away my two hours at the gym, ten miles walking with twenty-pounds on my back, the 3,000 calories of meat- sleep substituting for meditation; dreaming productively; waking up with total mental clarity and peak creative energy. Racing to work to write in a fucking notebook- the most important thing you do; what must be guarded before all else. Avoiding morning greetings and polite chit-chat from well-meaning co-workers; vicious mind-erasers and creative vampires, all of them. Everything in service of writing in the fucking notebook because writing in the notebook is all you fucking have.

This is a test from God, he said to himself. He wrote this on his Internet web-log. Autocorrect, always sure to capitalize the i-in-Internet but never the g-in-God. He tried to feel the presence of God in his daily life, but he settled on the idea that it were better if he didn't. Faith is a test of your mettle. Better that he stay hidden. I can take it, he thought. Meaning, slipping through his fingers like sand. Body falling apart. Watching his parents die. I can take it, he thought.

Grinding away, expecting something to click- to make sense, just once. Stay hidden, God- faith is having belief despite insurmountable energy urging toward disbelief. Faith is a challenge; faith is a choice. Easy to believe when everything is handed to you- money, women, meaning. Don't make sense of this for me, God, I can take it; I can do better- I can start getting to bed at 7:45.

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You're Just Like Delicious Tacos

Billy Pratt · 13 December 2020 · Archived copy · Original

“Whoever thought you’d be better at turning a screw than me? I do it for my life. Fuck yeah!”

You’re just like Delicious Tacos, he told me. He was messaging me for advice. Girl problems- but, more than that too, he said. His life felt empty. He was lacking direction; depression, anxiety. There’s something about my writing that suggests I could offer intervention- a quick series of bullet points or if/then statements. Something about my writing that’s aspirational.

I’m willing to believe this. Despite the failures which I’ve grown comfortable sharing with strangers, I’m a happy and centered person. I have positive habits- and even if my addictive personality will merely cut and paste beneficial habits in place of those destructive and pursue them with the same psychotic vigor, they’re at least contributing to my overall health and well-being. I read and write regularly. I lift weights and take long walks. I meditate and enjoy stillness. I love nature. I believe in God.

I’m just like Delicious Tacos. I write about getting laid, as a single man, in realistic terms. No big fish stories; the raw honesty of average women. This lends me credibility with those hard-up enough to find something like that impressive. Scarier are the types who take jabs and call it “fan-fiction.” Sex alone has become the *big fish story*, with the same anxious energy of when you would’ve killed a small animal to see tits as a thirteen-year old; relentless and aching.

They all want magic’s biggest secrets finally revealed. As if the plethora of Internet content describing it in detail has become too slick- too Hollywood; just as detached from reality. Average men spend a lifetime studying bullshit to screw a fraction of what the dirtbag bartender is pulling strung out. The quickest way to cut the line is a bag of coke. I know this because Delicious Tacos knows this.

Stay single long enough with your eyes open, talk to enough women, and you’re going to come to the same conclusions. Once more men get it, society will fall. The trick is to have your interests align with what women find attractive- interests so personally fulfilling that if you never get laid again they become spiritual quests. Without sex, lifting weights takes on a more *authentic gravitas*. The creation of good art- good, as defined by your own standard, will mean more than any woman’s opinion of you. A deep connection to nature. Reflections on philosophy, history and morality. The ability to make yourself laugh. Good food. Presence. This is the advice I would give- or just get a bag of coke.

You’re not like Delicious Tacos, she told me. I had lent her “[Savage Spear of the Unicorn](#)“- I wanted to hear her thoughts on what I consider *true contemporary literature*. She has a masters from an Ivy League, she reads Pynchon, she tells me I’m great. She’s smart. She liked Tacos, but she doesn’t see the similarities, and maybe I don’t either. Tacos is taller with a full head of hair; in better shape despite us both spending years at the gym, twenty-thousand Twitter followers, multiple books and fucks way more women- even if he’s paying for some of them.

I aspire to be Delicious Tacos, in a one-sided competition, existing solely in my own head. I’m Dave Mustaine to his Metallica- and maybe “Rust in Peace” is the technically superior heavy metal record, taking thrash to its logical conclusion. Maybe the Megadeth listener is the more sophisticated music fan, sipping chardonnay and discussing the subtle intricacies of Dave’s *deep in the mix* guitar fills. Pointing out how “Youthanasia” was recorded completely live in the studio as a fuck you to Metallica’s partial live recording of the black album- a fact that was presumably only for Mustaine’s own mental satisfaction- that he’s *better than Metallica*.

Even when the hard reality of metrics- sales figures and tickets sold- don’t agree. That Dave can be a better lead guitar than Kirk, a better song writer than Hetfield/Ulrich, a better leading man than James- at least in his own head, where he can set the parameters and claim victory. You’re not like Delicious Tacos, baby- lending her books with a gun to her head. You’re better- *it should be you*.

Online content is mostly bullshit. The impulse is to fill dead air. If enough *empty space* elapses, you end up firing whatever you have in the chamber- sound and fury, signifying nothing- into cyberspace like a drunk frat boy feeding quarters into a Space Invaders cabinet at a dusky college bar in 1982; haphazard shots fired into the night sky; just hoping to hit *something*. Just like what I'm doing right now- lit quote to seem smart, video game reference to seem hip. Paint a picture of fuzzy nostalgia- people like that. Write about someone more popular than yourself- maybe the uninitiated will be baited to click? Maybe Tacos will retweet? Maybe he'll be flattered and say, "That Bad Billy- not so bad after all?"

I told him to find peace within himself. Partake in things he enjoys. Realize his passion and pursue it with psychotic vigor. Consider himself dead, right now, and think about what he would've liked to have left behind- now, work backwards, and find a way to achieve it. This is all that matters.

You get enough sex and you realize that the girls you jerk off to are wispy fantasies- something that reality will hardly ever match. The percentage of truly great sex you end up having is so miniscule that it should be disregarded on its face- living for the weekend, teachers obsessed with the school calendar; focus on sex and you'll never stop missing your life. Thanks, he told me. He'll think about it, he said. And in the meantime, he'll shoot Delicious Tacos another DM- maybe this time Tacos will write back.

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Razor Blades and Shame

Billy Pratt · 21 December 2020 · Archived copy · Original

There are moments in life, however brief, that an unspoken sentiment is shared by so many that it becomes an energy unto itself- the kind of energy that's propelled nations to fight wars and outsider candidates to win elections. At the end of the decade, professional wrestling- fans, wrestlers, and promoters- had something to prove. It wasn't enough to kindly explain to the uninitiated that *despite the predetermined nature of match finishes* that this shit- the battering taken on the bodies of performers- was, actually, far more real than anyone knew. To chase the respect of those who will never care, violence needed to be amplified.

The rise of Extreme Championship Wrestling (ECW) may have been the direct result of this coalescence of energy. The convergence of two deeply felt sentiments: that a) professional wrestling was embarrassing *because it was fake* and the wrestling fan was an idiot for not understanding this, despite gladly acknowledging it any chance they had, and b) all those working in professional wrestling were performing on a *show for children*. The idea behind ECW was that they would explicitly define their show as *one for adults*, with a hard-R rating, and use profanity, sex, and violence as a means to achieve this end.

If Hogan's transcendent moment of betrayal was enough to secretly engage the lapsed teenager, ECW became something they could proudly identify with: Sabu smashing tables, Rob Van Dam diving into the fifth row, Balls Mahoney destroying chairs on unprotected skulls; barb-wired and thumbtacks. Even their thirty-second commercial spots for mail-order VHS tapes screamed with sinister brutality, and was always sure to cut-out seconds before an act of horrifying violence was committed- tantalizing and enticing the blood-thirsty teenager- who'd dare his friends to sit through a "taipai death match," giddily pointing to the explicit gore- what's fake now, motherfucker?

The violence was what offset the shame. The violence was what made wrestling cool. The violence became addictive.

Two years later, there was a silent understanding that John should be the one taking Eric to the hospital- after all, he was the promoter of our very first JBW show; "John's Basement Wrestling"- use of the basement meant to differentiate from every other idiot who thought they'd play wrestling by throwing terrible punches and denting cookie sheets. The basement, not such a bad idea; something that could be used year-round, with walls acting as pretend guard railing, miscellaneous items around for foreign objects- board game boxes as faux steel chairs, TV remotes for microphone headshots- a couch for *high spots*. We even had two older kids- local wrestling school trainees- who could be featured in our *main event*.

Like comparing the old monster movies- the Mummy, wrapped in toilet paper and Frankenstein with bolts in his neck- to the bloody slashers that came after, the contrast between our goofy headlocks and Earthquake splashes became jarring when Eric and Joe took the stage; jaws agape watching snap-suplexes on the concrete, powerslams and powerbombs- moves that men with more experience, more pay, and more motivation wouldn't take in front of twenty-thousand people, happening ten feet away, in front of a dozen horrified on-lookers. Guided by adrenaline in calls that must have been made on the spot, heavy-weight steel chairs were dented over skulls... which is when Eric, as slyly as he could, produced a pair of scissors.

The blood was real, I excitedly told the girls we invited- the premise was a party in John's lavish upper-middle class home; his parents on vacation; booze and beers to be had in the absence of supervision. The girls, single and ready to mingle, and now you're the kid eating worms- and just as dopily unaware.

What was rightfully horrifying in retrospect only produced a sense of misguided pride. We had done it- we had put on a wrestling show- we had a match that rivaled anything on TV, even if only in brutality. The girls left us to it that night- to sweep thumbtacks and mop up puddles of blood- high on what we accomplished, high on professional wrestling. Their seats, empty at our next show.

[Excerpt from **Razor Blades and Shame: The Emergence of Extreme Violence in Pro-Wrestling**]

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Ghostbusters 2

Billy Pratt · 29 December 2020 · Archived copy · Original

“The ghosts that roam this house, like winter air right through our souls.”

You don't have to write about my stairs, she said, and we can only be friends if you stop hurting my feelings. I didn't have to be in the room to know what her eyes would have looked like- desperate to hide the depth of her vulnerability- but like every other time, no matter how hard she tried, the way she looked at you betrayed her. This was what made you fall in love with her.

She stopped talking to you when you posted the piece about her house- her house as a metaphor for every bit of hurt, every battle scar, every coping strategy and defense mechanism; walls and coldness- circles that needed squaring. Parts of her life to be compartmentalized; some locked-away, some delicately framed with self-talk.

It was a long time ago, she'd tell me- with just enough hesitation, half-seconds further halved; moments so brief that you were certain you were the only person to ever notice, like Meriwether Lewis crisscrossing the uncharted west. New territory to discover and examine and critique. To write about- a loving tribute, as if to say: I see who you really are and I want to use every bit of energy I have to protect that.

She didn't see it that way- over the course of our time together, but also in the piece about her **house**. Like tricking Rocky Balboa into being on a news bit meant to humiliate him, she saw it as a *cheap shot*. Come laugh at the sweet, entirely normal woman- who never wanted to be written about; used as fodder for Internet web clicks- the entirely normal woman, who takes comfort in the “My Heart is at The Beach” throw-pillow; the entirely normal woman, with the dead husband and the unfinished house, who never felt she had anything to prove to anyone, and now you want to rub her face in it.

And even if you explained that it was meant to make her seem sympathetic in the face of awful people who make awful decisions, this was sympathy she never asked for.

It's funny, but it's not a joke, Blair explained to me. I have a difficult time with this distinction. Blair's good for things like that; smart, Ivy League **whatever**, IQ likely a standard deviation above average. I think you're emotionally abusive, she told me. She sent an infographic explaining the qualities of a manipulative narcissist; red flags, she told me, with the wide-eyes of sincerity.

It's not funny, she insisted. I told her that I'd cut-and-paste the list to my OKCupid profile. OKCupid, because anyone who hasn't switched to Bumble is expecting a little abuse. You're doing it again, she told me- this is *emotional abuse*.

And maybe she was right- it read like a personality description of someone awful enough to be me. I never shy away from *conflict*, especially when I'm “fighting to be right.” I try to get women to *think exactly like me*, and will not accept conflicting narratives. I often tell women that they love me and ask them to repeat it. I prefer when a woman mirrors my emotions- if I'm laughing, I didn't hurt your feelings, it was *just teasing*, *you big baby*, and you should be laughing too. In this regard, I will *deny someone's experiences* if I don't agree with their emotional reaction, using phraseology like “*it wasn't that bad*.”

I always prefer women to read my *mind, mood, or body language*- my mood which will shift, erratically and arbitrarily, throughout the day. I talk about myself incessantly- I have a fucking blog where I expect strangers to be facinated with me; I am *self-obsessed*. In this regard, I am always sure my needs are being met- even if only on a subconscious level- before *checking in on her*.

I'm *insensitive*, I told her. It's my worst quality. Please try to be understanding.

You can write about my stairs if you don't use the picture I sent you, she told me. I don't do well with *if/then* statements. I can't be told what to do- natural inertia forcing decisions to be made in the opposite direction, even to my own detriment. I couldn't understand why she didn't just sell the house, anyway. The past died on its own, no killing required- board up the old place and forget about it. She had the market on her side- riding the tide of an inflating bubble; photogenic good looks. Burn the boats on your way to a second life.

I have to use the picture of your *actual stairs*, I explained to her. For purposes of *authenticity*. Like the most damaged ego-maniacs of my generation, I'm obsessed with authenticity. Every bit of output- words written, social interactions had, emotions expressed- must be organically sensed with a blind, Jedi-like intuition. I am not someone who enjoys *small-talk*- pitiful social grooming for the lesser intelligent. I like to *discuss ideas*. Everything I've written about- personal lives dissected, women scolded for making what is *quite clearly* the wrong decision in retrospect- is exactly how it happened; at least, certainly, a close approximation. From my own perspective- from my throne at my computer.

She stopped talking to you when you posted the piece about her house, and you thought she was being a big baby. She said her feelings were hurt, but you thought she just wanted to *get her way*; that she was being *manipulative*. Exert a little bit of power; have you take your piece down; she always made snide comments about your *writing*. Started seeing her again during the summer- had broken up right before *quarantine*; it felt like ages had passed but also no time at all. Was already seeing other women, and you wanted her to know. *No one fucking breaks up with me*. Now was your time to rub her face in it.

I started working on my house, she told me. She was proud of the changes she made; *home-improvement*, they call it, and she did it all on her own. But it was when you got the picture of her freshly stained stairs that it hit you- so hard that you needed a minute to compose yourself.

Stay alone long enough, you learn to only trust yourself- not other people; their motives seem disingenuous. They are *inauthentic*; unlike you. Perfect son of God; purity of heart; *purity* of intention.

A writer; an artist- this must come before all else, at the expense of feelings being hurt, relationships damaged beyond repair. This is what you tell yourself to get to sleep at night- still necessary, even after the handful of *pills*. This is what you tell yourself when you know you're just a selfish asshole; a parody of a human being; a bad sequel. The King of Hell, on your throne at your computer.

I have to use the picture of your stairs, I told her- I'm a writer, I'm an artist, I'm an asshole- anything else, of course, would be inauthentic.

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Only Death is Real

Billy Pratt · 16 January 2021 · Archived copy · Original

“You’re holding on but letting go, I’m missing Cleveland and the snow; and lonely thoughts where everybody knows the truth and lets it be”

It’s the same thing every time, she told me. It’s an act, the whole thing; it isn’t real. The eye contact, the pursed lips, hands in the hair, the inflection in tone- “*baby, baby...*” She’ll pick up on this and mimic it back to me- same eye contact, same pursed lips: “*baby, baby...*”

When you’ve lived what feels like a thousand lifetimes compared to the high school sweethearts; you’ve figured out every bit of the female algorithm- missile launch codes carved into your skull like the password to skip to Mike Tyson; right to the bedroom; right to *true love*, scientific discovery at the price of normalcy; at the price of family.

At the price of outliving your parents- at least numerically. Without anything else- anything to provide perspective- the single man will either self-destruct in addiction or grind himself into the ground; defiance, on the road to decay; defiance in the face of genetic limitations- trying to get muscle car performance out of an economy class. Your parents were shopping on a budget- who knew how bad things would get?

The cold void of an endless January seems even crueler when juxtaposed with the colored lights of December. It was a December morning, before first period, that our eyes met in front of her locker. In what couldn’t have been planned, at least consciously planned- perhaps, more like the march of the penguins, or a rosebud uncoiling before the relentless morning sun- perhaps, something guided by nature and etched into a plan that wasn’t within our power to modify. Our eyes met, guided by invisible forces so strong that they had almost revealed themselves- a proof for God, had we been more conscious of it in the moment- our eyes met, and hung in the air frozen. No words exchanged. Even a kiss would have spoiled the purity of the moment. We had all that was necessary, and we could make from it something more.

We stayed after school that day and spent the afternoon talking about what we wanted the future to look like. Too shy, of course, to include one another in these plans- but we spoke in ways where this acknowledgement wasn’t necessary; that it was maybe so pressing and obvious that it could be left unsaid.

That night, December 16th, 1996, I took the late bus home from school- and that night was the only time I wore a seatbelt. This was the greatest day of my life, and I couldn’t let anything ruin it.

You’re just like Stanley Kubrick, is what people must have told Shane Carruth. Absolute darling of the independent movie scene at the dawn of the new millennium, Carruth did what would have been considered impossible- made his first movie, with a seven-thousand dollar budget, and won the grand-jury prize at Sundance. To put this in perspective, it’s like your friend’s student film winning an Oscar- like breaking a law of nature, this was something that *couldn’t happen...* but it did, because *Primer* (2004) is incredible. Breathtakingly incredible- even with its flaws; flubbed audio and blown-out lighting; there is nothing like *Primer* and *Primer* is fucking incredible.

And even still, I can never decide whether I prefer *Primer* or Carruth’s follow-up *Upstream Color* (2013)– a film so uniquely outside the box that I wouldn’t know where to begin describing it. Part science fiction, part cold realism- broken people with interdependent relationships- *Upstream Color* examines the connection between identity and trauma, how the latter inescapably shapes the former- and, more so, how these elements, so crucial to how we understand the world around us, are often invisible.

Absolute darling of the independent movie scene, for a short time Carruth had tried to work within the Hollywood system- to the point of even pitching a Batman movie. When he couldn't get funding for his big budget, trippy sci-fi adventure *A Topiary* he pivoted back to realism with *A Modern Ocean*— which caught a bit of fire, even making it to the casting stage... and then nothing.

Absolute darling of the independent movie scene, which is ultimately meaningless. No one wants to finance difficult, obtuse art. No one cares how good you are. No one cares if you're just like Stanley Kubrick, or just like Delicious Tacos, your inaccessible art- your brilliance- means nothing in a world of Mickey Mouse superhero bullshit. Beauty means nothing in hell.

It was in the cold void of January that Kevin had slipped you the little blue sheet of paper, folded up with your name across the front, during second period Theology. You had nothing to worry about, he said. He wasn't interested, he explained. He was already dating Michelle- a fact you all knew, but Jessica had still called him the night before, just to be sure.

There's this interview with Joseph Gordon-Levitt where he doesn't say the name *Shane Carruth*, but in my heart, I know he's talking about Shane- who interrupted him during an audition to tell him that his performance was shit. I've seen enough of Shane's acting- his screen writing, interviews given by him. I have a sense of his personality. This was **Shane**. On the way out, Gordon-Levitt still wanted to have his fanboy moment with Shane- this will be the impulse for anyone in-tune with what Carruth is doing; you're in awe of his work- and he tells Shane how much he appreciates Shane's two movies- to which Carruth replies, *"I don't buy that either."*

It is only in the cold void of an endless January that all can be laid bare. Only in the absence of the ornate, and the emotions inherently consequent, that proper assessment can be made. Only after New Year's Eve, 1996, making out with Jessica in her living room; Dick Clark with KISS ringing in the New Year; "I wanna rock and roll all nite and party every day"; drunk only on each other; hands in her hair, looking into her eyes- *this is gonna be our year, baby*— only in the absence of this can things be properly contextualized.

Terms and conditions; hypothesis and conclusion; the manager who won't let the artist pursue their passion project for *practical reasons*. Hollywood who won't give Shane Carruth money to make pure art. She was the prize and you were the runner up- second choice. She had negotiated for a better deal but chose to accept the offer on the table. You bought what you could afford and were happy with what you got. One little blue sheet of paper later, and it was tainted- like finding a horde of ants behind the wall of your dream home or the new car that never leaves the shop. A heap of junk who'd tell you that she loved you but you *weren't buying it*— it's an act, it isn't real- who cried at your coldness and sucked your dick on Friday night. You wanted a fairytale; you wanted purity and you got **mayhem**.

The punchline is that Jessica loved me for years after we broke up. For years, she'd do her best to find me- in the years before social media, this wasn't easy. Messages sent through friends. Showing up at the same goth clubs. Desperately seeking Susan; always a step behind, always on the prowl. She'd let a guy hit on her and I'd swoop in and pull her away by the waist.

No one could understand why I wouldn't just date her. If you saw the dress she'd wear to Equinox, you'd have wondered the same thing, but she just had the dumb luck of knowing me. She had the dumb luck of buying all those Seattle stocks at their IPO; an early adopter- commendable, but now she could step aside 'cause this rocket's not stopping 'til we hit the moon. Thanks for playing, baby. Maybe next time.

Writing is the pursuit of truth- this is what you'll say when asked why you write. Greatness existing within your **reach**— brief glimpses of its Platonic form, so brief you can only sketch them from memory; scribble out _____

words, inadequate substitutions for what you're trying to impale with your ball-point spear; feel the juices stream down your neck as you indulge on the progress you've made. The pursuit of truth- there's a purity to this.

Internet fame, a substitute for your relationship with God. This is what you say matters. This is how you get to sleep at night. This is how you justify a meandering existence, never having to commit, always thinking you could do better; you *should* do better. Incredible truth to be found in meeting desperate women on dating apps. There's no room in hell for the happily married; only the dead walk the Earth.

As if David Foster Wallace's suicide doesn't haunt you. Poke holes in your theory. You'll never be as good; you'll never be as acclaimed; critically well-received; famous- both Internet and *real life*. Even this, what you woke-up early to write, before work, in a spiral-bound notebook that you bought for a quarter; even this, your recent work- which you believe shows a *significant evolution* from when you started; your stylistic prime; your best, which you feel justified in labeling as *clever*- will always be shit compared to Wallace's worst... and even if you want to believe that turning words into art is enough to justify an otherwise meaningless existence, DFW's hanging corpse is somewhere laughing at you.

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Jennifer Lost the War

Billy Pratt · 30 January 2021 · Archived copy · Original

“...but will the morning headlines even say that it’s a shame?”

They’re all liars, she told me, all of them. While we had spoken a few times, only through text, in the years since things had come apart violently, I finally chipped away at Jennifer enough for a phone call. Years had passed, and maybe the resulting body image issues- collateral damage from getting off on calling her fat- had faded enough for the sound of my voice to be somewhat less nauseating. Or maybe it was the *mid-August blues*; five months into quarantine and just about any option seems great- a fact that I greatly benefitted from over the summer- but even if I had been excited to catch up with Jennifer formally, this wasn’t what I was expecting.

It was only a few years prior, the summer of 2018, where she had told me to “fuck off” on account of how she could “fuck anyone she wanted” and wouldn’t consider wasting her time “fucking me”- a point I half-heartedly attempted contesting but would ultimately concede. If I could *fuck anyone*, I wouldn’t be spending time doing any of this shit- dear reader, you’d be the one “fucking off.”

But, luckily for us all, I need this and I need you- *desperately*- so here we are together. I never flew too close to the sun because I never had the option- eternally shackled to hell’s version of Marley’s chains: the curse of the average man. But the average single woman in her thirties won’t feel the swirled cocktail of *gift and curse* that sexual restrictions bring and will typically indulge in ways that’d make her bright-eyed twenty-four year old self blush like she’s at Plato’s Retreat.

Jennifer was at the end of this ride- spent all her tickets on the log flume at [Adventureland](#), and even if she had a great time, now she had to sit in her wet jeans on the ride home- they’re *all liars*.

The election didn’t come up this time around. Four years prior it may as well have been foreplay. Deliberate triggering and antagonization. The last time a presidential election will feel significant; subversive; defining. What we had before us was space to make our own. Space for like-minded people to feel less lonely; less disconnected. There were people like us all around, quietly noticing things about the broken modern world- buzz like a Bethesda message board on the first day of release. Coming together and creating energy that was impossible to ignore; madness in every direction: blogs and memes, even better than our *wildest dreams*. A decentralized, meritocratic culture war was one we could win. This was our time and we weren’t going to let it get away. Our time, where fucking Jennifer while wearing a Trump hat felt significant- subversive and defining.

There was a definite thrill to having sex in a Trump hat- of conquering and winning. Part of the energy wave that we created together- each contributing a fraction-of-a-fraction until it took on its own electro-magnetic momentum; one that we were able to tap into on the back end like a perpetual motion machine- bumps of highly potent, 140-character at-a-time *good shit*.

We had won the election- we beat the establishment; David kicking Golith in the balls; Little Mac knocking Super Macho Man the fuck out. We were all Ricky Vaughn and Ricky Vaughn was emblematic of us all. We could fuck anyone we wanted, at least spiritually; symbolically.

The crest of a high and beautiful wave.

They’re all liars is probably what she wasn’t expecting- but like the song quote Ellis used to set up *Less Than Zero* (1985), “this is the game that moves as you play,” and, more often than not, faster than you’re able to notice. While she’s screwing Mr. Exciting- the guy she knows will never commit- she’s betting the house on the idea that those who are *less exciting* will be there for her when she’s done sowing the last bits of her post-divorce *wild oats*. The real shock hits when Mr. Dependable starts playing games too, and the only way he knows how- the long con-pedal boats and-hand holding; boring, limp-dick sex that she has to grit her teeth through just to say she has a

boyfriend- and then he treats her like shit all the same.

The election didn't come up this time with Jennifer because the energy had already dissipated. The game's been rigged with the conclusion forgone- this wasn't what we were expecting. Biden would stand as a puppet for the Neo-Liberal world order; Ricky Vaughn in hand-cuffs. This was the end of the beginning- a comfort to Jennifer who was someone outside of Internet culture; who liked Marvel movies and sharing memes about Mondays; who had thought that as long as there was a woman present in *places where decisions were being made*, all was right in the world. That as long as we send the orange man packing, we can resume a life of corporate approved consumer experiences- and with our pictures on all the requisite dating apps, we can become the product- for all the liars to consume.

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After Hours

Billy Pratt · 25 February 2021 · Archived copy · Original

"If you close the door the night could last forever"

It's okay to do nice things, Blair explained. She had made a reservation for the afternoon at a winery operating on a working beef farm. Anything pretentious would be tempered by a kind of rustic authenticity. They'll have cows, she told me.

Although it can be managed, it's impossible to entirely diminish feelings of hesitancy in a struggle that I can only assume is similar to the misnomer of the *recovering drug addict*— the same wishful thinking involved— that one can ever, successfully, erase the footprint— bust the ghost... thoughts wander; compulsions linger restlessly. There is no recovery for true addiction.

You've been around too long to think it's a good idea. You've seen too much. Instincts adopted and ingrained, that trigger semi-automatically; the lunging of the rattlesnake; fight or flight, and most times it's a combination of the two. Survival: running for your life from Blinky and Clyde, always looking for your next power pellet to turn the tables and devour them all. Quick and bloodless. Get them before they get you.

Just be normal, okay? Bright eyes pleading with the urgency of a death row inmate waiting on a morning execution. You can tell a lot by the way a woman looks at you— her wants and needs; the vulnerabilities she thinks she's hiding. She thought she was lucky to meet you and you seem intent on proving her wrong.

Just be normal. Holding hands at the Strawberry Festival doesn't signal weakness— that you're easy prey, that you're entirely unlike the guy who'd treat her like shit. The one she'd idolize— that even in hell, sometimes you can sit back and turn your brain off like you're watching the Incredible Hulk save a busload of trans kids from right wing terrorists. You can forget what you know and enjoy the moment. Holding hands while tasting an eclectic variety of artisan wines. It's okay to do nice things.

Blair bought me a gratitude journal for Christmas. It's best to focus on the positive, she explained. Careful to read every word I write and tell me that I'm great, even when I don't see it. Blair likes to make me feel good about myself. She's thoughtful like that. Her biggest concern is whether I'll like the pot roast on a Saturday night. I've never made one before, she'll remind me.

As if I'd know the difference— living like a ghoul for so long, you lose sight of these things. Meals with more than one ingredient. Showers without mold in the grout. Toilet seats attached to their namesake. The *little things*, which Blair has perfected.

Our waitress is a pretty, salt of the Earth ginger. The type of girl who doesn't exist in any location where she'd actually be able to be your girlfriend. The mask she's wearing engenders the fantasy that she's a doppelganger for every ginger you've ever wanted— the *fuckin' D-girl* that Chrissy gets a taste of in Season 2 of *The Sopranos* (2000), a scene which you carefully utilized what was then *emerging technology*— the clarity and frame-by-frame precision of digital video— to jack off to the glimpse of her breasts when gifted the season box set twenty years prior.

She takes you into the meat freezer and apologizes that organ meat is temporarily unavailable— an experimental recipe she's working on. This is how she spends her weekends, she says, embarrassed. I feel no obvious chemistry between us, but I wonder. What would be the right words to say? The right order? Nintendo passwords and missile launch codes. How would you open?

I wonder what it would have been like if we knew each other as college freshmen, Blair said aloud— not exactly as a question that necessarily required an answer; not a genuine inquiry but rather wistful romanticism, meant to hang in the air as the opposite of a tragic *missed opportunity*— an adorable *what if*. I told her that we wouldn't have known

each other, her as a hopeful sorority pledge- sure of nothing but enjoyable experiences on the horizon for the next decade, a certainty she'd bet the house on- and me, in my black jeans and Misfits t-shirt; smoking clove cigarettes around the time I realized that life only gets a little bit worse with each passing year. Explaining to Blair that women *exist* and men are *made*; that women are gifted their value *upfront*, that as a college freshman she was living a lifestyle equivalent to that of a millionaire playboy at a beach resort- the world at her knees; only good vibes on the agenda. She wouldn't be caught dead talking to a ghoul whose invite to the party must've gotten lost in the mail.

So why cash out now? Finally clawed my way into what's left- mostly empties and spilled beer. Vomit caked into the carpet, stinking of acid and sulfur. Why settle now that I can revel in the shit heap- the King of Hell- aging women at my knees like the cover of *Love Gun* (1977). My line on the graph infinitely heading toward the top- with another month at the gym; ten thousand Twitter followers; a million dollar bitcoin, I'll get there eventually. Why should I settle- the God of thunder, taking what's left and using every last bit- the Ed Gein of dating. You don't cash your chips in ten minutes after learning to count cards, but how much blood needs to be spilled, Vlad?

Revolt against the modern world or revel in its destruction? You feel owed this for every bit of shit you had to eat. For every disappointment you've suffered; for the promises broken; for the deliberate subterfuge in the form of memes embedded in a pop-culture that you still consider warm and nostalgic- you're the institutionalized prisoner, the slave finding comfort in his chains, Patty Hearst with a machine gun. So far off course, buried under relentless waves, carried out to nowhere. You were wronged by a world encouraging exploration and experience, and now that you finally got your ticket punched and your hiking boots on, you're not turning the ship around and heading home. Everyday is Halloween and you're going as a coked up sorority girl- Tyler Hadley with a hammer- you're going to push things until they explode. You're a fucking rock star, with your sideways cap and reasonably ageless face, and if they try to throw you out now, you'll kill to party. This is what you wanted, and you'll get what you deserve. Just be normal, okay? Welcome to fucking hell.

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WELCOME TO HELL

Welcome to Hell

Billy Pratt · 11 June 2021 · Archived copy · Original

"Hey Mama, look at me, I'm on my way to the promised land..."

Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, I assure you, the story I'm about to tell you is true- all of it. Every small victory. Every little triumph. Every lesson learned. Every mistake made. Every misdeed cast. Every bit of bullshit. Every lie. Every defeat. Every disappointment. Every heart broken. Every tear shed. Everything I'm about to share with you, it all happened. It's all true- all of it.

Impossible for you to know the emotional toll telling you this story has taken. The long days and endless nights, restlessly searching for the right words, in the right order; hoping it makes sense; hoping to be seen. Restlessly searching for meaning; enduring moments of despair; intense bouts of frustration; *fists against the wall*. Desperate to be understood.

Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, submitted for your scrutiny and judgement, this is my story- this is my life- and I am proud to share it with you; proud to announce the release of my very first book.

Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, **welcome to hell...**

"When the fantasy is all that's left, the impulse is to get lost in it. You want to forget that you're an arm above the water and your legs are giving out."

Modernity is Hell. It's a sentiment shared by many people, even if they aren't honest enough to admit it. But what *is* Hell? Hell is the impermanence of identity, the death of authenticity, the absence of love. It's the unsettling nothing you feel as you amble to work and back, numbingly consuming pop culture pleasures, sleepwalking your way through dead-end sexual encounters. Hell is the void, the death of God, the blurring of reality and fantasy, your own consciousness lost in the stew.

Welcome to Hell is a clear-eyed, touching examination of the world we live in. Equal parts memoir, cultural critique, meditation, and lament, "Bad" Billy Pratt's literary debut traces a poignant line through his failed relationships and other life experiences, painting a stark picture of the abyss that we've been condemned to.

- Matt Forney, Editor-in-Chief, *Terror House Press*

Praise for WELCOME TO HELL

"This collection is, as they say, a mood; an elegy for lost Americana, a memory of a place you've never been. If seduction is getting lost in the incomparable alienage of the other, and writing is teasing out the universal from the particular, then Billy tries to capture a universal sense of feeling lost. You will be able to see how much he cares."

- Zero HP Lovecraft, author of *They Had No Deepness of Earth* (2021)

"Billy Pratt wanders and wonders through the ruins of what is left of our civilisation and provides poolside musings on the facade of what now passes as human relationships in our atomised present day. With more than a helping of melancholy and longing for things which are now past, Billy Pratt writes in the mould of Delicious Tacos midway through an existential crisis. Enjoy these Despairing Tacos."

- Mencius Moldbugman, contributor to *Ending Bigly: The Many Fates of Donald Trump* (2021)

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We Simply Are Not There: An Interview with “Bad” Billy Pratt upon the release of WELCOME TO HELL

WELCOME TO HELL reviewed on THE AMERICAN SUN

WELCOME TO HELL on Goodreads



King of the Night Time World

Billy Pratt · 15 May 2022 · Archived copy · Original

"Come live your secret dream..."

My eighth grade teacher explained to us, separated from our female peers, that it's okay to masturbate. That we shouldn't feel shame- that it's *normal human behavior*. Later, on the playground, we collectively processed this information; we were uncomfortable. We accused one another of being masturbators. Each boy denied this accusation with vehemence; each boy except Teddy. Teddy stood with defiance; he refused to engage; he thought talking about it was "gay." He would neither confirm nor deny his status as masturbator. Later that night- in a remote part of town, behind the neighborhood water tower, where a teenager could explore the night time world without invasive eyes- in the shadow of an older brother's car headlights, a struggle session took place. Dave was never happy with the unresolved. Things got tense. Knowledge of truth's existence will demand its reveal by way of invisible forces and self-perpetuating inertia. Even still, Teddy refused to budge. Later that night we listened to Metallica while looking at his collection of *Playboy* magazines.

I knew I needed to see Shannen Doherty naked. I knew I needed this desperately. Preciently, I knew this before she was announced to appear in an upcoming issue of *Playboy*. Before the turn of the millenium, before smartphones and selfies; before getting a freshly taken nude photograph of a woman minutes after first interacting with her became an expectation- before female nudity was stripped of its prestige; stripped of its premium pricing- back when you knew your friend's dad made big money by the mere presence of a 52" rear-projection Zenith TV in the living room; more so if there were a monster-sized satellite dish in the backyard- and even if it was pragmatically meaningless; even if there wasn't enough original programming in the entire world to justify its ostentatious presence, he was getting every single CBS affiliate in the entire country as a showing of suburban, middle class power.

Teddy didn't have the Shannen Doherty issue. Pickings were slim. He only had what he was able to sneak away from his father. Teddy's father bought the occasional issue of *Playboy* from the newsstand, where it would sit on a rack high atop the other, more pedestrian magazines- a height unreachable for any kid contemplating an impromptu grab & go- with only its logo and a few inches of the cover model peeking out; a masthead that would ignite the imagination; a bowtied bunny taunting the eternally horny adolescent boy. Teddy knew his father wouldn't notice a few issues missing- his father had a subscription to *Penthouse*.

I didn't like *Penthouse*. The glamor model aesthetic didn't ignite my imagination- the women were thin and shapeless; flat chested, like my female classmates. I didn't want what I was already familiar with, even if not yet formally acquainted; I wanted a glimpse into the unknown; into my future teenage years- where girls turn to women and women are fully developed: large breasts and full hips.

That was the *Playboy* aesthetic: the girl next door, the captain of the cheer squad, the prom queen. Long, thick hair; big, luscious breasts; full hips and a slender waist; a warm, inviting smile. Together we perused Teddy's meager collection with a silent art gallery-like etiquette- overtones of suspicion still hung in the air. Teddy made it clear that all issues were for sale; he was willing to entertain offers. He would even part with his favorites for the right price.

Tiffany Sloan caught my attention: Miss October 1992. I was quickly learning that the real draw to *Playboy* magazine were the monthly, handpicked Playboy Playmates and not the celebrity cover models. This had been an interesting revelation, as these women were *not celebrities*. They were regular girls- girls you could possibly encounter on the street; girls you could have gone to school with; girls who, maybe the fantasy version of you; the hypothetical you; your theoretical *best self* could end up theoretically dating. This made the Playboy Playmate feel earthy and real in a way that a Hollywood starlet could not; Tiffany Sloan felt real in a way that Shannen Doherty did not.

My initial bid was rejected. Even if it had only been a few years prior that Teddy and I spent the entire summer tearing through *Contra* (1987), plugging in the Konami code and shredding aliens between afternoon horror movies and setting fires in the woods at dusk- it felt like a lifetime ago, in that moment, in Teddy's bedroom, with "Holier Than Thou" blaring on the cassette deck, nearing drowning out anything that dare compete. Teddy scoffed. I was embarrassed. I mentally scanned my bedroom. That same summer we had nearly worn out my VHS copy of *Wrestlemania VI* (1990) in anticipation of the year's *Summerslam*— always held at the *tail end* of summer; as bittersweet and frustrating as anything a ten-year-old would have to deal with. Watching Hulk Hogan and the Ultimate Warrior collide carried the manic excitement of a big time fight met with the cosmic grandiose of Greek mythology; a spear impaling a lightning bolt and a thousand atomic bombs, unfolding in real time, again and again, right before our wide eyes. It felt heavy and historically significant, and yet I knew it couldn't compete with Tiffany Sloan, staring back at me from the magazine's static pages.

Teddy broke the silence. "That KISS tape... the one with 'God of Thunder,' how 'bout that?" He wanted my copy of *Destroyer* (1976). I was surprised. KISS had been a subject of derision since I tried to introduce them to our heavy metal listening rotation earlier in the month. Teddy's taste in music consisted of a combination of what was on MTV and the contents of his father's aging vinyl collection. At the time, KISS was neither. While I was able to win his affection with GWAR- there was no eighth grade boy on the planet who wouldn't have liked GWAR- once "Beth" hit the Casio, Teddy declared that KISS was *gay* and demanded Megadeth. Even if the violin-stringed sincerity of "Beth" provided the perfect counterpoint to the nauseating bravado of album closer, "Do You Love Me?" Teddy would not allow the album to take its natural course. It was gay; their make-up was gay; the album cover was gay. Case closed.

Sometime later, Teddy wanted to make a fool of me. He wanted to assert his dominance; that, in my making mere suggestions, I was out of my depth; that he was the true, Robert Christgau-like, *dean of Eighth Grade Rock*. He asked his father about KISS. His father confessed- he had been a fan when he was our age but ended up feeling a sense of betrayal- something about a disco song- and that we should check out "God of Thunder," because "God of Thunder" rocked.

With a slow and ominous, Black Sabbath-like riff and throaty barking vocals, there was no eighth grade boy on the planet who wouldn't have liked "God of Thunder." With his father's approval, Teddy was no exception. Within weeks he was pantomiming Gene Simmons' brooding, monster persona, air guitar in hand, stomping around his bathroom in his mother's mint julep face mask. KISS was made for day-dreaming and fantasy; KISS was made for imprinting yourself on the blank slate characters and feeling like a cross between a comic book superhero and an oversexed rock star- a modern, consumer-culture God. KISS was made for eighth grade boys and now Teddy wanted my *Destroyer* tape.

A topic people are comfortable discussing doesn't qualify as something *intimate*— even if it were a prior generation's social taboo; even if those engaged in the conversation use both verbal and non-verbal performative markers of sensitivity and pseudo-shame. Under the right set of circumstances, people like talking about sex; with the right combination of playful cojoling and hard liquor, people like talking about their sexual fantasies. The world has become a safe space for this kind of talk. My eighth grade teacher was right: *it's okay to masturbate*.

What people won't talk about are their *non-sexual* fantasies. This is what adults find intimate, even if the fantasies are mundane; a life similar to your own but functional; a life where you did the right things; a life where things *worked out*; where you were afforded the minor luxuries that other people take for granted. Growing up without an alcoholic father; without a controlling mother. A girlfriend who wants you; a wife who respects you; a family like the Griswolds. Where you haven't lost your Chevy Chase-like idealism; where you feel comfortable in your role as patriarch; with the perfect career; the perfect suburban house; the perfect vacation; the perfect Christmas. These are the fantasies people won't tell you.

Maybe these are the fantasies that Teddy has. I didn't really keep track of Teddy- our lives went in different

directions- but I know that he ended up in rehab as a teenager. That he was in a Special Education program in high school. That he knocked up his high school girlfriend- Jen's cousin Vicki; a few years older than us with big, luscious Playmate-like breasts. That he became a plumber. That maybe he grew up too quickly; that maybe he would have liked more from his life. In eighth grade the future seems unwritten even if it were always predestined. I wonder if he has any regrets; if he lies in bed at night thinking about how things could have been different.

I wonder if he wants what I have. I went to college; I have a respectable career. I never married; I don't have children. I don't have any unnecessary responsibility. I don't have anything less than freedom.

I don't have mundane fantasies. Maybe I'm too old, in the chronological sense, to put on cold cream and strike poses in my bathroom mirror; maybe this is too much effort; maybe I'd feel self-conscious- but I fall asleep most every night thinking about being in KISS. A ritual that began with practical origins: I suffer from insomnia. Getting to sleep is difficult. I need something light to think about. Sometimes I imagine myself in a cabin, deep in the woods; sometimes in a tiny rocketship floating gently through deep space- and sometimes as a member of the *hottest band in the world*.

I imagine what KISS would have been like if it were my band; if I were in the role of the starry-eyed lover; if my high school friends were my bandmates. I never stray too far from the facts- the band's actual story- but I put my own spin on it like I'm writing fan-fiction. I imagine myself in a *better KISS*- a KISS that better understands itself; a KISS where each member better understands the character they embody: where Paul is the only one singing about girls; where demon Gene only sings monster songs; space Ace singing sci-fi songs and catman Peter as the emotional center. I picture myself helming this *more perfect* juggernaut, with Britney Spears as my rockstar girlfriend- whom I'd have sing lead on "I Was Made For Loving You," instead of me, something I think the band should have actually done in the late 70s with whomever the Britney Spears equivalent was at the time. I imagine the music video to the song with me and Britney wearing matching face-paint; I imagine a life better than my own.

I tell myself these stories at night to take my mind off the things that would keep me awake. I'm telling myself a story right now in order to mitigate my own shame- I like these stories more than I'm willing to admit. I tell myself these stories to escape my boring, normal life; I tell myself these stories because, in my heart, I think I was destined for more- that my *boring, normal* life is somehow beneath me. That it could have been me, up there, on the stage- that it *should have been me*. I tell myself these stories as a form of masturbation- and it's okay to masturbate.

Teddy never made it past the first three songs on *Destroyer*- "Detroit Rock City" became the song of the summer. Had he gotten to "Great Expectations"- demon Gene's gentle ballad; whose lyrical egomania provided the perfect counterpoint to Paul's thinly veiled insecurities in album closer "Do You Love Me?"- Teddy may have considered KISS *irredeemably gay*, but he never allowed the album to take its natural course. *Destroyer's* first three songs, in reverse order, defined the end of our eighth grade year- the final vestibule of childhood; the last time the future seems truly unwritten. It's high school where things begin taking shape; where we begin learning who we are and also begin learning to hate that person in equal proportion. What you end up doing with that knowledge is what will ultimately define you.

Maybe it was the end of that summer where those seeds were planted, hanging out behind the neighborhood water tower- where a teenager could explore the night time world. It was there, one August night, that Dave and I sat silently on the curb. There are times in life where words get in the way; where what's spoken can't hope to capture the moment- that maybe words imprison these moments instead; these moments that are beyond words. Maybe Dave and I knew that. Maybe we knew that it was time to start growing up; maybe we knew that we were on the precipice of one thing ending and the beginning of what would become the rest of everything else. Maybe we were in shock, watching Teddy in the distance- in the shadow of a car's headlights- having Jen's older cousin Vicki give him a blow job.

Dave broke the silence, he was never happy with the unresolved, "so what do you think, man? You think he jerks

off?”

“I don’t know, man,” I stammered, swallowing nervously, “but if he does, that’s *totally gay*.”

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WELCOME TO HELL

This is the Static Age

Billy Pratt · 18 May 2023 · Archived copy · Original

"Hey, hey, it's the static age. Well, this is how the west was won..."

I didn't know who she was, but she told me her name was Michelle and she went to my high school. She was a friend of Teddy's. He had given her my phone number because she was nervous about making friends at a new school. She said she liked Teddy and that maybe she'd like me. Starting ninth grade felt like the first season of a spin-off sitcom that I didn't want to be on; contractual obligations met with poor managerial choices, is how I'd have envisioned myself explaining it in some career spanning interview years later— ninth grade felt like a real low point. I didn't know anyone outside of friends from elementary school, cast members the invisible producers decided to keep around, and everyone else was *Saved by the Bell: The New Class* (1993).

I knew there would be girls, and while this idea was tantalizing, it was like seeing a painfully inaccessible item on the first screen of a *Legend of Zelda* (1986) game. Even if it appeared to be obtainable, the methodology behind its retrieval was buried in an issue of *Nintendo Power* (1988) that I didn't have; dull, aching frustration. Michelle's phone call was that tantalizing item. I found her at her locker the next morning. We never spoke again.

There was a familiar distance between boys and girls in eighth grade. No resonant feelings of ill will or persistent antagonism— boys and girls were simply on different planes of existence, living in alternate realities like nearby countries with a vaguely shared culture and little cross-talk. Then, one night, as summer approached, O.J. Simpson was accused of killing two people and after refusing surrender to the L.A.P.D., he led police on a slow-speed car chase while threatening suicide. This felt important for reasons that were not immediately evident— certainly not to eighth graders. It was important because the television said it was important. Without deliberate coordination, or so it had seemed, our entire class converged on a single residence to watch, and for the following summer boys and girls were suddenly friends.

And even if Teddy had once suggested my exclusion from a spin-the-bottle game as a way to coax the reluctant opposing team into participation, he still deemed me *cool enough* for a quick recommendation to a friendly girl. Michelle was short and heavily freckled; long stringy brown hair and a thick, raspy voice that would have been considered an asset during Lindsay Lohan's tiny window of unironic fame, but that was a lifetime away at the end of 1994, and a little girl who sounded like a dedicated smoker was alienating. Our phone call was awkward even in its brevity. She was excited to meet me. If you're anything like Teddy... a sentence she didn't think needed finishing. An idea that she allowed a natural death— the conclusion, to her, was obvious.

And even if it wasn't as easy as it seemed— even if I were only on the first screen of a long, adventure; a long, painful journey. Even if Michelle had only served as a *proof of concept*, I had seen the master sword. I knew it was there. I couldn't unsee it.

The final weeks of summer brought with it the emergence of Green Day as the first post-Nirvana supergroup, at a time when the passing years felt like episodes of a television show: definitive points of entry and exit that were mutually understood and implicitly agreed upon, with decades like TV seasons, each with their own set of aesthetics and plotlines. Just six months after Cobain's suicide the cultural winds already blew in a different direction. Green Day was sonically lighter than Nirvana. "Basket Case," Green Day's runaway, "*Smells Like Teen Spirit*"-esque hit, served as a counterpoint to Nirvana's murk. While Cobain dwelled miserably on the meaninglessness of suburban life, Green Day reveled in it— a simple message the modern suburbanite teenager, who devoted tremendous amounts of time to smoking pot and jerking off, was able to understand: *it's okay to masturbate*.

For those who experienced the ascendance of Green Day first hand, their breakthrough album *Dookie* (1994) is saddled with baggage difficult to explain. *Dookie*, like its best-of-the-decade predecessors *Nevermind* (1991) and *Metallica* (1991), is an excellent record that's aged phenomenally well— a fact that *did not matter* just one year after

its release. For mainstream rock fans of the era, *Dookie* introduced a sound previously unheard on MTV and commodified it. Teenagers were introduced to punk rock through Green Day, and subsequently considered Green Day *sell outs* for violating punk's rigid code of ethics (which they had quickly internalized). Green Day was an incredible band who was considered incredibly uncool only a year after they started selling out suburban hockey arenas.

Further, *Dookie* introduced punk rock to fill the vacuum left by Cobain's departure. This made sense. Green Day was a gentle introduction to punk rock; *pop-punk*, with a strong emphasis on the prefix. Green Day transformed metalheads into Hot Topic punkers overnight, and those newbie punkers turned on Green Day with vicious immediacy: by the end of 1995, Green Day was considered a kid's band.

Aesthetically, Green Day was overwhelmingly *non-threatening*. Something that worked for them when recording for the tiny independent Lookout! Records with labelmates Screeching Weasel and The Queers, where a rejection the overt masculinity that defined the prior decade's mainstream rock was considered a strength—after all, *punk rock* should be an inverse of the mainstream. But even if those punker converts were high on their newfound identity, the ghosts of Axl Rose and Motley Crue remained. Even Kurt Cobain, who championed the underdog, was still a guy who liked to shoot guns and heroin, both in equal measure. Pretty boy Green Day front man Billie Joe Armstrong, with his diminutive build, baby face, and bright blue hair made Cobain look like the strong silent type. A picture of Sesame Street's Ernie taken in a mosh pit adorned the back cover of *Dookie* upon initial release, which was initially meant to be ironic but once the band's fate was sealed, only served to further solidify their *punk rock for kids* reputation; kryptonite for the image conscious teen.

The funny thing about children's entertainment is that at a certain age kids end up hating it. Soon after childhood became something protected alongside the emergence of a comfortable middle class—no more dirty-faced twelve year olds talking pussy on factory smoke breaks—newly christened *teenagers* wanted to separate themselves from the quickly expanding age range of *childhood*. Children don't want to be treated like children, especially with puberty and dry humping on the horizon. More often than not this point is *misunderstood* by those trying to market entertainment to the young adolescent demographic, one that's considered a commercial goldmine.

When Gene Simmons noticed kids liking KISS he thought it *made sense* to lean in to a presentation deliberately *made for children*. KISS had already dominated the teenage market with their combination of black and white, leather and studs, proto-punk imagery met with raunchy sex songs—a presentation that differentiated them from the more *serious artist* approach of the era's mainstream rock bands. KISS didn't take themselves too seriously: they wore make-up, spit blood, smashed guitars, and blew shit up—which appealed to teenagers, but they took themselves *seriously enough* that no one felt embarrassed wearing a KISS t-shirt. KISS managed this delicate balance with an intuitive sense of grace and aplomb. The band served as a hyper-realized glimpse into the kind of adulthood a sexually frustrated teenage boy idealized—personified decadence—while serving as the same marker for kids having teenage day dreams of girls and cars.

KISS initially managed existing as something kids wanted to like while not compromising their rough edges for the *sake of kids*—a delicate balance that Gene Simmons *did not understand*, and by the end of the decade KISS had softened their image with a toothless radio-friendly sound. Their flashy costumes better fit a Vegas stage show, they had a TV movie depicting them as cornball superheroes and a Marvel comic book (made with “real KISS blood” in the red ink) with enough cheap merch to stuff every stocking for the 1978 Christmas season. Their *Dynasty* (1979) tour was attended by families like it was the circus and KISS had even planned a traveling amusement park (“KISS World”).

A cold, rational adult would assume that appealing to children makes a product already successful with children even more successful... except that isn't how it works. People choose the media they engage with most for how it make them feel about themselves; how they *want to feel* about themselves. Media products are enjoyable because they lay the foundation for a desired identity. Media iconography can replace undesirable parts of the self with a more desirable fantasy: sex and power. When a teenager begins seeking music to identify with, the actual music—

the sonics blasting from the speakers— is only *part* of the equation. The teenager wants an image template to copy-and-paste over themselves and get lost in.

A teenager in the mid-1990s did not want to emulate the effeminate, lovesick Billie Joe Armstrong, nor did they want to identify with the *punk rock for kids* Green Day.

They wanted something harder.

Her name was Christine and she scribbled her phone number on a tiny piece of ripped out notebook paper before getting off the school bus. She said we needed to talk; specifically to *talk privately*. I was to call her later. This was the first time a girl had wanted to talk to me; intentionally sought me for conversation; appreciated my emerging wit and occasional humor. She had liked me: to an unknowable degree, I conceded, but liked me to *some degree*, I was certain. I had landed a solid right jab and was setting things up for a big left hook. I held the piece of ripped out notebook paper in my hand and examined the writing on it: carefree and airy; the distinctly female bubbled letters of her name; the digits of her phone number, which I quickly memorized. I thought about the conversation immediately preceding her decision that privacy was a necessity for further interaction. The words I said: sentences structured in the correct order, words punched in at an admirable pace with a pleasing inflection. I had done something right, this much was clear, and I had gotten to the next screen of the game— with a quick uppercut I put Glass Joe on his back and I was on to Von Kaiser. Momentum reverberating through my body; finally on a winning streak; finally ready to conquer the world.

I thought about that phone call for the rest of the day.

The most memorable day of my childhood was one where I went to Toys R Us with my mother and grandmother; I was able to pick out two toys. This was momentous for reasons that shouldn't need explaining. I decided my best plan of attack was to get both a physical toy (an *action figure* as toy industry marketers had put it; a *doll* according to my grandmother) and a video game.

I had been obsessed with video games since my father brought home a Sears Video Arcade II, an Atari 2600 clone sold through Sears, one night in 1984, very likely on bargain basement clearance after the video game crash of 1983. He had bought with it an arcade's worth of Atari games. The Atari 2600 provided an experience like nothing else at the time (with the exception, of course, of its imitators). No longer was the television a one-way experience; the television could be interactive; the cold, alienating static of the television's empty channel three had found new purpose. These experiences were primitive. The Atari relied on the player's imagination more than it did technological wonder; it was up to the player to imagine the square blocks littering the screen as heroes and monsters. The player's imagination was an explicit component of the Atari's magic— it wasn't about *what* you were seeing but *how* you wanted to see it.

Seeing commercials for the Nintendo Entertainment System, embedded in Saturday morning cartoons, was a transformative experience at five years old; it was mystifying and important for reasons that were immediate and felt urgent. The initial release of the Nintendo Entertainment System came packaged with a physical robot that (somehow) interacted with the television, and a *light gun* that was used to (somehow) shoot graphics on screen in a self-explanatory game called *Duck Hunt* (1985). By that point, I had been to enough roller-rink birthday parties to have become well acquainted with their meager roller-rink arcade. I was in love with the dual screen experience of *Punch Out* (1984), the gorgeous vector graphics of *Star Wars* (1983), and the frustratingly addictive handlebar controls of *Paperboy* (1985). Even at five years old, I understood that these were *luxury experiences* not able to be replicated in the home... until I saw commercials for the Nintendo Entertainment System and was introduced to ROB— something that *didn't exist* in the arcade. The ads featuring ROB were evasive in their presentation. Like the gorgeous Atari box art, they were meant to ignite the imagination with possibility rather than deliver concrete details— discoveries left to be made by the daring. ROB moved and shifted as commands were entered, the television reflected in its dead eyes.

I probably played *Gyromite* (1985) properly once on Christmas morning. ROB moved at a glacial pace, even for a world that wouldn't know the slowest of dial-up Internet connections for another decade. ROB was a slog to set up; playing *Gyromite* wasn't fun. *Duck Hunt* was only slightly better— the gun was accurate and the game was responsive— but by the time any player figures out that they can't shoot the dog, *Duck Hunt* has run its course. Of course, the pack-in games weren't the point, they existed to get the NES on store shelves and in living rooms. What I got was a tech-demo: a *proof of concept*.

Within the same week my father took me back to Toys R Us and we came home with *Kung-Fu* (1985), a game that impressed us with its side-scrolling arcade action. The only game I finished with my father, back when we still spent time together. Some of my fondest memories growing up, playing *Kung-Fu* in our living room. Sometimes people move on and go their separate ways even while still living in the same house.

But even beyond any Christmas or birthday, family vacation or school play, it was the trip to Toys R Us with my mother and grandmother, when I got to pick out two toys, that was the most memorable: I chose Optimus Prime and *Super Mario Bros.* (1985). I had been familiar with Optimus from having watched hundreds of hours of *Transformers* (1984), one of the decade's iconic Saturday morning cartoons alongside *G.I. Joe: A Real American Hero* (1983) and *He-Man and the Masters of the Universe* (1983). Any kid exposed to even a meager few minutes of *Transformers* will walk away wanting to own the iconic Optimus Prime— the metallic embodiment of masculinity. With the disguised robot in hand, I perused Nintendo's black box collection, inspecting screen shots with a critical eye, already reeling from mistakes made; misguided choices and game paks collecting dust.

Donkey Kong Jr. Math (1986) had seemed like a worthy compromise for a mom reluctant to buy a new game on a non-holiday. It had math in the title; it was part of the "Education Series." It was a *math game* and *game* was half of that equation. A math game— it had to be enjoyable; *edutainment*; fun while learning. It was none of these things. I had another misfire with *Wrecking Crew* (1985), a puzzle game disguised as an action game and *Donkey Kong* (1986)— an arcade classic, and an admirable NES port... but one that didn't land with me at six-years-old.

The future sometimes will have a gravity that can be felt in the present. When something looms largely enough, something world changing, its shockwaves are felt in *reverse*. Static, single screen games; games whose only goal was an accumulation of points, bragging rights for the loveless, were rendered obsolete even before their replacement had been fully realized. The video game industry crashed in 1983; video games were considered a passing fad. These static, single screen games had gone out of style for a few different reasons, but partially because the next step in gaming evolution— the screeching monolith surrounded by howling apes— was so momentous that it had produced its own gravitational pull. I believe it were these forces that drew me to *Super Mario Bros.* that night at Toys R Us, with my mother and grandmother, where I was able to pick out two toys. The most memorable day of my childhood; the night that changed my perception of everything that came before and after.

And the events that unfolded that night, in my living room with Optimus Prime and my father by my side— one last ride for the old boys— blew my mind and altered my worldview.

Even if the second level of *Super Mario Bros.*, World 1-2, had played things straight: a stompy, jumpy, left-to-right romp through the underground; another stop in the Mushroom Kingdom, with its fiery dungeons and icy excursions, *Super Mario Bros.* would still be an innovative and genre defining game with glass cuttingly responsive physics. Only *Super Mario Bros.* aspired to be *more* than that for the adventurous player: the hidden beauty of *Super Mario Bros.* wasn't in its action but its component of *exploration*— something so woven into the fabric of the game that even the *concept itself* was left for the player to discover. *Super Mario Bros.* introduced players to the side-scrolling, stompy, jumpy platforming action game in its very first level— functionally an in-game tutorial— and then subverted the player's expectations in the very next.

That night I experienced the single greatest moment I've had playing video games, in World 1-2 of *Super Mario Bros.*, with my father by my side and Optimus Prime in my lap, in his undisguised robot form; his unwavering metallic masculinity providing symbolic support. I understood the objectives and mechanics of the game, the rock breaking abilities Mario gained in his advanced form as I jumped and stomped from left-to-right, appreciating the

soundtrack and atmosphere of the underground, when it occurred to me that Super Mario could jump his way to the top of the screen, to where the score and statistical information is kept, beyond the game's presumed parameters of play... and only on the second level of his adventure; only with your keen eye and ingenuity.

The most exciting moments of a video game carry the illusion of the experience being unique to the player— that these moments were not meticulously written and programmed; that every inch of digital space hasn't been documented and accounted for; that every moment you've had in every game you've played, every movement and every outcome, hasn't been lived a thousand times over. The most exciting moments of a video game feel alive. Similar to feeling emotionally connected to words on a page, a character made entirely of language, if this illusion is flawlessly executed, a video game transcends the mundane and achieves the beautiful; *true immersion*; when the exploration feels real; when the experience feels unique.

If I close my eyes and allow myself to re-experience that moment, I can still feel an echo of what I felt watching Mario run across the top of the screen into the unknown. I felt a little tiny fraction of what it must have felt like to sail the *darkened seas*, on a great big *clipper ship*, going from *this land here to that*; head buzzing; fear and ecstasy; freedom; *immersion*— running top speed, left-to-right, into the unknown; into nothing. All these twisted feelings on just the second level of a game that didn't need to *go there*; that could have played things straight with a stompy, jumpy, left-to-right romp through the Mushroom Kingdom and you would have never known the difference. This was Miyamoto's true master stroke.

I thought about that phone call for the rest of the day. I had done something right on the school bus, and whatever it was needed to be replicated with refinement. I had made it past the first level— functionally an in-game tutorial— and internalized the basic fundamentals. I had dodged Glass Joe's glacially slow haymaker with grace and aplomb, peppering him with counterpunch lefts and rights; a start button uppercut, used at the exact right moment, had put him on his back. Now I was on to my first real challenge: a *private phone call* with a girl who knew what I looked like, who had gotten a taste of my personality and demanded more. I had to rise to this occasion and smash through to a first date proposition— given at the exact right moment— to put Christine on her back. Slowly and methodically, I needed to reverse-engineer a perfect moment; to take from my surroundings what was needed and make of it something more.

Standing in my garage, where I would host many high school phone calls to come, clutching my family's portable phone, I imagined Doc Louis rubbing my shoulders and giving me last minute advice: stick and move, kid, *stick and move*. With confidence, and from memory, I dialed Christine's phone number.

She told me that she knew I liked Green Day, and she liked that we had that in common. Even if Green Day were still a year away from their dubious *punk rock for kids* reputation, I still didn't want to be known as the kind of guy whose favorite band was Green Day. At fourteen years old, this seemed important for reasons that seem less important now.

Green Day, although producing two much better albums before their breakthrough *Dookie*, 39/*Smooth* (1990) and *Kerplunk* (1991), weren't cool in the way I wanted to be perceived as being cool. Billie Joe sung whiny songs longing for female attention- songs with titles like "Why Do You Want Him?" and "Don't Leave Me," told from the perspective of a socially awkward, nervous and lonely boy whose only desire is female acceptance; who would sit "At The Library" while *staring across the room* and hoping that the object of his unrequited affection would be *leaving soon*, acknowledging that he *just needs a little time*— that he's too much of a loser to even talk to her! That he couldn't figure out how to structure his sentences in the correct order or punch-in words at an admirable pace with a pleasing inflection. That he was stuck on the first screen of the game, suffering Glass Joe's french heckling; now you know who the 1 in his 1-99 record was and it's loser Billie Joe Armstrong, who *can't even talk to girls*, much less get their phone numbers. Much less be standing in the garage, at 7:30 pm on a school night, imaging Doc Louis in his corner, mixing it up with a real, live girl.

I didn't want to be known as the kind of guy whose favorite band was Green Day.

I wanted to be known as the kind of guy whose favorite band was The Misfits. I had bought my first Misfits CD just a year prior after encountering Metallica's rendition of "Last Caress" on their *Live Shit: Binge and Purge* (1993) box set, and the Guns n' Roses version of "Attitude" on their *The Spaghetti Incident?* (1993) cover album. These songs were like nothing I had heard before—hard driving guitars and *no wasted moments*; no frills— they got to the point with purpose and blasted out melodies in the chorus. I knew I needed more, and when I learned that The Misfits were Glenn Danzig's first band— I had just become familiar with Danzig through his MTV hit "Mother" and already had several of his solo albums— their self-titled collection, *Misfits* (1986), was an easy buy with my allowance money on a weekend trip to Tower Records.

You never forget the moments you fall in love. These precious moments, when excised and distilled, run only in fragmented seconds; milliseconds so intense they last a thousand hours in time-dilated alternate dimensions. Two-thousand light years away, these are the moments that stay for a lifetime; these moments that no one knows but you.

When "Bullet" hit my discman, on the way to my grandmother's on Christmas Eve, I fell in love with The Misfits. This love, like a spear impaling a lightning bolt, rocketed through my body with vicious immediacy. "Bullet," track three on their self-titled collection, *Misfits*, was like nothing I had heard before. What starts as a poem about the Kennedy assassination shouted over an obliterating bassline in the sonic foreground ends as a sex fantasy about Jacqueline Kennedy masturbating Glenn and licking his semen off her hands. There is no chorus; there is no interlude or reprieve— "Bullet" is a brutal straight line of sex and death which would become a recurring theme of Danzig's work. I probably listened to "Bullet" thirty times in a row thinking I had found the band's standout track... and when I finally got to the rest of the album, I don't think I listened to anything else for an entire month.

A staple of the 1980's suburban experience was the outlaw independent video store— existing at a time before the rules were written. Before video rentals were commodified and sanitized by corporations like Blockbuster and Hollywood Video, the independent video store was the wild west of media distribution— a strip mall experience that seemed *dangerous*. Where you could rent Disney Afternoon cartoons alongside low-budget porn movies, clamshell boxes sitting within twenty feet of one another. NES games and pro-wrestling tapes; summer blockbusters and off-label snuff movies— all at the same time, all at the same store. A kid on a Friday night could walk out with *Batman* (1989), *Super Mario Bros. 2* (1988), and *Wrestlemania V* (1989) and have the greatest weekend of his life. But even if the independent video store was a haven for children's entertainment— after a certain age, children don't want to feel like children.

I wanted something harder, and even if my parents strictly forbade me from renting anything that was a puppy's sneeze above PG-13, my attention would inevitably drift to the store's horror section regardless. As much as I had yearned for the brutal sequences contained on the actual tapes— just as I had yearned for Suzanne Sommers' bouncing, braless tits while watching *Three's Company* (1977) reruns— the movies' unattainability became secondary to their VHS box art which had lit my imagination ablaze with impromptu, on-the-spot fan fiction inspired by images like the knife impaling Jason Voorhees's bleeding hockey mask or a scowling, decisively humorless Freddy Krueger peering around a corner in hell. The terrifying, scalpel wielding, black eyed surgeon on the clamshell of *Faces of Death: Part II* (1981), a movie so intense that it carried *several* warning labels. I studied these boxes with a silent art gallery-like etiquette.

The video store felt real in a way that the television did not. Real in a way that even premium cable channels, with their after hours, R-rated dalliances did not. The video store had a grime to it. The video store spoke to the *hidden adult world*; the degenerate and depraved adult world. The hidden adult world that adults lie to kids about. The hidden adult world that maybe adults lie to themselves about being part of. The outlaw independent video store was a kid's first experience with the darker, degeneracies of reality and it was mesmerizing... and once I became old enough to start renting those tapes, from bloodbath slashers, to black-and-white monster movies, to Egyptian blood feasts, I was hooked and never looked back.

I wanted Christine to know that The Misfits wrote songs about cool, old horror movies. I was the kind of guy whose

favorite band was The Misfits, not Green Day. Not whiny, loveless Billie Joe Armstrong but Glenn Danzig and his cryptic old band— so cloaked in mystery that even Henry Rollins had thought they “only play on Halloween.” I wanted her to know that Glenn was just like me, so obsessed with those old movies that he’d make transformative art in their name— like “Horror Business” which juxtaposes the movie *Psycho* (1960) with Sid Vicious stabbing his girlfriend to death in a motel bathroom— reality replicating fiction— or imagining New York City’s heroin addicted homeless as real life zombies in “Night of the Living Dead”— understanding reality through the lens of fiction. Through the lens of horror; through the lens of fantasy; through the dead eye of the television.

Glenn Danzig understood that the line between reality and fantasy in the age of mass media was difficult to decipher, which was the focus of The Misfits’ first album, Danzig’s magnum opus, *Static Age* (1997)— an album so thematically coherent that it may as well be considered a concept album: we are living in the “static age”; we understand reality through the lens of media. “Bullet,” the song that captured my heart, was recorded for the *Static Age* album and finds its context there. John F. Kennedy, with his Hollywood good looks and Camelot mythology, was the first *TV president*: his existence blurred the line between reality and fantasy; Hollywood and politics. His affair with Marilyn Monroe further blurred that line. Reality became theater; the dead eye of the television and the name of God spoken in equal measure. Kennedy had as cinematic an end to his presidency as it gets; as if it were written for the movies; covered to death by the media.

Lest you think “Bullet” is too crass— that poor, widowed Jackie Kennedy didn’t deserve the whore treatment— Glenn reminds us in the very next song, “Theme For a Jackal,” that the Kennedys are cannibalistic pieces of shit: even poor Jackie, who managed to find herself a millionaire in the wake of Camelot’s burning. “Theme for a Jackal,” about Ted Kennedy killing a woman in a drunk driving accident. After driving his car off a bridge, lazy Ted went back to his hotel room for dry clothes before turning in for the night— he reported his victim missing the next day. Something that could wait: big Teddy needed to *sleep it off* and knew that the Kennedy’s had been anointed American royalty because the television said so. What’s one more body added to the count, especially after they got Marilyn— another indictment made against the Kennedys in the band’s “Who Killed Marilyn?” and maybe one Glenn took personally. *The Misfits* (1961), of course, was Monroe’s final film.

I wanted Christine to know that The Misfits weren’t just writing songs about old horror movies, they were writing songs about *me*. To understand The Misfits is to understand that Glenn’s songs were written from a *first person point-of-view*. Most of Glenn’s songs were about growing up. “Teenagers From Mars” wasn’t actually about *Teenagers from Outer Space* (1959) but more like the the notebook scribbles of a horny sixteen year old in math class; a power fantasy written by the powerless. The only thing “Where Eagles Dare” had in common with *Where Eagles Dare* (1968) was the title— the song was really about rejection and sexual frustration. That “Astro Zombies” wasn’t about *The Astro-Zombies* (1968), but Glenn’s anger. That, like the evil Dr. DeMarco, Glenn wanted to “exterminate: this whole fuckin’ place...”

I wanted Christine to know that The Misfits weren’t just writing songs about horror movies, they were writing songs about being a teenager, and everything that came with it— every bit pain and fleeting triumph, every desire and every day dream; The Misfits were really writing songs about you. This was Glenn Danzig’s true master stroke.

I wanted Christine to know these things about me. That I like thinking about art; true art; suburban art; underground art; punk rock art. That I’m Super Mario, at the top of the screen, courageously running top speed into the unknown; into the dark corner of the video store, exploring drive-in splatter fests on VHS. That I had access to layers of reality— hidden reality, teenage reality, adult reality— reality that kids didn’t know about. That I could show her these things, both beautiful and dark; that our future had a gravity felt in our present; omnipresent forces pulling us together. Stick and move, kid, *stick and move*— about to knock out Von Kaiser on my way to Piston Honda; *we’ll take your weak resistance and throw it in your face*; momentum reverberating through my body; *we need no introduction for mass annihilation*.

I finally had the master sword; finally ready to conquer the world.

She told me that she knew I was going to the Green Day concert and was wondering if I could help her find tickets.

She had been looking everywhere because the guy she liked wanted to go. He was tall and older, she told me. She thought maybe they could go together. Maybe it could be a first date.

At some point between getting that piece of ripped out notebook paper and this very moment there had been a critical miscalculation. Clumsy and overconfident, I had gotten caught. Having mistimed Glass Joe's glacially slow haymaker, I was hit hard; head slumped, hands down. Doc Louis no where to be found. Up against the ropes, I scrambled for a next move; scrambled for a movie or TV show that had mapped out this exact situation, with exactly the right thing to say. There had to be a strategy guide or Nintendo code; there had to be an exact right move to make. A way to interface with the algorithm; process the data being given and write new code, in real time. The right words to say: sentences structured in the correct order; punching words in at an admirable pace with a pleasing inflection. What did Jack Tripper say when he wanted to get Chrissy in bed, fucking the shit out of Suzzane Sommers' bouncing, braless tits?

I told her I didn't know anyone who had extra tickets. She said that it was okay. That she'd keep looking. She hoped it works out, she told me. She really liked him.

I scrambled for something to say through pauses awkward even in their brevity; eating shots; gloves dangling; mouth agape.

I wished her luck and we hung up.

I ain't no Godamn, son of a bitch!

Why did she want him?

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WELCOME TO HELL

Touching the Face of God

Billy Pratt · 17 June 2023 · Archived copy · Original

"Sometimes the only thing we counted on when no one else was there"

Crying at the end of *Fraggle Rock* (1983) is one of my three earliest memories. I would watch in my parents' bedroom. It was on at night. I loved feeling ensconced in the Fraggles' world; I wanted to get lost in their winding caves. For an only child going to a school outside of the neighborhood, weekday afternoon friends were non-existent; The Fraggles are what felt real to me. At the end of every episode, I wouldn't want to go to bed. I didn't want to leave the Fraggles. I knew I would fall asleep contemplating the death of my parents. It was a long time from now, they would tell me. They were right. While the latter was always subsequent to the former, these events seemed unrelated. Maybe I didn't understand the pacing and structure of proper story telling; that a television show had a beginning, middle, and end; that the escapism of fantasy isn't meant to last.

As a child these events seemed unrelated but now they feel inseparable. Telling one story must involve telling the other.

What I liked about *Fraggle Rock* was that I could make it my own. The characters didn't live in the TV, in their fictitious winding caves, they lived in my head. They lived in my house: my mother, the ever-diligent, busy body Doozer; my father, the hulking, intimidating Gorg. My best friend, Chrissy, with her snow colored hair and icy blue eyes, was my Blonde Fraggles as we spent our Saturday afternoons exploring her cavernous basement. Our adventures were more important than what was on the television; our adventures with the Fraggles and the Muppets, and He-Man and She-Ra; fighting Darth Vader with cardboard tube light sabres; playing house in Fischer Price kitchens; having tea parties with Teddy Ruxpin and Grubby.

Fraggle Rock was Jim Henson's most ambitious idea. Henson wanted to take his puppeteering to the next level, reaching a broader audience with a lofty mission: Henson wanted to "save the world" with a simple, good natured TV show. He wanted his show to have an international, globe spanning reach. To accomplish this *Fraggle Rock* was a joint production between three separate countries— CBC Television in Canada, Television South in the United Kingdom, and America's very first premium cable network: Home Box Office.

HBO was its own ambitious idea. Prior to the network's launch in 1972— a full decade before the Videocassette Recorder (VCR) began mass adoption— a movie's original form was virtually forgotten once it left theaters. While some movies would eventually hit network television, they'd be cut up and censored with commercials for Swansons and Tide. HBO would show these movies uncensored and uninterrupted, along with live sporting events and concerts: all things that would have required a trip to the *box office* but could now be enjoyed from the comfort of one's *own home* for a flat monthly fee.

My father was enamored with HBO; he considered himself a *movie guy*. He bought an early model VCR and would record movies on six-hour-long VHS tapes with pencil-written labels displaying meticulous timecodes. I don't know if he ever managed to *watch* those tapes or if the tapes just served as cover for his secret pornography collection. Pornography was actually the premier driver of VCR sales in America— prior to this, porno movies could only be seen in filthy theaters with masturbating audience members. This created a *Sophie's Choice* (1982)-like scenario for the average heterosexual man interested in sleaze. The advent of the VCR solved this problem and made pornography accessible to the aspiring degenerate. The porno theater was left to those unable to afford modern tech cohabitating with enthusiastic public masturbators. Luckily, my father did not fall into either of these categories to the best of my knowledge.

All of my first experiences with nudity came from HBO. Came from sneaking down to the family room in the middle of the night and using our cable provider's awesome, wired, keyboard remote control— a commanders remote control; Captain Kirk's remote control, surfing cable television with authority on the bridge of the Enterprise in his La-Z-Boy recliner and finding HBO.

The channel had been aware of the rise of pornography and committed their broadcasting array to be *family friendly*... well, mostly. HBO would not air R-rated movies before 8 PM, and they banned any movie with an X-rating. Still, they were battling for movie channel supremacy with networks who didn't commit to such restrictive policies. Showtime would show R-rated movies all day long; Cinemax became known for cheaply made erotica. Playboy magazine would eventually launch a cable channel dedicated exclusively to soft-core porn and heavily edited hardcore (edited per 90's era FCC regulations: all shots of genitals were removed, rendering it merely OOH and AHH facial reaction shots). HBO had painted themselves into a moralistic corner.

But like all things both corporate and moralistic, they managed to find a suitable workaround that rendered their posturing superficial. HBO would air *late night content* with tons of naked boobs. These movies would typically have thin plots and poorly executed comedy, but even one pair of big ass 80's boobs made your ninety minutes well spent. I remember commandeering the giant remote, guiding our impressive 32" Zenith to HBO, and finally seeing what Suzanne Sommers had been hiding under her tight, braless, spandex shirt. From that day forward, I have literally never stopped thinking about boobs.

Especially after rifling through my father's meticulously curated movie collection, with its pencil-written labels and time codes. I was looking for *Superman II (1980)*, the third movie recorded on a six-hour Kodak brand VHS (Kodak used as a means of ensuring quality— after all, my dad was a *movie guy*). To get to the end of the tape, I had to fast-forward through something called *Blame It on Rio (1984)*— what I can only assume was Hollywood's answer to the rising popularity of porn.

Blame it on Rio was, for all intents and purposes, a porno movie without the penetration. Where Michael Caine is seduced by his friend's gorgeous teenage daughter, whose perfect tits are on display throughout the film more times than anyone is bothering to count. The friend ends up okay with the whole thing because it's revealed that he's been having an off-camera affair with Michael Caine's wife, completing the ninety minutes of middle-aged boomer dad wish fulfillment. HBO loved this kind of sham content used as a workaround to their anti-porn policy. To a horny kid, *Blame it on Rio* was a helluva find in their dad's movie library. *Kneel before boobs*. I don't think I ever made it to *Superman II*. Certainly not during my latch-key kid era, where I'd pop *Blame It on Rio* into the old Panasonic during *Disney Afternoon (1990)* ad breaks.

The dawn of the decade had brought with it a completely immersive, highly-addictive Candyland consumer pop culture met with the unprecedented accessibility of sexually explicit material... if you knew where to look. If you had the tools of the trade: a VCR and a cable TV subscription. All it took was a little bit of luck and determination. *Raiders of the Lost Ark (1981)*, only you're exploring your basement for a dusty old copy of *Playboy*. Scanning through your dad's VHS collection with the patience and detail orientation of a forensic scientist. Hoping that *Just One of the Guys (1985)* would be showing on HBO— ready to hit record; ready to catch a shooting star.

Time alone was meant for *Disney Adventures (1990)*; for cartoon friends and jerking off; Nintendo games and naked tits. As a child these things seemed unrelated but they now feel inseparable. These are the things that shaped a generation of men.

Telling one story must involve telling the other.

The United States peaked during Ronald Reagan's second presidential campaign with his aspirationally beautiful, gorgeously cinematic campaign television commercial that led with the words: "it's morning again in America." The Morning Again in America ad featured average Americans, of differing age and social class, partaking in a variety of activities that would typically take place during an average morning in America. We see a man in a city exiting a taxi, holding a briefcase, ready to attend his corporate office job. He has a full head of robust hair. He's young and virile. Maybe single, but he's on the upswing and climbing the ladder. It's fair to assume he finds tremendous content in his fair pay met with trustworthy job security; his hopeful future.

We see a farmer turning his tractor to the left while looking to the right. This shot is important because it makes

farming look high action and fun. The viewer, presumably not a farmer, may take a moment to think: what a nice life. We understand the farmer may be earning a leaner income than the corporate office guy, but we also understand that he is *no less content*.

Caught in a single shot and masterfully framed, we see a paperboy making his morning deliveries while riding a bicycle and a middle aged man leaving his modest suburban homestead, dressed in a business suit and holding a briefcase. This man is older and balding. We can assume he's happily married, with kids and maybe a dog. We see him getting into the *passenger side* of a station wagon. He greets the driver with a wave before opening the door. He's carpooling, presumably with a friend. The viewer understands that people in America *have friends*. Since his friend is driving a family truckster, we can assume the friend also has a family. People with family and friends are content.

In the next shot, we see another station wagon pull up to a colonial house. This car is arriving, not departing, communicating to the viewer that while many Americans go to work in the morning other Americans do *other things*. The station wagon has a small trailer hitched to the back of it; we understand that this American *has something to do*. We see a man with graying hair— a young grandfather— and a little boy, presumably his grandson, each carrying an end of a nice looking rug. The grandfather couldn't have carried the rug on his own; he needed the help of his grandson. We assume this little boy will grow up to be a hard working American and may, at some point, take a moment to reflect on having internalized a sense of grit and perseverance during this shared morning with his grandfather. They pass a gorgeous rose bush on the way into the grandfather's equally gorgeous colonial house. This man has retired to prosperity with a variety of hobbies that are personally fulfilling. This man is content.

We see a grandmother attending the wedding of her grand daughter. After the newly married couple leave the church to excitement and well-wishes, the grandmother and grand daughter embrace— this is the greatest morning of their lives. Immediately following the embrace, we see a shot of the White House at dawn and a montage of American flags being raised around the country: one outside a log cabin at a national park, another raised by a firefighter at a fire station, and finally a different grandpa raising the flag outside of his home. The juxtaposition of the embrace met with the American flag implies causation; these events are inseparable. Telling one story must involve telling the other

"Morning Again in America" is the single greatest presidential campaign ad, made at a time when the living room TV was the central component of any American household; Ronald Reagan was the ultimate TV president.

Elected at the dawn of the decade, Reagan felt like John F. Kennedy's final form. While Kennedy had been the first *television friendly* politician, Reagan was an actual Hollywood star. His greatest strengths were his looks and charm: his screen ready presence; his ability to deliver lines with a stirring grace. Embodying the Platonic form of the ideal grandfather, Reagan's presentation was kind but firm; masculinity tempered with a childlike wonder. Ronald Reagan most loved freedom, space shuttles, jellybeans, and big, corporate capitalism.

On January 28, 1986, six years deep into Reagan's gorgeous cinematic presidency, every school aged child in the country watched the space shuttle Challenger explode live on TV. On bulky televisions strapped to push-carts in elementary school gymnasiums with concerned teachers scurrying to cut the power, hoping to erase the prior 73 seconds from existence, but it was President Reagan later that night who properly contextualized the event. He addressed the school children watching directly, addressing *me* directly, conceding that sometimes "painful things like this happen," and that it's all "part of the process of exploration and discovery." The doomed mission was "taking a chance and expanding man's horizons." He concluded: "the future doesn't belong to the fainthearted; it belongs to the brave."

Reagan had a sincerity foreign those who succeeded him. He (seemed to) *believe* what he was saying while *delivering* what he said with perfection. Reagan's (theoretical) sincerity served as an invisible foundation for that delivery; it carried immeasurable emotional weight. When understood as the living embodiment of everything America was meant to symbolize, only with the big budget grandiosity of a Hollywood summer blockbuster, Ronald

Reagan was the greatest president we will ever have.

Over five-hundred years after the advent of the printing press, it was Reagan's love of big corporate capitalism that truly birthed the modern world. Reagan wanted to author a new America made from the ground up, shaped in his own vision with a free market guided by his own sense of morality. Reagan felt it important that corporations market products directly to children and thus relaxed FCC regulations on advertising during children's television programming.

It was now, during Reagan's *Saturday morning in America*, that cartoons could serve as commercials; that commercials could appear like cartoons. It was this hallucinogenic blend of content and advertising— no lines drawn distinguishing the two— that created a myriad of beloved animated franchises. Cheaply made syndicated TV episodes interwoven with toy commercials serving as explicit markers pointing directly toward Toys “R” Us store shelves. It was this manipulative corporate synergy that drove the last great bastion of imaginative fantasy world building— the worldbuilding of modernity.

The creativity driven by corporations hungry to capture the emerging “Barbie dolls for boys” market ended up creating some tremendously cool shit. Taking the lead from Kenner's phenomenally successful line of *Star Wars* (1977) toys, Mattel wanted its own franchise but one that *didn't need* a license; one they could *own* themselves and thus created He-Man, Skeletor and the fantasy world of Eternia. Hasbro wanted a two-in-one toy line: robots that could double as vehicles. They bought the rights to a line of Japanese toys that did just that and hired Marvel to write characters and back stories and thus the *Transformers* (1984) were born. The year prior, Hasbro relaunched its clunky, outdated G.I. Joe line as pocket-sized 3.75-inch figures. They were perfectly scaled for the imaginative child to battle their *Star Wars* toys with, which was a clever selling point, but it was the realization that the Joes needed a perennial in-universe antagonist that created Cobra, and with the iconic villain *G.I. Joe: A Real American Hero* (1983) took on a life of its own.

Reagan's vision of a perfect world was one that commercially exploited children. This created a highly addictive, hyper-realized consumer culture; kids crushing up breakfast cereal marshmallows under Disney dollars and doing lines with Sour Punch straws. Everything was commodifiable; everything a new impulse and desire. One couldn't simply watch He-Man without wanting to hold Skeletor. One couldn't see the dramatic first appearance of the Dinobots in “S.O.S Dinobots” (s01e07) without demanding a trip to Toys “R” Us to see the lifeless, scaled down, plastic molds in person. Even if *you knew* your parents weren't going to let you take one home, you still needed to *see them*. Study their beautifully designed cardboard boxes with a silent, art gallery-like etiquette. There were no words adequate enough to capture the excitement you felt the day your mail-away hooded Cobra Commander came after eight long weeks— an eternity for a six-year-old. You could never own just one of the Constructicons: you needed fucking Devestator.

We wanted what we saw on television; we wanted these things *because* we saw them on television. What we saw on television became our framework for understanding the world around us: all things made equal when presented as content attached to tiny snippets of a never ending prize catalog. We saw life as a series of consumer choices. These consumer choices, when in combination, created the people whom we became; our media interests and product loyalty made us unique.

We understood our future as a predestined path unfolding slowly with each gradual marker of progress— going to college and getting laid; starting a career and getting married; buying a house and having a family— as check points built into the game. An open world for us to explore, and enjoy, and get lost in its winding caves; a sandbox experience with quests we could conquer at our leisure. Life was a *Choose Your Own Adventure* (1979) novel with a multitude of endings and all of them were happy.

The darkness outside my living room window is my second earliest memory. How the streetlights reflected off the pavement. The desolation of a suburban street after dark. I would wait by the window for what felt like a

thousand lifetimes. Alone with my stuffed beagle, whom I named Barkey, not because *dogs bark* but because I couldn't properly pronounce Barkley, the shaggy dog on *Sesame Street* (1969), and I'd wear out the retail tag, the one you're not suppose to remove under threat of imprisonment, by running it through the crease between my index and middle fingers as a way of self-soothing. If I give this memory enough space, I can still feel little bits and pieces of it.

The earliest memories are like fuzzy still images. Copies of copies, with each remembrance, and the years in between, chipping away at the picture's resolution until all that's left are the feelings attached. Evasive feelings buried deep enough to be out of reach and too distant to reckon; to find the right words to capture. Ghosts that dwell and haunt for a lifetime. The darkness outside my living room window, waiting for my mother to come home—hoping that my mother would come home. The dread I felt, in my bones and on my chest. It was a long time from now, they would tell me.

My father would be passed out, unconscious, from having taken swigs of vodka from a hidden bottle in the garage since the early afternoon. Everything came down on the two of them, at the same time, shortly after moving to the suburbs and having their first, and only, child. My father was fired from his big city sales manager position. He would sometimes remind me he ran the “biggest office of a Fortune 200 company” when he was drunk and feeling sorry for himself. This rendered all of his *Salesman of the Year* awards, which he hung over his workbench in our basement during the tiny sliver of the Venn diagram that included both home ownership and prestigious employment, as painful reminders of what *could have* and *should have* been for all of us. From that point forward, we were on the shit end of an alternate 1985 without a flying Delorean to make things right.

My father became someone else when he was drunk. Someone I never got to know. Someone I never wanted to know. Someone I hated with every bit of myself for possessing the person I had known as my father. Someone I felt such a deep sadness for that once I acknowledged the feeling and allowed space for it to dwell, it would haunt for a lifetime.

At four years old, the darkness of the house felt encompassing; the size of the house, incomprehensible. The night would feel as though it could stretch out into infinity with each passing hour serving as a significant portion of my life. I never felt more alone than in these moments. It was a long time from now, they would tell me.

It was on one of my *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (1984) basement expeditions that I came across a newspaper article that my father had clipped; he was in the inset photograph with a proud, goofy smile. He was featured as a *man on the street* for a filler column where reporters asked random people random questions. My father was asked what he thought made for a *great marriage*. He answered, without hesitation, that a man should make his wife happy. In turn, he went on to explain, his wife would recognize and appreciate this gesture, and believing in the general spirit of reciprocity, go on to make *him happy*. In retrospect, he was probably making a blow job joke. My dad was that kind of guy. I'm not sure if he experienced any of the above first hand or if he was just spitballing. He had the newspaper clipping framed and it hung above his workbench in our basement beside his numerous *Salesman of the Year* awards. My dad was that kind of guy.

Just one year after I was born my mother was diagnosed with breast cancer. She survived with surgical intervention combined with long chemotherapy treatments. I am grateful for this every day of my life. Doctors told her that she couldn't have another child, so our family remained at three. As a child, I didn't know the difference nor would I have understood the profound scars that this ordeal left behind. As an adult, I know that my parents were not the same people after my mother had cancer. In a way, I've never really met my parents.

At night my mother would leave for work. She had a job at the photography studio at our local shopping mall where she'd sell overpriced photoshoot packages to gullible families. With her position she received an employee discount—awful, oversized pictures of me frozen smiled, staring at bubbles and toy trains adorned our living room for the next twenty years. My mother had pictures of me everywhere: in her bedroom, in my bedroom, in our family room. She loved me with a desperate intensity. After she left, I'd watch TV until it was dark, and my father was so thoroughly unconscious that he looked dead.

It was a long time from now.

Sitting by the living room window, with the street lights glaring off the empty street, and waiting for my mother to come home from the job she needed to keep our family alive, with my stuffed beagle, running the tag through the crease in my fingers, with thoughts of the Fraggles and the Muppets, and Christmas and Chrissy, and my mom and dad. The way I wanted them: safe and happy. All of us together, was probably my final thought for the night, by the window, as I was carried off into dreams.

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WELCOME TO HELL

Anthony

Billy Pratt · 23 July 2023 · Archived copy · Original

“These things, they go away; replaced by every day”

I ran into a coworker at the supermarket. A red hot needle poked discretely into the recess of my underarm—torture that is unseen; leaves no marks, so I can still function in a capacity productive to my employer. I intentionally go to a supermarket on the other side of town as to avoid this. I don’t want to be in *work mode* when I don’t have to be. I’m not very good at *work mode* in the social sense, and I disregard this character flaw with the half-excuse that bland social niceties are a feminine construct and there’s no good reason to excel at anything feminine. Leave me alone and let me do my job— which is something that usually works, in the context of the busybody work place, but falls apart when you run into a co-worker at the supermarket.

No one wants a real answer when they ask how you’re doing. It’s as boilerplate as reading the warnings on the inside of an instruction booklet for a brand new toaster or the 40,000 word Terms of Service bundled with an iPhone update. “Fine, great, and you?” will usually suffice when we’re at work and we all have our busybody things to do... but it’s when we have an unstructured minute to chat without such constraints that you suddenly have to improvise.

This insidious co-worker, how dare he stop at my supermarket, stood in front of the eggs while telling me about his summer— spending more time with his daughter and working on the house; *looking forward to the big vacation*. And you?

And you... well, me? I’m just hanging out. Low key summer. Spending time at the gym. Getting things in order. My father died, so there’s a lot to do.

There was a prolonged pause. I realized my folly with vicious immediacy. Not only did I provide my poor, unwitting coworker with a regretfully honest answer— I was never one to lie— but I mentioned the death of a parent while standing in front of the eggs at Whole Foods. His discomfort was tangible. I continued: it’s been a lot. You know it’s coming your entire life, but it happens so fast and then it’s over. The paperwork (my father made zero arrangements in the event of his death) and cleaning (nor did he ever throw anything away) is so overwhelming that you don’t really have time to process things. You don’t have time to grieve, and even if you did... what does that even look like? Besides, I need take care of my mother— she only has me, and before that, she only had us. She’s having a hard time with things.

I said maybe half of these things to my coworker standing in front of the eggs. I said these things in a dry tone that communicated matters of fact. In a social sense, this was my mistake, but this is what you don’t expect when dealing with the death of a parent. When thinking about it in horror, on those long sleepless nights. The nightmares you’d have about it, as an only child with abandonment issues. You fear abandonment but you expect the world to fail you— the result of growing up with parents who had profound, life defining problems. You fear their abandonment while you become their protector; guilt and sadness define your relationship— you’re Bruce Wayne picking over the events of *that night* in obsessive detail.

I said these things in a dry tone that communicated matters of fact because that’s what these things become. It becomes a fact that your father died and you have to grit your teeth and fucking deal with it. I didn’t feel the need for a gentle showing of performative emotion nor did I want to use a euphemism. My father died. He’s *my* father and he *died*.

The first time I used those words, at first only through text, staring at them before hitting send: *my father’s going to die*, sitting three feet from his hospital bed... his sedated husk with more tubes than I wanted to count, mouth agape with intubation leaving him with a static expression of horror— the moment of death still and prolonged. Staring at my text window through the blur of tears before hitting send. I didn’t want a euphemism because this is my life and my father and my father was going to die.

Something that becomes a matter of fact when it's over. After the priest says his last rites. Encourages you to say goodbye, what you thought was ridiculous five minutes prior, talking to someone who can't hear you, but with nudging... you tell him that you love him. That you knew about all the problems he had. That you understood. That you forgive him— you know he tried his best. You know he cared. I'm sorry, too. I'm sorry I didn't do more. I'm sorry I didn't do more to protect you from yourself. Maybe if I did, things would have been different for all of us... I promised to take care of Mom, and I will.

Holding my zip-up hoodie balled to my face— no matter how old you are, you're ten years old watching your father die. The staff instruct us to leave the room. They draw a curtain. They offer a refreshment cart, out of place in an ICU but has got to be some kind of end-of-life grief protocol for families. It's grounding— a reality check, maybe. Reminds you that you're alive and life is about to go on. Things are about to get *matter of fact*.

They invite us back into the room— my father, now relieved of his tubes; mouth closed; quiet expression. We stand by his side. They instruct us to hold his hands. My mother takes his hand. When did I ever hold his hand? Men don't hold hands. When my dog was sick, my dad knew what had to be done, and he loved that fucking dog. Men know when *its time* and they do the *right thing* for each other and now it was my *fucking turn*, and that's what this was: "your turn now, my turn later." A matter of fact because it has to be; a matter of fact because maybe it's easier to deal with that way.

A matter of fact that part of an only child dies with each parent; a life that only you both could know— that no one else could understand. This is why Bruce Wayne goes out at night; this is why I sit at a keyboard. Part of me died with you that afternoon, Anthony. I promise I'll take care of Mom, and I will.

My coworker told me it was nice seeing me after picking out his eggs.

Said he hoped I enjoyed the rest of my summer.

Doreen

Billy Pratt · 20 November 2023 · Archived copy · Original

There wasn't a final conversation of any significance. She always supposed there should have been— something she could point to and decode and understand. Even if this made sense to her, she was ultimately glad there wasn't anything semi-cryptic or implicitly symbolic; any words she could pick over on sleepless nights, alone or with a different man next to her. She was glad their last day was like any other: he came home from work and was happy to see her; he greeted her with a smile and a hug; they made dinner together, occasionally laughing at different parts of their tiny arsenal of inside jokes built over six years. Pleasant conversation as they ate, recapping their respective work days. Couch and TV time after, chipping away at an old season of *Survivor*; progress forever frozen midway through the queue.

There wasn't anything worth picking over, but she thought about their last day a lot— even if it were just like all the other days.

Doreen had a date that night— a nice man who took her to a seafood restaurant. After a scan of the menu, she found the average price of entrees skewed toward what she would consider *fancy*. This provided her a particular comfort: she felt confident he respected her. When the waiter approached, her date ordered a bottle of wine to celebrate their meeting. His name was Jonathan. He worked in an office doing something that she either couldn't follow or tuned out entirely. He loved his job, he said eagerly with a hint of ambition. He outlined his five year career plan. He spoke of a high yield savings account and 403b. He talked about how badly he wanted to be a father; to have a family. She decided before her lobster ravioli came that she wouldn't see him again.

She would try to leverage the details of these dates with Aaron. She'd tell him that she couldn't always see him— that she wasn't always *available*. These are *girlfriend privileges*, she'd explain. She had a life *outside of him*; outside of his rented suburban house, two blocks from the middle school soccer field they'd spend summer evenings wandering late into nights so empty they'd feel righteous in calling them their own— allowing space for prolonged silence, enjoying the stillness these moments offered as interludes between long unguarded conversations, where it felt as though they left themselves back at the house and allowed their spirits to roam the Earth. These summer nights were burned into her memory, these things she thought had gone away for good.

She assumed new men would come and go, as if she ran a Holiday Inn for transient business men living on modest budgets. Some would be attractive and some would be interesting; some would fuck her with the confidence and physical acuity of a thoroughbred. Some would treat her like the protagonist of a Hallmark movie, and even if they weren't co-star material, it was a fantasy she allowed herself to get lost in, at least temporarily... but Aaron was different.

Aaron never had the kind of dating app conversations Doreen had grown so accustomed to that she imagined the earning potential a startup offering artificial intelligence to handle the formalities might have. They would ask about her career and her interests; what she does for fun and what celebrity people tell her she looks like. What her best physical feature is (often they'd specify *below the neck*, which Doreen took as an opportunity to mention her bubble butt) and her bra size— a question asked with such frequency that she began to understand it as the online dating equivalent of a handshake.

All would ask for *more pictures* and many would brazenly request nudes. For the few who sparked attraction, who got her phone number and kept her interest— who said the right words to Doreen in the right order— she had several tasteful nudes: one showing her breasts, modest in size but with a perk she assumed was rare for a woman nearing her mid-thirties and another of the bubble butt. One was a full body, bra-and-panties picture only sent to men whom she assumed would see her naked: she feared unrealistic expectations and disappointment. She often received unsolicited dick pictures, despite her explicitly stated boundaries, and the ones who impressed her got additional attention.

Dating apps made her feel like the belle of the ball— a bored princess casually waving her hand and selecting her next suitor; the next contestant on a never ending game show, the more desperate of the men acting like Rod Roddy called their name and told them to *come on down*— swiping right like she were circling what she wanted for Christmas out of a *Sears Wishbook*. Doreen knew she had her part in this as well; nothing is free even if pretending can be fun. She learned to keep men interested— to keep them coming back; to keep men caught in her web, where she could farm whatever good feelings came as a result of all the grinding. She learned the hidden language of messaging frequency— to never respond too quickly. A quick response told her a lot about a man: his lack of options; his desperation; the likelihood of his involuntary celibacy. Doreen learned to pick up on these details instinctively, snapping into action reflexively.

Of course, there were the men whom none of these rules applied— as if her rules existed only as a great filter, weeding out men too afraid to break them while pinpointing their genetic superiors. Where Doreen would be the one messaging too quickly— too eagerly; trying too hard to impress. Sending out pictures with urgency. Taking new pictures if her canned nudes were considered too tasteful or if a specific request were made. Feigning reluctance at his suggestion to *just hang out* after he shot down the possibility of a dinner date and didn't offer to take her for drinks. Wearing the thong he picked out under her yoga pants. Her demand for condom use reduced to a suggestion before dying a natural death. Cinderella men whom Doreen knew would disappear after one magical night, and she eventually learned not to care.

Aaron was unlike these men— he defied categorization. He spoke with a confident inflection that lent his words credibility and he listened to her with genuine interest. He struck a balance between teasing her for her petty girlishness while asking thought provoking questions that made Doreen take pause; soul searching questions that would sometimes leave her speechless. He displayed a rare vulnerability when talking about himself that she didn't find repulsive; conversely, these moments made her want him more. The night they met at his rented suburban house, he wanted to know the most important thing she's learned that year, and she took time and care when providing her answer. She wanted to be honest, and she wanted to impress him.

After her date she found herself with Aaron— Aaron who defied categorization. Aaron, who provided Doreen the appearance of a relationship and the trappings of commitment— the late night phone calls fading into good morning texts, the inside jokes, the couch and TV time in his rented suburban house, where Doreen could lie across his chest and close her eyes and feel safe, as if the house were a castle and she were hiding from a storm. Sex so intense it felt like she was allowing herself to be broken into pieces; allowing herself to dissolve into him. Moments of stillness, looking into his eyes and feeling things she hadn't felt in a long time— things she maybe never felt before, if she were willing to be honest.

The appearance of a relationship like Doreen was playing house in an Ikea showroom— plastic TV sets and blank books. Walls so thin she could punch a hole in them if she ever wanted to take herself out of the fantasy— a failsafe she kept running in the background: always humming and always there, in the back of her mind; something she couldn't forget.

She would try to leverage the details of these dates with Aaron. She wanted him to know that if he didn't pull the trigger and lock her down; make things official so she could tell her mother she had a *boyfriend*... If he didn't clean up nicely in a handsome button down for her family's Easter; if he didn't meet her friends and spend time talking with the boys at the Superbowl party while she gabbed with the girls. If he didn't indulge her desperate whimsy of fantasy wedding planning— fantasy family planning— she wanted him to know that she'd find someone else who would.

A threat he never took seriously.

She thought about their last night and wished she could take every bit of it and stretch it out into infinity and live inside it. She thought about how none of it mattered enough for the pro side of his T-chart to declare a hard fought

victory. She thought about what she could have done differently. She knew there were problems: he was struggling at work; his father died. She knew his drinking was getting excessive. They would fight but he was never abusive; she was never what could be considered a *bitch*. Their relationship, she thought, was normal, and even if her friends told her to *never blame herself*— advice confirmed by every self-help book she read and every therapist she visited— she couldn't help but wonder why she wasn't enough.

Doreen wouldn't stop wearing her engagement ring for the next year. The day she left it in the jewelry box on her dresser felt like the first day all over again. She threw up at work that afternoon. In her weaker moments, her thoughts ruminated on wanting to be with him— entangled in a dreamscape for good. Their last night together, emblematic of all their nights together, stretched out into infinity.

And when Aaron asked about the most important thing she's learned, Doreen took time and care when providing her answer.

She said plainly, "that I didn't die with him."

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WELCOME TO HELL

The Girlfriends Walk Among Us

Billy Pratt · 20 January 2024 · Archived copy · Original

"Possession of the mind is a terrible thing; it's a transformation with an urge to kill."

Her name was Jessica and she went to my high school. She was my first real girlfriend, gained at a time when I had lost hope in ever getting a real girlfriend. One I *really* liked. One I was *genuinely* attracted to. One who made my heart flutter with anticipation—like every day dream you've ever had during that long static age when you're aware of girls, their big eyes and emerging bustlines, ones confident in testing the elasticity of all formerly loose fitting tank-tops; all around you but a world away and you're still stuck on the very first screen; the master sword collecting dust; Gannon raping Hyrule with impunity.

I was at a point of rational acceptance bordering on the contemplation of a secular monastic lifestyle: what could I accomplish if not in pursuit of a girlfriend? A question Dan wasn't willing to entertain. He became enamored with *Big Sandwich Girl*—a pretty, freckled, Irish blonde with large breasts that she had not yet grown accustomed to having, with *significant tapering* used as a precautionary measure under her white button down blouse, like she knew she had the world's greatest secret and she was sneaking it home every night with lips sealed. She presumably had no lunch period during her hectic, ambitious, Ivy League-track schedule and was only in our third-period Theology class as a necessity—no honors section was offered—where she would eat her lunch and she always had a very large sandwich.

It was her very large sandwich that made her seem attainable. This was a girl who had not yet developed a sense of what other girls intuitively began to know as if on cue; a gameplay event triggered by puberty; a short cutscene transformation where all girls learn how to attract popular boys, an exclusive club to which Dan *did not belong*. However, Big Sandwich Girl's large sandwiches seemed to imply a disconnect between what she looked like and how she imagined herself: a pretty girl would never eat so much so shamelessly, something Dan had considered *maladaptive behavior*. Pretty girls are meant to act daintily, this was a rule—rules that become mandatory almost overnight; over the course of a single summer, where girls end up less interested in reading and more interested in make-up; rules that were presumably *misunderstood* by an awkward cheerleader with twelve inches of whole wheat in front of her.

Without a more developed sense of social acuity, Big Sandwich Girl, with her freckles and her tapered breasts, exuded a fleeting sense of purity. An innocence that is all but lost by a girl's Senior year of high school—by her sneaking cigarettes and giving blow jobs; by autodetecting the proper social code for fitting in and unconsciously shaping herself into that mold. Big Sandwich Girl still seemed to possess the naive beauty of a Disney Princess: adorably unaware of her own preciousness. She didn't yet know the rules to follow.

This was his opening. Dan found something he assumed no one else could see. Something hiding in plain site, only under a multitude of cotton layers and several thick shoulder straps. A faint silhouette of what could be *softball-sized* under more idyllic conditions. Things that only become visible given time, thought, and close inspection—all of which Dan committed his class time to, roleplaying *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Big Tits*, and he was ready to fight through fire and flame to rescue the maiden and claim his treasure. He had one shot to get it right.

Dan had a lot to think about.

Purity can only exist in a tiny window before the rules are written. Before clawing at the howling monolith in the barren desert. Before the Platonic form: the roadmap promising harsh penalty to those who deviate. Before Jesus Christ— the name so bright and so sharp that the sign just blows up because the name is *so powerful*. Before order there can only be mayhem. Trial and error; chaotic attempts— and only in such madness is there authenticity.

Venom thrived under these conditions, as a heavy metal pre-Socratic in the days before *Master of Puppets (1986)*

served as a 12" vinyl warning to any band who dared compete: thrash riffs at a manic pace or else. *Master of Puppets* defined heavy metal as *technical mastery*; Venom defined metal as a tough-as-nails attitude. Lead singer Chronos didn't actually sing: he barked and snarled, about sex and the devil. They took the rough edges of 1970's punk rock met with a few KISS inspired sex songs and Black Sabbath-like odes to the Dark Lord— and while the feverish reception to Sabbath's more devilish music scared the devout Christians into using giant crosses as set pieces while writing lyrics that stated plainly, "God is the only way to love," Venom felt no such trepidation for being considered *Satanic*.

Find a better 80's tinged Friday night than being fifteen and spinning side one of *At War with Satan* (1984) on repeat while playing Atari under the twilight glow of the television— pizza crusts and Pepsi cans as the night's only collateral damage. Side one on repeat because there was no reason to flip *At War with Satan*— side one being entirely taken up by Venom's epic, twenty-minute long title track chronicling Hell's overthrow of Heaven— *At War with Satan* presents as dark, forgotten history. The final book of the Bible that had been lost; hidden; obscured by time. A song carrying realistic concern that, if played backwards, could open *The Gate* (1987) to Hell and summon demons. In 1984, there was no eighth grade boy on the planet who wouldn't have liked *At War with Satan*, and yet, for reasons inexplicable, Venom's mainstream, genre defining, rule writing popularity was quashed by the gravitational pull of what was to *come next*— the then unwritten, aptly titled *Master of Puppets*.

Sometimes the future will have a gravity that can be felt in present.

Miyamoto's combination of stompy, jumpy action and exploratory adventure was its own master leading countless puppets, setting a precedent for home gaming that would dominate the decade. *Super Mario Bros.* had a tremendous number of imitators who'd put their own spin on its core mechanics, to the extent that the formula became understood as the *essential components* of what made a video game— *Super Mario Bros.* had single-handedly redefined video gaming in its own overalled image.

Before these rules were written— before there was a roadmap to follow— attempts at creating games in the *adventure genre*, an action game with exploratory elements, were constructed with complexity by stoned programmers who thought the game's goal, and the mechanics required to achieve that goal, should be left for the player to discover. This was taken for granted in the NES era where everything needed to play the game was contained *on screen*. Looking at a lengthy instruction manual was for your boomer dad, Nintendo games were *pick up-and-play*.

The few ambitious Atari titles that attempted to construct lush adventures through dots and blips made the player fight for comprehension with the central question being: *what is going on?* It was the player's job to construct meaning; the *construction of meaning* became the goal of the game. The gameplay was in attempting to *understand the game*. Like Venom had failed to become a force powerful enough to embody the genre's rule writing, monolithic presence, complex esoteric adventure games like *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1982) and *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* (1982), although ambitious for their time, were resoundingly hated for such ambitions.

The magic of a moment like breaking through the top of the screen in only the *second level* of *Super Mario Bros.* gave the player a surreal feeling of being a participant in an unfolding, predestined world while actively *creating* that world in real time— which is something that can only happen once and ends the moment the player reads: "Welcome to Warp Zone!" Although fleeting, when experienced in its proper context— not unlike the shock of watching *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980) on opening night— this moment stands as the single greatest in video game history. There is nothing else like it because there can't be anything else like it. It's a trick that works exactly once before the audience grows wise to it.

The utility of this moment was a mechanic delivered with perfection: the NES player was taught to think outside the box. Miyamoto knew that once a player saw the top of the screen accessible, their natural curiosity would get the better of them and that curiosity was rewarded with the ability to skip levels. Teaching a player game mechanics organically became common with NES games like *Metroid* (1987)— a game that was consciously made to be the anti-*Super Mario Bros.*.

Metroid's development team knew that an experienced video game player would instinctively begin a side-scrolling game by *running to the right*, but when the first-time player begins *Metroid*, running to the right leads to a dead end. This dead end forces the player to return to the starting point and try their only other option: *moving to the left*, and only then are they able to obtain an item necessary for the game's progression. With this, the player subconsciously internalize the lesson *Metroid* is imparting on them: to make progress they will be tasked with solving obtuse problems that require unique solutions; the player will need to think on their feet, maybe for the first time in a video game. Anything but the use of sharp wit when adapting to newly encountered dead ends will halt the player's progress— *Metroid* did not present a single braindead pathway to the end of the game; *Metroid* was non-linear; *Metroid* made you think.

While *Super Mario Bros.* was bright and inviting, *Metroid* was dark and ominous. While Mario's world felt teeming with life, *Metroid's* atmosphere was lonely. *Metroid* was for the introvert; the kid who wanted to be left alone; the kid who had trouble making friends; the kid who'd cry on the first day of summer camp. The kid who understood the world as unfriendly and uninviting; who maybe realized that life only gets a little bit worse with each passing year. The kid who wanted to be underwater and far away; who wanted to stay hidden in his bedroom-like cocoon. *Metroid* embodied the fantasy of floating through space. Away; alone in the dark. Away, under the twilit glow of the television.

Steve took me aside and told me, in as stern a tone he could muster, that we needed talk— specifically to *talk privately*. He spoke with a calculated sincerity tempered with a deliberate urgency. His posturing carried authoritative overtones, poised to give pseudo-fatherly advice from a faux-big brother; *Songs of Experience (1794)* sung by an idiot. There was a sense of superiority peppered into his inflection, and I knew this superiority was squarely earned: Steve was the first of us to have a girlfriend.

There was no good reason for this; no lesson to be learned or technique to be gleaned. Steve was in the right place at the right time. There was a blue-light special on hand-jobs and Steve was first in line. He caught a shooting star on his camcorder and ended up on the evening news with a goofy smile. Accidentally dropped a bomb on the right rock and tripped over the master sword. No matter how much you believe that sexual success depends on hacking the social algorithm with a keen understanding of interpersonal dynamics, stupid motherfuckers still win the lottery.

For a sixteen year old, Sharon was winning the lottery. A short, fair-skinned redhead with large breasts and a spunky attitude, Sharon went to the local all-girl Catholic high school. A place where girls *had trouble* meeting boys. A veritable *girlfriend factory*, that manufactured local girls ready to be *your friend*; new-in-box; plug-and-play— a potential girlfriend goldmine... something can only be understood in retrospect, on those long sleepless nights; clawing skin for every inept decision made.

Colleen was one of those inept decisions. Sick of being ditched on weekends, Sharon's best friend wanted a boyfriend. Colleen called me and introduced herself. She told me that we had things in common: we were the same age and both attended high school. We knew the same people. We met on a group trip to the mall. We hit it off— she wanted a boy to spend her Friday nights with and I wanted a girl to touch. She wasn't pretty.

Colleen was my first girlfriend insofar as the term Pre-Socratic is a necessity; an aging single woman rolling back body count mileage like she's Ferris Bueller with a brilliant idea; a space where something can exist but *not count*. Colleen existed but she didn't count— she is not my canonical *first girlfriend*. We kissed and watched *The Real World (1992)*. I felt her up and mentally cataloged the shape and feel of her breasts: middling B cups with nickel sized nipples. Her breasts were slightly wider than they protruded, like hanging pectorals.

I liked these experiences, but I didn't love them. It wasn't sexy like it should be; she didn't look like I wanted her to look. I mentally cataloged these experiences to use as masturbation material for when I got home. These experiences were no different than my meager collection of Playboy magazines; my VHS tapes with nude scenes from late night HBO caught like shooting stars. A new medium with the same message: *it's okay to masturbate*.

MTV had been in the process of quietly redefining what made them interesting. They began minimizing music content in favor of more traditional television programming. Until that point MTV had been different from everything else on television. Unlike everything else on television, MTV had followed a format closer to a radio station; music videos were played in blocks and on rotation. These videos did not typically attempt to form a cohesive narrative— they were often a variety of scenes clipped together. Music video production was often shoddy. Footage was not always *fit for broadcast* (either accidentally or by design). MTV was television that didn't need to be watched.

The MTV format revolutionized how teenagers thought about music. While KISS prioritized image over sonics, the ragged look of the average 70's musician was something between an afterthought and incidental. The actual music— the reality of being a musician— was of prime importance, which was initially how MTV approached its programming: following the industry with pragmatism. MTV was your cable channel guide to rock. Boring VJs spoke with academic inflection, covering news and a smattering of trivia about the old guard of aesthetically unfit rock musicians, between playing blocks of boring, aesthetically unfit rock videos. This format *did not work*. It was only when MTV found a new guard of rock star to promote, equal part showman, model, and musician, that they became kingmaker to the industry and a cultural force.

The very first MTV stars wrote the rules of rock and created tropes that became so institutionalized that MTV themselves began to parody them. By the end of the decade they had introduced Pauly Shore to their personality rotation. Shore was a stand-up comedian whose schtick was that of a hyper-realized, west coast, rockstar wannabe. Shore, himself, wasn't a musician but the image trappings of the rock star became so ingrained that they existed at the forefront of the average person's understanding of music: if you wanted to be a rock star, you started by *looking like a rockstar*. You were better off learning the aesthetics and posturing than you were mastering an instrument. One needn't play music for one to be a rockstar; the fantasy replaced reality.

MTV culture not only wrote the rules for the aspiring musician, but created a mold for how teenagers presented themselves: MTV wrote the rules for *being cool*. Every socially successful teenager looked to become their own version of a rockstar— complete with a rock star style'd, deliberately ratty and shredded wardrobe, an intentionally messy hair cut, piercings, tattoos, and a badass car. MTV half-fulfilled Anton LaVey's promise of "hyper-individualism as a replacement for religion" made at the dawn of the media age but with fascistic aplomb: you will be your own God but only by following our rules.

When Steve got around to talking to me, finally, *in private*, he used a haggard hush to prompt my understanding that this conversation was serious. This wouldn't be about the forthcoming Metallica album, *Load* (1996), and our speculation of its sound and direction. A never ending conversation fueled by having *already heard* two entries from it on a bootleg tape from someone who had recorded the band's Donington concert with what sounded like a tape recorder, in a duffel bag, wrapped in ten-thousand t-shirts. We still spent the summer listening to it at max volume on my blown-out Casio tape deck, riding bikes to Movieland and renting *Super Street Fighter 2* (1994) while waiting for nude pictures of Playboy Playmates to download from AOL chat rooms as we ate our Taco Bell items ordered from the 49¢/79¢/99¢ menu— perfect for a high school kid with only a handful of pocket change.

For Christmas the year prior I got an IBM PC compatible *personal computer*, complete with Windows 3.2 and a CD-ROM drive. While I had grown up with my beloved Commodore 64, it was more of an esoteric gaming console than a real computer: games on floppy disks unlocked through bizarre command prompts punched into a lifeless blue screen. A process that lent the meager games an air of sophistication; that they were in a class beyond the cartridges sold for the more pedestrian Nintendo Entertainment System. This wasn't entertainment. This was serious. Computer games weren't for kids.

The CD-ROM was fascinating. I always wanted the set of World Book encyclopedias that Steve had on a dusty basement bookshelf— now my computer had every volume on a single disc. I would find articles that interested me and print them out. My new computer came with a racing game where a futuristic host in video cut-scenes berated me for my racing inadequacies. I would play the racing game. My new computer came with productivity software. I

enjoyed knowing I had productivity software.

But for all of its technological terror, the computer failed to keep my attention: it was a static experience; a closed system. Maybe there was a time when the mere interactivity between man and machine would have been enough; maybe I would have fingered the secretive inner workings of the C-drive like a surrogate girlfriend. Navigating the black screen of DOS like I was floating through space. Reading *The Annotated C++ Reference Manual (1990)* like its Nabokov. Writing code like poetry. Maybe this would have shaped the person I'd have become but the Internet loomed, its future presence with the gravitational pull of an artificial moon.

I wanted to be David Lightman in *WarGames (1983)*— my first glimpse of connectivity. Where a computer could function beyond the lifeless exchange of data inputs: it could be used to explore the outside world; to create causes that had effects; to interact with *real people*. People whom you'd never have met any other way, in any other circumstance, other than with screens and keyboards. Your phone line indefinitely occupied; your reach potentially infinite. *Shall we play a game?*

More importantly than any other feature, my new computer came with a 14.4 baud dial-up modem and a free trial of online service Prodigy... and while Prodigy soon became America Online, I'll never forget the feeling of my first night in a chatroom. It wasn't about what was being said; *what* was being said was never terribly interesting, ever, in any chatroom... this was about a shared fascination with a newfound communication utility. A fascination with our shared present moment, a new kind of atomized togetherness, all through screens and keyboards, as if we knew that what we saw unfolding was so bright and so sharp that it was destined to blow up because the *medium* was so powerful. There was utility to the Internet, we knew it from the moment we logged on, but we didn't know yet how to harness it. The canvas stood before us pristine.

It was through these chatrooms that a teenager could explore the night time world without invasive eyes; the *hidden adult world*; the degenerate and depraved adult world... into the lawlessness of a new frontier; the wild west; *in barren fields on the Arizona plains*... Taking what we wanted along the way. Shannen Doherty's issue of *Playboy* collecting dust under my bed as nude celebrities drifted to my screen at the speed of shifting continents. Illegal downloads and password swapping— nothing seemed impossible, nothing seemed immoral. Nothing seemed quite real. This was a new space, a *cyber* space, a plane of existence *between* reality and fantasy, so new that we couldn't fully understand it; we couldn't fully *see it*. An existence you were able to define for yourself; an identity you could build— where you could feel powerful, even if the girls at school didn't think so; even if your parents didn't respect you; even if you were bully fodder for the guys getting blow jobs on Friday nights, you still got yourself a hacked up version of *Doom II (1994)* for free and that felt like it *mattered more*. That felt more significant. That felt like true power; limitless power; omnipotent power; *inhuman reproduction, we're here for what we want!*

Between poorly planned high school social circles that seemed cemented in place and overheard chatter of house parties and easy hook-ups, a teenager guided by a strong sense of sexual frustration will unconsciously devote an unknowable percentage of cognitive power humming in the background— crunching data like a Seti screen saver— to the pursuit of sexual objectification, and when real life doesn't present an obvious next move, you start bombing the mountainside and pushing over tombstones like you're Link with an expired *Nintendo Power* subscription. Joshua tirelessly entering random launch codes at NORAD desperately hoping to just *get one right*. Staring at a bastard dead end in *Metroid*; your sharp with your only weapon. Trial and error; clumsy attempts— before order there is only mayhem.

The invisible hand pushing toward late night sessions in Local Romance chatrooms, where the determined teenage boy had endless chances to message girls, desperately hoping to just *get one right*. Real girls who would describe themselves in tantalizing ways, before pictures were common— their descriptions falling somewhere between reality and fantasy... Real girls who would respond to your charm and bravado, even if you were making it up as you went along. If you want to be a rock star, you start by *acting like a rock star*— the Internet could allow the fantasy to replace reality entirely. A little seventeen-year-old egomaniac, even if only from his bedroom, but with every Instant Message, every time you hit on the right words in the right order, you got one step closer to unlocking nukes

and launching missiles...and even if you were told to be on the lookout for pink sneakers one Saturday afternoon at the mall, and the only pair you saw sped past you like a girl with blast processing— either embarrassed or disappointed, you'll never know which— off into the ether, you learned a valuable lesson that day: you almost had an real life first date, with a real girl, and you did it using screens and keyboards.

You did it using the *Internet*.

You were one step closer to the master sword. You couldn't unsee it.

Doom (1993) became emblematic of a bleeding edge that only you and a few of your friends were tapped into; day one adopters; absolute lunatics, running top speed, in every direction with Big Fucking Gun in hand, into the unknown. Into poorly lit corridors with flickering lights, past non-orthogonal walls, with a glass cuttingly smooth frame rate and three fully realized dimensions. If *virtual reality* was a Hollywood promise made to impressionable kids by the prior year's otherwise boring *Lawnmower Man* (1992), *Doom* fulfilled that promise with vicious immediacy.

Before *Mortal Kombat* (1992) hijacked what it meant to be a video game from Mario's white gloved grip and redefined it as excessive violence, Sega had already been taking shots at Nintendo in ad campaigns highlighting *Sonic The Hedgehog's* (1991) speed and attitude— *Super Mario World* (1991) crept along at a lazy river's pace by comparison.

The Nintendo Entertainment System had a tremendous end to their introductory decade. Their brilliant, genre defining, self-published titles like coalesced with excellent third party enteries and managed to solidify video games as an inherent part of the cultural landscape— there would be no *video game crash*, as Atari had unwittingly facilitated in 1983. Video games were not a fad. Video games had become absorbed into the pantheon of mass media. Even if the "Nintendo Seal of Approval," Nintendo's theoretical method of quality control— devised to avoid the glut of poorly made, embarrassing 2600 cash-in titles— meant increasingly little in the face of shitty video games that made kids angry, Nintendo had enough quality titles at the forefront of public consciousness to maintain their positive image.

The next generation of game console expanded the definition of what it meant to be a video game while redefining expectations. Conceptually, a *next generation* of game console was a new idea— one that was met with skepticism from parents still reeling from the big money spent on beefing up their kid's NES library, half of which were already dead on the shelf. This felt like forced obsolescence, a scam to produce screaming kids demanding new things, whatever the new thing was. Video game developers working to usher in a post-Nintendo Entertainment System era knew they had to deliver an excellent product which impressed with immediacy. Something that created urgency. A product that needed only a single screen shot to convert a skeptic into an enthusiast— something that could only be accomplished with *great graphics*.

Standing amidst the marketing hurricane that was the early 90's sixteen bit console war, a kid would come to define a great game to mean *great graphics*— to the extent that it became a Freddy Kruegar joke in his kid-friendly, absolutely terrible *Freddy's Dead: The Final Nightmare* (1991)— *great graphics* meant a *great game*... even when it didn't. Even when you knew you had a stinking, unplayable, piece of garbage, it still *meant something* for it to have impressive graphics. Compared to the Sega Genesis and the Super Nintendo, the Nintendo Entertainment System did not have *great graphics*, and to your parents' chagrin, it needed to be put away; it was a baby's toy.

Nintendo's competitors came up with two points of differentiation: attitude and violence. If Nintendo wanted to make a *darn good game* that the *whole family could play*, the only way to gain foothold in the market, and attract the attention of emerging adolescents, was to do the opposite. Like the Nintendo Entertainment System, a console designed to replicate the early generation of arcade games with accuracy, the initial concept for the Sega Genesis was to replicate newer, more advanced arcade games, a feat the aging NES hardware was too underpowered to deliver gracefully.

While the Nintendo brand became synonymous with the entire concept of *home video gaming*, so much that both kids and parents would often refer to playing video games with the simple, clunky phrase “playing Nintendo,” Sega had been quietly dominating the arcade scene with their “Super Scaler” games like *Out Run* (1986) and *After Burner* (1987). These games were like nothing seen before in video game play; certainly nothing *playing Nintendo* could compete with—especially if you were lucky enough to find a deluxe, sit-down cabinet with motion simulation, and even if you were so lucky, it was the Super Scaler technology that made the games come to life: your Ferrari Testarosa screaming down the highway with trees and road signs flying through the screen at ninety miles-per-hour. Nothing before was that fast. Nothing was that immersive. Nothing had such *great graphics*. But even if Sega won the fight for quarters in shopping mall arcades, their first attempt at home console competition fell flat with the Sega Master System. Even though the Master System ran like a more impressive NES, with better visuals and more colors, Mario had an iron clad grip on the industry, and kids weren’t going to give up *playing Nintendo* so easily.

Sega needed new hardware that could do what Nintendo couldn’t. Sega needed hardware to replicate the arcade experience— if not accurately at least adequately; spiritually; to a degree to which a passerby might say: “hey, that looks similar.” In 1989, Sega released the Genesis. The Genesis was able to replicate side scrollers like *Golden Axe* (1989) and *Ghouls n’ Ghosts* (1989) to near arcade perfection compared to their more primitive 8-bit renderings, and at release, replicate their Super Scaler arcade games well enough to look impressive in gaming magazine screen shots.

However, arcade replication was not enough for manufacturer Sega to truly compete with Nintendo... until they came up with their own cartoon mascot, Sonic the Hedgehog, an anthropomorphized animal with attitude, whose cool sneakers and scolding, title-screen finger wag made Mario seem sheepish by comparison. Soon there were dozens of cartoon animal mascots littering the home console scene. Mario’s domination of the pop-culture landscape, which had been on par with Hulk Hogan and Mr. T., began to seem as distant and as dated.

But when *Doom* caught on the whole “sixteen bit war” seemed quaint by comparison. *Doom* legitimized having a computer— the computer as inarguably superior technology; the computer as limitless possibility; the computer as infinite reach. *Doom* outclassed Nintendo and Sega in orders of magnitude, and it was through screens and keyboards. *Doom* was the perfect game at the perfect time; the genre defining monolith buried below the surface of the moon. *Doom* changed everything and there was no going back. *Doom* was relentless immersion.

Doom relied on both programmer John Carmack’s graphics engine, which made the game’s signature lighting and geometry possible, and game designer John Romero’s expert direction. Romero wanted *Doom* to be more than just run-and-gun annihilation. Like Miyamoto wanted *Super Mario Bros.* to be more than a stompy, jumpy action game, Romero had wanted *Doom* to have an *exploratory* component. Romero wanted *Doom* to embody both *search* and *destroy* in equal measure, with elements of resource management and survival. *Doom* wanted to keep you on your toes; *Doom* wanted to make you nervous. For maybe the first time while playing a video game, *Doom* wanted you to be afraid. *Doom* wanted you to feel alone, with its *Metroid*-like atmosphere of solitude, now in three dimensions. This was John Romero’s master stroke.

Doom demanded the player annihilate demons but with careful thought and graceful aplomb. Decision making was crucial; the player would need to decide, on the spot, if the Bull Demon was worth their few remaining shotgun shells or if Doom Guy could handle it with pistol shots and punches. If you were topped out on ammo, when passing item pickups, you needed to remember where they were and how to get back to them; *Doom* demanded the player create a mental map of its twisted halls. *Doom* was more than a murder simulator; *Doom* was more than blood-and-guts annihilation. *Doom* was brilliant.

Finer points that were lost when a teenage boy discovers “Godmode” (IDDQD), an invincibility cheat code that wouldn’t have been conceptually unfamiliar to a kid at the time. Late in the Nintendo Entertainment System’s lifespan, toymaker Galoob released *Game Genie* (1990), a plug-and-play hacker kit that allowed players to alter NES games in a variety of ways by interfacing with the game’s code. Now a player could have infinite lives in *Super C* (1990), invincibility in *Street Fighter 2010* (1990), and tear through *Mega Man 3* (1990) in about twenty minutes.

The average *Game Genie* owner will have destroyed their NES library in a matter of days— total annihilation.

All the time and practice, trial and error that it took to finally beat Super Macho Man; heart break on the road to triumph; the actual tears shed when you came so close. That feeling, deep in your guts, when you finally put the big bastard down; calling your dad in to see; maybe he would get it; maybe he would be proud. The screen shot you had him take with his big, old Minolta; the moment needed commemoration; the moment, two minutes and fifty-four seconds of the first round, was so heavy that it needed to be immortalized. With trembling thumb, you feared pushing start. You feared the dream fight.

These are the emotions that make a video game great, and every bit of fear and anxiety that John Romero carefully built into his masterful level design: the obtuse problems requiring unique solving; the sharp wit needed to conquer *Doom*'s non-linear gameplay; to push past *Doom*'s dead ends; to find your way through *Doom*'s non-orthogonal geometry. All of the finer points that made *Doom* brilliant were lost once a teenage boy discovers Godmode.

Steve found the right setting for our private conversation in the *independent* section of Tower Records, which was contained in its own room, always deserted, and filled with the stuff they didn't want out on the main floor: underground hardcore CDs, *Something Weird* VHS tapes of horror and porn— most were a combination of the two— and the magazine rack which always had the latest issues of *Maximum Rock n' Roll* and *Flipside*. Every weekend we'd make the hour long trek to Tower Records on foot to check out the latest releases and scour the back catalogs with an art gallery-like etiquette. There was a greater depth of reality to the underground music scene than anything out there on the main floor— even GWAR didn't make the cut, *This Toilet Earth* (1994) sitting between Gloria Estefan and Hanoi Rocks... and why even bother with GWAR once you've found GG Allin and realized that GWAR, whom you had thought were the ultimate extreme metal band, were just the a watered down parody. GG was the real deal, a lesson I learned through a combination of Tower Records browsing and Internet searching.

Just like wandering into the independent section at Tower Records for the first time, discovering the wider Internet outside of America Online's corporate confines was like a mini *Truman Show* (1998) where you realize that everything you thought you knew was total bullshit. You learned there was a Usenet listing, or newsgroup message board, for every vague interest in existence with hardcore nerds having long, thorough debates; creating long, thorough FAQ text files. This was the *real Internet*. This was an Internet that produced a highly detailed, step-by-step guide on how to break into funeral homes and fuck corpses; how to encourage a *romantic relationship* with your dog; how to farm stranger's shit from shopping mall bathrooms... this was far beyond anything I had seen before; anything I thought was real. I had been on AOL listening to GWAR thinking I was a badass when the real Internet was there the entire time— GG Allin covered in blood and shit.

Steve wanted to talk about Colleen. He wanted to make something clear, he told me, silently demanding an acceptable degree of eye contact while attempting as dominant a posture as he could muster. This was his moment and he wanted it to be perfect.

Teenage life is a conglomerate of authentic moments and moments we wished were authentic. We begin learning who we really are while attempting to become who we want to be. Personality elements once gleaned from long talks with Dad replaced by a more perfect Jason Seaver delivering better advice in more concise soundbytes. Dad seemed out of touch by comparison, alienated by a world that's become foreign to what he experienced. His advice exceeded its expiration date according to MTV and its cast of newer, hipper role models. Fatherly advice that maybe never existed in the first place. Maybe Dad sensed defeat and gave up too soon. Maybe he felt scorned by a son who knew he was too drunk to be reliable. Maybe it became a negative feedback loop that only got worse with each passing year.

Becoming who we are while desperately trying to act like who we wanted to be. Choosing elements of ourselves from bits-and-pieces of popular culture like picking out Christmas gifts from the *Sears Wishbook*. Bits of popular culture mixed-and-matched and put in a blender with blatant disregard for intellectual property rights; He-Man

fighting Hulk Hogan with the Ninja Turtles looking on. Maybe the combination of what we choose to represent us says as much about us as anything else. Maybe the person we want to be says everything about who we are.

Maybe I wanted to be like ninja turtle Rapheal: cool but rude. Maybe I wanted to be more like *Real World* Puck, the asshole punk rocker with his fingers in the peanut butter. Maybe I wanted to be David Lightman, the smart introvert who gets the girl. Peter Parker, who only *seems* like a loser... who has a terrific secret. That I was someone cool on the Internet and that felt like it *mattered more*. It felt more significant that strangers with screens and keyboards liked me than the kids at my high school. It felt like true power. Omnipotent power was pulling up a *Local Romance* chatroom and getting phone numbers. I wanted to feel like a rock star and I only wanted to exist in spaces where it could be real.

I don't think any of that appealed to Steve— he had different pages of the *Wish Book* dog eared. Maybe it was the leadership qualities of Leonardo. The unwavering metallic masculinity of Optimus Prime. Maybe he wanted to be Jason Seaver, not Mike. He wanted to be the one dispensing advice with authority. The Daniel Larusso, tough-but-fair, application of the martial arts. Steve wanted to be the hero in an *Afterschool Special* (1972), the clean-cut good guy in his school's letterman jacket standing up to the bully; confronting the abusive boyfriend and saving the princess. That was who Steve wanted to be, and even if all the pieces weren't really there— even if these things didn't actually exist— he wanted to make them real.

Steve cleared his throat and put his hand on my shoulder. He told me that if I ever hit Colleen there would be trouble between us. Trouble, a word he felt didn't need further explanation; a word he allowed to speak for itself. Colleen was his responsibility, he told me, and he wasn't going to let anything happen to her. He forced a condescending smile and had me confirm my understanding. This was who Steve wanted to be.

I saw Colleen a few times after that. We had clumsy school night phone calls between clumsy Friday night hangouts. Watching TV and kissing a little became a short lived routine. Our break-up phonecall was awkward even in its brevity.

We dated for three weeks and never spoke again.

Dan's attempt at capturing the attention of Big Sandwich Girl came with a purity that can only exist in the tiny window of a teenage boy's initial fumbblings with local romance. Dan gave the entire matter a lot of thought. He thought about what makes for the best relationships; what women truly like and admire. What old couples who stayed married for a lifetime, unlike his own parents, claimed was their secret ingredient. The stories of how they met, the art of *gentle persistence*: be bold in showing her the good man you are. He watched sitcoms and romantic comedies while taking notes; he studied *When Harry Met Sally* (1989). With labored effort he came to a conclusion: there is no better foundation for love than friendship.

Friendship is built on mutual interests, that much he already knew. Kids who liked *Star Wars* (1977) hung out together. If you had a Sega Genesis, you made friends with other kids who had a Sega Genesis. If friendship between boys was easy, love couldn't be too difficult. Dan made a list of everything he knew about her. She was beautiful. She drove to school while we took the bus. She was an athlete, and she enjoyed a hearty lunch at 10 a.m.. Dan decided that he, too, would start bringing his lunch to Theology.

I tried to intervene. Although my own fumbblings were secretive, by that point I had spoken to dozens of girls from Local Romance chatrooms, on the phone, after midnight, for hours on end. During that time I made an important discovery: if you act like a rock star, you'll be treated like a rock star. I was confident and aloof. I never seemed nervous, and after a while, I never was. I acted like I was hot shit; that I was the coolest guy they were going to talk to; the coolest guy in the chatroom; the coolest guy in the entire fucking universe, because that was who I wanted to be. It was only there and then, alone in the dark, that I was able to truly believe it. Where I could make it real. Even if the girls at school didn't think so, in my bedroom I could be king of the night time world, masturbating under my sheets.

I told Dan that I didn't see it happening. That there wasn't a single move he could make to get Big Sandwich Girl to notice him. That there was a *science* to attraction; a certain subset of boys to whom a certain girl would find attractive— the rest of everyone may as well be Green Day's "Disappearing Boy"; invisible and worthless. That we needed to dissect who Big Sandwich Girl was aside from what she had for lunch: she was a pretty cheerleader from a wealthy family.

Dan was a goofy kid from budget housing whose mom worked two waitressing jobs. He often made himself macaroni and cheese at night because she wasn't home for dinner. He slept on a bare mattress because his sheets ripped and weren't replaced. His older brother ran away from home. His mother wrote a letter to the principal of our Catholic school begging to get a break on tuition; a discount; anything. She didn't want to lose another son.

I thought Dan should maybe focus on something more realistic. Someone more like him, who'd appreciate his kindness and humor; his gentle persistence and attention to detail.

Dan's lockermate Jessica took exception to my advice. She told him to follow his heart. That love stories *are real*. That *Friends* (1994) truly do make for the best lovers. That it took time and patience, two long television seasons for Rachel to understand that Ross was a *great guy* with a good heart. That he was loyal and courageous. That Dan shouldn't listen to me. That I'm just an asshole. That I'm breaking his heart and crushing his dreams. That it doesn't matter if Big Sandwich Girl is hooking up with the quarterback of the football team. That he's a jerk who *doesn't respect her*. That she needs someone who will *fight for her*. She needs someone who will love her. She needs someone like Dan.

Jessica and I would continue these debates long after Dan bumbled off to class. Sometimes just for the sake of arguing. Where the words being exchanged, their denotation and etymology, wasn't the point. It was about the emotions they conveyed. How the words would dance and entwine like a poem being written by the both of us, with skin tingling and face flush. The morning our eyes met before homeroom... It couldn't have lasted more than a few seconds, but it hung in the air like an eternal sunrise. Like breaking through the top of the screen with Super Mario; being a participant in an unfolding, predestined world while actively creating that world in real time. Like running top speed, together, into the unknown; into poorly lit corridors, past non-orthogonal walls. This was the floating monolith in the orbit of Jupiter; the acid trip light show; a journey beyond the infinite, the moment our eyes met before homeroom, with a glass cuttingly smooth frame rate and three fully realized dimensions. Courageously getting in the ring with Kid Dynamite and confidently breaking his jaw with a start button uppercut.

I finally had the master sword; finally ready to conquer the world.

Bringing his own big sandwich to third period Theology didn't seem to garner Dan any attention, even after changing desks to sit directly adjacent to Big Sandwich Girl, side-by-side with dueling big sandwiches, and even with Dan's calculated, attention grasping glances, as if startled by the unexpected— *do we both have big sandwiches?!—* Dan's best attempt at making a spectacle of their newfound mutual interest. A coincidence *too pressing* to not spark a conversation, Dan had almost certainly thought as he annihilated his Italian B.M.T.. As the weeks turned into months without even a cursory glance; without even minor acknowledgment of their shared lunch period and preference for quantity, Dan knew he needed a new tactic.

He decided to write her a love letter.

Jessica was my girlfriend for a little less than a year. We broke up for reasons that seemed important at the time and seem less important now. We broke up despite her big blue eyes, maybe the biggest I'd ever seen— maybe exaggerated by time and memory but for reasons more important than whatever really was. Maybe we remember things how they should have been. Her perfect breasts, firm and round with quarter sized nipples. With an arm around her shoulder and a hand down her shirt, watching *Halloween* (1978) on cable. Together, on a never ending Friday night. Together, hand-in-hand, going beyond the infinite.

We broke up despite her having *great graphics*: long brown hair, a perfect hip-to-waist ratio on her one-hundred and fifteen pound frame. Despite fucking on the shag carpeting of her living room, laughing in the face of whoever didn't get the joke— that we were maybe perfect together, something that can only be understood in retrospect, with claw streaked skin.

We broke up because maybe life begins at the end of the game— Gannon's throat cut from a single slash of the master sword; Triforce reunited; Hyrule in peace. Link high on experience points with his character stats maxed. Ready for a new adventure. Ready for a Second Quest. Life shouldn't end at eighteen— two kids in a house with a two-car garage. Forced obsolescence creating new possibilities: meeting girls on the Internet loomed with the gravitational force of an artificial moon. Godmode enabled; annihilating demon scum with your big fucking gun; your big fucking dick, talking to a new girl every night— new phone numbers came fast and easy. Jerking off under bedsheets, alone in the dark; jerking off under the twilit glow of your computer monitor, and it's okay to masturbate.

You had a whole life to live and it was only getting started.

Dan's reply from Big Sandwich Girl was awkward even in its brevity. She politely declined his advances and asked him to please stop watching her eat lunch.

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WELCOME TO HELL

The Misfits (1961)

Billy Pratt · 15 June 2024 · Archived copy · Original

"You know, sometimes when a person don't know what to do, the best thing is to just stand still..."

If you didn't already know, the ticket insurance that Ticketmaster sells is a scam. They get away with it because they don't expect you to use it. Ticketmaster thrives on an idiot proof, impossible to fail business model— people love going to concerts. For most any latter day Gen-Xer or millennial, popular music has played a significant role in their lives— heavy metal was the sound of adolescence; alternative rock, the soundtrack of wistful teenage love.

Music lives deep in the soul of anyone born in the age of the rock star, and so it follows that business for Ticketmaster is evergreen— the product sells itself, so much that Ticketmaster can exploit their customers and get away with it. People want to see their favorite bands; Ticketmaster can rip you off with tacked on fees until the price of your ticket is well into the hundreds of dollars, and while this may be annoying, you grin and bare it because seeing Metallica, or Guns n' Roses, or The Misfits is worth it. After all, you don't know how much longer they'll be around.

And they get you with the ticket insurance because they know you'll have a tiny moment of hesitation before committing to the purchase... you'll think, "I'd love to see my favorite band play live one more time... maybe one last time, but it sure is an awful lot of money... what if something happens? What if I get sick? What if I get hit by a car? What if someone dies? What if I can't make it to the show and need to cancel?" and in this moment of doubt— the Agony in the Garden— you purchase the modestly priced ticket insurance just in case.

But the ticket insurance is a scam, if you didn't already know. It isn't some willy-nilly, I don't feel like going to the show anymore kind of deal. You don't click a button on an app and have your money refunded. You need to file a *claim*. You need proper *documentation*. Not everything is covered— not terrorist events nor mental health disorders, among other things on a laundry list of shit-out-of-luck life events.

In the face of misery, it's easier to suck it up for a night, swallow a handful of drugs, and get to the concert.

My father died and two weeks later I was at a Misfits concert.

I ran into a coworker at the supermarket. A red hot needle poking discretely into the recess of my underarm— torture that is unseen; leaves no marks, often used so that the tortured can still function at a capacity productive to their employer. I intentionally go to a supermarket on the other side of town as to avoid these interactions. I don't want to be in *work mode* when I don't have to be. I'm not very good at work mode in the social sense, and I disregard this character flaw with the partial excuse that bland social niceties are a feminine construct and there's no good reason to excel at anything feminine. Leave me alone and let me do my job— which is something that usually works, in the context of the busybody work place, but falls apart in the non-work setting. When you run into a co-worker at the supermarket.

No one wants a real answer when they ask how you're doing. It's as boilerplate as reading the small-print warnings on the inside of an instruction booklet for a brand new toaster or the 40,000 word Terms of Service bundled with an iPhone update. "Fine, great, and you?" will usually suffice when we're at work and we all have our busybody things to do... but it's in the blackness of the unstructured environment, when we theoretically have a minute to chat without constraint, that one must improvise.

This insidious co-worker, how dare he shop at my supermarket, standing in front of the eggs telling me about his summer— spending more time with his daughter and working on the house; looking forward to the big vacation. And you?

And you... well, me? I'm just hanging out. Low key summer. Spending time at the gym. Getting things in order.

My father died last week, so there's a lot to do.

Met with a prolonged pause, I realized my folly with vicious immediacy. Not only did I provide my poor, unwitting coworker with a regretfully honest answer— I was never one to lie— but I mentioned the death of a parent while standing in front of the eggs at Whole Foods. His discomfort was tangible. I continued: it's been a lot. You know it's coming your entire life, but it happens so fast and then it's over. The paperwork (my father made zero arrangements in the event of his death) and cleaning (nor did he ever throw anything away) is so overwhelming that you don't have time to process things. You don't have time to grieve, I told him... Besides, I need to take care of my mother— she only has me, and before that, she only had us. She's having a hard time with things.

I said these things to my coworker standing in front of the eggs at Whole Foods. I said these things in a dry tone that communicated matters of fact. In a social sense, this was my mistake, but this is what you don't expect when dealing with the death of a parent. Things you don't expect when ruminating in horror, on those long sleepless nights. The nightmares you'd have as an only child with abandonment issues. You've always feared abandonment but you've come to expect the world to fail you— the result of growing up with parents who've had profound, life defining problems. You fear their abandonment while you've become their protector; guilt and sadness define your relationship. You're Bruce Wayne picking over the events of that night in obsessive detail.

I said these things in a dry tone that communicated matters of fact because that's what these things become. It becomes a fact that your father died and you have to grit your teeth and fucking deal with it. I didn't feel the need for a gentle showing of performative emotion nor did I want to use a euphemism. My father died. He's my father and he died.

The Misfits (1961) was both Marilyn Monroe and Clark Gable's final movie. Gable had a fatal heart attack ten days after filming was complete. The movie, written by playwright Arthur Miller, was considered a Valentine's Day gift for his then wife Marilyn Monroe. Monroe's drinking and drug use on the set was said to be out of control, with Monroe needing in-patient psychiatric treatment during filming which shut down production for two weeks. Director John Huston is on record saying he was "absolutely certain" Monroe was "doomed." On the set of *The Misfits*, Miller and Monroe's marriage fell apart— the two would divorce in January, 1961. Marilyn Monroe died of an apparent drug overdose on August 5th, 1962.

Glenn Danzig was born Glenn Allen Anzalone on June 23rd, 1955. After playing in a few local garage bands, Danzig started his first real band, The Misfits, with Gerald Caiafa Jr.— who took on the stage name *Jerry Only*— in early 1977. They were named after Monroe's final movie; Marilyn's end was their beginning.

My father was born on July 25th, 1942. He turned twenty years old in 1962. At this time he was away at university studying chemistry. He wanted to be a dentist.

In a metal box kept in his bedside nightstand were three handwritten letters. Two were written by him, and one by his college girlfriend. The letter written by his college girlfriend was neatly torn in quarters, then folded neatly, and placed at the bottom of the box— presumably for sixty years; the letter was dated 1962.

In this letter, my father's college girlfriend apologized for not having contacted him for several months. She was doing a study abroad semester in Italy and, she said, didn't have phone service so she couldn't call. She had no time to write, she said. Italy was great, though, she told him— she may end up spending the entire year there. Don't worry about her, she said. She'll be okay, she reassured him.

He ripped the letter into four neat quarters, to maintain readability, and stored it in a metal box in the nightstand next to his side of my parents' bed.

My mother found it after he died.

The first time I used the words “my father is going to die” was through text, staring at these words before hitting send for what felt like an infinity of moments sitting three feet from his hospital bed... his sedated husk with more tubes than I wanted to count, mouth agape with intubation leaving him with a static expression of horror— the moment of death still and prolonged. Staring at my text window through a blur of tears before hitting send. I didn’t want to use a euphemism because this is my life and this is my father and my father was going to die.

Something that becomes a matter of fact when it’s over. After the priest says his last rites. Encourages you to say goodbye, what you thought was ridiculous five minutes prior, talking to someone who can’t hear you, but with nudging... you tell him that you love him. That you knew about all the problems he had. That you understood. That you forgive him— you know he tried. You know he cared. I’m sorry, too. I’m sorry I didn’t do more. I’m sorry I didn’t do more to protect you from yourself. Maybe if I did, things would have been different for all of us... I promised to take care of Mom, and I will.

Holding my zip-up hoodie balled to my face— no matter how old you are, you’re ten years old watching your father die— the staff instruct us to leave the room. They draw a curtain. They offer a refreshment cart, out of place in an ICU but has got to be some kind of end-of-life grief protocol for families. It’s grounding— a reality check, maybe. Reminds you that you’re alive and life is about to go on. Things are about to get matter of fact.

They invite us back into the room— my father, now relieved of his tubes; mouth closed; quiet expression. We stand by his side. They instruct us to hold his hands. My mother takes his hand. When did I ever hold his hand? Men don’t hold hands. When my dog was sick, my dad knew what had to be done, and he loved that fucking dog. Men know when its time and they do the right thing for each other and now it was my fucking turn, and that’s what this was: “your turn now, my turn later.” A matter of fact because it has to be; a matter of fact because that’s what it is.

My coworker told me that it was nice seeing me after picking out his eggs.

Said he hoped I enjoyed the rest of my summer.

Two weeks later, I was at the seat I had purchased in the air-chilled suburban hockey arena ready to see The *Original* Misfits— “original,” a terrible, unaesthetic differentiator added to appease both parties of the occasional reunion. Before buying the ticket, I had promised myself I wouldn’t miss another opportunity to see The Misfits live— this felt pressing and urgent in a post-pandemic world. After all, you don’t know how much longer they’ll be around.

I didn’t want to be there, even with the handful of drugs I’d taken before I walked in; even with the autographed show poster safe in its cardboard poster tube and t-shirt rolled and stuffed into one of my cargo shorts’ pockets.

I didn’t want to be there, and while looking at my phone and counting down the minutes until I could walk back out to my car (stopping to purchase a bootleg shirt along the way, of course), while being assaulted with music that has defined large chunks of my life; music I’ve loved with all my heart, like “Astro Zombies” and “Hybrid Moments” and “Who Killed Marilyn?”, I got a text from an editor at Penguin.

We didn’t know each other terribly well, me and the editor. He was interested in my follow up to *Welcome to Hell* (2021), is how I met him, and I told him that my next project wasn’t close to completion. “Soon isn’t the word,” is what I like to say when people ask, to assuage feelings of immediate anticipation, and the pressure and anxiety I feel that comes with it...

I didn’t think I’d hear from him again, but the text I got while watching The Misfits play the music I’ve loved with all my heart, was from him. It wasn’t about the book but my father. I mentioned on Twitter that my father died. The response was overwhelming and beautiful. He wanted to know how I was doing with everything...if I was taking time to grieve— not for my mother or father; not for anyone else— but *taking time to grieve* for myself.

“Grieving” is just another part of the to-do list, isn’t it? Another *thing to do* not unlike cleaning out the basement or selling my dad’s car. Just another event on the timeline of events— my parents married in 1976 and I was born in ____

1980; my father died in 2023. If grieving is the acceptance of these events as part of the inevitable, inescapable timeline that life presents, grieving is achieved on its face. I am not in denial... my father died and I accept it. My father died. He died, I watched it, and I accept it.

It's a matter of fact— these events on the timeline of life with their short, clean words used to denote our understanding and acceptance of them. Cold, marble-hard words frozen in time with a workhorse like functionality; a mechanic's words with extreme utilitarian value. We use these words to make believe that these are just events on a timeline, with hard, blunt, lifeless words to mark their existence— to mark our understanding and acceptance of them. My father died. He fucking died, and I watched it, and I fucking accept it.

If that's not grieving, what is?

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WELCOME TO HELL

Night Trap (1992)

Billy Pratt · 28 June 2024 · Archived copy · Original

"Somehow, you set the wheels in motion, now haunts our memories..."

Although I couldn't verbalize it at the time, I felt a sense of confusion and betrayal as I left the shopping mall multiplex on a summer afternoon with my father in 1989— my only lasting memory of the day. We had just seen *Ghostbusters II* (1989).

Ghostbusters II is the first movie sequel I remember anticipating. *Ghostbusters* (1984) was the very first movie we watched as a family— my father, my mother and me— after my dad brought home our brand new, front loading VCR. Even if the VCR was mostly bought to watch pornography in a comfortable setting, he was also excited to watch big Hollywood blockbusters months before they hit HBO. He was a movie guy.

We rented *Ghostbusters* from a far away video store which, after returning the movie, we never patronized again— the VCR purchase allotted us one free rental. I was dazzled by the store's bright lights and incredible selection. It was only the Thanksgiving prior that my uncle debuted his top loading VCR to the family after dinner. We watched *Rocky III* (1982). The atmosphere in his Italian immigrant living room— furniture wrapped in thick, sweat inducing plastic— was electric. In the Reagan 80s, the only thing more exciting than home entertainment was movie sequels.

I fell asleep before the end of *Ghostbusters*— the long drive home after all the excitement must have tired me out. My mother told me about the city wrecking marshmallow man over breakfast. I immediately watched *Ghostbusters* front-to-back twice in a row as the tape had to be returned that very evening under the far away video store's punitive return policy— a contract requiring my father's signature. It was a godsend when the movie finally aired on HBO, in what felt like a thousand lifetimes later, and my father captured it on VHS cassette. I couldn't stop thinking about its sequel once the idea had been introduced to me, and yet, I felt a cold void in my soul after leaving the shopping mall multiplex that summer afternoon in 1989.

My father, to his credit, thought *Ghostbusters II* was just fine. After all, he was a movie guy.

People are sometimes more alive after they die. After someone dies, all points between past and present converge. The person they were before their lives fell apart becomes as relevant as who they ended up as after. Whatever success they managed to create becomes as meaningful as their failings, even if their failings came later and stayed longer. This is why awful people still get flowers at their funeral: they were once misguided teenagers; they were once lost young adults.

The man I came to know as my father was not the man my father was before I met him. This mattered little to me growing up and more to me as an adult— things I came to understand the generalities of but kept locked away in a mental box I would occasionally pass and acknowledge while always ensuing it was kept under lock-and-key in the winding passageways of my brain cave. These thoughts were complex and upsetting— on long sleepless nights when the box would push its way to the forefront of my thoughts. I could never find a comfortable medium between feeling sorry for him— the pain I knew he carried; the fear and self doubt; the buried self-hatred— while contextualizing the anger I felt for his failing me as a father.

He could have tried harder.

My father had a sad life that negatively impacted the trajectory of my own, is how I would allow these thoughts to settle so I could get to sleep. On those nights, I'd feel the gravity of his eventual death. I knew his death would cause despair urgent enough to force attempts at understanding his life in its totality while still managing the anger I could never quite shake despite promising myself I'd get over it and move on; stay focused on the present with gratitude in my heart.

On those nights when the box in my brain cave pushed its way to the forefront of my thoughts, I'd remind myself that none of it required immediate confrontation. That I could allow things to settle unresolved. That these ideas could remain messy and unreckoned with; puzzle pieces left askew. That my father's death would be a *long time from now*, even when I knew that time was creeping along with ceaseless persistence. Sometimes you tell yourself lies just to get to sleep. It's always a long time from now until the day it isn't.

Death is a confrontation. Death forces these ideas into the forefront of your waking thoughts: your father was a person before you were born, and this person matters as much as the person you came to know as your father. Something happened along the way to change things— to set his trajectory in stone— but this person existed and now death makes all things equal.

Death forces you to sit down with these puzzle pieces and make sense of them.

Although I couldn't have known it at the time— no one in my uncle's gaudy living room that night could have— the *Rocky* (1976) film franchise told the story of how the remainder of the millennium would play out with incredible accuracy; Sylvester Stallone was prescient. The 1980s became a decade of linearity: what started off as good only got better, and if not truly better in the strictest sense of the word, things got bigger; everything became *more*. To understand the unsustainability of this— the damning glory of pushing things beyond the infinite— we can look to Stallone's *Rocky* series as analogous.

Rocky (1976) was a quiet movie about an aging boxer lamenting having missed the opportunities he thought he deserved. When he lucks into a fight with the champ, after some initial trepidation— Rocky fears failure and the resultant crisis of ego— he decides to go at it with everything he's got. Before the fight he creates a reasonable, quiet expectation for himself: he only wants to go the distance. Rocky *doesn't want to lose*— not again, not this time. Rocky's quiet lesson is in humility and acceptance: that the average man can make a nice, albeit unremarkable, life for himself by force of will. If he wants it enough, by blood and sweat alone.

Rocky's lesson is that it's okay to be unremarkable— that an unremarkable life is worth fighting for.

Rocky told a compete story and won best picture for 1976, but audiences weren't satisfied... at least not completely. Feeling the gravity of the decade to come, audiences demanded a more grandiose sequel with a happy ending: audiences wanted to see Rocky beat the champ. Canonically, this undid the original's quiet thematics. Rocky wasn't supposed to win.

Had his life gone differently, Rocky may have become a better fighter as a younger man but he failed to realize that, either by choice, circumstance, or a genuine lack of potential. Something happened to Rocky along the way to set his trajectory in stone and he ended up in a shithole apartment earning pennies while fighting chumps. Even if things *could have* been different, they weren't. After ending up on the wrong side of thirty, a washed up bum of a fighter, Rocky lucks into an opportunity to believe in *what could have been*— wish fulfillment for the average joe.

With the excesses of the coming decade in horizon's view, *Rocky II* (1979) gave audiences what they wanted: Rocky beats Apollo. Playing out like a retcon apology letter or a *Choose Your Own Adventure* (1979) styled alternate ending, *Rocky II* has the strange designation of a movie where the majority of its run time serves as filler content made to deliver a fake boxing rematch. The movie itself isn't particularly good or interesting when taken as a whole, an academy award winner it is not, yet it delivers in spades on the promise of a feel good, Hollywood ending. It's virtually impossible to not get full body chills when hearing Rocky's celebratory, movie ending, "Yo Adrian, I did it," as Adrian murmurs back— under the twilit glow of the television screen— "I love you..." half-celebratory, half-overwhelmed with emotion, face fully stained with tears.

Rocky II told a compete story— if you weren't satisfied with the quiet subtleties of the award winning original, *Rocky II* completed your narrative journey with a big, loud sledgehammer. From a story perspective— from the perspective of Rocky's exhausted character arc— there needn't be any more *Rocky* movies, but that wasn't how the 1980s were

set to work and audiences were primed for an even bigger and badder Rocky– a more extravagant Rocky; a more refined Rocky; *more* Rocky.

1980's audiences were ready to want more of everything.

Rocky III was perceived as *unnecessary* by critics at the time– a word they'd keep in their lexicon as a descriptor for many 80's sequels to come. These critics weren't entirely wrong from a theoretical perspective but completely wrong from almost every other: *Rocky III* tells a story as important as the original. The disconnect critics had was in *misunderstanding Rocky III's* connection to the prior movies. *Rocky III* features Rocky Balboa in *name only*: gone is the slow witted, illiterate Rocky. Rocky is now a man of class and wisdom. The shy, withdrawn Adrian is replaced by an outspoken woman of elegance and glamor. Different characters, different movie– something no one seemed to notice at the time.

Rocky III exists as the original's polar opposite. *Rocky III* tells a story of hubris; of *overconfidence*. We meet world champion Rocky who's had ten bombastic title defenses and is ready to retire to a life of gaudy luxury. As he's about to begin his retirement speech, after unveiling a giant, gaudy Rocky statue at a public press conference, he's confronted by Clubber Lang, a brutal heavyweight brawler, who makes a public challenge to Rocky. Rocky, of course, accepts without hesitation.

After the public spectacle, trainer Mickey tells Rocky he wants *no part* of the hulking Clubber – he won't train Rocky for a fight that Rocky is sure to lose. When Rocky reminds Mickey of his ten bombastic title defenses, Mickey reveals they “*was hand picked challengers*”. Rocky's success was not his own; Mickey was controlling things from behind the scenes. Like the desperate Casablanca Records early-80's determination to will KISS back to their mid-70's apex with fake news headlines and plenty of radio station payola, Rocky was a *protected champion*.

Rocky was a paper champion.

Rocky refuses to believe this and, instead, fully commits to his public image as the *greatest of all time*. If the newspapers and magazines are saying it; if Johnny Carson and the Muppets think so; if celebrities like being seen with him, it *must be true*. Ace Frehley never stopped spending money as the KISS ship sank because KISS said KISS was the hottest band in the world, and who was he to disagree? There's always another hit record right around the corner even when there isn't. Rocky believed Rocky was the greatest of all time because people said Rocky was the greatest of all time.

Rocky decides to lean into his public image which has become the only thing holding his version of reality together. Rocky rents a hotel ballroom and fills it with gym equipment and a boxing ring. He wants to do all of his training for Clubber in public and with spectators. There's banners and balloons, and tons of Rocky merch. With this, Rocky has painted himself into a corner: Rocky *can't* take his training seriously. Rocky must believe that the false-self, media produced *Rocky* is the greatest of all time and always will be.

The *greatest of all time* needn't fear challengers to his throne– he can be king of the night time world forever.

Clubber defeats Rocky with vicious immediacy. Clubber is what Rocky *once was*– a young, hungry fighter. Clubber is what Rocky *never was*– a man taking advantage of his prime. Even worse than Clubber, reality crushes Rocky's fighting spirit. In the shadow of brutal defeat, Rocky encounters former foe Apollo Creed who wants to train Rocky for a Clubber rematch. Apollo wants to take Rocky back to the beginning– to detach the fighter in Rocky from the overhyped image; to break Rocky down until all that's left is what's real.

Apollo wants to give Rocky his edge back– to give Rocky the *eye of the tiger*.

People are sometimes more alive after they die, because they lose all rights to privacy. The living are left with the task of sorting through their belongings– creating order from chaos in the literal sense. My father wasn't a hoarder in the sense that he could have been on a TLC show, but he didn't like throwing things away. He was a saver. As a child, my parents' basement was a goldmine of dusty porno mags and interesting junk, but as an adult it's become

another looming problem. I knew it would need to be reckoned with someday in its dusty totality; another lonely obligation for the only child. After my father's death, I would come to spend my nights chipping away at it piece by piece. Dismantling the history we endured.

Admittedly, a lot of what's in the basement is my own and not terribly well kept. This is a shame. An unforgivable sin of the pop culture memorabilia collector. A lesson we thought we learned from hearing the horror stories of silver age comic book kids who trashed their million dollar collection when they decided to *grow up*. Who maybe still have a trampled copy of *Fantastic Four #8 (1961)* saved accidentally— saved incidentally, as a reminder of what could have been. A reminder of how their cherished memories of childhood transmogrified into a big time cash grab— one they regret not being able to partake in. They don't miss the paper artifacts of their adolescence— the adolescence they grew up and moved on from— only the lost potential of profiting from their adolescence. These are the people who grew up to manage the Reagan 80s.

Only we didn't learn from their mistakes. As teenagers, we weren't careful to preserve everything we owned because we viewed our generation's eventual relics as *lesser* than what came before, even when considering their *future potential*. We understood only the past as something that could hold value; as something that could hold *meaning*— that their adolescence was more important than what ours was destined to become. Our adolescent culture was destined to remain of lesser importance in perpetuity— the books were closed. A newer issue of *Spider-Man #1 (1990)* could never become as valuable as an old issue of *The Amazing Spider-Man #1 (1963)*, even in sentimentality.

Our present was not as important as their past.

It's difficult for a child to decide what to keep of a deceased parent's belongings. You can't keep everything, but throwing things away feels like little pieces of their death happening again and again— only, you're the one doing it this time. You're deciding. You're severing what's left of the relationship. You're erasing them.

A lot of what's kept in the basement is from the life my parents had before I was born. My father's "Salesman of the Year" awards won in succession during the late 70s— I never knew him to be a successful salesman. His motorcycle helmet from when he was a biker— he once biked across the entire country. His dismantled model airplanes from when he was an "aeromodeller." Furniture he built from fucking lumber that I always assumed was store bought. All of these things that were important to him, that he was proud of, that I feel no personal connection with— at first blush all of it is garbage to me.

I never saw him fly a model airplane. I'd always known it as something he *used to do* before me, but *didn't do anymore* after me— like everything else in his life. The basement is a dirty pile of shit because he gave up working on the house around the same time he gave up on everything else. You'll know the time a homeowner has given up on their dreams by looking at when they stopped working on their home. It's like counting the circles on a tree stump. The house became my father's decaying castle.

Maybe he tried to balance suburban life, having a family, and maintaining a career but alcoholism got the better of him. Alcoholism became his defining trait.

I never saw him fly a model airplane, but my mother was happy to share these stories after he died. These stories suddenly mattered again— these stories felt real to her again. These stories of the adventures they had together. The times he'd lose track of one of his planes and they'd go searching the countryside for it by motorcycle long into the night. Times in their apartment before they bought the house. Happy times.

Times before me. Times before my mother's cancer. Times before he couldn't hold a job. Times before alcoholism became his defining trait. Times before me.

I have this reoccurring nightmare that I'm at my kitchen table, eating dinner with my parents in 1992. Like all dreams, the dream is ephemeral and surreal. I'm at once an adult and an adolescent; that part of adulthood that never quite leaves adolescence. My father is drunk— his face red, his eyes vacant. By the turn of the decade, the

pieces of his personality that represented fatherhood had eroded into a mechanism necessary for his own survival. If he didn't have a son to dominate and a wife to serve him, what did he have left?

Our relationship deteriorated. He didn't talk to me, he talked at me. He spent time ordering me around. He spent time criticizing me and giving awful, drunken advice; barking awful, drunken orders. *Ghostbusters II* was the only movie we'd see together for twenty-five years, and he was a movie guy.

By the turn of the decade alcoholism became his only trait. For his long stretches of unemployment, he'd drink all day. He wielded fatherhood like a blade to offset the shame he felt in allowing his life to fall apart. By this time my mother all but hated him. Their relationship unraveled with vicious immediacy and constant fighting; mean fighting; terrible fighting. There's a particular terror in experiencing this alone; these things that no one else can ever know.

My parents slept in the same bed, and we had dinner every weekday night at the kitchen table, although I had wished we didn't. By the time my mother got home from work and had dinner ready, the sun had set and the sky was dark. My father would sit with us, hardly conscious—his face red, his eyes hateful. He would tell my mother her cooking was shit. That dinner was shit. He'd scrap the food off his plate with his utensils, hardly able to keep his head up. My mother would berate him, call him a useless drunk, tell him he'd be better off dead.

As the 1990s trudged forward with merciless persistence, this became all we had together. Like a reoccurring nightmare, this scene repeated every night of my adolescence. The same words were said in the same order—maybe only exaggerated as time went on, bordering parody like Bob Crane doing dinner theater. Every day I'd come home from school and between Disney Afternoons and Must See TV lineups, I'd watch my parents hate their lives over dinner.

I couldn't make sense of *Ghostbusters II* in 1989, specifically how it didn't manage to exceed the original in every way. Confusion permeated my subconscious in nameless shadows. I didn't have the language to explain my sadness.

Hollywood wasn't supposed to let you down—I never experienced disappointment before. Hollywood movies were the cream of the crop; the best of the best. Hollywood movies were supposed to deliver in spades where maybe Saturday morning cartoons missed the mark. Once you realize no one ever takes a hit in *G.I. Joe* or that the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles reset after every episode like nothing happened to them at all—no memory; no scars... That *Batman* (1966) faces toothless peril at the end of the first part of every two-parter but always manages a supposedly impossible escape at the start of the second... you understand television to be a lesser medium.

But movies were the real deal. *The Real Ghostbusters* (1986) were a *prima facie* fraud—a watered down facsimile. The actual, real Ghostbusters were on the big screen. Ready to return to action in their second epic adventure. One that had silently promised to be bigger and better than the first. Bigger and better, as all things went in the Reagan 80s, and right at the tail end of the decade; what should have been the *biggest* and *best*. With the 1990s in horizon's view, the nine-year-old brain could hardly fathom what incredible delights were in store... unfathomable, if only *Ghostbusters II* didn't poke a hole in that logic—in ways I wasn't ready to understand. In ways I couldn't consciously acknowledge.

The world I was born into isn't one that could disappoint—it wasn't *supposed* to disappoint; it wasn't made to disappoint—this is how a child understands the world around himself; the esoteric, hidden adult world. A child believes in nothing more than the functionality of that world. The idea that promises made are promises kept; the idea that adults will inherently *do the right thing* when given the chance. That the tiny glimpses captured of the complex system known as *modern America*—helmed by our nation's proud, stoic grandfather—was something we could believe in; something we could *depend on*. Our parents existed as avatars of righteousness—their decisions were made with only our best interests in mind.

Contemporary Hollywood promised topflight quality—this is how a boy born at the dawn of the decade understood the movie industry. When your favorite thing—your favorite character, TV show, or video game—got made into a

movie, the memetic presumption made was that of *elevation*. When you saw “the movie” added as a tail-end differentiator to any product’s title, you knew for certain that whatever the thing was had achieved a degree of cultural significance far greater than anything without the prestigious designation. The existence of “the movie” legitimized a product in a way inaccessible by any other means.

Movies were serious business.

As it followed, if your favorite movie was big enough to warrant a sequel, that designation, in itself, legitimized the movie above all others sequeless. Movie sequels were a *big deal*. Every kid knew the *Star Wars* (1977) trilogy was a big deal because it had *three movies* that told a single, epic story. If a kid’s favorite movie ended up with a “Part 2” attached to its title as a tail-end differentiator, there wasn’t a nine-year-old boy on the planet who wouldn’t be excited beyond the capacity for rational thought.

Yet I left the shopping mall multiplex that summer afternoon knowing I didn’t like what I had seen. Knowing in my heart that what I saw *wasn’t good*. The first *Ghostbusters* was about a shapeshifting god of destruction being summoned to New York City by an esoteric cultist architect who designed a skyscraper to function as an antenna to attract and concentrate spiritual energy and bring about the apocalypse. A fucking *end of the world cult* built into a slapstick comedy that culminates with a giant walking marshmallow— that the Ghostbusters shoot with lasers until it explodes.

With the image of Manhattan covered in melted marshmallow screen burned into my nine-year-old brain, I couldn’t stop thinking about *Ghostbusters II*.

Ghostbusters II was surely going to be epic in ways I couldn’t begin to understand...

Ghostbusters II is about a painting that tries to possess a baby. At the end of the movie, the Ghostbusters fight the painting. Not the world ending god of destruction at the top of a Manhattan skyscraper, they fight a fucking painting, in a museum, so that it doesn’t possess a baby.

In *Ghostbusters II*, if you don’t care about the baby, the painting, or the same characters doing the same things, all of it feels hollow. Worse, the Ghostbusters’ proton packs are replaced with slime-filled Super Soakers to make the movie less violent and more *kid friendly*— something no kid asked for and no kid wanted. Also, the sign outside the firehouse is the *movie’s logo*: the cartoon ghost with the circle-backslash “no symbol” over it, holding out two fingers to signify *Ghostbusters II*. Why is this immersion breaking logo *in the actual movie*? What pandering, commercial horseshit.

Although I couldn’t verbalize it at the time, *Ghostbusters II* hurt me in a way that I wasn’t ready for; *Ghostbusters II* hurt me in a way that I wasn’t going to forget. *Ghostbusters II* was my first experience with disappointment— profound disappointment. *Ghostbusters II* was the first time the world let me down. The first time I couldn’t rely on the myth of modern America: an overwhelmingly positive trajectory where good things only got better; where everything in life worked itself out for the best— where the future was something to anticipate and and embrace; a place of positivity; a place of *hope*. *Ghostbusters II* was first time the adult world had let me down. That you couldn’t count on the people in charge to do the right thing— they were human; they were weak; they were fallible. *Ghostbusters II* wasn’t there for me. *Ghostbusters II* betrayed me.

People are sometimes more alive after they die, because part of the process of coming to terms with their death involves telling their stories. Death forces these memories out of the subconscious and into the forefront of your waking thoughts— into the forefront of your day, these memories now carry a sense of urgency; of necessity. Death is a *séance*; death is a conjurer. Death shapes and animates our memories— these monstrous emotions hiding in shadows— turning them into words and stories. Words and stories that hang in the air to be analyzed, and processed, and understood. Telling these stories helps make sense of death for those left living.

The man who set up my Nintendo Entertainment System and felt the same shock and awe while experiencing *Super*

Mario Bros. (1985) for the first time was the same man too drunk to come to my first grade wrestling meet– I looked into the sea of parents, noticing only my mother and even then, I knew why... This same man built me a gorgeous red and yellow lemonade stand out of fucking lumber for my seventh birthday party yet never bothered to help me drag it to the curb and teach me to use it. He bought me a chemistry set for Christmas– his Bachelor of Science in Chemistry degree ready to pay off– and never helped me take it out of the box; the same for the woodworking kit he bought me the next year.

In our later years, he'd lament how I never managed to pick up any of his skills– his every day handyman, *fix what's broken* kind of dad stuff. His electrician skills. His ability to open up the hood of a car and tinker around with the engine. If I were ever asked to help with these tasks as a kid, I'd stand around holding things while he'd sweat and curse. I never learned any of these things because he never taught me, and I didn't care enough to ask.

For a long time, the latter half of this equation would bother me. My father had his half-hearted attempts at fathering. He tried to be there. I wanted him to be there. He ultimately couldn't will himself to a place where he could be there. For a long time, I would blame myself for not making more of an effort to conjure his parenting into existence. I could have asked him to help me use the lemonade stand, or the chemistry set, or to show me how to make a fucking bird house. I could have asked him how to fix a toilet or what the fuck he was doing under the hood of my mother's buzzing '89 Corolla– what ended up as my first car. How to fix dry wall. How to do anything. I could have tried harder to spend time with him, even with his big, fat, red face; even if he was piss drunk at 1pm.

For a long time, I would think that I could have saved him if only I were different. These thoughts– Bruce Wayne's intrusive interior monologue, a mystery even the world's greatest detective couldn't solve– would keep me up at night...

How many times would I have had to ask? How many times before I resented his alcoholism too much to bother asking?

A story my mother has come back to often was about my father growing up. My father had a difficult childhood. His father abused him. His mother never loved him, and she would tell him so both as a child and later as an adult. His parents would fight viciously in front of him and his sister– fights that would often end in rape. There were also things my mother wouldn't tell me. Awful things. I'd never ask.

When he was old enough they sent him to boarding school. They didn't want him around. When he got back, he met my mother. They met at a wedding for mutual friends– he wouldn't leave her alone until she shouted her phone number into his ear over the loud wedding band. She figured if he managed to remember it, she'd go on a date with him.

They married and lived together in a little apartment. Once they saved up enough money, they bought a house. My father was doing well then. He was sales manager in a "Fortune 200 company" (as per a copy of his resume I found in the basement). Drinking was probably considered *part of the job*, a delicate balance my father was able to temporarily strike.

A year after I was born, my mother's cancer diagnosis was too much for him to handle. His drinking went from excessive to out of control. He was afraid of losing his wife– an idea he couldn't process. A idea that swirled around in his brain, undoubtedly causing feelings of confusion and betrayal. Feelings that he couldn't quite verbalize.

She said a turning point between them was a time when he was too drunk to take her to her cancer treatment. She had to drive herself, she told me, stopping to throw up along the way.

Throughout my life, my mother would tell me these stories to remind me that my father wasn't a bad person. Maybe she needed reminding too. That he wasn't a bad person– that he just maybe didn't always do the right thing... and as time went on, as the crushing weight of the nihilistic 90s descended upon our formerly idealistic nation; our never quite idealistic, but maybe just *good enough* little family, some things were lost for good.

Stories you can play through, and replay in your mind, on sleepless nights. Hoping just once to put them in the right

words, said in the right order, for it to be satisfactory; for it to be *good enough*— maybe not the best ending, maybe not catching all the nasty Augers while saving Kelly and the girls, but just good enough to stop playing it over and over again; good enough to be done with it.

I have this strange knack for tying commercial art to its year of release. Ask me the year of release for any movie sequel between 1980 and 2000 and I'll nail it. Without Googling, I know *Nightmare on Elm Street 2: Freddy's Revenge* is 1985, just one year after the original, for instance. I can do this trick with rock albums released during this time span as well, like White Zombie's *Astro Creep: 2000* (1995) or Motley Crue's *Dr. Feelgood* (1989). I like tying things to their release year and understanding them in the proper context, yet I can never seem to remember that *Rocky IV* (1985) wasn't a 1989 movie— everything about *Rocky IV* screams 1989.

The joke about *Rocky IV* is that it was the final word on communism as global force. Shortly after its release the Berlin wall fell and the Soviet Union was broken up and defeated, and the joke is that *Rocky IV* was so bright and so sharp that communism blew up because *Rocky IV* was *so powerful*.

Rocky manages this by defeating monster Soviet fighter Ivan Drago, in his home country of Russia, and in the process of doing so wins over the live crowd with his indomitable fighting spirit. The (formerly?) communist crowd cheers Rocky's victory and chants his name. Balboa then gets on the microphone to acknowledge his new fans and praise them for their implicit acceptance of democracy and capitalism:

During this fight, I've seen a lot of changing, in the way you feel about me, and in the way I feel about you. In here, there were two guys killing each other, but I guess that's better than twenty million. I guess what I'm trying to say, is that if I can change, and you can change, everybody can change.

The Berlin wall fell in November of 1989. In my mind, *Rocky IV* was a *late spring* release that same calendar year. His defeat of Drago, and symbolic defeat of communism, carried such incredible, immediate urgency that it managed to not only be prescient of the Soviet Union's fall but serve as catalyst. With such indomitable momentum, the wheels of history trudged forward powered by Rocky fucking Balboa.

But this wasn't exactly how things played out— *Rocky IV* was released in 1985. Even if it actually influenced the fall of the Soviet Union, these things take time.

Rocky IV contains not one, but two full fledged music video montages— "No Easy Way Out" and "Hearts on Fire." The movie also features other extended scenes with *entire songs*: "Living in America" (featuring a choreographed sequence with James Brown and Apollo Creed) and "Burning Heart." With so many songs, it feels as though the music is driving the movie; with two montages that function as music videos, it's not hard to see how influential the success of MTV was on the making of *Rocky IV*. Again, this screams 1989 to me with the tropes of the MTV music video very well set in stone and part of the public lexicon by that point. However Stallone was, again, ahead of his time.

Yet I can't escape the idea that *Rocky IV* should be a 1989 movie. It should be the final word from a flawless decade— the collapse of communism was very clearly the 1980's season finale. The cool, MTV-powered *Rocky IV* punching the Berlin wall to pieces. Punching the Soviet Union to death and asserting bold American supremacy. That was how the 1990s deserved to begin.

But that isn't reality; that isn't how things happened. *Ghostbusters II* was how the 1980s ended. Leaving a shopping mall multiplex feeling betrayed and confused, and as Rocky Balboa reached the highest of heights, as Reagan's idealistic 80s turned nihilistic 90s, Stallone gave Rocky brain damage in *Rocky V* (1990).

With no higher height than ending the cold war through boxing, Stallone attempted to make *Rocky V* grittier and more realistic— a smaller movie with more personal stakes. Stallone likely saw this as a *return to form*, bringing the movie back to its roots (and even hired the director of the original *Rocky*, John G. Avildsen). Since *Rocky IV* was ostensibly Rocky Balboa saving the world and changing history, it left little else for the character to do short of

fighting aliens or boxing the devil. It *made sense* for Stallone to take Rocky back to his Earthy, Philadelphian roots. A smaller story for Rocky made sense *on paper*.

Rocky V goes like this:

After Rocky returns from Russia battered and fatigued and is diagnosed with brain damage, he's forced to retire. Along the way, Paulie was (for some reason) in charge of the Balboa estate and (somehow) loses all of Rocky's money— the Balboa's are back to being poor, just like the first movie. Rocky decides to re-open Mickey's gym and discovers heavyweight prospect Tommy Gunn. Balboa rediscovers his passion for boxing by training Gunn. Along the way, Gunn is seduced by Don King-copycat, boxing promoter George Washington Duke who convinces Gunn that he needs to fight Rocky. More things happen, and then Rocky and Tommy Gunn have a street fight. Rocky wins and the movie ends.

Rocky V (1990) was a critical and commercial failure. People didn't want a gritty and down-to-Earth Rocky movie, but the emerging 90s demanded it— *Rocky IV*'s sensibilities were already ostentatious to the average American even if they didn't know it. With the collapse of the Soviet Union feeling like old news, and the perception of American exceptionalism at a place between a smug assumption and a total afterthought, the culture shifted from aspirational to *self-critique*. Was American life as rosy as we liked to think?

George H. W. Bush took office in January 1989— Ronald Reagan, he was not. While Bush dominated the '88 election over helmet wearing idiot Michael Dukakis, Reagan was an impossible act to follow. Bush lacked Reagan's impeccable charisma; Reagan's toasty, crocheted blanket by the fireplace with hot cocoa and melty s'mores-esque warmth; Reagan's firm and believable sense of command: "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!"

Bush could never have romanticized government funded space exploration as beautifully as *slipping the surly bonds* of Earth and *touching the face of God*— not Bush, no way. While *Saturday Night Live* (1975-) had several actors parody Reagan, none of them were immediately ironized like Dana Carvey's portrayal of George Bush. It was funny, and it resonated, because everyone knew George Bush was a joke. George Bush was the *Ghostbusters 2* of presidents.

Bush knew he had a near-Herculean task ahead— that it was his job to not only continue the trajectory that Reagan had set in motion but attempt *new heights* for a *new decade*. Like Stallone with *Rocky V*, Bush wanted to simultaneously look back on what made the Reagan 80s great, with a back-to-basics return to form, while looking ahead to forge new ground and define what a 1990's America *could be*. Bush called for social reformation— a cultural *return to form* focused on "family values," while simultaneously forging forward with a brand new, post-cold war, world conquering patriotism.

This twofold game plan failed miserably for single-term President George Bush. *Operation Desert Storm* (1991) was a war that no one asked for nor understood; whose goal and purpose was only vaguely clear. While the country's mass media attempted blunt force patriotism— *you will follow this war; you will Support Our Troops*— the sentiment was hardly grass roots. It certainly did nothing positive for the public image of the Bush administration.

The Gulf War was just another thing on TV, and TV was quickly changing. Cable television was becoming ubiquitous. You were the weird kid at school if you didn't at least have *basic cable*— thirty channels including MTV and VH1 (Disney and Playboy were extra). The newfound normalization of cable television as an expected facet of middle class American life meant networks now had to compete with cable television shows. Cable television shows had slightly less restrictive content. Cable television could get away with programming "specifically designed to be viewed by adults and therefore may be unsuitable for children under 17," according to *TV Parental Guidelines* (1997), when compared to their network counterparts... which meant the networks had to kick things up a notch if they didn't want to be replaced.

The 1980s were a decade of linearity— where what started off as big only got bigger. If everything became *more* in the most literal sense, the 1990s were left little room to continue this expansion so gears had to be shifted. In the 90s everything became *more explicit*. The 90s were a decade of boundary pushing: a decade where media content

was darker; more sexual; more grotesque. If network TV was tasked with competing against less restrictive cable television programming, things had to become *more vulgar* and the fledgling FOX network set its mission statement to be cable-like content on broadcast television.

FOX became vulgarity TV.

Married... with Children (1987) was FOX's answer to cable— the show pushed established boundaries in both content and message. *Married...with Children* debuted at the tail end of the Reagan administration, and its grim thematics would shape media representations of the American family from that point forward.

Married... with Children took a decisively different tone from the other competing network family sitcoms. While the Seaver parents had a handful of rambunctious but good natured, all American kids who maybe got in a spot of trouble during any given episode's twenty-three minute run time, it was the wisdom of Mike and the heart of Maggie who reeled them in by the end... and we all grew a little bit from their lessons even if getting there was painful. *Family Ties* (1982-1989) featured hippy parents who somehow ended up with a republican teenage son! They'd bicker but they'd end up getting along in the end, each learning from the other. In *Diff'rent Strokes* (1978-1986), rich, white Mr. Drummond learned to be poor and black from his two adopted sons who, in turn, learned to be rich and white. The hallmark of the 1980's network sitcom was good natured *learning*.

Married...with Children featured no such learning. *Married...with Children* wasn't about the joys of middle class American family life— that for the average American man, having a wife, two kids, and a house with a *two car garage* was a commendable victory, no. *Married...with Children* was about misery; *Married...with Children* was about despair. Misery was the joke in *Married...with Children*, played again and again, in different wording that was arranged and rearranged in all different situations and set-ups, but would always circle back to the same core punchline: Al Bundy's overt despair.

Al Bundy was miserable with his family and his life. Housewife Peggy didn't so much hate her husband but was constantly disappointed in his misery. Promiscuous daughter Kelly was an idiot. Loser son Bud was sexually unsuccessful. Al's greatest accomplishment was in high school football, and he believes his life has gone downhill ever since.

If the viewer had aspirations for their own marriage and children watching *Married...with Children* must have made them feel like unambitious dweebs. If the viewer was already married, with children, and took pride in this quiet, unremarkable accomplishment, watching *Married...with Children* must have made them feel like they were losers. Watching *Married...with Children* was demoralizing and the middle ground between aspiring family man and proud patriarch is where the show did the most damage. *Married...with Children* most affected the viewer who could relate.

It wasn't difficult for the average man to relate to Al Bundy— marriage isn't meant to be easy. It's easy to get people to ruminate on the negatives of marriage. It's easy to relate to Al Bundy, with his slut daughter and loser son. Annoying wife who wasn't as hot as Al Bundy thought he deserved when he looked in the mirror and still saw the high school football hero— lamenting having missed the opportunities he felt entitled to. It's easy for Al Bundy to get lost in his collection of porno magazines or to sneak off to the local strip club after work to piss money away at a fantasy life he could pretend was his— a life he failed to realize either by choice, circumstance, or a genuine lack of potential.

His own quiet, unremarkable life— a house with a two car fucking garage— wasn't good enough for Al Bundy. Al Bundy was the anti-Rocky Balboa.

It was easy for Al Bundy to wish away his family with every drink.

People are sometimes more alive after they die because they become your responsibility— their ghost lingers and haunts; taunting from a distance and perpetually out of reach. Bruce Wayne delivering endless soliloquies, long into

the night, at two static headstones. There is no closing argument from the defendant, only rooms full of garbage to sort through from someone who maybe started their prolonged death about when you entered the story– my present was never as important as his past.

He could have tried harder, but he didn't. I couldn't have saved him, and I shouldn't feel like I should have had to.

There are no answers to be had and there never were going to be– no cheat codes or answer keys– those long nights spent pouring over the details were a waste. Even if you come close to putting the whole thing together, you end up stuck with a few extra pieces that don't fit. That aren't going to fit. It's not meant to make sense, and part of *coming to terms* is understanding that; accepting that.

Why did he give up on everything? Very slowly at first and then all at once. Why did he prefer drinking to having a family? Why did he not get tough when things got hard– Rocky fucking Balboa licking his wounds while planning his come back. Where was his *eye of the tiger*? Why did he settle for letting everything around him decay?

Why wasn't a quiet, unremarkable life one worth fighting for?

Sometimes the only answer you can be sure of is what is– this is what happened, and there are no further answers to be found. No more questions, your honor. Maybe no further answers need finding. Maybe you already know the truth and the best thing is to just let it be.

Even if things could have been different, they weren't.

He did the best he could.

Sometimes things are simply what they are.

A few weeks after leaving the multiplex feeling confused and betrayed, I found myself at *Ghostbusters II* again, this time with my friend Teddy. He hadn't seen it yet. I tried to warn him– to tell him my story; to brace him for disappointment– but there's just no telling a nine year old not to see *Ghostbusters II*. Movie sequels were a big deal.

So I endured it once more, and on second viewing it wasn't any better– if anything, more flaws were revealed. Louis Tully becoming the fifth Ghostbuster– even if only temporarily; even if only unofficially; even if only spiritually– felt wrong. The Ghostbusters (somehow) making the Statue of Liberty come to life and walk across Manhattan, controlled by way of an NES Advantage joystick (somehow), *felt wrong*.

All of it felt wrong and there was nothing I could do about it. The world can be dark and disappointing. Adults can let you down. Maybe what's best is to accept that sometimes things are simply what they are.

After the movie, on the walk out of the shopping mall multiplex to his mom's old beater, Teddy told me what he thought of *Ghostbusters II*, "you were right," he said, "that sucked. Let's go play *Contra*."

And we did.

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WELCOME TO HELL

KnightFall (1993)

Billy Pratt · 23 January 2025 · Archived copy · Original

“...and the dead lay in pools of maroon below”

My mother and I would come to spend our Saturdays together. We would go out in the early afternoon to different stores or the mall, or to a park, or the beach during the summer. We'd go to a restaurant for dinner, maybe Friendly's, and we'd be home before network television's prime time lineup. My mother would usually fall asleep sometime during *Empty Nest* (1988-1995) or *Golden Girls* (1985-1992), and I'd be up laughing by myself. She was my best friend— if she didn't have me, she'd have been alone.

We would come home to find my father passed out— if you didn't know better, you'd think he was dead. The remnants of the dinner he made for himself would be on the stove. He liked Salisbury steak. My mother would use these Saturdays as a reprieve from the brutality of her week. My father would use them to drink. He existed separately from us. He was alone.

It was on a trip to our local flea market that I found *Batman: A Death in the Family* (1988)— it became the first comic book I ever owned. Like all boys, I liked superheroes. I liked superheroes, but I didn't like watching *superhero cartoons* anymore— while the characters made the mind race with excitement, the delivery of their stories felt childish. Even the more forward thinking, 90s orientated *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (1987-1996) didn't have enough attitude to make up for its sensibilities. The content wasn't delivered with maturity— no one got hurt and no one died; on Saturday mornings, even turtles never bled. There were no stakes, and I knew it, but *A Death in the Family* felt different.

A Death in the Family felt real.

The cover was striking: against a glaring black background, *Batman* appears at the masthead in plain, unremarkable lettering. Lettering that communicates the serious nature of the work— this is *serious business*; we are not here to have fun. *A Death in the Family*, written in red, is vertically descending so that *death* and *family* are given their own lines and proper emphasis. Under the title, Batman is depicted on his knees, head down and face shadowed, holding the bloodied body of Robin while communicating the cover's final message: in this book you are going to see Robin die.

I internalized the following lesson with immediacy: superhero cartoons were for kids; superhero comic books were for teenagers. While nothing ever happened in the cartoons— every conflict resolved itself in a single episode— it was within the pages of comic books that things *could happen*. Things *did* happen in comic books. The evidence was there in front of me. Characters died in comic books.

I knew I had to see Robin die.

I had to see Robin die because Robin was a dumb character to begin with. Robin was only considered a necessary part of the Batman presentation due to the cultural saturation of the 1960's television show that was still in syndication by the end of the 80s. The average adult would have considered Batman and Robin an inseparable pairing. An average adult would not have considered Robin any sillier than Batman because, to an average adult, all of this was silly— superheroes were *inherently silly*. Robin was no sillier than the rest.

A teenager, however, would interpret things differently. Teenagers take Batman seriously. Teenagers understand Batman on the conceptual level as *plausible*— Batman as the story of a fortunate man driven to the outer edges of sanity by unfortunate circumstances and when left with no other option takes vengeance upon the city's criminal element under the cover of night. A teenager would consider this a reasonable response to tragedy. Batman is how a teenage boy understands morality, necessity, and duty. Under these exact circumstances, Batman was something that *could happen* but not Robin.

Robin was ridiculous.

Like Bruce Wayne, Dick Grayson has a tragic origin story. Eight-year-old Dick worked along side his parents at a circus. They were acrobats. Unbeknownst to the Graysons, the mafia was extorting money from the circus. As a disproportionately harsh preemptive warning to the circus owners, gangsters killed both of Dick's parents. After investigating the double murder, Bruce Wayne adopts the young boy. This would have worked had the story ended there: Bruce Wayne with an adopted son, finding a renewed purpose which acted as a counterbalance to his brooding Batman persona. Having a son would give Bruce Wayne depth; *Batman* a greater sense of realism... but that isn't how things played out.

Instead, Bruce creates a silly costume and has an eight-year-old boy help him fight street thugs at night. If the *Batman* series managed to unwittingly achieve even a vague sense of realism, the introduction of "Robin, The Boy Wonder" kept things rooted firmly in the ridiculous.

It was the teenage boy who blamed Robin for why the *Batman* live-action television series wasn't any good— the show was silly and camp. The show didn't take itself seriously or give proper reverence to the source material: the tragic, brooding Dark Knight. The show was barely watchable even when considering the shallow smattering of Sunday afternoon network TV options. I would watch it when my mother took me to visit my grandmother. She didn't have cable. I would watch while silently acknowledging that the show was *bad because of Robin*.

The teenage boy rejected Robin. The teenage boy wanted a serious Batman. The presence of Robin undercut the teenage boy's ability to believe in Batman—to get lost in the darkness of Gotham.

In an unprecedented move, DC Comics allowed the reader to decide the fate of The Boy Wonder.

At the end of *Batman #427* (1988), there was an advertisement for a telephone poll with the following ad-copy: *ROBIN WILL DIE BECAUSE THE JOKER WANTS REVENGE, BUT YOU CAN PREVENT IT WITH A TELEPHONE CALL*. One 900-number was given the caption "The Joker fails and Robin lives," and the other had the caption "The Joker succeeds and Robin will not survive." Below the text, Batman is depicted as angry and determined, holding an open-mouthed Robin who's in an ambiguous state of consciousness. At the bottom of the page it's noted that each phone call cost fifty cents— one third the price of a comic book at the time.

Teenage boys voted for Robin to die.

Michael Ortega was unusually ecstatic the first day back from Christmas break. He could hardly contain his excitement while standing on the boys' line by the flag pole. He had an incredible Christmas, he told us. He wanted to impress us. He placed a deliberate emphasis on the word "incredible." An incredible Christmas— everything he got was Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, he said. There were *no filler gifts*— not this time, not for Michael Ortega. He couldn't believe his luck— an *incredible Christmas*. Everything was Ninja Turtles, he reiterated. He got the Technodrome and the Party Wagon. He got the sewer playset. He got Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles socks and underwear. He rolled up his pant leg to show us his sock. We were in seventh grade.

We were in seventh grade, and the rest of the boys got heavy metal cassette tapes and violent video games. I got a Sega CD with *Sewer Shark* (1992) and *Night Trap* (1992). Teddy, always the forerunner, got a compact disc playing stereo with heavy metal compact discs. We were all very spoiled and fortunate, and we received the news of Michael Ortega's treasure trove of Ninja Turtles gear with derision. We were in seventh grade.

We were in seventh grade, and it was only a scant few months prior that we would have loved having Michael Ortega's incredible Christmas. Things change quickly in a boy's life. One morning you wake up and decide that you need something harder— harder than the turtles; harder than Nickelodeon; harder than The Dynamic Duo; harder than things *made for children*. Your emerging adolescent eyes pierce through the veil of pandering condescension with the obliterating brutality of Superman's heat vision.

You want what the older kids have; you want to do what the older kids are doing. You want to experience what so —

far has *eluded you*; what's been *inaccessible* to you; what you've only seen in glimpses and flashes in movies like *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (1986) and *License to Drive* (1988). You want to be a part of the secret teenage world— you want to be ensconced in it; to get lost in it. You want what you feel entitled to; what you consider your *destiny*: feeling up a girl in the back seat of your mom's Toyota Corolla.

You don't want to wait, and by seventh grade you feel like you've been waiting an eternity. You don't want to wait, and as you gaze upon Michael Ortega's hairless calf and Pizza Party Time sock, you seethe with frustration. You don't want to wait, and by seventh grade you'll take what you can get: blood and rock n' roll.

It was something my entire elementary school class decided in collective unconscious unison: music is the hallmark interest of the teenager. This mindset began its evolution early and grew with an organic graduality. One day in fourth grade, the girls decided they liked New Kids on the Block. New Kids on the Block branded merchandise spread throughout my fourth grade like cancer cells tearing through flesh: denim jackets, Trapper Keepers, and lunch boxes. Even the boys liked New Kids on the Block; even the boys had their branded merchandise. The boys, except for me and Teddy.

Teddy and I liked hair metal— Teddy and I liked Motley Crue, Skid Row, and Poison. Simultaneous to the New Kids on the Block supposedly introducing ten year olds to the *secret teenage world*, hair metal was peaking in popularity and giving kids something closer to the real deal. Even if the New Kids were *teenage-coded*, it was all smoke and mirrors— their act was G-rated. Hair metal was pushing a hard PG-13. Hair metal was the real deal.

Hair metal, although a derisive label, is used here delicately and with neutrality. *Hair metal* because the image these bands presented stood on equal footing with their music. These bands existed exclusively in a post-MTV cultural landscape— image was as important as product, perhaps even more important. Perhaps the image was the product. *Hair metal* because these bands took on a near identical visual aesthetic. *Hair metal* because these bands styled themselves to look like women with big hair and overdone make-up. This was considered very cool in the smack dab middle of the Reagan 80s.

Teddy and I enjoyed the rock star posturing and air guitar jamming, but it was the music that captivated us— we were music guys. While there may be no better term for the over-produced, radio friendly pop-metal that dominated MTV during the 1980s, calling it *hair metal* unfairly allows the casual listener with unearned pretensions the ability to be cruelly dismissive: all but those who stuck around after the genre's sudden collapse of mainstream appeal consider hair metal absent of merit.

The truth is that hair metal rocked. Hair metal is the soundtrack to a party so perfect it could only be considered the Platonic ideal; a party so perfect it could only exist in the movies— in your idealized memories twenty years later. Hair metal is a preview of what's to come for the sexually frustrated twelve year old boy— a promise so convincing it seemed to hold contractual obligation. Hair metal is the soundtrack to your day dreams. Hair metal is girls and cars. Hair metal is the endless Friday night; the eternal summer; the first kiss with your first love.

To love hair metal is to love life.

Hair metal is the logical progression of what KISS introduced to rock music in the 1970s— a sharp focus on a hyper-realized, theatrical image met with songs about sex written in coded language and double entendre: the song "Nothing to Lose" is about Gene Simmons' attempts to coax a girl into having anal sex; Paul Stanley named an entire album after a reference to his penis. The following generation's hair metal bands copied this formula with precision and without shame. Teddy and I thought this was badass— surely, we thought, this was how cool teenagers talked about women.

We wanted to be cool teenagers.

Cool teenagers knew Skid Row's "Big Guns" was about a man's infatuation with large breasts; that "She Goes Down," a throwaway track on *Dr. Feelgood* (1989), was about blow jobs. We felt cool knowing Poison's "Talk Dirty to Me" was about *talking dirty*. That meant sex.

As aspiring cool teenagers, even with several long years ahead in the prison-like hell of childhood, we knew these songs were a window into what life would become. Even if we were already armed with a vague conception of our own genetic limitations, we knew we would eventually have girlfriends. We knew we would get laid. We knew we'd have adventures and misadventures; we knew we'd have crazy, crazy nights. We knew life would land somewhere between "Nothin' but a Good Time" and "Dr. Feelgood"... Somewhere between the two but never in the jungle, aboard the "Nightrain," or riding the "Rocket Queen."

Unlike other hair metal bands, Guns n' Roses weren't trying to be relatable. *Appetite for Destruction* (1987) didn't hold the keys to a teenaged future—Guns n' Roses weren't meant to be aspirational. When Poison would sing about partying and Motley Crue would sing about strippers, the idea was that the listener *could relate*. These rock stars were the idealized everyman; the coolest guy at your high school; the *big man on campus*; the template all teenage boys aspired to embody. Guns n' Roses were something different. *Appetite for Destruction* doesn't meet the listener on the listener's terms. Instead, Guns n' Roses gives the listener a voyeuristic glimpse into a foreign world: the world of a drug addled, dirt bag, nightclub rock star spelled out in explicit, raw detail. Guns n' Roses weren't trying to be relatable—*Appetite for Destruction* is alienating. Guns n' Roses were monstrous.

Appetite for Destruction documents singer Axl Rose's introduction to Los Angeles. William "Axl" Rose was born in Lafayette, Indiana—Axl is originally from the smack dab middle of America—and relocated the City of Angels to pursue a career as a rock singer. Album opener "Welcome to the Jungle" details Axl's first impression of LA: sex, drugs, and violence. *Appetite for Destruction* begins at the end of Axl's journey from innocence to experience. The only hint of William Rose *Appetite for Destruction* offers is in its first few seconds— we hear William's reaction as he steps off the bus from Indiana; his shock at the vicious immediacy of Los Angeles:

"oh my God..."

From here "Welcome to the Jungle" hits like a bullet. "Welcome to the Jungle" is a letter of warning written by Axl to his former self; a warning of the omnipresent dangers hidden within the excesses of Los Angeles. A prescient warning that these excesses will overtake his former self— to what extent, Rose never makes explicitly clear even when appearing to do so:

"You know where you are? You're in the jungle, baby. You're gonna die..."

Is Axl referring to his own violent death— an overdose, a drunk driving accident, a murder— or something more delicate? Is Axl referring to the erasure of his former self? Was Axl afraid he would lose himself entirely to LA, or is he committed to reveling in debauchery to the end? Axl lets this question linger; *Appetite for Destruction* allows the listener to decide.

The rest of *Appetite for Destruction* hits like an atomic bomb. Rose details the band's exploits with women, alcohol and heroin. These extremities, the characteristics of the rock n' roll lifestyle that Rose animates Los Angeles with, were not meant to be relatable to the average Guns n' Roses listener— the white, suburban, 16-24 year-old male— nor were they presented as a glamorous lifestyle worth pursuing. Instead, Axl Rose presents the darker themes of *Appetite for Destruction* in plain language and through an amoral lens; a gritty, dark, and dirty lens. *Appetite for Destruction* is the documentation of Axl's life— Axl Rose's diary made lyrical and set to music— lending it a higher degree of authenticity than anything his peers were capable of at the time.

Guns n' Roses felt real.

Teddy unfolded his cassette tape foldout and made a box in black ink around every use of the word *fuck* and every obvious reference to sex or drugs. It was in the foldout that he found the words: "with your bitchslap rappin' and your cocaine tongue, you get nothin' done." He drew a large box around this gem hidden deep within the liner notes: he liked that it contained both the words "bitch" and "cocaine."

After we heard *Appetite for Destruction*, our rock star posturing and air guitar jamming became exclusively dedicated to Axl and Slash. Teddy would hold his toy shotgun like a guitar and I'd do my best Axl Rose. We'd

pretend our pretzel sticks were cigarettes; our little cups of Pepsi were whiskey. We'd get boxes of Good & Plenty, for their medicinal color scheme, and pretend they were "drugs." We'd cut lines of Pixie Sticks and snort them through Sour Punch Straws— we were music guys.

We'd listen to *Appetite for Destruction* while playing Nintendo— the album's closing track, "Rocket Queen" never failed to give me chills. As the song eases into itself with a prolonged instrumental section, the sounds of live sex are mixed in with the music. Axl had sex with a woman in the vocal booth of the recording studio to layer over this last track. For the album's final act, Axl Rose wanted to make the listener a literal voyeur. We'd pause our game and listen with hushed excitement— this was something beyond the rest of the album; this hit harder and carried a greater depth of reality; we felt cool hearing it— but when the song switched gears to its sentimental coda, Teddy would quickly hit stop and flip the cassette back to side one. According to Teddy, the rest of the song was gay.

I never felt that way about the coda to "Rocket Queen," even back then, but it was Michael Ortega's hairless calf and Pizza Party Time sock that made me burn with irritation on the first day back from Christmas break while standing on the boys' line by the flag pole. It was Michael Ortega's *incredible Christmas* that gave me second hand embarrassment. We were in seventh grade, and our teenage years loomed in the air as wispy day dreams of a cruelly delayed future. A future we were forcing into existence by sheer, desperate will; throats burning with Pixie Stick drip. The Pizza Party Time sock, the hairless calf, the *incredible Christmas* were bad enough, but it was Michael Ortega's naked sincerity that was too much to bear that morning by the flag pole.

It was Michael Ortega's comfort with himself. Michael Ortega's comfort with being a kid. Michael Ortega's naked desire to still be a kid. Michael Ortega was *okay with* being a kid. Michael Ortega didn't know any better, with his Ninja Turtle toys; the Party Wagon and the Technodrome; the socks and underwear. Michael Ortega wasn't burdened by what was to come, he was happy with what simply was. It was this sincerity— this postureless content— that reminded me of what I was running from.

I needed to live in a space perpetually consumed with fantasies of the future— some idealized future of adventures and misadventures; girlfriends and backseats. I needed to feel a pointed distaste for the present. I needed to understand childhood as an obstacle to overcome: a long, dreadful inconvenience on the path to where I wanted to be. I needed actions taken to distance the past; to distance my present self. To quarantine him; lock him away and never look back, and for an awful moment on the boys' line by the flagpole Michael Ortega made all of this impossible.

That morning we looked upon Michael Ortega's naked sincerity with derision, his innocence as shameful. His thoughtless embrace of childhood as terrifying. Michael Ortega was everything we hated about ourselves.

Although I couldn't verbalize it at the time, I knew why my mother insisted on seeing *Medicine Man* (1992), a wooden Sean Connery drama, the weekend *Wayne's World* (1992) released to theaters. *Medicine Man* had opened the weekend prior, and it stands to reason that sometime during the intervening week she had seen commercials for it— she *insisted* on seeing it. She insisted on seeing it despite what I considered a concise and succinct, logically infallible argument: it looked boring. That little bit of resistance in weekend movie choice, the simple appeal to good reason, angered my mother— she had her heart set on seeing *Medicine Man*. Without reservation, she snapped at me and her tone indicated that I had done something wrong; I had spoken out of turn.

With the inertia of disproportionate anger, she said with pointed inflection that maybe *Medicine Man* would give her hope. Maybe hope is what she needed.

Despite not knowing what I had done wrong— despite feeling the assurity of possessing the correct opinion regarding new release cinema— I felt badly about this for the rest of the day. I didn't like upsetting my mother.

I didn't like upsetting my mother because I knew she depended on me. She had enough of my father to deal with; I wanted to make her happy. I wanted to be there for her— the times she would complain about my father; tell me she

regretted marrying him. That I would someday need to tell some imagined judge, at some imagined divorce proceeding, that I am choosing to live with her and not him. That he's a worthless loser. That he should drop dead. She would make me promise that I'd never drink; would tell me that alcoholism is genetic and inherited— make me *promise* to never drink.

She would tell me that I was going to go to college; that I was going to be successful. That this meant everything to her. That it was my job to make things right; to make up for their failings. That I wasn't going to turn out like my father. It was my job to not turn out like my father.

I didn't like upsetting my mother because I wanted to be there for her. I wanted to make her happy. She was my best friend— if she didn't have me, she'd have been alone.

The next weekend, we went to see *Wayne's World*. We both loved it.

Wayne's World was the perfect movie at the perfect time. The 1990s were looking for something new to pin its identity to and characterize itself by which is how we've come to understand the idea of *decades*, conceptually, by the millennium's swan song— a new decade brought with it a new aesthetic and a new attitude. A new decade brought with it a *new culture* which was scheduled to commence immediately following the champagne toasts and self-congratulatory pats on the back signifying a past decade *well done*. Just after the ball's dropped we're meant to realize, in collective unconscious unison, that the prior decade has become ancient and terribly uncool.

There would be new Coca-Cola ads; new Pepsi slogans.

The 1980s peaked with Michael Jackson's *Bad* (1987), as if on schedule and by design, as a follow up to *Thriller* (1982), the album that defined the first half of the decade and sold thirty-two million copies in its first year of release. While this made Jackson the primary living embodiment of the decade itself, it came with tremendous pressure to follow up with something that would be as critically acclaimed and *even more* commercially spectacular— conditions that would be diametrically opposed in any decade that followed but their convergence was considered a common sense state of being in the 1980s: the best of anything was what was most popular; what was most popular was the best of anything. Ronald Reagan won *forty-nine states* in 1984— an impossibility at any future point and what most emphatically illustrated the prevailing philosophy of the 1980s: the best things were the most popular things.

The idea that Michael could top the success of *Thriller* was an idea that could only exist exactly when it did: on the back end of the decade, when it was still conceivable that big American things could only get bigger. His goal for *Bad* was 100 million copies sold, a number he'd write in Sharpie on his bathroom mirror as a constant reminder. A number that was never possible but also not completely ridiculous— at least not conceptually. It wasn't so different than Reagan's forty-nine states.

The fact that Michael couldn't touch the success of *Thriller* with his excellent and critically acclaimed follow-up, *Bad*, was symptomatic of its release coinciding with an exhausted decade winding down. New energy was already beginning to manifest and this energy would grow with an organic graduality. The 90s loomed and the 90s were to be different.

The 90s would speak a language that Michael Jackson didn't have the vocabulary to understand— a fact evident by how he handled music video production for *Dangerous* (1991), *Bad*'s follow-up. Jackson packed these videos with every major star of right then and there. The video for "Black or White" featured Macaulay Culkin from *Home Alone* (1990); "Remember the Time" had Eddie Murphy and Magic Johnson; "Jam" had a scene where Michael Jackson taught Michael Jordan how to moonwalk. While these videos were popular and *Dangerous* charted well, it didn't capture the coming cultural zeitgeist; Michael Jackson was no longer perceived as being cool.

It didn't capture the coming cultural zeitgeist like *Wayne's World*.

Wayne's World was the true start of the 1990s, so let me bring you up to speed. *Wayne's World* is about best friends, Wayne Campbell and Garth Algar, who live in Aurora, Illinois, which is a suburb of Chicago. The duo,

who are in their late twenties, still live with their parents, which is both bogus and sad, but they host an amazing cable access television show, the eponymous “Wayne’s World,” and they still know how to party.

The audience is introduced to Wayne, as he speaks this information directly to the camera, and the monologue ends on a wistful note: Wayne wishes he could make good on “Wayne’s World”; he wishes he could do his show for a living. “Wayne’s World” is all Wayne has to show for his life. Wayne Campbell has nothing else.

Through the show Wayne Campbell has found his passion. The rough around the edges, no-budget show has a punk rock vibe. The show is an underground sensation; “Wayne’s World” has an audience; “Wayne’s World” is popular. Wayne and Garth are treated like local rock stars. It’s only for the *lack of opportunity* that they aren’t able to make ends meet with their weird, off-beat television show. Hitting it big with “Wayne’s World” is Wayne and Garth’s happily ever after scenario. Their mega-happy ending.

Had *Wayne’s World* been made in the 1980s, the story would present with the same hallmark linearity that was characteristic of the decade itself. If Wayne’s stated goal at the beginning is to bring “Wayne’s World” to its apex, cementing the show as a viable path for Campbell to move forward– the convergence of passion and utility– the story’s end would have Wayne achieving this goal, along the way finding adventure and misadventure while meeting the girl of his dreams and capturing her heart. In the Reagan 80s, *Wayne’s World* would have been a straight forward success story– the mega-happy ending.

Only that’s not how *Wayne’s World* plays out...

Wayne’s World is a cautionary tale about the dangers of *selling out*– about finding the strength to walk away from success when it comes at the cost of *artistic integrity*. In *Wayne’s World*, Wayne and Garth are approached by sleazy television producer Benjamin Kane who proposes an ambiguous deal, offers contracts, and has checks made out for five-thousand dollars. Wayne Campbell isn’t able to see this as a threat; Wayne is only equipped to understand corporate interest as *opportunity*.

Even if “Wayne’s World” is a television show, it’s spiritually a rock band. Before all else, Wayne and Garth are washed up 80’s rockers on the foreshore of the 90s. Wayne Campbell’s understanding of the world is filtered through the prism of music. Selling out wasn’t a thing in the Reagan 80s– big things only had room to get bigger; the best things were the most popular things; *forty-nine states*.

Corporate interest in “Wayne’s World” is so obviously the next step in a success story that Wayne doesn’t bother reading the contract. Who read contracts in the Reagan 80s? The local band signing the big record deal was universally understood as all things righteous and good in the world; the American dream, no legalese required. Wayne immediately signs with Benjamin and gets his five-thousand dollars.

However, the contract Wayne signed was to *sell his show* to Benjamin; Wayne no longer owns the eponymous “Wayne’s World.” Under Benjamin’s direction, Wayne’s warm basement is recreated on a cold television set, complete with a gaudy neon Wayne’s World sign, cheesy new theme music and an awful sounding television announcer introducing the two. Everything charming and low-budget about the show has been replaced with the mega-uncool *TV friendly* version. Wayne knows this sham production– this parody of “Wayne’s World”– isn’t his show. He storms off the set and walks away from all of it. Instead of playing by the rules and compromising his art, Wayne would rather lose everything. Wayne is not a sell out.

Wayne’s World is where the 90s truly began– where purported integrity became more socially advantageous than straightforward, meat-and-potatoes success. Wayne wins no further award nor concession prize by story’s end. Wayne gets the girl, but Wayne’s show is lost forever. Wayne learns that integrity is an end in itself, albeit fruitless and hollow.

Even if *Wayne’s World* was released five months after Nirvana’s cultural monolith, *Nevermind* (1991), grunge was not yet seen as a new philosophical paradigm quite yet. *Wayne’s World* actually served the 90’s first warning shot that big American things would not continue to get bigger– at least not in the traditional sense; not in the *linear*

sense. America's cultural landscape would no longer present as monocultural, even if monoculturalism was still the rule of law— everyone simply decided that they, alone, were the sole exception to monoculturalism, inexplicably and in collective unconscious unison. It became cool to act like whatever you liked *wasn't* the most popular thing, even when by every metric it most certainly was. It became cool to believe that what you liked was counter cultural and underground even when it was getting round-the-clock rotation on MTV. Can it still be considered *alternative rock* if everyone is listening to it?

The prevailing notion was that there was *someplace else* in America where these other, mega-uncool people lived. Who liked mega-uncool things, and these people *didn't count*. They existed for the sole purpose of pretentious derision by the rest of us who were much cooler and liked niche albums like *Nevermind*, which sold forty-two million copies in its first year of release. *Wayne's World*, a movie about the ethics of low-budget, underground entertainment made \$183 million dollars at the box office. What was cool to think wasn't popular was actually very popular.

My mom and I loved *Wayne's World* but not for its dissertation on artistic integrity nor its ode to underground art. We loved *Wayne's World* because it's a movie made of happiness. While Wayne may lament his inability to put the pieces of his life together, it doesn't stop him from having a good time— he still knows how to party. Wayne and Garth are *happy people*; they find a way to have fun with whatever they're doing. There is a perpetual lightness to *Wayne's World* as we see the world through the eyes of Wayne and Garth. It is impossible to watch *Wayne's World* without a smile plastered on your face. My mom and I laughed the entire time.

I loved *Wayne's World* because I saw myself in Wayne Campbell. Wayne was what I aspired to be. Wayne was the cool adult who still has his love for music set squarely at the center of his life. Music was the center of my life when *Wayne's World* came out and I assumed it always would be— I assumed I'd look just like Wayne when I grew up. Like Wayne, I wanted to grow up but I didn't want to grow old— I wanted to always know how to party.

Wayne's World works so well because Wayne Campbell was based on the real life of Mike Myers. *Wayne's World* was so lovingly crafted because Mike Myers has an obvious love for his teenage self, so much that Myers insisted on using Queen's "Bohemian Rhapsody" when the studio requested a more contemporary song for the film's hallmark car scene because that's what he did with his friends when he was a teenager— they drove around town being goofy and listening to Queen. They were music guys.

Wayne's World worked so well that it made "Bohemian Rhapsody," a song fifteen years old at the time of release, into a reborn hit single. I bought my cassette copy of *Wayne's World: Music from the Motion Picture* (1992) from Woolworth's unexpected, albeit paltry music section on a Saturday afternoon trip to the mall with my mom. I primarily bought the *Wayne's World* soundtrack for "Bohemian Rhapsody." The song was infectious, and the timing was tragically perfect— Freddie Mercury, singer for Queen, had died only three months prior. Two months following the release of *Wayne's World*, FOX broadcast *The Freddie Mercury Tribute Concert* (1992) featuring performances by Metallica and Guns N' Roses. I watched with my mom. The high point of the show featured Elton John singing a touching rendition of "Bohemian Rhapsody," with Axl fucking Rose storming out for the loud, rockin part at the end. Even now, sitting at my desktop and typing these words over thirty years later, I have goosebumps. The moment was electric.

Back at the car, unwrapping my brand new *Wayne's World: Music from the Motion Picture* cassette, I had a moment of overwhelming regret. There was an economy to choosing what cassette to buy on a Saturday afternoon trip to the mall. Times were tight. I could only sometimes wrangle a cassette purchase out of my mom; often she would only buy me a magazine, either pro-wrestling or video games. Cassette choices required heavy contemplation— quick mental math; impromptu pro and con lists made on the spot. I'd usually spend the entire time at the store in their music section looking over heavy metal cassette tapes with a quiet, museum like etiquette. My pick for that Saturday afternoon was the *Wayne's World* soundtrack because it had *three songs* I knew I needed. The math made sense. I pulled the trigger.

I pulled the trigger with haste, I had realized back at the car, as I unwrapped my *Wayne's World: Music from the*

Motion Picture cassette. This realization ruined my entire weekend. I knew “Bohemian Rhapsody” was on the soundtrack— in fact, it was the very first song. This was alluring during the analog age; the first song on any cassette provided easy replayability. I knew it would also have the “Wayne’s World Theme”— this was important to me; I was eleven years old. But I didn’t read the full track listing thoroughly enough which became my fatal flaw. I assumed the soundtrack included “Everything About You.”

Ugly Kid Joe’s “Everything About You” was in *Wayne’s World*, but it was curiously left off the soundtrack. Like *Wayne’s World* was for movies, “Everything About You” was the perfect song at the perfect time. Ugly Kid Joe had captured the coming cultural zeitgeist. Recorded as part of their *As Ugly As They Wanna Be* (1991) EP, Ugly Kid Joe released their debut just two weeks after *Nevermind*. While “Smells Like Teen Spirit” will be considered the more significant contribution to the prevailing zeitgeist, only the high school textbook version of cultural events would leave out the contribution of Ugly Kid Joe. “Everything About You” set the table for the nihilistic meal Kurt Cobain would die consuming... “Everything About You” was fucking badass.

If 80’s hair metal rockers existed in a place between aspirational cads and superhuman rock gods, the 90s were set to provide a more *down-to-earth* presentation of rockstardom. The 90’s rock star was *recessive*; awkward, boyish, and shy. The 90’s rock star wasn’t the antithesis of the football jock in the same way that the 80’s rebel-with-a-heart rocker was. Rather, the 90’s rock star was the unpopular, uncool, socially invisible antithesis of the football jock who ends up a grizzled, antisocial, and broken adult. Rockstardom in the 1990’s did not present with the same straight forward, nuts-and-bolts linearity as it did in the prior decade. The 90’s rock star didn’t cherish the upward trajectory of success as all things righteous and good— the 90’s rock star resented it.

This trajectory found its apex with Kurt Cobain— his contemporaries lived to outgrow their self-destructive phase— but it began with Ugly Kid Joe. The success of Ugly Kid Joe’s “Everything About You” helped put into motion the transition to the new decade as much as *Wayne’s World* did. *As Ugly As They Wanna Be* was a microcosm of everything the 90s would become. As much as I saw my future self as some amalgamation of Wayne Campbell, I saw my present seventh-grade self in Ugly Kid Joe. The cover art to *As Ugly As They Wanna Be*— a nasty looking teenage brat wearing a backwards baseball cap and stained white t-shirt while giving the middle finger and hiding a beer bottle behind his back— was how every suburban adolescent, pre-teen rocker saw themselves, even if the representation was really only half true at best. We wanted to see ourselves as nasty little misfits; bad kids who did bad things. We wanted to see ourselves as bullies.

The music on *As Ugly As They Wanna Be* captured this spirit in auralty— Ugly Kid Joe was music for nasty little misfits. “Everything About You” wasn’t a song romanticizing teenage life nor was it idolizing girls and sex. It was a song about hating things. It was a song about hating everything. It spoke the language of seventh-grade boys: seventh-grade boys hated everything. The bare-bones, no budget music video for “Everything About You” featured shots of the band rockin’ out on the foreshore of a beach cut with footage of a guy flying a blowup sex doll around like a kite. This minimalist approach was perfect for the irreverent song— it was fun, cool, and stupid. The guys were *havin’ a ball hating everything little thing about you*. Hating everything was fun, cool, and stupid.

It was something that every pre-teen boy decided in collective unconscious unison upon turning twelve years old: negativity was the hallmark attitude of the teenager— apathy was in; it was cool to be a loser. By the smack dab middle of 1992, *The Simpsons* (1989-) were already in the middle of their legendary third season which began only five days after the release of *Nevermind*. The season premier, “Stark Raving Dad” (S03E01), featured Michael Jackson... well, not exactly. Jackson voiced a character named Leon Kompowsky, a fat, hairless mental patient who was convinced he was Michael Jackson. The episode became a meditation on the intersection between identity, faith, and delusion tied together with one of the shows most heartwarming stories. Pure magic but certainly a weird turn for the series which thus far had the sensibilities of a traditional sitcom.

Through the end of the second season, Homer Simpson was written as a father overwhelmed with the responsibilities of *modern fatherhood*. Homer was conceived as a response to 1950’s era sitcoms that the of *Simpsons* writers had grown up with. Pioneer family sitcoms like it *Leave it to Beaver* (1957-1963) and *Father*

Knows Best (1954-1960) who portrayed the father of a family to be God-like in his omnipotence, omniscience, and omni-benevolence; the perfect man who garnered infinite respect from his family and community. A representation of fatherhood that did not ring true with *The Simpsons*' boomer writers who perceived fatherhood as a thankless inherent vice. Homer was initially written not as an idiot, but as a regular guy doing his best with an impossible mission. Homer's foil in these early seasons was Bart.

Like *Fraggle Rock*, *The Simpsons* weren't marketed as a children's show— *The Simpsons* were a *family show*. Like *Fraggle Rock*, *Simpsons* episodes were written to be compelling and accessible for all ages. At their best, the humor in these shows was universal. There's something pure and beautiful about a joke that can be enjoyed by the entire family. However, despite FOX's best efforts to differentiate the show as a primetime cartoon suitable for all ages, most parents received *The Simpsons* as a show for kids that simply ran at night. *The Simpsons* gained an audience primarily consisting of children, and by the second season, the show's emphasis had shifted from father Homer acting in reaction to idyllic sitcom tropes, trying to embody the ideal of perfection in a gritty modern world, to rambunctious, havoc wrecking, ten-year-old Bart.

If Ugly Kid Joe's grotesque mascot stands as the omega of juvenile delinquency— vile and hopeless— Bart Simpson could be considered the alpha. Bart Simpson glamorized tomfoolery; Bart made it cool to be a loser. This reversal of the prior decade's aspirational *good vibes for young people* sentiment, where it was cool to do well in school and succeed, was most palpably visible in *Simpsons*' merchandise that was pushed to their adolescent audience as the series became a cultural phenomenon. I owned an oversized Bart Simpson t-shirt with the words "don't have a cow" despite my not understanding the request. I had a large novelty button that read: "UNDERACHIEVER" in the shows trademark font with Bart aiming a loaded slingshot forward, toward the novelty button's viewer, while adding "and proud of it, man" in an exclamatory speech bubble. While "underachiever" is deliberately placed in quotation marks as a curious attempt to soften the torrent of negativity being marketed to children, the messaging of the button remains the same and is a microcosmic representation of the prevailing takeaway from this shift in cultural perspective: it was socially advantageous to be a loser.

It was uncool to have positive feelings about your own future.

It was cool to be hopeless and nihilistic.

The next year they killed Superman.

It all started on the boys' line by the flagpole. A lot of things do, I guess, looking back. They'd have us line up outside our elementary school first thing in the morning, in relative silence, with one line for the boys and one for the girls. Our teacher would walk up and down the line and run a "uniform inspection"— all shirts tucked in; all shoes proper— while making sure we had our backpacks and lunches. Looking back, this was their way of shifting our mindsets to one befitting the classroom; weeding out any tomfoolishness. Each line straight, all kids facing forward.

The first day back at school from summer break brought with it tales of summers *well spent*— long lazy hours in front of the TV; Nintendo games played and replayed; pool parties you either attended or were cruelly excluded from. Reconvening with friends who didn't make the cut as part of your summer roster but you liked all the same. The best of times, the worst of times: the first day of eighth grade, only there was one thing that stood out that morning, on the boys' line by the flagpole. Something was different. Something was off. There was a new boy in our class and he was moving like a robot.

Things happened quickly from there like a lot of things do. We learned that this new boy liked walking like a robot, inexplicably using an invisible gear shift to signify a change in direction. He was both a robot and a human truck. Some days he was Godzilla, spitting invisible fire while raining a torrent of accidental saliva all over the hallway floor; all over the back of Rich Dagostino's Starter jacket. I wonder if Rich ever caught on. Between having braces and a lisp, this new boy would shower his desk with saliva whenever he spoke. He also had dandruff, something you

wouldn't know if he didn't seem to enjoy pointing it out. This new boy threw up in first week of school, flooding the area around his desk with pink milk and Fruit Loops. His name was Michael. We had never met a boy like him before.

We had never met a boy like him before, and Michael Ortega wasn't happy about it. He wanted to be the only Michael. He didn't like this new boy sully his good name, and it's not that we cared a whole lot about how Michael Ortega felt one way or the other, but rather that this unique situation called for a nickname—so much is obvious to an eighth-grade boy. I offered my suggestion without preamble or request. I simply said the word “Urkel.” How could I forget?

Things happened quickly from there, with the organic graduality of a forrest fire in the dry heat of August; like cancer cells tearing through flesh. We had a boy to taunt on the playground. Secretly, each of us were glad we weren't the ones being taunted; that there was a single, explicitly definitive boy for that role who made himself standout. It was his own fault. I can hardly be blamed for the rest of it, really. The word shot out of me with a will of its own, and it was only a single word anyway: Urkel. The kid was a nerd. It just made darn good sense.

I can hardly be blamed for the rest of it. The incessant teasing; the constant name calling. Urkel, with his Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle toys he'd pack with his lunch and play with while he ate. The plastic would absorb the odor of his baloney sandwich leaving our classroom stinking of it long after lunch. He'd provide shoddy character imitations and improvised dialogue, all with a mouthful of lunch meat. You tell me what an eighth-grade boy is suppose to do with that. You tell me.

Always trying to win our approval, one day Urkel pulled something out of his Jansport that was genuinely captivating: *Superman #75 (1993)*. Only, we didn't know that yet— the comic was encased in glaring black plastic with only a large Superman logo in the center, only this Superman logo was unlike any we had seen before... this Superman logo was bleeding. Urkel informed us that within this never-to-be-opened plastic bag was the *death of Superman*; the issue of the Superman comic book where Superman dies at the end. The issue where they *killed Superman*— something that, even within the realm of fiction, didn't make sense. It didn't seem possible. It seemed to defy a law of nature; defy our understanding of the world; our understanding of all things righteous and good. This seemed otherworldly and surreal. I knew at that exact moment I had to see Superman die.

I had to see Superman die. The issue, by the time Urkel brought it to school, was a hot item on the comic collecting market. Unlike DC killing off Robin only a few years prior, the death of Superman was a cultural event picked up by the mainstream news: newspapers wrote stories about it; local TV did puff pieces on it; entertainment aggregate television shows covered it; talking heads on cable news stations talked about it. The coverage ranged from “how could they kill Superman,” said with a kind of contrived outrage to wondering “what took them so long to kill Superman?” Or maybe that was just our response to it on the playground, as receivers of this news, once the shock wore off.

Maybe it made sense to kill Superman— for a monster to beat Superman to death with sharp, bony protrusions. Leaving Superman laying in a pool of his own blood, because big American things had no more room to get any bigger. Big American things needed to be torn down regardless if anything existed to replace them with. The 90s would run roughshod over all things admirable; all things hopeful; all things wholesome, maybe only starting with our imaginary heroes.

Urkel's comic book didn't win him any respect with the boys even after a bit of momentary interest. Our abuse continued unadulterated, even after his police officer father came in for a faux, single-presenter “career day” which quickly became a scared straight for mean kids. One that was maybe too subtle for us kids to understand, even after Officer Dad broke the writing surface of a desk clean in half with his nightstick. A planned stunt or genuine frustration with our apathy over his confusing presentation seeping through the cracks of a questionable plan to get us to be nicer to his kid, I'll never know.

Our abuse continued unadulterated. There was an afternoon recess game of Suicide handball we let Urkel in on.

Our punitive playground ruleset involved the final losing boy facing the wall and allowing every boy playing one free shot, as hard as we could muster, with the ball. Uncoordinated and unathletic, Urkel was an easy pick for the game's loser and it didn't take long for him to fulfill that grim destiny. Facing the wall, we each took a shot at Urkel. He flinched with every hit. None of us had the heart to go for a head shot— not of us but Kurt. Kurt, future college football quarterback, who had become Michael's most prolific bully, had taken a shot at Urkel's head and connected with some terrible combination of power and precision. Urkel didn't move for what felt like an eternity before slowly walking away to cry. We allowed him this moment without preamble or request.

I can tell you with certainty that I didn't feel, at the time, what I'm feeling now while telling you this story. Boys understand rules and consequences; boys understand hierarchy. Winners and losers. Urkel got what he had coming to him for making himself stand out— for being both a robot and a human truck. For playing with his Ninja Turtles toys while eating balonie. For being the weakest among us. For trying to be our friend. For being so comfortable with himself that it never occurred to him to be self-conscious— and we decided in collective unconscious unison that he should have been. We looked upon Urkel's naked sincerity with derision, his innocence as shameful. His thoughtless embrace of himself as terrifying. We tormented him without concern for morality, necessity, or duty. We were monstrous.

I tell you this story with the glassy eyed look of a man well into a night of drinking; a time well past midnight. A place where nostalgia and guilt collide. A monologue that begins as a memory and gains the momentum of urgency and the tone of confession. How could I forget?

What's often forgotten is that Nirvana only existed as an active, popular band in a tiny window of time during the early 1990s. Even for those who experienced it firsthand, it's nearly impossible to consider their music on its own terms without the burden of suicide. Nirvana records cannot be assessed objectively without this constraint, even if it only lurks in the subconsciousness of the assessor. Kurt Cobain's suicide has become the leading component of their brand identity. Kurt Cobain, a name like Jesus Christ insofar as the myth— the image and commodification— has usurped the flesh and blood. It's difficult to think of Kurt Cobain as having existed as a living person who did normal things with an internal narrative separate from *tortured musician* and *suicidal rock star*. We reduce Kurt Cobain to these bare elements and sound bites. We understand Kurt Cobain using the vocabulary of the 1990s, as the paragon of artistic integrity who died on the alter of his art— Kurt was not a sell out. There is not a single person with even a passing familiarity with Nirvana who doesn't know foremost that Kurt Cobain killed himself. Kurt's suicide has become more important than Nirvana's music— Kurt's suicide has become the product to sell. Kurt's suicide has cemented Nirvana's enduring commercial legacy.

If Reagan's forty-nine states, his relentless optimism, and his aspirational *good vibes for young people* sentiment had been *Morning in America*, Kurt Cobain's suicide was its nightfall.

Nevermind hit number one on the *Billboard 200* album chart on January 11th, 1992 knocking Michael Jackson's *Dangerous* out of the top spot. As cold points of data, we could chalk this up to coincidence— the unlikely intersection of one guy who was living in his car around the time the other guy was doing PR photoshoots with the President Reagan.

Billy Ray Cyrus and Garth Brooks actually dominated album sales that year (by a lot) while Nirvana only spent two non-consecutive weeks at number one— a fact that no one remembers accurately and even if they did, would not change the accepted narrative that Nirvana carried the torch of popular music during the first half of the decade. While the truth of this is complicated, even when excluding country music from the conversation (which most people do anyway), it's still an indisputable fact that for a single week in January, a white trash pauper from Aberdeen beat the shining white knight of pop— where the antisocial, broken loser got one over on the clean cut popular kid.

And like all stories, Michael's story ends with that one day whose vivid imagery is burned forever into your brain. That one day, during afternoon recess, on the playground with its punitive ruleset. That one afternoon when Michael had decided that he finally had enough; when Michael finally snapped. That one afternoon when Michael

couldn't contain his anger. Couldn't contain his hurt that manifested itself in some terrible combination of shouting and crying— incoherent rage. Rage at all of us, that each one of us must have known we deserved.

Rage that climaxed in a desperate plea, as Michael shouted to the unseasonable warmth of an early springtime afternoon. Michael shouted directly to Kurt's face: "stop calling me Urkel!" The echo of this plea has remained with me, reverberating in my thoughts on those long sleepless nights thirty years later.

And after a moment that felt like an eternity, Kurt did the only thing that naturally occurred to him. Kurt punched Michael square in the face, bloodying his nose and splitting his lip, and Michael fell to the grass like a sack of shit.

My mother would use her Saturdays with me as a reprieve from the brutality of her week. Relentless and inescapable; stuck inside a forever unfinished middle class suburban house with an abusive alcoholic. She did her best to make things work except for when she didn't— except for when she couldn't. Except for when her tolerance for orders and commands and criticism from her husband ran out. Her husband who could hardly keep his eyes open at the dinner table. With his constant accusations of lying and cheating he managed to alienate her from any semblance of a social life. She had no close friends to confide in. If she didn't have me, she'd have been alone.

I was her best friend, and I knew in my heart that I had to take care of her. I knew she depended on me. It was my job to make her happy. My job to be there for her. I knew that if I disappointed her— if I made her angry— for reasons that seemed just or unjust, not that it mattered how I felt about it one way or the other, she could hardly be blamed for overreacting. For screaming at me until she was red in the face. For telling me I was an embarrassment and a disappointment with the inertia of disproportionate anger and pointed inflection. For telling me that nothing was wrong. For telling me that I had nothing to be upset about. That I never had a reason to be upset. That I didn't have a right to be depressed. That her life was hard, not mine. That her mother was mean, not mine. Her parents ignored her. She didn't ignore me. She was my best friend.

She was my best friend and I knew why she dragged me to see *Medicine Man* instead of *Wanye's World*. In a commercial for the movie, Sean Connery barks "I found the cure for cancer and now I've lost it." I can tell you with certainty that I didn't feel, at the time, what I'm feeling now while telling you this story. Even now, sitting at my desktop and typing these words thirty years later, I realize I'll never be able to understand the momentum of urgency and the tone of confession my mother imbued the word *hope* with. Hope was what she needed most— something she told me with naked sincerity.

She could never escape the totality of her life; a totality that weighed on her at all times, and her outlet for that weight was me. She could hardly be blamed for it even at her angriest. Even at her meanest. Even at my most terrified. Even when I thought about my life and my future and felt hopeless.

She was my best friend; we were alone together.

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WELCOME TO HELL

Earth After Death

Billy Pratt · 7 February 2025 · Archived copy · Original

“We’re not sorry that we tricked you”

We had a TV in the large, ground floor family room our suburban house offered before my parents converted it to a studio apartment for rent when they couldn’t make ends meet on my mother’s sole consistent income and my father’s sporadic, dysfunctional alcoholic income. This conversion happened so early in my life that I only have a few memories of spending time in the family room; these memories are happy and cherished. Memories of playing with my Skeletor and Cobra Commander. Memories of Christmas morning’s Nintendo Entertainment System set up— reveling in the disbelief that my parent’s actually got me one; reveling in the newness of the experience. Playing *Duck Hunt* (1985) at the advised six-foot distance from the television, measured with precision, probably for the only time. Probably the only time playing *Gyromite* (1985) as intended while watching ROB the Robot interact with the television in what felt like the future unraveling right then and there in our ground floor family room.

My dad and I would hang out in the family room on lazy weekend afternoons, where he’d watch TV and presumably drink— I was blissfully unaware at the time— and I’d be on the floor playing with my action figures and wooden blocks as he’d be flipping channels with his large, wired, cable TV remote. Every time he’d land on something that had the 20th Century Fox fanfare, I’d hope it was *Star Wars*. It never was, and I don’t know how I knew the 20th Century Fox fanfare may indicate an impending showing of *Star Wars* or if I just wished every movie that came on were *Star Wars*, but I know I never got my wish. My dad usually insisted on watching *Star Trek* (1966-1969) or *M*A*S*H* (1972-1983).

I hated *Star Trek* and *M*A*S*H*. I would complain endlessly to my dad, who would seem baffled that a five-year-old boy didn’t like TV shows about space and war. He seemed unable to understand how these shows could be boring for a little boy while simultaneously carrying the visual trappings of things boys typically liked. As an adult, I know these shows were written for adults. They weren’t meant for kids even if they looked that way. My dad was trying to trick me.

I wanted *Star Wars* and they weren’t *Star Wars*. They were boring.

Return of the Jedi (1983) was the first movie we went to the shopping mall multiplex to see as a family— my father, my mother and me. I was three years old and I hadn’t seen the first two parts of *Star Wars* beforehand— something that didn’t seem to matter. I had absorbed *Star Wars* through the cultural zeitgeist. *Star Wars* to me was about space ships and laser swords. *Star Wars* was about Luke Skywalker and Darth Vader. It didn’t matter if *Star Wars* was about much else— this is what *Star Wars* was to me and seeing *Star Wars* for myself was all that mattered. I needed to see how *Star Wars* ended. I thought seeing the end of *Star Wars* was all that really mattered, anyway. How something ends feels like it matters the most.

I thought *Star Wars* was mostly about Darth Vader. Despite not having seen a single *Star Wars* movie, I had been obsessed with Darth Vader: he was Serpentor and the Cobra Commander combined. Pop culture presents its iconography to children in glimpses and flashes; in loud, overpowering images that register pre-verbally. I didn’t need to know what Darth Vader did. I didn’t need the *story of Darth Vader* to intuitively understand Darth Vader. Darth Vader looked cool and kicked ass, like Skeletor and Megatron, but with an additional element of mystery: Darth Vader wore a mask. Darth Vader had something to hide.

I knew I needed to see his final battle. I needed to see the end of *Star Wars*. I needed to see the end of Darth Vader.

I needed to see Darth Vader’s face. I needed to know who this veiled space menace truly was. Presciently, I knew this would happen at the end of *Return of the Jedi*. Even at three-years-old, I knew Darth Vader’s face would be revealed by the movie’s end. I felt this was all but guaranteed— this, I thought, was why people wanted to see *Return of the Jedi*; to see the end of Darth Vader; to see his face revealed; to see who Darth Vader *really* was.

Sometime during the movie, I told my mother I had to go to the bathroom. I had to pee. As irritated as the mothers of toddlers will be at their toddler's unpredictable and inherently nonsensical bladder necessities, my mother reacted with irritation: she reminded me that she had taken me to the bathroom before the movie started. She told me to wait. It wasn't an unreasonable request. I couldn't wait. I pissed myself. My mother reacted with the kind of irritation mothers of toddler's will have when faced with a moment they've deemed crucial to their own lives met with the cold reality of toddler piss. My mother took me to the bathroom to quickly clean me.

We got back before the movie's end. We got back as the final confrontation between Luke and Vader had just begun. Realizing I had missed nothing of importance, I relished the moment in my dry underwear. After Vader's defeat, I had my moment. I got to see his face. I got to see who he really was. The final moments of the movie felt perfunctory— the Ewoks celebrating, the galaxy safe; Luke burning his father's body— and it animated itself before my tired three-year-old eyes. I got what I wanted; I had seen the end of Vader. I had seen the face of Vader. I had seen the real Vader.

I learned that Darth Vader was an old man.

Johnny Rotten's last words on stage with the Sex Pistols was an answer in the form of a question— Alex Trebek would have been proud. He asked, "[did you] ever get the feeling you've been cheated?" A question directed more at himself than the audience; maybe directed more at anyone who's ever existed than just those at the Winterland that night. A rhetorical question for Rotten to make a point— rock stardom wasn't what he was expecting.

The Pistols were on the tail end of a disastrous U.S. tour where manager Malcolm McLaren had booked them to play "redneck bars" across America's deep south as a means of provoking violence. He wanted media coverage. McLaren wanted the Pistols to be rock and roll's most dangerous band. Concurrent to this their heroin addicted bassist, Sid Vicious, was rapidly self-destructing. The band was so caught up in perpetuating their outlaw, anarchist image that it became what solely defined them. Any attempt at enjoying success would change these inherent components. Any deviation from their gutter muck reputation would mean they were no longer *The Sex Pistols*. They had hit a neverending dead end— Johnny realized he was sold a rotten bill of goods. That *punk rock* stardom was a misnomer; an oxymoron; a big nothing; a TLC reality star thrilled to be on TV but at what price? *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* (2012-2017) stuffed in a bikini with a mouth full of spaghetti.

Punk rock stardom wasn't even a cheap generic, it was a scam email counterfeit; gas station dick pills with printer ink and sawdust. It didn't contain the same *active ingredients* as genuine rockstardom; it was worthless. There were no *credit cards and private planes*, nor *hotels and fancy clothes*— this wasn't a classy affair, and they weren't KISS. They never would play suburban hockey arenas, and their album wasn't the multi-platinum selling *Love Gun* (1977). They were the dirty, low-down Sex Pistols— broken glass and bar fights— and they always would be. Johnny Rotten felt cheated.

Punk rock stardom was a neverending dead end.

A neverending dead end.

I woke up one morning when I was thirty-two years old and broke up with my fiancé. We were engaged in a way that people say they're engaged when they've decided, abstractly, that a shared goal is marriage without having the proper items in their inventory to achieve said goal and actually marry. I went to sleep the night before knowing with certainty that I had hit a neverending dead end— my game was over and I had been playing for years in a zombified state. I woke up that morning and from the dialogue box options available, I chose: *I don't love you anymore* and *we're breaking up* over our normal morning routine. Having planned this break up with the same thought and care one would take in preparing for a video game's final boss, I defeated her quickly and had her successfully packed and moved out within a few hours. I played things beautifully and she left happily.

Starting over with nothing is a strange, wonderfully awful netherworld to find yourself in at thirty-two years old. A

place between life and death; between hope and letting go. Maybe it would have seemed less dire with only half a decade removed or perhaps completely devoid of any further possibility just five years after the fact— but being thirty-two with nothing is a beautiful purgatory; a thinking man's block of clay; a lesser man's gateway to hell. For most probably some combination of the two, its exact ratio decided by everything that's made you what you are to that point: nature and nurture, inflection point decisions made ten, fifteen, or twenty years prior; experience and health; wit and skill.

As the log days turned into short months, this seemingly antithetical combination of liberty and dread churned inside of me. There were new women I had gotten to know— I liked hearing their stories. In retrospect, these stories were more interesting than the sex we'd end up having, although I can't say I treated both with the same degree of urgency at the time. Sex was the goal; sex was my marker for success. Sex was the result of having finally hammered down the winning play strategy to get past the first screen of the game— putting Piston Honda down and getting on to Don Flamenco— a strategy I had only lucked upon a handful of times prior. I finally had a handle on what I was doing. A master of my domain; I was now in control of all things.

Still, I enjoyed their stories. I enjoyed getting to know them as people. Some of their stories would come before sex, usually with a lot more added after. They enjoyed having someone to confide in; someone non-judgemental; someone as broken and disparate. Their lives had taken shape through a different series of events— different inflection point decisions made; the wrong dialogue box choices made at the wrong times. While their game was different they still faced the same neverending dead end; their lives stuck in the same zombified state. I wanted a glimpse into their lives but I couldn't fully enter their stories. At every decision making prompt, in the face of explicit confrontation and ultimatums given, I would avoid commitment at all costs. I *couldn't* commit. My body wouldn't *let me* commit.

Once it occurs to a person how tiny decisions made create long-lasting ripples... How easy it is to get lost in what was initially considered a *fun diversion*; a side quest that grows and spreads with the organic rapidity of cancer cells tearing through flesh until it overtakes the main campaign and becomes its own beast to slay... Once you realize how the end product of these tiny decisions— getting home drunk and calling a girl in December of 2007— can only end up being measured in the magnitude of years... there's some cold invisible ratio buried in your battle damaged subconscious that reflexively forbids any further poor decision making.

I had hit my tipping point. The ratio of thinking man to fool— innocence to experience— had favored avoidance. I couldn't allow myself to stick my hand in the bee hive again, even if the outcome was inherently unknowable: wasps or honey, I'd live on without a tale to tell. What I knew for certain was the ultimate weight of these decisions. The magnitude of years.

A neverending dead end.

The first point-and-click adventure game I ever played was *Maniac Mansion* (1987) for my Commodore 64. My dad took me to Toys "R" Us for a new computer game despite it being neither a birthday nor a holiday. It was a *regular day* and I was there to buy a *computer game*, which was entirely different than a stupid, old Nintendo tape. This was a classy and intellectual affair. This was *software*.

I had been obsessed with mansions since renting *Clue* (1985) from Movieland— our gorgeous, local, mom-and-pop owned video store. The excitement I felt seeing its box on the video store shelf after suffering the endless winter between theatrical run and VHS release cannot be understated. I loved the idea of a beautiful, ornate, Victorian mansion to explore and get lost in, with rooms secluded and places to feel alone. I loved the idea of a study and billard room. A black-and-white tiled kitchen. I wanted a ballroom and conservatory. I wanted a dank and shadowy cellar.

Clue stands as one of the best movies of the decade partially for its refusal to properly adhere to a single genre. *Clue* is a character driven comedy attached to a legitimate *whodunnit* murder mystery; *Clue* has as many creepy moments as it does one-liners. *Clue* was ambitiously released to theaters with *three separate endings* distributed at random.

The idea was to mirror the board game's 324 possible combinations of *who*, *what*, and *where* solutions; the idea was for enthusiastic movie goers to run around from theater to theater seeing *Clue* multiple times in order to catch every ending. This marketing strategy *did not work*, and *Clue* made slightly less than its \$15 million budget during its box office run... but it was the emerging home video market where the movie found an audience. The home video release of *Clue* contained all three endings.

I loved *Clue* for all of the above stated reasons but mostly for the mansion. *Clue* allows space for the viewer to feel like the final guest of the evening; an invisible voyeur exploring the mansion alongside the active players. *Clue* allows viewers to *hang out* in its different rooms; *Clue* was as much about ambiance as it was mystery and comedy. *Clue* was a masterpiece. So, when I saw *Maniac Mansion* on the store shelf, with its gorgeous box art featuring its cast of wacky characters painted in dusk's twilight with the foreboding mansion ominously in the background, I knew I had to have it. I wanted to explore the *maniac mansion*; get lost in it; feel alone in it.

The first title produced by LucasArts – George Lucas' video game company– *Maniac Mansion* built on the foundation of *text driven* adventure games like *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (1984), where the player is given a short paragraph explaining their situation and nothing more:

You wake up. The room is spinning very gently round your head. Or at least it would be if you could see it which you can't.

From here, the player uses verb/noun combinations to explore their surroundings. The vocabulary of the game was limited; the game understood some commands while not understanding others. The game wouldn't accept "use" as viable language but understood "examine." The player's job was to fumble with words, exploring the possibilities of different combinations while sometimes having a bit of fun seeing how the game would respond to silly commands ("eat pillow"). Douglas Adams co-designed the game and sometimes even seemingly random commands would result in hilarious rebuttals. Every bit of progress, resulting in a new block of text to explore, was satisfying... but as the game progressed in complexity, without any visual cues, it was easy to get lost.

Maniac Mansion solved this problem by turning the text-only adventure into a point-and-click graphic adventure. The player would *point* the cursor to where they wanted their avatar to go and *click*. At the bottom of *Maniac Mansion's* screen was a word bank of verbs. This made the game only slightly easier for a seven year old– *Maniac Mansion's* multiple solutions still had the seemingly random, impossible to deduce logic that was a hallmark of early adventure games... or at least it seemed that way to a seven year old. *Maniac Mansion* gave me everything I wanted, fulfilling every promise the gorgeous box art had made. I explored the mansion with glee, each new room filling my guts with nervous excitement. However, the game came straddled with one fatal flaw that was common in early adventure titles: the neverending dead end.

The solutions to these early adventure games were so incredibly precise, the right *items*, used in the right *order*, at the right *time*, that the game was impossible to win any other way. If any of these vital items were lost– if Wendy died with the empty glass jar in her inventory– the game would be rendered *unwinnable*; an impossible mission that trudged along lifelessly with the unwitting player never the wiser. God help you if you forgot Authur Dent's toothbrush in his house before it was demolished. Twelve hours in to *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, aboard the alien ship, at the very end of the game, you'll need that toothbrush to finish. Sadistically, the game chose these winning items randomly with every restart.

Sometimes you don't know what you're missing until you need it most.

The Rise of Skywalker (2019) was the last movie we went to the shopping mall multiplex to see as a family– my father, my mother and me. It occurred to me a few years prior that going to the movies on Christmas Eve might be a nice thing for the three of us to do. Holidays with a table full of extended family had been a thing of the past for a while by then, either through death or estrangement, and my parents never went to the movies on their own. I knew they'd appreciate it. After all, my dad was a movie guy. There was something that felt right about seeing *Star Wars*

on Christmas— something cozy and American about *Star Wars*, especially on Christmas. *Star Wars* resonated in a way that any other film franchise wouldn't have; that any other movie couldn't have. A different movie wouldn't have had the same emotional gravitas as *Star Wars*. Sometimes old stories are what we need most.

The Force Awakens (2015) met its release in the twilight haze of an era's end. Donald Trump announced his bid for the 2016 presidential election only six months prior— it was still considered a lunatic fringe position to think he had a chance. I was part of that lunatic fringe, but it *didn't matter*. Politics had not yet become ubiquitous to American life— a necessary obsession for all people living under the rainbow. *The Force Awakens* was a product released at the cusp of this paradigm shift. *The Force Awakens* was the last of its kind. I took my parents to see *The Force Awakens* for all the above reasons. I thought it would be a nice thing to do before sitting down for dinner at a Zagat rated steak house; a nice, middle class American Christmas Eve. My parents were getting noticeably older at the time yet they were still functionally the same people— something I can only appreciate in retrospect. We took a selfie outside the Zagat rated steak house. I am grateful for that picture.

As much as I wanted a nice, family Christmas Eve, the more pragmatic side of me knew it was a good opportunity to see the shitshow that was to be Disney's reboot of the presumed dead *Star Wars* film franchise. Three years fresh into my neverending dead end and I had managed to build an entirely different understanding of the world around me. I had become some combination of realist and cynic— a cold invisible ratio buried in my battle damaged subconscious. I came to believe people were little more than rats on a sinking ship; automatons being haplessly led to their own destruction like *Lemmings* (1991). I came to see the world as a massive con which only the naive bought full heartedly. I was no fool.

I was no fool and understood what I was getting with the *modern action movie*. I was aware of the controversy behind *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015) when I went to see *Terminator: Genisys* (2015)— I knew going in what the deal would be. The action movie was traditionally considered a *boy movie*; now it was being written as a *girl movie*. It retained its masculinity in image only: with explosions and franchise familiarity. It posed as a *boy movie* while delivering a female-centered story. Women were the true protagonists and the male leads acted as subordinates; there would be no princess who needed saving. I was no fool and I knew these rules would apply to *The Force Awakens*, and as much as I wanted to put together a nice Christmas Eve for my parents, I also had a pragmatic goal: I wanted to hate watch *The Force Awakens*. I wanted to be hater.

I got what I wanted. Like in *Terminator: Genisys*, *The Force Awakens* is a retelling of the original story but with a female lead in place of the traditional male. Like in *Terminator: Genisys*, this female is smart, strong, and never makes mistakes. Like in *Terminator: Genisys*, she is surrounded by men who are less smart and less strong— there are multiple scenes of them looking like geeks and goofballs. Like in *Terminator: Genisys*, the movie is secretly about the female lead and this secret is gradually revealed until it's not a secret at all by the end of the movie. I got exactly what I wanted, and I hate watched *The Force Awakens* on Christmas Eve before going to a Zagat rated steak house with my parents.

On the drive to the steakhouse, I luxuriated in my hatred while my parents did what anyone normal does after going to see a movie. They talked about what they liked about the movie. They went to the movies to spend money on a having a good time— they went to the movies to have fun. They went to the movies to see a modernized version of something they were already familiar with; something they knew as part of a universally shared culture they enjoyed participating in. They enjoyed *The Force Awakens*.

I was happy they had a good time but I'd be lying if I said part of me didn't burn with silent irritation. I questioned their enjoyment. I questioned why Rey, the sequel trilogy's new Luke Skywalker, was just good at everything right away. I questioned why Kylo Ren, the sequel trilogy's new Darth Vader, was defanged and emasculated within in the *first half of the movie*— cursed to linger on as a toothless threat for two more full length films. That *The Force Awakens* was just a copy-and-paste of the first movie with the volume turned all the way up to parody— that the new Death Star was bigger and badder than the first; the new rebels were even scrappier; the new Empire more explicitly space nazis.

My parents didn't seem bothered by any this, which only made my silent irritation burn hotter. My mom said she *liked* that the girl outsmarted all the boys— she got a kick out of how Rey was immediately good at whatever the heroes needed. My mom liked that she always managed to one-up the boys. My dad agreed, that was *funny*, he said. He said he liked seeing “all that old *Star Wars* stuff.” They both said they loved seeing Harrison Ford as Han Solo again. They relayed this with the kind of warmth and cadence typically reserved for remembering old friends or recollecting once lost memories.

I was no fool— I knew *Star Wars* deserved better than this.

The first opioid I had ever taken was hydrocodone. Hydrocodone is the generic alternative to brand name Vicodin; my doctor gave me a prescription for recurring neck pain due to a herniated disk. According to Wikipedia, recreational use is most common, as popularized by Eminem— a broken Vicodin tablet adorned the compact disc of his major label debut *The Slim Shady LP* (1999); he referenced it often.

The delivery method of snorting Vicodin crushed under a credit card and dollar bill may not have carried any additional pragmatic value, but it wasn't about pragmatism. Sitting at my computer desk at 2 AM, snorting lines of hydrocodone while shooting OkCupid messages off to the *currently online* fellow destitutes, it was about capturing a feeling. I wanted to feel like a rock star, and if I couldn't have the brand name I was willing to settle for the generic.

Because maybe I felt cheated. Maybe I did what I thought was good and right and still came up with an unwinnable game; a neverending dead end. A relationship that would've been a “fun six months” stretched into a soul crushing five years. Five years with my budget Lindsay Lohan, generic starlet. The dollar store version but when you're a working class man you're happy with what you can afford— and maybe where you shop is predetermined by some cold invisible ratio of rock solid, immutable traits that loudly determine how romantically viable you are to the opposing sex. Maybe it was always a rigged game and you just didn't know it as you were burning through money throwing softballs at bowling pins desperate to win the big stuffed pig.

Maybe it was my own damn fault. A series of bad decisions and poorly executed next moves. Not enough experience points; too many poor dialogue box choices made in succession.

I wanted the BPD girl. I wanted an IV of ecstasy to the jugular. I wanted the breakdowns, the red faced screaming; tearing up my t-shirts and tossing them out bedroom windows. Smashing my cell phone on suspicion alone. Because I cheated on her in a dream. Because her astrologer said it could be possible, maybe. Kicking my door down because I got the last word in a fight and it was a hell of a zinger. Watching her cry got me hotter than a thousand atomic bombs exploding on the surface of the sun. I opened the puzzle box and it tore my soul apart.

I did my best with it.

I did my best with it but it was a rigged game— bouncing baseballs off glued down bowling pins at the carnival; pushing the boulder up the mountain in hell. I thought I was *working toward getting married*. I thought I was the *responsible one*. That there's nothing more attractive than *a man with a job*. A man needs to suck it up and *do the right thing*— a man should put his woman before himself. I thought of my father, man on the street in his mid-70's leisure suit, happy to dispense his new age relationship advice of *mutual respect* and having a *co-authored, shared vision*: make her happy and she'll respect you. Win her approval and she'll love you for it.

I thought of Jason Seaver. I wanted to make Jason Seaver proud.

But I felt cheated and one day I said fuck it. I realized that none of what they say is important is actually important. My father was a fool. Women don't want sensible decisions made with a boy scout's standard of personal accountability. Women don't care about about your job, or your carefully considered philosophy and worldview. Your air tight, Samurai-like code of morality. Your willingness to self-sacrifice. Your love of all things beautiful and good.

Women like self-absorbed, narcissistic assholes.

I attacked my neverending dead end with the egomania of Axl Rose on *Appetite for Destruction*; every ounce of *Appetite for Destruction* is soaked in sex, drugs, and chaos. *Appetite* makes Paul Stanley lamenting the trappings of rock stardom on *Destroyer*—questioning the emotional legitimacy of clout chasing groupies on album closer “Do You Love Me?”—seem adorably naive. Rose indirectly answers Stanley, just as my postmodern literature professor always said that “great works *talk to each other*,” with simplistic brutality on “It’s So Easy”:

You get nothin’ for nothin’ if that’s what you do,
turn around bitch I got a use for you
besides you ain’t got nothin’ better to do
and I’m bored

To Rose, it didn’t matter if you *really really really, really* loved him, “It’s So Easy” was his philosophy on life. Rose knew you could be a homeless junkie and still get pussy; that a corporate middle management position didn’t make women wet; that the fairy tales told about *conscientious responsibility* meant shit— the shit any man learns after getting laid pushing nothing but attitude: *it’s so easy*. Lines of hydrocodone and bored college girls, house sitting and home alone? Leave the door unlocked and I’ll be around by midnight. *So damn easy*.

Axl Rose was living the rock star lifestyle that gnarly impish punk Johnny Rotten felt promised— even before Guns n’ Roses made it big. While Axl was just a couch surfing beggar with nothing but the clothes on his back, he understood a lesson that Marilyn Manson learned a generation later: “If you act like a rock star you’ll be treated like one.”

So fuckin’ easy, and if I couldn’t have the name brand I was willing to settle for the generic.

It’s difficult to explain with precision the awful feeling I had one particular night after receiving the selfie I’d have Jessica send before she left the house for my apartment. I started having her take a selfie before leaving for me to look over and nitpick; ask her to change outfits or do something different with her make-up. She loved this type of detail orientated micro-management; this type of petty control. It turned her on and made her feel cared for. She was excited to share her selfie with me that night. She dyed her hair black at my request and wanted to show me even if it would ruin the surprise. The black hair was perfect for her pale skin tone. It made her big, sad blue eyes appear bigger and sadder. She looked incredible.

I met Jessica a few years prior. We would come and go like the seasons of a television show, occasionally falling into what playing house is to a relationship— a Hollywood facade; a nice looking house with no interior; an Ikea showroom with thin walls and fake books. She would eventually get fed up and tell me that she met someone else, or that she’s gonna start looking soon, or that she’s falling in love with me. I wouldn’t argue with her. I would wish her the best and mean it. Even if part of me wanted to be that person, more of me knew I couldn’t be.

I met Jessica when she was twenty-five years old. She was a virgin. It’s not that she was particularly attached to her virginity, but rather that she spent a lot of time alone. Her friend group was her family; her life was insular. She only trusted family, she told me. Outsiders made her anxious. She dropped out of college from too much anxiety. Being around so many people was difficult for her. The small talk college students make before class made her as nervous as when she’d get to class late and people would watch her sit down. Attending class became untenable. She dropped out and got a job at CVS where any dialogue exchange would be expected and controlled— this, she could do.

I met Jessica after her family moved here from California. She lived with her mother and sister in a small house which she helped support. Her mother was an alcoholic whose employment was sporadic and her younger sister was pregnant. She takes care of them both, she told me. She told me she was lucky to have her job at CVS— she didn’t want them to lose the house.

I met Jessica when she was trying to be more socially open to new experiences. She wanted to meet new people. She wanted to meet men— she wanted to fall in love and get married. She wanted to have a baby; she dreamed of being a mother. She was ready to try after a long stretch of time where she felt like her life was on hold. A long stretch where she felt trapped in a painting; a scene; an endless moment; a neverending dead end; a static age. She told me she was finally ready for something more.

I met Jessica ten years after her fifteenth birthday. She went to Disneyland that day with her mother and sister. She told me she can close her eyes and still feel glimpses and flashes of what she felt that day at Disneyland in her chest and stomach; in her whole body, if she allows her mind to wander for long enough. The emotions she felt that day, she said she hasn't felt since. Memories can't be all you have, she told me. They can't replace experiences, even with enough mind wandering. She came home that day from Disneyland, with her mother and sister, and found her father dead in his car parked in their garage. He fed a tube from the exhaust through one of the windows.

I met Jessica when she felt like she had gone far enough denying herself the life she knew she was capable of having. She wasn't the one who died, she told me. That night with Jessica, when she sent the selfie with her dyed black hair, dyed to finally win my approval, I had the awful feeling that things had gone too far and gotten out of control. Something a silent part of Axl Rose must have felt after causing football stadium riots with abruptly canceled concerts only half a decade after the release of *Appetite for Destruction*.

Taking place after Axl had become the biggest rock star walking the Earth— too big to find satisfaction in small scale chaos— Rose had become addicted to the assertion of power. Something he felt before MTV and rock god status. Something he felt as a couch surfing beggar living off lust struck groupies happy to invest in a ground floor start up. Happy to invest in a fantasy. The same fantasy Axl Rose clung to as a small town white boy on a Greyhound to LA: if you act like a rock star you'll be treated like one.

But Jessica wasn't looking for a rock star nor was she looking for someone who thought he was acting like one. Someone lost in delusion living the watered down generic alternative, but she liked how I talked to her all the same. She liked how I fucked her. Maybe she was as turned on dyeing her hair as she knew I'd be when I saw it. Maybe she knew our sex that night would be electric— explosive, a thousand atomic bombs exploding on the surface of the sun, and maybe she was right.

But maybe I knew things had gone too far. Maybe I finally pushed things beyond their breaking point. Maybe I wasn't stuck. Maybe my life wasn't over. Maybe I knew all along that it was a lie I was telling myself. Maybe I knew I wasn't playing an unwinnable game; a *neverending dead end*. Maybe I knew that was bullshit. An excuse to justify bad behavior; to justify doing whatever the fuck I wanted: cheap sex and generic drugs. A generic party lifestyle that I thought I missed out on; that I felt entitled to. Maybe I knew I had been single long enough to have become the villain.

Maybe I knew this was the end.

There's something about endings that stand out among memories like the final pages of a novel, dog-eared and patient, or a game forever saved before the final boss— a moment suspended in time; a place between hope and letting go. Endings feel like they *matter more*. Endings allow all points between past and present to converge. Endings remind us of the purity of how things began. *The Rise of Skywalker* was the last movie we saw on the last Christmas Eve we were able to go out to a movie and a Zagat rated steakhouse— my father, my mother and me.

Soon after things happened quickly: the world shut down; people were getting sick; my father was getting older. He started falling in the house. His legs would give out. When he couldn't get up anymore by himself, my mother would come up with creative ways to help him get his big, sturdy body off the floor with her one-hundred and fifteen pound frame: "turn over, now put your left arm on the couch. Left. Left arm! For support. Now lean to the left and..." And then there came a time when he couldn't get up anymore at all.

If I close my eyes and allow my mind to wander, I can still feel the grip of my father's hand when I pulled him up from his theater seat after watching *Rise of Skywalker*. He still had strong hands. Despite everything, he was a proud man who was embarrassed to be seen with his son helping him up. Always the realist— the conscription of the only child— I made note of this moment as it happened: I knew it would be the last movie we saw together. *The Rise of Skywalker* is a fitting end for the cynic focused more on regret than achievement. What became *The Rise of Skywalker* was director J.J. Abrams' best attempt to make due with the mess left behind by director Rian Johnson's *The Last Jedi* (2017).

Much has been said about *The Last Jedi* since its 2017 release. As a piece of art, reception has been divisive. Objectively speaking, and when viewed as a conscious entity, *The Last Jedi* is a movie that aggressively hates its predecessor and itself. The extent to which you feel that this hatred is justifiable will dictate what you think of *The Last Jedi*. Judging him only by the work he created, Johnson seems to have resented the assignment. He created a work that resisted the simplicity of Abrams' *The Force Awakens*— a simplicity that can be crystallized in a single scene from the 2015 film:

Our main characters, Rey and Finn, have inexplicably come across the Millennium Falcon. They board and pilot the Millennium Falcon. Somehow, Han Solo and Chewbacca also end up on board the Millennium Falcon— Han Solo looks like he did in the first movie where he played an outlaw smuggler. Han speaks the line: "Chewie... we're home" and the scene's score makes you feel this moment. Not only has Han and Chewie found their home again, aboard the Millennium Falcon, but so too have the audience watching a movie that finally feels like *Star Wars* again...

Rey and Finn have a moment where they stand in for the audience as they react to meeting Han Solo the way a *Star Wars* fan would react to meeting Han Solo. When asked about the Jedi and the Force, Han says: "It's true— the Force and the Jedi— all of it. It's all true."

All of it— it's *all true*. Speaking directly to the audience and practically looking at the camera, Han Solo allows you to have a deep and personal momentary ensconement in *Star Wars* that cuts right to the heart of your force awakened soul. A moment that justifies your love of *Star Wars*, either as a fanatic or just someone who enjoys participating in a universally shared culture. A moment that lets you uncritically luxuriate inside your memories that are inseparably tied to *Star Wars*. Sometimes old stories are what we need most— all of it, it's all true.

Abrams allows the viewer this gentle moment without preamble or request but with the light touch of an artist who understands the heart of his work; who understands that this moment is *Star Wars*. Even if the characters and story of *The Force Awakens* is as paper thin as the walls of an Ikea showroom, it doesn't matter— this moment is *Star Wars*. *Star Wars* is going to the movies on Christmas Eve with your parents. *Star Wars* is pretending the cardboard-tube attachment that came with your Darth Vader halloween costume somehow transformed your flashlight into a lightsaber. *Star Wars* is hoping that every 20th Century Fox fanfare is the real thing this time... *Star Wars* is playing with your action figures on the floor while your dad falls asleep watching *M*A*S*H*. *Star Wars* is getting lost in the glimpses and flashes of a galaxy so much larger than was ever captured on film. *Star Wars* is using your imagination to fill in the gaps.

Sometimes *Star Wars* was the only thing we counted on when no one else was there.

Something Rian Johnson *did not understand* when he crafted his follow up to be the antithesis of this moment— *The Last Jedi* is the antithesis of *Star Wars*. At every turn Johnson uses his movie to make the audience feel stupid. If you're looking for nostalgia and familiarity, that's stupid. If you're looking for a simple and predictable story, that's stupid. If you wanted a movie with heroes, villains and a childlike sense of morality, that's stupid. If you wanted to see Luke Skywalker kicking ass with a laser sword, you're fucking stupid. There has never been a movie that hated its audience more than *The Last Jedi*.

While *The Last Jedi* is interesting as a kind of big budget work of avant-garde art, the likes of which will never be attempted again by a major studio holding a beloved intellectual property, that isn't what *Star Wars* ever was; that isn't what *Star Wars* ever should be. While *The Last Jedi* begs the question of necessity for the "film franchise" as a genre of motion picture— for the artistic integrity of the *movie sequel* in general— it's not a question anyone wanted *Star Wars* asking.

Abrams was no fool. He understood that *Star Wars* didn't have another story to tell. He understood that *Star Wars* was more than a story— that *Star Wars* was a feeling. That *Star Wars* was an experience to be shared. That *Star Wars* is memories— *Star Wars* is part of our universally shared memories. That *Star Wars* didn't deserve better than *The Force Awakens*, but that *The Force Awakens* was *Star Wars*. Abrams understood that sometimes old stories are what we need most.

When I felt my father's hand in mine— when I pulled him up from his theater seat at the shopping mall multiplex on Christmas Eve— I knew it was the beginning of the end.

My father's rehabilitation clinic had a small TV bolted to the wall a few inches from the ceiling, and directly in front of his twin-sized hospital bed. The TV was *cable ready* yet had no cable box attached— if the television was capable of a high-definition display, you'd never know. While the clinic subscribed to a basic cable package, no premium channels were offered. Taking the coaxial cable directly into the back of the television without the intermediary of a cable box produced a static haze over most channels. This is how my father watched television for the last thirty days of his life.

"Rehabilitation clinic" is a gentle misnomer, if you didn't already know. A way for the family to ease into the reality of change— the understanding that Dad won't be coming home ever again— and for the patient to understand the impossibility of their own recovery. This is meant to take place gradually and only through implication; all parties involved are meant to meet this conclusion organically and without coercion. This is when a *rehabilitation clinic* becomes a nursing home, and this is how my father spent the last thirty days of his life— in transitional purgatory. He died playing an unwinnable game. He died in a place between hope and letting go.

To my father's credit, he resisted this organic conclusion at every turn. He would repeatedly ask when he was going home, sometimes in a way that broke your heart and sometimes hurling abuse at my mother who was there with him every day from the start of visiting hours until the end— bringing him blankets and clean clothes; home cooked meals; sitting with him in bed, like they were at home, watching their shows at night. If things played out differently, she would have done this for the rest of her life.

I visited him there every other day— I did not have the free time available nor iron will of my mother. I saw more of him during his last thirty days than I had for a long time before then. For a long time before then, I had seen him mostly in transitional times— the empty spaces between coming and going. Hello and *how are you?* You're looking good and *what about this weather?* The spaces in-between important things. The spaces in-between the panels of a comic book. My mother would use my obsessive preference for productivity to make passive aggressive comments about supposed implied feelings of self-importance; she would call me a Stormtrooper. My visits carried explicit overtones of efficiency and precision. I visited frequently but my visits were brief. I had things to do; I had a life to put together.

But my father was standing at the precipice of his neverending dead end, and I wasn't going to let him face it alone. I was going to be there with him: sometimes with long conversations about life; sometimes simply enjoying quiet moments of nothing. Sometimes watching him nap or eat his dinner. Sometimes listening to old stories I've heard and reheard over the years. This was the last time my parents were able to talk about those old times. Old stories that suddenly mattered again— stories that felt real to them both again. Stories of the adventures and misadventures they had. The times they'd ride his motorcycle long into the night. Times in their apartment before they bought the house. Happy times. Sometimes old stories are what we need most.

My father's rehabilitation clinic had a small TV bolted to the wall and that was how we watched television together for the last thirty days of his life. Options were limited considered the shallow depth of modern basic cable, so I'd let my dad pick. I'd let my dad pick like the last time we watched television together, hanging out in the family room on lazy weekend afternoons. I'd let my dad pick and his frustration was palpable; he was not used to limited options. He was a movie guy. I'd let my dad pick and it was on our last day together that he put on *M*A*S*H*.

With *M*A*S*H* on the TV bolted to the wall, all points between past and present converged. I was as much a boy on the floor of our family room playing with my action figures and wooden blocks as I was a misfit teenager confused about girls. I was a young man with anger and resentment, like Luke Skywalker, and like Luke Skywalker finally seeing the face of Darth Vader in the finale of the *Star Wars* saga, I was an adult with my father dying in a hospital bed beside me.

And like any good television series finale, all the drama and conflict from the middle seasons didn't matter anymore. A good ending will always call-back to the very beginning, and this is why endings matter more. A good ending will bookend the series and provide proper closure for the main characters.

With my father beside me, I reminded him of those old times in the family room when he'd try to trick me into watching *M*A*S*H*. I told him that I was finally onto him. That I knew he was trying to pull one over on me. That I was right all along. That *M*A*S*H* was boring.

He looked at me and laughed.

"I guess *M*A*S*H* is kind of boring."

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