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MONEYBOYS

by

JOSHUA DESHAIES
B.Sc. Brown University, 2012

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
in the Department of English
in the College of Arts and Humanities
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ABSTRACT

Moneyboys is a novel that explores queer identity in the early 2000s, in the final few years of the height of the American boy band craze. The story’s protagonist must reconcile her own identity with what she views as two increasingly opposed goals: to make space for other queer people in turn-of-the-century Tinseltown and to continue getting hers. Her pursuit of these goals, her life outside of the fame machine, and the glossy, holographic, six-packed residents of the internet cause her to forge different versions of realness – an ability to define and embody an idea until it’s the truth – for herself, for the band of publicly-closeted and mostly-queer boys she manages, and for the American boy band consumer. Because this is still the turn of the millennium, she’s accompanied by hybrid intermissions of morning commute radio, basic cable news tabloids, and IM conversations – none of which makes it any easier for her to discover or remember what is truly real. Though this is, of course, what she must attempt to do.
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CAST OF CHARACTERS

#

Moneyboys

*Jacob “Jake” Bennett,* The Boy Next Door

*Liam Correa,* The Bad Boy

*Colin Jones,* The Sensitive One

*Brett Lazar,* The Heartthrob

*Matteo “Matt” Salazar,* The Cute One

#

Dirigible Enterprises

*Jenna Muldoon,* Producer and Manager of the Moneyboys

*Frank Wilson,* President, CEO

*Seonghun Park,* Choreographer

*Frida Andrade,* Hair & Makeup

#

University of Southern California

*Tisha “Tish” Ayler,* Mathematics

*Stacey Thompson,* Computer Science, Sociology

*Ji-Iseul “Jessie” Lee,* Computer Science
Dougherty Zborin, Computer Science

#

Media Personalities

Felicity Grossman, CEO, Talent Comet

Edward James Martin “Ted” Koppel, Anchor, Emmy Award Winner

Annette Herd, Reporter

Juan Lainez, Radio & Television Host

Richard “Risky” Nipperson, Radio Host

Megan Regan, Coast-to-Coast Entertainment Correspondent

Britta Schick, Television Host

#

Lick

Roelanda “Boots” Butsuyahi, Bartender

Madame Bacardi Gabor, visiting drag queen

Cognitive Disco Nance, drag queen

Kenya Knott, drag queen

#

Residents of The Greater Los Angeles Area
Natalie Conway, Grieving Mother

Thomasina Enders, Sick Teenager

Dextra Enders, Thomasina’s Mother

Rondo Hitch, FBI Agent

Barry Mulligan, Acting Coach

Sebastian Saucedo, UCLA Music History Professor

#

END CAST
"Well I know, I know it’s the real thing
Because she told me so"


The whole universe is awash with boys – pretty, sensitive, boys. Boys with 8-packs from their 6-hour cardio days. Boys who are the shit and the bomb and fly. You look anywhere from Lansing to Los Angeles, and it’s like the new millennium’s folded into the old one, the rush of celebrity permeating every sign, marquee, and garland. But they no longer say Judy, Judy, Judy – it’s Justin, Justin, Justin. Boys are on lips and in dreams and even in TV Guide – or rather, TVGuide dot com. Just like everything else, they’ve begun to go online, freeing up space in shopping carts, and eating away at time.

Time being the thing Jenna Muldoon doesn’t feel like she has right now. Her boys – the band she manages – are afloat numbers-wise, but just barely. To the point where Jenna feels like a fraud. The boys have had a single early hit – July’s “Crash Into You” – that fell out of
playability a third of the way through September, when everyone looked up and New York was covered in ash. Its chorus went like:

Crash into windows
Crash into halls
Tear it all down
You and all you walls

Crash into frames
Burn it all through
I’m comin’ in
To crash into you

Which, needless to say, came to a hard stop when they’d ended up more prescient than they’d ever wanted to be. A whole year’s worth of work went down with the towers, and now Jenna feels washed-up, like she should’ve had the psychic power to see the attack and the tragedy coming, like she should’ve planned further and deeper contingencies, like maybe she could’ve even done something preventative or life-saving, or as life-saving as the producer-manager of a boy band could do. Her boys’ve been singing B-sides since, selling tickets at smaller and smaller venues, word having gotten out about the September 13th FBI investigation into their lyrics that, as far as Jenna’s been able to track, lasted two days and mostly involved autographs. And even the agents had boys on the mind.
“You’re unmarried?” one of the agents, a wall of a man in triangle shades named Rondo Hitch, had asked her. “What about a boyfriend?”

“I live with a girlfriend,” Jenna told him.

“Like a friend that’s a girl, or–?”

“We bump uglies,” she had said. Which was enough to shut him up.

But that meant the rest of the day would be spent figuring out who else knew, Jenna part of the out-at-home, out-only-when-asked-at-work crowd. Think DADT, but she actually makes money. Jenna rattled through her tests, asking the lead producer, Frank Wilson, if he’d ever seen Will & Grace (he had, his wife loves it, he’s collected it on a series of VHS tapes) or what, though she’d never seen an episode of Seinfeld, she claimed was her favorite episode (“Not that there’s anything wrong with that!” Frank guffawed), or “The Puppy Episode” of The Ellen Show, which Jenna has seen, has recorded, and watches so frequently that she could recite it from memory (Frank hadn’t, but he was happy to put it on his list – he loves puppies!).

So, when the question finally rolled around, and when Frank, tempered by drink six – his desk drawer’s got more Crown Royal than the entire province of Ontario – whispered, “So, what’s your deal? They catch you cheating on a boyfriend? Or don’t tell me – husband,” he seemed amenable enough to the point where Jenna was willing to risk it, saying, “I have a girlfriend, Frank. I’m gay.”

“Wow,” Frank went, his trap making circles before his brain could catch up, “Wow, wow, wow! I never would’ve guessed!”

“So it’s,” she had said, her face behind the glass he’d just handed her, “OK?”

“Are you shitting me?” Frank asked, grinning, “Of fucking course it’s OK! Hey, wait, am I being too loud?”
“You are pretty loud, yeah.”

“It’s a secret?” he whispered through his teeth.

“Oh,” she said, “No. No, I’m out.”

“Wild,” he said, “Man, that’s wild. Great. Super cool. Y’know I’ve never worked with a gay woman before? You’d think I would’ve, since gay guys are fuckin’ everywhere in Hollywood – makeup and choreo and all that – but man, this is cool. You’re the first!”

“I guess I am.”

He’d offered her dinner, but the sun had already sunk, and Jenna wanted to return to Tish Ayler, the girlfriend in question. Plus, she wanted to avoid the boy-meets-gay-girl game working for various music-industry macho metros has made her, unfortunately, used to. They’d have a few more drinks, and Frank would nod toward another woman, and ask what she thought – maybe for a ranking, like she’d had focus groups do for the boys’ headshots. And she’d have to come up with an excuse about why no one in the restaurant was attracted. She’d rather be quietly out than give Frank, or any other dude, any activity. Not to mention she had to focus on a new strategy for the band – the Moneyboys is what they’re called, which was Frank’s idea. It’s a strategy that months later, she still hasn’t come up with.

Jenna is home again now, on the PC that Tish, an instructor of mathematics at USC, bought when her department decided to do a clean sweep of all new machines post-Y2K. It feels, at times, taller than her – especially since she uses it almost exclusively while Tish is asleep, the house lit only by its monitor and moonlight, the phone line empty and thus able to be commandeered without fear of missing an important call, the whole world still and in awe, like the Backstreet Boys have once again taken it over, black and blue. It’s part of a routine – she can’t sleep, she pours herself a bowl of stale Chex, she balances it on the PC tower as pages load
– a routine that she doesn’t love, but that she can’t spend time thinking about now. Now, she’ll fix the situation with the boys – how to make them loved again, how to get their names back on lips, their faces back into shopping carts. She’ll worry about adjusting herself once that’s done. Or she’ll at least throw money at a chiropractor, a cardiologist.

So, stumped, slumped, and at a proverbial speed bump, Jenna does what any former advertising exec turned producer-manager does, and turns to the Golden EFFIEs. The prize committee’s site is still just text floating around unbordered photos, but their documentation is at least solid. The grand prize in ‘93 went to the Apple PowerBook intro, which doesn’t help Jenna, since that tech would’ve sold even if it had been hidden between entries in a phone book. ‘94’s went to the agency behind an anti-drug campaign, which only won because it’s the hidden areas of America – the suburbs and everything that goes on in their basement – that make the country tick. ‘95 is barren, and she’s halfway through the ‘96 prizes when what’s in her eyes matches what’s in her mouth, though there it’s partially macerated. She clicks on Chex Quest, comes face to face with a Doom mod, and thinks, “This sold?”

But it turns out, as Jenna sweeps across Angelfire and Geocities, it did more than that – it turned people into lifelong fans. Even now, in ‘01, there is a not-insignificant number of people clamoring for a Chex Quest 3. “It’s been four years since the second game,” writes user CerealZorch, “How long will we have to wait for a third?” A guest book below his statement has a hundred thousand signatures, nearly all of them in crude agreement.

Jenna looks at her empty spoon, the floating checkerboards of wheat in their illuminated bowl, and then back at the screen. She wonders if there’s something to this, but the light outside her house has begun to purple, which means the sun will soon be up, and so will Tish – who runs, and who will yell at Jenna if she’s still at the computer when Tish rises. Quickly, the
bowl’s in the sink and PC’s shut down, and the spoon – evidence Jenna’d forgotten to hide – clatters into her bedside drawer next to at least three other hidden utensils. She catches her knee on the corner of the small bureau, and flops onto the bed holding it. This pain – like the tiredness, like the bad heart she’s got to keep medicating – is one of many things she’ll feel once she’s landed on a solution. But for now – for the last few hours before she’ll be back at work – she bites her own teeth and forces it all lower down into her mental spreadsheet.

#

“A dating game,” Jenna tells Frank, who’s entered her office saying he needs some artificial light instead of the real thing.

“Come again?”

“For the computer.”

“Hello to you, too,” he says, setting a cup of coffee on her desk despite the clock just having struck 10:30. Jenna catches his lower eyelids twitching, his hands. He’s got circles under his eyes so deep he could carry groceries in them – and his spray-tan isn’t making them look any better. There are still small flecks of the stuff in his goatee, fluorescent orange and already peeling, like he’s gone in for one of the bags of Cheetos Jenna keeps in her largest desk drawer.

“Catch me up.”

Jenna muscles her monitor a few degrees clockwise, so when they both lean back, on opposite sides of her desk, they can stare into the front of its bulk. She’s made a slideshow on Powerpoint.

“Wild to think this was a new program a decade ago,” Frank goes. “What are those nerds gonna think up next?”
“That’s a good place to start, actually,” Jenna says, tapping the spacebar and watching her title card dissolve, where an MS Paint chimera of Brett Lazar – the band’s heartthrob and oldest member, a boy the exact shade of golden Frank wishes he could pay for – leans toward the two of them and says, via an elegant, purple dialogue box, “Hey, girl.”

“I don’t get it,” Frank says. He lisps, “hey, girl,” tilts his head to the side, and lets a wrist go limp. “Are you trying to tank us further, or what?”

“Not that,” Jenna says. “The opposite. We’ll work on the dialogue. I only had an hour.”

Brett is – like Jake and Liam and Matt – gay. Frank knows that most of the boys are, but often says that he doesn’t want to know, his thoughts on the matter mimicking the military’s. Whenever he whips into Jenna’s office with ideas like a dropped condom or a relationship with one of the girls from B*Witched, Jenna tilts her head until he says, “Right. Only Colin.” In secret, most of the boys have told Jenna that they’re not sure Frank even knows their names. She of course hasn’t told the boys that their queerness is what Frank defaults to for Worry Numero Uno – if there’s even the slightest reveal of their sexuality, the whole operation could blow up. The boys are supposed to be objects of desire, washboard-abbed options for the billions of potential, screaming female fans. Their elimination as an option would spell death in the water – and even though the Pacific’s a big ocean, living in LA has taught Jenna that there’s a million sharks, and they’re all packed pretty close together.

The slideshow, then, turns into a selling of heterosexuality. Jake leaning against a tree asking how the player is doing at school. Liam, hood up in the rain, offering a bike ride. A scene of Matt in PJs next to a fireplace taken from a Gap campaign, head angled no longer toward fabulous prices but at a sprig of mistletoe. “It’s a controlled environment,” Jenna says. “We do the whole thing in advance. It’s literally impossible for it to go wrong.”
“That’s what you said about ‘Crash Into You,’ Jenna. And there you were calling yourself a woman of the spreadsheets, the odds. Here I was thinking I’d hired the executive version of Kenny Rogers. And here we are in this big hole.”

“We’re not in the red yet.”

“We’re on the line. I’m gonna be honest, Jenna, I’ve started to look at other options. There’s this girl coming up, named Vanessa Carlton – Iovine’s saying she’s gonna be the next Mandy Moore, but with dancing and piano playing, and we might get an option—”

Which is the first she’s heard of these possible other projects. It goes without saying that her head would be beneath the blade if the Moneyboys tanked, which would mean the end of her career as a producer and the start of many smaller, lackluster careers for the boys. Jenna clutches a desk drawer as Frank talks through further options. There’s a Canadian skater chick named Avril. An option for the Philharmonic right before the December holidays if Frank decides to cut ties now. Because of something about his photographs, Townsend might be leaving The Who. Frank’s got a way out on every finger, every toe. And Jenna’s got a fingernail piercing her desk’s weak metal. She smiles and nods, until Frank taps twice on her desk, and nods toward the cement walls of her office.

“We could spruce this place up, too,” he says, “Huh. Maybe some spruce. Could look nice on the walls.”

And before he can go into further plans for the reformation of Dirigible Enterprises – which Jenna doesn’t want to hear, seeing as they’re already renting out part of the building’s first floor to what Frank’d thought was a merchandise supplier but that seems to be a bunch of tall, skinny men in suits and bowlers who sit around a table eating lobster and never throwing out the shells – Jenna turns to her PC and whispers through the rest of her slideshow to the empty room.
“So you just let him leave?” Tish asks, wide-eyed. “You just let him walk away?”

It takes at least an hour after she returns from work for Tish to remember to not be surprised by every statement. Jenna’s never sat in on a faculty meeting, but from what she’s heard, everyone who attends them is expected to be kind of a bimbo, feigning amazement at even the smallest competent suggestions in the hopes that they’ll actually happen – that funding will get approved or they’ll splurge on the new version of Excel or that someone will finally talk to a dean about the student from Florida who keeps making racist comments despite attending USC, which, it turns out, is not the cure-all some of the faculty thought it would be. Jenna could read the names of the hundreds of boys they rejected when making the band – none of whom have become famous since – and Tish would say, “Really? Wow. Incredible,” until she unwound herself back down to earth, and the stiffness dripped out of her neck, and her face warmed back into the one Jenna’s fallen in love with.

The sun is setting. On their plates wilt supermarket salads, California-themed – walnuts and spring mix and small, sweet raisins, and slippery cubes of chicken – that’ve been poured out of plastic containers Tish picked up on the way to Jenna’s house, where Tish has recently moved in. Neither of them cooks. Few people in the city, in this new millennium, do.

“I hate that I didn’t say anything,” Jenna says, “Trust me. But I didn’t know what to say.”

Jenna flings a leaf at Tish, but it flops halfway across the table, which is made of plastic. Their old table broke a few weeks ago, and neither has had time to replace it.

“Didn’t realize we were playing radicchio pong,” Tish says, plucking the leaf from the table and stubbing her knee as she rattles down next to Jenna. Jenna rests her head on Tish’s shoulder.
“It’s been almost two months of this,” Jenna says, “And I’m already so tired, you could play me on KBLB and say M.C. Hammer wrote me, and no one would bat an eyelash.”

“Try being a Black woman trying to get tenure.”

“Right, I know. Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize, Jennifer,” Tish says, having downloaded back into the version of herself Jenna knows, loves. She throws the leaf in the direction of the nearest trash can. “We’re a power couple, remember?”

Which has been part of the plan for a while – though it hasn’t really come together like the two of them had hoped. Tish has missed out on tenure twice in the past year, once to an old Ukranian man and a second time to an old Russian man, neither of whom knows what LAPACK even stands for, let alone how to run it. With each review, as Tish has described them to Jenna, a board of deans rifles through a prepared binder of Tish’s research, computational and thus ahead of what most of the department does, and closes it before her, saying that she is still a bit too young, or a bit too fiery, or her models of fourth-order derivatives are, like her chances of ever moving up in the department, too theoretical. She’s helped student groups protest, she’s advised the GSA, and she’s taught about ACT UP during office hours, and all of these look terrible on her resume, though it’s not mentioned – it’s just known. The only good news is that every rickety hire keels over or goes emeritus within one semester at most, so the department’s got more turnovers than Magnolia Bakery.

“Another slot’s opening up,” Tish says.

“It’s your time.”

“It’s been my time for a while, Jenna. But I’m gonna behave and not get my hopes up, and hopefully get surprised when they finally figure out I’m the right choice. I’d probably have a
better shot at applying for one of those hybrid computational positions they’re opening up through Viterbi, but Dornsife is always gonna have my heart.”

“And you’ll always have mine,” Jenna says reflexively. Tish tells her to shut up and kisses her on the temple.

“Speaking of hearts, by the way,” Tish says, “Yours went where exactly, when Frank said he’s cutting the operation?”

Another of Tish’s specialties is recursion. Part of what Jenna loves about her is that their arguments never really end – they just become temporarily hidden, placed behind theses about popular solutions. Each often finds, in small amounts, one way of changing the other – Tish would call this solving, Jenna would call it challenging. But the point is, Jenna feels like stagnation is impossible when she’s around Tish. Without Tish, Jenna would know neither true love nor the internet.

“In my mouth?” Jenna asks. “I don’t know. And it’s not confirmed.”

Tish twirls some leaves around her fork, damp enough from the packaged dressing so they adhere to it like flat, green noodles. She is infinitely ungraceful, but makes up for it in these small moments, these little bits of elegance where it’s almost like she’s made it to the linear algebra at the center of the universe, and has figured out, briefly, how to channel the world’s elementary elements into what, if it’s not grace, is at least a convincing substitute.


“I know, I know. It’s just exhausting.”

“Weight of the world, right? I’m right there with you. I’m just saying, this is your chance.”
She’s referring, Jenna knows, to the other part of their power couple plan – the part that came on date three or four, when Tish held her hand without prompting, kissed her on the neck on the sidewalk outside of Kaprielian, and then whispered after they passed a scowling palm tree of a man, “Oops, that was a dean.” This part of the plan is that the two of them, who are both destined for power – especially now that they’ve both since learned more about how to hide even while out, to play the professional game – will create space. They’ve both theorized that there are ways to let more queer people into their respective fields once that space is made. Tish could write recommendations, sit on hiring boards, or submit a video of one of the recently-tenured fossils uvula-deep into a sweaty kiss with their surprised spouse, asking why her kiss was listed as too unprofessional but his wasn’t. Jenna had thought she’d build up a reputation, start her own studio, and then hire as many gay employees as she could.

“And this is your chance to ensure that,” Tish is saying. “The world is looking at these kids, right?”

“But really. That’s the problem. And I’ve gotta be honest,” Jenna says, “I’m really starting to doubt I can do this. Like, there’s a universe where I cut my losses here and move on while the profits are still high, but then I’m almost definitely blackballed from the industry. Or worse, I have to start working on commercial jingles. And then it’s like – who’s left to do this? Who’s left to protect our fellow gays?”

“Our fellow queers. And do you think I’d be sitting here, eating cold salad at a table from the frathouse line of products, wasting my time encouraging you if I didn’t believe you could?”

Jenna leans into Tish’s chest.

“You’re Jennifer Fucking Muldoon,” Tish says, as though this already means something beyond Dirigible – as though Jenna had not already failed at completing her stated goal with the
first year of her job. Jenna cries ink blot tests into Tish, and she hates that she does it weakly. She wishes her eyes could flood – that they could have any kind of immediate impact beyond a slow fizzle toward failure.

“I don’t know if I can.”

“Then show yourself that you’re able. Jenna, I don’t – you have a real opportunity here. Frank seems like – I feel bad saying this, but you’re smarter than him. You can run things. You can change things.”

“Do you think the cereal idea is stupid?”

“No, but you know my advertising knowledge is booty. Do you want to talk through it again?”

Jenna rises, knees and ankles both cracking from another seated day. The computer is on, and Jenna’s slideshow is there, emailed to herself, and she mumbles through the first, bland lines of her presentation. Love and interaction – blah, blah, blah. Tish is doing the thing where she looks where she’s supposed to look, but is almost definitely thinking about something of a higher order, her eyes deviating very slightly in opposite directions. But as Jenna lands on the slide of Jake, she starts diverting, vamping no longer about marketability in a general sense, but as a kind of marketability that might, finally do some good. “What are boy bands now?” she asks.

“Straight, white boys in designer clothes big enough for three of them. What if we marketed to all of the people who aren’t just the culturally-relevant white teen girl, while still hitting that market?”

“You’re saying ‘market’ a lot.”

“Stay with me,” Jenna says, now feeling like she’s flying, or at least like she’s being wheeled around, high speed, on her desk chair. “This might be it. Maybe this is the start of a
rebrand. We don’t say it – and I don’t even say it to Frank, but what if we start thinking about the audience as all of the people who aren’t cool or trendy, but who’re just lonely? We focus on people who play games – the nerds. We focus on people who’ll throw something from a cereal box into their computers. We do shadow posts on Geocities guest books. We start doing demo research with gay people. It’s all secret, of course, but it’ll boost our numbers for sure.”

“And how do you do this?” Tish asks, further in than she’d been a few minutes ago.

“You’ll need what, programmers? Artists? No offense, Jenna, but these graphics are a little serial kill-y.”

“Look, you try learning this Photoshop thing in a day. It’s impossible, I swear. And I don’t know, Tish. I don’t know how. This is all just an idea. I legitimately have no idea how I’ll sneak this past Frank.”

“But you’re excited about it, at least.”

“As much as I can get excited about a last chance.”

They exhale concurrently. Though Tish stands and Jenna’s sunk deep into their desk chair, they’ve reconfigured themselves into an improbable hug, arched like posture-warning diagrams that’ve fallen for each other across a page. Jenna still feels a little hopeless, but she also feels like she’s had more than her standard seven cups of coffee – there’s a jitter to her now, an energy. This whole idea, while it may feel wild – far off from the spreadsheet-based marketing with which Jenna Muldoon has made her name – is maybe feasible.

“Maybe there’s money in it, too,” Jenna says. Tish grabs the plates from her hand and tosses them in the sink, her laugh so loud it shakes the walls.

“Of course there is,” Tish says. “Not where I was going with that, though.”

“I’m just saying that maybe there’s a way to do both. Maybe we’re gonna be rich.”
Tish sighs, embraces her, and then points to the dishes.

“Not the point,” Tish says. “But let me know when all the cash comes in, Miss Moneybags. You can buy me a nice ring.”

#

If the bus radio was supposed to send Jenna Muldoon a sign today, on November 10th, 2001, it went overboard. Mary J.’s on about the power of family. Jenny From the Block swears she’s real. Enrique promises he could be her hero, baby. But when each of them sing, Jenna doesn’t feel like they’re singing to her – she feels like the singing voice she’d have if she could carry a tune in anything except a CD is flowing through each of them, like they’re not singing for her but with her potential. Maybe this is the start of something real, Jenna thinks. Maybe she could be a hero, could acquire the type of family she hadn’t had since her friends in college absorbed her, carried her to the City of Angels, and then became angels themselves. She doesn’t, she’s realizing, have a lot of people. She has Tish, and when she tries to think of other names – friends or colleagues or, well, what else is there? – she comes up so blank that she looks around the bus to fill them in. She swears Walter Mercado’s down the aisle, whispering into his hand. Two women wearing sunglasses below the ceiling, even in the overcast weather, beatbox along with the rickety rhythm of wheel against pothole. Next to her is a man in clerical vestments. He’s holding a bible, but the material around his mouth, which looks like dried-on powdered sugar but isn’t anywhere else on his cassock, makes Jenna think he’s one of the guys who got on at the WeHo stop. There are so many people in this city – so many people in the world – and she’s got one. What happens if she fails her? What if she’s fired? What if she dies a failure, uninsured and unloved, her bad heart suddenly dangerous?
She’s on the verge of crying again, but she holds it in. The sky explodes into one of those storied, brief Los Angeles rainstorms. The water doesn’t even hit them, but it’s enough to make the whole crowd groan. This type of ugly weather – this change from the sunny, the normal – isn’t supposed to happen in this city while they’re conscious. Let it be reserved for the noir hours, they’d say. They don’t want to be reminded of any of the city’s hidden elements, of any mechanics, meteorological or otherwise, that happen behind the infinite brilliance of the city.

Frank is like this, she thinks, or at least likes to think. He pretends annoyance at the grit, the behind-the scenery, but really he’d rather not hear about it at all. The man’s a romantic, as much as a guy making six figures can be. He moved from New Jersey to LA in the same way Jenna moved here from Michigan, both of them believing they’d make it out of the smog or fog or snow and into a place so pretty and amenable to desire, it would feel like that new kind of sparkly Play-Doh that Nickelodeon’s spruiking abetween episodes of Invader Zim. There’s maybe a way to keep Frank thinking like that, Jenna thinks, though she doesn’t like to think it, since it’ll mean operating around him for a while. But, hey, what’s a little secret on the way to success – on the way to having the types of people around her that are, well, more than singular. It’s the first time she’s felt aspirational in over a decade. She could maybe, actually be one of those machines keeping the Los Angeles sun on, instead of just shifting money around so she and her bosses get the most of it.

So, she avoids her office – if Frank asks, she’ll say she was in the bathroom, fixing her face– and pulls all of the boys out of a cardio session with a cycling coach who looks as severe as he is, but who will also quick-stop all operations if Jenna hands him a gift card to a certain Australian-themed Steakhouse.
“Hope the onion’s extra-bloomin’,” Jenna says, before turning to the boys, and telling them they can change into normal clothes if they want. Each of them have begun to fill out a bit, and they’ve all been growing out their hair, though Matt’s the only one of them with it anywhere on his chin, and even what he’s sprouted is pretty weak. It’s all they’ve been able to do since September, the gigs drying up further and further. They’re of course still skinny – any boy band with biceps large enough to carry their love away aren’t on stage anymore – but they look more presentable as hot objects, as people who could be loved.

While they change, Jenna goes over the notes from the last focus group, all teen girls they’d hired from the East Los Angeles Chapter of the Moneyboys fan club. They’d all been nice, written love notes to the boys until Jenna had to turn the light on behind the two-way mirror where she’d been seated to say that this was all stuff the boys would never see. Frank even showed up to spin his daughter into a hug and tell her to talk about the boys like she does at home. And then it was like Jenna was back in high school again, in a room full of teens tearing others into pieces just by thinking. Now, she keeps a single sheet that tells her what not to do, or what the boys should never be.

Brett Lazar, 24

- It almost seems like he feels like he owns any room he enters and while that’s usually good sometimes it gets annoying like he’s gonna tell me about his 55 other girlfriends or about how it’s natural that I’m bad at algebra
- Why does he grab his crotch so much? Is that on purpose?
- Is his hair really that color? It’s like half blonde and half black and he should just dye it one of the two or do tips like Justin from *NSYNC, who are a better band because
they’re hotter and sing better. Maybe if everyone in the Moneyboys was like Brett they could get away with it, but he’s, like, the clear talented one.

- He has a little angle to his dangle if you know what I mean. A little whip in the hip. And, like, it would be ok if he was Latin, but he’s definitely white? I don’t know it’s a little bit suspicious.

Colin Jones, 23

- OK I don’t mean to be mean because they’re always teaching us in school that bullying is wrong but he’s kind of a butterface. A butt-his-face? I don’t know what the term is but he has a hot body but you could solve a lot of his problems with a paper bag.

- He seems kind of hokey. Like I get that he’s from the Midwest, but, like, grow a personality maybe?

- He dances like he has rocks in his shoes. Like he’s always missing steps unless he’s doing the – I’m sorry if this is offensive – the really gay kind of ballerina steps you have him do sometimes?

- One time he talked on stage about football for like an hour, and usually it’s hot when guys like sports, but he was so boring that it was like – I wanted to leave the show.

Liam Correa, 22

- He literally always has his hood up at signings and he kind of looks like a punk bitch (not in a good way). Like he just looks like he doesn’t care.

- Does his face even move? Like I get that he’s singing but he just kind of stares out into the universe and it doesn’t feel like he connects with fans.
- My dad said the band is a bunch of terrorists and he looks like he’s the most likely
- He’s Mexican? LOL I had no idea! I wish his last name was easier to say.
- He always looks like he wants to cry, and that makes him seem really weak, so he’s my least favorite.

Matt Salazar, 22
- OMG he’s so cute like a stuffed animal but then you think about how all of the other guys in the band have a personality and it’s like what even is there?
- That poor, sweet boy. Not a care in the world. You could put your head up to his ear and hear the ocean.
- My mom says he’s the terrorist.

Jake Bennett, 21
- What’s up with his hair? Like who said a bowl cut was OK?
- He looks like one of those stick bugs, but with a funny blonde wig. Like for Halloween. Do you even feed him?
- I guess he’s kind of a funny guy? Maybe he could tell jokes in the middle of songs?
- So in our club, nobody really likes him as their favorite, so he’s the one we talk about for all of our friends who have low self-esteem. Like, you couldn’t score any of the other ones? Jake is probably the guy for you.
- Why does he jump around so much? I wish he would chill.
And Jenna’s fought some of it, crossed off, for instance, the points about Matt and Colin no longer having personalities. They’ve done some of the recent promos together, and have the same kind of aww, shucks rapport that Britney Spears has with anyone. Once their audience is bigger, that’ll all be solved. She crosses off the note about Jake looking like a stick bug, thinks more about his haircut, or at least getting him some hats – something potentially iconic, like AJ McLean with his Kangols. It’s these small types of problems that Jenna’s collected more data on than produced solutions for that dig at her, make her feel like she’s cut out for managing neither people nor the audience that’s supposed to love them. If she doesn’t record them, bloat notepads into phone books, they won’t get solved. But they keep popping up, and it feels like playing whack-a-mole against a machine that’s expanding to cover the world.

“One thing at a time,” she says to the boys, when they’ve returned, though none of them is really sure what she’s talking about. It’s a part of the distance, and it’s usually much more intentional. Jenna knows if she begins to care about them, about twisting them from people into celebrities, then it’ll be much tougher to care for them – to make the kinds of spaces that’ll allow them success in the future. Getting attached would be antithetical to the plan.

Though it’s not like the boys aren’t trying. Matt is a hugger. Jake is, Jenna thinks, legitimately funny, if not a little bit stupid. The boys bring her single flowers from bouquets at banquet tables. They belch and scratch themselves and let their shoulders droop in front of her. They all complain. They tell her everything despite her insistence that it’s not appropriate she hears it. She’s the only one they turn off the charm for, the only human on earth they’re comfortable enough to not be sexy in front of. Even Brett, the closest they’ve got to a seasoned pro, stops puffing out his chest whenever Jenna enters the same space – though he’ll swap back to masc whenever Frank arrives.
But Frank’s not here, of course. So when Jenna asks them to pose and talk for videos, footage she’ll cull for the eventual cereal box game, Brett squats like he’s typing, and does his best Carrie Bradshaw. “I pondered why so many men acted like dicks. In all of this dickery, where was the dick for me?”

Which is how things go until Jenna reminds them that this could be make-or-break, which is how she describes everything, which is enough to get them into smaller versions of themselves. This repetition is also part of the distance. They know Jenna has a girlfriend— they’ve even made the mistake of calling Tish Jenna’s wife. And because she’s found her way into what seems to be the kind of loving, supportive, out relationship that none of them have, any chain of questioning she lets go too far lands on those ideas, of authentic love or authentic romance, of what’s there if they ever get to stop performing. “That’s a question for the future versions of you,” Jenna always tells them, “You can trust that I’m not the one that’s gonna teach you how to love.” And though all parties involved know that that’s true, Jenna and all of the boys look, for a moment, sadder whenever she says it. But the less they know about her, the better. She thinks, “stop worrying.” She thinks, “technician,” “machine.” She thinks in the reduced vocabulary of boy band songs, asks her own head to stop frontin’, to look across the chaos and find the one, true way of being dedicated to her cause.

“OK,” she says, after Brett flirts into the camera for long enough. “One last line. Anything you want, as long as you’re in character.”

“Girl, when I’m at home, I look out across the stars, and I wish on every single one of them that you were there with me.”

“Perfect.”

“I always am,” he says. Jake boos.
“Looks like you’re up next, then, Jake,” Jenna says. “Roll out.”

“Are you from Tennessee?” Jake asks, spinning like a parody of a TV weatherman in front of the camera, and Jenna cuts him off before he can finish.

“Not a generic line,” she says, “We’ve gotta give them something they haven’t heard before.”

“Are you a blind dog? Because you’ve been barking up the wrong tree this whole time!”

“You know we can’t use that. And please don’t call your fans dogs. Just be yourself. Pretend you’re talking to someone you love.”

He twirls around again and says, “Hey. I make jokes because I’m nervous that you won’t like the real me. But I think I’m finally ready to show you more.”

He’s suddenly so sincere that it’s jarring. Jenna knows Jake comes from acting – all of his vocal training from community theater in increasingly-large communities – but this is the first time she’s seen him drop the facade for anything potentially public-facing. And it’s not just viable – it’s perfect. Strangely so. Usually, anyone in the music industry avoids the discordant, but this is the type of capital-M Moment that could begin defining him in further, deeper ways. She can see him wringing this kind of tenderness into solos – all of the boys get them, but since they’re usually not the kinds of high-energy dance numbers audiences scream for, they’re the points during shows that become bathroom breaks, trips to the concession stand. This is especially true of Jake’s solos, since he’s the least-showstopping, which is not anything Jenna will tell him. Usually, she ensures that his movements keep him in front of lights that block views of the main house. But if he can turn this earnestness into a renewable resource, she thinks that maybe he could keep getting away with the stupid jokes, could jibe his way into the hearts of millions.
And this cereal box game could be the perfect place to start this renewal – for Jake, and for all of the boys except Brett, who’s already gotten his persona so rigidly locked down Jenna wouldn’t be surprised to see it up Route 1 at Folsom. Nearly all of the feedback in Jenna’s dossiers is people wishing the boys weren’t X or weren’t Y. What she’s thinking is that this game is how she’ll be able to let fans love whatever new, concrete personas the boys assume. But to do that, she’s actually got to determine those concrete personas.

The thing is, personas are hard to pin down once you’ve known people for long enough. She could, of course, slap labels onto them – a bad boy, a dreamboat, a neighbor’s son – but that would have the kind of mismatched inauthenticity that the public’d see through instead of into. The idea for today’s recording is that, if she lets the boys be themselves in front of a camera, some character will coalesce from their lines. Then, their lines will become dialogue, and stills of the boys morph via better artists than her into graphics for the cereal box game. It’ll be short and sweet and – she hopes – low-budget, since Tish has put her in touch with some computer scientists who swear they’re interested in boy bands, and won’t charge a dime in the name of research.

“Was that OK?” Jake asks. Neither Jenna nor any of the boys have said anything, and Jake looks like he’s heard silence – the absence of an audience – for the first time. He’s sweating and wide-eyed, and his teeth, perfect like they’ve been measured to the millimeter, clench dangerously.

“It was perfect,” Jenna says, and then the other boys applaud, Colin barking as though he’s just seen the Chicago Bears score one of their rare touchdowns. Matt holds both of Jake’s hands when he returns to the group, and when the two of them hug, Jenna swears she can them kiss each other on the cheek. She notes on one of the many scribbled-over pages in her dossier
that she’ll have to nip that later. These boys, so often, believe they’re being subtle or secret, when in reality they’re human airhorns.

And Jake’s eerie moment of sincerity seems to inspire the other guys, Colin delivering a momentous soliloquy about the lights of the city and missing home and missing you, the one he loves on the other side of the country. In the right light, this is the type of performance that will soften the hard lumps of his face into a more lovable shape – plus, if all else fails, there’s always facial reduction surgery. She goes back and forth about dying his hair, too – he’s red but not full ginger, cut from the same sinewy, midwestern cheesecloth of all the kids she grew up with – but there’s something odd and individual about him that she doesn’t want to ruin, if only because she thinks it’s something audiences could fall for. He looks the most like a model out of any of them, distinct and alien, attractive but only just.

Matt’s up next, and he also unfurls himself before the camera, talking about how when he’d auditioned for the band on summer break after his first year doing pre-med at Vassar, he was terrified about leaving the world he’d worked for for the world that he and the other guys would build together – and that it’s been scary all this time, until you came along – yes, you the one who’s out there, listening to him now. Jenna’s not sure where this has come from, the boys’ realization that their fans want them to be people, but it’s major. Some gear in the back of her brain kicks into place, and goes, “Whoop, there it is.”

When Liam, in one take, removes his hood and headphones, says he’s embarrassed to admit this – and appropriately, genuinely blushes – and talks about how his abuela was the only person to ever talk to him about love, and how hard it would be, but how much he’d be willing to work for the love of a person when he finally found the one, Jenna just about keels over. He
brushes his hair back and it’s the first time she’s seen his face off-stage in a while, his emo bangs out even during dance practice.

“How do you even see?” asked one of their contract choreographers after a recent day of dance practice Liam had spent behind his hair curtains.

“I can echolocate,” he said, “Like a dolphin,” an animal he’d then tried to mimic. Liam is what those in the business of boy bands call unique. He’s untrained, and still somehow the best singer in the group, which means he’s the one recording most of the background vocals. When he auditioned, he’d been delivering pizzas. His whole family had shown up with banners, green jerseys with iron-on patches of his face. He mumbled the first verse of Blink-182’s *Adam’s Song* before rocketing into the chorus, somewhere between screamo and opera. His voice has a slight rasp that’s not there when he speaks, like he’s polished himself only far enough to be presentable. Jenna will forever remember his stomps around the parquet of the audition stage, his body suddenly heavy but intentionally so – not robotic but performative. He was, Jenna had thought then, at least trying to make himself into something – trying to change what people wondered about when they saw his name. And as Jenna asks him to try a few more lines – “for variation,” she says, though she really just wants to hear him say more about himself, in this strange, new, way – it’s like he’s letting whoever he’s speaking to in on the performance, winking at them without actually winking. They are somewhere out there, a universe away, but he’s tilting the mask just slightly enough for whatever kind of love he’s hiding underneath it to be seen through.

She has the boys rifle through individual postures, but only those safely across the range of imagined love – heartbroken to enamored, tears to gush. Brett asks if he can stick around and re-record a few things while the other guys get lunch, and while she’s sure this is only because
the rest came up with better lines, she says yes. Brett is, out of all of the boys, the one she most enjoys talking with. He’s a little older than the rest of the crew, had joined the Moneyboys jaded, has had at least one drink – if not many, many more – outside of their rooms at Toluca Hills, and always reverts back into queeniness once he’s sure the cameras are off. He’s been in a few movies, did one of the lesser-known Sandler flicks where he played a kid with x-ray vision that renewed a crumbling marriage.

“A weird day,” he says when he’s satisfied with his new lines, which mostly talk about touring and loneliness and having a person to come home to.

“What do you mean?”

“It’s the first time you’ve let us get away with being a little bit – y’know.”

“Really? I feel like I never comment on it.”

“Yeah, but, like,” he says, walking to where a brick of a Nokia’s been swaddled in his discarded jacket, tapping exactly one of the buttons until he lands on something he likes, “This was the first time you’ve encouraged it.”

“Did I? Unless I poofed into a fever dream, I don’t remember saying anything about being—”

“Faggier,” he says, completing both of their dropped sentences. “And you didn’t, but you came close. Be yourself? Pretend you’re talking to someone you love? Jenna, if that’s not a code, I don’t know what is.”

“Huh,” she says, “I mean, I didn’t mean to, but—”

“No, no, I don’t think it was a bad thing. I mean, I think all of the other guys did great. They were actually excited to try. They outdid me for once, which let’s be real, literally never
happens. By the way, that line about the stars I did at first? That’s really more of a Colin thing, now that I think about it. Oh, and we should talk about the lovebirds, who I’m sure you noticed?”

“Jake and Matt?”

“Bingo,” he says, zipping the phone into one of the infinite pockets of his cargo pants. “I had a feeling you saw. Your face got all weird.”

And here she was thinking she could win the WSOP, pop up on ESPN Classic after a late-nite *Connolly* rerun with the million-dollar prize. “Weird how?”

“I don’t know,” he says, an arm around her as they emerge back into the Dirigible parking lot, “A scowl? I mean, your face is always kind of a scowl, but it turned into more of one?”

“Noted,” she says, passing Frank’s car, or at least the one he drives here, a cherry-red and scissor-doored Tatra V8.

“Oh, come on,” Brett says, “I’m not trying to be mean.”

“I’m sure,” Jenna says, though she isn’t. Brett, off camera, is always in this kind of middle space, confident and validation-seeking, one ion away from tilting into whatever his next performance will be, all behind a permanent smirk. He waves to a staffer carting coils of cables that Jenna’s never seen before, and then mouths that they’re probably new.

“Seriously,” he goes, “No need to trip. I still love you, hand to god and all that.”

“That’s not what I’m worried about,” Jenna says.

“Then tell me what you’re worried about! By my time, I’ve got about twenty minutes of lunch left before my favorite producer-manager yells at me for not doing, uh, whatever I’m supposed to be doing next.”
“It’s signing headshots,” she says. There’s a little spike somewhere in her emotional EKG, an idea that he could be the kind of friend she’s been looking for – or that she could blip into more moments of mentorship, actually help the kid out and reveal the overwhelming kinds of industry stress that he’ll deal with if he ever wants to produce. And that same spike wants to tell him about all of it – that this may be their last promotional chance, that she’s trying to help them find space without being obvious about it, that she wants to open up their audience to the people who love in ways different but equally valid to the scream-y, heartfelt, pubescence of their usual demographic – but it won’t come out of her. She takes a breath and swallows it, says she swallowed a bug. And then she says, “Do you think Jake should cut his hair?”

“Oh, thank god,” Brett says, “Yes. Yes, totally. We make fun of him for it every day, but he’s too afraid to ask you about it.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, he’s like, super intimidated by you?”

“What’d I do to him?”

“No idea,” Brett says, checking his hair in one of the main building’s windows, “But he’s always, like, nervous that he’s gonna screw up and you’re gonna kick him out. Which is why I think the thing with him and Matt isn’t a bad thing, if you wanna talk about that?”

She doesn’t, not really. But it is a thing she should note down in her ever-bulging folder of dossiers. It’s in her hand now, knocking against the side of her leg like a bag of bricks.

“I’m all ears,” she says, thinking that if she names everything, she won’t have to remember she has a ticking brain for at least a few minutes.

“I think they’re helping each other be more confident,” Brett says. “When you said all that stuff about how we should talk to people we love for this game thing, they were looking
right at each other. And they both just, like, lit up. Matt finally looked like he wasn’t twelve anymore. It was like they both actually believed in love for a sec, instead of just acting it out. I was almost crying, I swear.”

“Yeah, but if anyone finds out—”

“I’ll monitor the situation,” Brett says, “No worries necessary, Jenna. The big brother of the band is on it, as soon as I get back from my date tonight.”

“A real date, or a band date?”

“What I’ll say is I don’t have any condoms on me, so you can probably surmise.”

Brett, even if he were on-camera in the courtroom of the esteemed Judge Judith Susan Sheindlin, would testify that any date he goes on helps the band – anywhere he’s spotted with Summer Sanders (who’s in his pilates class) or Jerri Manthey (a friend from one of the more reputable 3-day acting retreats) is guzzled down by the media as further evidence of his heterosexuality. Because he’s young and part of a boy band – a project devoted to a preservation of youth and innocence – the media also wants to break him, which helps Jenna out further, re: the whole him-pretending-to-be-straight thing. And it also helps Brett get away with his moments of non-innocence, which are frequent and hidden and facilitated by a series of online hookup communities on which he’s proven to Jenna that he only shows himself from the neck-down. Jenna considers the whole thing a breakeven, and she’s even a little hopeful that his charm could pull some diamond from what Jenna imagines is a rough bunch online, or that are at least below his standards.

“I don’t know why you make that face whenever I try to tell you about my adventures,” he says to her now, outside of an entryway beyond which Matt and Jake have stopped holding
hands as soon as they saw her before them, “I get my needs met, I get our needs met. What could go wrong?”

He tells her – though at this point, she knows it’s only because he doesn’t want to sit and sign for an hour – that today’s guest on A Date With Brett is a woman named Felicity Grossman, former manager of a talent company that’s pivoted into documentaries.

“She’s like what you’d be if you weren’t good at your job.”

“And your plan is–?”

“I’m just making the connection. That’s all it is, I swear. If anything comes up, I’ll go to you. Plus,” he says, tapping her folder full of dossiers, which coughs a thin receipt upon impact, “Look at everything you’re dealing with around here, Jenna. All of this – all of this chaos. Just let me handle this one thing, OK? That one thing being myself.”

“Chaos?” she asks. It’s news to her. Part of her job every morning is sitting next to her printer – a bureaucratic hand-me-down from Frank – and taping together detailed schedules of everything the boys are expected to do: workouts, dances, promos, practice, meetings with a nutritionist on retainer. She’s always thought of herself as rigid, for better or for worse, the better part of which being the fact that she can show up and grind a place into its mechanics without the very entity Brett’s just raised.

“Yeah,” he says. “I mean, you literally swapped us out of cardio this morning because you wanted us to shoot footage for, like, a game? I guess? I still don’t totally get what’s going on, but it was fun.”

“That was a one-time thing,” she says.

“Last week, Frank swapped out vocal practices for a car commercial, and then Matt forgot how to riff when we got there. We didn’t eat yesterday because the trainer was late and
made us workout during lunch, and since you were at a meeting or something, you couldn’t be there to tell him that ketosis isn’t a good idea if you spend most of your day burning calories. I shouldn’t be telling you this, but I’ve been skipping online classes the past few days because I’ve just wanted to browse the, uh, websites we were just talking about. Like, don’t get me wrong, I love it here, and so do the rest of the guys, but if you think there’s anything even remotely routine or – what’s the word? professional? – about this place, then look around, Jenna.”

She does look around. There’s nothing on the walls, the whole building new cement Frank keeps telling her he’ll refurbish once they make it big enough to do so. He’s even promised her an office window, said something about how good crews are at breaking concrete into the proper shapes over lunchtime vermouth on one of the rare days pre-”Crash” that Jenna finally felt like she’d put everything into its proper place. Someone’s drawn with sharpie on the floor, renderings of Fairly OddParents characters and the evil doodle from Spongebob. Liam has, tied around his left arm, what looks like a pair of boxer shorts too large to be his own.

For the second time in as many days, Jenna Muldoon quivers. This isn’t the kind of space she’s wanted to make for the boys, for what Tish would call homosolidarity. It’s messy – and she’s not even thinking about the dust under every table and desk, the spiders jazz-fingering in every corner. What’s been meant to be the start of her empire isn’t just crumbling from the outside – its foundation was jank from the start.

Brett sees her stare into some crevasse of Dirigible, and it’s like he’s psychic, hugging her before she can tell him the whole place is no peach.

“I know, honey,” he says, “But it’s OK. We’re all gonna get through it and make it big. You, me, Liam and the lovebirds. Even Colin. Just,” he goes, releasing her to join the signing, “Let other people handle things, OK?”
And letting people handle things is what Jenna does, for the approximately seven minutes of work time it takes for one member of the team of computer scientists she leads past the boys for a quick wave – a younger grad student with a dyed pink fade named Dougherty Zborin – swear he’s seen Brett before, even after affirming that he’s never heard of the Moneyboys. The leader of the team, a USC instructor en rickety route to tenure named Stacey Thompson, tells him to hush, in those exact words. She is an ally of Tish’s, another computation whiz who’s interested in the social, and who thus still exists in the wobbly world of adjunctitude. They’re in separate departments, though, and Tish seems pretty convinced that Stacey will hit tenure by partnering with Jenna on the videogame. Stacey, less so.

“I’m really more into the sociology of musical acts,” she says, “So if there’s anything we can incorporate about that – about what the audience likes, and the hows and whys of what they like it – that’d be my heatmap.”

“Sounds to me like you’re describing marketing,” says Jenna.

“Eh, tomato, tomatillo. Consulting looks good on an academic resume. Even if it’s lower than my usual fee. Best case, we find something interesting. Worst case, we get our name on a CD.”

“A CD for a cereal box,” Jenna says, which doesn’t talk Stacey’s face into budging any further. The more Jenna looks at her, the more Stacey looks like a Moai in a glossy ponytail. Her shirt says Cheap Trick, which seems like a pretty purposeful choice.

“What types of assets do you have so far?”

For a second, Jenna looks down at the bushel of document stacks in her hand, thinking that this feels like a job interview for her instead of for Stacey and her team, thinking she should
talk about her intent to rifle through all the human meteorites with which she works and funnel it all into a successful machine. Jenna talks through the video, how she’s had the boys record lines matching their selves, various poses in front of green screens.

“OK,” says Stacey, “We’ll have to do some screenshotting and encoding, but any monkey can press control-print-screen. How soon can you get us the footage?”

“I can walk through some of it today?” Jenna asks, “Maybe send the rest tomorrow?”

“Wild,” Stacey says, an eyebrow finally clicking north of her forehead. “OK, Miss Efficiency, let’s see what you’ve got.”

Jenna hates that she’s beaming at being called efficient, but it’s refreshing that anyone, even this almost-stranger, can finally see what she’s going for on the micro-level.

They’re into her office then, and already Dougherty is saying it feels like home.

“Or at least the stack,” he says, “Which is basically where we live.” He produces a banana from his rolled t-shirt sleeve like a magician, takes two dynamic bites to eat the whole fruit. It’s only when Jenna tries to place him with Brett – would he bite Brett like that? would Brett even tell her about it if he did? – that she remembers the footage from earlier in the day, each of the boys dropping revelations casual to each other but potentially caustic to the public.

“The footage is still pretty raw,” Jenna says, fast-forwarding through video in what she hopes doesn’t end up looking like a panic, Brett’s Bradshaw impersonation in a perfect squat.

“What was that?” Dougherty asks, the peel now dangling from his hand like a dead animal.

“Oh, just goofing off,” Jenna says, “The boys goofing off. You know how they can be.”

“Yeah,” he says, and Jenna wonders if he woke up with Brett, the two of them in his suite at Toluca Hills, on the same mountain as the Los Angeles zoo, where she’s twice had to be early,
Brett hungover from a long night of hiding, leaning against the balcony wall as the tigers roared, Brett in a faux-velvet bathrobe holding a dawn martini and Jenna next to him with a bucket as hecheers the animals, singing that one day, baby, they’ll make it – they’ll get out of their cage, “I definitely know how they can be.”

It’s only through stopping and starting the footage that Jenna realizes how spotty it is – how it’s infinitely more of the boys talking to each other, whipping secrets like vending-machine sticky hands, cheap and more breakable than they’d realized. It’s only when Jenna lands on Jake’s speech that she takes her hand off the double arrow and lets it play uncooked. She watches Stacey and Dougherty and all of the CompSci grad students’ faces yield into melting. Stacey even smiles a little, the side of her mouth arced like a glitch before her composure returns.

“I’m genuinely charmed,” Stacey says, which is enough to elicit gasps from her students.

“The use of non-gendered terms here is also interesting. Right? ‘The one.’ ‘They.’ A sort-of-general ‘you.’ This is smart. It’s like, you don’t know who’s going to play the game, if they’re male or female or nonbinary. The audience is the venn diagram of cereal eaters and boy band fans.” She’s leaned forward, taken a post-it from the rainbow helix of blank ones on Jenna’s desk, and begun scribbling notes.”This is smart,” she says again, “I think this could work.”

What Jenna hears is that she’s adequately censored the video from them, the wrong parts nimbly skipped. That it’s still marketing they’re talking about – not anything social beyond that. She wonders if she can learn video editing in a day, asks Stacey if she’s OK with jump cuts.

“Yeah, I don’t care,” Stacey says. “It’s more about the process. We can stitch whatever together. What do you think, do we shoot for KiriKiri or NScripter?” she asks, though both Jenna and the grad students know instinctively not to answer. Where Jenna’s trying to create space by
omission, Stacey’s projecting it straight from her diaphragm, pauses where she gets the chance to think.

“So you’re in?” Jenna finally asks her, the moment Stacey’s eyes float back to the monitor, where Brett’s re-record on the solutions of loneliness has just finished.

“Let us collect user data, and yeah,” Stacey says. “We’ll make the CD a download link, get people online, include a little software that pings us whenever the file is downloaded. User-friendly, of course. They won’t know, and it’ll be a lot of data, and that’ll be good for both of us. Right?”

“Right,” Jenna says, wondering in how many more dimensions her own analog files will sprout, if she’ll have to invest in a briefcase or a duffel. Trying to re-cross her legs, she kicks them under her desk, nearly stubs her toe. For a sec, she thinks about asking if any of these students do data entry on the side – what it would look like to have everything digitized, clean and removed from a literal paper trail. If all of the chaos Brett talked about could be spreadsheeted beyond the schedules, organized into bits more digestible than a single Corn Flake, even with milk.

“So you’ll get us the footage by tomorrow?” goes Stacey, and Jenna tells her yes, thinking how maybe there’s a way to chunk n’ chew all of the edits she’ll have to make on this footage tonight, too. It’ll be a drag, a trudge, a study in a limbless machine telling her to talk to the hand. But if she can find a way through it, then she’s on her way to becoming the type of producer-manager that could twist this whole operation back into success, or even being an operation at all. It’s almost like, for a moment, her concrete office has a window, a carpet, the kind of floor that doesn’t scar when any furniture’s pressed across it. Jenna Muldoon can see the future, the capability of whichever kind of omniverse Dirigible becomes, at her command and
protective of the boys and willing to keep the whole thing going until its glorious, rewarding crash.

#

Jenna, under the pale moon, where she sees, well, very few stars from her concrete office, is looking at very specific signs, icons for splitting and trimming and cutting, shaving the video into portions for the very people like her, the ones eating cereal in their offices into the single-digit hours of the night, hoping that with any new opening, any reveal of a rough edge, there will be a kind of magic that wasn’t there before. You ask anyone in Los Angeles who’s up this late, still in their offices, sustaining themselves off of whichever stale ingredients they’ve found in the staff lounge, and they’ll tell you that these late hours capture the best image of the city. It’s like a performer itself – bright all day, lit with neon even during noon, all the different kinds of light, human-produced and not, ricocheting from any entity capable of a glow – the jewelry, the polished and manicured air vents, collars on tiny, white dogs. Seen from the right angle, the right light, anything can have these small, glittering, temporary edges – anything has the capacity for stardom – or barring that, beauty. But you take all of the spotlights, let the sun sink into the earth’s pin like a Titleist, and suddenly, you can swear, by the moon and the stars in the sky, that anything can have an edge. There is gold even in them there hills that don’t glisten.

It’s a matter of letting people in, Jenna thinks, though not about herself. Stay up late enough in Los Angeles, and the city-as-performer, though never quiet, at least takes a brief nap. This, she thinks, is the truest version of the city – it’s the one she’s most comfortable within, where she feels the most faceless, just one person able to be lost in the low lull of the city’s snoring, reverberating hum. It feels, she thinks, like being inside a giant bell rung softly. It’s white noise rather than any kind of smart or dedicated noise. It’s unconscious.
Unconscious being how Jenna feels right now, eyes drier than a TV countertop after being struck by a foaming, late-nite cleaning product. Three hours of footage have been boiled down to thirty-two minutes, all of the scraps of the boys’ unusable bits split into separate files that’ve invaded her desktop like a small, uniform army. With all of these new files, and with her single-color background – orange, she claims, like the sunset or the over-powdered part of a Cheeto – her monitor looks like a lost Warhol. Then, her taskbar pings green. It’s been hours, but the downloads are complete, a zipped package of interviews with all of the bands doing better than the Moneyboys are right now, their boys in the jewels and sunglasses and Yankees hats that hip hop said meant success so clearly that pop had to listen.

She goes through the footage of these bands, makes sure she absorbs something new from every member, the Knights and the Carters and the Meléndezes. They talk about their childhoods over backsplashes of old home movie footage. They give parts of themselves to the public fluidly. Bass talks earnestly about wanting to be an astronaut. Ricky Martin tries on dwindling shorts. And each interview is cut better than her footage – each leaves the viewer with an edge of its own, an idea that there’s this space that the boy who’s just talked has left open only for the viewer. It’s not that they don’t reveal anything – it’s that they’re removed exactly when that reveal is about to happen. They walk to the end of the cliff, stare into it, say hi to the viewer down below, and then say toodles. And though your average fan wouldn’t realize it, she knows there’ve gotta be all sorts of invisible walls put in place so these boys don’t veer off-track, don’t accidentally slide a ring-popped hand into the abyss of fandom. There are scripts so cultivated that there’s no room for the chaos of boys, of recognizing them as people beyond their performance. They’re a face, they make noise, and then they move back into the background
noise, bye bye bye, until they’re needed again, their outlines always tangible. And when they return, they’ve still got their glowing outlines.

“I think that’s what a celebrity is,” says Chacez, *NSYNC on TRL a few months ago, “which is something we’ve been thinking about a lot, yeah? It’s a person who, like, you always know who they are.”

“Does it ever feel constraining?” asks Daly, a microphone thick in his hands..

“Not really,” goes Bass, “It’s more like this thing that’s there for you. So if you ever forget who you are, you’re there for yourself, too. You learn what parts of yourself are OK, y’know? Which ones are lovable. And then you learn to love those parts yourself.”

He is, of course, a professional, but there’s a little flicker before the jump-cut, too, where he blinks into sadness. But Jenna, the whole unlit universe of boy bands collecting somewhere deep within her, misses this one thing. She listens to the music of other groups as she watches these interviews, notices risks with higher tempos. It all sort of clashes for a while until it’s transcendent. She’s not watching anything or listening to anything because there’s too much of it all, but it’s somehow all being absorbed, a monolith to boy bands being raised from her vertebrae to her brain. This is the key to teaching people how to love her boys, she thinks – these outlines, these scripts made of glue. They’re made smaller to appear larger than life.

This, she thinks, is what this game is going to have to do, and then what she’ll have to do, too – teach the boys how to be less of themselves to be more of themselves, to flirt with that edge, to become more widely lovable – so that even the rough, hidden parts of the city, the shift workers and the underground dancers and, of course, the late-nite cereal eaters, can feel like they’re flirting, if only briefly, with those edges. The clock strikes five, and Jenna Muldoon, for the first time in months, feels like she may be able to get away with this.
And all around the city, the boys are waking. At Toluca Hills, Colin smiles into consciousness at a planned alarm, does calisthenics in-between journal entries. In the next apartment over, Liam is on the phone with a regiomontano uncle who can’t sleep because of the demons he’s predicted will follow Liam over the next few years. Liam is saying “Estoy bien, todo está bien,” but all the while he's thinking, “Good.”

Brett, in a WeHo studio that’s growing increasingly, to his irritation, luminescent, rubs the eye cream of whomever he slept with last night into the thin folds beneath his eyelids, hopes it includes pumping solution, and starts opening drawers and removing lids from ceramics until he finds a packet of instant coffee, which he tosses a few times in his hand, licks his teeth, and then swallows in a cluster of grimy gulps before leaving. There are, of course, calls from Felicity Grossman on his phone, but he tells himself he’ll return them later, in the future – because who in their right mind would be up at this hour? Which members of the waking world are available to love right now, as the sky granulates back into full light? Certainly, he thinks, not him.

And certainly, think Matt and Jake, who’re in each other’s arms again, maybe themselves. Maybe there is a way to hide and find love, to choose which part of yourself you’ll lacerate away, donate for public consumption, but only so you’re able to give the other parts of yourself to someone else.

And if the purpose is reduction – Jenna thinks, the sun finally creeping into the hallways to blot the artificial light of her office and tell her that all of the normal, well-adjusted folks will soon be rising, that Stacey Johnson and her team will emerge from the outside world into the halls of Viterbi, the concrete laboratory, where Jenna Muldoon will be sitting – if the purpose is reduction for a wider kind of love, then why not reduce them further?
Fuck one game – it’s five now. She’s got five scripts, one for each boy, long apologies ready for Stacey and her team, and long explanations about how popularity data could say interesting things. Maybe, she’ll argue, the data will show that Brett and Jake and Colin, the band’s white members, are the most downloaded – and wouldn’t that be an interesting development? She can see Stacey sighing and saying that more data is nearly always better data in the computing sphere, and then she’ll walk like an extra in “Thriller” into Tish’s office, smelling like sweat and holding a box of Safeway bagels, promising this is going to be one of the last nights she doesn’t come home, saying that she’s finally made the breakthrough they’ve been hoping for, and falling finally asleep, onto the small, long bench behind Tish’s desk.

#

“Stacey said she hated that you were right,” Tish says, tossing a crumpled ball of paper onto Jenna as Mudd’s clock tower chimes all twelve times, “And I had to have office hours in the Subway a block over this morning, by the way, so thanks for that, sleeping beauty.”

“Sorry,” Jenna says. “Would it help if I told you I’m a sleeping beauty who’s finally figured some things out?”

“Try giving mini-lectures on cardioid derivatives on the backs of napkins and we’ll call it even,” Tish says, kissing Jenna’s neck. “And you look like the opposite. I – we’re both lucky a dean didn’t pop in to check on me, to make sure I wasn’t doing anything too queer. Checking for U-Hauls and moon boots. Making sure I wasn’t harboring any rogue lesbians who look like they dug themselves a hole to sleep in last night.”

Jenna feels like a true chucklehead, like she’s solved her own plans to ruin Tish’s. She stands, trying to flatten out the topographies that sleep has forged across her clothes, wrinkles
across her shirt that’ll be permanent as long as it’s kept from a dry-cleaner, stripes that are now zigzags.

“Should I go?” Jenna says. “Should I only see you at home?”

“No,” Tish says, “Well, maybe. I kind of wanted to talk to you about it last night, and this wasn’t – I’m sorry. My big mouth. You just woke up.”

“No,” Jenna says, forgetting she’s on three hours. “I’m the one that should be sorry.”

She’s in the doorframe, hand on the knob and ready to slam it shut, but she tries to say goodbye and she chokes. Tish melts her like this, even when Jenna is ready to shout. Jenna tries saying all of the things she wants to, that she’d finally felt like things were coming together at work, and it’d felt like things at home would just roll along smoothly, too. But the real world doesn’t move by La La Land’s fantasy time or fantasy weather, so when it rains, it pours.

“I just,” Jenna tries, “Feel bad.”

“Yeah. That’s reasonable.”

“You’re just gonna go into hiding?” Jenna asks, “Like I don’t exist?”

“No, Jenna, it’s not that at all. I think this is kind of like we were talking about – it’s a means to an end. A way to make space. Trust that it’s just for this one round of applications. And nobody’s hiding. I’m just becoming slightly less visible. Visually asymptotic.”

Tish’s palms are beneath Jenna’s then, their hands configured as though one will tell the other’s fortune. There is a warmth there that Jenna has felt only with Tish, that back in Michigan she’d tried to discover against the lacerating cold with hookups like Brett’s, though they’d been coordinated via hotlines instead of dial-up. Some reasonable strand of her wakes up, knocks on the rest of her noggin and asks if she’d really want to face the pervasive loneliness of losing the
last person she’s got, starts singing – more softly than, but just as romantic as Tal Bachman – that Tish is her Cleopatra, Joan of Arc, or Aphrodite.

“It’s tough,” Jenna says, “To move from a place where I’m in pretty exclusive control to—”

“One of compromise? Yeah, your power fractals when you’re part of a couple. Honestly, I kind of hate it too. But I love you infinitely more.”

The two of them sit, as though choreographed, still holding hands, on the bench. Jenna’s knees knock just below Tish’s as they land.

“This feels like a pew,” Jenna says. “We feel like nuns.”

“Nun this,” Tish says, nearly tackling Jenna against the wall. Once they’ve kissed enough for the occupant of the office next door to rap on their side of the wall an exacting three times—and for Tish to hypothesize that the knocks were an instinctive 30-60-90 – Jenna leans into her like they’re back home, like she’s slept even fewer hours than she has. She rambles through the game, the meeting with Stacey, the phone call she has with a branding rep from General Mills later today.

“OK,” Tish says, “So this isn’t so bad. We’re both in the process of moving up, right? We’re both in the figuring-things-out phase. Job-wise, I mean.”

“Right. All of this – both of us working too much and everything – it’s all temporary.”

“I swear if you swear.”

“Fuck.”

“Jenna.”

“Fine. This is the beginning of the means to the end. I swear. We’re a power couple.”
“We’re a pre-power couple,” Tish says, “If we look at it plainly. But there’s nobody else I’d rather be part of a pre-power couple with. I’ve got an hour until class.”

When Jenna asks what about and Tish starts showing her Fortran printouts, Jenna asks if they can talk about anything else.

“OK,” says Tish, “Any of the boys do anything silly lately?”

“Not really. Although Brett did say the whole place was chaotic.”

“Yeah, it’s always seemed like it is, from what you’ve told me.”

“Seriously? Even you think so?”

“Yeah, I mean – this is a surprise to you? Your whole thing is making messy things work. Remember back when you were working for Tiger, and they said ‘make us a CD player, but tiny and expensive and it only plays songs for about a minute or two,’ and you’d drawn up a plan for those Hot Clips things by the next day?”

“Hit Clips.”

“Whatever. What I’m saying is – and I’m gonna say this mathematically, so it sounds like I know what I’m talking about even more than I actually do, which is still a lot – but what I’m saying is that you thrive in entropic environments. Other people see chaos, but you see intricacy – at least once you’re able to take things over.”

“Intricacy and boys don’t really go together, if you catch my drift. We found Liam shivering on the roof of the dance studio a few mornings ago, smoking a joint before choreo practice. I was half-expecting him to lie about what he was doing, but he just deadpanned ‘Nope, it’s pot. You got me.’”

“It’s gotta be a lot.”
“It is. Honestly, I’d never tell anyone at Dirigible this, but I feel overwhelmed every day.”

“I think part of that’s because you take on so much, like with this game thing. But I wonder if – and this is again, one-hundred percent, the mathematician in me – I wonder if there’s a way you can put things together into a series of theorems, or rules? 101: thou shalt only eat salad if thou has a photoshoot upcoming. Thou shalt stay super skinny so thou canst belt thoust’s pants down to the last belt loop. That kind of thing.”

“That’s what this is supposed to be,” Jenna says, kicking her handled portfolio. It barely even tilts. She wonders if, while individuating the boys, there’s a way to set up an umbrella system – a way to keep them all within their outlines, to understand which of their edges are permeable, and which should stay secret forever. She’s not sure what 101 would be yet – maybe something about the importance of effortlessness? Of creating a form of chill even two and a half minutes into an uptempo dance number? Of never being allowed to break a sweat? As though, like any entity within the limits of the Greater Los Angeles Area, waiting for its moment, the folio flops forward. Maybe these rules will be part of some greater streamlining, Jenna thinks, a reduction not just of the boys’ public spectra, but of all of the noise they carry with them.

#

Heartbreak for Jenna Muldoon. The cereal folks say no, the call a professional courtesy that lasts only a few seconds, and ends on the sort of manufactured kindness that could fit into a box. “But if there’s anything else we can do for you,” goes the rep, and then they hang up.

So, what was supposed to be a meeting – impromptu for Frank, planned for her – turns into Jenna alone again, idea-void enough to seek the comfort of data-entry, her portfolio of dossiers unfurling around her feet like she’s just won Microsoft Solitaire. Some of the long
accordion folds do bounce slightly, and there’s some minor ease in that, like she’s still got
information to spare, and that it and her are still tenacious enough to coil into some new,
effective strike – one that’ll get the Moneyboys out of financial water-treading and back onto the
center of the map. She gets through all of the information about Brett, but finds it bland, and
places one of his stills at the top. It’s a screenshot she didn’t send to Stacey, one where Brett’s
eyes seem a little wider because of the light they’ve swallowed, the moment before he’s about to
lapse into a character that’ll die in seconds, there only for a laugh. It’s maybe her favorite picture
of him, but after a minute of considering it, it no longer fits the document, and she drags it into
the recycling bin. She finds a different photo of him, a standard smolder – eyebrows barely lifted
over what could be his resting face. It’s not as close to what she knows of him as a person, but
it’s more appropriate to him – deeper into the reduced persona she’s going to assign.

She gets through Brett and Colin, lists of their don’ts and goals, photos of them that
match. Her clock – a small, pink digital number shellacked in gold dollar signs – hits a new hour
and plays a few seconds of one of the boys’ earlier songs. The small touches of personality her
room has accrued are almost all from merch that hasn’t sold: the clock, stickers of themselves the
boys have placed on the side of her hand-me-down desk, a cadre of five matching stress-
squeezers in the boys’ shapes that she does genuinely like.

The music stops, and as if on cue, there’s a knock at her door, a meaty hand that has to
grab the other in a thin V to fit through its frame.

“Sorry to show up unannounced,” says Rondo Hitch, “You want I should flash the badge,
or what?”

“Could’ve sworn we’d been investigated already, Mr. Hitch.”
“It’s Agent Hitch, technically. But Rondo’s also fine. We’re close friends at this point, right? You mind if I sit? How’s the girlfriend?”

Jenna’s about to ask what the policy is re: refusing an impromptu rendezvous with an agent of the federal bureau – to batten all necessary hatches with the kind of snarky non-responses that even he can’t read into. But he wiggles his voice recorder in his palm, and jams the off button on it so much that it runs, suddenly, as much risk of breaking as the chair buckling under his big ol’ gams. He mouths, “unofficial business,” his teeth flashing large and rectangular, his lips small lines. He is tired like Jenna, she thinks – his eyes bagged, his buzz starting to fray in wheaty, blonde batches, his elbows making craters on his thighs as he leans forward.

“The girlfriend’s great,” Jenna says. “How’s the, uh, monitoring been going?”

“About as good as your day’s been. Got to nap for a few hours in a parked car at one of Southern California’s most beautiful campuses, but other than that, it’s been tiring.”

“You’ve been following me?” she asks. “No offense, but I have a feeling I would’ve seen you.”

“Look, I know I’m a big guy, but I dress up like a mountain, or a building, and I blend right in.” She blinks and he says, “That’s a joke,” though Jenna’s not convinced either way. “So, you wanna know why I’ve been following you today, or should we keep tangoing like this?”

“I was gonna ask if you’ve ever wrestled professionally, but I guess I’ll bite on that instead.”

It’s odd – the same part of her that’s been refusing all of Frank’s requests to be camera-ready isn’t as peeved by paranoia about being watched by this one guy, his one bureau. Part of it’s that she doesn’t have too many secrets. Sure, there’s the family she rarely speaks to, or the
friends she’s fallen out of contact with. But most of what she’d want to hide from the general public is job-related, and she’s got a funny feeling Hitch knows all of that already.

“Funny story,” says Rondo, “Lost out on a state championship in high school because I gave a guy a pretty grievous spinal injury.”

“I was thinking more WWE.”

“Yeah, I’m sure I’d look great in those glittery tights. Hey, do you think they pad their crotches, or–? Actually, don’t answer that. I legally need you to ask me why I’m here.”

“Why are you here, Agent Rondo Hitch, FBI?”

“Again, not recording this. I’m here because I’ve heard you’re making a little game, and there are gonna be download links, and we – uh, well – we’re interested.”

“In some copies of the game?” she asks. “Sure, I can even get the guys to sign them for you.”

“Not like that. I mean, we want the download data. It would be, uh, useful to us.”

“OK,” she says. “But I’m gonna assume you know that the cereal folk just gave me a big, fat no, though.”

“Yeah, so, that’s the thing,” he says, standing again, the height of about three Jennas. His head’s almost at the ceiling, and he looks up and sits down. “Tell me we can have the download data, and they’ll say yes. I can’t say too much on why, but let’s just say we’ve got Betty Crocker trapped in a cell in some nondescript location.”

“OK,” says Jenna. “Am I allowed to ask why you want it, or is this more of an order?”

“This is the courtesy call before the order gets issued,” Rondo says. “This is me being nice because you were super cooperative last time. This is also me saying that the plan is we leak a little bit of info about these two darling little sweethearts if you say no.”
From an interior suit pocket emerges a sweaty folder, which curls open to show a clear face shot of Jake in what’s gotta be Matt’s arms, though Matt’s head is obscured by the window. Above Jenna, one of the flickering fluorescents finally shrivels into one, final death crackle – but the room’d feel darker even if it weren’t for that, Rondo Hitch threatening rather than sniffing for the first time since she’s known him. It’s not just fatigue that’s engulfed him, it’s this kind of snarl, like any move he’s gonna make has been as choreographed as a dance number. She’s scared, sure, but also envious.

“I guess I can’t say no,” she says.

“I guess you can’t. You can keep that, by the way. We’ve got a lot of extra copies. So, you want I should tell you what’s gonna happen, or am I gonna have to,” he says, and then breaks into what’s honestly a lacklustre, nasally Brando, “make you an offer you can’t refuse?”

“Let’s cut to the chase,” she says.

“Choice,” he says. “For now, just go outside, enjoy yourself, forget about all this nonsense. In about fifteen minutes, the cereal guys are gonna call you back. They’re gonna have a change of heart. All you do is say yes to what they offer you, make sure you and whatshisbut Wilson sign all the contracts, and then – bing, bang, boom – all of the necessary data-collectors will be in place. And this is an *NSYNC operation, if you catch my drift. No other strings attached.” She’s blank until he says, “You could at least laugh at that one, yeah? I was pretty proud of it.”

“Ha ha,” she says.

“Tough crowd.”

“Am I allowed to ask why you want our download data?”

“I’d rather you didn’t, to be honest.”
“Is that a government rather-you-didn’t, or a Rondo one?”

“An Agent Hitch one, if we’re being exact. It’s kind of a tough conversation.”

“Let’s have it, then.”

He sighs, and stands, and flicks at another light, which flickers out, too. Then, he sits back down.

“You know all of these are on their last legs, right? You should really think about getting ‘em replaced. I swear, we’ve got interrogation bunkers nicer than this.”

“Agent Hitch.”

“All right, all right. So, as I’m sure you’re familiar, there was a terrorist attack on US Soil a few months ago. A war and a Patriot Act later, the president wants to make sure we’re, uh, ensuring that the people he knows aren’t gonna attack us still stay, uh, powerful.”

“What do you mean?”

“Look at you, Jenna. Look at me. A couple of powerful people.”

“Sure.”

“And you know why that is, yeah?”

“Gonna guess it’s not that we both studied our asses off in college.”

“Look, I’m not as much of a meathead as you think. But all I’m saying is, the president’s looking at who’s hit us, and he wants to make sure that the economic success in the country stays with, uh, people that look like us. So we just wanna make sure that the, uh, lighter boys are more popular than the, uh, heavier ones. If you catch my drift.”

“But they’re not even—” Jenna says, “Matt’s Filipino. Liam’s Mexican.”
“That’s not what matters,” says Rondo. “You should hear W. He’s walkin’ around saying things like ‘if it’s brown, flush it down.’ Which is not a thing I’ve told you, by the way. And don’t even get me started on the gay thing.”

“That’s shitty, Agent Hitch.”

“Never said it wasn’t. Just saying it’s the bureau’s official position.”

“And if it turns out they’re popular?”

“Then I dunno. Look, this Patriot Act thing is new, and we’ve got a ton of info to start sifting through, but nobody’s sifting. Most guys are just listening in on their exes’ phone calls, or trying to break into their desktops for nudie pics. Plus, the war and all that. What I’ll say is the chance of direct action being taken against you and your boys is unlikely.”

“But not impossible.”

“Look, you’re in the industry, so I know you’ve seen Houston as the fairy godmother. And she’s right – impossible things are happening every day. But you’re no Brandy, if you catch my drift. You’re useful to us for your data. The End. Roll Credits. Check back next week for Angels in the Endzone. You’re not an active agent – you’re a metric. Does that seal it?”

As much as it can be sealed, Jenna says, though not in so many words. Rondo stands again, finger guns a third light into failure.

“Excited to be working with you, Miss Muldoon. And, uh, hey? Do me a favor and make something up for Frank Wilson about why I stopped by. That guy’s, uh – well, let’s just say there’s a reason I came to you instead of him. The world is full of zanies and fools, and all that.”

Rondo tries to bow, but it looks more like he’s trying to atomic drop some poor, unsuspecting O2 molecules. He tips an imaginary hat once he’s weaseled outside of her doorframe, looking like the most unincredible hulk, somehow more decrepit-looking in the
hallway’s more natural light. She can hear him pounding down the stairs, and then on the
sidewalk until he’s no longer making noise, or is making noise that he’s successfully buried
under something else. On her screen is that same picture of Brett, and on her desk, still open, is
the photo of Jake and Matt. It all feels unjust, this and the bureau and the timing of it all, like
what Jenna’s doing couldn’t just be a thing on its own – like she can’t take a step forward
without maliciousness appearing somewhere else. This is a feeling she’ll have to bury, she
knows, and so she does her best to think of a shovel. Maybe this is what the fame machine is –
she’s seated somewhere deep within its wires and gears, believing she can pull any of the strings
from her sunny, little bridge. But there’s some insidious power behind all of it, or maybe a few
insidious powers, or whatever. Things she can’t control, and thus bad things. She sighs, places
her feet on her desk, and waits for a call from a different kind of General.

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A day later, all of the boys filter through Jenna’s office. The idea is that they’ll get some
minor, insignificant input on what each of their individual personas are – costumes and
catchphrases, who’s able to say “girl” without a diphthong, who can stretch into the best acting
parts. This is a one-on-one thing – she wants to ensure that no one persona overwhelms the
group, or that something uncomfortable isn’t imposed by one boy onto another, some secret that
she and the bureau that’s in all likelihood left some residual trackers around to tune into her
interactions doesn’t need to be influenced by. It’ll also give her a chance to finally talk to Jake
and Matt, who show up together, both heads of hair tousled like they’ve stuck their tongues into
an electrical outlet, both faces intentionally small, like this is just another look.

“Colin’s here now, but we’re almost done,” Jenna says. “Pick which one of you wants to
go first, and then come back in, like, fifteen, OK?”
“We can’t go together?” Jake asks.

“Not unless you plan on performing in a shared body for the rest of your careers.”

They look at each other like, “Could we?”

“Guys, you’re not making this easy. Just flip a coin or something.”

And they’re off, though judging by Jake doing his best Emma Bunton within earshot – “Tonight,” he’s singing, though softly, “Is the night when 2 become 1” – they’re just gonna hang out in the hallway and wait for each other.

“Young love,” she says to Colin, “Am I right?”

“Wait, you know?” Colin asks. “They said not to tell.”

“Did they forget to tell themselves?” she asks. “It’s pretty obvious.”

“Right, but–”

“Do you think I should pretend not to know?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I just kind of like – I dunno. They’re my bros. I want to make sure I’m supporting them. Maybe you should ask them what they want. Hey, did you see Venus was out last night? It was super bright. I stayed up late for it.”

“How late?” she asks, in a way she hopes is closer to cousin than mother.

“Eight-thirty,” he says, blushing. “Sorry.”

Colin, though heterosexual and perpetually boring, is the one whose persona has been the easiest to pin down. He’s not the best actor, but – given the innocence, the sky-staring, the same Midwestern-style waxing nostalgic about days he doesn’t fully remember – he’s been the closest to an archetype this whole time, a Sensitive One like Brian Littrell or Jonathan Knight, not just glossy-eyed but glossy-faced, the kind of guy who’d look the most at home under the sparkles fans draw across his face in notebooks. He’s got a jawline that he’s still growing into – and may
never, to the point where she’s heard Brett calling his skull Jurassic – which is an additional line on the resume for being the band’s Sweet Guy.

“This seems pretty spot-on,” Colin says. “I don’t have to do anything secret?”

“Nope,” Jenna says. “Just keep being your usual, nice-guy self, and everyone’s gonna keep on loving you.”

“Shucks,” he says, unironically. “Geez.”

“I’m serious,” she says. “All of the guys talk about how supportive you’ve been for them all, and they really appreciate it. And the fan mail we get? Pretty much every letter mentions you’re husband material.” Both of these statements are lies, but that’ll stay between her and whoever’s listening. Colin’s not simple per se, but he’s not detailed, either, which is why he’d been the easiest to assign. Even Brett – who’s also easy, though in more ways than one – is performing when he’s on-stage. Colin never feels like he is. And that’s fine – that’s something about him Jenna only knows because she knows him. As far as anyone in the industry knows, he’s acting as much as any of the rest of them, and successfully, too.

“So that’s it?” he asks.

“Easy, right?”

He slouches forward, does the theater kid pout he must’ve learned from Jake or Brett. This, Jenna thinks, is the danger – that they might begin overlapping, that they’ll mix more than just fluids with each other. If Colin gets meaner or sharper, if Matt gets less visibly cute, if Brett learns some kind of genuine empathy, they’ll fall from the roles she’s developed even before they’re assigned. She sees, in Colin attempting to act himself into breaking, bits falling off of the place she’s carved out for them in the fame machine, nuts and bolts bouncing off wireframes.
“I dunno, I was hoping I’d get something cool to work toward, like – I know these are stupid examples, but like racecar driver, or astronaut.”

“Do you want to drive a racecar or do space training? We could look into that.”

“No, not really. I’m not totally sure what I want. There are a lot of options. It’s kind of overwhelming.”

And that’s the point of this assignment, Jenna tells him – to make sure he’s about to ground himself in himself. She talks to him like he’s Paltrow, about to appear on QVC and hawk some crystals. This is the type of coddling she’s been paid to summon, she thinks – it really is the same as working with music execs. Everyone’s putting on their own show, and everyone just wants to feel they’re powerful and loved. This role assignment can’t be her idea once Colin leaves the room – he has to buy into it. He has to be reminded that he’s the center of the universe, at least in Los Angeles, which is already the center of the universe.

“This is to set you up for the future,” Jenna says. “You have the power to be anything you want to be. And you stick with this, and I’ll be here to support you. Can you do that?”

“Of course,” he says, smiling dopily again. He claps a few times, and breathes into a nervous laugh. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to be so brash, there.”

“No harm, no foul.”

“Wow, we’ve even got you using football terms? Be still my heart, Jenna!”

“Inappropriate,” she says. “You good, though?”

“Yeah, of course. Thank you. Do you want me to go get Jake and Matt for you?”

And she says yes, and she hears him say how quick and easy and reassuring the whole process was to Matt and Jake, how wonderful Jenna is, and how wonderful, too, are their lives and the industry and the world. He says, “Blessed,” and Jenna hears Jake groan. He’s back to a
smile by the time he breaches Jenna’s doorframe, closing it behind him and bowing – look, no lover. There are a few minutes of footage of Jake, age 12, on public access doing card tricks, dressed in a suit of glistening, violet sequins that would probably still fit his waist today. He’s filling out like a swimmer, Jenna notices, sort of spindly but still growing. This is the first time she’s seen him in a sleeveless shirt outside of crashing the boys’ cardio practice, which she decides to open with.

“Yeah, well, M– some of the guys, I mean – they’ve been telling me that I’m looking a little bit better lately? And I’m trying to, I dunno, talk myself into being confident?”

“You always seem confident on stage.”

“Yeah, but that’s different. That’s a job, y’know?”

He’s shaking a bit, and even Jenna can tell these aren’t good vibrations. Any of these boys can sing the absolute pants off of a ballad, the socks and undergarments away from a steamy, R&B-influenced track. But move them into a position where they’ll have to confront any actual kind of love, and they panic. They know they’re supposed to be experts, but they’re all just kids. And Jenna gets it – she’s twice their age and then some, and still doesn’t know what she’s doing in that arena, either. She could tell Jake this – that she gets angry and has to talk herself down, or that she leaves and distracts herself with work at even the smallest inkling of her relationship reversing polarity and turning sour. But instead she says, “People love you. You know that, right?”

He nods, running a hand through the front of his hair. It looks like he’s tried to front-part it like Leo, but it’s just made him look boxier – the kind of cut that’d get him cast as a peasant before either Romeo or Juliet, regardless of whether Luhrmann’s there to whip a plus into the title.
“Tell me what’s on your mind,” Jenna says.

“Brett and Matt are both saying I should do something with my hair.”

“Do you want to?”

“I dunno. I think so?”

“Then we can do that.”

“OK.”

“Good talk.”

“Sorry,” he says. “Do you want to talk about whatever you called me here for?” He’s looking at the wall behind her, she notices. Counting grains. Biding a kind of time he thinks isn’t at least partially hers, gritting his teeth to get through it. There’s a wobbly ambition to him, some transformation into a survival mode she hasn’t seen before. He crosses an arm across his chest, flexing but still thin.

“Gonna be honest, Jake,” she says, “It looks like you came here to fight.”

“Because of the shirt – or what? You want me to take it off?” And he clicks back into his stage self then, which means she’s lost him, will have to dig him out of the exact persona she’d been ready to ask him to refine.

“Jake,” she says, trying to make her voice sound like Tish’s, low and understanding, “What’s going on?”

“I know you know about me and Matt, and I just wanted to say that we’re in love and this is the first time either of us have felt what love is, and it sounds so stupid, but it feels like we’re in one of our songs, and all of the ways I have of talking about it aren’t funny anymore, they just sort of sound like lyrics, and so I’m deeply in love, but I’m also worried I’m losing myself, and
I’m afraid of disappointing you, and I think that’s everything,” he blurts, in maybe three seconds, cumulative.

“OK,” says Jenna, “That’s a lot. I’m glad we’re talking, then.”

“I’m scared of you?” he half-says, half-asks, and then lands on, “I’m scared of you.”

“OK,” she says. “Let’s start with that. I know I can be kind of a hardass, but–”

“It’s not that,” Jake says, releasing his arm, leaning his head back over the chair. “It’s weird. I don’t know what it is. I think it’s just the whole thing where I’m afraid of disappointing you? But it also feels like more than that? Global, kind of?”

“Global.”

“Maybe not global. But definitely on a larger stage.”

“OK,” she tries, wondering if this is his way of Morse-coding to her that he’s heard about the intricacies of the USC partnership and the popularity data, or the strong encouragement from the bureau about the whole rigamarole. “But larger stages are exactly what I’m trying to get you onto. So is that not a good thing?”

“I guess.”

“How about this?” she says, standing again and reaching a hand toward his face, then wiggling it when he doesn’t stand up right away, “We start over. Hi Jake, I’m Jenna. You’ve got a thing with Matt going. As long as it doesn’t impact the band, we’ll find a way to make it work.”

“For real?”

“For real. You have my word.”

And he doesn’t – she’s rifling through the mental catalogue of all of the ways she remembers her friends in college breaking up, or all of the reasons why one of her parents would
ask the other to spend the night outside, in the Michigan snow, because of a minor, petty indiscretion. The difference between her and Jake, though, is that she knows how to hide it. And as she takes his hand in hers, she knows to squeeze it a bit, to transfer into him some of the confidence she wants him to have in her. There’s of course a small thread within her that’s still feeling guilty about the whole thing, but she tells her brain to snap it. It’s not like Jake knows how to make a future for himself – that’s the whole reason why she’s here, to guarantee that he doesn’t ruin the place he’ll have.

“That,” he says, his neck softening, his eyes on the ground and then her, “Means a lot.”

“Of course,” she says. “Are you feeling OK now? Do you want to talk about this?”

“I mean, my bullshit detector’s still ringing a little bit, but I’m pretty sure it’s residual at this point.” It’s not one of his fuller jokes, but it’s at least a start – an unmanicured olive branch.

“Fair enough. You at least feeling OK enough to work through it?”

“I guess,” he says, sighing theatrically, bowing again, pulling a pristine smile out of an invisible hat. “If you insist.” She knows that she’s swept him back, then – that he’ll at least listen through what she’ll tell him, and be willing to bargain through all of her requests, not knowing that most of what he wants, she’s already planned for. A haircut, one of those new Gamecubes, the assurance that he’ll keep performing, on-stage and off, and will still be loved, on-stage and off, as long as he follows her instructions.

#

Each of the boys gets their outlines solidified. Jake is The Funny One, Colin’s The Sensitive One, Matt’s The Cute One. Liam is thrilled to be The Bad Boy, asks if he can goth it up a little more on stage. Jenna says maybe, that they’ll think about it, and he rolls his eyes and sighs and hugs her.
“What do you think you’re gonna be?” she asks Brett, going over the roles with him.

“I dunno,” he says, “The mean one? The messy one? Isn’t it your job to tell me?” They land on The Heartthrob, which Brett deems appropriate, before rising to leave for another date with that Grossman character, this time with Frank’s OK.

“Daddy Frankie said it was chill – a possible good connection.”

“You call him that to his face?”

“Oh, of course not. That guy’s eyes are always one little blood droplet away from popping out of his head. I mean, you’ve seen him, right? Always staring. You could call that guy Don’t Blink-182. Watching, waiting, antic-ipated. Anyway, have a good one! Keep it tight!”

He twirls from her room and says, “Oh, shit. How much of that did you hear?” She’s worried it’s Rondo, or maybe one of the CompSci kids, but when she hears Frank booming “Just the last part, but I still wouldn’t go with that line,” she’s left with the kind of relief-sigh she hasn’t gotten to breathe all day. Jenna likes Frank, in the way that one likes a cousin they only have to see a few times a year. He’s earnest, or at least good at acting earnest. He’s got a wife and a daughter who, in the presence of people to whom he’s not trying to leverage his alleged connection with Big Poppa Pearlman, he swears are his reasons for getting into boy bands. Sweat stains ring the armpits of his velvet shirts after 10AM on most days. He twitches, though not in a way that makes her concerned. Most importantly of all, he’s never an outlier. He’s as predictable as a tide in a hot tub.

“I thought I said no on the game,” he says, more tired than mad.

“You did,” Jenna says, “And you were right about it. That version I proposed was, frankly, bad.”
“So why did we get this check from General Mills? Why is Kellogg’s asking me what they sent and trying to give us a counter-offer?”

“I streamlined it.”

“You went behind my back,” he says. And he says it again and again, reddening each time. Jenna nods blandly. The dread that’s been climbing around her revs up again – if Frank finds out how intentionally she’s tried to streamline the project to a widening audience, or how the government’s gotten involved, albeit observationally, or how all of this is still, somehow, lumbering forward because she wants to let more homosexuals into every concentric membrane of the operation – there’s a chance he hands her a pink slip, and it all goes kaput. But she thinks about how she’s begun to tie everything together, to sort the boys and plan the projects and draft some rules. Though for the first time in a while, she doesn’t have a direct statement prepared, she thinks she can vamp her way through this. It’s an algorithm more than a single, filigree command. The Boy Band 100 system is born, then, Jenna Muldoon a progenitor.

She’s been working with men like Frank for years, the sort that will erupt and settle, like a weak volcano. They say in the industry that the squeaky wheel gets the grease, but the wheel that can scream is the one that gets paid. What does Frank love? In ascending order, Jenna rattles: his wife and daughter, his alleged dealmaking prowess, money, being right. Boy Band 101: Once everyone has a role, you can lean into them believing it more easily. Tell Jake he’s funny and suddenly there’s a confidence behind his stupid dad jokes. Tell Colin people like it when he comments on the stars during concerts, and he’ll do it every time. And it’s the same with staff – solidify Frank with the proper information, things he wants to believe about himself, and he’ll believe them immediately. Briefly, she sees herself as though she’s in The Matrix,
pulling chains of neon-green MS-DOS characters into their proper places, technomancer sunglasses across her eyes.

“Fuck this,” Frank is saying, pacing around the room like he on one of those DDR machines, “Fuck this. Shit on a stick.” She has to have faith in what she knows, what she’s building. She has to believe that Frank’s brief transformation into Baby Cha-Cha’s angrier cousin will be just that – brief. She swallows some oxygen, hopes that she’s been able to intake enough molecules to build some ad-libs to keep herself afloat, and starts.

“Wasn’t the reason you hired me to make your life easier?”

“Yeah, but this is making it harder, Jenna – this is the kind of thing I need to sign off on.”

“If you had, they would’ve swept up *NSYNC again. LFO. Maybe even one of those pop-punk groups Liam’s always talking abou. We had a limited window, and I acted, and I got us the money, and the advertising.”

“Yeah, but–”

“Frank, listen to yourself. You’re fighting against us picking ourselves out of the hole. And honestly?” she asks, absorbing his movements until he starts to go less purple, bleeding him dry of his anger until he’s gone bankrupt, “Honestly, Frank? It kind of sounds like you’re throwing in the towel.”

“It’s not like that, Jenna. I just–”

“You just what, Frank? You just what? Do you want us to fail? Do you want to go back to your wife and your kid and say that you didn’t consider every option? Are you upset I was right about this?”

“Honestly, a little,” he says. He leans forward on her desk, almost romantically. “Fuck.”
“Frank,” she says, Boy Band 101 rattling around her cranium, ready to be released into the room, “Don’t turn into a maroon on me now. I was the one who made the call, but you were the one who hired me. You look up the whole hierarchy of Dirigible, and it’s your name on everything. Were you not the one who got sent the payment? Are you not the one getting calls from other places? You want to know what I’ve gotten, Frank? Stress. Heart pains. And the salary you pay me. You’re the hero here, Frank. You’re the general. You’re the one who provides. I’m just the footsoldier.”

It’s a trick she’d learned at Jive years back, solidified through 101 – connect a man’s identity to war, and he’ll eat it up, even if he’s a veteran of nothing. Because it means people he wants to have beneath him think he’s powerful, like Frank, The Boss, wants to perpetually be. He’s got a persona as much as the boys do. So, she realizes, does she. And as long as she can play toward these identities, then she – The Informed One – will be able to stay in charge.

“Hoo,” he sighs, “Well, shit. I forgot I was here for a sec.”

“Then I’m here to remind you.”

“Tell me when something like this is in the works next time, OK? Even if I say no to it beforehand.”

“Deal. Also, don’t take the Kellogg offer – they’re hiding some stuff in the fine print. Plus, you really want our guys to show up on Froot Loops?”

Frank lifts himself up from the desk in a curled push-up. His sweat stains shimmy in the breeze he’s made, down to his belt. Jenna walks around the deck and initiates another of Frank’s moves, a clap on the shoulder, a sign that she’s learned from him, that she’s just a continuation of whatever he’s set into motion. She realizes it’s the first time she’s touched him.
He circles her, smirking, tapping on each of the file cabinets. “I used to think you were all so nice,” he tells her, “Like Ellen. But you’re a real monster. Just like the rest of us.”

#

Soon, it is December 30th, and Matt and Jake still haven’t celebrated ex-Mas in the way Jenna had hoped, racking up parental phone bills that, in the spirit of the season, each’s families asked Dirigible to pay. Jenna agrees to go Dutch, claiming camaraderie should be a business expense, even if it’s not listed as one. They’ve already used some of the cereal money to pay for round-trip flights, the boys and Frank zooming to all corners of the continent, and Jenna staying put. Her holiday’s with Tish, they and Tish’s parents snared happily in garlands and ugly sweaters, stuffed with cheesy casseroles and fried greens. This is, Jenna thinks, the most Californian a celebration can get until Tish’s sister dips and returns to her apartment – where the shindig occurs – with a few different choices of Pinot Noir, grown just a few miles north in Sonoma, packaged yesterday and delivered via a network of average, everyday folks who’d split the cost of vino and petrol, and driven in a chain down the coast. Happy Happy, Tish’s family all says, and probably even believes.

A quick break where Jenna called her own parents, the one time per year unless there’s a death in the family. It used to be twice, but the oldest J.C. in the book had his birthday deemed more important, more of a catch-all.

“It’s snowing,” they say, from Michigan.

“I’ll bet.”

“You’re taking care of yourself.”

“The sky is blue,” Jenna had said. “John Paul is Catholic.”

“All right,” said her mother, “Stay well, then.”
Dial tone. End of call.

She thought about switching data plans with Jake or Liam. She’s thinking more, though, about how to split the two of them up in a way that’ll keep them both willing, if not happy. She’s thinking about this as she ambles through Southern California’s campus, on her way to see the final version of the game that Ms. Thompson and her team have summoned over the past 1.5 months.

“It’s finished already?” Jenna had asked over her home phone this morning. “Is it good?”

“It’s the best thing we’ve all made,” Stacey said, in a strange, new lilt that meant Jenna’d have to check the product out in person, down a few staircases into the florid, neon basements of Viterbi.

When the team had been in her office, they’d undersold their own place – its walls at least painted, its air scented with a combination of B.O. and some wintry combination of spices. “Cinnamon?” she asks Dougherty, who’s her guide into the proper cluster, “Root beer?”

“Some air freshener some of the economics Kappas started spraying a week before break, and it’s still here. We’re all doing our parts and inhaling whatever chemicals are involved so they don’t make it up to the ozone.”

“I’m not one to talk, but you guys really go all-out for the holidays here,” Jenna says, nodding toward a string of lights in the shape of chili peppers plugged in somewhere behind the doors they hang across. There are posters, too: something about 25 Days of Coding, a tree cobbled together from slashes and asterisks; ads for a study at Keck about the posture of people who sit at these new computer things all day; and a KSXC recruitment poster where Traveler the horse has headphones over their ears, licking their lips at how great it must feel to join student radio.
“Wait until you see our lab,” says Dougherty, “It gets worse. All I’ll say is that it used to be blanker than your office. And then we all caught the bug.”

Jenna’s thinking, “Plague? Zombies?” until she’s in the Thompson stack, where they’ve printed out stills of every single Moneyboy and attached them to the walls. A few even have frames. There are whiteboards beneath them – newly installed, given how they overlap with a their scuffed counterparts – debating which of the boys is best. “Who has the best story?” asks one of the boards, and there’s a tally across it that’s dead even.

“I’ve got terrible news,” Stacey Thompson says, all gravel out of her voice. In fact, it’s like she’s swallowed a few CCs of helium. She nearly falsettos. Jenna engages panic mode for a quick second before Stacey follows up with, “I’m genuinely enamored by these boys. I hate it. I know I’m not supposed to be the audience for this, but – anyway, just look.”

Down in the front of the room, which Jenna now sees is in the shape of a miniature lecture hall, there’s a line. A swath of LAliens, cherry-picked from any county, any grove, stare over each other at a chugging PC. At it, a guy Jenna could place from one of the rare nights Tish has carted her out to WeHo, a bear or an otter in a backwards mesh cap, sways and dips his ass like it’s tracing the infinity symbol as he taps through the game, squealing at some line of dialogue Thompson’s team has cleaned up. “Keep watching,” she says, and she and Jenna take bench seats, watch as folks get so close to the monitor, they’re nearly sucked in.

“This is usually the toughest test,” Stacey says, “The public. The everypeople. The weirdos. But, well, look. Flying colors.” A dad and daughter play one of the five paths together, laughing when they reach an ending. “Jake,” says Stacey. “Kills every time.”

It is not often that Jenna Muldoon, herder of all boybandic quarks, gets the chance to sit, to watch – or at least not in a way that lets her appreciate what she’s had a hand in doing. The
past few weeks have been edits, emailing back and forth with the boys about standing in front of any green object, wiring money for chartreuse tablecloths, and adapting their lines until each of the boys feels, on-screen, more realized. Telling Frank that other bands might’ve been eaten up by the cereal companies – even though she’d heard nothing about this – had made her feel like it was true. Now, as a skinny man in skinnier jeans grips the mouse in front of them like it’ll drop gold if he shakes it, she wonders if that paranoia had been some mere, recursive part of her brain. If she’s become so autonomous, she’s self-wiring, able to know what she needs before she can think to want it. The whole process – the planned comeback, the structured love-strike – has taken months. It’s finally working.

“I still can’t believe it,” says Stacey. “But I guess that doesn’t matter.” Jenna notices a barrette in Stacey’s hair, clipped onto the vertex of whatever inconspicuous tie holds her ponytail in place. It’s handmade, clay or melted plastic, shoddily painted. But it’s almost definitely Liam, hands on the edges of his hood, finally letting it fall from his head, finally releasing his hair and his face, all of the pretty parts of himself he’d been hiding until his version of the game’s final third. “Oh,” says Stacey, “Yeah.” A hand flips back to cover this created Liam, but it stops just short. She runs a thumb across the top of its head, as though in a kind of baptism. “We all have favorites.”

“No skin off my back,” says Jenna, “That’s actually great news.”

“I figured. It’s just – I don’t know. I’m not embarrassed by it exactly, but it still feels off somehow. I’m thirty-five. I’m not the audience, but I’m enamored. Huh,” she says, touching her version of Liam again, “Maybe it’s just that I’m not used to feeling like this? Something to think about for the paper.”

“The paper?” Jenna asks, thinking she’s missed some cash.
“Yeah, we’re gonna do a whole report about this whole thing, remember? It’ll be on your desk first, of course. Can’t say anything about it in advance – bias – but you can probably guess that it’ll be glowing.”

“That’s a relief.”

“This whole project has been one,” says Stacey, “Truly. Part of the reason I want to write this paper is because I’m still trying to find the words to talk about it. We’re attaching user surveys to the game, by the way. Should’ve told you that earlier. But it’s more data, and it’s going to the right place, which is you and I.”

And the FBI, Jenna thinks, twisting her neck in a few different directions to check for Rondo. But nothing in the room’s large enough to contain him, just like nothing in the room’s able to contain the line, which has bubbled all the way out into the hallway, students and professors and townies in glistening, multicolor suit jackets, mismatched bowties. Post-holiday shoppers who’ve wandered through USC’s campus on the way to some other happy return, nostalgic or aspirational, bags and receipts clipped onto them like children. A gal in a pickelhaube, the leather of her vest reading “Dykes on Bikes Take The South.”

They are all so different in how they move throughout the room, in how they stare at the computer, in the ways in which they interact with the different games. There are, of course, the teens, who want love, or to be taken away. The glasses’d professors who want some mix of mentor- and companionship. The queers who are confused by how accessible the love of this game could be, how truly blasé it is for the boys to love them, even in this virtual sense. There are the people who want interaction, the sweaty-necked jitterers, the people who keep their faces toward the wall until they play through Colin’s or Matt’s story, and finally turn around and look
at the other, real people around them. This is the plan coming together, Jenna thinks. This is the widening audience – this is making space.

“Doro,” Stacey calls, after a few more minutes of people-watching, and Dougherty is beside the two of them, the pendant around his neck of the same cut as Stacey’s barrette, though his is Brett, leaning backwards, just the barest line of midriff peeking, toned, over what’d be a waistline if the necklace went any further south. “I got this,” Stacey says. “You want to show Jenna back out?”

“Sure thing,” he says, offering Jenna a hand. “These lecture seats are deep,” he grunts, “You need a wrench to get out of ‘em sometimes.”

“Doro’s the best wrench in the business, too,” Stacey says. “Anyway, you two have fun.”

There’s a small sparkle in her eye as the two of them leave, like there’s this new thing going on LA where everyone’s privy to some information before Jenna is. There’s some secret there, setting off her bullshit detector like she’s Judge Joe Brown and someone’s claimed never to have seen the car they drove to the courtroom. Something’s clicked, some technology has finally loaded around her. She gulps the stale air of Viterbi, tries and fails to see any of the familiar posters. Between the painted walls, the Tetris-block twists and turns, she feels like she’s in that one, labyrinthian screensaver.

“This isn’t how we came in, is it?”

“Nope,” says Dougherty, “Gotta show you something first.” They get into his office, which is much closer to a closet than Stacey’s, and he says, “So before I say anything, this isn’t blackmail, I swear.”

“Not a great opener,” she says, afraid of what could be recording her, a pinhole or some behind-the-vent security number. There’s nothing to hold here but her other hand.
“I just,” he says, “I’m a little desperate, and I’d never do this publicly, but–”

He walks toward her. There’s this spike in her chest that says she’s gonna have to fight. She thinks about angles, trigonometries she hasn’t considered since undergrad, how she could spill her weight onto Dougherty and beeline for the door, any door of this closed city. There’s got to be a map somewhere, she thinks. They wouldn’t have all of this tech down here without an evacuation plan. Plus, they’ve got to take care of the people. He is so close she can feel his breath. But just as she’s about to sweep his knees, he’s past her, typing access codes into a PC behind her, and pointing to the screen.

“I’m sorry you had to find out like this,” he says, “But I figure you want this to stay a secret, yeah?”

Before her is an email chain, Brett’s face, and Brett finger-gunning, and Brett, erect, before a hotel mirror, back when they’d been touring. Here she was thinking he’d be the best at sneaking – that he’d be as autonomous as her.

“But he’s nasty,” Dougherty is saying, “Like, I’m sure you can read all that. And don’t get me wrong – I loved it. I’m just in a jam, here. Which is why I’m asking for some money.”

He loads an HTML editor, fastest-fingers some server codes. She leans against the only side of a server that doesn’t seem to have lights or access points on it, hears it click, and stands back up. It’s a small comfort to know that she’s not the one in danger, but it’s still a comfort. Scenarios float before her, alternate universes where she trades out Brett for one of the boys that made their waitlist, where the money and the success and the health insurance and all the resources to do good – do better – stay with her. But when Dougherty says, “I’d need a few hundred, and that’s it,” they evaporate, the smallness of his number infinitely more soothing.
She makes a show of it, of course. Asks him what he’s doing, why he thinks he can get away with this, all of the captured-damsel questions she’s learned men in any industry love, seeing as they make them feel smart, give them empty lines to talk across.

“So the idea is that it’s a website for famous people who want sexual encounters that aren’t, let’s say, kosher with how people see them.”

“It’s a gay hookup site.”

“A queer hookup site is the idea,” he says, “But the first secure one. Totally discrete. You have to pass a series of algorithmically-generated tests to log on. You have to be verified by one of the team members, and there are only two of us – me and this new grad student named Ji-Iseul – and we’re both queer enough to keep things quiet. Brett’s already in, if you give him permission. I tried asking him for money, but he said all of it was with you and Mr. Wilson.”

Which, of course he had. Maybe Brett, she thinks, is less of a limb and more of a phantom, another force besides Frank putting her name on obligations all across the areas of the city the sun’s long set on. She’ll call him tonight, maybe try to browse Geocities West Hollywood for any trace of his accounts, reminding him he’s too loud to hide.

But then, she thinks, this could be another opportunity. Here’s Jenna within the boy band system again, wondering if there are ways to give people outside of the band roles, if all fans are The Lovers. Maybe Dougherty could change it up, throw himself back into being at least a resource for the band. Or, even better – what if Matt and Jake realize they have options? What if they have a way into love that isn’t each other?

“I’m gonna give you some advice,” she tells him, “And if you follow it, you’ll get the money, and you’ll stay quiet about it, got it?” She is standing like Frank, she realizes, her hands on her hips, her back curved forward.
He nods. He holds one hand with the other, like she’s popped out of herself and into him, like she’s slain whatever Jenna’d been standing in the room moments ago and left him with the carcass.

“This takes off, and you start charging membership fees.”

“But we really want this to be free-to-use, and—”

“Dougherty, if you don’t, this turns into fuck-Napster. All of your info gets compromised and shared. And famous people – even mid-tier famous people like my guys – none of them are gonna want to be part of this if there isn’t some price of admission. It’s security.”

“Sure.”

“Not just sure. It’s exact. I’ve been in the industry for years. I’ve worked with the kind of clients you want to have. They’ll all want to pay, because it’s a symbol that they’ve made it. Charge whatever’s beyond nominal, and you’ll start having clients pop up, whether it’s just my boys or some other closeted celebrities. Look around,” she says, hoping he knows she’s waving beyond the walls, the wires, the blinking stacks, “Los Angeles is a gay city. We just don’t have all of our faces out there, yet. And if you can prove that you’ve made a secure place, then people will flock to this – what’s it called?”

“Starfucker,” he says.

“Change a letter. Marketing tip.”

“I can trade the U out for a V, maybe?”

“It’s a start. Anyway, here’s my deal. I give you the few hundred, and when you start charging fees in a few weeks, you send me codes for five memberships. That way, I’ll agree that this isn’t blackmail. You stay quiet about my guys, you just let them live their lives. You can watch if you want, but that’s it. And that’s as much as we talk about this. Deal?”
“Deal,” he says, knees still wobbling. “And is it really all five?”

She shakes his hand. “Like I said, this is as much as we talk about this.”

A few hours later, back in the otherwise-empty offices of Dirigible, there’s an envelope for her, stamped but not postmarked, written in the shoddy script of a programmer. She’s not sure why he’s spelled her name, ostensibly, “Janna Meltdown,” but Dougherty’s delivered her some business cards with cubic numerals, their backsides a glowing geodesic, maybe even a photo of the true Waterford number, a bar of text introducing the new website Starfvcker, saying that NYC doesn’t have the only ball that’ll be dropping tomorrow night. She’ll slip the codes under the boys’ doors, a not-so-quick there-and-back to Toluca Hills before she’ll meet up with Tish’s family again, counting down and waiting for the minting of this next, new year, the boys that will return for her and bend, rend the public.

#

Turns out ‘02 operates like the absence of the molecule it matches, the whole thing a blur. The games go out in January, and boy, do they ever get hits. The States are out of mourning and back into boys – their five, renewed options, there for whoever opens the box. Articles pop up about the Moneyboys dating discs getting traded like Pokémon cards, everywhere from playgrounds to eBay, which is sort of a playground itself, Jenna thinks. Some discs end up so replayed, their download codes so accessed, they melt, and GM and Dirigible release joint announcements saying this is a result of love and fandom more than of the discs’ cheap material. Suddenly, the band’s got corporate allies, willing to lie in tandem.

Beans equally cool: Tish makes it to a final round, whisper-shouting as she calls Jenna. Tish tells her that they’re making it, that they’re almost there, that they’ll be the power couple they’ve always wanted to be, Tish finally tenured and Jenna finally moneyed enough to enact all
of the dreams they’ve discussed for so long. They’re halfway through the produce section of
Safeway one day when Tish calls Jenna her wife. And it’s an accident, but it’s a new year, and –
they think – what better time to act? Cut to the two of them at a raunchy chapel erected as a
photo-op outside of FUBAR, next to the dumpsters, still dripping with the ejections of bodies
who had been there before the two of them, posing for pictures with a Drag King minister in a
painted-on goatee, granting them chunky, plastic rings and delivering them through every bar in
the place, a cape with “JUST MARRIED” across Tish’s shoulders, and a band of clinking tin
cans on strings tied around Jenna’s waist.

They deliver themselves this single night, a pushpin in a bulletin board otherwise covered
in staples, tasks deemed more necessary but never feeling so, their love like a laser, like an aura,
so thick and wieldy that who needs a honeymoon? And it feels coalescent. They’ve got the exact
name of a person besides themself that they’re doing things for. Jenna ups her insurance
premium, for once. Switches to some slightly fancier heart meds. Makes a joke to Tish one night
– she’s got a few nights a week at home again, finally – that the three things healing her heart are
Amlodipine, Benazepril, and one Tisha Ayler, soon-to-be tenured professor of mathematics.

“Assistant Professor,” Tish says, “But that was deeply cute.”

When it finally happens, Tish crying from the sofa when she gets the call, she and Jenna
jump on it, literal springs in their feet, all the world their cushion.

“We’re doing it,” Tish says. “It’s actually happening.”

It feels, almost, as though her life has become one of those new reality shows, like she’s
the kind of person who should be followed by cameras – like Probst should be doing a voiceover
every new day she wakes back into consciousness. “Previously on,” he would say. Or, “Since
our last break.”
These imagined breaks aren’t the only ones, either. Jenna hears secondhand from a very apologetic but still winking Brett about a cold night in Hollywood, Matt in a leather harness he’s bought online, appearing via Starfvcker at the mansion of a white-haired former muscleman, who would give anything to deal a few lashes to the Moneyboys’ cutest member, to watch Matt wince as he takes anything the man can throw. This happens, of course, without Jake, which Brett lets slip, an acted-out oopsie he pulls off, and the two of them go their separate ways, those ways being, thankfully, just two different rooms in the same complex. The way he tells it, Brett took them both aside for identical talks. “There are billions of boys,” he told them, “And people keep making them. Lord knows why.” Wildly, both Jake and Matt confirm this. Even wilder, they’re both talking to Jenna more frequently now, giving away more of themselves to her. Jake makes her a red card that says “TMI,” leaves it on her desk with one of her post-its. “Your new catchphrase,” he writes. She never uses the card, though – any extra info is valuable, and she’s infinitely comfortable to sift through it, to find that one additional edge that someone else, somewhere in the industry, has missed.

A further sign of their uptick occurs when Frank’s phone goes off and he hauls ass all the way down to Jenna’s office on the floor below. “You’re not gonna believe it!” he yells. “We’ve got our first Make-a-Wish call! Kids are thinking of us while they’re dying! This is maybe the best possible sign!”

He promises her a window, or at the very least, that wood paneling he’d been thinking about. Every so often, whenever one of the boys isn’t in her office, he’ll pop by with a pair of Zimas. The joke’s that whenever he offers her something harder, she declines, so he’s gone with the tamest substance he could find that’ll still get them inebriated. A week after the Make-a-Wish call comes in – Frank says to wait on the offer, seeing as there could be a higher-profile kid
gumming up their lungs at any moment – he slingshots back to her office, wood samples still clutched in his hand, saying they’ve finally hit the big one.

“Let me tell you the story ‘bout the call that changed my destin-ay-ay,” Frank sings, so devoid of any meaningful key that Jenna wouldn’t be surprised to hear any lock in a ten-mile radius sigh in relief. “This is the big one,” he tells Jenna, “Maybe the biggest one of all. The Mouse.”

If Pearlman’s taught the American musical ecosystem anything, it’s that so goes Orlando, so goes the world. *NSYNC got the concert special bump in ’98, and anyone in the business will tell you that’s what gave them the bootcut-jeans’d leg up on the Backstreet Boys. It’s the type of occurrence you claim when you get, no questions asked. It’s rare you’re given access to a TV audience for, functionally, free – even rarer because The Mouse was gonna cancel their *In Concert* series this year. Word was they weren’t getting enough artist revenue, and the whole venture wasn’t seen as profitable, so the money got filtered into in-house programs. Word’s also that they got the cute kid from *The Cosby Show* to sign for her own series, where she’s a psychic. It’ll undoubtedly crush. The point is, it’s unheard of for an unaffiliated group – none of the Moneyboys, for instance, were ever members of The Mouse’s TV club – to get the concert shout, Frank explains.

“But The Mouse stuck his tail out once again, just to feel around, to see if there’s any cheese left out there for them in the music industry.”

“Does Mickey eat cheese?” Jenna asks.

“Man, I stopped thinking about how anything in that universe worked after trying to figure out what Goofy was. But the important thing is that they’ve heard we have ad revenue. They’re willing to trade us a, uh, non-nominal fee for an appearance.”
“So we take it, right?”

“Thing is, they’re really wholesome over there. Or they at least want to seem like they are. I got an email regarding how they want to make sure our boys are representing their values. So, we just have them do some community service.”

“Like granting a wish,” Jenna says, and Frank’s already scrambling back upstairs for his phone.

#

Turns out it’s not the Make a Wish kid – a thirteen-year-old named Thomasina with an accelerated case of Bethlem myopathy – that Jenna has to prep Matt for – it’s Thomasina’s mom, who saw both the videogame version of Matt asking for a kiss in his game’s final scene, as well as a video online linking he and all of the boys to last September’s terror attacks. She called Frank this morning, asking if he, as a parent, would let his kid’s dying wish be to see a young man who all signs pointed to being upstanding, until very recently. Frank, naturally, said yes, said he’d even let Matt take his daughter to prom and trust him to drive her home, either not remembering or not caring that Matt doesn’t have a license – and can hardly even ride a bike.

Boy Band 102: Grace is needed only in front of the camera. Matt’s one of those kids that – once he stops dancing, at least – doesn’t know which parts of his body are his anymore. Jenna wonders if part of why she pegged him to be The Cute One is because he’s trapped in this state that most people grow out of during puberty – that him bumping his knees on signing tables or walking into Windex’d doors like those birds in the commercial is part of what causes him to seem safe or endearing – at least until he pulls a stunt, also clumsily.

“I’m still sorry about that,” Matt says. “I didn’t mean for Jake to find out. I still don’t know how he did.”
“I know, Matt. And I’m sure he’ll forgive you soon. But right now, we need to figure out how to assure this parent her literal dying child isn’t going to spend a few hours eating lunch with someone she thinks is unsafe.”

“I’m, uh, not sure about what the right way to ask about this is, but – on Star Trek, they say, ‘permission to speak freely, Captain?’”

“What? Yeah, of course. When have I ever not let you speak freely?”

“I know. It’s just,” he says, “we just don’t want to disappoint you. It’s like – with you and Frank, we know he’s always gonna be mad at us. So you’re kind of all we have. Especially since there’s no one else who’s gay around here.” He makes a small noise, half a burp, like he wants to swallow back what he just said. Jenna breathes through an open mouth as he blushes, continues. “But yeah, about making that parent feel safe – I don’t think I’ve ever done anything unsafe in my life. Except for that time you made us all go bungee jumping for that Discovery Kids thing a few weeks ago.”

Before which he’d had to urinate three times, Jenna driving him back and forth from a cluster of different port-a-potties, until Frank got fed up enough to tell him to run to the woods like a real American. “About that,” Brett had said, and that was how the world found out about Matt’s dual citizenship. Forums erupted. The Rogers Centre and McMahon Stadium sent in offers to host the boys, their owners mentioning how proud they were that one of their nation’s own sons was ripping up the fame ladder as politely as possible, albeit while paying too much for health care. In the weeks since, international fans – a thing the Moneyboys haven’t had until, well, now – have sent him copies of L’Unifolie and moose plushies that he’s already posed with for the Moneyboys website. What’s wild is that Matt’s spent maybe a cumulative three years in the great north – years zero to two, and then a few weeks every year visiting relatives. But – Boy
Band 103: When group perception’s at play, truth is about as important as a second appendix – Matt’s got that broad, soft kindness about him, enough to where a few of the more casual fans might believe Jenna announcing that they’d pulled him from the Canucks’ B-Team.

“Maybe it’s like that,” Matt is saying now, “The process of acceptance, I mean. If people can embrace me being Canadian, maybe they could also embrace me – y’know,” he says, sticking a finger into his fist, and pulling it back and forth, “fucking.”

“OK, first of all, don’t say ‘fuck’ around Thomasina.”

“I don’t think anything could ever make me want to talk about sex around a thirteen-year-old. That’s both gross and not a time I want to relive.” Jenna’s seen the pictures and she doesn’t blame him – a buzz cut with the slightest touch of mullet fringe, a nose that took him an extra decade to grow into, a gap tooth that braces he wore up until joining the band jammed away and that he’s still afraid of seeing sprout again, to the point where he still wears a retainer at night, even though his dentist, who doesn’t know any better, swears Matt’s teeth are as straight as he is.

“But – and if this isn’t an OK thing to talk about, feel free to tell me to be quiet – I mean in the greater, global context. Like, how do people accept me as a person who has sex?”

“This is the literal last thing we should be worrying about right now,” she says.

“I’m just saying, the more that I think about it, the more that I’m pretty sure that’s why I went off on my own without telling Jake. I felt like I wasn’t being taken seriously during sex, and this – don’t get me wrong, I’m really, really grateful for everything that you do for me, and for us – but having to lean into my persona as the cute one is really not helping.”

“Why would you want to grow up so quickly?” she asks.

“Oh god, does fucking age you?” he asks, genuinely panicked, until Jenna rolls her eyes steeply enough. “Sorry. Does having sex age you?”
She pinches the wrinkle deepening between her eyebrows. “I’m not a medical professional, but no.”

“OK. Sorry. I didn’t know. That guy on the network was the second guy I’d ever done it with, so I’m not really that knowledgeable about things.”

“And that’s OK, Matt. It’s fine. You are who you are, and you’re gonna keep growing.”

“Not if I keep feeling stifled, though.

“OK,” she says, “We can work on that, at least. How about this – you put on the show of your up-until-recently very innocent life for Thomasina and her mom, and then we’ll talk about getting you some space to experiment more.”

“Sure,” he says. “But don’t forget, OK? What do you want me to say to her?”

“Why don’t you brainstorm? What do you think she’d want to hear?

As Matt rattles on about his pre-band charity work, which consists mostly of being the Secretary of his high school’s Key Club, Jenna’s blooming spreadsheets. Ahead of her, in a different direction than Matt, there is data, beautiful data, color-coded and tabulated into various metrics, various rules. It’s as though someone’s broken down a fountain into all of its various components, but also removed each individual water droplet, and placed them into separate, observable cells.

“So should I not mention I was a Cub Scout?”


“Do you have any information about Thomasina that would help??”

“It’s loading slow. Gimme a second. I’m trying a bunch of new windows.”

“OK. So I won’t tell her I can make fire, but I did get a badge for sewing. Also, leadership. Both of those probably work?”
“Probably,” Jenna says, but it’s close to a whisper, her screen like a vampire she’s made. She gets it, how people could be sucked into their PCs by the game about the boys. They are always there, always willing, boiled down into non-personhood like a good program. “You can always default to asking her about herself, too.”

“Sure,” Matt says. “Um, I really appreciate being able to get your perspective on life. It’s really helping me value my own more.”

“That,” Jenna says, turning away from her screen, “That actually sounds great. Tell her that. As sweet as possible. What else you got?”

“Do you watch football?”

“What if she says yes? Can you actually talk about football?”

“I know there’s a thing called a field goal. And I think one of the teams is called the Stallions.”

“OK, let’s avoid that.”

“Right. It’s probably also not a good idea to talk about skincare, either?”

“Oh, god,” Jenna says.

“Can you imagine?”

“Hello, you’re dying, but how would you really like to glow from your coffin?””

Matt laughs – a short, high-pitched ha, his real one, the faggy high-C the now-fired acting coaches were supposed to have trained him away from ever using – and leans his elbows onto her desk, relaxed for the first time since he’s been across from her today, she realizes. Though he’s close enough to the monitor for her to reflexively load a new window of Ask Jeeves to cover the effervescent quasar of data, he doesn’t look at it.
“Thanks,” he says. “I needed that. It’s just – god, it’s so tough. I want to be good – for the band, and for you, and everyone – but I’m so scared about messing up. Frank gave us this whole speech before you got here this morning about how if any of us ruins the band, the rest of us are gonna remember it forever, and people are gonna threaten them, and everything. Which, I guess, fair. And it is all a thing I’m – we’re – taking seriously. But it’s just nice to not live in serious land for a minute.”

“I’m actually from Serious Land, Matt, so if you could not disparage my home country, I’d really appreciate it.”

The same, squeaky laugh emerges again. Like Matt, she softens a bit, tells herself that she should have had faith in the emotional machinery she’s hoisted around the entire complex. Matt asks for a hug, and though it’s over her desk, he tightens around her, presses his head into her stomach, and apologizes a few more times. She would enjoy it – would relish in the trust Matt has given her once again – if she weren’t mid-calculation, wondering how many more survey results she can get through during her lunch hour. But, for now, Jenna Muldoon merely recognizes Matt’s warmth – it’s there, and it’s one of the many semi-renewable resources that, if she needs to, she can take to keep building.

#

Jenna Muldoon has always considered herself a background player, a technician pulling the ropes backstage, heaving and lugging sandbags, ensuring the curtains close just when they need to. She’s got the most important role – ensuring that nothing is let in or out of a production that isn’t required for audience buy-in. Because an audience knowing exactly what she wants them to know about whatever it is she’s presenting, cloaked, from the rafters, is integral to them seeking more about that whatever – more information, more love. And if they’re seeking that,
and if they can’t see her, then they won’t ask her about those things, and she won’t have to consider them. She’s not meant to be the kind of person who, on a public level, delivers love or charm or anything worthy of that buy-in, and so it is better if she’s only seen by the people who are. She can direct them, sure. She can imitate them, emulate them. But the idea that it’ll be her neck on the public line is not one Jenna Muldoon has ever wanted to consider.

“We need someone in front of the camera,” Frank is saying, “For The Mouse. Just this one time.”

“You can’t do it, Frank? You’re a better talker.”

“They’re specifically requesting a woman. After all the legal bullshit his bands are putting him through, they don’t want an audience to be reminded of Pearlman. They want someone softer, kinder.”

“We could hire an actress? We could try to hire the new choreo before the special, and see if they want to do it?”

“Jenna.”

“Frank, all due respect, but have you gone deaf? When have you ever seen me go soft or be kind?”

“Literally never. But I have to imagine you wouldn’t have gotten married – congrats, by the way, assuming my invitation got lost in the mail – if you weren’t, y’know, capable of those things. And if anyone in this industry is capable, it’s not an actress. It’s not a new choreographer. It’s you.”

She flattens her hands, moves her palms toward the ceiling, waves up and down her face and says, “Really?” But Frank says it back, says to hire the permanent makeup artist first to give
her any new face she wants. “You’ve got at least two of ‘em already,” he says, “Which is a compliment, by the way.”

Allegedly also a compliment is what that new makeup artist, Frida Andrade, tells her during her first time in what she calls the salon, a modular studio with a pair of mirrors that Frank has sworn on his dead grandma he’ll turn into a real building once the money from the special comes in: “You’ve got a really interesting face.”

“That doesn’t sound like a compliment,” Jenna says, blinking through two different shades of mascara.

“It is! Trust me. I’ve been painting faces for a decade, and everyone always wants to look the same. Big eyes, cheekbones, luscious lips. And you’ve got none of those, and that’s to be appreciated.”

Jenna wants to ask, “By who?” but doesn’t, aiming for the right foot with Frida, who spoke in her interview about her own girlfriend, which had cemented things for half of the two-person hiring committee. Frida’s got hair like a grocery-store bouquet: towering, full of plastic accoutrements, and so tall there’s gotta be some filler. Her own stylistic choices, from what Jenna’s seen, lean somewhere between farmer and horror film villain, little body parts across nearly everything she wears, severed-hand cufflinks and photorealistic hearts for the buttons on her overalls. But like Frida had said in her interview, “You’re hiring a painter, not a sculpture.” And her portfolio’d sent them over the moon, visions of music videos floating across their eyes like cartoon fruit on a slot machine. She’d come to the industry from costumes, which meant she could do it all, from subtle to werewolf, from the normcore-breaking single jacket in “Hey Leonardo,” to, well, anything in that Backstreet’s Back video.
“We can go goth, if you want?” Frida is saying now, “Big eyeliner? Lean into your whole tiny, precious, face thing?”

“Precious isn’t what I want to be.”

“OK, sure. Well, what do you want to be? And are we doing a haircut, too? Should we talk about that?”

“I don’t know,” says Jenna, baffled she can still say those words, “Maybe?”

“Great,” says Frida, “Super helpful. Maybe let’s start with this. If you had to give yourself a title, like one of your boys, what would it be?”

“The Informed One.”

“Also super helpful. We could maybe go librarian?”

“Do whatever you need to do.”

“Right. Huh. You’re tougher than a celebrity, y’know that? Hard nut and all that. Maybe we can break it down further. What do you like about yourself?”

Finally, Jenna thinks, a softball. “A lot,” she says. “I like how I can be a technician of people. I like how I can stay behind the scenes and help people, while making sure no one in the fame machine destroys them. I like having the means to support my family, which I finally have. I like my stability. I love my wife, my relationship with her. I like that everyone here seems to trust me.”

“Perfect,” Frida says, “I knew it,” nodding up at a small, rainbow business card taped onto the corner of her mirror, which reads, in white text, GAY MAFIA. “Another card-carrying member.”

“I figured it was obvious.”
“Nothing about you is obvious. That’s your whole deal, it seems like. Even the way you talked about yourself just then, it was all stuff in relation to other people. It’s like you live through them, so you don’t have to actually live yourself. Which is fine, though, right? I mean, it must be working. The band’s on the rise, and you seem – maybe happy isn’t the word, but – stable, like you said.”

Jenna Muldoon defaults. She’s back into the kinds of things she talks about when Frank puts her on the phone with an investor or faceless business associate, that she’s finally having the kind of success she wants, that that financial success is what’s keeping her and her mission afloat. The mission being, since she’s got meetings later, too complex to go into, so it’s just absorbed into this big, amorphous cloak of success. Or at least that’s what she’d been doing, until under the hot lights of this makeup chair, terrified that she’s somehow not a person – that if Tish and Frank and the boys all disappeared tomorrow, she’d just poof away, too, halfway between a Terminator and a fairy godparent. Does she not have the archetype she’d thought she had? Is she not able to follow her own direction? Or is she just blank, a red cell in a spreadsheet – undefined?

“I don’t think it’s that,” Jenna says.

“Fair enough,” says Frida. “Why don’t we try a few different faces, and we’ll see what you like? You can pick one, or we can adjust as necessary. I’ve gotta prep a few of the boys for promos, but – hey – I’ve got two hands, don’t I?”

Frida whips out a binder with peeling stickers, glittery Charizards and Lisa Frank chimeras. Inside, front page, is a sheet of paper the size of an index card with a drawing of a mannequin head. “This is you right now,” Frida says, pointing to it, the blank face. “We’re gonna turn you into one of these other ones.” The other ones being various patterns, lips and
elevated eye-sockets, topographical formations of contour and foundation, diagonal lines and numerals scribbled like field notes. Each has a name beneath it: the P!nk, the Aguilera, the pineapple-headed Kirkpatrick.

The permanence of these faces – that one look could be tied to a single identity – seems suddenly terrifying. If Jenna’s going to make this single appearance, she has only the one shot. If the boys mess up once or twice, it’s chill. They’re pretty, of course – but more importantly, they’re adjustable. They’re young and pliable and repaintable. Every day with them is, if Jenna orchestrates the operation precisely, a new cliffhanger for their audience, a revelation of a new edge to be later defined. But Jenna will be screenshotted, ogled for just the one time, not famous or handsome, but there and odd, an unidentified outlying object. She does not want to be known by some greater public – she wants to blend in, be so basic and so trendy that she’s functionally unknowable.

“I’m gonna dab some of that sweat off your forehead,” Frida says. “Also, you can grip the arms of the chair if you’re nervous. They’re pretty strong.”

The boys, like Frida promised, rifle through the other chair for touch-ups. Brett appears first, sings through a few bars of Kandi’s “Don’t Think I’m Not,” as Frida, holding a swatch of blues next to Jenna’s temples, comments on how he doesn’t really need makeup. Colin’s cheekbones get marbleized. Liam shows up as Jenna’s in the middle of what Frida’s called a nu punk look, her eyes swallowed by liner, feeling at least less than a corpse and more like a corpse bride.

“Can I just get what she’s getting?” Liam asks. “If I could be a haunted doll, I’d be an even better singer.”
“You guys do a ‘Thriller’ video, and I’m all for it,” Frida says, “But we’re under orders today.”

And she’s over Liam’s face with a much thinner foundation than what Jenna’s getting. He’s suddenly paler – moodier, more beautiful, Jenna thinks. It’s only when Frida starts transmogrifying his hair from blacks to walnuts to even traces of blonde that Jenna’s wondering where this new style came from.

“You guys talked about this already?”

“Yeah,” says Frida, squinting at a palette of skin colors, “Frank and I did. Or at least, he just sort of gave the word and I said, ‘yeah, you pay me, guess I can’t argue.’ I think his exact words were ‘sunkissed from the follicles-up.'”

“And paler everywhere else?”

“She’s gonna stop at my neck, Jenna,” Liam deadpans. “Get your mind out of the gutter.”

“He’ll be easier to light,” Frida says. “That’s what Frank said, anyway. And I’m not trying to start any fights in my first week here.”

Which is all that the three of them say for a while. When they’ve only got a few minutes left in the session, long after Liam’s left, Jenna asks Frida for the most popular option in every category. “Nothing individual,” she says, “I’ve gotta save that energy. Plus, it’s about the boys, right?” Frida nods, rolls her eyes and says she thought Jenna’d be different, but OK, OK, it’ll all be OK. And it will be, Jenna thinks. She’s got more rope to cut.

The next time Frank’s orbit lands in Jenna office, she asks why he’s asked Frida to turn Liam white.

“Aw, geez,” Frank says. “Was hoping this wouldn’t get back to you.”

“You literally pay me so that everything does.”
“Yeah,” he goes, “It’s just kind of a delicate topic, and I didn’t really want to talk about it. But, now, here we are, I guess.”

“Here we sure are.”

“Look, I know the optics of it are bad, but when you told me about how those USC people were doing a report on popularity, I downloaded those user surveys also, and there was one glaring thing I saw – that Liam and Matt are trailing.”

“I saw that, too,” Jenna says, though she’d only thought that Rondo and the whole bureau wouldn’t bother them then, and moved on. But in fighting, at this moment, what feels like so clear a wrong, her mouth warps into a weapon. “And my response was, ‘hey, let’s maybe restructure the songs to give them more time at the center of the formation,’ or something like that. It wasn’t, ‘hey, let’s turn these brown boys into white ones.’” These options are, of course, sudden – she’s devised them only now.

“I don’t want you to think I’m a bad guy,” Frank says. “There’s a reason behind all of it, if you’ll let me talk through it?”

“Sure,” Jenna says, her face cracking red beneath her new makeup. “Go for it.”

“You look nice, by the way.”

“You’re wasting time.”

“All right, all right. This is how we let Liam and Matt in more with the public,” Frank says. “Look at 98 Degrees. It’s a bunch of white guys singing in Spanish – una noche – and by all accounts, they’re looking to be a flash in the pan. They’re a spike.”

“They’ve been on a steady increase since that Mulan song,” Jenna says.
“So were we, until people started matching us to 9/11. A slight bump, since all press is good press, and then suddenly we’re sliding down the edge of a mountain, chased by a pixelated yeti. One of those elbow functions you’re always talking about.”

“A delta function?”

“Yeah, that’s it. But anyway, point is, we don’t want to end up like that. We need to be better about sneaking Liam and Matt in, popularity-wise. We’re not telling them to be any less of who they are in the racial sense, and we’re still doing that thing you’re always talking about and making opportunities or whatever. It’s just, like, wearing a mask. Right?”

“It feels wrong,” Jenna says, this being the first time she’s feeling she could be part of a wrong thing. This had all been supposed to be a struggle, sure – but an easy one, one with 1:1 problems and solutions, everything scalable. The idea that, in trying to make the world better – in trying to make it safer and more willing for the gays – she’d have to make other harm, isn’t something she’s wanted to think about. She wonders if there’s a way to not solve this immediately. If she can just keep playing the game by the same rules the public’s set – if she can keep gaining money and resources until she can literally buy the time to puzzle through all of the bad, sift it away with the kind of infinite power she’ll undoubtedly have by then. “It feels hard to take.”

“Then don’t take it,” Frank says. “Just don’t fight it. Know that you don’t have to fight it. Jenna, I’m saying this, for maybe the first time ever, not as a businessman, but as – dare I say it? – your friend. You’re cutthroat, sure. That’s why you’re here. But I need you to think of yourself. I know you want to do good by these boys. And think of how much good you can do if you focus on yourself. One day, you’ll have your own studio. You’ll have houses in Malibu, plural. Boats and shit. One of those jump houses. I don’t know. Whatever you want. But the point is, you free
that mind of yours from all of the high-level world-fuckery stuff, and you just focus on building you. I’m doing the same thing. I’m here for my wife and my daughter, and I’ll be here for as long as the money’s good. You know as well as I do that boy bands are temporary. We put on a show, we leave with the ticket fees, we go on and change the world how we want to from there. We get the money and get out. End of story.”

She knows he’s pulling a fast one on her, and she hates that it feels correct. It would be inefficient to fight everything, especially in relation to any kind of financial success. She thinks of what her life could look like in even a year, if the band continues on what’s looking like a much more upward trend than their last. She could start a charity. Her face could be more than just a single, permanent slide from a TV special. She could be known for causing the kind of openness she’s wanted the band to make. And maybe that means a few speedbumps, a few antagonistic changes in tempo. She’ll go back and repair them later, of course – she’s no monster, despite what Frida’d wanted her to pioneer. She’ll clean up every bleeding file because that’s what she’s good at – maybe even try some of this autotune some of these execs have kept talking about.

“You can still care about them, obviously,” Frank says. “That’s why you’re good at this job. The other reason why, I mean. Besides the fact that you’re basically a machine. But just know that you can use that. You can sell any part of yourself, sell any part of the boys, and buy it back later.”

Jenna nods, and Frank nods back, and he backs away from her office saying, “Think about it.” That she hasn’t made a call in front of him seems to have turned him paler, too. Maybe, Jenna thinks, there’s a way to play the fame game even better. She’s downloading every song on the office internet that night, then, composing an email to Frida asking for timelessness,
transferability. She’s ordering an elliptical trainer, wondering how much of herself she can lose and refill with even more knowledge, even further references, not just boy bands but the entire industry schematic. There’s a lot of fat for her to cut, she thinks, parts of herself and the boys she can slough off into some corner of the darker parts of the internet until she’s able to make a place for it. She’s working late again, missing the golden hour for the dim ones, parlaying her whole self into what she wants to be for the special – in the background, still, sure. But with a kind of motor that’ll get so widely ignored that she’ll be able to forget about its small moments of villainy, step out of them so silently the world won’t be able to double-take. And the moneymakers will take note, and the fans will stay focused on the band, and they’ll all float up to a city of gold realer than even Los Angeles.

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TRANSCRIPT FOR: Jennifer Muldoon, Dirigible Enterprises

STATION: KTTV-DT

PROGRAM: HOLLYWOOD INSIDER

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SUBJECT: Record for Dirigible Enterprises. Full text below.

BRITTA SCHICK (ANCHOR): I’m sure I’m not saying anything shocking when I tell you we’re all about the Moneyboys! They’re the hottest band of the year so far. How’ve they come back? Who are our favorites? And what really happened at their concert special last night? We’ve got MEGAN and JUAN here to talk about all of that and then some – tonight on HOLLYWOOD INSIDER.
SCHICK: All right, it is Monday once again, and I’ve gotta say, it seems like this is gonna become a recurring segment, huh? Moneyboys Mondays?

JUAN LAINEZ (PANELIST): I’d be down!

SCHICK: As the great David Wooderson’d say, “All right, all right, all right.” Joining me tonight are the voice of your commute, the so-called reasonable one on KBLB’s “Juan and Risky in the Morning,” JUAN LAINEZ—

LAINEZ: Pleasure as always, BRITTA.

SCHICK: They paid you to say that, I’m sure. And also with us is cable news’ blonde bombshell and our coastess with the most-est, MEGAN REGAN.

MEGAN REGAN (COAST-TO-COAST CORRESPONDENT): Britta, I just flew in from my hometown of Orlando, and boy are my arms… well-rested! Obviously, I flew first class!

SCHICK: Glad to hear it. And you were there for the premiere of the concert special in Orlando, right?

REGAN: Pleasure Island 8, front and center.

SCHICK: And JUAN, you were watching on TV, too?

LAINEZ: You know I was, BRITTA. With thousands of other fans, of course. Maybe millions, now.

SCHICK: Well then, let’s get right to it. The band’s on a meteoric rise, aren’t they?
LAINEZ: Yeah, and it’s a phoenix-like rise, too. They, uh, didn’t plan their last big hit in the best way. But they’ve revamped a bunch of old songs and they’re dancing better and looking better and sounding like the real, honest-to-goodness band they are!

REGAN: That’s right, BRITTA. At first, when [REDACTED] announced they were reviving their [REDACTED] Channel in Concert series after calling it quits at the end of last year with Aaron Carter and Samantha Mumba, all of us in Florida thought we’d never see ourselves become a cultural beacon again. But now, we’re saying that nobody’s gonna top that show. The level of talent? Exquisite. The level of hotness? Y’all, I’m a twenty-eight year-old woman, and when I tell you that any of these boys could flood my basement—

LAINEZ: Oh, Brett’s probably a good choice for you, then. He’s twenty-six.

REGAN: Pass along my number if you find it.

SCHICK: I have a feeling there’d be a line. But you were saying?

REGAN: Oh, right. The talent. The looks. “Smexy,” the kids are calling it online. And maybe most important of all, the behind-the-scenes content.

LAINEZ: Girls, you know we live for the drama.

SCHICK: Talk us through the dramatic moments, you two.

LAINEZ: So the big moment happened when Liam, who’s one of the band members, got a surprise visit from his parents.

SCHICK: They showed up in the autograph line, in case anyone at home didn’t see it.

LAINEZ: They did. And at first it’s this beautiful moment, since Liam’s the moody, emo one, who’s usually pretty stone-faced when the boys aren’t performing—

REGAN: And sometimes when they are, too, but—
LAINEZ: Anyway, the cameras actually catch him blushing for maybe the first time ever. It’s genuinely cute.

SCHICK: We have a clip, here, actually.

[View of the Moneyboys – Jake Bennett, Liam Correa, Colin Jones, Brett Lazar, and Matt Salazar – signing autographs at a long, white table clothed in silhouettes of a famous mouse. A white circle is drawn around Liam.]

LAINEZ: Let’s do a play-by-play. Stop and pause. Stop and pause.

[Footage is paused and started four times. Liam’s head is down, signing and posing with fans. Finally, a hand extends to flip his hood backwards. At first, he’s shocked – eyes wide, palms slammed on the table so hard the mouse heads ripple. But then his hands go in front of his mouth. It’s a different kind of shock, and his family is there, represented by at least a few different generations. He stretches himself over the table to embrace multiple relatives. His father runs a finger across Liam’s forehead, smearing some makeup off of it.]

LAINEZ: So, I did some research, and I’ll circle them, but here’s Liam’s dad, his aunt and uncle, his maternal grandmother.

REGAN: What a cutie.

SCHICK: You’re right – I’ve never seen him so excited. And they start talking, too.

REGAN: Ugh.

LAINEZ: Yeah, in Spanish.

REGAN: I couldn’t understand a word of it.

LAINEZ: I’ll translate in a sec, but look right here.

[Behind the Moneyboys’ manager, on the back wall of the Haunted Mansion, one of the large, golden faces that double as door-knockers seems to cough, or at least blink. LAINEZ]
replays it a few times. Each time, it’s as though more movement is revealed. LAINEZ shows a screenshot at the start of the autograph-signing scene, and the door-knocker is wearing triangle shades.

LAINEZ: Creepy, isn’t it?

SCHICK: Whoa. Weird.

LAINEZ: The manager sees it too. Look, she’s turning around, and then she sees the door-knocker, and then she’s shaking her head.

REGAN: Probably a classic [REDACTED] prank. You know those cast members love getting a rise out of celebrities. Remember when they got Cleo from Cleopatra to hide in the Minnie suit?

SCHICK: Who could forget? And that’s a good point, but I was thinking it’d just be animatronics. You’d have to be, like, enormous to replace one of those giant heads. Anyway, this is where the drama really starts.

LAINEZ: Right, so I’m doing my best to read lips here, but I think Liam’s dad is saying, “¿Tienes novia ya? ¿Un novio?” Which isn’t that hard to translate for any of us who live in L.A.

REGAN: Maybe you should do it anyway.

LAINEZ: It’s a super dad thing to ask. He’s saying, “Do you have a girlfriend yet? A boyfriend?” And Liam just looks back at him and says – at least I’m pretty sure – he says, “Estoy ocupado,” and nods toward the rest of the guys, plus the manager, and says, “estas son mis únicas opciones.”

REGAN: Which means?

LAINEZ: It’s pretty funny. He’s basically saying, “Nope, these are my only prospects,” and looking at the band and the manager.
SCHICK: It’s quite funny, yeah. But why do we think Liam’s dad asked if he had a boyfriend? Is there any credence to that?

LAINEZ: Look, I want any of these boys to be gay as much as the next, well, gay man. Especially Jake or Colin. But as a gay Mexican, I can tell you this is just regular, parental ribbing. Oh, you don’t have a girlfriend? Must be because you’re looking for a boyfriend. It’s all teasing. That kind of thing.

REGAN: I’m sure a lot of young ladies out there are relieved.

SCHICK: Oh, I’m sure. Anyway, talk us through what happens next.

[A circle appears around the producer, whose hair is a carbon copy of “The Rachel,” and whose eyes are invisible behind a pair of tinted shades. She is pale, almost definitely malnourished, as though she’s tried to lose a lot of weight quickly. Her hand’s on her heart often, and she seems to have trouble standing.]

LAINEZ: Well, as you’ll see here, the manager goes over to security and pretty clearly points to Liam’s family.

SCHICK: We can’t see what she’s saying, though.

REGAN: I mean, we can guess.

LAINEZ: Right, this is what happens next.

[Two large men in very tight SECURITY t-shirts link arms with Liam’s father and maternal grandmother, and whisper to them. They reach for Liam, and he looks at them, but the security personnel shine their torches toward him, a dear in headlights, revealing the empty space in front of his autograph area, which is quickly re-saturated with screaming fans. It’s like every part of him has dripped away. His father is waving goodbye, making a heart with his hands as security leads the family elsewhere.]
SCHICK: Needless to say, this seemed controversial.

REGAN: That’s what happens. People in the business know this. If you’re a performer, you’ve gotta always be performing. And if you do something that isn’t a thing your whole audience literally cannot understand, like speaking Spanish, then you should stop doing it.

LAINEZ: Agree to disagree there, REGAN, but it’s worth saying that Liam shows up on-screen a few minutes later kicking a hacky-sack around with some cousins, though their faces are all blurred out. He talks about how much he loves being in the band, how supportive the team all is.

SCHICK: There’s no inflection in his voice.

REGAN: That’s classic Liam, though. Fans call him the goth of the band, even though he’s just kind of moody.


SCHICK: Groundbreaking. It seems like Liam is all right, then?

REGAN: Just like you said: all right, all right, all right. Reporters are saying he and the family are fine, too.

SCHICK: Has anyone talked to Liam directly?

REGAN: Well, not exactly, but he’s still with the band, and he was seen heading into the Dirigible Enterprises offices – that’s their management company – a few hours ago, so everything seems OK.

LAINEZ: Can we talk about the weird manager?

SCHICK: Who?

LAINEZ: For real. She looks like she just crawled out of The Matrix. I wouldn’t be surprised if she took a pill and crawled back into whatever world she came from.
REGAN: I was gonna say Tomorrowland, but yeah, same diff. She looks like an internet person. Like she just sits in front of a computer all day, watching everything from MTV Videos to Zoog [REDACTED]. And she’s got a face blanker than Liam, too. Can’t tell what’s going on in that head of hers, even when she asks Liam’s family to leave.

LAINEZ: A true legend of the hidden temples. But yeah, I agree with that. It’s weird to think that the band’s being managed by a professional cyber hacker. But hey, she’s brought them out of the fires of failure, so I guess that internet person’s doing something right, huh?

REGAN: A big yeehaw to that, Juan.

SCHICK: More big yeehaws when we come back from break, too. Big moments from the concert: the boys announce the name of the Make-a-Wish recipient they’re going to show around their campus next month, with maybe the cutest video you’ll see this week. Plus, teasing new music? New videos? A tour? Find out all of this and more after the break!

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“I know that looks like it’s a couch,” Tish says, pointing, “But that’s gonna be your bed for the time being.” They’ve just finished watching the concert special, which Jenna had of course already seen. She’s long written press releases about how Liam was reunited with his parents after the autograph sessions, and she’s long had them corroborated by the happiest rodent on earth. “At least until you settle this,” Tish goes, car keys hanging from an outstretched pinky.

So, after an are-you-coming joke that doesn’t land, Jenna’s driving across Los Angeles to Toluca Hills, an apartment complex a long walk from all things Griffith that swears it’s not a hotel. It’s a place famous for all of the child stars it’s hosted during their rapid relocations to the city, and more famous for all of the ghosts of careers that have died within its walls, the kids who’ve had to move back to Nowhere, U.S.A. with nothing but a few months of school to make
up, the kids who’ve settled on commercials and downsized to somewhere cheaper, maybe even one of the above-ground lunchboxes Pomona’s fishier landlords swear makes adequate student housing. Toluca at least tries. It’s, as you’d expect, on a hill, which manufactures elegance. It’s got a gate, though you can just sort of push it open. The complex is in the middle of a perpetual redesign, Seussian columns and light fixtures stripped down to their wiring as boxier, modern numbers linger scabbily, concealed in bubble wrap.

Some of which has been stuffed under Liam’s door, popped and frayed and still attached to a tarp with the complex’s name. Jenna’s thinking the worst – that he’s found some source of exhaust in there, that he’s thrown a toaster in with the bathwater. But when Brett answers his door down the hall, her wrists still reflexively knocking against his chest and his glasses and his toothbrush, like a lever, he laughs.

“Oh my god,” he says. “He’s fine. Come on.”

And Brett’s two-thirds of the way down the hall in only a puka shell necklace and a pair of leopard-skin briefs before Jenna asks him to go put something else on. He turns to look at his back, notices that the briefs have been wedged upward, rolled into a makeshift thong. He unfurls them.

“That better?” he says, slurring through the toothbrush, casual as ever. “You caught me checking out my ass in the mirror. But, I mean, can you blame me?”

Liam peels the door open only enough for a hairline of light to hiccup out of it.

“I don’t want to talk to her,” Liam says, closing it again. “And put some clothes on.”

“I thought you liked me better with them off,” Brett says. “I thought you had taste! Like the rest of the global population!” He launches a wrist to his forehead, twangs, “Ah do declai-
uh,” and crumples to the floor. From the ground, he whispers to Jenna, “He’s watching through the peephole.”

“Then you shouldn’t have had your peephole out,” Jenna whispers back.

“See?” Brett’s saying to the door now. “She’s in chill mode. Let’s at least talk, OK?”

She’s about to ask Brett if he’s drunk, and if so, how drunk, until Liam opens the door, mouth pressed into a long line, and Jake’s shoving a joint the size of a conch shell behind his back. Turns out it’s wider than he is, and its end breeches the air beside him, a spike of its paper snagging on the fabric of his armchair.

“Uh,” Jake says.

“We didn’t start yet,” Liam is saying. “Also hello to the queen of destroying families.”

“Gonna be honest,” Brett says, lifting Liam into a hug, “I don’t know whether you’re talking to Jenna or me. But, hey, all the more reason to talk.”

Brett, as always, does most of the talking. This is a tamer tradition, he says, one in which there’s no harm done. They climb up to the roof and smoke when they know they’ll have a few days off from singing. Seeing as the schedule for the next few days is mostly dance rehearsal, online classes, and a meeting with a Make-a-Wish kid for Matt – who, Brett notes with a flourish, is distinctly not here and thus quite responsible – everything is totally, unequivocally fine.

“What if we end up having to record tomorrow?” Jenna says.

“Well, now you know that we can’t,” Brett says. “See, guys? She’s on our side.”

“I’m gonna pretend I didn’t see this,” Jenna said. “I wanted to come here and apologize.”

“Go ahead, then,” Brett says, a long leg dangled over a couch arm.

“I’m sorry, Liam,” Jenna says, because it is the thing that she should say, a logical output.
“OK,” Liam says. “See you at work.”

Though there have been other times that the boys haven’t believed her – when she’s told Colin he has to stop eating gummy vitamins like candy, or Matt that she genuinely thinks he’ll make a good husband to some lucky man someday – this one bites the most. It cuts, like Stewart or Stevens would’ve said, the deepest. There is some partial unfathomability about the way Liam stares at the floor, the joint, and his bandmates, and never at her. She’s constructed realities before them for so long now, and delivered them so many bright and different versions of success, that the idea that she can’t land yet another? Well, it doesn’t compute. She needs to have it work, she thinks, this apology. She cannot fail at this small thing if she wants to continue seizing all of the larger ones. But, strangely, there seems to be no way of fighting for it. She could threaten Liam’s contract, or research pressure-points on his tongue that force him into declaring acceptance, but it would mean very little if issued by her own command. She’s frozen, then, diving into all previous versions of herself – the Michigan winters, the silent fights with her family, the new and glistening layers of online armor – and finds none that Liam would embrace. But when she’s about to feel like she could seep through the floor into some deeper, failure-designated bowel of the universe, she realizes that nothing’s stopping her from creating a new one. Jenna Muldoon can always learn, always adapt – sure, this is known. But why can’t she conjure realities that aren’t true? If she’s begun to start turning unsuspecting members of the otherwise-oblivious public into lovers of these boys, why can’t she make a reality out of a thought bubble?

“What if I took you guys to where I used to smoke?” she says.

“What?” Jake asks, now yukking it up through his teeth, even blushing a bit.

“No way,” Liam says. “I don’t believe it.”
“I’ll show you,” she says.

“She’ll show us,” Brett says, his eyebrows rising faster than the rest of him. “OK, OK, fine, I’ll go put on a shirt.”

“And pants,” Jenna is saying, though he’s down the hall yelling, “No promises!” before she can finish the sentence. Jake leaves to grab some shoes, and she’s in the room with Liam alone. All of his clothes are black and ripped, adjustments he’s made from the technicolor boyband palette that usually only goes as dark as maroon. His jeans, she realizes, have been painted, have chips peeling off of them that he keeps nudging into chalky pigment. There must be stains up the waz in this apartment, she thinks, before seeing that he’s looking not at her but past her, probably at the door.

“I really am sorry,” she says. “I got an order, and I had to follow it. I’ve emailed your family, too. We’ll find a way to make this right.”

“You talk like a fax machine,” he says.

“I’m a really sorry office appliance, then,” which nudges a small, low laugh out of him.

“You don’t have to do this, y’know? I’ll, like, still show up. I’m under contract.”

“You know that I see you as more than just a contractor.”

“Great.”

“Seriously, Liam. Without you – without your voice, and your presence – the band’s not the same.”

“Maybe it’d be better if it were different. I think that a lot, actually. That I don’t fit with, like, what you’d call the greater vision. Like, I’m not made of candy like all of the other guys. I think I’m bad with people. And clearly I don’t deserve to have a family, so—’’
“Again, Liam, I am really, deeply sorry about that. I’m gonna work on finding a way to let friends and family of the band into events in some kind of better, more efficient way in the future. It’ll be OK,” she says, “Just let me make it OK.”

“Sure,” he says, nodding at Brett and Jake, who’ve stopped doing The Carleton as soon as she’s noticed them, “I’ll believe it when I see it.”

Jenna drives south, of course, to the edge of the city, the sand and the water, Santa Monica’s storied pier lit like one of the trench’s underground volcanoes has exploded into tourist-friendly streamers. The beach is too crowded, so she pivots up Route 1, past the pleasant, green geometries of Palisades Park, and past the end of the Rustic Creek where every liquor store and taqueria’s been called a hidden gem at least once by a local paper. She’s past the late-night bikers and rollerbladers in holographic patches of clothing on the Ocean Walk, their rhythmic pulses all, for one brief, dopplered moment, so synchronized that it feels like they’re pulling the tides into a more traceable pattern. She’s nearly past the long, thin stretches of Will Rogers before she spots a cluster of trees fringing a sort of boulder next to a set of miraculously-empty tennis courts. A quick swivel, and though each boy grabs the handles above their heads, they all survive.

“Didn’t think we’d be time-traveling tonight,” Jake says, “But then again–”

Jenna bushwhacks as best she can through the low shrubs that’ll block them from the highway, the skaters, anyone on patrol. She taps the rock, and says, “This is it. The boulder!” She waits for a moment before turning around, worried that if she doesn’t, the jig will be up, and the boys won’t believe her. But by the time she’s back around to face them, they’re all looking at her like she’s shown them a ghost.

“The boulder, huh?” Jake says, pulling himself up to its round apex. “Well, all right.”
“See?” Brett is saying to Liam, who he then lifts and passes to Jake. Liam’s maybe the most mystified of all, neck immobile, staring out across the small grove, as surprised as Jenna was that it existed, though much worse at hiding it.

“Shit,” Liam says.

“You thought I was making it up?”

“I,” Liam says, “Yeah, honestly.” A few tokes later, one of Jenna’s best wings when she says, “No, I don’t want to mooch your guys’ drugs,” and they’re all believing her again, Liam asking her about a history she’s still constructing. She tells him she used to come to this place with her friends from college, all of them theater gays from Ann Arbor, guys in impeccable shape but with broken brains full of dreams of fame, but that none of them are here anymore. Liam stops asking questions then, and leans his head into her neck, like he’ll float away if he doesn’t stay on her shoulder. When he offers her a hit, she knows that she’s done it — successfully forged a reality from nothing, a new version of Jenna she’ll discard and stack on top of all of the other ones. The moon blooms higher and the skaters dwindle and the four of them watch the park rangers’ green trucks bobble across the low dunes looking for and missing people like them.

“Come on,” Brett says, once they’re gone, and he’s down to his undies again, charging toward the ocean. The secondhand weed’s done nothing for Jenna — her whole body still feels clenched — but sitting with the boys, letting herself lie to them freely and for their benefit, has let her relax as much as she’s going to, to the point where she doesn’t yell at Brett about potential cameras out across the beach, zoom lenses in the city. She moves to the edge of the water as Jake and Liam also dive in, screeching about how cold the water is, how dirty, how dry their skin will be. She sits next to the pile of their clothes, the layers of themselves she’s bought for them, and
thinks that everything around her has been monitored and controlled – if not by her, then by some force she’s got a hand within. Some small, thin warmth comes from it. It’s all beautiful, the city and its landscape and its people, all of the discarded versions of people who’ve made themselves its fertilizer. And there are so many old versions of Jenna Muldoon, that she can’t help but feel like everything she can see – everything she can touch – is at least in some way, her own creation.

#

Though she’ll be reporting back to both Make-a-Wish and the rodential corporation whose parks you’re not allowed to die within unless you’re named Mufasa, Thomasina is the audience that wants to give the Moneyboys an easy, breezy, beautiful win – she’s been a fan since just after their first cassette tape, and the photo on her MaW profile is her in a puffy-paint t-shirt with all the boys’ names on it (with Matt’s at the top, of course) that’s kerned weird, slanted like she made it. According to Frank’s account of his conversation with Thomasina’s mother, the girl owns every VHS, CD, and Hit Clip the boys’s faces have ever charmed. “She’s on LimeWire, too, apparently,” Frank had said, “Which is a thing I’m fine dealing with later if you are.” Sent to Jenna since are Thomasina’s slideshows of the boys, and a ZZT game – the kind Jenna hasn’t seen in years – where each of the boys finds a piece of her broken body, and heal her back together through the power of a revamped ‘01 track called, “Ladies,” a zero-hour addition to hit the industry-standard 45 minutes – one of their weaker sonic efforts, given that it’s mostly a concert song and thus gets all its flair from a dance break. When Jenna finished playing the game, though, there were sprites of the boys ripped from the cereal games, their pixelated limbs flapping back and forth in the same arrangements they’d nailed during the concert special, all of it hard-coded in. This girl is their audience, Jenna knows – she’s a nerd.
“Thomasina will love it.”

“I thought we were more worried about Mamasina,” says Matt.

“You let me do all the worrying,” she says, noting a small slant in his smile, an extension beyond what’s comfortable. “That’s literally why Frank pays me.”

At the front of Dirigible Enterprises, next to the receptionist Frank hired on the basis of being young, blonde, and 80% gazonga – “You’re not gonna tell me this is bad when our primary operation is with a group of attractive men! That’s anti-feminist,” Frank’d said – Jenna goes over the guidelines, and nods as Matt repeats them. Do your best to make the day special for your Wisher. If you’ve seen multiple, remember that each is an individual case. Do not mention their disease(s) unless they bring it up first. “Yadda yadda,” Jenna says, and then drives down her own list, from back when she’d been in her MBA. No correcting the client. Never tell the client No. You become whatever the client wants you to be.

Jenna’s about to go through all of her Boy Band Rules, but sees a notepad by the receptionist’s wrist, glyphs already across its top half, a pen discarded quickly, like Jenna’s gaze dumped it telekinetically away. She walks Matt, instead, around the grounds, pointing to the locations he’s supposed to show off, which have all been staged for the day, or entered out entirely. The final stop is a conference room where the lights are still up, connected via door and one-way mirror to a smaller room labeled STAFF ONLY, from which Jenna and Frank will monitor Thomasina and Matt’s conversation. Under normal circumstances, Jenna tells Matt, it would just be her, but Frank’s excited – is the word she uses – to verify, like he promised The Mouse he would, that all community service is going according to plan.

“Awesome, bro,” Matt whimpers.

“OK, let’s not do that, either,” Jenna says.
“What if something goes wrong on the tour?”

“Remember what I told you about worrying?”

Jenna’s back around to doing that professionally, by the way – hiring a permanent choreographer, looking to fill all of the gaps Frank hasn’t already saturated with sexy, promising women – but it’s the sort of worry she can use as fuel. It’s been enough to develop an entire floor plan of the ever-expanding premises with a zigging, zagging trail that will allow her to bump into Matt if anything goes wrong. Part of it – when they cross the parking lot to get to the choreo room – will be in a golf cart, which, in a way she recognizes is both inefficient and childish, Jenna’s a little excited about. There’s another small warmth that rifles through her – similar to the one she’d felt at the beach, but not exactly. It’s less that this is a difficult project, and more that this is the first symbol of the band’s expanding influence. And whichever new version of Jenna Muldoon appears when Thomasina does, Jenna knows, will be able to bob and weave, move and shake, put her name down, flip it, and reverse it, until she and her boys find even further success. She talks more success with Matt – what it’ll look like, what she thinks Thomasina will encourage him to be. He mirrors her movements like she’s done with Frank, his shoulders high, his chest flung forward from the rest of his body, posture like the kind of dancer none of them are.

That they arrive just as Thomasina and her mother, Dextra, do feels like a confirmation that everything will go right. When Matt shakes their hands, and asks about the drive, both mother and child seem to effervesce. Thomasina can hardly form words – her brush with fame stealing her voice – but Matt offers his hand, and crushes every question Dextra throws at him. What has he been doing lately? Reading and watching hockey. What’s his relationship like with all of the other guys? They’re like brothers to him, all of them, even if they do argue now and
again. Is he seeing anyone? He’s taking a break from the dating scene right now to focus on music. On music! Jenna, in full view of a security camera, pumps her fist.

Everything’s flawless until it isn’t, when during Jenna’s second shot across the parking lot, she sees Matt doing the opposite of what would earn him a gay merit badge, and walking what she thinks, at first, is very slowly, but then not at all. When Jenna drives up, Frank is there, flicking him with a ruler across his lower back, where a patch of sweat has started to develop.

“Gotta stand up straight, man,” Frank says, “You’re walkin’ around lookin’ like a snap bracelet.” He turns, then, to Dextra, and says, “We look out for our guys, here.” Matt, to his credit, is smiling, to cover up the little tears that glint in the world’s most famous sunlight, holding his hands up as Dextra and Thomasina do their best to laugh along, too.

“Performers don’t sleep,” Matt says through a contorted mouth as he’s struck again, “But that’s why we do the work.”

“Make sure you don’t bend over for anyone,” Frank says, and then he turns to the visiting pair. “Y’know we make sure our boys all take online classes? Matt here’s gonna go into business after all this is over.”

“Or medicine,” says Matt, stepping subtly away from the ruler.

Jenna butts in here, throwing her arm between the ruler and Matt’s back, in a way she hopes looks casual. Dextra curls her tongue in her mouth. One of her eyebrows clicks up, in the same way Jenna’s mom’s would when she’d catch her sneaking through the front door after she’d closed her window.

“I see you met Frank,” Jenna says, wrapping an arm around him, and prodding him toward the golf cart until he figures out the direction he’s been asked to go. “Anyway, we’ve got a meeting! Make sure you have fun here, though! We always do!”
“We do!” Matt yells, a bit too enthusiastically, cradling the back of his neck in a palm. “Everything’s fun! Hey, let me show you the choreography room!” The pitch of his voice is so high, it’s like he’s been pricked with a pin and deflated.

“Look, I was just trying to help,” Frank says.

“Did you see how Matt looked?”

“Yeah, he was bending. Arching his back. And we can’t have that.”

“Why’s that?”

“Well, pardon my French, Jenna, but he looked a little faggoty. And when I talked to Dextra, she brought up this thing she’s started looking at online, called The Society of Concerned Americans against Boy Bands, or SCABB, which she says she’s gonna work on founding a chapter of here in Los Angeles after Thomasina finally kicks the bucket. She says she’s convinced her daughter’s become obsessed with these ‘unethical–’ Frank does scare quotes here, “–men, that they’ve given her a false sense of hope that’s prevented her from healing.”

“You and I both know that’s bonkers, Frank.”

“Yeah,” he says, blinking more than makes Jenna comfortable, “Sure. But you’ve gotta know that this is how we lose, right? This is what tanks the band – when people start thinking we’re ruining the world before they realize we’re running it.”

“We’re not ruining anything, though. We’re giving them what they want.”

“Yeah, and that’s the problem. People see too much of a good thing, and they worry that other people are getting more good things from it. We’re not a theme park – we can’t seek out and please everyone. This isn't the happiest place on earth. Someone has to lose.”

“And it’s–?”
“Hell, it’s process of elimination, Jenna. It’s not me that’s gonna lose. It’s not you. It’s not the mother-child duo that could report us as frauds to one of the biggest charitable organizations in the country and maybe the biggest entertainment corporation in it, too. It’s not gonna be the fans in general, since we need them to keep paying us. And there are only five guys left.”

The golf kart nearly keels over, its axel wheezing against a wheelstop. And Jenna’s wheezing too, then, her ventricles clogged and throbbing, the flow of blood like a shredder. She’s on Frank’s shoulder then, and he’s whisking her up to her office, the prescription pills he knows she keeps in her top drawer. She clutches herself, swallows a few of the pills, and wraps a fist around the orange cylinder bearing her name until she can feel her arm again.

“Shit, Jenna. I didn’t mean for this to be such a shock to you.”

“It wasn’t,” she says. “Bad timing.” More for herself than any kind of revelation Frank thinks he’s rewarding her with.

“Maybe we should up your coverage, then,” he says. “Gotta make sure you can keep handling all of this bad timing. That’s what I pay you to deal with, after all.”

There’s a way of working with this, she thinks. She can still, of course, help the boys – it’s just that she’ll have to defend them from Frank, from parents like Dextra, from this SCABB group, and from anyone else who’s realized that Los Angeles, as part of the world, has begun in the new millennium to seem more catalogued, more finite, limited in a way that means they’ll get less and people like the boys, like her, will finally dig themselves out of land that’d once been prime, available, emotional real estate. It’s a matter of reinvention again, forging a Jenna that learns the rules of the game as she makes it. She will be a different person to Frank, to the boys, to whoever.
She looks up at him, and he’s holding a pair of menus. He winks once with each eye. She looks at both pamphlets, but not at Frank, and the day feels suddenly hotter than before. And she wants to tell herself it’s because she’s out of the breeze the cart made as it moved, or that she’s got enough faith in Matt to ace his date with Thomasina with flying colors, or that maybe Jenna’s body has adjusted to the shadows of her indoor room, Los Angeles’ most famous natural asset in the hallway mere feet away from her – that she’ll be walking into it shortly, and the good brain and the bad heart are preparing her for when she’ll have to walk out into the light again.

“One’s for better plans, and one’s for Domino’s,” says Frank. “I’m getting a personal pepperoni. You can have one too, if we call the insurers, get you to a doctor. I hear the ER’s lovely this time of year.”

There’s a pain somewhere behind her head, where it feels like a small explosion’s gone off. She cracks her neck, hoping it’s just a blood flow issue – she’d even accept a TIA at this point, and not just the kind that ends in Mowry. It’s in her temples, and the words she tries to force together don’t leave her brain, and the pain gnashes down across her teeth, and she feels particles of them sparking off like someone’s replaced her tongue with a buzzsaw and her sinuses with lightning bolts and every vein inside her chest with whatever goop they make Kablam! characters out of. For the first time in decades, Jenna Muldoon feels like she needs to stop.

But, as soon as the pain is there, it’s gone, a headache in its place. Like she’s talked herself out of it, and into some new self “Sorry,” Jenna says. “Weird migraine, I think.”

“Up those meds,” Frank tells her. “That’s why we pay you the big bucks. Anyway, you ready? We’ve got a show to watch.”
He pokes her with the side of her thumb. Jenna wants, briefly, to bite it off – to destroy him in ways more intricately plotted, some electric guitar/sax combo rocketing off in the movie about her life where she inspires his wife into a divorce, or pulls the trigger on forwarding his wife emails he must be sending to all of his new hires. The only dirt she has on him that’d have any legal sway is a coke habit that’s about as normal in the fame machine as blue eyes. Plus, she knows his wife knows about it – the one time she’s ever been on speakerphone, she hectored him about both nose candy and cigarettes with the same tone. Jenna tries not to shake, but sees herself vibrating laterally in the mirrors of the elevator, as Frank continues to talk through doctors in the area, “plastic surgeons of the vein,” he’s saying. Frank pinches something out of his teeth in the mirror as he talks, and when his tongue touches his fingernails, Jenna thinks about sewing the whole contraption shut. She’s frustrated there’s no play – that she can’t indict him on injustice, since that’s not how America works.

“Hey, I’ve got a good one,” Frank says, pulling her foldable chair out from under the foldable table. They’re in the room behind the mirror now, and Jenna’s trying not to cough anything up. Frank launches into another version of The Aristocrats, swearing at every pause – whenever Jenna forgets to courtesy-laugh – that the punchline is worth it – like every good thing in life, it’s coming. When she doesn’t break after its long end – once Matt has brought the family into the room, carrying metal trays of takeout more chivalrously than he was supposed to, a member of the one-day catering staff behind him saying that he really doesn’t have to, that they were going to bring the food up anyway, and even put it on plates – Frank looks her over and says, “OK, Mudloon, you know it’s a good move.”

“The healthcare? Yeah, Frank. I’ll take care of it.”
“True, but not what I meant. This SCABB thing. We let Dextra do her thing, and we don’t announce it publicly, and then SCABB endorses us as good and pure, or whatever. We don’t offend anyone. Not one paying audience member gets hurt. You know it’s the right political move. I know it’s not what you want, and I know you’re in the middle of going through a whole lotta junk right now, but the minute you turn that big brain of yours back on, you’ll know it’s the right thing to do.”

“Yeah, but–”

“Nope. No butts. Look, it’s been this way from the beginning. You and me? We’re on the same side. We’re riding this out until it ends, and we each walk away with enough moolah to build our own wheels of fortune in our garages, hire Ms. White to walk up and down turning panels. Vowels on the house.”

When Jenna sighs, it sounds like a vent releasing steam.

“Look, all I’m saying is to cool off and think about it. And I’ll remind you I’m the one with authority here, and I’ll put you on probation if I have to, Muldoon,” he says, “ha ha,” like it’s another joke. Jenna focuses on Matt, his face in the shape of a plastic creature that’s escaped from a funhouse, laughing robotically as Thomasina points to an image of Admiral Ackbar projected from the conference room’s computer, saying, “They’re called memes.”

Battle, war, thinks Jenna. There’s never not a way to shed an old skin. She needs a statement, some kind of dazzling topic Frank can layer platitudes across. In front of them, Thomasina details another image – her favorite of Matt, apparently – of him bewildered by an off-screen gift, a package of Godiva chocolates slathered with gold bows as RuPaul poses for a different photograph behind him. Jenna’s seen it, but not this version – one that combines the text of the Ackbar still, “It’s a trap,” with Matt’s reaction.
“You use it when you think a boy is a girl, or the other way around,” Thomasina says.

“On forums.”

“Oh!” Matt says.

All of which is a riot to Frank, who yuks, shakes the table with a pounding of his fist.

“Man, we gotta save that,” he’s saying, “That’s incredible. Nuttier than squirrel shit.”

Jenna’s always known that the fame machine runs on clouded oil, but it’s rare she receives a reference point to how crude its exhaust is in person. “It’s weird,” she says, maybe even somewhat genuinely, “How people can take the boys and make them whatever they want.”

“Isn’t that the point?” goes Frank. “They’re a product. A commodity. A thing we sell.”

They are, Jenna thinks. They are. But.

“That’s a good one, that I said just now,” Frank says. “You should add that one to your list of rules. Credit me when the book comes out – put my name up there with yours when you’re giving talks at the IBC conference. Yeah, we belong together. You and me. Like soulmates without the fucking,” he goes, chuckling like a machine gun.

“Does it ever feel like we’re putting them in danger?” Jenna says, the question springing from behind her brain stem, the same place where the pain had been before, so quickly, like an automatic reversion to default software.

“What? Like this girl, here? Jenna, please. She’s having the time of her fuckin’ life. Just look at her.”

And though she could cancel, reboot, gank the words out of her own mouth, she says,

“I’m talking about the boys.”
“You fuckin’ with me, Muldoon? Could’ve sworn we’ve talked about this.” He crosses his arms and leans the back of his chair onto the wall. He kicks at the foot of her chair and she stands.

“You’re worried about the *boys* being in danger?” he yells. “Fame *is* danger, Jenna. Danger’s what they signed up for. Fame gets you power and clout and all the good things in Column A, but it comes with Column B, the stalkers and the pleasing everyone and the having eyes on you at all times. Famous people get assassinated. Famous people cause scandals. The rest of us – the smart ones, anyway, like you and me – we sit behind them, managing our risks.”

Frank’s looking at her now, along with Matt and the family he’s supposed to guide, Frank not realizing he was loud enough to break the barrier, the whole illusion.

He whips her chair into the only wall that doesn’t hold her, his back, or the mirror, sees the eyes of the conference room upon him, and goes, “Fuck.” A few minutes of pacing – Matt sweating buckets through the front of his t-shirt as he asks Thomasina if she’d like to hear him sing anything, her choice, anything at all – and Frank’s cooled down again. Though Jenna doesn’t love that he’s falling into this tradition so frequently.

“OK,” he says, remembering to whisper this time. “OK. Look, I should’ve run this by you, too. That’s on me. It’s my bad. I just,” he says, poking a fire alarm off so her can light a cigarette in the concrete office, “I’m making the call. Officially. These boys are our ticket. We’re not bringing in any other acts. We’re diverting all resources to the band.”

“All right,” Jenna says, and it’s like anything Frank’d done earlier makes immediate sense. It might’ve been gross, but hasn’t she done gross things in the name of the band, too? Isn’t it a balancing effort?
“That’s it?” he says, “All right?’ Jenna, I’m gonna need more excitement than that. You’re gonna be a permanent fixture, here. Speaking of which, I’m gonna need you to make nice with the gals out there. Then, come back and we’ll talk brass tacks. Or fuck that, actually. Make ‘em golden tacks.”

It’s tough to remember that Frank has executive authority until he’s giving orders for once, orders that Jenna can’t switch away from. She’s out from behind the mirror, then, smoke around her, vamping about a conference call and a deal that became too dangerous for the band, that Frank had only been mad because he – like her – wants to make sure the boys advance in the world, stay safe. And she’s walking Matt, Thomasina, and Dextra elsewhere, answering questions that they don’t ask. “Network stuff,” is what Jenna tries, which fools nobody. “So, hey,” she says, walking them in the direction of the parking lot. “Who wants a golf cart ride? Who’s having fun?”

“I know I am,” Matt says, Jenna wishing for once that she was the type of religious that could bless his heart right then and there.

Thomasina turns to Dextra and asks, “Why does everyone here keep lying?”

#

You wouldn’t know it – wouldn’t even be able to see her if you looked at a map – but Jenna Muldoon is on top of the world. She goes dark, invisible, to an allegedly-better doctor and then online. Questions about the identity of the Moneyboys’ manager from the concert special Alex Mack into nothing but hits on the Moneyboys website, updated weekly with new shots of the boys, new angles, and every few weeks a new behind-the-scenes photo. They dazzle, they crowdplease, they camouflage. This week’s is a photo of the five of them on a teetering rock formation a week after the band had been solidified, sand across their ankles, wet from the
knees-down. “Look at Colin’s baby fat,” goes one commenter on a Geocities West Hollywood repost. “Look at Jake’s hair,” writes another. “From Cereal to Stars,” announces the start of a profile on Time dot com’s first virtual exclusive, each of the boys holding a box of their favorite processed grain. A photo of Thomasina, a starry border blinking around her endorsement, a statement clearly written by her, seeing as it mentions hopes and dreams in spades. Both her description and the end of the Time piece mention the Moneyboys website, the constant profiling of the boys, the new images of them cascading into the internet like nuclear runoff.

The trick to these photos, Jenna has learned, is that there’s always a new, possible, photographic angle. The boys lie down, they stand above the camera like the giants she knows they’ll continue becoming with her help. Each new vision of the boys is a different edge, a different piece of them that’s revealed to their fans, another way in which those fans seated at desk chairs in basements and time zones across the country will feel closer to them. Each is a new donation, a new, few-minute obligation for the boys. They slice these images of themselves off into the universe, and then they go back to singing. It’s not just the boys who do those multi-minute postures – it’s Jenna, too, though she’s back behind the curtain. Liam’s punching the new wooden panels Frank’s had installed in her office, and Jenna’s holding his fists until he cries, saying that she knows what it’s like not to be what your parents want you to be. Colin arrives every day with new ideas for his persona – maybe he could be cooler? different? more seductive or more secretive? – and Jenna talks about how she sympathizes, she gets it, that consistency is the toughest and most underappreciated part of any entertainer’s career. Brett hates a Halloween costume, says it’s not tight enough, and Jenna says, sure, there was a time when she wanted to show off, be desired as well. And it didn’t work out how she wanted it to, her cultivated image
boiled down to a single, forgotten clip on a few television programs, but the second half is not anything Brett has to know. They’ll talk about only what needs to be processed.

The boys are linked to basic needs, food and air, their faces on Happy Meals, their music in the background of Boeing commercials. They’re across the United States, and everyone leaves the cool, dark underbellies they’ve nested within to see them, to fall in love with them, and to maybe even touch them. The data says that the band’s concert-goers are often buying their first tickets. Jenna looks out across these ever-expanding amoebas of people, and they look like Los Angeles, they look like the Michigan basements of her college days, they look like America, horny and multicolored and not entirely sure how to stand after leaving their chairs at home.

That their love has been commoditized is nothing new – this had been the plan all along. But it becoming anonymized, like Jenna has, was. This is the point, Jenna thinks. The specifics of which songs the boys sing, or which steps they dance, or who harmonizes with whom don’t really matter, do they? What matters is that their love, on these grand stages, is made available to anyone willing to love them. And that they become more available by the day. Every day, they could be yours. Every day, they reveal themselves as a different, closer version.

And Jenna makes new versions of herselfs, too. She’s the sun electric, outta sight, looking out over the online version of Mulholland drive at the world that she’s gonna make with every new evolution – for all of them and for herself. The things she’ll have! The money, the space, the empire! It’s all for the taking, boys. Just let her keep getting away with this. Let her keep playing with who and what she’s built. It’s still, geologically speaking, the new millennium. Every slice of the world, every inch of its love, is for the claiming. Let her keep building you, boys. Let her keep creating it for you, fans. Just stay online. Everyone, just stay in front of her, face forward. And please, for the love of all things boybandic, do not look behind the curtain.
“Am I original?

Am I the only one?

Am I sexual?

Am I everything you need?”

– Backstreet Boys, “Everybody (Backstreet’s Back)”

Often, Jenna Muldoon feels like she’s the only one holding it together. While rumors saturate every empty space – lingering feuds between old Mickey Mouse Clubmates, lawsuits brewing against Incognito Johnson himself – Jenna is a technician: managing it all, doing good work, no legal team required (though there’s still one on retainer – she’s no jamoke). Before everyone’s phone lines got hooked into the sky, damage control was much easier. But now, anyone can key a message to anyone else, even have one up while they’re disconnected. And they can look up boys, silent and brooding and so close to a user’s eyes that it doesn’t matter how flat they are, how the edges of their frosted tips recede into the coronas of their IMACs. You ask any exec worth their weight in managing ability and they’ll tell you that AOL is the problem.
But Jenna isn’t so sure. Where everyone else sees a vacuum, she sees further opportunity, wants to wring money from the modems.

Because what’s at the center of the internet? Who is there, pulling the strings and coiling the wires and beaming everyone’s hopes and dreams and correspondence into the ether? The same people who boy bands are for, at their very core: nerds.

Boy Band 104: it’s all supposed to look effortless, even though everyone involved knows that it’s not. It’s supposed to be like deodorant, there and pleasant, inoffensive – but deeply, unbendingly effective. And, as Jenna knows, having overseen another iteration of Moneyboys (the game, though this time it came attached to 16-packs of individually-wrapped chips) – a process that involved meetings with software engineers who sweat craters into the pits of their shirts – nerds need deodorant. Boy bands are what this audience longs for – they’re emblematic of effort transforming into coolness, one of the few essences so pure it’s safely immeasurable. Where other execs had seen their audiences with small glows, maybe a pleasantly-bloated deltoid just south of each ear, Jenna had known to market to those who’d listen quietly, dance only in rooms devoid of other people. They’d twirl through parents’ basements, dodge other servers during late-night shifts, and sing along in a whisper, all part of an unnoticed network. Like Tom in his underwear but heavier, with more cellulite. Individually, nerds – people like Jenna, she’ll even admit it, OK? – aren’t the type of audience that the groomers and bodily arrangers of Hollywood want to think about. But together, it is them – the shy, the horny, the pale – that have blipped into a network that’s propelled the Moneyboys, by the start of ‘03, to chart spots so consistently above the ground they come with a concierge. They consume, they pay, they spurt back data. They trail their hands across their bodies in bed as they think about the boys, the beautiful boys, to the point where their imagined selves become so removed from what’s real
that soon, they’re just a vestige of their image of their favorite bandmate. Jenna has seen the chatrooms – the screencaps of 180p videos of the boys mid-lunge at concerts, circles and lines superimposed across their crotches in an effort to triangulate the exact shapes of their genitals. She knows she’s turned the Moneyboys into an entity nerds believe are worth more work than their jobs, their lives beyond the internet, their lives at all. And what’s even better is the nerds are quiet, appreciative – couldn’t cause an issue if they tried.

Or, at least, that’s what Jenna had thought until this morning, when the bespectacled spreadsheet jockeys from the CS program at USC left her with an accordion-folded printout that may weigh more than she does. It’s a report, delivered as promised, from The Thompson Lab. It says that the boys are perceived by audiences as more feminine, that they’ll be part of the origin point for a crisis of masculinity in the late naughties, that they’ll turn the nerd market into people who care about themselves before the boys they’ve idolized, and twist common advertising knowhow into a gnarled, useless display.

“This is potentially incredible,” said Stacey Thompson, who’s dropped by personally despite being swamped with consulting gigs, wearing a t-shirt with Matt and Liam arm-wrestling pleasantly across its front. “If this data’s correct, then in five to ten years, we’re going to see boy bands open up representations of acceptance and self-love on a massive scale. Sure, groups like yours get socially sacrificed – deemed too queer or too freaky, get knocked off the market – but if you keep going in this current direction, bands could become an empowering thing for people.”

“Huh,” Jenna had said. “How do we market to avoid us getting sacrificed?”

“The thing is, I don’t think you want to. I think this is one of these cultural changes. I really think we’ve landed on something, here, which is why—”
And then, there was the form packet unfurled from her file keeper, strewn with small, thick, doom-inducing paragraphs, poked with signature lines. There was the offer of a documentary team from The School of Cinematic Arts to film the process of boy bands leading to self-acceptance over a decade-long period, with the types of near-invisible appearance compensation fees that educational institutions always offer with the hope that the famous will want to express – or at least perform – enough moral goodness to not ask for as much money as the public tells them they’re worth.

“So you’ll see we have places for everyone to sign – you and the guys and up to ten higher-ups, but let me know if you need more.”

“I’ll think about it,” Jenna said. “Plus, Frank’s out of town, so I can’t make any decisions without running them by him first.”

“Right, OK.” Stacey grabbed at Matt’s arm on her shirt, closed her hand around his 2-D bicep, began to breathe like a lawnmower. “Well, please let us know right away if – sorry, when – you’re willing to go along with this.” As Jenna walked her off of the studio lot, Stacey re-listed the ways in which the USC documentary could be a deeply meaningful opportunity. “Think of what it was like for you, when you were younger, Jenna. Think of what it would have been like to be inspired by the people you idolized, instead of just staring at them emptily. Instead of hoping they’d love you from far away. The capacity for releasing this information – it helps nerds, and queer people, and anyone who doesn’t figure out how to love themselves until–”

Which is all Jenna heard before Stacey was back past Security. Jenna thinks now, in a lawn chair squat against the parquet floor of the dance studio where the boys are practicing, about how she can further that emptiness, that distance, that hope. How she can stop the world from examining anything except their bodies or their voices too closely. How the audience she’s
wanted to open boy bands for can stay as just an audience – the rare, consistent entity of the fame machine, so monolithic that they’ll never change. How, in the sort of cosmic, natural sense, uh-oh. She sighs, takes a chip-clipped bag of Fritos from the floor and shovels them in, along with two of the newer heart pills. If the Moneyboys stay on their current course, careers will tank. Which is a problem. No one but her should be able to doom them – no one else would know how to drag them through it. This past year, on tour, each of them cried on her at least once. Colin found and broke up with a secret, long-distance girlfriend. Brett missed the bus eight times (eight! of nineteen stops!) waddling back from hookups, waited behind until it was both him and Jenna, and crumbled, looking aged for the first time. Matt told her he’d thought about escaping in Vancouver after the whole Liam thing, and then, eyes like TLC was doing the soundtrack, made waterfalls. They’ve talked about pasts and futures, and she’s nodded along like she hasn’t thought about leaving them, too. And in revealing themselves to her – though she hates to admit it – she’s started to care about them further. She’s started watching politics. She wonders if Bill and his sax are as liberal as the country will elect, and is afraid – for the first time – for someone else. She has seen the hate flung at Jonathan Knight for leaving the New Kids for medical reasons, has seen how quickly fans turn into mobs when what they’ve been taught by a trusted group of five or more professional hot people is shattered.

Though, more importantly, what about her?

It would not be unheard of for Jenna, a producer at the heart of one of the most popular boy bands at the turn of the century, to be blamed for the queering of the American consumer – to, yes, get away with the money, and the expanded audience, and probably zero prison time, but also to be ostracized forever. Frank would take no heat. Men lead men astray all the time, at paces more frequently than even the analysts could measure. It’s par for the course. It’s meh. But
Jenna, who’s the section of gender that’s supposed to be continuously responsible and caregiving, whose wife teaches mathematics at the same school the CS Team is from, is so drastically painted with targets that she’ll glow like a plague victim in front of the populace, get buried as all of the boys do, and probably deeper at that.

Before her, the boys whip and contort their bodies in rhythm, directed by one of the many other queers who she’s ensured now run proverbial hamster wheels for the fame machine, Seonghun Park. He escaped into choreography a year or so after his own band didn’t take off across the Pacific, and jokes that he hasn’t gone outside since, since he’d been yoinked up immediately by the Backstreet Boys until their hiatus, at which point Jenna made a few phone calls, wished AJ all the best in recovery, and offered Seonghun the position that’s helped turned the Moneyboys into the kinds of audio-cardio phenoms that can rival even Ms. Jackson, if you’re nasty. He looks, Jenna has always thought, like a very ripped ghost.

“Take five,” Seonghun says, and the boys pant onto the ground in ways that match their tour-solidified personas. Brett, the heartthrob just smarmy enough to feel like an older brother, grins and groans, pivoting into a kneel with only his ankles. Jake, the boy-next-door, flops onto his ass, and then goes full snow angel. Liam heads to the one unmirrored corner of the room, and plays Blink-182 on his CD player so loudly Jenna has to look up and tap her own ears until he notices. Colin, the sensitive one, leans onto the wall barre and stares out the studio window, despite the morning fog being too thick to see anything. Matt waves to Jenna, starts approaching her with a bottle of water until he sees Seonghun doing the same, and instead, bows like a total dork. Jenna sighs. It’s eternally obvious when their movements aren’t choreographed. She waves back, drops the report with a thud that gets even Liam to look up, and catches a water bottle from Seonghun.
“Always working harder than us, huh?”

“Can’t let you guys upstage me.”

“That’s what, like, twenty pounds? We should get you lifting.”

“If I worked out, Seonghun, I wouldn’t have time to worry about all of this,” Jenna says, waving her bottle across the studio like a wand. It’s partially-opened, and its broken seal drips water onto the two of them.

“In everything she does, Ms. Jenna Muldoon makes it rain. Hey, speaking of money, is Frank back yet? Dude still owes me a paycheck.”

“Take it up with accounting,” Jenna says, setting the bottle next to her chair, replacing it with the bag of chips, “Plus, Frank’s flying back from Seoul as we speak.”

“Still can’t believe he went there without the only Korean guy on staff. Didn’t even offer me a ticket.”

“When was the last time you saw him do anything nice?”

“OK, OK. Fair. Good point.” He rolls up one leg of his sweatpants, pads a patch of dry skin with his towel. “Hey, uh, I probably already know the answer to this, but me and Frida and Carlos from Acting are all going out in WeHo after the sun sets. Doing the whole queers-at-work thing, y’know? You’re welcome to join.”

“I’d love to, but-”

His hands rise up to his chest, flare outward and pause, as though he’s been caught about to give a hug. “Hey, say no more. You’re busy. I get it.” He bows, awkwardly like Matt, and Jenna rolls her eyes at him, knowing he saw the strange bend in one of the studio’s mirrors, that he’ll work on it with him individually. “We shall remain work friends,” he says. He turns,
gathers the boys, and pulls sheets from his own file folder, begins pointing to lineups, poses to hit.

If only everyone on staff knew how much headspace Jenna allocated to defend them, to prevent the whole operation from sputtering out into the sting of irrelevance. She doesn’t, she thinks, have time for friends outside of work, can’t remember the last time she had. They can stay here, and she’ll see them five days a week, period. There is otherwise too much to parse, too much to filter through her.

Another complication: the possible crucifixion of everyone queer on staff if it’s revealed that the Moneyboys are a step to the deterioration of a stagnant masculinity. Though some employees, like Jenna and Seonghun, are out, there are others who aren’t – and they’ll all get blacklisted if anyone with enough zeroes behind them figures out they’re pushing an explicitly queer agenda. Plus, there are the boys, most of whom would also get outed, would have their eventual solo careers so far underwater that it would be like giving them cement shoes and asking them to train for a triathlon in Santa Monica Bay. People forget that L.A., even though it’s one of the truest blue spots on the political map, is, at its highest tiers, mostly controlled by folks who live in Irvine, fill their bathtubs Scrooge McDuck-style with gold coins, and look away as their pools and sprinklers turn a red desert green.

She wipes the snack scum off on a trail of paper entrails she’s ripped from the report. She takes a deep breath, gets to thinking, then decides it’s too much to think about. There are smaller issues with which she can pollute her brain until it feels like she’s accomplished something major. Matt is growing chest hair now, and she needs to make a call on whether he should shave it, wax it, or risk discoloration and have him zapped by one of those new laser machines. Colin eats too much sugar and keeps getting cold sores on the inside of his mouth, and the acyclovir
isn’t working. So, she’ll have to set up a meeting with a dietician. Liam and Brett saw the one-year anniversary showing of *The Majestic* together after the tour ended, thinking it would be another classic Jim Carrey comedy flick, and emerged from the theater holding each other, with feelings, the whole escapade captured by paparazzi. And *The Public* follows Boy Band 105: the boys should be sensitive *enough*, they should feel emotions around each other, but only for their audience – not in any way romantic, especially with another potential object of affection. Jenna sighs. She’ll have to break them up. What does Brett do that Liam will hate, and vice versa? She tears a few pages off of the analysts’ report, writes down, “picks his nose,” and “lisps when he’s not trying.” Her temple swells.

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“If you don’t want us to fuck,” Jake says to Jenna, who’s called him in for dirt on Liam and Brett, “Then ask Daddy Frank to pay for separate hotel rooms.”

“You know that’s not in the budget.”

“After the tour, he literally bought us all cars for Christmas.”

“That was—” Jenna begins, but then goes in for more sustenance via the Frito-Lay family of products. She offers Jake a bag of his own, since the whole drawer is filled with them, separated by file tabs. “Yeah. I know,” she says.

Brett, who’d been notorious for staying out late, even among the guys, started making Jenna feel like a Cranberry once he and Liam declared themselves a couple – rather than the flurry of scheduling that’d come from his cavalcade of dates, he’d sit back and watch the guys pack up, would talk more with the staff – until Jenna’d have to shoo him along, hearts in his eyes for one of the small number of people who aren’t their audience, she asking him why and even if he’d have to let it linger.
“He fell in love,” Jake’s saying now, having refused the chips. He sings, in his best Celine, “Tale as old as time…,” which means Jenna’s got a few more minutes to be in her head before the ex-theater kid in front of her tapers into the song’s last word.

Jenna doesn’t have favorites, but Jake is probably her favorite now. When the Moneyboys had released their first single, almost two years ago now, he’d been the lowest in their popularity surveys. His original persona (Boy Band 106: each member has to have one, you’ve got to be able to describe it in three words or fewer) was The Funny One, but then he hit a late second puberty and found a jawline that actually fit his face. So, now, he’s The Boy-Next-Door – still funny, still reminiscent of the goofy charmers Jenna remembers figuring out their sexualities in college, but also, now, hot.


“Aren’t you supposed to be resting your voice?”

“My voice is indestructible. Just like my heart. Hey,” he then says, pointing to the massive stack of papers on Jenna’s desk, with perforated edges dangling jaggedly away from it like tentacles, with light orange, BBQ-flavored fingerprints nestled on its borders, on a few of its folds, “What’s that?”

“A bunch of spreadsheets about the band,” Jenna says. And then, knowing that a bluff’s the best way to convince a person who’s loved by enough devoted fans that they should do the important thing – to just keep thinking about themselves – she adds, “You want to read it?”

His sunglasses transferred from his collar to his coif, magicked into a headband, Jake grabs a small, cushiony model of Matt from her desk, squeezes it a few times, and goes, “Of course not.”

“Good. ‘Cuz it’s stressing me out.”
Jake, who says, “So I actually have an idea, if that’s allowed?” doesn’t reduce the stress at all. Especially when he finishes with, “I think I want to come out. Like, to the world?”

“Jake,” Jenna says, but as he waits for her to continue, she realizes she’s full of air.

“OK. I know it’s a weird idea. But we’ve been passing around DVDs of *Ellen*, and that scene where she accidentally comes out into the microphone and people start hugging her and then the show doesn’t go off the air? I want – I don’t just want that. I think it’s possible. Like, it’s the 2000s. It’s already been a new millennium for a few years now.”

Jenna, despite the kind of deep breath that those without high blood pressure can take consistently, explodes with history: how the whole cast of *Ellen* gets blacklisted, how Laura Dern, Ellen’s TV girlfriend, only queer by association, can’t book anything but *The Larry Sanders Show*, and even that gets protested.

“But Ellen has a talk show coming up now,” Jake tells her. “So, like, it has to work out, right?”

“That’s,” Jenna says, wondering where she’s going, “That’s what’s happening to one, single person. How many gay people do you think are in the world? Because it’s more than one. Like, we’re both proof of that. The band is. The staff here is. And people on the outside – Jake, I shouldn’t be the one to have to tell you this, but they’re shitty.”

“I know people are shitty. I know. I just–”

He is barely old enough to buy his own porn, buffer but not strong, dreamy in a delicate, unthreatening way. Jenna pictures him with scars and black eyes, missing teeth. She imagines him hidden under coats while entering stadia, apart from the rest of the Moneyboys, his persona crushed. She imagines him booed. He is still a kid, he is still a source of income, he is a thing to be protected.
Jake’s eyes, despite logic, get bigger, glisten and wobble. He looks at his shoulder and apologizes. Jenna has to think of a distraction – Frank’s rule is no tissues in the office, and she’s already signed off on the monthly dry cleaning bill, meaning any mucus that leaps onto Jake’s shirt will stay there. She needs a distraction.

“Do your parents know?”

“Yeah. I mean, not officially. But they’re not blind. Plus, they’re from Santa Cruz. Do yours?”

“Look,” she says, “It’s complicated. I don’t talk to them anymore. Not since I moved out here.”

Maybe why Jenna’s so inured to all of the Hollywood muppetry, so capable of navigating its mechanics, so ready to tell all the Rogers to go home, is that her own family was the same way as a lot of the crowd out here. They were fine with queers, as long as they stayed at a distance. Once, when she was walking with her grandma through the campus at Michigan, she saw a trio of guys in rainbow armbands coming their way with pamphlets, and her grandma crossed the street – in traffic – to avoid them. Jenna’d go to the same school later, and stare at the place they crossed the road every time she walked past, as though her footprints had been laser-cut in.

And that same distance has been part of Hollywood since Jenna’s been here. Probably much earlier – at least since The Boss flew in from New Jersey and sang, “You can look but you better not touch.” Look at the Walk of Fame, less than a block from the LGBT Center, but invisible from it, since a sheet of buildings stabs the sky between them like a picket fence. Look at how the only famous faces you see in WeHo are the drag queens and porn stars, and even then, few of them are known for their faces. Look at that Nightline report from ‘01, heteros
weeping and analytical reports on just the prospect of boys wanting to do theater instead of football. It’s all the same act of pushing away and waving from afar – just at different temperatures.

“So, yeah,” she says, “My parents are, let’s say, distant. They weren’t huge on L.A., and when I moved here, we all decided it would be for the best if we just dropped contact. They’re still alive, running around up in Yooperland – they just think I’m losing my purity through, like, drugs and booze, instead of women.”

“You don’t think they’d be OK with it?”

“Look, it’s either cut off all ties, or do one painful phone call every Christmas, where we talk around everything instead of actually talking to each other. And trust me, when people outside of our circles figure out you’re gay, you don’t need any more pain.”

It’s not a rule, but it’s known: the enemy of a boy band is silence. Jenna and Jake each try to find some entity in the office that isn’t each other, one that they can look at or say something about. Behind Jenna rests a series of framed diplomas, the centerpiece her MBA from Marshall. Portraits of the great ones, their idols bottom-right, picture-in-picture, bloom out from between the degrees. Max Martin’s gangly beard drips into a picture of Britney. Tina beams across her daughter and the rest of Destiny’s children, Darkchild behind her, sunglasses on indoors.

Jake says, “Cool lamp,” pointing at the remake from A Christmas Story that Frank had donated to her office when his contractors had finished installing the wood paneling.

“It’s an acting role,” is what Jenna settles on. “A full-time one. If you’re the first domino, you might take out everyone else in the band. I know it’s hard, but I also know you can handle yourself. I’m not worried about you,” she says, feeling like she’s left him on a tour bus and
remembered only after it’s pulled away to refill. “Plus, do you really want to mess up everyone else’s careers?”

“Yeah,” Jake says, “No. I don’t. Sorry. I shouldn’t have mentioned that. Just, uh, forget about it. I’ll be fine. I promise.”

He grins. He bows theatrically, as though he’s adorned in a robe. She knows he’s practiced it, imagined the twirls of hips and hand before a loving, applauding crowd. He doesn’t look at her as he leaves.

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“Anne-yong,” mispronounces Frank Wison, a day later, hurling a paper bag onto Jenna’s desk that takes out the foam models of Brett and Jake entirely, and sends Liam, teetering like Anna Nicole, to capsize over the edge of her desk. They all sort of bounce.

“I wasn’t sure what size you were, and I know it’s not nice to ask, so I took a few liberties and got you a Korean Double XL, which I think is a U.S.-Regular-Large. I don’t know. You know how it is with other countries – we’re bigger’n all of ‘em!”

Jenna holds the shirt out in front of her – it’s eighties-neon and says TURBO, has a pair of guys dressed in five or six jackets each staring back at her. It’s so large that if she wore it, it might drag on the ground.

“Thanks, Frank,” she says, poking at a zit that has somehow ruptured on one of her lower eyelids. “Take it it was a good trip?”

“Oh, it was the best,” he says. “Man. The fuckin’ best. All these other record company scrubs are looking at Japan. Can’t keep their mouths shut watching SNAP.”

“SMAP.”
“Yeah, whatever. But they go and watch these same boys every year, thinkin’ they’re the only flowers in the world, and none of them know to travel just a single, extra plane ride west. The Korean boy bands? Doing some incredible stuff. The food? Jenna, they use garlic in everything – my Italian ass was over the fuckin’ moon. And the women? Gorgeous – but I don’t need to tell you that. Anyway, back in fifteen – I’m gonna go drop one, and it takes me at least five minutes to get in and out of this suit.” He taps her doorframe twice, hikes up his pants. As he leaves, Jenna makes out patterns on every element of his outfit: the pants houndstooth, the vest checkered, and the jacket stripes, all slightly off from each other in color. Each piece of his suit looks like it’s been exiled from other execs.

It’s strange that Frank is this energetic. He’s in late almost every day, complaining about a hangover or his daughter, some budgetary tribulation. Typically, his only exercise comes from walking down and up the stairs at the end of the hallway. Frank will tell anyone who asks – and many that don’t – that he doesn’t let people into his office unless he’s firing them or giving them a raise. “Keep them on their toes,” he said to Jenna on her first day, and then let the air hang, waiting for her to shake. She remembers that day, her haircut, the fresh bob, back when success seemed more inevitable than it did now. “Hi, yeah, I’m the boys’ producer and manager,” she’d said to herself in the car. Hollywood, even for the people that construct its backdrops, has a way of spinning you out of control, until you believe that with enough association, and just the right moment, you’ll be loved, touted as a natural. How this happens is a mystery, but everyone just trusts that it does, that there’s a black box even the statisticians and their IBMs can’t measure – Schrodinger’s Valley.

Waiting for Frank’s a drag. Jenna has budgets, outfits, and dance orders to optimize, to ensure that no one boy’s designated the greatest celebrity of the band – she’s seen what happened
when Nick Carter stayed with The Firm, what’s going on with the letter-end boys now that Timberlake got the buzzcut and the ability to tell the world, “Man, I’m tired of singing,” in the middle of the “Pop” video, how easily a band fractures when one of its boys flies too close to the Hollywood sign. Plus, there’s that report, which she’d sent an intentionally-vague email to Frank about last night. She feels like she’s holding a cluster of lit fireworks, knows that she’ll have to let one fly up and explode. She pops the zit and opens a spreadsheet, on the Dell she suspects Frank funded just so he could knock on its hood and say, “Dude, you’re gettin’ it.” But soon – almost reflexively – she’s on the forums, where a post from a paparazzo shows Matt buying condoms at the 7-Eleven next to Toluca Hills, where all of the boys live.

“Wonder if he’s having a guest over?” one commenter hypothesizes. Others list women they’d love to see him with: Britney (he’d help her turn innocent again; she’d teach him to bang), Vanessa Carlton (they both seem so devoted, so sweet), and Jo from S Club 7 (her band’s uncoupling, so she’d have time for him). The fans check flight trackers and a page called Bodyguard Confessional. One of the other commenters says that they’re wealthy, that they’d pay a large sum of money to anyone who can get them close enough to Matt to be able to lick the sweat from the waistband of his Calvins, the place where his tan line ends.

Normally, this would be not just fine, but a goal. Objectifying the boys is what you want your audience to do – it’s just that they’re supposed to be objectified in different, specific ways. Boy Band 107: There’s supposed to be a boy for every fan, yes – but more importantly, there’s supposed to be a boy for how every fan loves. These types of comments about Brett or Liam? Wicked. They’re meant to be heartthrobs, to not only have a body that audiences upvote as hot, but to wink at appropriate times, have a fluidity of groin while dancing that also qualifies them as sexy. The nerds who fall in love with their bodies are supposed to consider them in bed, fucking
– or maybe flexing, showing off. Matt, though, is the cute one. Fans are supposed to see him as more of a cuddler. At 24, he’s safely enough past the possibility of blooming late, of excessive workouts turning into bulk, of the MTV Spring Break cameos of him at an eating contest while Liam high-fives college students who’ve returned from the ocean after swapping swimsuits turning into questions of how he’ll be able to oingo boingo after stuffing so many hamburgers down his gullet. He’s supposed to be the most boyish, to age slowly, to talk their nerd audience into a slower version of time, to deliver them a calmness that linear science and math do not. But in this photo, there’s a molded shoulder poking out from one side of a tank top. The distressed patches in the knees of his jeans are so gaping that a line of his quads is revealed through each of them. His ass is, at this angle, phat. He has, inexplicably, a light fuzz of facial hair. She writes on a post-it, “Matt: not just chest hair,” and sticks it to her computer. She realizes she can’t ask Jake to spy on the other boys today, and there’s a feeling like one of her ribs has popped away.

“So anyway,” Frank says, there again across the room. Who knows how long she’s been in la la land? He goes, “What I learned on my summer vacation was,” and waits for her to laugh. Frank, she’s learned, is all about these pauses, spaces for him to stay as validated as each of the boys’ personas combined. Jenna knows to butter him up, to tell him he’s funny, to monotone, “Ooh, what a bad boy,” when he talks about embarrassing his daughter, and to call him a ladykiller with a deadpan so far into the ground people wonder if it ever really lived when he mentions all of the options he’s had to cheat on his wife but never taken. And she knows it works, because, like the boys, Frank keeps slipping her secrets – and, like with the boys, Jenna files them away until they’re relevant. He wishes he could lose weight, he thinks he may be allergic to shellfish but cannot – cannot – stop slurping up oysters. He’s worried about coddling, how P.C. everything is getting, since his daughter’s started coming home with detention slips
after repeatedly calling classmates faggots. He tells her almost every day that one of the reasons he likes keeping Jenna around is that it’s good to know that a woman – let alone a queer one – is as bad as him.

Jenna, of course, laughs. Frank, the waters tested and his toes not bitten off by any undetected piranhas, loosens a sliver of a chuckle back out of his piehole like a fart. Their guts quiver back and forth at each other as Frank tells a prepared series of terrible jokes about Koreans. None of them are funny. But Jenna knows how to work her one higher-up as well as she works the band, understands how to be a funhouse mirror for a person who doesn’t have anything but the sky on floors above them. Once, she planned a surprise party for him at which the whole party wore fake, auburn goatees, to match his. He still talks about it, calls it the greatest thing ever, says every time that his wife and daughter only got him a cake – and not even a good one. No ice cream.

“But anyway, what I actually learned,” he says, “Uh, I should back up a bit. That shirt I got you? Take that out. See those two guys on there? That’s Turbo.”

“Wow,” she says, “I couldn’t tell. The label didn’t give it away at all.”

“Look, I had this whole thing prepared, so just go with me, OK? OK. Anyway,” he goes, pushing the air away from his torso as though he’ll swim through it, “That’s Turbo.”


“And they do this thing that’s fuckin’ brilliant. They have their own TV show.”

“They talked a network into it, or–?”

“Well, I mean, it’s online. They have a website, and they post it on there, and every week or so, their fans get to know more about the band. And people eat that shit up. We see Kim Jongkook working out, his pecs the size of my head – he’s the buff one. We see Kim Jungnam
trying not to get emotional as he writes a letter to a parent somewhere far away. And they play games!”

“Like checkers, or what?”

“No, like obstacle courses with tiny bikes. I’m not,” he says, now walking in a small circle, his arms fluttering like he’s full of air and waving to anyone who wants to buy a used car, “Maybe I’m not explaining this right. The point is, people eat this shit up. They feel like they know the band in this more personal, intimate kind of way. You walk around and everyone’s wearing their merch, shirts and backpacks and shit. We need to do something like that with the Moneyboys.”

Before Jenna can wonder whether Frank’s checked his inbox, he says, “Which is why I was so excited to read your message about this documentary series with the college. Which is also why I was so confused when I read your reservations about it.”

She knows she had been vague – both because the whole conversation with Jake had set her mildly off-kilter, and because Frank’s the type of guy who needs to be convinced of an opinion in person. He’s also not the best at the sensitive stuff, the delicate maneuvers. He wouldn’t put the necessary twos together to consider how the boys would have to hide even further if there’s a film crew around, or how they and she would become magnets to the world’s pitchforks if the wrong secret’s caught on camera.

“Hear me out,” she says, now vamping, “On why I think it’s not the best idea.”

“I’m setting a timer,” he says, his watch beeping, “You have two minutes before I call them and agree to it.”

Nothing’s changed about Frank in the past year. If anything, he’s become more of himself, his spray tan more orange, his eye bags deeper, his monthly sessions of touch-up plastic
surgery hidden by sunglasses, turtlenecks, once even an eyepatch. Most of all, though, is that he’s still a big baby – he’s always gotta be right, be adored, be encouraged that his persona really is The Powerful One.

“You’re selling yourself short, Frank,” is what she tells him. “You’re really gonna take the first offer? From a college? Did you see what they want to pay us?”

“Yeah, but nobody else has this opportunity–”

“Man,” she goes, “You must still be jet lagged. If you think that’s the best offer we can get for this, then I’ve got a pet rock to sell you. Is this the same Frank who doesn’t pay full price for anything? The same guy who’s writing a book on dealmaking?”

“Well, fuck,” he says, flinging his jacket into the air, once again invigorated to show up, do nothing, and acquire praise, like Tuxedo Mask, “You’re right. This is why I keep you around, Muldoon. That cutting edge. That razor – uhh – mind.”

“Not your best work, there, Frank.”

“Yeah, yeah. You’re right. Chalking this one up to jet lag, and – hey, wait. Doesn’t your wife work at USC?”

“Sure does,” Jenna says, realizing he’s handed her another dagger. She’s a mirror to him again. Though it’s uncomfortable – though her face must look like a crumbling statue – she pulls a Frank, and winks.

“You wily motherfucker.”

“I mean, they’re in different departments, but–”

“Right,” Frank says, winking back now, rapid-fire, like enough of his veins have clotted up to deliver unto him a twitch. “Different departments.” He tries to circle her, which means
she’s got to pull her chair further into her desk as he passes behind her chair. “A bad mama jama as always, Muldoon,” he says.

And then he’s out the door, yelling back that he’s going to find another deal, and there’s the pain in Jenna’s abdominal pit once again. She thinks, maybe, she should eat something – that if she fills herself with physical, tangible molecules, then there won’t be space for the emotional ones, the small black holes in her universe. Like L.A., she’s not supposed to reveal her internal vacuums – the stars are supposed to be five-pointed and primary-colored – just cute, nice, easily-digestible things.

#

Cross-referencing schedules, Jenna sees that the boys have half-hour breaks for lunch today, and that all of their choreo is in the afternoon, which means none of them will use the break to eat anything more than a protein bar, if anything. They all know how quickly they digest, especially after a minimum of three hours of dancing. There are a few bands – and Jenna won’t name names, it being a professional courtesy – where at least one of the ensemble has IBS, around which daily schedules must often be adjusted. Though she does have to deal with a lot of other shit, Jenna knows she’s on the luckier end of the producer-manager spectrum, which is a big part of why she sticks around. That the job gives her sufficient health insurance to slosh down an amount of heart medication that would make most horses keel over is the other important part. It’s a perfect match – if she’s the one with the pre-existing condition, then the law of averages says that none of the boys will turn up with one. The law of averages will move, instead, toward her. And taking anything average away from a group of superstars is sort of the point.
A few months after the band had formed, Jenna had made the mistake of having the group film concert promos – the cards that play on screens behind them between songs, of Matt blowing kisses to the crowd, or Brett turning to look over his shoulder and wink, and so on – together, all in the same room. She’d thought it would be a chance for further bonding, unaware that many of them had already begun to bump uglies. The hour it should have taken split into three, as Liam complained about Colin’s fade, and Jake had to keep getting his hair re-styled because he jumped around too spastically for even the most expensive pomade to withstand. They heckled each other, until Frank – who’d still been trying, at that point, to play some form of teacher or dad for the boys, popping in once a day for a few minutes – started stomping around, flinging his arms in the way that only Jenna had gotten used to, since she’d been with him during the planning process.

“Just be fucking nice to each other!” he screamed, his eyes about to pop out of his skull like a Beetlejuice extra. “Just tell everyone they look great!”

Now, grimacing, eyes so bloated they can hardly see, the boys tell each other they look great on a regular basis. It happens in chains. “You look great,” one will say. “No, you look great,” will go another. And they’ll rattle on, Duracell bunnies, until Jenna tells them to stop. “You’re all in your fucking twenties, and work for a studio that pays for multiple personal trainers,” she tells them. “Fuck’s sake. Let’s just agree that you all look great, and move on.”

Which is when another of them – usually Jake – will tell Jenna that she looks great, in the sort of warm-enough way that makes fans want to enter contests through which they could win one-on-one dates with the boys.

Today would be the kind of day that she’d host Jake in her office, listen to him moan about being behind Colin in a lineup (Jake: “He’s taller and paler and ginger, and he can’t stay
on beat, and I love him, but I mean, you all make the choice to hide me just to give the straight one more screentime;” Jenna: “You’re all pretty, and that’s literally by design”) but she thinks it’s best to give him some cooldown time after yesterday’s talk. She may need it as much as he does – there’s still that flare in her temples, that knife-shaped pain in her stomach. When she tried to talk to Tish about it last night, she spoke around it, until Tish told her that she’d clearly spent too much of the day working, and carried her to their bed like a child, where Jenna had plopped down and slept for ten hours. And then, when she’d woken up and tried to think about it, it still felt like appendicitis and a bad headache.

She thinks she’ll feel better once she solves another issue – she’s going to have to snowball a few of them. First on her list is Matt, who’s done with promos and out of the studio at the exact moment she leans next to its front door.

“Uh oh,” he says, when he sees her.

“Nice to see you, too, Matt.”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean it like that. I just – I assume you saw the photos?”

“Yup. What are you doing for lunch?”

“Well, it seems like it’s probably gonna involve spending time with my favorite producer. Which I’m totally happy to do. I just – yeah, I just hate making mistakes, and I know that I made one, and I’m really sorry.”

The boys were on Conan a few months ago, and when, during a multi-headed version of The Newlywed Game (christened “The NewlyBand Game,” as to not give any fans the right ideas), O’Brien asked for which adjective would best describe Matt, three of the other boys wrote, “Canadian.” He was born in Vancouver, and apologizes at every opportunity. Though it’s a tick, it helps him lean into the sweetness of his persona without even trying. His edges seem
softer than those of the other boys. His slight accent gets audiences who’ve paid for contact lenses to more accurately see the contours of his body to look at his face instead. When the band began, he had slight blotches of rosacea under each of his eyes, which Jenna had the makeup team leave in place. There’s a photo of Jenna and the boys taken right after Matt goes into concert makeup for the first time, of him pouting in the corner after Brett lays into him, calls him Little Orphan Matty. Cut to cartoons of him, cherubic and diapered. Cut to music videos where, even when the boys have their shirts off, there’s a float or a CGI ripple in front of most of his torso. His cuteness works in multiple ways – he seems less intimidating to the shyer fans, but it also makes him seem like more of a potential conquest to the pervier ones. She monitors the message boards, and he’s consistently the most fetishized, drawn and photoshopped into gags and harnesses. It’s tough to make Jenna feel uneasy, and this somehow does it, which she takes as affirmation that she’s done a good job of convincing the world of his innocence, herself included.

“I didn’t have anyone over,” he tells her, whispering in case of a secret paparazzo microphone hidden in a purse or under a lapel, “I haven’t in a while.”

From under an Expos hat and clunky sunglasses, he sips a glass bottle full of green juice. It claims to contain mostly almonds. If Jenna had been ordering for him, he’d have gotten a red or a pastel-colored drink. But he’s on break, and the day’s mugginess is enough to keep the photographers at bay – everyone, even the wrinkled, looks better in overcast lighting. Plus, he’s still in makeup from the promos, and pictures of perfect people looking perfect aren’t worth nearly as much as them in any sort of distress.

“OK,” Jenna says. “I believe you. But why the rubbers, then?”
“I just – I don’t know, it felt good to feel like the possibility was there, I guess?
Sometimes, I feel neutered. Like, the body hair is coming in, and I thought that would be, like, the thing.”

“What thing?”

“I don’t know. Everyone else – it feels like they’ve all graduated into being sexy, from back when we first started. Like, if you look at pictures of us now compared to us then, I’m the only one who looks the same.”


A camera bulb flashes from the bush. When the pair of them look up at it, its glow is pointed toward another table. Jenna lowers her sunglasses to roll her eyes, and this is enough to perk Matt back up.

“Screw ‘em,” she says. “They don’t have taste and our disguises are good.”

“I know,” he says, and is about to say something else, when a waiter perkily asks if Jenna and her son would like another round of bottled cleanses. So, instead, he sighs and tips backwards, leaning his head over the back of his chair, until Jenna presses his chin back forward with her ring finger, worried someone will recognize his clear, perfect skin, his bone structure.

“This is what I mean,” he says. “I just – I’m twenty-four. I want to grow up, and be a man, and have people realize that I am one. Like, I look at Jake – and I know I’m not supposed to whine about him to you, since I was the one who messed things up, and all that – but I look at him, and he’s filled out, and he’s so confident when we perform. And Liam’s the youngest, and he’s turned into a badass, suddenly? And what do I have, aside from being cute?”
“A lot of people would kill to be cute,” Jenna says, opening another bottle. “But I’m sure we can do something. What do you want, a new haircut?”

“I mean, that’s maybe a start? I’m sorry. I don’t mean to be such a pain about this, but–”

“It’s literally my job to figure this out, Matt. It’s not a pain. I get paid for it. I get health insurance.”

“OK,” he says. “I just – I want to do something manly. I, uh, admittedly do not know what that is, or what it looks like, or really anything about this. I’m super sorry.”


“Y’know, the last guy I did sleep with was technically a bear–”

“Don’t–” Jenna goes, leaving cash on their receipt so they can walk away, “You really don’t have to tell me these things.”

“It was OK. He was on the network,” Matt says, referring to the online service Starfvcker, a paid hookup service that’s become notorious around in-circles for having quickest blacklist trigger finger in the west. Since her talk with Dougherty over a year ago now, the site has become a way for the boys to have their needs met without the exclusive use of each other. She’s ensured all of them – even Colin, in case he ever gets curious – has a premium account, though all of the accounts on Starfvcker are premium. It’s one of the things they don’t tell Frank about. It’s listed in the budget as Recreation, with all of the gym memberships.

“Still,” Jenna says, twirling a finger at their driver. “I don’t know why you guys all tell me everything about your sex lives. You know I don’t need all the gritty details.”

“Who else are we gonna talk to about them?” Matt asks, double-checking the closed latch of his seatbelt, “Each other? Plus, I’m not sure any of us have any gritty details to speak of.”

“Except Brett and Liam.”
“Yeah, and also Jake.”

“Jake?”

“Sorry,” Matt says. “Frick. I shouldn’t have said anything. I – you, um, didn’t hear that from me.”

“I sure didn’t,” Jenna says, eyes back, then, and staring at her brain. She’s still recalibrating by the time they’re out of the van. She grips an imaginary hilt, rubs it up and down her face until Matt, with the natural, uneasy smile his acting coach was supposed to have long ago removed, apologizes, and says he gets it.

“Film the promos again tomorrow. We’ll squeeze it in. I’ll make sure you still get lunch, OK?”

“Sure,” says Matt. “Thanks for that. And the talk, and everything. I do feel a little better.”

At which point Frida Andrade – makeup maven, best in the biz – walks by with an armful of ears and noses. The whole arrangement looks like it could have been voted off of Scare Tactics by all of the other, more tv-ready cryptids. Frida’s biological nose and ears have become steadily draped with rings – bridges of them, chimes – to the point where even if she’s not mid-conversation, you can hear her coming from a mile away. “My dog tags,” she calls them, having grown up military-adjacent her entire life. She once let loose, during warm-up chit-chat, that one of her parents was a sniper, which is why she’s a vegetarian now.

“Hey, hey,” Frida says, passing the van, “Two of my favorite people!” In her piercings, Jenna and Matt both blush.

“You rob the plastic surgery ward?” Jenna asks her.

“Nope,” says Frida, “But watch out for all of the naked Potato Heads I left back there.”

“Did Frank order the prosthetics, or–?”
“Nah, just trying to stay ahead of the game. It’s technically my lunch break, and I’ve gotta stay on the up and up, yeah? We all saw Kidman win the Oscar. Word on the aesthetician street is that these puppies are about to be all the rage.” A schnoz tips onto one of her fingers. She holds it up and goes, “Arf arf!”

Which is when it hits Jenna, right as she stares into the one, tightened buckle of Frida’s overalls. “Wait, Frida – any chance you could make the boys look older?”

Matt, who’d started inching away, turns back around.


“Just an idea for a music video,” Jenna says, nodding at Matt. “Could be fun, could maybe bring in some of the Clay Aiken fanbase.”

“Right, he does have that sort of inoffensive, aged elf thing going on. Huh. Yeah, let me play around with these, and I’ll get back to you. Hey, I gotta run, but I’ll see you around? Page me! Both of you!” And she’s off, somehow still juggling the morass of body parts, her looping, workout video curls like metronomes as she waddles away with them.

Matt just sort of sighs, walks over like he’s about to hug Jenna, but then backs off and apologizes. She claps him on the shoulder, in the safe kind of way she imagines a supportive teacher or coach would.

“Don’t say I never did anything nice for you,” she tells him. “Now go shave.”

#

Though Jenna’s got a finger – or at least a toe – on nearly every operation pulsating out from Moneyboys HQ, she’s only got twenty total, and so every so often, a small mystery will jet softly past her. The idea is that her staff’s qualified enough to handle these molecular-level issues
before they sprout four stomachs and a tail and she has to have a cow. And it has mostly worked out. Even the fly-by helicopters of Extra would confirm that what she doesn’t know hasn’t yet hurt her. But as she rides her elevator all the way up to the building’s fourth floor, Frida places noses, ears, cheeks, and chins across Brett and Liam, who scowl and squint, imagine how long they could keep their faces in a certain position before their new parts fall off. Jenna does not know that after their dance rehearsal, the two of them will don a grid of prosthetics organized by Frida, and spend an extra half hour adjusting foundation and edges, just to be able to walk into the dim, purple light of Hamburger Mary’s unnoticed.

“She’s definitely not coming?” Liam will ask, and Brett will jab him in the ribs.

“It’ll be fine,” Seonghun will say. “But you guys are buying the first round.”

“Hey, I wonder if we’ll see any celebrities out here,” Brett will try, and Liam will snort into a laugh so abrupt that his fake nose will nearly flap off of his face. For guys as famous as they are, any reflective surface is a mirror. As they catch themselves in the bar’s polished metal walls, and see their one-night freckles, Brett will add, “Y’know, you kind of made us look like Colin.”

#

Jenna, meanwhile, opens the door to Tish rising concerned from their sofa, cradling her hands about Jenna’s face, and shaking her head, saying that the job is draining her.

“Oh, like yours isn’t, Professor,” Jenna says. “Nice to see you too.”

Tish has a full foot, and maybe about twenty pounds on Jenna, but – a former collegiate swimmer – is still slimmer. Since their marriage, she’s gained this psychic vibe about her, like she’ll be concerned for anyone she runs into, will make an effort to help them. For a while, Jenna worried that she’d become a source of academic inspiration for Tish, a project with enough work
needed to satiate her big brain. But when she’d mentioned that fear to her, and Tish had suggested an independent couples’ counselor, adding, “Do you want to work after you leave work?” it had been enough to convince Jenna that she’d found a lover who was on the same wavelength, who could talk her into relaxing – and who was too busy to be anything but down for Jenna’s proverbial Whitney. Jenna leans into Tish, flopping like a wooden board into her, the weight from her ankles transferred via yogic physics into Tish’s arms.

“So after your sick day yesterday, you owe me an extra work summary,” Tish says. “Also, I’m reheating that lasagna, because tonight’s not gonna be the night we start cooking.” As she takes both of Jenna’s hands, Jenna feels like a Disney heroine, lies across Tish’s legs as they both flop onto their couch. It is a couch that Jenna hates, beautiful and uncomfortable, ridged by a painted metal, the type of centerpiece that the wealthy are meant to have.

“You aren’t gonna believe how many people mentioned Ellen to me in the past 48 hours.”

“That bad, huh?”

“Possibly worse.”

“That’s harsh,” Tish tries, so distinctly uncool that it’s cute. “What do the kids say? Whack?”

“Right now, the kids are saying, ‘We want to cause a ton of trouble for Jenna, who does everything for us, who works her tail off to make us famous, who’s the only one we come to when we’re having an existential crisis, which we’re all having at the same time, because of course that’s how the world works.’ Despite all the extra work I do for them, they find ways to get me to do even more.”
“It sounds,” Tish says, as she’s somehow removed Jenna’s hair tie and strung it around her own wrist with an elegance Jenna wishes she could teach the boys, “Like they really trust you. That’s important.”

“It’s a pain in the ass.”

“I think you care about them, too.”

“How do you know that?”

“You’ve told me that. Explicitly.”

“I’d believe there were some explicatives.”

They rearrange, and Jenna lies on Tish’s stomach until the microwave rings. Tish details a case one of her students ran a simulation on today, these conspiracists pinning posters to phone booths, convinced that everyone in the Greater Los Angeles Area is on the verge of losing their identities, of a pervasive, cultural subversion via popular music. “Men becoming women,” the posters had predicted, “Everyone getting happy. Everyone turning gay. The whole world crushed under the weight of a manufactured, manicured image.”

“To be fair to him, that’s kind of the goal,” Jenna says, before Tish can finish. “Any chance he works on a very specific team at Viterbi?”

“Haven’t the slightest, dear. Though I did hear something about the film school trying to get in with you and your li’l idols.”

“We’re probably breaking those hearts, too,” Jenna says. And she walks Tish through the report, the documentary proposal, Jake and Matt and the bandcest and all of the other crises, as the pair of them walk into their kitchen. It’s the one room in their house they’ve tried to make look Californian, rigid with deep, red tile, clocks and appliances in the shape of suns, vases that look like they could have been lifted from LACMA, but are made of plastic and thin glass,
tossed into the back of their SUV from the clearance section at Homegoods. They’ve been planning on decorating the whole house for a while, but Tish started working with Masters students right when the Moneyboys’ tour started last year, and so each other room in the house looks like a bachelor pad furnished by a child spinning a wheel: an armoire with jeweled glass abutting a small, glass replica of a slot machine that they vow to one day buy a table for; a really, truly lovely hardwood writer’s desk with a piano stool too low for it forced underneath its mantle; pictures of Tish’s family – The Supportive Ones – tacked onto their walls like posters with the kind of 3M putty that not even Tish’s students use anymore.

“Remind me, how old are these boys again?”

“Most of them are between 23 and 25. Brett’s 27.”

“So they’re still boys.”

“You try telling them that,” Jenna tells Tish, “They’re boys with enormous paychecks. They’ve all made it before even realizing what adulthood is. Matt watches Disney movies exclusively. Colin only eats unsauced pasta and chicken nuggets. I’m afraid they won’t know how to take care of themselves when the whole operation goes kaput.”

“Is that in the cards?”

“Well, it’s complicated, but,” Jenna tries to finish the thought, but her cranium’s so muddled that no individual end can slide through.

Tish pushes her plate from the other side of their dining room table – a round, polished, heavy object that they tell each other the thrift shop from must have stolen from L.A.’s last castle – next to Jenna’s, like a curling stone. With an ungrace that her family mocks her for – “Look at Jenna,” goes Tish’s dad whenever they meet up for dinner, “She’s the shape of a bulldog and can still dance better than you” – Tish grabs a chair, twists rigidly between the lamp, the open
dishwasher, the microwave on an unwound ironing board. Soon, she’s next to Jenna, the way they’d eaten in grad school, shoulder so close to shoulder that they’d form a Venn Diagram if they could, making their own booth wherever they went.

“I feel like you have to give this poor kid something,” Tish says about Jake. “Remember when you started in music, and you said you’d make it a safe place for queer people? How back in grad school you came up with all of these plans about how you’d get yourself to the top so you could take all the rest of us with you?”

“Tish, I hardly remember where I was a half hour ago.”

“OK, even further back, then. Remember what it was like for you, when you figured out you were queer?”

“Yeah, it sucked.”

“It was traumatic. It informs your trauma today.”

“Thank you, Doctor Phil.”

“Seriously. It fucks you up. My family was great about it, and it still fucked me up. Society does a lot of the bad work, even for good parents.”

“Yeah, now multiply that by a million fans watching your every move. A few weeks ago, we got word that a bunch of them were crowdfunding a satellite to hover above Toluca Hills, set timetables for when the boys enter and leave. We had to call the feds and everything. I’m not convinced they’re still not always watching the boys in some way.”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying. Imagine you’re finally starting to get confident in who you are, and someone comes along and says, ‘Well, no, you can’t be that – you’d disappoint too many people.’”
“I don’t like to look at it like that,” Jenna tells her, “I just don’t want any – this sounds shitty, but I don’t want any additional distractions, for the boys or for the execs to pounce on.”

“That does sound shitty.”

“I know.”

“Identity isn’t a distraction.”

“I know.”

“And you’re asking this kid to give up or ignore a lot. And not just that, but to perform that ignorance as well. For the sake of this report.”

Jenna’s thumb snaps the head off of her plastic fork. Noodles soar, splatter marinara onto the wall. She thinks of the Moneyboys’ appearance on Slime Time Live, of Jake pieing Brett in the face, of Matt so thoroughly throttling one of the guys from BBMak in a hot pepper eating competition that the touring Liverpudlians had to cancel their Orlando show. Their manager had attempted a lawsuit, claimed battle wounds to one of his singers, ended up settling on The Moneyboys covering “Back Here” and running away with 80% of the profit. On the broadcast, he and Jenna had posed as the type of parents who just don’t understand, had gotten slimed by both boy bands pulling synchronized levers, disappearing behind the green goo.

“Not just him, but all of them.”

“Jake’s the only one who’s asked to come out.”

“The fact that he has to ask you permission for that isn’t at all concerning?”

Most boy bands – most male singers across the current scene – have a starting pose in their videos, necks tilted forward, heads looking up slightly. Managers will tell you it’s sexy, that it makes these tepid theater kids look like badasses, but Jenna thinks it makes them look insecure
– and not in the relatable way. She finds herself looking at Tish in the same way, can feel the light angling her face into a long, defensive posture.

“I feel like I’m doing OK,” Jenna says. “I feel like there’s so much going on with other bands – so much actual garbage – that the stuff I’m dealing with is manageable. I’m doing OK. Like, look at what’s going on with Whitney Houston. Look at *NSYNC and the Backstreet Boys not getting paid even after their contracts give out. I feel like I’m doing better than all of them.”

“You are, sure. But I wonder if we don’t have a responsibility as queer people to protect each other, in a way. That’s why I started doing work with, well, every queer student group.”

“Yeah, and I can’t protect you when you go to protests. I am protecting the boys, though, is the thing,” Jenna says. “Think of all the shit they’d go through if I let them do whatever. Think of all the hate they’d get. Instead of spy satellites, we’d have to worry about homing lasers. We couldn’t tour anywhere in the south that doesn’t start with ‘San.’”

Boy Band 109: Audiences – people – get angry once anything they’re spoon-fed as truth turns out to be anything but. Makeup stays the same – Liam will always have the slightest tinge of purple in his eyeshadow, Matt will have blush if the glow of his mid-dance cheeks ever tempers into the rest of his face. No one’s allowed to do anything wild, because then the fans will do something wild in return. And some of them are already prepared to. If a celebrity is a thing, they believe, then they’re a thing they can possess, can weaponize a defense against losing. If Yolanda’s firing a shot, just think about what a rogue fan will do.

Tish bends her own fork with an index finger, flings a noodle at the same wall that Jenna had hit earlier, hits the same spot almost exactly. She says, “I’ve been meaning to say this for a while – I’m sorry if it all sort of came out in a burst, there, but I really think you’re hurting these kids, and I think that you’re hurting yourself in the process,” and then stumbles around the
appliances again to mop up the stain with a paper towel. Jenna finishes eating with a spoon. Her spankin’ new cell phone goes off, but before she can reach for it, Tish has turned around and found her staring at it. The wall glistens – those ads about the quilted paper towels were right, Jenna notices. A rare moment of truth in advertising.

“I guess what I’m saying is that I worry about the effect this could have on you, Jenna. We’re older than them. We have years of capital-T Trauma from having to process our queerness in a society that didn’t allot time or space for it. I’ve been talking with some of the people from the counseling school who demonstrated with ACT UP, and they’ve been saying—”

“Look, if you’ve got a solution, I’m all ears.”

“You know I’m not on this earth to solve your problems. But I genuinely will try to think of one.”

“Literally, you have full license to – anything that solves the whole issue, I’m down for.”

“Arson? Murder?”

“Maybe not murder.”

“Well, at least you have a moral line somewhere.”

“Yeah,” Jenna says, “I just try not to think about it too much. Could you imagine? I’d probably get shitcanned immediately.”

“So, then, what’s the happy medium? The mildly-moral solution. Which, by the way, I am still not in favor of.”

“Yeah, I got that. And right now, it’s to make them look old.”

The plan being that if Jenna can’t instruct the boys to not break any of the Boy Band Rules, she’ll show them what it looks like when they do. Aside from Matt and Liam, they’re all white, have extensively-moderated skincare and sunscreen plans directed by an on-staff
dermatologist. The boys, facetuned into their early forties, and laden with Frida’s prosthetics, will not, for the first time in their lives, be pretty. It’s almost like Jenna’s consulted Miss Cleo, received word of receding hairlines and eye wrinkles and neck bloats that even KYBELLA couldn’t solve, and been so ecstatic about it she’s paid the extra $49.99 to stay on the line a few more minutes. If she’s done enough to saturate them with how much their faces are loved, how they can look at a fan from miles away and charm them immediately, then they’ll turn distraught. They’ll want to do anything they can to stay where they are, to not rock the boat.

“That,” Tish says, “Sounds kind of evil.”

“It’s a quick fix. And it solves everything. It makes Matt not want to age anymore. It gets Jake focused on maintaining his status quo. It gets Brett and Liam to see each other as ugly. It ensures they all behave if and when Frank secures another documentary. Plus, it keeps me on the payroll, keeps the heart meds flowing in, helps us afford living in Koreatown.”

And now Tish looks back at her with that same music video starting position, the sun setting purple outside their window, and lining her face with sad, zombic disappointment.

“I—” she starts, and then pushes the dishwasher door closed to walk past it. “Jenna, you’ve done a lot of things, is what I’ll say. Please don’t do anything that would make me not want to be with you.” She kisses Jenna on her hairline, says she’s got derivatives to solve, and will be on the couch if Jenna needs anything – it is close to a goodbye, an agree-to-disagree, that a mathematician will do. Jenna wishes people in the fame machine could be more like her wife, could have opinions and drop them once they realize the fight’s for another time. Tish will bring it up later, Jenna knows, and that’s fine – she just doesn’t have to worry about it now. Some in Jenna’s industry approach what Tish has. There are consultants, sure, and there are men like Frank who’ve made money and known enough to sit on it when their knees began creaking. But
none of them are like Jenna Muldoon, a true technician of fame. Though the headache is back, though her brain feels like it’s about to pop out from her head, sizzle through her audial canals, she knows she’s protecting the boys, keeping the good health insurance, doing what Avril advocates, to fall and to crawl and to break and to take what you get and to turn it into – eh, something. It’s late. She can’t remember the rest, and it’s not like she gets paid to know someone else’s lyrics.

#

That night, it’s like everyone and their mother learns how to email – though, graciously, not Jenna’s. Frank, who’s on and off MSN, AOL, and their company address like he’s flipping channels, sends her a single joke eighteen paragraphs long that ends in the punchline *The Mighty Fucks*, a list of restaurants he’d like to try, and thus places where she’ll be expected to set up meetings, and the lyrics to a song about soldiers and their guns, with the headline, *Boys?*, which is out of the question because two of them would have to rap, would have to somehow wring authority out of speaking instead of singing. Plus, she thinks, has he seen them? She’s at her desk and it’s too early for this, like it always is. Also in her inbox: Frida replying *YESSS!* to the idea of aging the boys for fun, coupled with an image of her at a bar, noses bent down her neck in drooping lines, as though she’s the most fashionable monster in that banned episode of *The X-Files*. But the one who’s taken the most real-estate in the jmuldoon block of the internet is Jake, who has sent her single-line links to news articles, polling data about the public perception of gay marriage, the 61-39 Californian victory over the Knight Act. Between them are quotes from *Angels in America*, *Will & Grace*, and MTV’s *Undressed*. When Jenna looks up, she sees that she has ten minutes before the scheduled, 10:45AM touchdown of Hurricane Frank. She also sees Jake, back foot against her doorframe, leaning against it, arms behind him. From this pose,
in one music video, he bounces off of the other side of the frame, spins into a kick and a solo segment that’s meant to look like he’s fighting with himself.

“How do you have time to watch so much TV?” she asks him.

“Well, Matt and I don’t fuck anymore, so that’s really all I do now. Can I come in, or are you still mad at me for being dumb earlier?”

She rests her head on her fist, flicks her fingers to mesh her face like a net, and sighs. With the other hand, she motions him in.

“You weren’t being dumb, Jake.”

“OK, good, I’m glad we agree. Can you at least hear me out, then?”

“You’ve got nine minutes.” Unfurling her bottom drawer as Jake finger-guns into the type of smile that’s begun to get him acting offers from film studios – which Jenna notes on a post-it to tell him about when his current fiasco upends – she unclips multiple family-sized chip bags, arranges them in the empty niche between monitor and computer, and motions to them like a sommelier. As is tradition, Jake eats none of them.

“So I want to talk to you today about public opinion,” he says, waving his arms, as though his charm is enough to transcend into actual magic, to summon a ready-made, futuristic PowerPoint behind him. He is trying. It’s heartbreaking. He talks the way Jenna would expect a fifth-grader to, emphasizing key points, reading off of flash cards revealed from the thick, lipped pocket of his cargo shorts. He discusses an extensive, two-night Google pilgrimage, does not fail to mention that he spent an additional twenty minutes updating the Moneyboys’ Wikipedia page with interview-revealed information, and photos that he says actually make them look good, and show all of their faces.
“And now, as a dramatic artist,” he says, performing the bow he’d used to exeunt her office when she’d shoved him back into the closet days prior, “I’d like to talk about the rich, cultural contributions that our people have made to—”

Which is when they hear a floor-shattering rumble, the cannon-decibel’d explosion from the steel door at the end of her hallway. In seconds, Frank is in front of them, pressing Jake’s shoulders, along with the rest of him, back into one of the chairs across Jenna’s desk.

“The show is on!”

“What show, Frank?”

Jake releases his breath through pursed lips, whistling timidly, testing what kind of noise he’s allowed to make.

Frank has his palm on the phone’s receiver, says, “Yeah, I’m with her right now,” then turns back to Jenna. “Remember a few days ago, when we talked about doing the show? Like, the documentary? Well, I’m on the line with Felicity Grossman from Talent Comet, and they’re in. Isn’t that right, Ms. Grossman?”

From the phone comes a minor warble, the suggestion of a cheer.

“Brett set up the connection a while ago, but I finally got around to replying to the email! I’m gonna go pop the nearest cork, I swear,” Frank says. Jake looks at Jenna like he’s Malcolm in the Middle. “And they’re gonna cover all the cameras, too. Hundreds of ‘em! This is big. Big!” And like he’s pulled offstage by a cane, Frank’s away, saluting the phone.

“Big,” Jenna says, shrugging.

“If I lose my abs because of this, I’m never gonna forgive you,” Jake tells her, reaching for a single Cheeto. “I don’t even know what the hundreds of cameras are for, and I’m already stressed out.”
A few finger-licks later, Jake fondles a string of paper he’s ripped from Frank’s printed song list. The idea, Jenna has explained to him, is one of Frank’s – that a crew follows the Moneyboys around backstage, that supposedly-hidden cameras (the positions of which will be known to all parties) will capture supposedly-private moments, that the whole shebang will disarm their fans, make them love the Moneyboys even more – while, at the same time, proving how butch they all are.

“Would they put cameras in our rooms?”

“Probably not without telling you. Why?”

“Did you forget what we were just talking about?”

Jenna’s first thought is that they’ll need a cover, then – a reason for the boys and their Starfvcker visitors to go to and from each others’ rooms during moonlit, one-digit hours. What do kids their ages do?

“Is it still Pogs?” she asks him, “Pokémon cards?”

“I’m twenty-three.”

“And not helping.”

For the second time in as many days, Jenna’s actually sweating. She can only lean into the close, responsive friend motif so hard before the fantasy shatters and the audience figures it out. Unlike a lot of producers – and this is why the boys’ numbers have bloated in the past year – Jenna knows that their nerdy fans are rarely stupid. Give them two dots and they’ll connect them. Give them three and, suddenly, the gossip rags hold weight. Her arm beginning to twitch, Jenna grabs a stress ball from the top of her desk, throws it against the wall above her chair, and says, “Hold on. I need a minute to think.” After two rebounds, the ball ricochets from the wall and hits
Jake in the shoulder. Trained, he remains quiet, though his baseline simper tilts down, as they watch the ball flop onto the floor.

“OK,” Jenna says, “Room together, no cameras in the rooms, no dicking around on the network for a while.”

“Wow, all five of us in one room? That sounds great,” Jake deadpans. “Just kidding. I hate it.”

“It would only be for a month or so. You could deal.”

“Yeah, I know I could deal. But it would just suck.”

“Sometimes, you get paid to suck.”

“Is that an option?” Jake grins, authentically this time. “I didn’t think blowjobs would be the way I’d talk you into this, but if you insist.” He mimes fellatio on his own foam model, places it down with a weak, “heh,” when Jenna’s expression stays rigid, like she’s Olmec and her temple’s eaten yet another pair of Orange Iguanas. Even before she inhales, the two of them both know she’s about to send him home with the booby prize, a swatch and a pat on the back. His grin’s gone so quickly Jenna wonders if she’ll see it pop up on the side of a milk carton. As important as it is for her to not turbo-boost one individual boy to the top of the fame machine is for her to assure that none of them ever feel like they’re fallin’ – in the no-ground-beneath them way, not in the Alicia Keys style. In the animated series – if Jenna’s whole life were drawn by underpaid artists beyond the Pacific – this would be the part where her eyes flash white, where all of her different slices of information unfold from her head like satellites: Tish asking her to empathize, Frank doing grabby hands, telling her to make like Wilson Phillips and hold on, enumerated Boy Band Rules in the shape of flight panels. If she were younger – Jake’s age, finally out of college and away from the family, what would she have wanted to hear? Or rather,
what would have convinced her not to hear what she wanted – that she’d be validated, sure, but at the expense of incredible pain, slashes not just across a snowy street, but across her tires and face.

She false-starts a couple of times, tries to link that they both moved to Los Angeles because they felt safer there, that she gets how it is – she’s cool like that – and that she’s just trying to protect him.

“I know, and that’s super kind of you,” he says, “But I can take care of myself.”

“The issue isn’t yourself, though, Jake. The issue is that you breaking away from what the rest of us are doing could endanger everyone. Brett, Liam, Matt – even Colin. Also me, in case that matters to you.”

“Obviously it does, Jenna – or I wouldn’t be here talking to you about all this. And I know you’re looking out. You’re our band mom–”

“Please don’t say that. I can’t have people knowing I care.”

“OK, sure. But you’re basically, uh, that. I guess – I dunno. I’m just trying to tell you where I’m coming from, and how it feels like this is the right moment, and if I don’t do this soon, my head is about to explode. Maybe you know things I don’t – actually, I’m sure that you do. But I’m not smart or jaded enough to know those things, so–”

“Got it,” she says. “You want proof?”

The report, its frayed edges now near-entirely shaved away, its sides and cover pages now lacquered with enough fossilized snack dust that Jenna would have lost a letter grade if she’d turned it in to a professor, looms next to them. She undoes the first few pages, places it between them, and walks him through the summary.

“But that’s amazing,” Jake says. “We can keep being trendsetters.”
“No, it’s not.” She points to the flaccid histograms, traveling via gradient into a blotchy redness. “Do you see this? This is where we tank. This is where all of the work we’ve been doing – to get people to pay us, to get the world to love you – goes pear-shaped. You’re looking at this from the highest tower in the castle. If you’re the first, you become hated. You’re out of every industry gig. You’re Laura Dern without the heterosexuality to fall back on. You’re living in a fucking cardboard box, and people are still finding ways to chucks rocks through it.”

Jenna doesn’t realize she’s yelling until he begins to cry, in the way that performers do when they realize they’ve demonstrated that an award means something to them – he chokes, covers his face with his forearm, the polyester of his purple windbreaker grinding cutely against his face. It is the worst – especially since he’s the group’s actor, the one who’s better than any of the others at keeping it all together.

He says, “Fuck.” Then he says, “Keep going.”

Boy Band 110: The risks a band takes should be small, but should feel much larger, look shinier and more significant than they are. They should be cheap and grand, like holographic cards that don’t end in ‘Zam or ‘Zard. So, Jenna takes one. She apologizes, She sits with her arms crossed until Jake finishes crying. It does not feel at all meaningful to her, is what she tells herself – but maybe Jake gets something out of her silence, a thing that in this business, you can afford to give no one.

“How about this,” she says. “I’ll try to find someone to help you with this, because I’m clearly not the best person for you to talk about personal stuff with.”

“But I want – Jenna, you’re literally the only person here who gets what it–”

“I’m not, Jake. I know it must seem like I know a lot, or can handle anything, because it’s my job to make it seem like both of those things are true, but even a producer-manager has
cracks in their armor. And another part of my job is to find someone else to fill them when I can’t.”

He closes his eyes, tilts his head back like Matt had yesterday. She wonders if it’s a gesture they picked up from each other, or one they invented unconsciously.

“Sure,” he says, and there’s the smile again, though it’s set somehow further back in his face, and doesn’t glisten enough to distract her from the worn reds around his eyes. “OK. Sorry. I know this was kind of rude of me, to feel like I could just, like, relate to you and have everything be OK. I wasn’t thinking of the good of the band, and – yeah. OK.”

With a flick of his sleeve, his face is wiped – not free from tears or puffiness, but free enough that a quick voyage to Frida will spin his skin into the illusion of perfection. She notices, as the cuff of his sleeve rolls off of him, that there is, impossibly, a zit under his eye as well. When he leaves, this time, there’s not even a bow, just a rigid nod forward and another apology. Jenna wonders if she’s transmogrified into a being too harsh. But then she thinks of her own coming out – all of the nays she’d heard, all of the acts she’d wanted to perform but was unable to. The crying, she remembers, is part of it. She wishes she had told Jake that, but he’s down the hall now, and likely even more upset at her than he’d been before. The pang from before shoots through her temples, her stomach, her chest. It is too early for remorse, she thinks, and it is eternally inappropriate for her to feel guilt. She closes all of her chip bags, spins the top from one of her medication cylinders, tosses a few more heart pills down. One is caught in her esophagus, so she shotguns her remaining pitcher of coffee until she feels it unstick. She kicks herself in the calf for forgetting, for a moment, to care about herself before the boys. It’s not anything she can afford to do, if she wants to stay powerful, if she wants to keep the whole operation in tact. Boy Band 111: The reason you hire younger performers is because they have more to give. If you
believe they’re giving it for you, then you don’t have to lose yourself in all of the hard parts. Plus, they’re like gak — you can move them in any direction, and they’ll always come back to you. She crushes a paper cup, a relic of a hallway trip earlier this morning, under her fist, point-first, and though it’s so satisfying as it splats into its own blueprint, there’s a stabbing sensation before it all goes flat, something that will leave a mark for hours.

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“Hmm,” Frank says, across from her in the private room of Wang’s, a restaurant he almost certainly does not realize flips into a queer bar after hours. On its gold wallpaper are stains in the shapes of small explosions, which he does notice, wondering if they’re an aesthetic choice. “Things are getting more urban by the minute,” he tells her.

Frank’s examination of the wallpaper is just one of a series of quality checks that old-school guys like him do in every place they scout. When Jenna explains Frank to people, she says to imagine a mind-curdling chimera of Gianni Versace and heterosexuality — a guy who likes to look at things, to step back and say that they’re magnificent while holding his thumb and pointer finger in what Frank would call a European-looking OK, but that chugs beer from wine stems, scratches his thighs when people look, makes even less of an effort to tame his facial hair. So far, Frank’s gone through the garland over the entryway — “why the fuck is it made of sticks?” — and the chopsticks, which he has decided, definitively, that he does not love.

“I just fuckin’ got back from a country that made me use these every day. Now I’ve gotta look like an idiot white guy here, too? Fuck, I swear, I’m gonna find myself at my last moments, right before the pearly gates, asking Jesus for a fork. Because you know they serve Asian food in heaven — hey, did you know MSG’s not actually that bad for you?”

“Wasn’t aware, Frank. Good to know.”
“Anyway, question,” he says. He still hasn’t sat down.

“What’s up?”

“You had one?”

“Right.”

Jenna’s lead-in on the documentary series is a take on Boy Band 112: everyone thinks they want to be friends with a celebrity, but nobody actually wants to. You occupy the space too close to a star, and it turns out that without the illusion of distance, you’re just worshiping a person, a kid who picked their nose in gym class, or your weird neighbor with the broken trampoline collecting rainwater. And nobody wants to worship their neighbor.

“Don’t look behind the curtain,” she tries on Frank, “Don’t think about how the sausage is made.”

“It’ll come pre-cooked, Jenna. Promise. Curtainless. No risk – I swear. By the moon and the stars and the sun.”

“Yeah, about that.”

Jenna sits. Control is shock factor in this business, relaxation is emphasis. And Frank is a person that has to be shocked into doing anything. He’s a rom-com construction crane operator, functions like a truck that can’t dress himself, barrelling forward into what’ll work maybe 80 percent of the time, and running over the other 20. He’s at least open about this – it’s why he brought Jenna on, why he’s hands-off with the boys. “I’m afraid of stepping on them,” he told her during that first meeting, “But I also don’t want them to fuck anything up.”

Best to rip the surgical tape all off at once. “So that report–”

“Oh, right, because we’re not making enough millions.” And then into a falsetto, jangling his fists over his ears. “Help us, Jenna-Wan Kenobi. You’re our only hope.”
Frank bows to everyone on the wait staff who enters, points out when they’re a race different than what he expected, as Jenna summarizes the report’s first third – the loss of money and the boys’ careers at the end of the rainbow. Then, she adds, “Some of the boys are thinking about coming out.”

“Huh,” says Frank. “Why? They all have it so good.” His face blooms through a whole paint swatch in a matter of seconds.

“I’d guess it’s the traditional reasons. Feeling cloistered, like the world doesn’t know the real them? It can actually be pretty traumatizing—”

“You had to do all that too, right? And you got through it? You’re fine. Look at you.”

“I’m fine. Yeah. I’m also twice their age, and—”

“But you’re fine, right? Plus, they have you to talk to about all that gay shit, right? It’s a beautiful operation. It’s almost like Ellen’s on staff, looking out, just for them.”

“I really need to teach you about a second lesbian, Frank.”

“Billie Jean King,” he says, finger-gunning one of the room’s many, red-papered chandeliers. “Rosie O’Donnell. Whatsherface from Contact.”

“Two for three.”

“Hey, I’ll take it. Anyway, what I’m saying is, all of this emotional stuff? Your territory. And if you don’t want it to be, then you can hire someone else, or ignore it altogether. And if you can’t, then I’ll just find someone new. Look around,” he says, motioning to a window tinted from the inside, where there aren’t too many people visible – just a young, straight couple pushing a stroller festooned with a 2-shaped balloon, “There are a million bodies in this city, and everybody has a talent.”
She knows that he’s trying to make a joke, the kind that would slide her just far enough over the edge to get her to say she’s on it – that this is meant to be the comfortable sort of work banter between a pair of confidants unmatched in pull. But there is, for a moment, some electric sense that pings through Jenna. It’s preservative, the reconfiguration of alliances arranged since the job, since leaving her own family, since birth. The rifling places her at the top – her insurance, her paycheck, and along with it, the guy who pays her.

“I know you care about them, and that’s a choice you’ve made. But you’re not with them. You’re with me. And we’re not even that bad! We don’t – we don’t fucking abuse them, like – I don’t need to tell you what’s going on with those poor kids over in B2K. Those kids’ll be fucked up for life. Ours? Maybe just a few years at worst. We pay our kids, and we feed our kids, and we ask them to perform for the world, and all we need is for them to pretend like they love it. Imagine – Imagine what your life would have been like if you got to do dance practice and have the whole world love you for your early twenties. I mean, fuck. You’d be set. Any of us would be. So what I’m saying is, let them be set. Let them enjoy this. Then, walk away. Leave them, but leave them with enough cash to handle all of their problems. At worst, they break even paying for a celebrity psychiatrist.”

Maybe Frank’s right. Out there, in L.A., let alone the universe, there are millions of queer people she’ll never know. She can’t be responsible for all of them, for making sure they grow up fine, turn out OK. Jenna gets paid a lot, but not that much – not enough to love in the way the boys sing about. She stands, tips her face up just slightly to be on eye-level with him.

“But tell me more about this money situation,” Frank is saying. “That’s what we care about. Who’s losing what?”
“We’re all losing a lot, if we stay in it long enough. You, me, the boys, everyone involved. If this info goes live, it happens in maybe a year or two. If it’s broadcast, we become a symbol – or the boys do, at least.”

“Well, I’ve got some bad news,” he tells her. “It’s going live times two.”

“It’s what?”

“I okayed the series with Talent Comet, and also negotiated with USC about their stuff, too. They’re on-board for a documentary.”

“Frank, that’s…”

“It’s business, is what it is,” he says, crossing his legs as he sits, absorbed in a moment of rare fluidity. “I’m not \textit{not} gonna take free money when it’s thrown at us. Jenna, you set all of this up. The gold bricks are stacked all nice in a hundred-thousand dollar pyramid – and I’m talking the GSN remake, here, new and fancy, and ripe for the taking. Plus, you said we have time, right? Then you and me – we’ll just get out when the getting’s good. We’ll leave the kids with enough. And that’ll be that. No moral hangups. No bad juju.” Frank’s arms are on the outer edge of the shimmering, hardwood table he’s flung rice all over, the blood in his face cooled down a bit, now safely into pastel.

“OK,” she says. She isn’t sure if she means it, but she needs him to think that she does. And it’s like there’s a sword through her whole gut, its sharpened edges up from a hip through her esophagus. She tells herself it’s hunger, maybe the allergies dancing around in her sinuses again. She sits back down, says she could eat a horse.

“In case I haven’t been clear,” Franks says, “this whole report thing? I actively do not give one single shit about it. The future is literally whatever. People then can deal with it then. But you and I? We’re both here, now, rolling in it. Let’s stick to the plan. Get the money.”
He tries twice to gather another small cluster of rice with the fork the wait staff’s brought out, but it sticks together no longer, splinters into small pieces.

“Fuck it,” he says, and starts tonguing his bowl. The grains populate his thick goatee, like tiny, little bullets fired by weak carbohydrate guns.

“You have a wife, Jenna. I have a daughter. I also have a wife. I didn’t phrase that right, but it wasn’t in front of company, so – anyways, what I’m saying is, money. Money, Jenna. Remember that, and we’ll be OK. It’ll all be fine.”

The couple outside of the window stops. Jenna worries she’s been caught red-handed in a crime she hadn’t known she’d been completing, until she remembers that the window’s tinted, that they’re likely scouring a menu. On both of them, shirts with the boys on it, the models from a few months back where they had an artist come in from Japan and draw them all, *Sailor Moon*-style, but shrunk down a little, chunkier. Colin has purple spirals around his head, stares out from the fabric. Liam has vertical, blue lines and pupil-less eyes, staring at Jake, who’s having, somehow, a great time karate-kicking Brett’s ice cream cone. That this throwback has appeared at all feels promising. That it’s appeared twice? Maybe, Jenna thinks, it’s a sign.

#

Jenna sets an out-of-office reply on her company email, checks it anyway on one of the set’s two clunky computers before the director begins calling for shots. On the other one is Brett, who’s usually last into makeup because he’s got the kind of bone structure that could spear someone flesher, anyone without edges. If anyone’s around when he enters Frida’s polishing trailer, she spins him back around to them, and says, “Done.” He knew on the first, lense-less take to wobble into a sheepish smile, sling one arm behind his head in a way that appeared casual. He’s the truest professional they have, hasn’t yet met the mark he can’t hit, does most of
the talking when they’re interviewed as a group. There’s an emotional sleekness about him – a finesse that Jenna suspects is derived from being in the spotlight for just a bit longer, from rotating through parachutes that the fame machine pulverized, from having fallback plans titled with every known letter shredded. So it’s strange to see him twitch slightly when she enters, x-out of a gray-bordered window that must have taken minutes to load, judging by the connection speed on her screen, the raspy whistles of dial-up hanging and shivering from the fuzzy, black speakers next to it.

“Hey, Jenna,” he says, like a switch has been flipped, suddenly cool again.

She knows not to ask – even guys well into their late twenties will turn teenager on you if you pry. An old assignment of boy band legend – a project called Twinkle* – never took off because its band members were all thirteen-year-olds journaling in spiral notebooks, which one of their moms took, read, and – in discovering a triangle of crushes – pulled her kid from the band. Nearly everyone involved in a band’s got some kind of hidden truth. Jenna’s seen how the boys stop talking when Frank appears, when his eyes seep wide in slow realization. They resume only when he’s gone, after he’s made one of his three jokes – that he’s leaving them with the good cop, so they can go back to having fun.

“You doing OK, Brett?”

“Always,” he sing-songs, a regular Bobby Briggs. “Life’s a dream.”

There’s an intricacy to the type of interrogation she’d need to do here, but before she can unsheathe her mental tweezers, start attempting an Operation without an alarm, Seonghun walks in, tailed by Frida, Matt, and Colin, who’ve summoned enough paper noisemakers to ruin any uncaffeinated producer-manager’s morning. Brett pulls another out from one of the many pockets in his leather jacket. As it emerges, the room is tinged with a slight smell of processed
animal flesh. Colin whips a can of Axe out from his own pocket, douses the place, and it’s worse.

“He did it!” Frida yells, jumping onto Seonghun’s back, whipping her noisemaker around like a flaccid lasso. “Our baby boy’s a citizen!”

“There’s cake in the production trailer,” Seonghun says, blushing.

“You couldn’t have waited a day?” Brett asks, mugging like he does after every joke, which is why he couldn’t be the funny one. “Today’s, like, a hundred percent dancing.” He moves closer to Seonghun, gives him the type of Ouroboros arm-linking hug that straight men give each other, but then dips his forehead into his neck. Then, he looks back at Jenna, and says, cycling rapidly through blinks, “That’s what I was trying to check for – just so you know.”

“Of course,” she says. She hovers next to them, until Colin says he’s going to lick one pathway of frosting off the side of the cake.

“Now this, I have to see,” Brett says, clapping his hands like he’s washing them. “You all coming?”

“We’ll be there in a sec,” Seonghun says. “Don’t finish licking without me.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” says Brett, his flirt mode now fully-loaded. “Hold him down, Frida!” As blase as he’s able, he scampers away with the rest of them.

Seonghun, still blushing, pokes a thumb into his left eyebrow. He’s still blushing.

“Hey, uh, I just wanted to thank you for all of this,” he says.

Jenna, half-conscious, does a wordless, Wile E. Coyote, “Who, me?”

“Yeah. I mean, when I was with the Backstreet Boys – and don’t get me wrong, I loved everybody there – but it was almost exclusively straight people. Like, I’d left Korea, where I didn’t feel safe being out, and then I came to this place that was basically a bunch of straights
performing all the stuff I thought I’d come here to do as a gay man – singing and dancing, and–
OK, so this sounds a little stupid now that I’m saying it out loud, but it just feels like you’ve
done a really good job of setting up a community of really talented queer people,” and he’s
wiping his eyes. Jenna wonders if she’s living in Groundhog Day, with a new person on staff
crying to her every day. “After all the stuff I went through back in Korea, I never thought being
involved with a boy band would help me learn more about who I am, and I’m, uh, really grateful
for the opportunity.”

Jenna’s mouth hangs open for maybe two seconds two long before she massages her face
back into what’s meant to appear appreciative.

“Uh, yeah,” she tells him, moving creakily to shake his hand.

“Is it OK if we hug?” he asks her. “If not, it’s totally fine, and I understand. It just – this
feels like a coalescent moment. Like, I know the finer details of citizenship are probably one of
the few things that escape the Jenna Muldoon radar, but ever since 9/11–” and suddenly it’s like
he’s being tested again “–Which I recognize as a great national tragedy, and do not in any way
mention it to compare my own experiences to those of the people who lost their lives on that
tragic day – anyway, making it from the green ca
rd to here has been a journey. I didn’t want to,
like, burden anyone with it, so I tried not to talk about it too much, but just – you and all the
people you’ve gathered here, you all helped me a ton, even if you didn’t realize it. So, thanks.”

She nods, and they are together like magnets, Jenna’s arms reflexively around his waist,
somehow both thinner and more muscular than she’d expected. She cannot tell if it’s that she’s
only interacted with him mid-choreo, but he, strangely, smells nice, like artificial pine. When he
lets go of her, it feels perfectly-timed. Do dancers, she wonders, practice hugs next to
stopwatches?
“Anyway, I just – I really appreciate you, and value you as a friend. I’ll let you get back to whatever. I’ll save you some cake if you want, too.” And he’s off as well, chiller than even Brett on his good days.

That Jenna’s never really been great with affection is something she’s wanted to improve – it’s on the to-do list for when she finishes all of the immediate things. Unless she knows someone well – Tish, or… well, really just Tish – she quivers a bit if anyone touches her on more than just the shoulder. She’s had doctors check it out, but unlike with the hypertension, they couldn’t find anything. Tish has suggested some of the therapists she’s befriended through advising the Queer Students Organization, spoken specifically about trauma in ways that Jenna wishes she could handwave into vagary. But as she leaned into Seonghun, the shakes didn’t emerge. She wonders if she trusts him, if he’s given her something, if she’s committed the cardinal sin of music production and befriended a lackey. She worries about all of the budget cuts she’ll have to talk herself out of, chugs an extra heart pill, and sits down in front of the computer at which Brett had been clicking away. Part of her is excited to tell Tish about this. It is all very confusing.

For a moment that feels rarer than your average solar eclipse, Jenna Muldoon, technician, feels overwhelmed – feels at all, in an explicit, biting way. She knows that the feeling of being lanced through happens whenever she works toward stifling Jake, or any of the boys. That the headache appears at similar moments, when she tells Frank she’ll handle them, when she, like a Gamecube miniboss, plays with enough age-projection software to make all of the boys look ugly, concocts a fake music video plan to make them afraid of the future, has a backup plan drawn up that she intends to use as the real one. She closes her eyes, tries to gnash them together even harder than the limit of her lids, wishes she had a reset button.
What she’s heard works: deep breaths, rest, meditation. She only has time for one, so she inhales and starts counting, gets up to three before she has to breathe it all out. A few more breaths in, she’s up to four, and then, surprising herself, five. She opens her eyes, feels herself coming back online, swills the half-empty paper container of cold coffee someone else has left next to the monitor. Her brain bends, snaps back into place like a LEGO.

RE: Seonghun: she didn’t even know she was helping, but still was. Even if she has impacted him in the wonderful, powerful ways he seemed to indicate, she did so without trying. For other people – other executives – there are methods to their madnesses; but for Jenna, it’s just methods, amassing like ice crystals, like fractals, beautiful patterns she doesn’t have to double-check once they’re out in the universe. And if anything, Seonghun is proof that they work. Here’s a guy who’s followed every itinerary, shown up to every meeting – albeit sometimes in sweatpants – put in all of the work she requested of him, and – through it all – gotten what he wanted. Even if he hadn’t ever stated it to her, she found a way to help. This isn’t any time to reconsider, or to panic, she realizes – it’s a time to motor ahead.

#

Colin hasn’t even wiped the frosting off of his face by the time he’s caught up with her, which Jenna feels like must’ve only taken a few, athletic steps. His high school team made it to the national gridiron quarterfinals during his senior year, and he’d been recruited to Iowa as a fledgling wide receiver, the final part of that fact the only thing the other boys care about. Turned out that the pulverizes had more than just hawkeyes, and Colin, who’d been taking ballet and yoga for flexibility, ended up ostracized, despite being one of the fastest vehicles in the state that ran on mostly corn and milk. A grieving collegiate coach, the team drowning in the rankings, the whole team donned tutus and appeared outside his dorm room to ask him to come back. A
triumph, a bump in the numbers, a great photo of Colin, freshman year, lifted by his teammates – now in skirtless but still very tight uniforms – as he scores the two-point conversion that takes them to an even record. Come February, Colin a month and a half into his first music class, he told the coach – who’d pulled all of his hair out before the meeting, bitten off every nail – that the culture wasn’t for him, that his delicate heart couldn’t handle being called Sunshine by everyone in the state. So, the sun set. A few years later, lessons and makeup and the influence of one Jenna Muldoon, and a different star’s appeared in its place.

“Hey, Jenna,” Colin says, licking his lips, “Do you have a minute?”

“Why, do you need me to find you a napkin?”

“No,” he says, “Ha ha,” his polite little laugh. “It’s no big deal. I’ll have to wash it off in Frida’s trailer, anyway. But I wanted to ask you about something, if that’s OK?”

“That’s always OK, Colin. But if it’s something big, I might need to handle it after the shoot.”

“I think it’s something kind of,” he says, a thoughtful, reflexive hand up to his lips, “medium.”

“Medium?”

“I’ll just come out and say it?”

“That’d be helpful, yeah.” They’re walking from where the less-essential vehicles have been parked down the hill – personal cars, costume vans, the caterers of the day. There’s this thing about the outskirts of L.A. where it gets hilly, full of forests. Every so often, when you look out across the hills, you’ll see one of the few, remaining mountain homes, wooden and crumbling now that the old gold rush has ended, and it turns out the new one’s – pause, here, to gasp like they do in *Soylent Green* – people! Blink and you’ll miss them. Blink and they’ll make
like the structures behind the Hollywood sign, flattened and replaced with glass boxes. It’s a hike. The frosting’s started to melt off of Colin’s face, dripping down like, well—

“I’ll listen as long as you get rid of that, uh, white stuff before the other guys go in on you,” Jenna says, a wrinkled handkerchief uncoiling from her pocket.

“Oh, that’s nothing new,” he says, though it’s muffled now. “But thank you! Anyway, my question is about my persona, if that’s OK?”

“Colin, just assume it’s OK to ask me anything.”

“I just wanted to make sure. Do you want this cloth back, or should I—?”

“Put it in the laundry bin once we’re done. It’ll get back to me. Was that the question? ‘Cuz that was easy.”

“Well no,” he says, the fabric away from his face, bound to his sticky hands, “Actually, it’s about me? So, I was thinking,” he goes, which is a signal of bad news. First Jake, now him? Why can’t they look at Seonghun and see how things move when Jenna touches them? How the moon goes from paper to cosmic wonder? “I was thinking,” he says again, “That maybe I could be something different?”

“OK,” Jenna says, but does not mean. “Why?”

“Well, it’s complicated,” he says.

“We’re a few feet away from the set, Colin. Give me what the netizens tell me is the tl;dr.”

“It’s just that everyone else gets to be someone else on stage? And I don’t?”

“Yeah,” she says, the two of them stopping to lean against what has to be a staged wagon wheel, “And that’s a good thing, right? You have it easy. You don’t even need to act.”
“That’s true. But that means I don’t get to have any secrets. Everyone just knows me. With the other guys, they have all of these plans to fall back on if they forget who they are? But I just feel like – what happens if that happens to me? Do I just lose myself?”

To be fair to him, that’s almost exactly what some of the songs promise their fans he’ll do – like in the upcoming “Classified,” which’ll appear on their next album unless anything wonky happens, in which Colin, taking the chorus, sings:

Gonna keep you a secret, baby
Gonna give you my heart
Gonna give you it all, girl
This is only the start (ha, yeah)

‘Cuz I’m lost here without you, baby
Nowhere to give my heart
Nowhere to place my everything
Take it all, every part (of me)

“All due respect, Colin, you usually do look kind of lost,” Jenna says, pivoting to, “Not in the dance numbers – just in the face,” when his eyes start watering. She doesn’t need another cryer, another reminder that the people she’s tried to turn into very sexy wireframes are actually people. “But that’s good! You’ve got this dreamy quality about you! Girls love that!”

Part of why Colin’s fans do like him is because of this quality – he’s still The Sensitive One at the end of the tour, the one with a mind cloudy enough to be interpreted in more
directions than even the city’s cobweb of a freeway. He could be thinking about anything, even – and especially – you. Jenna wonders, briefly, if she’s taken advantage of that in her calculations – if she’s misinterpreted his worry as fogginess. But when she asks, “Tell me what you’re thinking about right now, in five seconds or less,” and he goes, “Oh, I don’t know, Orion? also, Matt sang his audition song last night for us?” she knows he’s adequately pegged.

“Also this stuff,” he says, not very convincingly, “This stuff that we’re talking about right now.”

“How about this, then?” Jenna asks, heaving forward, nearly losing her balance as the wheel slides out from underneath them. (Colin is, of course, as upright as he’d be if the wheel still were – probably if it were turning, even.) “You come up with a list of qualities you want the world to know about you. You come up with a list of secrets you want to keep. And then in a few days, you and me go over the whole thing, readjust as necessary? That work?”

He’s running toward Frida’s makeup trailer before he answers, golden retriever style, grinning and missing a step, remaining mid-sprint. “Yeah,” he says, “That sounds great! Thanks, Jenna!” He nearly collides with Seonghun, who sidesteps him, and looks at Jenna to ask if Colin’s trippin’.

“Everything’s great!” Jenna yells back. “Now come on! We’ve got a movie to make!”

#

The music video, for what was meant to be a B-side from their next album, but which Jenna shoved up through the cartoon bank pipeline into promotion to the full track listing because the song’s called, “Love You Through The Ages,” tanks once the boys see each other in the makeup of old men, all looking like Keebler elves after a series of heavy benders. Matt’s eyes pour out like they’ve acquired a gash. He cries so much Frida has to re-apply his makeup.
“Oh, god,” Brett says to Liam, “I was afraid of this.” Colin and Jake sit across from a mirror and stare blankly. Seonghun calls them for a number he’s prepared involving walkers and canes, excited for permission to get a little goofy, but when he calls for all of the Statlers and Waldorfs in the band to join him in front of the rickety, wooden house they’ve scouted for the shoot, none of the boys want to be on camera. Jenna calls an emergency design team meeting, saves the day with a screen-plotted secondary idea she swears she drew up this morning. The boys can look the same, young and beautiful and not in violation of any of the rules – they’ll just have backgrounds of date spots in different eras, neons for the futures, the top of Runyon for the present. Frank straight-up applauds.

“I.C.E. makes the ice,” he cheers, in Matt’s robe over a puffy jacket, because he’s cold in the 60-degree morning. “Man, if you were all more like Jenna, we’d be international. Beyond Canada, even. Beyond the U.K. I’m talkin’ world tours, baby. This kind of work’s what we should aspire to.”

When Jenna enters the makeup trailer, the boys peeling off the faces they never want to see again, Matt asking Frida detailed questions about skincare, making lists of boutique names with a pen on his forearm that she’ll eventually have to cover up, they all flank her – even Jake, his mouth a flat, pleasant line.

“You really saved us,” Brett says, knowing that any humility he manufactures will come off as more powerful, given his persona. “We almost had to be ugly. In public.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Jenna tells them, delivering packets of the new shoot’s details she’d sacrificed her order at the new Starbucks to print off before arriving on-location. “ Couldn’t have all of these pretty faces being anything but that. Wash them off, and we’ll do shots of you running from whatever kind of monster we can scrounge up for the haunted house.”
“Just use those,” Colin says, pointing to the pile of face-bits each of them has removed.

“For real,” says Liam, who keeps touching his cheekbones, as if to ensure that they’re still there, weren’t wiped away with the fleshy overstock.

“Not sure flesh monster’s the way to go,” Jenna says, “But we’ll work on it. We can green screen something in. It’s Hollywood, right?”

And in that moment it is, especially – the sun finally slotted into position, the diagonal light of just before noon severing the cloud cover into easy compartments. In the subtle reflection of the trailer window, Jenna sees all the photogenic faces look up around her, knowing that they’ve made it to a place in this city where so many don’t, pierced through the stagnant, nebulous continuum of auditions into a place where before them, down the mountain, they can see the city struck with rays. If it’s the City of Angels – some of them think, at least – then it’s got to have people looking down over it in the way they do now. Colin throws an arm around Brett’s and Jake’s shoulders, and says, “Soak it up, bros.”

“Yeah,” Jake says. “If we’ve learned anything today, it’s that we won’t be pretty forever.”

In the reflection, Jenna sees Matt stare down even further, into the floor, like he doesn’t want to look at himself. She remembers a TEDx talk Tish gave in Bovard when USC hosted a conference of people like her, adherents to the church of numbers and information, about the shame of queerness as a metaphor in mathematical studies, the shunning of aberration, the inability of people like her – like most of the boys – to look at themselves after that shame occurs. Tish had tied the whole thing into something poetic about data manipulation, but to Jenna, that wasn’t the point.
She knows she’ll have to check in with Matt – with Jake again, too, probably – but she’s done the good work today, lined up the boy-shaped dominoes, and flicked them over at a precise moment, to carry them for weeks. A pat flicks her back, and she shudders – it’s Colin asking if they can go to lunch, since Brett and Liam had already left. The pair doesn’t show at the catering vans, despite the spectrum of cured meats that always appear when Frank’s on-set. So, here is the fame machine conspiring against her again. And here’s Jenna, scurrying up and down trails until she sees the two of them walking back, Liam paces ahead of Brett. And then here’s Liam, amscraying when he sees her, fucking all the way off to his trailer, tearing past her with a shoulder check that could rival Lidström’s.

“So, I should probably tell you,” Brett says, with a face that looks like he could star in a cigarette ad, as long as he was distant from the smoke, didn’t allow it to deign his golden lungs with a tinge, “I just cut things off with Liam.”

“Seriously? You couldn’t wait until we were done with the video?”

“I have a hookup tonight,” Brett says, shrugging. “That’s what I was actually doing on the computer this morning. Look, I might be a slut, but I’m not a cheater.”

There is a certainty to him that Jenna envies – a belief in his own mechanics so different from the crises, the consistent realignments of her own. Here is a kid who, unlike the rest of them, knows what he is doing, could be calculating as much as she is, but veils it all with an apathy that convinces anyone who sees him that it’s natural. She thinks of Frank, gesticulating enough to power a small generator, of her foot rattling beneath her desk as she’s on phone calls, clenching a stress ball because squeezing any of the foam boys would be too symbolic, too much like she was picking a least favorite. She wonders if Brett has moments like she has, where she’s pulled enough strings, knit them all together into a system that works, that produces guys like
him and Seonghun, but that even when it feels like the whole contraption is tightly-coiled, stuff like this new breakup spills through – how does he prevent them, or at least obscure them?

“I’ll see you out there,” Brett says. With a hand through his bangs, parsing them into a more horizontally disheveled place before the shoot starts, he nods to her, and ambles off, himself a weapon he cannot toss, perfect and chill.

So then here’s Jenna, examining the sky for the satellite swinging a Candid Camera at her. Here’s Jenna, who cannot, for the life of her, catch a break beyond the boys’ big one, which seems like it’ll only ever fracture into more work for her, more faults to pave across.

#

It takes an hour to extract Liam from his trailer. He locks the door and all of the windows, and bolts every latch – even the frosted bathroom window firefighters not two hundred miles north of them know to snap open in emergency situations. Jenna knocks on the door, tells him she’ll be outside for as long as it takes for him to be ready to talk, feeds Liam a verbal highlight real: the time he got Tommy on Cartoon Cartoons to spurt milk out of his nose at Liam calling his cohost a real zinger, the second-place finish on Celebrity Jeopardy! last year, where he’d outshone Paul Schaeffer and Bob Dole to even get to the final, the one tour stop in Monterrey where the team brought his grandmother on stage – with a translator for the audience – and let him break, cry-laugh when she told the crowd she thought she was coming to watch Los Rayandos instead of her son’s boy, but that she thought he’d done OK, overall – enough to make her proud. Jenna’s quiet in large spaces, scribbling notes on one of her printed spreadsheets. At one point, she goes dark to listen to Jake complain to Seonghun, a trail below, about how Colin doesn’t wash the backs of his legs, how he tries to look out for him but how he’ll get crushed when the contracts are up, when women realize he doesn’t wipe the scum off the part of his body
that touches toilet seats. She feels a combination of nostalgia and betrayal – this was the type of small jibe that Jake had brought to her up until a few days ago. She wishes once again that she wasn’t sentimental – she feels like a Criss Angel assistant with all of the jabbing pains through her, wonders why the morning’s affirmation hasn’t yet cured it. When she straightens her back against the trailer door, Liam opens it, and she falls backwards, striking the back of her head on its cushioned floor.

Without rising, knowing she’s got at least two chins out as she stares up at him, she says, “How’s it going?”

“My life is over,” he tells her. “Do you want to come in?”

He offers her a thin hand. The two of them twist around feebly until she’s up. Liam closes and locks the door behind her, sighing definitively beyond the quota set by their acting coach – and not in the quiet way the coach has explained.

“You want to talk,” Jenna asks, “Or just sit here, pouting?”

“Honestly I’m fine with either. Nothing matters.”

“How can I help? What do you want?”

“Oh, nothing. Just to have never been a fool. To have never been enough of an idiot to trust the best-looking guy in the band. Of course he wouldn’t want me. I don’t know what I was thinking.”

“For what it’s worth, Liam, the data we’ve collected says that you’re all even in the looks department.”

He stares at her, blinks blankly, then leans, his face guarded by his hoodie, into the trailer’s interior. Jenna has never seen him so ready to burn things down. It’s like he’s teleported to Frida’s and back, had his periorbitals darkened, the faucet on his nose run for a while. If he
weren’t actually crying, it would be perfect for the video. Part of why Liam’s the designated bad boy is that his face is naturally a bit more gaunt, his eyes larger, deep and sad. Even when he hasn’t been sobbing, his mouth’s always a little bit open, which Jenna hadn’t realized contributed to his moody look until after she’d heard him mouth-inhaling. His spine is mildly scoliotic – though the P.T. on staff is working on it – so it always looks like he’s protecting something, guarding it for only those of his fans who will love him the most. Boy Band 113: each member of the band has to have something – some small mystery – that satisfies the nerds online, since once everything’s been learned about a celebrity, they’ve got nothing left to give. You look at groups at the ends of their ropes, 98 Degrees or *NSYNC, and you can see that they tried too quickly to tell their fans everything about each member, fizzled out when it turned out that they were all just guys in their mid-twenties, scrambled to laden them with new interests, carousels of staged girlfriends, jet skis, gelled hair spiked clown red.

So, Jenna wonders, what can she reveal about Liam – both to himself and to the fans, in a way that keeps him consistent with what they know? They know he’s into videogames, after an unstaged photo of the band got sold to the Inquirer of him, jumping, his knees over his hands, as he thrashed Matt within some arena of the Game Boy Advance. They know he wears glasses off-stage, which is endearing, but not helpful enough to expand upon. She ruminates on his perceived edginess, of all the goths in striped, fingerless gloves that line up for his autograph at meet n’ greets. And then it hits her – the trauma.

If he can experience it in front of people, then he can seem a bit more aggressive or unhinged, in a safe, controlled way. All of which could make him sexier. Look at Eminem in 8 Mile. He’s not even an attractive guy, but the green-tinted warehouse light falls on him at just the right angle, and suddenly – ohp, there goes gravity – everyone has eyes for him, their hearts
softening to the consistency of Mom’s Spaghetti. One dial further on the persona gear, and his skinny ass is suddenly a sex symbol, his ribs poking out from underneath his tank. Plus, the Oscar doesn’t hurt.

“What if you were the monster?” Jenna asks him.

“What?”

“For the video. We get you a goofy suit, like an angry Sesame Street character. We’d have to lean into the, y’know, cartoony side, but the whole plot could be about you trying to mess with the other guys, steal all of their loves for yourself. We put Matt in the first scene, on a date with a woman who dares him to enter the house. You pull a lever and she falls down a trap door, into your arms. She’s enamored. This happens repeatedly. Two shots happen for the dance – one of you with the guys, but one where we get women to take all of their places. Because it’s like – they learn to love you, despite the, uh, mischief you do. And once they do, they live forever, like the love you’re supposed to have. Final shot is of them loving you, baking you cakes and leaning over as the other guys shake the bars of the cage you’ve kept them in. So it’s like you win.”

“Does it have to be goofy? What if we did fake blood?”

“Goofy’s the only way we get away with it.”

His mouth flips into a dollar sign. Jenna knows he’s trying not to smile.

“Can I think about it?”

“Yeah, sure thing. But let me know soon, because we’ll have to have Frida do new palettes, and Seonghun choreo a new number, and everything. But – I don’t know, doesn’t this seem like a good happy medium? Lets you get all the over-acting out, lets you get the aggression out, too.”
She’s sure she has him when a small meteor of snot splats out of his nose, escaping with a short, tidy laugh.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” she says.

“Tell everyone it took me a while to decide.”

“Of course. You want me to stick around for a little bit, or are you good?”

“I’m good,” he says. “Just don’t tell anybody.”

#

“Huh,” Tish is saying, having popped up to the mountain with take-out after her 1PM advisee cancelled. She looks over the sketches Jenna has done for the video’s new plan, animatics that will become real people, and circles cleavages on the maid costumes Jenna’s drawn for each of the lovers. It is the first time she’s visited Jenna at work, since helping coordinate the online classes the boys take through Marshall, two years ago. “You’re dressing them all like that?”

“The idea’s that they fall for Liam so hard they start working for him. It’s like *Beauty and the Beast.*”

“That seems,” Tish says, yanking the chip she’d brought mid-air, close to Jenna’s mouth, out of range of her chompers “Enormously shitty. Is that what straight women want? To serve?”

Jenna inhales, opens a new bag of chips, polishes off the final end of her second bahn mi. “It’s in the bank of requests we get. Teen girls asking for internships, to cook for them, to – y’know, there’s a lot of weird foot requests, too, and we have a folder for those, too, but I’ve never really read through them.”

“I can’t tell if you’re joking.”

“We really do have a feet folder.”
“No, I mean about this whole concept. You’re setting up a video in which one boy – who, in real life, has zero interest in sexualizing women – creates a harem, by stealing them from a number of other boys – many of which also have that same non-interest, so that he can use them, functionally, as slaves?”

“I was thinking more like Mrs. Potts, like they’re there because they want to–”

“Mrs. Potts was cursed,” Tish says, “She was literally transformed into serveware, forced to steep in the Beast’s castle with all of the other servants.”

“Thank you, Tish School of the Arts.”

Tish hasn’t yet eaten, has emerged from her pleasant, calculating cloud, stares at Jenna like laser beams could come out of her eyes.

“I’m serious, Jenna. This is really bad.”

“It’s the third video plan. We have to shoot this one. I’ve drawn up so many already, and we’ve had to go through so many ideas to even get here, and–”

“Think about what you’re doing for a minute. Just one. Step back and think about what you’re teaching these boys about what it’s OK to do, and how what they learn, and eventually perform and project – how that impacts your audience.”

“I don’t know, Tish. I’m not a psychologist. And I’ll remind you that neither are you. But I know how to sell a song. That’s it.”

“Do you not – was there no experience you had growing up, where men commented on your body, or where you had relatives who asked if you were ever going to learn how to cook, or–”

Tish’s hands unfurl, hover next to each of her ears, like she’s Jean Grey, about to mindblast Jenna until she gets the point. It’s not their first argument, but it’s the rare situation
where Tish seems uncomposed, non-academic, like she may stand, or overwrite recursion for a hardwire, or not back down when it’s time for her to head back to teach.

So much of Jenna wants to hear Tish out, but Jenna’s had to switch things on the fly so many times today, is still reeling from multiple episodes of emotional accountability that she really should learn how to beam away, that she remains, technically at work. There’s no easy switch for her to flick, to turn her into Jenna-at-home, a Jenna able to both vent and listen. So, she stares at Tish, and Tish stares back, both of her palms in the air, shrugging so vehemently toward the heavens, the satellites, the data the modems whip back and forth, that her shoulders climb over her ears. She watches Tish undo her headband, twirl it around her fist, squeeze it, and spin it back around her head. She watches Tish take a deep breath, flip back into academic mode, suddenly composed again. They are both always at work.

“I can’t tell you how to do your job,” Tish says, “But it seems like everything you tell me about what you’re doing seems constantly worse. Every new step you take seems lower, like you’re taking advantage of more and more people. Maybe that’s the goal. I don’t know, and I likely do not want to know. But look at yourself, Jenna. Look at where you are, how much power you have.”

Before them, the city just beyond High Noon, so distant and contained by its enclosure of highways that Jenna can gawk without feeling like the city will snap back at her like one of those bracelets, recoil into the same sort of disapproval that Tish gives her for staring. She remembers back when she’d first moved to L.A., the MBA a gateway to being away from the cold weather, the cold family, the people that would have been afraid of her before they loved her. She remembers the band post-Crash, when she’d had the same sorts of ideals as Tish – floating, distant promises that she’d take the music industry over from the inside, make it safer for its
queers. And while she knows Tish would look at her, tell her about all she’s decided to reneg on, Jenna Muldoon chooses not to think about it all. She hasn’t lost or lost sight of anything, is what she wants to tell Tish – she’s just found new methods, new machines to get there – to make things safe for all of them, she’s got to make them safe for herself first. What she says is, afraid of their argument becoming audible from the nearby set, “I get it what you’re saying.”

“That’s all I’m saying, Jenna. Also, if you keep pulling shit like this video, I’m gonna stop helping, stop abiding it altogether. I’m not like one of these girls in your videos. I’m not like one of these kids you keep under contract. I can go if I want to.”

It may be that they’re up in the mountains, places ridged by canyons and cracks in the rock, trees and old hunting lodges – all vertices and chambers for sound to bounce off of. But Jenna hears Tish’s claims hang there, ricocheting across her ear drums. She looks up at Tish, hurt, knowing that she’s making her eyes big, trying to summon the water up through her ducts, but finding nothing there – after all of the work mechanics, all of the chip grease, there’s nothing in her but oil.

“I said what I said. I’ll see you at the house.”

Though there are shorter, more efficient trails, Tish walks down from their spot the way they came, tripping over long drops in verticality. Jenna watches her all the way down to her car, and Tish never turns to her, never donates a reassuring smirk to confirm that she’s, yes, upset, but isn’t considering any sort of serious maneuver. Jenna takes deep breaths again, counts to 3, 4, and doesn’t make it to 5, chewing instead into the bitter medicine of another heart pill, cross-legged between two empty bottles of soda. A spotlight flashes in her direction from the set the team’s built out of the old house. They’re sending her the bat signal, which means it’s time to get back to work.
The rest of the video is filmed without a hitch over the next few days, not counting her home life, where all Tish gives her is the odd raised eyebrow and glass of ice water. But when Jenna walks by the computer room at HQ – five clunking PCs on soft, cornflower-hued folding tables collared by much more expensive chairs – as the boys are supposed to be checking in for their USC-sponsored online classes, there are only four of them present. They’ve flipped the device Jake usually uses to face the rest of them, from which they play pirated episodes of *Futurama* saved to a compact disc.

“He’s on campus today,” Brett tells her, his hand playing the keyboard like it’s a piano, flipbooking through slideshows on how to manage riches, or acting theory. “Not sure what for, though.” Frank, who waves her over in the hallway, tries the word “gazongas” in a joke and seems hurt when it doesn’t land, doesn’t know anything either. So then she’s frantic, plowing through traffic on the Santa Monica Highway even in the off-hour, weaving off of exits and entering back onto the raised road to save time, pass a few extra SUVs turling along.

She parks in the lot next to Tish’s building, hoping she’s put her own systems in place, registering spouse license plates in some Trojan database. It’s been a while since she’s run for any reason, but despite her legs still drained from scooting up and down the canyon and stairs of the house from the shoot, she’s barrelling across the campus, pushing through red buildings and red sweaters, some of the best and brightest of the state, the kids whose parents paid for other brains to take the SAT, the hardworking crowd of scholarship students, all clocks ready to have their faces smashed by reality once they leave and realize they won’t compete against any of the legacies, that anyone in Shakey Town has a parent or producer holding its moving parts in place with cash, artificial light, and expensive leather straps. She knocks down a guy who’s at least
twice her age, hears a portion of him shatter, sees a well-meaning kid try to help him up, call an ambulance.

Soon, forging muddy footprints across sprinkler-laden quads, she’s at Marshall, where the manager of online courses – who’s essentially a kid himself, visor sunglasses pushed back on his head, shirt unironed, just a few buttons away from popping open. His chest hair is both thin and out, a risk she doesn’t so much admire as appreciate the boldness of. She wonders if he has an agent.

“Jacob Bennett,” he says, all vocal fry. “Well, we have three of those.” She tries his birthday, his height and hair color, his student ID, all of which she has memorized. When the manager waves her around to his side of the monitor, and points to the mugging face – Jake in his old haircut, the sides still long and flouncy, his bangs nearly over his eyes – asking, “This the one?” Jenna’s already got a post-it and pen out, recording the building and room number listed beneath him. It’s not until she’s in front of the Seeley G. Mudd building that she recognizes it from the back of the photos Tish had taken once she made Assistant Professor. She storms through it, flapping her gums in quick bursts at anyone who can direct her to the proper place on the fifth floor, until she’s face to face with her wife, who looks up from a book heavier than Jenna’s lungs feel, so full of tiny text it might burst, and turns to the celebrity sitting across from her.

“I’m gonna guess this one’s for you,” Tish says.

“Hey, Jenna,” says Jake. “Thanks for setting this up.” Tish gives her a double eyebrow, a fucking look.

“Yeah,” Jenna pants, “Remind me what I okayed, again?”
“As you’ll remember, Jake switched into an elective about queer history to learn about more, since he already had credits in acting from the Cal States before he enrolled in the online program here. As we spoke about,” Tish is saying, her face twisting into signals so obvious that Jake would catch them if he weren’t so excited, giving Jenna the TV smile they’d all gone to lessons for, “This was an elective that Jake was interested in, and one in which I was happy to fill in as professor until a faculty member in the appropriate department is able to step in. At which point he and I will take this class together.”

“Right,” Jenna says. “I’ll, uh, wait outside, then. I want to make sure he gets home OK. Or, back to the studio at least.”

“The second home.” His face could sell not just used cars, but new ones, expensive ones, some of those hundred-thousand-dollar solar motors NASA’s building.

“I’ll make sure he’s safe,” Tish says. “That he learns a lot.”

Outside, Jenna presses her back to the wall, slides down onto her ass in as put-together of a heap as she can. She wishes she had someone with whom she could roll her eyes. She can feel her face coiling like a Warhead, turning so sour she’ll have to release it in some way. On the other wall is a portrait of the man she knocked over outside. She hears an ambulance, which reminds her to chomp down another heart pill. The whistling, wheezing alarm is somehow soothing. She counts breaths, and only gets up to three until she falls asleep.

What feels like years – Jenna doesn’t have dreams so much as perform unconscious analyses, internal debates about song quality and perceived longevity; the most recent involved “What Would You Do?” and the verdict was that everything aside from the melody and production doesn’t deserve a passing grade – but is actually twenty minutes later, Jake is

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standing over her, nudging her with a new binder in crimson and gold, its bookstore sticker still untouched, not yet curling across its faux leather.

“Are you OK?” he asks.

“Wyclef seems like the only real talent, if I’m being honest.”

“The heck?”

“Huh? Oh, sorry. My mistake. How was class?”

“I just,” he says, and exhales, lapses into the dopey, theater kid smile he’s spent his whole professional career trying not to exhibit. “I’m just feeling really good. Thanks. Can you – I mean, I just thanked Professor Ayler, but I know you’ll probably see her later tonight, so if you could just thank her again for me, I’d–”

He is a kid, a dork, so excited he’s shaking a little, a quiver on two and four.

“I feel amazing, Jenna. Thanks for setting his up. Do you want to ride home with the driver, or – hey, look at that. I keep calling HQ home. Weird. Anyway, want to ride back, or did you take your own car here?”

She waves him off like she’s an ice sculpture, gives him a flaccid, “Good work,” and a worse, “Good for you,” until he’s off, still glowing in the way that stars do, radiant, communicable. When he’s out of earshot, she’s back into Tish’s office, twirling an expensive pen patterned with Trojan insignia, smug like the cool best friend on every show on the Disney Channel.

“Go ahead,” Tish says.

“Go ahead with what?”

“If you’re gonna yell, then yell.”

“I’m not gonna yell.”
“OK. I gave him a reading list.”

“You know I can’t approve this.”

“I know.”

“People could figure out what’s in his binder, could take pictures of his notes if he leaves them open somewhere. One of the kids here—”

“I get it, Jenna. Your kids aren’t allowed to be queer.”

“That’s— that’s not what—”

“Publically, anyway. So, this is me giving him something. Reaching out to this kid who’s drowning.”

“OK.”

“The books are getting sent to your office.”

“OK,” Jenna says, now so absorbed in this feeling of being played, of betrayal that she feels bad about feeling bad about, that she knows she’s reverting back into the personality she’d had entering business school, the flat monotone, the kind that kind people like Tish had to speak to in ones and zeroes to eek any kind of emotion out of.

“You’re red,” Tish says.

“I’m good.”

“You’re still worried about that report?”

“I am.”

“How do you think these boys feel? You’re worried about maybe losing your job, losing your insurance – I can put you on mine, and I know it won’t be the same, but we can make changes, get you on a healthier diet, figure it out. You have a person to fall back on, but you keep doing stuff to push me away. It’s almost like you don’t want to get helped, because you realize
that if you do, you’ll have to realize that all you’re doing with these boys is giving them a cardboard persona you’ve made for them. They’re all three-dimensional people trying to fit into two-dimensional objects.”

“They love it,” Jenna says. “They love being loved.”

“Are you sure? Because Jake spent most of our session in tears, telling me how grateful he was and how cared-about he finally felt, how he knew he could trust you to set things up.”

“I never told him to—”

“You’re an adult, Jenna. He’s a kid.”

Jenna wishes Tish would yell, would react with anything beyond the scholarly, authoritative drone she’s steadied herself back into since their argument on the mountain. She knows that when someone screams or flings their arms around or tries to fight with anything beyond a list of bullet points, that they’re unsure – that they detect a wrongness. But still sitting, behind a pair of glasses Jenna never remembers seeing her in, hands folded over her legs, Tish is alert, prepared, more capable than Jenna has ever witnessed her. She is on her home field, surrounded by books and posters, isosceles banners of each of the schools she’s attended, pictures of her family and Jenna and old kickball teams in rainbow headbands. Behind her is a recent award from the Student Lavender Council, for faculty support. She is surprised at how visible, how out Tish is at work – Jenna thought she had been doing fine at this, coming out gradually when asked, eking out space; but Tish has somehow set things up to make herself known immediately, to anyone who walks into her office.

“If you want me to stop helping, I will,” Tish says. “Say the word.”

“Stop,” Jenna tells her. It’s automatic. She hardly feels herself saying it. Then, “You’re not helping.”
“All right,” Tish says. “Then I think you should get back to work.”

Outside, Jenna hears a camera flash, hears Jake asking to check the reel to see how his hair looks, says, “Form a line,” and asks if he can borrow someone’s hoodie. Jenna wants to apologize to Tish, to go back to the honeymoon phase, to be taught again by her, to feel loved in a way that isn’t procedural. She wants to tell her that she knows Tish is morally right, that she feels awful manipulating the kids, running them back and forth across the Hollywood cheese grater, but that she’s doing it, she feels, for the both of them, to keep their whole power couple operation running. Tish glares Jenna down as she leaves. Jenna realizes she’s bowed like Matt, in the middle of dance practice days ago, formal and unsure. She does not look up to see Tish shake her head, instead running after Jake, telling his driver to turn around, and telling him to ride in her front seat. She wants to break the news to him immediately, crush him before his excitement for learning from Tish has time to bloom, but he falls asleep across Route 10, still clutching his binder, smiling in his sleep. When Jenna gets home, beneath clouded-over constellations, afraid of opening the door to a boiling house, she finds it empty, a note from Tish that she’s spending the night at her sister’s, her suitcases gone.

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The day before both documentary film crews show up, Frank has the bright idea to give the boys a bunch of what he calls, “gay shit,” maybe some wigs and acrylic nails, enough clear liquor to murder a blue whale – all to get it out of their systems. Though Jenna wishes she could pull Frank aside, tell him that you can’t get the gay out, that that’s not how sexuality works, she sees him unloading a case of his beloved Zima, and realizes it’s as much of a celebration for him as it is for the boys. Since Tish is still frontloading each of their conversations with, “Are you
“If only you knew,” he says when she tells him this.

The boys arrive, and though Frank is dadding it up, two bottles in, anticipating they’ll see the barely-transformed room as a carnival, their faces drop. When he explains what the party’s for, their chins are on the ground. When they keep them there, Frank says, “At least there’s booze,” and starts pouring.

It’s enough. After an awkward conversation rotation – “Hey, Frank,” Brett says, when the rest of the boys give him a can-you-handle-this look, “You’re here,” – Seonghun enters to giddy applause, shocked shrieks. They ask what his drag name is, and when he says, “Song Ji-Hyun,” nobody gets it, but they’re all far enough from the corner where Frank’s keeled over to not hear him make a bad joke about rice queens. Soon, Jake releases the karaoke mikes, nearly shatters a
window when he taps them together. Frida shows up with pizza and empanadas, the exquisite, greasy trash they’re not allowed to eat when they’re filming. Jenna tells them they’ll get tomorrow morning off, so to fire away. Seonghun’s wig is, in a flash, on Colin. The other boys groan, though it’s the same sort of begrudging, appreciative noise they make when fans bring them baked goods they’re not allowed to eat – they could be poisonous, they could contain allergens or razor blades or printouts of the multi-dimensional graphics their extra-nerdy followers have computationally produced.

“Can’t believe you’re making us work on our night off,” Matt says, taking one of the microphones, adjusting its dials like he’s done it before. “Gimme that wig. Does anyone have any cowboy boots?” It’s like lightning strikes when the song starts, like Shania Twain’s possessed him, found a body she can can-can kick from, yeehaw, and give perfectly-timed, over-the-shoulder hair flips when the chorus ends, and Matt yells, “Man, I feel like a Woman.” Colin attempts Eve’s “Let Me Blow Ya Mind,” and, well, does his best. A few drinks later, he’s before them, grumbling through the Ken to Jake’s Barbie. Jenna’s never seen either of them ham it up more. When Jake sings, “I’m a blonde bimbo girl, in a fantasy world,” the room fucking erupts. At the end of the song, he tries a split, gets maybe two thirds of the way down before teetering back down onto his ass. This is, Jenna realizes, the first time in a while that they’re all doing what they’re supposed to, but in a natural way – Jake keeps the party moving, transcends into a jester when things get slow, Brett nudges them all with elbows, until he starts lying down on the ground, at which point he moves to nudging them with his ankles. They’re all, actually, authentically, having fun. Frank rises when he sees the the two of them, plus Seonghun, reenact “Bootylicious,” step-for-step.

“Fuck,” he says, “It’s almost like they’ve practiced.”
Once some of the liquor bottles have fallen onto the ground, Liam steps into the small, carpeted arena they’ve designated as a stage, kneels unsteadily next to the song-choice panel, until the pleasant, poppy synths of every good Kylie Minogue emerge from its speakers. Jenna feels lifted. She finds herself going, “wooo–” feebly at first, but then at increasing volume. She realizes she’s doing something she hasn’t done in years – having a good time as the boys do. It seems like Frank’s plan, intent aside, is actually going well – until Liam’s voice starts breaking halfway through the second chorus of “Can’t Get You Out of My Head,” as he stares at Brett, who examines the carpet, the walls, the room’s flailing reflection in its windows. The rest of the song sounds like it’s ground through machinery. Like the professional Liam is, he finishes, but he stumbles out of the room right afterward. Jenna looks at Jake, mouths, “my office,” and he nods, following his bandmate out.

It’s 9:30. Frank nods to them all individually, says, “Guess I’ll hit the dusty trail, too, got the wife and kid to get home to,” and pulls himself up, streaking fingerprints on the glass window. Before he leaves, he places both palms on Seonghun, slurs, “You’re one pretty lady – a real fox – and if you ever want to make it in this business, here’s my card,” and then leaves without handing him one. From the stage, Brett rolls his eyes, says he’s getting his role as the heartthrob taken by his choreographer, and thrashes into Meredith Brooks’ best song, still floating across the FM airwaves six years after it came out. Most of the other boys know the chorus, but Frida mumbles every word along with him like she’s been possessed by every spirit in Portland, until he tosses her the other microphone, and – no longer singing – the pair of them, through synchronized screams, release the chorus – “I’m a sinner! I’m a saint! I do not feel ashamed!”
Jenna says, still tepidly by normal standards, “Woooo.” The room swirls around her, and it’s like she’s back in what the eighties were supposed to be, technicolor, sweaty even in the snow, not the start of a President-overseen genocide of people like her, like the friends she’d had in college who’d been the first ones she’d come out to, like the boys like these ones who’d get her made up and brought to clubs, her hair higher only than her spirits, her legs collecting frostbite as they bopped between the three bars in Ann Arbor. She remembers the lights – ratty, sputtering, but still doing their jobs – like the ones they’ve hung tonight, the glitter in the snow, how if you found the proper contour between the blue lights, you could tell who’d had what on their mouths. How even though the buildings had blacked-out windows, once you found the right basement and knew the right bouncer, you were finally dancing with your own people, a prismatic, pasted, pastel group flinging themselves at each other, searching for anything to take back to campus to remember the night by. She remembers the boys, the girls, their arms linked together, yelling, “plow,” as they dove into snowbanks, reenacting the childhoods they’d spent attempting to be loved by people who wouldn’t love them. How they’d drop paper umbrellas into their tequila sunrises, tell each other they were all gonna make it to L.A., get rich and famous and break shit open for each other. How their parents would appear every few months, only to cry and curse and lament the payment of tuition on kids who went to college to die, but never to mourn. How hers, at requisite holidays, clapped her shoulders and sides, said every day how grateful they were that she was not like all of the people who’d finally let her be, and how she would nod, glance past them as though far away, her friends had popped back up from their graves, and if she looked hard enough, she’d see them, dancing away somewhere safe. It is nice to remember this for a moment, with the knowledge that she’s blasted so thoroughly she’ll likely bury it back down again, not have to face it for another long while.
The way she now – her body, despite her best efforts, back in the present-day – weeps is different from the boys. They’re all spotlit lightning rods, but she’s rarely been one to want attention. It’s never worked out when she’s had it. Brett, still panting from his yell session with Frida, is the first to notice her face scrunching and breaking. He is horrified, his face wide like a stock soldier in an action movie – attractive, sympathetic, terrified at whatever is about to drop on him. The fear doesn’t suit him – he reads as not boyish, but childish, too young, too expectant.

“Nothing’s wrong,” she tells him, patting him on the head with a corpse-like hand. “I’m just happy. All of you are so very alive.”

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After placating from the crowd and tequila, Jenna’s rendition of Ms. Spears’ “Lucky” is one she hopes no one with ears remembers. It’s bad, and it’s fun, and it’s enough to bring her back down into the cognizance that things aren’t A-OK, they’re sort of a B- or C-, and that she should probably go check on the boys who haven’t returned. In her office, Jake rubs the back of Liam’s head, the two of them seated against a wall.

“You really need a couch,” he says.

“I’m just gonna stick to the floor,” Jenna says, and flops over. Her phone erupts from her desk – “it’s been going all night,” Liam says, “Like my heartbreak, it is eternal” – and she rolls most of the way over to it, elbows her way up to the top of her desk – knocking all of the foam boys over, along with a mug of dull pens from old jobs, a lightning ball lamp she’s never turned on, some salt rocks, two calculators, and half of the report, which cascades like a deflating concertina to her floor – and mutters, “s’hello?” into the mouthpiece.
“Jenna? This is Stacey Thompson, from the CS team at Viterbi? I’m terribly sorry for the late call, but I’ve been trying to reach you all day, and–”

“Staceyyyy!” Jenna yells, perhaps too excited. And then, like one of those frogs, “Wasssupppp?”

“Right. Uh, I’m doing well? Thank you so much for taking my call. Is this an OK time?”

“Always,” Jenna says, “S’always a good time for the Moneyboys.”

“OK, excellent. That’s actually why I’m calling.”

“The Calling,” Jenna says, not really covering the phone as she turns to the boys and sputters through the first few lines of a chorus: “If I could, then I would–”

“Great video,” whispers Jake. “Good names in it.”

“Phone,” mouths Liam, pointing to the receiver banging then, off the side of the desk, flirting with the floor.

“Apologies,” Jenna says, “Some interference. Not shhhhhure what’s going on.” She winks at the boys, who both give her thumbs-ups.” She nods, her mouth all the way open, globbing around the air as though still trying to find its shape.

“Um, yes. Of course. Anyway, the reason I’m calling is because there’s been a slight change of plans. See, we’ve struck a potential deal with Nightline to have them assume narrative control of the documentary, and then show it on their program. We think it would be an excellent opportunity for our program, and our students, as well as for your organization, because it would reach a national audience.”

“Uh-huh,” Jenna hiccups.

“So, we’d just need your permission to–”

“Of course! Stace-ayyyy. You need me to sign something, or what?”
“Well, we can just have you give verbal permission, if we record it, and that’ll be legally binding according to our lawyers, and it’ll be faster as well, so–”

“Do it up,” says Jenna, tracing circles with her toes toward the ceiling.

The boys cannot get enough of this, and she loves it, that she’s there to entertain them, that they’re trying so devoutly not to laugh, that each of their hands sweeps past each of their mouths in alternating configurations. She rolls back along the floor, wrapping herself in the phone cord, snickering as Stacey Thompson talks her through her name, and company, and all of the necessary permissions. When she hangs up, and rolls a teensy bit further, yanks the phone cord out from its wall, both of the boys high five her.

“I’m gonna call drivers,” she says, but only sort of, most of her letters still snapped together. Liam left a jacket in the conference room, and braves gazes for it, vows to leave dramatically, to not just make a scene but his scene, which sounds so impossibly poetic to Jenna and Jake that they end up applauding.

“Oh,” Jenna says, now looking only at Jake, trying to meet his eyes despite her gaze bobbling, getting knocked down but pulled back up again like Chumbawamba’s taught the world. “I forgot. I wanted to apologize.”

He’s brighter than those sputtering lights now, all of those spindly, throbbing, ready-to-break capsules about to overwork themselves to a burst. If this were a movie, he’d float, his strings somehow tied back to Jenna, grinding a pulley to raise him, removed for the final cut.

“The, uh, arrangement with you and Tish – with Professhor– with my wife, who is very angry with me. I bet she really wanted to be the one to tell you this, but we can’t do it anymore.”

And then, it’s like the strings are cut, like Jenna’s hiding a knife. He crumples, still has at least one toe dripped in the night’s camp, places a weak wrist over his forehead, says, “Lord, I’m
having a conniption,” in a southern accent Jenna notes she’ll have to have the acting coach polish.

“I’m,” she slurs, “Serious. Very, very serious. There was, uh, a thing with the credits, and also a global thing.”

“A global thing?”

“Yeah, yeah. Anyway, I am really, really, really, really, ridiculously sorry,” she tries, knowing that that Stiller movie is one of his favorites, that he and the other boys do mock runways with scooters before their shows.

“You’re not,” he says.

“Yeahhh, you’re right. It works out better for me if you don’t do it, so, yeahhhh.”

And maybe she would notice his look as the kind she’d used to give her parents, her teachers, the bouncers that kicked she and her friends out of hetero bars back in Michigan, the hope that with enough scrutinazation, he could rearrange the entire system, put the right pieces through filters and show her how wrong she’s made him feel, if Jenna wasn’t so sure she was doing the right thing, that protecting her is a gateway to protecting them, that enough power means she’ll be able to one day, maybe, possibly, split it. But instead, she grins, her head tilted, her face long and jagged, as though spotlit from the ground. She picks the lamp that’s fallen over beneath them. She grinds one of his shoulders with an uncomfortable, eerie thumb, as far away from him as she’s able to be.

“Get some rest,” says Jenna, somewhere on Mars. “We start filming tomorrow!”
“I could be an accident but I’m still tryin’
And that’s more than I can say for him”

– Fall Out Boy, “Grand Theft Autumn/Where Is Your Boy”

It is 1:20AM on September 1, 2003, and all across West Hollywood, the queers are fighting. A Micky’s bouncer whips the thin bodies of inebriated twinks onto the street, walking back inside the bar before he can see the scrapes the sidewalk gives them, the punctures. “Showgirls isn’t even until tomorrow,” says a manager when he walks back inside. “Why are these faggots getting so rowdy?” A girl in glittering beads puts her acrylics through the collar of a suit in a limo. Up late, a closeted member of the LAPD logs onto Adam4Adam and begins tagging torsos that he recognizes. He is one of the few who, in a glitch of the new UI, experience the four minutes when users can see who read their messages, but did not reply. He makes a blackmail list, compiles names of executives, responds to each stilt with “sigh...bitch.” Outside Fubar, some idiot tourist from Indiana cracks a joke about the King riots, is descended upon by a crew of friends who met at Tae Bo, decided to wear matching Power Rangers t-shirts when they
went out tonight. Behind a taqueria, a man gives a hand job to his best friend’s closeted brother. A block over, a woman pisses on a palm tree in the middle of a divider, as her friends yell, from across the lit-up highway, to come back, that it’s dangerous, that it’s disgusting. She gives them the finger in myriad, detailed ways: a trumpet, a crank, passing her second hand before her taunting one quickly like a magic trick. Miss Coco Peru, inexplicably still out, just wants to go to bed.

This date and time would be otherwise unremarkable, but down in the lowest basement of Lick – a bar so piled-high with funds from a suddenly-wealthy cadre of young dot-cum investors, half a pack deep, mid-debate on the merits of outing with a weaselly little guy from Miami calling himself Perez, a bartender named Roelanda “Boots” Butsuyahi pencils in her entry to the Coming Out pool for ‘04, a contest the bar will not live long enough to turn into tradition. Though her timing is not perfect – some of the names she lists will wait for their moments – Boots forges a list that will be passed from bar to bar, a quickly-worn index card, of forty-plus celebrities that will come out in the next decade or so. She nails, from whichever psychic whirlpool she’s temporarily entered, Raven and Dougie Houser and the silver fox that used to host The Mole. Most of her names are half-names, descriptions, or roles. When Jack from Will & Grace comes out seven years later, her list, now framed on the wall of the manager’s office in The Abbey, will emerge, checked off once again, and cheered by the post-close staff, who get another round of free drinks whenever Bootsradomus is right. But tonight, she snaps the tip from her pencil, halfway through writing, “The one from Moneyboys w-” until it’s stabbed through by the scampering graphite.

“Shit,” she says, gumming the broken nub of the pencil against her card, “I had way more.”
“Sure,” says the guy across from her, “And I bet you’ve got a bridge to sell me too.”

And maybe, thinks Boots, there’s something in the air tonight. Before she throws the punch, she can feel it coming, the sensation of her hand in this man’s face, the small pop as he bites into his cheek. When she does, it feels how she thought it would. She clocks out, says she’s taking a sick day, leaves her card on the side of the bar, and will only come back once a week on a slow night until she doesn’t anymore, heads back to college, and eventually to an oil rig in the North Sea. She will never know how many of her predictions come true, will dodge all celebrity news – and any news at all that doesn’t filter in via the BBC – until she returns, years later, to a country she no longer recognizes – that she, like all of the fighters who quit, unconsciously, helped to build.

Jenna Muldoon, still in 2003, though, has other predictions with which to contend, no one with which to fight across the intimate, personal network of queer Los Angeles, since she and Tish have caught the Trading Spaces fever, deciding that if they’re going to repair themselves, a singular unit, then they may as well improve the unit in which they live. Each room’s got a theme, which lets Tish simulate new color combinations and Jenna to develop new personas. The living room’s like an archipelago now, green patches painted in clusters across the new, blue floor. The bedroom’s got a strobe light, its theme being Donna Summer, but vague, since Tish has sliced it with mirror-silvers, matte smoke, and purple streaks. They’re still not talking much, but the redesigns give them something to talk about. Thing is, they miss each other. On purpose. Tish is away in the early mornings, a marathon-training class at the Village center. Meanwhile, Jenna’s at work late nightly. Any time she’s at the house, then, Jenna’s alone with her neck and back pain until she orders from somewhere down the street, speaks to the delivery kid for half a second before she sits on her computer to browse, reading about the boys, their floundering
rivals, the membrane of rumors between the two. More of her wants to take advantage of her sleeplessness than attempt to cure it – if she hears more from the nerds her boys service, if she gets the information faster, then she’ll be more able to react when their swords fall, sharp even if they’re LARPing. She has found chat rooms where dedicated roleplayers perform as the boys – and since Jake’s not talking to her, the textual back-and-forth of the IRCs feels, at first, soothing. There is another person across all the electrical webbing who’s at least in Jake’s outline, who rehashes jokes he’s practiced with her, told on talk show appearances and his one skit on All That. It is nice until, out of nowhere, it’s sexy, and the computational Jake tries to alley-oop from what’s supposed to be a joke into a question like, “What’s long, thick, and filled with my cum?” Though she does not allow herself to feel it at work – that would be unprofessional – she misses him, his cattiness, his big-eyed friendship, even the unrequired singing. The chat box does all of this, in a very diluted way, until it doesn’t. It is a sugar pill, but laced – enough for her to feel like she hasn’t torn him into living his public presence, that everything she does is to save he and the other boys, that she’s still set on doing the best, right thing. She’s fallen asleep in the chat box’s blue glow twice.

The Nightline/USC team were in and out within a couple of days, so sleek and leathered that Jenna couldn’t tell who were the professional camera people and who were the Tisch students who’d bought their dregs at the thrift store. They wheeled cameras around like weapons, Trojan horses, there largely for stock footage, they said – plus a few targeted shots. The questions they asked Jenna were so pointed they felt polished, ground down. She remembers few of the answers she gave, too absorbed into the web the night before. For the first time in a while, Jenna is scared of a media opp – she doesn’t fully remember what she agreed to, and the episode airs tonight. Part of her wonders – she’s told this to Frank, who’s handwaved it away – if the
report and its introduction to the public will be like a kaleidoscopic chamber built from the 
backdrop in “Say You’ll Be There,” reflecting off of each other into self-fulfillment. He said, in 
another instance of Jenna unsure of whether or not he was joking, “You’d better hope not.” And 
maybe it worked, because she’s put together a set of backup plans and sent them to him, afraid of 
what he’d pull out of his stagnant brain if she didn’t. She’s had nightmarish visions of the boys 
in military getups and trucker hats, zoom-lensed makeout scenes with chunkily-lipped hotties, 
maybe a few girls from Heff’s mansion. Boy Band 114: masculinity is a line – theirs should be 
accessible, especially to their online fans. Menacing, even mildly aggressive, sure, but never 
overtly sexual, and never dad-like. There’s a reason they’re not called Man Bands – their 
performers are supposed to be in that goopy space between the kid’s menu and adulthood, 
because it makes their fans feel like they’re there as well – that they’re pubescent, lovesick in the 
right direction, the young direction, the one that will keep them eternal.

The local plan is popcorn, Frank and the boys in her office. It’s to create a diversion – so 
no matter what the boys see on Nightline tonight, no matter how desperately they flail their 
results in front of the viewing populace, no matter how many relatives watch – the boys’ll at 
least have something to chew on. She knows Colin’s mom tapes everything he’s in. That Liam’s 
grandma fast forwards through the same media, only to see the parts with him. She had thought 
about sending them new devices somehow more interesting than their offspring, cycled through 
the Sears in Baldwin Hills to search for a dishwasher or circular saw with bells, whistles, and 
blue lights that they’d be so moved to install they’d miss the program. But then she couldn’t 
order electromagnets in time, or at a size large enough to disrupt their televisions, their VHS 
recorders. So it’s dazzle camouflage up close and a rescue mission on a national scale. She’s 
done worse.
They’ve had a few potential powder kegs like this one: a challenge from O-Town after not one but two of the boys’ songs knocked “All or Nothing” out of Billboard’s Top 3 (it fizzled, but only after a payment from Frank meant Letterman found other beefs to t-spin into his Top 10), an ill-conceived early gig opening for Ricky Martin that made them all look waifish by comparison (the gym regimen helped with this, as did a temporary acting coach that made them hold their hands above their heads, wrists in place), a tabloid that allegedly showed Liam materializing from a car full of jockstrapped go-go boys (it had been him, but his shoulders had been covered in every appearance, which meant a quick tattoo fixed everything). But Jenna knew how each of them would strike in advance – she had scouted the information instead of been given it, had negotiated editing approval with every necessary source. This Nightline thing could blindside any of them in any way, throw them smack-dab next to a bizarro P. Diddy to star in the new season of Breaking the Band.

“Eye contact,” Brett says, when he’s the first to enter, and Jenna’s head is too far into her monitor to see him. “Don’t you always tell me that?” The video of “Love Through the Ages,” golden in part due to that eye contact, has reached its 500,000th view. She posted it on their site, and since its release, she’s also found solace in watching its digits tick upward, as though each hit is another second of time she’ll get to react, to repair things. Brett brushes a dipping water bird out of the way to sit his hard, little ass on her desk’s corner.

“Hello?” he says. “Earth to Jenna? Girl.” There’s still nothing until he yells, “Oh my god, Matt’s on fire!” She nearly knocks her keyboard into her trash can.

“There she is.”

“Not funny.”

“Still out in space, huh? Need any help setting up?”
“Are you offering? Because they’re gonna bring in a couch, but we can cut the movers’ fees if—”

“Oh, ew. I’m not offering that. I did squats today.”

Without her approval, he’s cut his hair on its sides, kept it long on top. Between that and all the leather, his early declining of a surgery that would have whittled down his canines just so, he looks like he could be the one vampire that’s figured out the sun. She’s begun an RSS feed for casting notices for each of the boys. She adds “hot vampire,” to Brett’s list, “maybe hot werewolf,” but is pretty sure nothing will come of either – Ann Rice isn’t casting anyone else if Cruise and Pitt are on the line, and the idea that another movie of young, sexy monsters is— Hey, anything goes in Tinseltown, but Jenna’s not getting her hopes up. It’s finally the third quarter of ‘03 – by now, people are more comfortable if their monsters are just people.

“You gotta get a window for this place,” Brett says, flicking at the popcorn maker Jenna’s rented from Party City on her own dime. “Y’know I used to work one of these things at Fuddruckers?” And then he’s priming the heater, filling the necessary chambers with oil and kernels. They’re all good kids, she thinks, even when they fly in trying to be annoying, even when they cut off all speech. She tries to remember this as she plans her escape, that she should leave each of them with something, not just take all of the money for herself and run, which is looking more and more like the plan.

“Have you talked to Liam at all?”

“Nope.” Could he be any more chill about this? “I keep trying to, and he keeps running. I haven’t had this many doors slammed in my face since before I had abs. It’s the worst.”

“I’m sure it doesn’t feel great.”
“I don’t do upside-down sit ups like that goatee’d dude in the cinematic masterpiece *Deuce Bigalow* for nothing, Jenna. It’s so I can be adored. Also, this thing’s working now. How much butter you want?”

Colin arrives next, sweeps Brett up in his arms. He’s gotten, Jenna notices, even meatier, his forearms like uncooked holiday hams, plastered with eerie, red hair that she’ll have to do something about. Brett pretends to hate it, squirms around kicking until Colin lets him go, and receives a kiss on the forehead for his troubles.

“I’m just really happy to be here with you guys,” Colin says.

“We know,” Brett tells him. “You literally say that every time.”

“It’s true!” Colin says. “It’s always a blast with my gay bros!”

“You’re from Michigan, right?” Brett asks Jenna. “Is everyone in the Midwest this dopey, or–?”

“They call it ‘charming’ where I’m from,” Jenna says. “Don’t get a case of the fantods about it.”

“Thank God,” Brett says, when Matt enters. “Help me, Matteo, I am surrounded by snow-people.”

“Oh no,” he says, “The Whites are fighting,” and catches his eyes in the artificial light. “You really need windows in here, Jenna.”

Before she can tell him they’d have to dismantle the building for them, Jake and Liam arrive grandly, on a large L-section carried by a pair of movers who, thankfully, seem to be in on the joke. Neither of them speaks when they enter, though they both wave like Queen Elizabeth, their palms straight, their forearms poised angularly. They both bow when the movers set them down, motion toward them to beg the others in the room for applause. It comes, though Matt’s
the only one who’s enthusiastic about it – doubly so when the movers return with an enormous flatscreen, drill it efficiently into the wall.

“Shit,” says Frank, from the doorway. “I really need to get into upper management.”

The way the boys laugh at Frank’s joke is timed, harmonized like a chorus. Jenna can picture Brett coralling them, teaching them how to laugh as a group, to never let the air go empty without one of them filling it, do-re-me-fa-ha-ha-ha.

When Jenna preps the boys for what they’re about to see – that vaguely, the people who’d been filming are jealous, are unfun academics, just want to drop a screw in their collective tuna – and hands out freshly-printed pressers, the boys all sort of slump. Frank’s mouth flatlines, gets eaten by the goatee that’s already struck most of the rest of his face, that’s yelling beard but not ever achieving it.

“We need to be prepared for anything,” Jenna tells them. “This may not be fun.”

Floors down from them, across the grid, permutations of nerds who’ve heard via message board, mailing list, or good ol’ fashioned word of mouth, settle into their dens, their living rooms, their basements irradiated by space heaters. Televisions glisten and whirr across gas stations, top corners of kitchen lines, on rooftops next to lawn-chairs kids have left to sacrifice to the rain so their parents won’t know they can climb out of their windows and meet each other to talk about the Moneyboys after the adults have gone to bed. The clock strikes 11:35PM, just after a commercial for OxyClean helmed by the incomparable William Mays tears across the screen.

“Like blueberries!” the boys chant in unison, “Coffee! Even red wine!”

“At least no one will be able to hear the first parts,” Liam yells, blushing just the slightest bit when Brett laughs. Jenna sees Jake elbow Liam, and they both move to look, necks rigid, at
the television. She notes that she'll have to investigate this new duo, just as Ted Koppel and all of his jowls inhale, exhale, and begin.

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TRANSCRIPT FOR: Jennifer Muldoon, Dirigible Enterprises

STATION: KABC-TV

PROGRAM: NIGHTLINE

CITY: LA

DATE: 9/1/2003, 11:35PM

SUBJECT: Record for Dirigible Enterprises. Full text below.

[Title Card.]

ANNOUNCER: September 1, 2003.

TED KOPPEL (ANCHOR): Boy bands. Like them or not, they have become a part of our nation’s history. Our American sound – our American image – has been shaped by them for decades.

ROGER EBERT (CRITIC) [Reading from his own review]: The Monkees themselves are a harmless lot, little pop-idol puppies who can’t sing, can’t dance, can’t talk, don’t need to.

TED KOPPEL: Even the greatest critics of our times see boy bands as harmless at worst. But new research may indicate a more insidious side to boy bands – and the impact they have on their fans.

[A video of the Moneyboys in concert, tossing microphones and lifting each other into assisted backflips. The clip’s color goes monochrome. Doom chimes play. Jagged jump cut to NATALIE CONWAY, a white woman with a coif of blonde hair so high that even a
nonbeliever, under the proper cocktail of solids, might believe it has been touched by Jesus. She cries.]

CONWAY (MOTHER OF AFFECTED SON): Suddenly, I’m lookin’ through his room – as is the prerogative of any good mother – and I’m checkin’ for weed, or other drugs, and then I pull open one of his drawers, and– And–

[Blur to blue.]

KOPPEL: Tonight: Boy Bands. Harmless fun, or the beating heart of an insidious fame machine?

ANNOUNCER: This is ABC NEWS NIGHTLINE. Reporting from Washington, Ted Koppel.

[KOPPEL at his desk. His voice is flat, professional. He blinks, perhaps, more frequently than normal, as though he wishes to indicate, intentionally – perhaps to his spouse, his friends, or other loved ones – that he is slightly uncomfortable. It is there for a flicker, but it is definitely there, that slight twitch before he begins speaking.]

KOPPEL: It is difficult to trace the origin of boy bands. In the United States, many of my generation remember The Monkees. Before them, The Beatles on Ed Sullivan, young women enthralled by them, screaming the names of every member. Later generations will remember musical acts such as New Edition, New Kids on the Block, and Menudo. Historically, they have been seen as pure entertainment. They are rarely political, are as much about appearance as they are about vocals, and most common knowledge points to them as innocent – good, clean fun. But new research out of The University of Southern California points to an impact that boy bands – whether unintentional or otherwise – may have on American youth and culture. Arts and Culture Reporter ANNETTE HERD recently spoke with some academics from this university, and their
findings about this seemingly harmless cultural phenomenon may surprise even their most devoted fan.

[HERD standing in front of the Moneyboys’ dance practice. Her reflection, and that of her camera crew, is visible in the mirror behind her, though it is blurred a bit, for effect. Audible are the strikes of sneaker against ground, the occasional contact between floor and unexpected limb. Rarely, during a jump or a spin, one of the boy’s shirts will lift up, just slightly, revealing a band of flesh not typically seen by reporters. Screenshots of these moments appear online within minutes, and waistband analysis of what sort of underwear each boy wears initiates.]

HERD (REPORTER): The Moneyboys, behind me, are one of the most recently-successful bands of the past few years. Their rise, meteoric at its slowest, is due, according to their Lead Producer, Frank Wilson, to the connections that each boy is able to make with their fans.

[WILSON’s talking head. A brown wall. Trophies, blurred like the boys in the previous shot, glisten behind him.]

FRANK WILSON (LEAD PRODUCER): One important thing we try to do with the Moneyboys, is to make sure you know who each one of them is – so you don’t see them as a group, you see them as five very talented individuals who can come together and perform. This is important. It means that fans always have someone to relate to. They might like Jake, because he’s funny, or Colin, because he’s always got his head in the clouds.

HERD: Do you have a favorite?

WILSON [laughing, for television]: Well, I’m not allowed to pick favorites. But my daughter loves Colin, and I’ll trust her taste on that one.
HERD: Since their formation three years ago, The Moneyboys have been rapidly approaching the numbers of rival boy bands, like *NSYNC and The Backstreet Boys, the latter of which recently surpassed New Kids on the Block as the highest-grossing American boy band of all time. This commitment to each individual member reflects not just in WILSON’s approach from the top-down, but also in every element of their preparation.

[A shot of Seonghun demonstrating different poses for each boy during each hit – Brett’s hand just barely over his face, Liam looking over his shoulder, his long, striped sleeves flowing around his triceps. Cut to JENNIFER “JENNA” MULDOON, at her desk, which seems curated in the same way a member of the Moneyboys’ fan club might be, in that it is covered with memorabilia. It is a bit haphazard, despite MULDOON’s clear attempt to clean it. Dust still catches light on surfaces she’s missed.]

MULDOON (PRODUCER/MANAGER): I think part of the reason we’ve been successful is that we don’t want to treat these boys like they’re being ground into and out of this machine. Most boy bands only run until their contracts are up, and there’s a reason for that – the performers in each band are rarely treated like anything but talent. Producers forget that there are people under there. Look at what’s just happened with The Backstreet Boys.

[MULDOON, posing the boys for a photograph. Matt is positioned leaning slightly forward, back still straight, pectorals out, elbows on his thighs.]

MULDOON: This is a secret that most people in the industry know, but that not a lot of people on the outside do. If you sit like this, you look immediately more inviting.

HERD: And more attractive, too. It looks like his shoulders grew a size.

[Matt blushes. It is appropriately charming.]
HERD: This strategy of an individualization that begins with each member isn’t a new one – it’s one that boy band producers have used for decades. Each member of a boy band has a role. In The Moneyboys, for instance, Liam Correa is the bad boy. Brett Lazar, slightly older than his other bandmates, is the heartthrob. Scholars of popular music are able to trace these roles back for musical generations. Here’s SEBASTIAN SAUCEDA, from UCLA’s Alpert School of Music.

[SAUCEDA speaks from a desk (and before a series of cabinets) with boy band memorabilia: an O-Town t-shirt from their first tour, a Boyzone pendant, and, noticeably, the stress-ball statues of each of the Moneyboys, displayed front-and-center, as though he had known he’d make Jenna look messy. Revealed from the side of his computer screen is a spreadsheet of small, detailed notes. He gesticulates intensely, nearly hits HERD in the face a few times while talking.]

SAUCEDA: So, you see, you can trace back all five of these roles – the hearthrob, the bad boy, the cute-slash-nice one, the sensitive one, and the funny one – back through most boy bands – all the way back to The Monkees. Pick a category. Who do you want to see?

HERD: Hmm, let’s do the sensitive one.

SAUCEDA (UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA IN LOS ANGELES): OK, so we have Matt Salazar from The Moneyboys, of course. But then there’s also Lance Bass of *NSYNC, and more or less everyone in Plus One, but that’s more of a marketing–

[Fade to HERD walking across the Dirigible Entertainment campus.]

HERD: Regardless of which role each performer plays, every boy in a boy band is cultivated for an indiscriminate attraction. Modern boy band strategies – such as those used by WILSON and MULDOON for the Moneyboys – take this attraction a step further, and ensure
that each boy is known as an individual to their audience, releasing short clips online – home movies, or audition tapes – that make each performer seem “realer,” as though these minor secrets of their lives close distances between they and their fans.

[Clip of Jake as a kid, strung by briefly-glimmering wire in green tights, flying over whomever’d been recruited to be literally overshadowed by him and play Wendy. Clip of Brett auditioning for the Sandler film he did, snarky even in his tiny form, his eyebrows thin yet defined. Clip of Colin playing basketball with his cousins. He is nearly struck by the ball, turns at the last second to see it. Somewhere, an aunt yells, “Get your [redacted] head out of the [redacted] clouds, Colin!” It is snowing. He’s in a Bucks jersey, and his flesh is a dim purple.]

HERD: Intrinsic in this strategy is the art of customization – if a fan believes that they are more distinctly catered to – if the amount that they know about a performer is increased, and more completely in line with what they believe to be true about that person, then that fan feels like they’re learning about themselves as they learn more about that performer.

SAUCEDA: It’s why we have favorites. You might hate math, or hate to read, but our minds work in these interesting ways because we all love to learn. So if you feel like you’re learning – even if you’re not learning useful information – your brain is convinced that you are. Which makes it feel like growth. So you have fans who pick their favorites, and get this sense of growth, and that’s great.

HERD: But then.

SAUCEDA: But then that’s where it gets tricky. Because if your brain so deeply wants to learn about these performers, then it’ll start rearranging things in your own life to keep that process happening. So, you start by thinking, “I like nice guys. I like Matt.” But then you see a paparazzi photo of him buying condoms and think, “Maybe I could try sex with the right guy.
Maybe now’s the right time for me.” Even if you’re not ready. That’s maybe an extreme example, but it’s–

[HERD, walking through the Dirigible Enterprises campus again.]

HERD: But it’s what’s happening across the nation. The skill with which producers of these boy bands are able to change the cognitive processes of their audiences is growing in effectiveness. The numbers bands like the Moneyboys put up demonstrate this. STACEY THOMPSON, a professor in both sociology and Computer Science at The University of Southern California, studies this effect between directed advertising and the global consumer.

[THOMPSON, grinning, staring just off in the wrong direction, wearing contacts instead of glasses to appear more camera-ready, at her desk, in a shirt of Matt from three years ago – their first tour, down the west coast only, his cheeks not yet entirely cut.]

THOMPSON (UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA): We’re in an interesting period right now, because it’s almost like we’re having a meta-capitalism of attractive people flashed before us. Between reality shows, and increasing access of fan communities to the internet, and to celebrities themselves. They’re all fighting for our attention, but boy bands have it, because we connect with them. We have visuals, and music, and the additional bits and bobs that production teams give us. We’re allowed to fall in love with them, to believe in the kinds of hopes that they ask us to believe in.

[HERD walking across USC’s campus, stepping out of the way of an elderly professor on crutches.]

HERD: Dr. THOMPSON is in the process of publishing data that projects the future of society in relation to boy bands. She is an admitted fan of boy bands. Though she’s only
discovered them later in life, she’s been replaying the cassette tapes of yesteryear in her spare time.

THOMPSON: –Boys II Men, Westlife, obviously *NSYNC and The Backstreet Boys.

HERD: You don’t have a favorite between the two?

THOMPSON: No, see – one great thing about boy bands is that you’re allowed to like all of them. People fight over which is the best, which is their favorite. But it’s not a one-to-one response. That’s what I mean by “meta-capitalism of attractive people.” We can like whoever we want, and there’s little consequence.

[HERD, in a different area of USC, some students dodging the camera and others trying to enter the shot, holding screenplays they’ve written, headshots, marker-on-8x11 paper signs that say, “Hi re me, Spielberg!”]

HERD: Or is there? Through online contacts, I was recently lead to the family of Zachary Conway, of Chatham, Virginia. Zachary’s mother, NATALIE CONWAY, says she has specific evidence of an impact that boy bands – specifically The Moneyboys – have had on her son.

[The same woman as before: the large hair, the red eyes, the tear lines dripping onto an embroidered blouse.]

CONWAY (MOTHER OF AFFECTED SON): My son Zach, well he’s always been great at sports. Football, baseball, you name it. Basketball, even. He’s a star on all the teams, but especially the high school soccer team. He scored eighteen goals a season – a record for the county and the state. No one boy’s done that three years in a row, ever. Ever.

HERD: And he’s a fan of music, also?
CONWAY: Well, yeah. And therein is the problem. See, his daddy and me made this mistake of lettin’ him listen to secular music as long as he kept his grades up, and kept doin’ good at sports. It seemed fine for a while, but then–

[CONWAY clutches her collar, causing her microphone to pop. She sniffs a big, wide sniff, and begins crying. She reaches for a tissue. HERD places a hand on hers.]

HERD: Take your time.

CONWAY: Suddenly, I’m lookin’ through his room – as is the prerogative of any good mother – and I’m checkin’ for weed, or other drugs, and then I pull open one of his drawers, and– And–

HERD: Why don’t you show us what you found?

[CONWAY’s eyes like bullet holes in a reservoir wall, she holds faces that do not match their bodies, but only just – Brett a bit too buff, Matt with a blur between his legs the size of one of his thighs, Colin suddenly, by comparison, half a head higher than the other two.]

CONWAY: It’s all penises! Penises, penises, penises! My son, the star athlete, likes to look at penises in his spare time! This – this so-called band – these Moneyboys. I-I mean, they made him… They turned him gay!

[HERD, walking across rural Virginia. Cars honk as they drive past her. Years later, when she is interviewed about this report, she will note the number of times her team had to stop and re-shoot this segment, the number of men in sputtering vehicles who pulled over to ask what a fancy lady like her was doing walking the streets in a pantsuit. There is certainly an intrepidness to her – a romanticism, almost, about her assignment to report on small-town America. Though she had expected quaintness – and certainly received some, though the cat-]
calling and the thick accents – she is impressed by how emotionally – how just generally well the concerned citizens of Chatham, Virginia state their points.]

HERD: CONWAY’s case is only one of hundreds that have popped up across the United States in recent years, specifically in small towns like Chatham in the late nineties and early two-thousands.

[Cut to HERD, in SAUCEDA’s office.]

HERD: When does this phenomenon of customized attraction start to occur?

SAUCEDA: Well, as long as there are boy bands. But it happens on a much larger scale once access to the internet happens, because then the boys are there, viewable – even moving in videos, eventually – forever.

[Cut to CONWAY, still crying.]

HERD: Do you remember what year your house got hooked up to the internet?

CONWAY: Oh, right before Y2K. I remember all the fuss, how we duct-taped all the wires down ‘cause we thought they’d explode. Now, I wonder if we should have just let that whole contraption burn.

[Cut to HERD again, striding confidently through the blank, rushed hallways of a hospital.]

HERD: And maybe she would have, were the internet not an access point for support groups like the Society of Concerned Americans against Boy Bands, or SCABB. SCABB coordinates meetups between parents who believe their children have been turned gay as a result of listening to the music of boy bands. Their membership is in the thousands, and they have chapters throughout the United States. Though they include both parents of children afflicted by
boy bands and parents who are afraid of what could happen if their children ever listen to boy band music, their meetings are mostly therapeutic.

[An unnamed PARENT, sobbing, yelling, clocking a punching bag so hard its sand begins to spill. He heaves between each word]

PARENT: [Redacted] Ashley Parker Angel! Why’d you have to go and [redacted] take my [redacted] son away!?

[HERD, whose steps must be off the charts, strutting through Seeley G. Mudd.]

HERD: So, then, where is the line? Are the strategies used by boy bands – and the people who market them – predatory? DR. TISHANA AYLER is a Professor of Mathematics at the University of Southern California.

[DR. TISHANA “TISH” AYLER leans back before a bookshelf. On a round table in front of her sits a small scale, which MULDOON purchased for her years ago – though this goes unmentioned in the report. In the corner of the shot, a small, photograph of she and her partner – though this is never mentioned during the report – JENNA MULDOON is visible.]

AYLER (UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA): It’s certainly an interesting plus-minus case – how do you enforce the things you’re trying to, with boy bands – romance and fun and beauty – without taking advantage of the people who support you? How do you make that romance, or that fun, or that beauty safe? How do you ensure that the romance isn’t aggression, or that the fun isn’t selling a version of masculinity that’s dangerous to fans – to people?

HERD: It’s tough.

AYLER: Oh, it’s gotta be. I’m telling you, as a person who works in numbers, where things are almost always cut-and-dry, this is a case where they start looking weird. It’s
impossible for me to look at the metrics that are used for tracking fan responses, or the numbers that are used for optimizing each boy’s performance – how much vocal time each gets in any song, all correlations between appearance time and vocal time in each video, and so on – and think that there’s not something sinister behind it. At the very least, it’s got to be incredibly stressful for the performers. You have to know – or you have to have the people around you trying to tell you – that you’re creating a way of thinking for sometimes millions of impressionable fans.

[HERD, back on the Dirigible campus. Behind her, the Moneyboys line up at craft services. Liam flings a hot dog at Matt. It bounces off of him, onto the ground. He picks it up, tries to toss it into a trash can, misses, tries a few more times. Though blurred, this is still visible. It is a gorgeous, sun-saturated, Los Angeles day.]

HERD: So, do the producers of these musical acts know what they’re promoting? What sort of indiscriminate attraction they’re creating on such a large scale? The possible impacts of sexuality and culture that they could impact across the world?

[WILSON and MULDOON, in talking-head form, played back and forth with each other.]

WILSON: It’s just music. There’s no magic, no mysticism. Just kids singing. Trying to make people in the world feel good.

MULDOON: People can think what they want, but we’re just trying to go about this in a wholesome way. There’s enough tough stuff in the world – I mean, just look at the news.

[A shot of Seonghun teaching Brett and Liam how to drop it low. The three of them laugh, twirl back into the Destiny’s Child dance they’ve been practicing off-hours. Jake’s palms
to the sky, close to the back of Matt’s shirt. Matt removes it. Jake takes pictures, gives a thumbs-up.]

WILSON: I think part of it’s that there’s a purity about these kids. That even if they mess up, even if there’s an unintended consequence, you look at them, and you look at us, and know that the *intent* was never there to hurt anyone.

MULDOON: We’re – like I said – we’re just trying to go about this in a wholesome way.

[HERD has finally sat down, back again across from THOMPSON. Across her lap, a neon-yellow towel from the 2002 tour, which THOMPSON has ostensibly gifted her.]

THOMPSON: If there’s a silver lining – and this is what our studies show – it’s that this kind of group-attraction – this ability of a large group to all fall in love with the same people, or the same person – likely results in a society where marginalized people are able to relate to non-marginalized people, in this common, mostly-inoffensive way. Ten, twenty years from now, we may be hearing from queer people, from people who’ve felt like they’ve had to perform masculinity, and so on. We may have fans taking more of an initiative to love themselves, or care about themselves, instead of only caring about themselves in relation to their favorite boy.

[A shot of Frida testing blush on Liam’s face, lipstick on his wrist, wearing it herself, and threatening to draw it across his pouting lips.]

THOMPSON: You look at the Moneyboys – and they’re a good example of this, for the most part – but you look at them, and see that every masculine performance is – pretty translucently – a performance. In a way, they and other boy bands are queering fan culture, and allowing new voices to speak while doing so.

[HERD is back in Virginia. The shot of her walking pulls out, reveals she’s bought or found cowboy boots in a distinguished navy.]
HERD: But not everyone – in fact, about half of Americans – approve of these new voices. Especially when they emerge from unexpected places, at unexpected times.

[CONWAY holds a tray of cookies wrapped in plastic, snot-rockets as she explodes into tears again, screaming at a medical professional white-knuckling a clipboard.]

CONWAY: I just want my son back! That’s all! I’d give anything! The house! The car! My own [redacted] life, just to let him live the way God intended him to!

[A shot of SCABB members protesting outside of an FYE. They hold signs such as “Timberlake made my son gay – what is he going to do about it?” and “God Hats Boy Band [sic].” Fade to a slowed-down scene of the Moneyboys sticking the end of a number. The Wilhelm Scream. Then, the NIGHTLINE studio, in which HERD sits across from KOPPEL, solemn.]

KOPPEL: Quite the story, Ms. HERD.

HERD: It really is. The team at USC is doing incredible research. I hope it gives our audience a lot to think about.

KOPPEL: Well, I’m sure it will. Thank you for your excellent report.

HERD: Of course.

KOPPEL: And that’s our report for tonight. I’m TED KOPPEL in Washington. For all of us here at ABC News, good night.

#

There’s an episode of The Simpsons Jenna’s seen – maybe one of the Treehouses of Horror – where during the bit at the end of the intro, the TV fires off some kind of atomic microwave blast, and the whole family, everyone from Marge to Maggie, blinks back, singed, maybe even cooked. Homer’s down all four of his hairs. Jenna’s never been to war, or felt close
to any sort of radiation beyond what President Ike let leak out of Santa Susana, so those opening credits are where she goes when she looks over the boys and Frank – and probably where she’d go if she’d see herself, too.

Liam says, “Crucified.”

Brett says, “Burnt at the stake.”

Jake says, “Wow, if only we could actually make people gay – it’d really open up the dating market, right guys?” and the silence between his sad, little bursts of laughter is so vivid – so healthy and piercing – that even Frank knows the poor kid’s swung and missed. On-screen, pre-Letterman, a cue card reads, “Beef: it’s what’s for dinner – tonight,” but the only thing they’re all eating is air. It’s like they’ve all been lifted thousands of feet off the ground, their ears popping, and then dropped back down to earth. They can’t hear anything, and it wouldn’t really help if they could.

Matt says, “Does this mean people hate us now?”

Colin says, “Wait, you guys are gay?” And that he’s the boy with the first good joke makes it feel even more like they’ve all been zapped into bizarro land. Frank has, inaudibly magicked himself between the television and everyone else, his whole body haloed in its pixels. If Jenna didn’t know who he was, she’d barely be able to make out the structure of his face, beyond the small lines the screen has provided her. His eyes aren’t there. Behind him, the Ninja Turtles explain that drug dealers are dorks, not to talk to them. Kids eat Gushers and turn into fruit. Shapes of exaggerated geometries burst from a yellow-duded singer – pop goes Perfection. It’s all clear. Jenna wishes she were home, in front of her own monitor, where each crisis seems contained – vast and puzzling, but in a small box only she sees, able to be turned off.
“I need you all to go,” Frank says, his voice blank. “Jenna, you stay.” He mutes the TV, drops the remote on Jenna’s desk.

The boys’s heads – even Jake’s – slowly, painfully turn to her. And every slice of her, each miniscule, emotionally-cooked cross-section in the Jennaic diagram, wishes she could tell them she knew what was about to happen, because it would mean that she did. But instead, here she is before them, after so many years wearing authority, only to know as much as they do: about their fans, about their safety, about what Frank will do. Brett puts an arm each around Matt and Colin, looks at the door like he’s ready to jump anyone who enters it. When she turns to him, he nods silently, unblinking. She wonders how quickly she could get them all down the stairs, into her car and as far along I-10 as a full tank of gas would carry them, has visions of stopping at a station in the middle of nowhere to buy them all sunglasses, shave all of their heads.

“All due respect, boys, which isn’t a lot right now,” Frank says, “I know for certain that you all heard me just now. Get out. Go to bed. Come straight here tomorrow morning, and we’ll deal with this. Don’t speak to anyone. Don’t look at anyone. Bed and here. That’s it. Know that if you make this worse, I won’t hesitate to kick you out of the band. Things happen in Hollywood. Drug habits come out. Weird sex stuff. Don’t make me open my little black book and introduce you to any of it, capisce?”

“Go ahead, guys,” Jenna says. And it’s as though there is no universe behind them as they all walk out of the room, staring dead at the person who may be the last barrier between themselves and what Frank wants them to perform. Liam, the last to leave, puts a hand on her knee, and the rest of the boys watch their touch as though it will turn radiant, phosphoresce more impressively than the television.
“Anyway,” Frank says, and the boys are still in the doorway. Jenna’s head rings and rattles.

“Guys, you need to go,” she tells them. But then her phone begins doing its best impersonation of her brain – and it’s spot-on, a true Robin Williams, so head-piercing, so distinct in the rest of the quiet room. Matt rushes in, lifts the receiver from her desk.

“It’s your wife,” he says, offering Jenna the phone.

Frank says, “You have five minutes.” And his hands move where those of so many fans would love to – across the backs of the boys, leading them out of the office, pressing buttons on the elevators for them that the hallway’s so voiceless Jenna can hear. She hears Frank slap the elevator door twice once it moves, knows that five minutes was a generous estimate.

“Jenna? Are you there?”

“Yeah,” she says, twirling the phone’s cord around her ankle in a nervous stomp.

“It’s good to hear your voice.”

“Are you sure? Are you sure about that, Tish? Because it doesn’t seem like a person who distracts me with decorating, and then doesn’t talk to me, and then shows up on a TV show that may get me shitcanned – it doesn’t seem like a person who does all of that would want to hear my voice at all.”

“OK,” Tish says. “I’m sorry about the program. They said they wanted someone from the hard-math side of things to appear on the show after Stacey said she was taking the socio angle, and I thought I could damage control. This was something I tried to tell you about, but we never see each other anymore.”

Jenna breathes into the receiver, shuts off the TV, is lit only by the power button of her computer. “I know I made a lot of mistakes, but—”
“Jenna.”

“I’m admitting it. Frank is outside, and I need to talk to him soon. And I’m saying that I’m sorry for the mistakes that I’ve made and I hope I don’t get fired.”

“OK. OK, can we at least agree to talk today? Tomorrow? I can cancel my morning class. I just – it feels like we’re orbiting around something important, instead of actually looking at it. And the thing with the Nightline episode? I laid everything out. I spent two hours defending you. And all they used was my intro. I was so ready to show you that we could have each others’ backs, even if we disagreed, and–”

“Stop trying. We’ll talk tomorrow.”

“Stop trying? Jenna, I–”

“I’m the only person who can handle all this, Tish. You – you’re brilliant. You’re probably – no, you’re the exact, number-one smartest person I know – but when it comes to anything with the band, I need you to let me handle it. Is that clear?”

“I don’t like the way you’re talking to me,” Tish says. “Let’s save it for tomorrow.”

“Right,” Jenna says, and she knows that she is, that she’s going to have to shed another skin and forge a new version of herself-as-wife, to help hang mirrors and banners and hay, or whatever kind of concept they’re going to try next. She’ll be like a room in their house – there this whole time, reborn and odder, a version of settling that Paige Davis could uncover Tish’s eyes and have them both gasp. Of course she can be another new Jenna. She can flip out of herself like the floppy paper chains sick kids cut of the boys, five-fold or larger – infinitely-folded, even – a machine with its own engine. She says OK, and Tish says OK, and she knows neither is sure what they’re approving, but that there is at least enough trust left for them to give things another try.
“Frank,” she says, putting the phone down, and before she can finish saying his name, he leans through the doorway.

“Everything OK?”

“Are you gonna fire me or not?”

“Are we in my office, Jenna? You of all people should know procedure. That’s, like, your whole thing.”

Frank’s eyes are closed. He seems not only unconcerned about the room’s lack of light, but calmer within it, sadder, at peace. He sniffs something from his hand, snot or powder or something crystalized, wipes his sleeve across his face, offers his other to her.

“I’m good,” she says.

“Not totally true. We are pretty deep in the shitter. Did USC run the changes they made by you?”

“From what I understand, Nightline made those changes themselves. I heard there’d be a shift, but—”

“But what?”

In daylight, Jenna is not the best liar, which is why she’s built a reputation off of bluntness, of arranging thousands of delicate parts into probabilistic compartments, enough so that nearly every base is not just covered, but dusted-off, re-painted, so pristine that they look like they’ve never been stepped on at all. And the ones that aren’t have become layered in half-truths, knots of statements she could say without technically lying. This is on purpose. Anyone who looks at Jenna knows when she’s not firing from the hip. But Frank can’t look at her now.

“It wasn’t what they told me it would be. And I think the meeting they had about it happened last week, when none of us were in.”
“Those fuckers. OK. What do we do?”

“We have to really control what goes out now. We probably have to control the documentary, maybe hire someone to watch through all of the footage so that they don’t catch the boys being—”

“You know, I know,” Frank says. His hand is close to her again, his wrist slack. Against the glow of the power button, it’s the only part of him she can see clearly. “You don’t need to say it. You know I’m not the best with this, uh, personal stuff. You just have to fix it.”

“Right,” she says.

“Consider this two strikes, is what I’m saying.”

“I got you.”

“OK. So we’re clear. Plan on my desk by tomorrow.”

“Roger.”

“It’s Frank. Also, you really need a fuckin’ window in here. I can’t see shit. Think of how beautiful of a moment this could have been – you and me fixing shit again – if we had the city in front of us. Like it’s there for the taking. Symbolic. A reminder of how close we are to the finish line. We deal with this, steady the ship, and then walk away with the money.” He rises, strikes his knee on the border of her desk, sends half of its contents flying.

“Shit,” he says. “This is what I mean.”

“Right.”

When she believes she’s in the clear, has slid under the semi truck of her own termination like Dom Toretto, and finally exhales, it turns out Frank’s still in her doorway, doing what he does worst, thinking.
“Oh, one more thing,” he says, “Fire that choreographer. And the makeup artist. Anyone there was footage of them, doing – y’know – gay stuff with the kids. We need to make a statement, and that’s – I’m making the call here. That’s how we start this one. We need those kids to know that we’re not fucking around.”

Jenna’s forehead slides down to her desk, lands craggy on a few of her keys, sticks to them. She feels herself cut into by the things that were meant to protect and unlock things for her, jingles as she rises once again.

“OK, Frank,” she says.

“I’m sleeping here tonight.”

“What?”

“I’m sleeping in my office tonight. You’re not the only one with trouble at home. We’re – we’re the same in more ways than you probably realize, Jenna. Is all I’m saying. Have a good night.”

The keys fall from Jenna’s forehead, onto her lap, land with one eerie, universal pang. She feels a line above one eyebrow bleeding, a thin trickle that collects in that eyebrow, and runs subtly down the side of her face, across her throbbing temples, her swollen sinuses. She reaches for her heart pills, can’t find them, trips over her phone cord and stumbles over to the light switch by her doorway, and flicks it – knowing she’s electrified one of two spaces in the building, a binary constellation, half of it invisible, nestled low in the Los Angeles skyline. It is not that she does not feel anything – it’s just that so much of what she feels she can’t process in any sort of order, like it’s all being loaded into her at once and none of it can get through, like each is a different version of herself fighting her old brains for space. She picks up her backpack,
hears the pills fall from it, chomps into one, and walks out, leaving the light on, knowing she contributes to that skyline, but not in a way that anyone else can appreciate.

#

Beyond the doors of Dirigible Enterprises, as though they have been posed for a photoshoot, in the hoodies and ski jackets Tinseltownies don when the temperature goes below 65, sit the boys, across her car. In the harsh neons of the city, out of their makeup, Jenna sees the scaled surfaces of their faces – the zits, the scars, the dark circles, all their blemishes the impossibly-small of the famous, but still jarring for her to see all at once.

“So?” says Matt.

“I’m still here,” she says. “But the general deal is that you’re all gonna have to act straighter. In a really dedicated way. And I’m gonna have to enforce it. I shouldn’t be telling you this, but I’m also sorry. I know it’ll be shitty, but you’re all just gonna have to deal for a little bit. But I’m working on it.”

“Then you should get some sleep,” says Tish, leaning against the side of the building, the shape of her hair pressed up against Moneyboys HQ, as though it’s consuming a part of her. “I’m driving you home.”

“And we’ll take care of the straight-acting part,” Brett says, leaping from the hood of Jenna’s car. We’re gonna be the straightest, most heterosexual bitches anyone in this industry ever lays eyes on. But only in public,” he affirms, now looking at Colin. “You people are exhausting.”

On the ride to Toluca Hills, the boys ping questions at Jenna until she can’t speak anymore, and then switch to Tish, who’s apparently announced herself to them – may have even had them on speaker when she was talking to Jenna earlier. Matt squeals a little when Jenna
identifies her wife, when Tish holds up her hand and Jenna’s, which have the same thick, tungsten rings. For the rest of the ride, they mine Tish like she’s hiding the last, remaining Daily Double on a highly-populated board. Where did she and Jenna meet? (“Grad school at USC,” she says, though they’d first met in a chatroom) What do they do outside of work? (“Mostly, be tired and sort of lie on each other.”) Who’s the top? (“It doesn’t work like that and sexual roles are outdated.”) What’s it like living with Jenna? (“Difficult.”) Is she as much of a hardass at home? (“Probably more of one.”) What are all of her secrets? (“I’m still working on finding them.”)

“We kind of see Jenna like a pineapple,” Colin says. “Hard outer shell, but secretly sweet.”

“I’ll let you know if the sweetness ever shows up,” Tish tells him, and the boys all laugh, though Jenna’s not sure it’s a joke. By the time they arrive at the apartment complex, Jenna has to wave them out of the vehicle – even push Matt and Colin from it – saying, “Bed. Bed,” and nothing else, for her and for them. In the morning, she will remember Tish trying to start a new conversation with her, Tish carrying her to the couch, sitting next to her for a while, watching her as she closes her eyes, and apologizing until the number and volume of her sorries disintegrate into a massive, meaningless cluster.

#

It’s not until Jenna, on the most important day of her job so far, on the bus and upset about it, having to share one of the BRT’s strange, carpeted seats – with ass-spaces so flat they don’t match the bubbles of the city’s primary demo of aspiring models and actors, and which also don’t provide ample dimple against the thigh of a ride partner – with a man older than Frank’s age, full emblem of chest hair out because he’s dressed like a baby, in a bonnet and diaper and, strangely, snow boots, that she realizes there’s a post-it note attached to her hand.
When she peels it off, he looks at her and smirks, like she’s the weird one. On it’s a message from Tish, a time and a place for lunch, a salad bar Jenna’s never been to at high noon, where a reservation’s already been made. At its base, it says, “I let you sleep in – let’s talk :)” which seems somehow foreboding. She’d woken up at seven, heard Tish in their bathroom, and thought it’d be best to buy more time, her wife a reservoir of trust Jenna’s willing to keep tapping. The man in the diaper is still staring at her when she turns back to him. He says, “Marriage trouble? Yeah, I know how that is,” and gets off at the next stop. The drag queen who sits down in his place looks like a rooster at a bachelorette party, feathers and sequins, burn marks and scars, eyeshadow melting after its twelve hours of use.

“A phoenix,” says the queen.

“Sure,” says Jenna.

“Everyone’s been giving me ‘chicken’ all night, so I thought I’d clarify.”

“Must’ve been a long night.”

“You’re really saying that when you look like that? OK, girl.”

They don’t talk for the rest of their trip – Jenna knows when she’s been beat, and the sunlight bouncing off of the queen’s sequins give a light show that could get *Pokemon* cancelled. The queen gets off in MacArthur Park, where she wiggles her fingers at Jenna, and descends from the vehicle singing Donna Summer’s best song about cake. Almost immediately, the big, orange feet, large shell, and zero other discernible features of *Garfield’s* Sheldon plops down next to her, says through a quivering echo that they’re testing costumes for Universal downtown, and that this was the easiest way to transport it.

“Wherever you go, you’re home,” Jenna tells them.
“Yeah, plus did you hear about this Nightline thing? Apparently that band the Moneyboys is gonna turn us all into queers.”

“Hadn’t heard,” Jenna lies, watching her face twitch in the window.

“Yeah, I watched it with my brother last night,” the egg says. “Heavy stuff. Think I’ll just stay in here, to be safe.” The egg says, “heh, heh,” in the way Jenna imagines a fisherman or a cruise ship activity director would, a person who’d have to entertain themselves around the same small, contained group for extended periods, and gets off at the stop before Jenna’s. As they leave, they bow as much as they can to Jenna, say, “Don’t crack out there,” and wobble into a large, glistening skyscraper.

This is the first time Jenna’s taken the bus in maybe a decade, and up until the moment when the people part like clouds at the Metro Center, revealing, finally, enough room for her to stretch her knees, she’d told herself that this is why. But once she’s clear of 7th Street, has the time and freedom of limb to think about the morning, whip together the last few strands of strategy she’d put together before boarding, she wonders if maybe it’s not so bad. The city, she knows, lives more vividly and breathes harder than any other place she’s lived, and maybe one of its spirits slipped out of a bottle somewhere between here and Koreatown, started delivering her symbols of rebirth like she was Scrooge – not, admittedly a stretch – and maybe they were ghosts of Los Angeles’ past, present, and future. Which is which? She’s not sure – and plus, they’re all weird, or mad at her. But just like how any press is, well, at least the currency that powers the fame machine, then maybe any sign, for Jenna Muldoon, sweating out of her blazer the day after the Moneyboys have been vilified by a national news outlet, is a good sign – or at least a sign that things can’t get any worse.
And things start out well enough. Frank’s awake, in an emergency suit – designated so both because it’s the one he keeps in his office and because it’s a bright, traffic-cone orange – and receptive to her strategies, nods and says yes and asks if she wants any coffee. She talks through the plan to look through all of the footage herself, to get final say on what’s usable; that she’s found and vetted an acting coach purported to work after-hours with the best and brightest closeted stars, on turning their body language more masculine. Also in the works, also approved by Frank: appearances on reality dating shows where Talent Comet would still be allowed to film, celebrity editions of Next and this new program called Paradise Hotel that’s supposed to be appropriately smutty, but still blurry enough in every sensitive, necessary place to leave room for doubt. She tells him she’s already spoken to the boys about damage control – though she doesn’t mention it was for a few minutes last night, as she was barely able to stand.

Firing Frida and Seonghun is no fun, especially because neither of them freaks out or makes a scene in the way the divas of fame and technology Jenna’s always worked with have. Frida – who always looks just a little like she’s been electrocuted, anyway – blinks a few times and says, “Well, shit. That sucks. Oh well.” Jenna can see Seonghun’s tear ducts swell, his adam’s apple bobbing precipitously, but he shakes her hand and thanks her for the opportunity, and keeps his head down as he walks back through the hall. Her head’s also down for a while after that, even as she squeezes each of the boy-shaped stress relievers, and tries to lose herself in scheduling spreadsheets. If she let herself think she had a heart, it would have broken for them both, one piece shattering because beneath her armor she hates firing other queer people. They were both genuinely skilled at their jobs – effective, loved by the boys – and she just kind of likes them. Worst of all is their absence as antithesis, the idea that just when she’d finally been opening space, she’s had to vacuum it up again. She thinks of all of the times they tried to
include her, despite how much time she spent in her office, scurrying around, hands full of logistics. She wishes she could have done more for both of them – slipped them her personal number on a scrap of paper, or promised a recommendation – but they’re not who’s ensuring she gets paid. Frank, allegedly, has scouted a new choreographer and makeup artist, both of whom are extremely heterosexual, discussed their differently-sexed spouses and multiple offspring when he spoke to them this morning.

“You should see these new girls,” Frank says. “Real bangers,” which is an expression that Jenna hasn’t heard before, and is one element of their morning meeting that brews further unease beneath her, a light, festering thing – a sense that even with the helm safely in her hands, the enforcing of this new, heterosexual agenda could still make things go deeply, tragically wrong.

By the time Felicity Grossman arrives, toting a trio of white vans so large that they have to park toe-to-tip at the back of the lot, though, things are mostly smooth. Sure, as she checks in with the boys before sending them to their now-filmed online classes, Liam says he’s still feeling down, and Jake still presses his lips flat and doesn’t talk to her, and Matt is carrying a faggy umbrella and wearing an inch-thick layer of SPF70 on his face, afraid of aging and wrinkles and his face becoming what it had looked like in the “Love through the Ages” video, and Colin says he’s got some great ideas about how to appear more mysterious, like wearing deer antlers, and Brett winks at her with an intensity beyond what his usual, flirty style allows, and – actually, Jenna thinks, maybe she’s screwed. So she walks with the boys to their online classroom, which a few music video set designers have jazzed up with tablecloths, and new, bright paint that’s still dripping down the walls, upon which decals bought from teacher supply stores – grinning, round
computers and apples housing worms with glasses and word-art that says, fittingly, LEARN – have been stuck.

“Quite the set-up,” says Felicity Grossman, who leaves an embrace with Brett to shake Jenna’s hand.

“We have to make sure that education doesn’t fall by the wayside,” Jenna says. “Plus, nobody wants their idols dumb. We know what we’re doing, and we’re accountable for it.”

Felicity motions for her cameraperson to lower his lens. “Y’know, it’s OK to lighten up a bit,” she says. “We’re not – we’re literally giving you full control of everything that gets released.”

“Frank must’ve given you a ton of money.”

“I mean, duh. But so, like, you can afford to drop an f-bomb or something. Make you seem more relatable to the viewing public.”

“An f-bomb, huh?” asks Brett.

“We take learning,” Jenna says, glaring at him before composing herself for the camera, “Very fucking seriously.”

“OK, but can you do that again? The camera wasn’t on.”

“So anyway, I was fucking this chick last night,” goes Liam. “I was getting all the way up in there.”

“In where?” Matt asks, with a dryness that means they’ve planned this.

“In her vagina,” Liam says, grinning like he’s twelve, “Obviously.”

“Don’t use that,” says Jenna.
So, Jenna, eating a vegetable that hasn’t been baked or fried and feeling the crunch of her lettuce strangely wet – unnatural in how its liquids drip down her chin, how full of small inefficiencies it is – finds herself across from a wife who’s devised a plan Jenna doesn’t know, hoping everything can stay stable, like a light ballad, 70BPM, back at HQ as she listens to notions of reconciliation and marital histograms and an unwillingness to remain an enabler. The restaurant, You Ain’t Green Nothing Yet, sits adjacent to an arrangement of angles and structural limbs – tilted-open windows and skywalks under construction – that cause each ray of the city’s light to descend on her, as though she’s just an ant in its otherwise complicated, beautiful, system, and that Los Angeles, bored, has placed her under a magnifying glass to set her on fire. The City of Flowers and Sunshine is really doubling down on its latter trait, slathering its residents with a sudden humidity and a number of degrees Fahrenheit that’s just peaked into the triple digits. Before her and Tish, walking from, probably, a gym to the beach, or other places those with bodies that facilitate the removal of clothing go, the toned and tan strut, jog, and otherwise shimmy down the boulevards and drives, no part of their body jiggling that isn’t supposed to.

“My biggest concern is that I’m not heard,” Tish is saying. “The point – I believe, anyway – is that we support each other.”

“And not take over each others’ jobs.”

“OK. Sure. Did you feel like I was taking over?”

“I – Well, not exactly. It was more of a – I’d feel like I was working hard all day, and draining myself to make sure I’m helping to provide for us, and then you’d say a thing that would make me feel bad – like I was a terrible person doing terrible things.”
“Hm, OK. Terrible person? Probably not. But terrible things? Not a definite no. I know you have lofty goals, but I wonder how much the end justifies the means – or if the end changes if the means get too soupy.”

“Don’t talk about soup on a day like today, please.”

“See, this is what I mean – I’m trying to comment on something that you do – something that I’m worried about – and what I get back is a non-response. Things are fine, or OK, or a joke, and it feels like it falls on me to help you parse through the things you don’t want to think about. Which takes my concern, and doesn’t help it, and gives me more responsibility.”

“I’m not—” Jenna says.

“You are. You always have been. I’ve been thinking about this a lot, and part of it’s on me for taking this on so much, but I feel like part of what you expect me to do is teach you how to become a better person – a better queer person.”

Cut to an immediate k-hole of Jenna hearing about what Tish has done since tenure: founding organizations that bring queer community members for on-campus performances, protesting downtown as persistently as she did during the King demonstrations, spruiking for fundraisers, rallying faculty to vote yes on a talk from a fledgling filmmaker named Miranda July. She’s been here and queer and nobody’s had a choice. She’s been at the Center and the running both bases and books for the kickball league she used to play in. Word is, Jenna now remembers Tish telling her, she may be able to get the two of them into next year’s Pride parade. Jenna pans to the two of them buying flat, wide cookies with multicolored, off-label M&Ms for a party of Tish’s queer colleagues at USC, more than a year ago, the last social anything Jenna’s done; to Tish guiding her via light, loving handhold through introductions, inadvertently calling Jenna her wife; to the ceremony at FUBAR where they were finally, it felt, surrounded. To all of
the spaces in their home, newly decorated, where Tish has been doing, this entire time, what
Jenna’d set out to – making spaces. It’s just that they’re only ever occupied by one person. Jenna
thinks of the kitchen, the three empty chairs at the dinner table, the chill of the AC behind her
back as she sits at her monitor in the late hours as Tish sleeps. To Jenna, alone, unable to fill the
faults she’d been thinking Tish could live with with mythologies of the band, legends of the city.

“I never asked you to do that. I could handle it if you didn’t.”

“I know. I’m taking some of the blame here. But what I’m saying is that if we’re going to
keep this going, we both need to make changes to make sure that doesn’t happen.”

Tish’s hand moves from the base of her bowl to partway across the table. She feels like
one of the few things burning Jenna that isn’t trying to, or that only wants to because she
believes in a certain sort of goodness within her, a dynamic potential, latent and atomic.

“I have an idea,” Tish says. “You’ve met my colleagues, my family, the people from my
world. Why don’t we have your world over for dinner?”

What Jenna hears: obligation, access. That there is another force in the world attempting
to keep her from the ever-increasing list of what Jenna must complete to be able to exist, to allow
others to exist – to breathe easily again, make like Gorillaz and just zone out, choose the music
business, and get the cool shoeshine of the unconscious mind – feels like another enemy she has
to fight, place on her list next to society in general, *Nightline*, her band making decisions worse
than what they’d get if they dropped plastic coins into Plinko. That it’s a woman she’s relied on
for so long to coax her into relaxation, into helping her balance the machinery of her occupation
with a humanity that – despite Jenna trying never to look back at it – is what prevents her from
attempting the hottest new trend in reality shows, flipping the table. So, she splits the difference,
lands on petty.
“I don’t think we could fit all of Dirigible into our house.”

“Jenna,” Tish says, her hand now across her forehead. “Do you remember right after we met, when you were talking about this problem you had in class, where the professor was talking about that band – Fat Tuesday, or something?”

“You mean ‘Til Tuesday?”

“Right. ‘Til Tuesday. And how they wrote this song about abusive queer relationships, but the producers were worried it wouldn’t sell, and they made them change all of the pronouns so that the song sounded like it was a hetero thing?”

“Yup. Good old USC, keeping the topics topical.”

“And how when you told me about this, you didn’t even think about it, and said it was the right call, because that was what would sell it more?”

“Yeah, of course I remember. This brain’s like a steel trap, when it comes to data. Plus, it was the first thing we fought about.”

“OK, but then do you remember how we decided to agree to disagree about that?”

“Yup. The first of many times.”

“OK. Well, I’m not sure I can agree to disagree about that anymore. I think that what you’re doing with your job right now isn’t advancing us – it’s neutering us. And I want to find a way for you to see that we can help each other. I think having everyone over will be a good way to show that we can still do it. We can show off the house. We can actually cook for once. I’ve already called and asked Frank about it, and he was on board, as long as they could film something, which is fine with me.”

“You what?”
“But I told him I’d ask you about it first. Which is what I’m doing now. And I’m also telling you that it would behoove you to say yes.”

Jenna wonders, her hand in the place where Tish’s had been, when she missed Tish – an omni-nerd, a perfect sounding board for limit-breaking – turn into a person that wouldn’t recede from conflict – how many times Jenna had pushed her in the wrong direction, or nonchalantly spoken of a decision made with the kinds of great, social implications that until recently she hadn’t been the kind of person to consider out loud. There is a chill to her wife now, a thin, sharp edge that seems to have sprouted. Maybe it burgeoned, like a discarded razor blade snagging a sandal, a murderous piece of Halloween candy double-checked by a paranoid parent, to the surface when Jenna had become absorbed in her computer, in monitoring the nerds as a collective, instead of thinking about the one watching her, trying to love her closely. In working twelve-plus hour days with audiences that require that distance for their love to thrive, mushroom up to their brains with convincing messages of that distance closing, that the chassis in which they chase the sun will one day touch it, the center of their galaxy, Matt or Liam or Jake. Or whomever. And Jenna looks at the center of hers, senses these new, keen veins, pictures her body barbed. It is rare that Jenna Muldoon is willing to take a suggestion these days, but she will. Not only because it could sweep into good footage, but because she wants to try again. Not to make a community, but to show the boys and Tish – and maybe even Frank – that she’s already begun to make one.

Tish’s pager buzzes. When Jenna says, “Student?” she says, “No. Alarm. Remember that you’re not the only one with a busy work schedule.” She walks to Jenna’s side of the table, squeezes her hand, and then leans in for a hug that Jenna’s too in her own head to return. She is not sure if she misses her wife, or how easily her wife once acquiesced.
“You’re planning, by the way,” Tish says. “I can try to cook, but I have other problems to solve. You can’t be all of them.”

Jenna blinks, and Tish is gone, then, money on the gable, and arm somewhere down the street calling a cab. She sits for a moment, tries to see if she can see her in the backseat of a golden car, but then a red light follows the rest of the city and starts going green, and the cinderblock of traffic that barrels past the bodega is enough to remind Jenna that she’s got so much more of La-La Land to manage. She lets a hand fall from her face, and it whizzes against her fork, flinging a dressed tomato onto a windshield, forcing the driver of a Hummer the width of two lanes to go serpentine until it’s stabilized again. No damage done to the drivers, Jenna thinks, looking down at the rest of her salad and feeling a strange gurgle – which is more than she can say about her stomach. But then, there’s her phone rattling as well, Frank sending three buzzes at once – his standard. It’s almost comforting that through the technology of this tiny, electrical module on her hip, she’s able to recognize the same signal, that she’s attuned herself to the modified Morse, and can interpret it into the specific communications of a single person without even having to speak to them. “If only,” she thinks, realizing Tish paid for the pair of them, “It was all that easy.”

#


“Big enough to still bother me with it, though,” Jenna says.

“Cameras,” she goes, and places her hands on Jenna’s desk like that’s it.

“What about them?”
“We’ve got some extras,” she says, making finger guns, blowing the nozzles of both of them. “Did you or Frank authorize any additional ones, or do we have some classic Hollywood spies on our hands?”

“I’m pretty sure we haven’t added any extra. I mean, I can call Frank, but–”

“He said to ask you,” she says, and then goes, “Duh-na-duh-naaaaaah,” like an ocean’s about to appear out of nowhere, just so Halle Berry can pop out of it in her orange two-piece, and walk, dripping, seductive, onto the beach to whisper into their ears, “Espionage.” Jenna wouldn’t hate it, but this does throw another wrench.


“The latter,” Jenna says, reaching for a foam boy to squeeze – today it’s Jake, because of course it is. “Why?”

“Well, a lot of ‘em do this thing where they’ll find places where – let’s say – well-respected journalists leave cameras, and do what they can to put their own devices there that look as similar as possible. Which is why we count ours, because it’s a thing. It happened to us when we were filming a thing on Princess Di. A bunch of guys in red devil jerseys showed up every night to add more to our stationary camera stash. Found out later they were called full-kit wankers, which I love. But they were still annoying. Cheered for the wrong team, too.”

Jenna hears Felicity’s foot tapping against the front of her desk. Once Felicity’s realized Jenna’s heard it, she grins.

“You’ve gotta admit – it’s exciting,” Felicity says. And then, her eyes fluttering, she whispers, “Investigation.”

“We’re literally the only two people in this office.”
“Would you like me to investigate?”

“Investigate what? The fake cameras?”

“I have disguises—”

“Couldn’t you just, like, check to see which ones aren’t yours?”

“—Wigs and mustaches. Hats. Shoulderpads. Fake guts that Velcro around your back—”

“Maybe you could cross-reference serial numbers?”

“Ah,” she says, “I like that. I like the way you think, Ms. Muldoon.” She taps her fingers to her head in a salute, does it again and then a third time when Jenna’s face remains blank. “A real flair for the dramatic.”

When Jenna had first arrived in LA, accepted into Marshall’s newly-minted concentration in music production, she’d been told by the only other woman in her cohort that she’d made it to a town of slashers. But just as Freddy and Jason had begun to infiltrate her noggin, her colleague had introduced herself as one, singer slash actress slash graduate student, who also waitressed at the Sonic down the road, was hoping to parlay her four and a quarter hours per day on roller skates into a role as one of the horny trains in *Starlight Express*, like it was that easy. Part of why Jenna’s been able to climb against all the old, hetero men in the biz – she thinks, anyway – is because she’s never slashed anything but her competition – and maybe, transitively, the prices of their merchandise. People who try to do it all lose focus too easily, until they get hired and burn themselves out thinking of using all of their other talents for roles that don’t require them.

So, now, as Felicity Grossman rolls up her sleeves, and Jenna sees the inked-on bust of Gil Grissom across her forearm, Jenna knows what her slash is. Across it, on her other, smirks Sarah Sidle. As she pushes back her hair, there’s Nick Stokes trapped in a crystal ball, dangling from one ear. Before her, like she’s glowing and throbbing, is the type of dangerous, passionate
person Jenna would recognize anywhere: a nerd. She wonders how many times Felicity has read through scripts with Brett and a pair of mirrors, asked an invisible lab tech for fingerprint analyses, worked her tongue around the word, “discharge.” As Felicity speaks, Jenna pulls up her resume, flips to page three, which no exec with time the same price or above as money would have ever looked at prior, and sees fan films, costume contests, escape rooms.

Now, Jenna’s foot taps against the other side of the desk – though this time, not out of excitement. The last thing she needs is an employee – a contractor, at that – attempting to CSI anything related to the boys, bodily or otherwise. A puzzle-solver, regardless of whether she’s acting the part or living it, is yet another jigsaw piece that could jam in and ruin the entire operation. Regardless of how pleasant, how professional Felicity Grossman is, her apparent love of the types of connections one could make with string and corkboard means her brain will fire with bulbous pace and volume exactly opposite to the type of surface-level thought Jenna wants even their most devoted fans to consider about the boys. Boy Band 115: the minute a fan begins thinking about a boy beyond what’s presented to them, drawing conclusions out of genuine concern or obsession past a level of fanfiction, things get dangerous. Stalkers appear. Notes forged from cut-out magazines. And, most terrifying, the ones with brains – the nerds – could arrange all of the emotional geometries Jenna’s spent three-plus years attempting to hide back into their respective, revealing slots. What she needs is a greater, more compelling distraction – a rabbit hole she could kick Grossman down, where shadowy figures in sunglasses and trench coats hand her entremets that say, “Follow Me,” on them, turn her different sizes and onto different trails.

“Well, we can’t pay you anymore than we are,” Jenna says, “But it’s unfortunate. I’ve had similar suspicions for a while.”
“Right? This is what I’m saying.”

“So,” Jenna says, stretching both her arms and her voice in an attempt to seem casual—an attempt that anyone looking at her instead of preparing to combat a season-finale level of conspiracy would see through so entirely they’d feel like they were staring at the wall—“I guess we just have to batten down the hatches and hope all of our plans pan out. I think the boys are prepared enough. I think that Nightline feature scared them into behaving for now.

“Are you sure?” Felicity asks, a bit too enthusiastically. “What if Nightline is filming again, using rogue agents? What if this is part of something greater—more sinister? I know the FBI was involved with you guys earlier. We don’t have a choice. We have to solve this, Jenna.”

It takes everything contained within her skin for Jenna not to laugh at how earnest the fast-talking head of Talent Comet has become. This is what happens with slashers of any kind—guts spill, sometimes turn campy. She tries to mimic her sincerity, and her voice emerges with a full, albeit out-of-order, pentatonic scale, when Jenna says, “Reeally? Do you think so?”

“Of course! But you’re in luck—I’m happy to investigate these espionage crimes for a nominal bonus, if you’re willing to pay for it.”

So, Jenna asks for a number, offers a third of it, and Felicity Grossman agrees to set up even more cameras—cameras around the cameras—to catch any fakes, any intruders. The footage will all still go through Jenna—uploaded by a series of cables and wires Jenna swears she’ll read up on before they outlive their usage to a server in the room beneath her very office. She can also take the video files home on a hard drive that’s supposed to be portable but carries a nest of its own wires and feels like a rectangular tween in weight and cumbersome whenever Jenna lifts it. Frank swears he’s ordered a cart, but Jenna’s about to stop at Sears on her way home, talk
Frank into a reimbursement. She thanks Felicity for the extra responsibility, the refresher in file-transference.

“Crime never sleeps,” says Felicity Grossman, pulling her cap over her eyes. “And neither will we.”

#

The idea is that each documentary episode will focus on an individual member, tell their story, and reiterate their standing in the band, their Rule-106 Persona. They’ll be released in reverse-order of current popularity, and filmed one-at-a-time, to make the whole operation feel electric, live. Episode One is Colin (Iowa! Took ballet to get better at football! Gee Whiz, he sure has always been tall!), because The Public never goes for the option that could love them back in the way they want to be loved back. When he meets with Felicity Grossman and the rest of the production team – Jenna’s there too, because she’s not an idiot. She understands the punishment of listening to this sweet idiot speak, how to talk him out of changing into more flamboyant shirts, and how to moderate the mundanity when the production team’s eyes begin to roll – and when they ask him what they want his episode to focus on, Colin says, “Mystery, and maybe also friendship.” Jenna thinks, “Gag me.”

This first episode is part of the strategy that would have been business-as-usual, had the Nightline episode played more than it dropped. Boy Band 116: When one member becomes less popular, they should become the focus. Otherwise, you’re left with a star or two, and a bunch of background slashers. It’s easy enough to reset prices for the next round of merchandise – posters of calculated photographs, the boys shirts unbuttoned or still in the air as they return to earth faster than matter from a choreographed leap; the 2004 Calendars that’ve just been sent out, featuring each boy in different outfits, sometimes themed, all of them in costumes for October
because the two groups that buy table calendars, moms and younger kids, just absolutely eat that shit up; sparkling journals, each of their faces in glitter, that include playlists and milquetoast manga-versions of the boys they hired an artist to design as as inoffensively as possible. Sell the other boys’ merch for $5.00 and Colin’s for $4.50, and suddenly every grandma and great aunt on a shopping trip with a vague band description and a prayer see the Moneyboys’ pastiest member as their favorite. Rearranging the profiles on the Moneyboys site means that Colin’s is clicked on first, that fans learn about his favorite color (tan – Jenna still hasn’t figured out why), his favorite sports teams (The Bucks, The Hawkeyes, The Hawks – a trio of selections that is likely interesting to 0.1% of their audience, but does – Jenna admits – help lend credence to his heterosexuality, what with having opinions about sports different than the “pick your own city, consistently” strategy that a lot of queer men learn to employ when they return home and have to discuss anything played on a field, court, or rink with a stodgy, old relative), and his favorite food (bread, inexplicably). She can schedule factory errors where a rogue sticker of Colin shows up in packs of each of the other boys, gets the nerds remembering that he’s there, too, that they need a second choice, and second out of five isn’t too bad.

“My hero is my mother, without a doubt,” Colin says. “She raised me and my two brothers. Also, the armed forces.” He pauses, and just when Felicity is about to ask her next question, he says, “Or are they?”

Though she’s still suspicious of Felicity Grossman – her bob, her twelve pagers arranged on the belt of her fanny pack, which she wears over her shoulder like a bandolier, the unwrapped beret she begins each new day underneath – Jenna can sit back and enjoy her professionalism, that she nods and weaves as she asks Colin questions, takes notes, squeezes in follow-ups, draws lines, diagrams. If it weren’t for Brett, Jenna would have thought from Felicity’s outfit – the
Army Surplus military jackets with pre-jiggered badges like *Captain Fun* and *Corporal Punishment* – that she were also gay. But it’s 2003, and everyone’s wearing moon boots now – even the straight people. Though watching them try to bounce down the street in them is like watching a person in heels for the first time. When the craze swept in earlier this year, Los Angeles became a town of Bambis, a fountain of youth – or at least a fountain of inexperience – in yet another new and unexpected way. She remembers, now, a video of Colin trying them before a video axed for being too similar to the sexy aliens of “Oops, I Did it Again.” He’d gone from a natural to a flop in seconds, eyes popped-over with frustration, bouncing on his long legs at lengths they hadn’t previously achieved, confused by the power of these strange objects.

“And man,” Colin is saying, “I always think: what is this magical city going to do to surprise me every day? And I think that I’m part of it, too. People are always saying I’m a mystery.”

Jenna thinks, as Colin hums those six notes from the *X-Files* theme: Maybe dying his hair isn’t the worst idea. He could go brunette, grow it out a bit more, let loose the natural waves. She also thinks: I cannot wait until we film Episode 2.

On their next water break – well, it’s a water break for Colin, and a soda break for Jenna, Felicity, and the crew – Jenna walks over to where she sees Matt’s umbrella jutting out from the top of a bench. He’s dressed to dodge paparazzi and tourists alike, but instead, he’s just sitting there, next to a salad that’s more mayonnaise than leaf suppurring in the sun.

“Do you want it?” he asks. “I don’t know if I want to eat today.” Though he’s baseline one of the quieter boys, that he barely moves his face while talking today blurs his speech into a murmur that Jenna has to lean in to hear. Plus, the long sleeves and – Jenna double-checks because, like, what? – winter gloves Matt’s wearing make him leak sweat more than Jenna’s ever
seen him release in dance practice. He looks like one of those eBay dolls that’s entered its goth phase and claims that mom, it’s not one – this is who I am now.

“D’you get lockjaw, Matt? What’s the deal?”

“Nying nhh nhhhh,” Matt says, like the umbrella’s about to sprout a head and Autobot into a ventriloquist dummy. Jenna thinks of an episode of *Doug*, tells Matt, “de doy dought de dasketdall,” but he doesn’t get it, gives a shrug even an ant wouldn’t notice.

“Y’know I used to watch that show before meetings? I thought it’d make me destress, but I think I just had a crush on Judy.”

“Nhh,” says Matt, through his teeth and lips.

“So do you want to tell me what’s up with the new Victorian look? You mug Jack White on the way here?”

“Nhh,” says Matt, which Jenna is pretty sure means “no,” this time.

“You’re gonna have to give me more than that. If you’re dealing with something, it is literally my job to help you, so–”

Matt sort of says, “I’m trying not to move my face.”

“OK. Why’s that?”

“Can I write it down?” he half-asks, producing a notepad, a pencil that clicks through four different colors. His note is long, and not the most legible, given the thick gloves, the non-movement, the sweat leaking down from where Jenna’s pretty sure his eyes still are. Since the “Love Through the Ages” shoot – since seeing the cultivated version of his advanced, wrinkled age – Matt had been working with Frida and Seonghun on skincare – toners and serums and moisturizers, oh my! – to prevent himself from becoming anything close to the prosthetics he had to wear. He notes that he thought he looked like one of those ocean floor fish: warped, eternally
in an imitation of melting, mostly mouth and accompanying jowls. That before joining the band, he had a lot of trouble seeing himself as beautiful, had unhealthy eating and workout habits that Jenna tells him were probably part of what helped him get into the band in the first place. So when, even in a hokey way – a way that was literally shellacked onto him, a way he could rip off with his own, two (still youthful) hands – that image of himself as attractive was eviscerated, it made him rethink his body, to see it as a transient set of decaying mechanisms instead of the boundless, ever-spurting font of youth it’s supposed to be, to he and the nerds and everyone else, he decided he had to do everything he could to ensure he never ages again. Jenna’s not sure whether this makes her job harder or easier. It’s good that he’s taking care of himself, but the whole not-moving and not-entering-the-sun acts are going to make it hard for him to have an image at all.

“I don’t know which skincare to use,” he says. So does the note. There is, apparently, a multi-crate structure lingering in the equivalent of his trailer – each of the boys has an “office” on the second floor, but most of them are used for playing *Melee* and bragging about the possession of a private bathroom – but he’s afraid of mixing the wrong tincture with the wrong facemask, afraid of making his face curdle or the expensive products do the same. He doesn’t understand its mechanics – what sort of molecular bolero happens when Neutrogena meets Clearasil? – and is without his guides.

“Let’s look some up,” Jenna says. “Are you on any forums?”

Why do the work of learning when other people have already done it for you? From her office – one of the boys looking up skincare tips isn’t exactly the type of scene she needs in a documentary about how butch they all are – in the final fifteen before Colin’s next set of interview questions, she lets Matt guide her through Google searches and CTRL+Fs, until he
lands on a site of recipe lists run by a guru who claims to be in her eighties but appears – if the photo of her, enormous, grand, and slowly-loaded on its front page – no older than thirty or so. Having been in the business of organized scamming for a while, Jenna’s first thought is that this lady’s had work done – but she doesn’t tell Matt this, who’s dictated an account name and password, and three questions to ask in the site’s community section, a comment box with visible replies that’s turned into something like a forum, but with the opposite of an adenoid problem.

“Do you feel OK now?” she asks him.

“Kind of?” he says. At least he’s moving his lips again.

“OK. Good. And please ditch that umbrella. You look like the folks at Disneyland are gonna start complaining about why they only got 998 happy haunts.”

And when she holds out her hand, and he places the folded-up contraption into it, she wonders how anyone could ever think she’s neutering queerness. If you asked Jenna, right in this moment, she’d say she’s empowering it, finding it small, private, meaningful moments, teaching it to dodge laser beams. But then she’d see the swelling across Matt’s eyes, hidden by his sunglasses, or the tremor across his hands that he – a professional accustomed to granting audiences the metaphysical band-aids that stop, if only for a song or performance or wink, them from thinking about their scars – disguises with a leg-jitter, the type of hyperactive energy a guy in his mid-twenties is supposed to have. She wonders if she’s taught them all to play the game too accurately, too completely, and then draws up from within her the big, true idea that’s guided her through this business for so long – that there’s no such thing as having too much technical skill. Too much volume, sure. Too much effort, even. But there is always room for people – people like her, Jenna thinks – to keep getting better at logistical bobs and weaves, behind-closed-doors moments that hit a blossoming Venn Diagram of issues. This is the way she will
save them, she thinks, with plans and responses. Even through their minor backfires, they’re a means to an end she’s OK with, one in which she’s out and rich and the boys aren’t entirely messed up. Boy Band 117: The boys are yours, to use and love and fantasize and consider – as long as you don’t get too close. Or, in Jenna’s case, let them.

#

Damage control on the initial cut of the Colin episode is basically zilch, given that they get a shot of him dancing with Rebecca, the virgin from *The Real World*, until the other four boys thrust spastically around him, making unh-tiss noises, whispering boots-and-cats-and through their teeth like they’d learned back when beatboxing seemed like an investment for their professional development.

“It’s called party-boys,” Jake says, his curls sweaty during a talking head. “You ever seen *Jackass*?” As he talks, the camera eats him up, his thin waist, his joy, all of him gyrating like a Caucasian uncle. “Dude,” he says, in a voice that feels borrowed, “It’s so funny.”

Jake’s other confessional is filmed a day later, as he twirls the neck of a rubber chicken around his fingers, and as he and Colin sneak cartoonishly down a hotel hallway with cylinders of Barbasol from the production team, Felicity hypothesizing that this will all come off as fun. Jake says, “I just want to make sure everyone has a good time. I think it’s, like, important?” He lapses into Valley Girl a little, but the footage is still usable. It’s one scene. It’s mostly shaving cream, and it’s filmed exclusively from the waist-up.

The production team loves him. “Jake the joker,” says Felicity Grossman, “It writes itself. Print the t-shirts now, load ‘em into the cannon, shoot ‘em into every aisle of the Kids’ Choice Awards!” Frank giggles so vividly his voice cracks. They call in Rhonda from Graphics to sketch up a caricature, Jake’s eyes upside-down Us. Jenna stares at the wall of the meeting
room, wishes she had a view of anything but the City of Angels, knows that leaning into a persona that Jake defines for himself is dangerous in the same way the Nightline episode was – that it’s another element over which she loses control, that she cannot save him from when it zags awry.

Plus, she knows what he’s doing. Back in Michigan, Jenna – a few years removed from where they are now, sure – remembers the sleepovers and the kissing games, the “practice,” and all the performance that sent her flailing and dazed into college, wondering what kind of strange, soothing poison bubbled within her but thankful she’d found a way to express it. The tepid jokes, the cuddling, the critiques of tongue form were all safe in how un-serious they were – the affirmation that none of them were queer was such an easy test to pass because it could be fallen into, made fun of. Jenna’d get home and start scraping any soft surface, wallpaper and cheap tables, plaster, anything that would knot up in thick ribbons beneath her fingernails, lift them into painful, tantalizing alarms that matched those she’d just gotten. Almost every person – even the heterosexuals – has a same-sex crush at some point, and these types of games are how they cope with them. Read: “why would you use that pillow when I’m here, ha-ha?” Read: bro jobs. If there’s an out, there’s no risk of outing. The problem is, once a queer person’s conscious of that, and they use it on anyone else, it becomes a predatory method of learning love, affection, and everything else a real person needs. Look at Jenna – it took her well into college to figure herself out, and twenty years later, she’s still having relationship trouble. Jake walking the line between flirt and actual, red-handed homosexual could tank both the operation and him as a person. And while she’s more worried about one of those than the other, taking out both floundering birds with a single stone is her best move.
The plan is to talk to Jake when the boys show up for dinner – Frank and Felicity will also be there, to supervise and to film, the idea being that they’ll all be able to appeal to these SCABB people by showing the creation of a family, men and women and nothing fishy, they all swear. Normally, Jenna would’ve vetoed that idea – it was Frank’s – but it’ll be some solid footage to round out the Colin episode. They may even move a few of the anomalous, googly-eyed SoCal conservatives into fans. Boy Band 118: If a group of boys is charming, pretty, and engaged enough, they can make anything interesting – a phone book, a used car, a rebranded message – and they’ll make that thing interesting to anyone with eyes. They’ve done a version of this sort of production yearly – the Bakersfield County Fair in ‘01, an ill-advised concert in south Texas called Bop Near the Border that despite the heat was allegedly attended by multiple Bushes, veiled and bodyguarded in the audience. There’d been an offer for the boys to do another show for the troops, to perform alongside heterosexual icons Ricky Martin and Whitney Houston in December, as a warmup to the Rose Bowl catered to college football fans and their desire to sit in a stadium and watch bodies meters diagonally below them – but Frank had decided that they needed the conservative push now, as soon as possible, since they’re usually the ones yelling at the dinner table. A dinner table being what Jenna’ll be able to show off here, the idea of a family around it, the one she’s built and decided to protect. Maybe they’ll be moved like a Seussian green monster, their hearts ballooning at the idea of a shared meal in fall colors. Maybe they’ll think she’s married to Frank. It’s whatever. It’s jack. She’s an invisible performer here – a part of a family that no one needs to know she’s made.

“You should hang up some guns,” Brett says, he and Felicity arriving first, messing with the whole talk-to-Jake plan right away, “Maybe some skulls?” He’s bopping around her, singing
bars at her request, as she duct tapes cameras to Jenna and Tish’s newly-decorated walls. Felicity asks him to grab the cameras beneath her stepladder, smacks his ass when he bends over.

“Heh,” he says, grinning, “I’d better check again.”

“Have you ever been pegged?” Felicity asks.

There’s a pause awkward only because Brett never allows these pauses to happen. And then, “Never heard of it.” When Felicity makes a run to the bathroom (Tish, mouthing: “Is she setting up cameras in there?” Brett, not-quite-whispering: “Nope, probably just taking advantage of your loud fan, if you catch my drift”), Jenna shoots Brett a look, and he says, this time whispering, “What? I’ll tell you when they’re on. And you’re not the one who has to show up and act right away, Ms. Bossybags.”

A few minor hangups before the other boys arrive, all four of them pooling in with the same driver and calling Jenna to say, via secure line, that they’ll be arriving on gay time: Grossman has trouble taping cameras onto a statement wall that’s been decked out with hay, Brett rolls his eyes in front of what turns out to be the tester and then has to explain to Felicity that he was practicing for an upcoming video – faces and all that, she knows how it is – which Jenna has to alchemize a concept for in the moment, Tish treats the oven like Keanu in Speed, burning everything that comes out of it into what could at least be a new, green, and trendy form of construction material. This at least means there aren’t any cameras in the kitchen, since Grossman’s afraid of their intricacies being invaded by smoke. Worst of all, though, is when she’s dawdling near the computer, Jenna beside her, Tish and Brett on the couch talking about Living Single, and Felicity taps the small, ocular lens hooked into the back of Jenna’s monitor with paper clips and a ball of individual adhesive strips.

“Your webcam’s on,” she says. “You trying to do my job for me?”
“You think I want more jobs? Could’ve sworn I turned it off this morning. Tish?”

“Never used it,” she says.

“Huh,” goes Felicity, “Well, it’s probably a glitch. Maybe the light just went on. I’m gonna unplug it and plug it back in, if that’s cool?”

Until they’re in the kitchen, Jenna having taken over from Tish, swearing casserole but ordering from Nona Rigatoni’s down the street, when Felicity’s in the doorway doing something with her eyes that makes it look like her inner Lizzie McGuire’s emerged, though life-sized and in her real body’s place.

“You OK?” Jenna asks, the phone just barely on the hook from her recent lasagna order.

“This is what I was talking about,” says Felicity, who’s got her mouth next to Jenna’s ear like she’s about to slurp into a wet willy, “We’re being surveilled.”

“In what world–” Jenna starts, but then remembers who she’s talking to. “Who could–?”

“Do you have any enemies?”

Was Grossman the only consumer in America to miss that episode of Nightline? There are whole organizations against them, Jenna reminds her. That’s why they’re doing this. Felicity mouths what appears to be, “heck,” and Jenna thinks she’s gone angelic like Rickman in Dogma, but Felicity says it again, going, “Hackers.” That something as devout as her technology’s always been doesn’t register with Jenna – it’s gotta be malfunctioning, she thinks, which is what she also tells Felicity. But then visions of thumb-headed sugarplums dance through her head, Rondo Hitch in one of the many unmarked vans that pass through the town as unnoticed as what Tish has sworn these new, wireless signals will be able to do in a few years. There are a lot of cars outside today, she thinks, though this is a weekday during lunch hour. It could be anyone, she thinks. Even some random Angelino, savvy in their slashing, spying for fun. She wonders if
Felicity’s pulling a fast one on her, if she’s the one behind the small, blinking curtain, if this is all the premise for a double-cross.

“You think—?” Jenna tries.

“It’s unconfirmed,” Felicity says. She removes her hat and then what turns out has been a wig this whole time, bundles the two into Jenna’s garbage bin like she’s been possessed by the all the energy that left The Big Fundamental a postseason ago. Swish, the bag even goes. From Grossman’s fanny pack comes another style – longer and redder, an edgier new mascot for Mickey D.

“It’ll be fine,” she says, once Jenna’s eyes bug. “You and Tish will notice. But we’re hanging out with a bunch of straight guys, and they’ll just be like, ‘oh, did you change something about your makeup?’ What’s more important is that we get a code word. Maybe a code noise.” She hums about 14 notes from the Spyhunter theme, until Jenna says, “OK, OK, that works.”

“We have to be vigilant,” Grossman says, clapping Jenna on the shoulder. When she leaves the kitchen, Jenna toe-tapping more than what any shrink worth their emotional weight would call even remotely healthy, happy, or well, Jenna hears Brett from the living room couch, going, “Wow, girl. What did you do to your hair?”

#

Frank agrees to play delivery-boy with the lasagna, assuming he can eat some – Jenna thinks he means when he arrives, when they’re all sitting down, but Frank shows up red-handed, a fist-sized chunk of marinara and friends missing from the sheet tray.

“You got a sink?” he asks, “Maybe one of those fancy, European toilet ones?”

The boys, absent of a stylist, have still managed to dress themselves well, appearing in the Los Angeles equivalent of late fall catalog clothes, sweaters and scarves and, for Matt, even a
beret. Liam, who’s wrapped his argyle number around his head, goes, “Babushka,” to Jenna, to Tish, to everyone he meets, and the other guys lose it every time.

“We saw some of the weirdest stuff on the way over here,” Matt says.

“You guys do live in LA – you know that, right?”

“Yeah, but I think they were having some kind of march downtown? Also, it’s called a balaclava, right?”

Which doesn’t do anything for Jenna’s nerves. Though Liam, once it’s announced that the cameras are on, talks about how he used to go camping with his friends in high school, build fires in the woods at midnight – “y’know, manly stuff,” he says, when Jenna raises an eyebrow she hopes she’s deep enough into the corner of her living room they’ve set up as a table for one of the cameras to capture.

“You sound so butch,” Matt writes on the notepad that he’s apparently still carrying with him, “Jenna must be so proud.”

And it gets a laugh, but maybe she is. Aside from Jake going mildly rogue and Matt ostensibly raiding Helena Bonham Carter’s wizarding wardrobe for most of the past week’s shoot, the boys have behaved since the damage control plan has been in place. Sure, there’s the odd line, rehearsed but not requested, that mentions a fictional fling or too-cutey-selected object of desire – but those are all peanuts. Maybe, Jenna thinks, this could work.

That is, until Tish also decides it’s time to work, chiming a glass of water with a spoon until it sings.

“If I could have everyone’s attention?” she asks, and Jenna’s already blind with scenarios, unsure of what kinds of education she and the boys are in for. Frank’s face turns into a question mark, at least until he spoons more sauce into what’s, due to the semisolid tomatoes,
become the fullest beard she’s ever seen him with. He’s missing his mouth, Jenna realizes, twitching. But to Tish’s question, he leans back, arms like eels, and says, “Yeah, OK, yeah, let’s try this, yeah.” Which is infinitely more agreeable than Jenna feels about the whole kit n’ kaboodle.

“OK, so I know things have been a little tough for you guys, since the documentary. So, I wanted to talk about some organizations where some of you may be interested in volunteering? Colin, I remember you saying that you were interested in working with the elderly, correct?”

“They just get me,” Colin says, staring down a camera like it’s been caught hotwiring his most recent Xmas gift. “They understand I’m a mystery that doesn’t need to be solved.”

“And Jake, I remember you saying you were interested in film and theater, right?”

“Uh,” he goes, “Yeah, as long as they’ve got a fight scene.” Brett throws him a thumbs-up under the table that he shields from Felicity. Frank is nodding along, long after Tish stops talking. His lower lip reaches the orbit of his nose – he’s nearly kissing it. He keeps nodding, giving the boys thumbs-ups as well, his pointed fists tracing circles and semicircles and infinities, the man cabbaged so far out of understanding anything about time or shapes that Jenna realizes, were the cameras not there, they could say anything. She’s wondering how to yank the cameras off of the wall in the most polite way possible when Tish starts handing out pamphlets: OLOC for Colin, the ONE archives for Jake, a shift at a testing center for Liam, where he could scout tattoos, Tish says. The boys are all about it, delivering high-fives that even Frank responds to, Brett telling Felicity – and at least two cameras behind her – that they’ve been thinking about doing more charity work, as part of some cloudy faith. And Jenna feels like the world is falling on her. Before her are too many things for the boys to be, options for lives that end better for them, sure, but that so jaggedly disrupt their presents that they’re not viable. She’s about to ask
Tish if they can go check on dessert in the kitchen – a tiramisu from the same restaurant, which’d also arrived clawed-out and marinara-laden – when Felicity stops blinking and starts humming, nodding unsubtly toward the webcam that none of them have turned on, beaming out at them like a laser.

“Get the windows,” Felicity says, but as she rises, one of them crashes inward, its glass folding into a small infinity of pieces.

“What the fuck,” states Frank, quite pleasantly.

And Jenna’s moving in slow-motion now, channeling all of the boys into the bedroom with Tish, saying that she has no idea what’s going on, just telling all of them to stop screaming. She and Tish are back outside, and Frank has rolled under the table. Felicity’s at the window narrating, counting the folks in gaiters, the one blood-red hat that reads “SAVE AMERICA: FUCK HOWARD DEAN.” When Jenna peels the blinds off of the smaller, rounder window above the kitchen sink, she sees their whole, small stretch of street coated in glitter, full families, sons and daughters and AK-loving niblings, decked out in fatigues, knives, and bullet bags, all at attention, fingers on triggers. Parents and their babies in strollers that say, “My other child is a GLOCK,” searching for a parking spot. At least three pairs of grandparents lowering themselves into motor scooters fringed like ghillie suits.

Matt sticks a perfect face out of the bedroom, and whisper-yells, “Maybe we should’ve gotten fake goatees?”

“Take mine,” mumbles Frank, who laughs until Tish has a hand over his mouth.

Jenna has a second-long nightmare of the Backstreet Boys’ experiments with facial hair – mismatched, almost reptilian – before peering further across what’s become an enormous sea of demonstrators. She dives as a rock hits the kitchen window next to her, its path curved
professionally. When she’s back atop the sink, standing on the edges of all of the knives and cutters Tish had tossed during the earlier cooking attempt, she can make out banners and flags, five glittery stick figures with X-ed out heads, and the letters next to them: SCABB.

“Frank,” Jenna says, scrambling under the table, “Frank, I need you to go deal with all of this.”

Brett emerges from the bedroom saying, “Jenna, a moment?” He’s professional as a bent-over butler – it’s like he’s eaten and absorbed every Grantian mannerism – until he covers the mic on his hip and whispers, “I slipped him some ecstasy.”

“You what?”

“I thought I was handling things! He was gonna come here and start measuring our backs again. I half-expected him to show up with those straight porn magazines, and wink at all of us again, like, ‘here’s the cure, boys, go ahead and start yankin’. Cue sax and all that.”

“Brett,” Jenna says, but then another window falls, and she’s back into the front room.

“A bowling ball!” goes Frank. “Wow! This city! Can you believe it?”

Jenna has half a mind to throw it back, but when she gets close to it, it starts ticking. And then that half a mind is gone, and then the other half of mind, until she’s out the front door, whatever this device is in her hands, looking for somewhere, anywhere to throw it among the laser sights, until it beeps, and then beeps faster. With every Jennaic sliver of sinew, she hurls it away from her, but it goes a few feet, and blows up. The blast rattles her, the walls of the house, the walls of her brain, the PC. Before she can stand, she’s immediately struck with a water balloon full of what she hopes is fake blood and more glitter.

“Fuckin’ AIDS fucks,” yells a guy in a helmet from a nearby truck bed. “Probably tryin’ to infect all our kind right now as we speak!” Another blood balloon pops – this time on her
head, its contents splattering down the side of her face, her glasses whipped onto the pavement. From next to the helmeted man, a woman with teeth like the Aggro Crag spits at her, tosses another.

“You tell those fuckin’ funnyboys that if they show up today, SCABB’s gonna make sure they never show up anywhere again!” she yells. Out from behind the woman pops a pair of kids in gas masks and overalls, toting pistols Jenna hopes are just realistic Nerf models, twirling them around their pointer fingers like seasoned rodeo clowns. And then, from behind the kids, diagonal and wobbling like a bloomed mandala, jolt clusters of flak-jacketed protestors, holding signs anti-everyone and everything inside of her house. One of the SCABB demonstrators burns a rainbow flag. Two more huck, somehow, three balloons between them – one hits Jenna in the eyes and she doesn’t witness the arrangement. She wants to say something pragmatic, incisive – something to stab back and cause a regret to permeate through them, but instead she just runs inside, her hands sliding across her knob until the door rattles behind her, as the crowd and their sirens holler, as more objects pop, she hopes, into the ground or the air.

“Holy fuck,” goes Grossman, “Look what they did to you! We need to get out of here!” She aims for Brett’s hand but grabs Frank’s, satisfied with protecting at least the guy who’s fronting the bill, leaping from a newly-absent window, the two of them bungled into a heap outside. “Run,” goes Felicity, “Run!”

Jenna shakes, exhales glistening, red gunk. She thinks: how? Then, she remembers the grieving parents from the Nightline investigation, the punching bag, knocked down and probably reerected with her face taped to it, maybe Frank’s and the boys’, too. Maybe they rotate, or staple them all on at once, so they can tear away and fall down like wet post-its when the families of queer children that never wanted them land a good hit. Jenna wonders, in order: what she must
look like now, like a casualty from a glammed-up Mortal Kombat, how they’ll explain it all on camera; how all of these people with Indiana and Okie license plates made such good time to The Golden State; how she feels – or if she’s even able to feel – about what’s been enacted upon her and further threatened.

Which is when sirens start blaring, and the whole mess of people clear out of her lawn and the newly-glittering, newly-mock-bloody wedges of Los Angeles, her tiny lawn up into dirt smoke. Men with large voices shout “move, move,” and she hears walkie-talkies, and sees families weaving, enfilade-style, through vehicles to get away from the scene, cross the open areas of the street to be anywhere else. Someone outside of her house yells her full name.

“We need to run,” Tish says, throwing ski jackets over the boys, blankets and cushions, an unhung curtain over Brett.

“You need to do no such thing, Professor Ayler” says Rondo Hitch, who opens the door with one hand, nodding toward the brilliant, red light of the webcam. “You’re lucky the bureau was watching.”

“#”

“You’re safe now,” says Rondo, once the dust has settled, though he’s the only one who seems to believe it. A trio of booty-bumped vans, tarps over them in case of aerial spying, has backed into the hairline yard in front of Jenna and Tish’s house. None of them’s fooling anybody, but the neighbors have at least dispersed, the guys in official-looking vests waving their arms around until the others’ cameras were safely behind windows. The vans, which Jenna, Tish, and the boys are lead into, read MOVING and PLUMBING and RONDO HITCH FENCING AND JOINTS. Climbing into a backseat, Jake tests the waters with a weed joke. Though there’s a trail of bloody, glittery footprints from the doorstep, and the windows are still
full of naked air, and there are clusters of lasagna, somehow, in the lawn, the big man shakes his head and says it’s nice there’s finally time for levity.

“Levity?” Tish is going, “What the fuck? And you were watching?”

“Not very grateful for the person who saved you,” Rondo singsongs.

“Saved us?” Tish asks, “Do you see our house? Can you see Jenna right now?” Turning to Jenna, she goes, “Are you with us? Can you say something?”

Jenna is certain, as she drips into the ridges of the van and the fringes of their lawn, that what’s happened could qualify as a crime. But she feels somehow distant from naming herself a victim of it. The ire of SCABB wasn’t directed specifically at her – barring her body, barring her house – it felt more abstract, sweeping, like she was a bird flying accidentally before a bullet. She tells herself that while it was bad, it wasn’t that bad, and then when she looks up at Tish, and realizes she hasn’t said anything yet, she pushes off of the pumper with her clean hand, walks back behind the broken lock of her front door, and cries, quivering, globules of whatever substance from the balloons now congeal around her now plopping onto the floor. She smears more of it on her face when whoever’s behind her passes through the same door, until it turns out to be Tish, all of the boys in the doorway, the voice of Rondo going, “come back,” over and over until he threatens to bust through all of them.

“I’m fine,” Jenna says. “Just give me a chance to reboot.” She hears the boys all sort of whimper a little, snatches a glance and sees Rondo’s doing it too, definitively not a big softy but at least skilled at reading the room. Tish says she’s gonna nervous-clean until Jenna’s ready to talk. She rifles through Swiffers across the spectrum of matter, ends on a vacuum. The glass is off the floor, which is where the webcam’s head, still flopping with electricity, finds its final platform. Tish is kinder with Felicity’s cameras, unplugging them and tilting their lenses toward
the wall, an audience never meant to be part of the house. Jenna moves to the doorstep, shoes on concrete, and hears Tish moving around their bedroom, likely surfing for any other technology, almost definitely opening Jenna’s rogue utensil drawer, which, turns out, is where all the missing spoons went. Jenna revels stiffly in this moment of illogic – the feeling of nothing re: being watched by the government versus the shame of hiding a small secret from her spouse.

The spoons clatter into the sink, as resonant as a virtual chime. Tish is inside wheeling some heavy object around – maybe the vacuum again, Jenna thinks, imagining more of her wife in her efficient way, until Tish is next to her, and it’s a suitcase. Hitch approaches them again, Tish says, “I swear to god,” and he’s off, waving a clipboard at them, coughing unsubtly to take all of the time they need.

“Jenna,” Tish says, “When this man showed up and said he’d been monitoring us, you were the only one who wasn’t surprised.”

It’s not a question so much as it is an opportunity for further recursion on Jenna’s part, Tish’s bullshit detector having obviously been sharpened and polished during her explorations without Jenna, Jenna’s ability to turn circular present only in the clusters of tissue around her heart. She could lie, she thinks. She could lie and get away with it, Tish’s eyes as red as the webcam’s next to her, a votive, silent crier. But Jenna lapses back into logic. There are rules, of course. Universal ones, and not just the kinds that NBC owns. If she can compartmentalize boy bands, performance, and everything else, then surely she can compartmentalize marriage as well. The threads float before her like webchains, imaginary neon greens peaking from between the curdled glitter of fake blood in the corners of her eyes, the sun setting into them as she tries to chain them together. Tish, as the wife of a part of the fame machine, has to realize that she’s part of it, her body absorbed just like the actors and models and boy bands. She should be eternally
supportive, around Jenna, in front of her, putting her first. Isn’t that what the boys convince their audience they’ll do? Isn’t that what love is?

“Jenna, I know today has been rough for you, too, but you sound like a complete idiot.”

“I’m doing what you said,” is all Jenna says, “I’m establishing a system of rules.”

“OK, that’s,” Tish goes, “OK, I’m not having this fight tonight.” Her hands are around Jenna’s, then, her thumbs across Jenna’s palms, beneath the murk that’s still across her. She breathes, seems to whisper until Jenna reads it as blank. “I’m going to go stay with my sister for a little while. I need a little bit of time.” And she’s off, into the sunset, waving goodbye at the guys, stopping to give Rondo the finger, until she’s in her car, and down the street, and just what Jenna had been seeing of her for so long – an outline.

Jenna’s before them, then, Rondo retelling what they’ve lived though – how they’re all safe now that he’s around, how they’ve been keeping tabs on the band to ensure their cultural context, how, well, no, they won’t be able to hunt down the SCABB members, since they’re not actually a terrorist organization. “They just got a little passionate,” is what Rondo says, “But, hey, you guys are probably fine now.” He’s patting himself on the back, in the literal sense, and also all of the agents around him, a few of which have shown up with ice cream sandwiches. Brett’s still in his curtain, waving it like a cape, a matador to Jake’s bull behind the cluster of vans. It is as though all of them have fast-forwarded to another future, one far removed from the day. Even when Jenna shows up, its results still all over her body, they are laughing with each other, eternally cared for.

“Why shouldn’t we be in a good mood?” Rondo asks. “Nobody’s dead! No real harm was threatened – it’s just property damage, right? And that almost definitely happened because your address is look-up-able online, see? Man, this shit is all basic. I could’ve told you all of it months
ago. I mean, really, you just got protested against. And we cleared it all up. What are you so upset about?”

“I’m trying to help these kids, Rondo. I’m trying to protect them, because look at me now – I’m what happens when you do the wrong thing in front of the wrong people. I keep trying, and they keep fucking it up.” She doesn’t care that the boys all within earshot, that Tish has flown right past them on a one-way ticket to the valley of elsewhere, that the five bandmates have become so suddenly surrounded by anger and threat that they’ve formed, technically, a trauma tortellini.

“Whoa,” he says, which is all he’s got until long after the sun’s set, when one of his agents pops out of the PLUMBING van with a phone, corded into some back part of the vehicle. He listens to it, hands it to Jenna, and says, “Wilson.” Frank’s talking through a cold compress from a hotel bed, saying he booked separate rooms for he and Felicity like a responsible adult, though Jenna can hear her in the background asking how safe Brett is.

“So you remember we’ve got that promo to film, right?” Frank asks. “Can you make sure the boys are still on for that? I’m not sure I’m gonna make it in tomorrow. Must’ve had wayyy too much to drink. Feel like my head’s–”

Which is when Felicity chimes in with, “Hey, I was just passing by Frank’s room and I heard you talking! Anyway, I have a feeling you’re gonna veto the footage for today, so could I come over in a little bit to film around it? Maybe some befores and afters? Get a few shots of the boys looking regretful that they couldn’t perform for the crowd, maybe? Elicit sympathy.”

Jenna throws up her hands, just sort of nods, and soon the team lines them up in front of a camera rig. It gets colder. She looks around for a cardboard box or cartoonish tin can, a thing she could kick without consequence. Matt says something milquetoast about wishing he could have
performed even for the people who don’t like him, since he believes in second chances, turns his eyes all big and weepy. Brett gives a long statement about coming together that makes Jenna want to barf. Colin says he’s sad he couldn’t have been in front of this new and obviously beautiful – in that they are a group of people – group of people, and Felicity yells, “Cut,” claps Colin on the shoulder and says, “You don’t get sad. You get angry. Man band, not boy band, like Frank said, remember?” They reshoot. Liam gives the finger and it is, by some magic, the most endearing he’s looked. But then Jake goes up, disappointingly sincere, and says, “I’m worried about Jenna and I hope she’s OK.”

“Beautiful,” Felicity says. “We can use that.”


“I don’t–” Jake starts, the sides of his lips curling into the specific type of uncomfortable smile that only occurs when a person on-camera sees something unexpected go wrong behind the lens. It’s happened on *The Bachelor* frequently. “I’m actually really worried? Should we talk about this off–? Are you–”

“Turn the cameras off, Felicity. Right now.”

“You’re the one approving the footage, Ms. Muldoon.”

“Yeah, and I’m not approving this. Off. Now.”

And maybe it’s the night air, the paper moon nothing against the infringing cold, but it’s like everything around Jenna and Jake hardens into an ice sculpture – like as soon the crew 76es the recording lights, they become statues in a gallery.
“You know what I’m talking about, Jake. You’re acting out, because of that thing I haven’t let you do.”

“I – Jenna, this is all you’re giving me. I don’t know what else I can–”

“All I’m giving you? Do you not see everything around you? Do you not have meals and a personal trainer and hundreds of thousands of people who love you? Who gave you that?” she asks, batting her fist against a van. “Did you do that yourself, or–”

“OK,” Brett says, waving his hands, stepping between them. “We’re settling this later. Everyone’s mad. Fuck it, even I’m mad.”

“Then any of you could fucking show it,” Jenna says, like she’s auditioning for the ring of fire, feeling like Frank in one of his rages.

Shaking her head, Felicity says, “We really should have filmed that.”

Jake walks beside her, his voice so choppy it’s like it’s full of reverb. She keeps staring even when he says, “Jenna, I–” and “I’m sorry – I don’t know what to do.” An arm of one of the other boys absorbs him – Jenna doesn’t see who it belongs to – and she’s silent, an automaton with a battery at zero-percent, still glaring forward as they all pile into a hired sedan. The boys whisper in the vehicle, afraid of being heard, wondering what, as a group, they’ve all done wrong to switch Jenna with whichever sort of monster’s appeared in her place today. She is ready to crash through anything, make walls and people alike look like failed gymnasts, crumpled, seized up into shapes their bodies should never have held.

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If you were to enter Jenna’s apartment immediately after she did again, spy through some beam of a satellite, you’d see one shoe still leaving footprints all the way to her couch, where it’s flung against her wall, leaving a stain that looks like the place an intruder was forced into doing
their best imitation of the watermelon in *Glory*. She would lie face-down for a while, sandwiched between cushions, padding against the outside world. After a while, you’d see her attempt dinner in a microwave, leave the plastic film on the tray twice, cook it too long so it melts on top of the food, try it anyway, eat half of it, throw it out. Then, you’d see the receiver in her hands, hear the dial tone constant and dull next to her, dopplerling as she wrings her palms about it. She’d press a few buttons, hang up, press them again, hang up again, make another failed go at the microwave. Then, she’d fumble the connection ports on the heavy hard drive she’d toted in, squat to her tower and up to her monitor, waiting to hear the ping of success, her first of the day. You’d watch her with the phone again, lobbing it lightly against her fingers, like she’s warming up for a pitch. She’d get five numbers into the combination she’s clearly considering. She’d type them almost unconsciously, and then her eyes would zap further open, and she’d slam it into the hook again. But no one sees this, and there is nobody spying on Jenna Muldoon anymore – she is important enough to target, but deemed not important enough to demonstrate against once the point’s been made. She is without other people.

Aside from those on her screen – the boys, who Felicity gave small, low-cost, ostensibly-sturdy cameras to, told them anyway to do their best to leave them unbroken. This, visible because Liam filmed it, sticking out his tongue as Ms. Grossman explains the rental policy, that they’re, in essence, taking the studio’s money if they destroy her technology – not hers. Liam cycles through peace signs and the sign of the horns, brattily makes a circle with his fingers and mouths, “you lost the game.” Jenna laughs the same way her mom would when someone else told a joke she didn’t want her daughter to know she found funny. She sighs, and says, “These dweebs.”
The boys’ footage is jagged, and they swap cameras with whiplash-initiating frequency. Colin extends his arm to record maybe thirty percent of him watching the rare Bucks game broadcast for an audience operating on Pacific Standard. Then, Brett talks to his camera about his favorite Broadway shows, how he’d think about pursuing a role as Corny Collins in this new *Hairspray* show, even if it meant dying his hair blonde. Behind him, Liam passes a few times, at least once on a skateboard, fast enough for a crash to be inimical to his priceless teeth. Cut to Matt giving a full introduction, saying, “Hello to Jenna and anybody else watching this – I hope you enjoy this gateway to my life, even though I imagine you probably know a lot about it.” His footage is cute, genuinely. It’s a shame Jenna can’t authorize the use of any of it – in the background of his bathroom, which he shows off as part of an endearingly misguided tour, there’s a mountain of creams, ointments, pills in orange cylinders Jenna hopes are the flukey, anti-aging supplements you can buy outside of most gas stations, from one of twenty-plus leathery white women who Jenna’s not convinced aren’t all the same person.

There’s footage of unfinished apartments, climbing on roofs. The boys are still staying at Toluca Hills. By choice. Jenna’s offered them apartments downtown, closer to the rich and famous she and Frank tell them they’ll forever be, by beaches and concierge services, sommeliers. She’s even had Frank pop in and talk them through places so far removed from the new old-Marriott vibes Toluca Hills gives off that they may as well exist on another planet. But every time they get the chance to leave, they stick around. She wonders if it’s because they enjoy being the place’s one success story that each new generation of slashers and singles can look at. Maybe it’s because they’re close to each other, in the college campus sense. Here’s footage of Brett walking down a flight of stairs.
“By my authority as band leader,” Brett says to a closed door, “I order you to let me in.” He pounds on it until Jake, hair unstyled and thus in the shape of a mop’s disgruntled twin, eyes still caked over with sleep, goes, “Mmph,” bows in a theatrical, practiced way, and flicks on his light switch. A clock on an end table, which Brett zooms in and out from – manually, with improvised whooshing – reads 3:33. “Make a wish, buddy,” Brett says, and Jake flops face-down onto his bed.

“My dude Jake hasn’t filmed anything,” Brett says to his camera. “So I figured I’d come help him out. Welcome to Late Night with Brett Lazar – thank you, thank you – and let’s hear it for our in-house band, Jacob and The Bennetts, playing us out right now with the song of their choice of musical number…”

When Jake flips onto his back and sits up, he’s switched into performance mode, grinning despite the morass spilling like tendrils over his head, eyes still dopily half-shut, lips red from licking them in his sleep. When he launches into a two-minute cover of Sisqo’s magnum opus, devastating in both its rapidity and flow, Jenna hears herself snort. Jake shakes what little ass he has. Brett pretends to smack it. Jenna knows she can’t use this, but it’s like all the crud she’s had to scrape off of her today messed up her efficiency bone – she keeps watching.

“So, Jake, thanks for joining us on Late Night. I know you’re a busy guy: singing, dancing, setting fashion trends. What are those boxers, Old Navy?”

“Yeah,” he says. “They’re the only thing about me that’s old, though. I mean, have you seen this face?”

Brett mimes an earpiece. “I’m checking with everyone in the crowd, and everyone’s saying they love it. They’re all about it. They with you had three. And that t-shirt – tell us, Jake,
“Unfortunately no, Brett – this one’s Banana Republic.”

“Ah, what a shame. The crowd does not love that. Can you hear them? They’re silent.”

“Sorry to disappoint. Maybe I should start singing?”

Another verse of “Thong Song” later, and Brett has moved the camera to a stable surface, positioned himself in an armchair next to Jake’s bed. He wears a full suit, while Jake swings a leg the wrong way and flashes the camera a haunch. Brett has, somewhere, acquired cue cards, “Late Night,” drawn on the sides of them that face the camera, in Sharpie. It is incredible that the two of them – even on this flimsy, medium-definition device, even in the single-digit hours of the morning – remain such naturals. She thinks of Bobby Brown, of Ralph and Johnny drawing lines to cordon off New Edition’s biggest star. But here these two are, friends in a way that can’t be faked for a camera, supportive as much as they’re able before the clock strikes, and their coaches turn into wake-up calls for dance practice.

“So, first question,” Brett goes, clearly thinking of one on the spot. “The lights are always off in your room – why’s that?”

A flicker of an exhale from Jake, a gulp he catches himself swallowing. He does what years of training has taught him not to, and stares briefly into the camera, thinking about who’s watching this, hours into the future, if they’ll catch him slipping. Then, he’s back in performance mode.

“Well, Brett. I was sleeping.”

“Ah, right. Sleep. You know it, you love it – sleep! As you can hear from the crowd, they’re big fans of it.”
“I wouldn’t be surprised if they’re doing it right now!”

Brett rolls his eyes and throws a card at him, spins it like Gambit. It notches into the low collar of Jake’s v-neck, and the two of them erupt, Brett even losing his stage laugh, releasing a low, nasally, “haaaaa.”

“Looks like someone hasn’t been skipping chest day,” Brett says.

“Ah, yeah. Well, it’s important to look good, right? Sells records as much as the music does.”

“Yeah, does it ever. Man, I remember buying a 98 Degrees album for – uh, wait. Cut that. I remember buying a Destiny’s Child album because Beyonce is out of this world, and the minute I hear ‘Bootylicious’ come on, I like – it’s the weirdest thing, it’s like my body takes over, and my ass just starts going, and–”

“You’re probably gonna wanna cut that, too.”

“Yeah, wait, shit,” Brett says. “Sorry, Jenna. Cut out like, the last five minutes or so.”

“She’s probably pissed at you right now.”

“Yeah, as always. Sorry,” he says, waving his hands. “OK, Jake, now for the real part. Please put on some pants.”

“Oh god. At this hour?”

“Yup!” And Brett’s in the door, saying, “And do it fast, before I yell that one of the Moneyboys is in his undies past a very open door.”

“They’ll come out and ask you why you put yours back on,” Jake says. He stumbles into a pair of sweatpants adorned on one side with the smiling, scararily bland face of UCSD’s King Triton, gets one leg in, and then bees it, landing face-first on the carpet. Brett’s so chuffed he drops the camera, lands on the floor as well – first on his knees, and then horizontal, clutching
his sides. It’s here Jenna realizes that he’s probably a little drunk – a close-up of his face in the foreground paints it, even in limited pixels, a bright, flushed pink. When Jake helps him back up, saying, “heh heh heh,” sarcastic, like it’s a bad joke, Brett pulls Jake in for a hug, and the camera cuts out. Jenna, her note-taking pen now discarded to the surface of her pad, wants to yell at Brett. She pulls back in her chair, rubs her knuckles into her eyes, and stares at an empty wall, wondering what sparked her so quickly into protection. She remembers Jake in her office, tap-dancing like the shit-eating little idiot he is, whipping through show tunes the same way her friends in college would, him saying he breaks into song faster than Colin breaks out into cold sores, trying for an hour that Jenna could have spent answering emails to flip his shoe off of his foot and onto his hand.

“–pressed,” Brett says, the camera active again in Toluca’s computer room. “So here’s something that’ll really cheer you up,” Brett now yells, as thought suddenly unaware of the hundreds of sleeping talents populating every room around them. “All of these pages should’ve loaded by now, so here! Is! A! Uh, hold on, this one’s loading again – Here! Is! A bunch of your best moments!”

Jenna knows she can’t use this footage, either – camera-on-camera action is distended, like water’s been splashed over a TV plugged in with only one prong. But they rifle through video and image of Jake at various concerts, holding a bulbous cookie on top of a float in a Disney parade, his first split jump over Colin and Liam, a microphone stand in his fist the moment he lands. There are old hairstyles, the bowls and mops – “Jenna, for the love of god, I know we’re fighting right now, but please cut that part out” – and soggy half-curls leaking as he ascends from a pool holding a beach ball. One picture shows him in the glasses Jenna barred him from wearing months ago, which she asked him to throw out the window of a moving vehicle.
because he was a nerd no more. But then, there’s a video of him narrating the merits of the newly-introduced Sorcerer in D&D’s third edition to a group of fans at a signing table, a mucousy puff from his nose when another fan breaks the line to ask if he’s excited for 3.5. “Are you joking?” he asks them. “Does a bear sh– uh, defecate in the woods?” Brett wobbles the camera back up to the pair of them, to say, “Holy shit, look at those bangs.”

“I really – let’s just agree to never talk about them ever again.”

Then, the camera’s back on the monitor, where Jenna recognizes the paths of other cameras, angled on thick cords, and zooming across the first stadium the boys ever sold out. RIMAC buzzes as the hooked lenses swoop down to meet the boys, all of them bowing as the credits on this MTV Concert special begin to roll. The boys embrace, jump into each others’ arms, high five. And then a crew member points somewhere in the crowd. Jake beams so fully, screams for whomever he’s pointing at to stand and wave, and he’s dear in an unrehearsable way. In front of that lens, Brett snickers. In front of him, face nearly glued to her monitor, Jenna shatters, but the spaces between her broken parts feel full. She remembers Jake bolting off of the stage, nudging into the first notions of confidence that would later help him transfer his persona. She remembers worrying that, then and there, he’d attempt a backflip. But instead, he ran to her, and said he’d seen his parents, and thanked Jenna for surprising him, so unexpectedly. And she’d done a thing she’d hated and embraced him, told him she was glad he’d seen them, didn’t say anything about the fact that they’d shown up on their own, bought a ticket like anyone else. She’d mailed them cash, later – the ticket prices – and the envelope was returned to sender.

On loop, the video plays multiple times, and Brett and Jake just sit there and watch it, and Jenna watches them watch it. She blows her nose on her forearm, wipes it away, apologizes to the empty room, the blinking computer, to none of the boys that can hear her, to Tish and Frida.
and Seonghun and all of the other people she’s molded into stepping stools. Around her, the city whips palm fronds seized by wind. All across the galaxies of the rich and famous, lights on porches are whisked away, credenzas rattle into walls, and potted plants timidly uproot. Hearing the storm shock her windows, Jenna feels like this moment is symbolic, like she’s transforming – not a girl, but yet a woman – like she’s finally broken and reformed into a machine with a heart, like she’s staring at Dorothy, finally confirmed as her friend, doe-eyed, babbling, off less to seek and more to become the wizard, the wonderful wizard.

As she’s about to weep – to plan the schedule of her repentance – Autoplay larrups her into a video dated last night. It’s much fuzzier, angled toward the roof of Toluca Hills but still encompassing most of the complex. It looks not like Los Angeles, but a noir-ish caricature of it – the type of apprentice-level cinematic magic a sophomore at CalArts would use to show that place designated as one of the world’s prettiest has some grit to it, some shadow. Everything seems longer, including those shadows. Just as Jenna tries to place them as shadows of palm trees or the parked, upcharged U-Hauls that patrol the area in the daytime, since people are in and out of Toluca Hills by the minute, some of them start moving, turn into a person. They’re small-bodied, but, in not being part of the swirling environment, they glow.

She recognizes his coat – a black, white, and neon purple windbreaker commissioned for last year’s press tour that can’t be great, in either sound or appearance, for the type of stealth that he’s going for – before his face angles into a streetlight, his wet hair spilling around his face like he’s just swum back from rocking the boat. He bolts in bursts. Each time he stops – each time he’s further from the complex – he turns back to look at it. It’s the same way – the same wistfulness a kid as young as him shouldn’t even know how to begin approaching – that Jake would leave her office after a long lunch hour of wondering about his family, or gossiping about
some of the other boys. Like he doesn’t want to go, but knows that the people around him – the people like Jenna – will shift him into a more proper place if he doesn’t. When Jake finally passes off-screen, the camera cuts.

Autoplay shifts to Liam’s chin encompassing half the screen, as he balances it on his shoulder saying, “I’m gonna beat Melee’s classic mode with every character.” But Jenna clicks the backwards double arrow, and rewatches the clip of Jake sneaking out again. She pauses it each time she thinks she sees a different person emerge from the shadowy tendrils of palm trees or the glittering cent-signs of vending machines, as though a discovery at the proper millisecond will reveal his intent. She wonders: sex? drugs? She knows it’s not rock and roll. As she scrolls through the rest of the videos – Colin floating potential secrets as Brett folds laundry and asks every few minutes if Colin wants to try having one, Liam reviewing hotel shampoos he’s collected by taste, Matt announcing he’ll read through a Moneyboys presser in a British accent and then invoking a voice that sounds strangely Jamaican – she begins to do what Jenna Muldoon has never done until today. Sweat. She knows she has first pass on all of the footage – that Felicity will only see what Jenna wants her to see. But what if she misses something? Plus, Jake is a performer – he doesn’t do things on his own, unless there’s someone coaching or applauding behind a curtain. Who could be pulling his pretty, manicured strings? Even worse – what if he’s become independent? Jenna imagines headlines adjusted via post-midnight tips directly from the source – GAY BOY BAND MEMBER ENDS MULTIPLE CAREERS, or MONEYBOYS’ JAKE BENNETT IS ENORMOUS NANCY, WORLD IS APPROPRIATELY TERRIFIED – of explosions that domino into tanking Jake’s career, and those of the other boys, and Frank’s, and hers.
Next to the computer, on the sliver of wall between living room and kitchen, sits a phone – traffic-barrier orange, glistening from disuse. Why talk – both Jenna and Tish had thought – when messaging, emailing is so much more efficient? The phone is so smooth that her hands glide over it, and it dangles like an oversized bungee jumper from its socket as when it falls, rattling against the tile. She wipes her palms on her sweatpants, and clutches the receiver, dialing one of the many numbers she’d long ago forced herself to memorize, thinking – back when she’d first started as a manager of boys – that if a parent or grandparent or any person who had cared about one of her kids had called in a panic, she didn’t want to end up the kind of manager who wasn’t able to contact them reflexively. And while, as she dials the number to Jake’s room, she doesn’t understand which reflex of hers is kicking back against the anxious hammer of his possible removal, there’s still a pang of relief that hoodwinks her brain into feeling like she’s solving something.

By the third ring, she’d be willing to admit to an imagined Tish that she was nervous. By the fourth ring, her teeth grind. Once the call goes to voicemail, she can hear the receiver beginning to call. Jenna is torn between a pair of equivalent dreads – that Jake could have burst from the band into the arms or onto the lap of someone he sees as more supportive than Jenna, gone rogue like all of his favorite movie characters, or that Jake could have dipped from the equation entirely, and that this is all a test run for when she’ll have to act oblivious to a panicked, biological family. She wishes that she had let him sing more queenily, or do any of the Broadway numbers during intermission when none of the other guys had energy, or returned one of his hugs with more than a stiff arm. With each unanswered call, scenarios new and severe bloom through her brain – Jake swan-diving from a bridge, or 6-stepping into a moving vehicle. The phone still in her hand, she grabs her keys from beside the computer, where the video’s been
paused on the last part of Jake to walk out of the warped screen. She is ready to make like Mazda and zoom zoom all the way to the complex, to whip like an uncoiled spring up and down the wobbling grid of Double Dubuque until she can scoop him into her car and bring him back.

She is halfway beyond her door, one shoe off and the other slapping against her doorstep, as she hears his voice crumble out from the receiver, a fried moan.

“Jake, are you OK?”

“Mmm… g’morning,” he slurs.

“Yes or no?”

“Yessur no what?”

“Are you safe?”

“Safe from weird phone calls? No.”

“Jake, this is Jenna. Can you – look, are you OK? Do you have all of your limbs? Are you in, like, a halfway-decent mental state?”

“Negative on that last part. But that’s probably just because it’s three in the morning and I’m talking to my boss. When I should be sleeping. Y’know. Like a normal person. Did I miss a call time? Did someone die?”

“No, Jake,” she starts. She can’t catch herself before she sighs unprofessionally into the receiver, parsing that this is the first time she’s spoken to him since they fought. In the pause, the pair of them breathing static back across the wire, she wants to rearrange herself back into the shape of a person wronged. But as she tries to accrete enough anger to regress to the Jenna of what’s become yesterday, she feels her grip loosen on the receiver. It feels like releasing a throat. Though she doesn’t feel like she was unjustified in yelling at Jake earlier, there is still a part of her that wants to apologize – to assure him that she’s still trying to protect him from anything
that would steal him or his talents away from her or the agency. When she tries to think back to how shattered she felt earlier, she sees him instead, pupils shrunk, quivering, wondering how and why a person he thought he’d won over into a shaky form of trust had turned on him so frequently and so deeply. She sees herself lecturing about the good of the band as he keeps sloughing off pieces of himself, hurling them into a kind of mouth, until there’s nothing left of him. As she’s about to tell him she’s sorry – that it’s that kind of self-removal she had been worried about, that he’d disappear before she had time to save him, she hears him sigh on the other end, remembering the fight as well.

“Is this just ‘cuz you’re mad at me?”

“No,” she says. And she knows she can still apologize, but as she gums the air, she feels the moment – as brittle and quick to escape as so many dreams of fame in the city – flop into a safer kind of performance. Part of it, sure, is the prevention of confusion – that she doesn’t want Jake (or anyone) to see her as flighty, the type of person who can zap into anger and then back into a doting manager. Or that her anger has less meaning, like Frank’s. But part of it’s also that she doesn’t want to admit – to herself or to him – that she was so willing to forgive him.

She steps back inside her house, sees herself in the mirror she hangs her keyes under, mouth moving like a fish’s. In some other dimension – one in which she hasn’t messed up so much over the past few days – Tish is telling her that she needs to better compartmentalize, that if she doesn’t, she’s going to default back into the dispassionate Jenna that could sell sun to your average Angelino. But she doesn’t want to tell Jake that she has footage of him leaving. That would prevent her from finding out where he had gone – from having the only thing more valuable to a manager than money: leverage. Worse, it could make him even more ready to slip out at night than he could be at present.
“We, uh,” Jenna says, “We got a weird call. Someone said they saw you running around downtown.”

“Right,” Jake says. “Well, sorry as always to disappoint you, but that was probably the discount version of me. Mind if I go to bed now?” His voice is almost comic in how close he’s remembered to move it toward a grunt – the kind of stunt a SNL alum would attempt, to show they’re also able to do dramatic work, a new version of *Punch-Drunk Love*.

“Yeah,” she says. “Glad you’re OK.”

“I’m sure,” he says. And then he hangs up. And Jenna Muldoon slides onto the floor of her apartment, regretting how much she’ll have to clean in the morning, and saying, “Sorry,” to herself and to Jake and Tish and everyone she’s never been able to say it to in any sort of genuine way, her chin moving like it’s got a pair of lines up to the corners of her lips, a phalanx of nuts and bolts mouthing, “Sorry,” against the curdling of a new day, until she slides onto her couch and falls asleep, going, “Sorry, sorry, sorry.”

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A double order of black coffee nestled in one half of the cardboard carrier Frank left on her desk when she was late this morning, with a note reading, “Everybody gets one – except my best employee, who gets two,” Jenna slaps the side of her printer. When nobody on the bus had sat next to her, and she’d caught the kind of puffy-eyed reflection most people in Tinseltown would call pre-op, she’d stopped into CVS and dropped more money than she was proud to admit to the cashier on a pair of sunglasses she’s so far committed to wearing indoors. The day’s schedule – which she usually prints and slaps onto Frank’s desk – is caught halfway between an inked reality and a hard blankness, twisted into its wheels and laserjets. When even unhinging
the plastic flap on its back doesn’t free the paper, she strikes the printer again, and transcribes the whole thing on a post-it note, which also gets mangled in her pocket, but is at least portable.

“Back when I was a kid, I had to work on a farm,” Frank lies to the boys. “We understood the value of hard work, because we had to do it. We were committed to our careers. And—” when Jenna’s completely into the conference room, where the boys are autographing headshots “Oh, thank god. Jenna’s here.” Liam drops his marker – a thick, silver cylinder – and Frank reminds him that anyone who makes a reject is paying its dollar value. Liam signs his name around the unintentional mark he made, not realizing that his name sits just below the end of his nose, like a fancy mustache. When he tries to slide it onto the finished pile, Frank says, “ohp, no, ohp, up, up, up,” the same way Jenna’s only seen repeated by cud-chewing prison tower guards in two-star movies. She’s not one to talk, though – her sunglasses look straight out of Cops.

Frank isn’t blind to this when he asks her to walk outside, reminding the boys that the window that’ll be between them and the hallway is transparent, so he’ll be able to see any – and this is the word he uses – tomfoolery, and then opening with, “Bad boys, bad boys, whatcha gonna do?”

“It’s been a long couple of hours, Frank.”

“Yeah, and I still haven’t heard a Thank You, given how I basically did your job for the past few hours.” He points with both hands toward the coffee in each of hers. “Not to mention the double-fisting I’ve OK’d for you and you alone.”

“Sure,” she says, “Thanks, Frank.”

“Your mouth to my ears. Anyway, they’re all still terrified from your episode yesterday. I made sure of that.” His arms slide backwards into the jacket he’d been holding, and from its
pocket he removes a pair of sunglasses that look like Jenna’s, but with diamond-like droplets smeared across their edges. “So I’m gonna go.”

“It’s 10:15.”

“Yeah, and I’ve been dealing with them for the past hour and fifteen. Tell ‘em I’m also gonna go sign some things – but some papers, or paychecks. More important things.”

“Are you gonna be around, or—”

“I’m about to drop an enormous shit, Jenna. Like, it’s crowning as we speak. I dunno if our plumbing will ever recover. Oh, and Felicity Grossman said she’s still waiting on the first round of footage. Anyway, if you need me, I’ll be in my—” he winks, “—office.”

People say that though it’s got a relatively set geographical area, Los Angeles’ size – given its influence, the desires of so many people to live within its confines, the dead dreams bobbing up into heads of those who’ve moved away – is immeasurable. But Jenna’s headache might have it beat. She sets one of her cups down, and smooths the post-it note on the back of a hand. Her brain’s rattling around at a BMP greater than that in “B.O.B.,” but her memory’s still there, and might even be sharper in the fugue of everything else. She picks up the other coffee, attempts to swing the door handle with an elbow until Matt – like all of the boys, not looking at her – pops up to let her into the room, and sits in the seat Frank had left warm.

“I was unprofessional yesterday,” Jenna Muldoon admits. “It won’t happen again.” When none of the boys say anything – they just look at the pictures of their faces, or at the table or the floor – she tries, “I hope we can move past it,” which at least gets a few mm-hmms.

Jenna goes through the rest of the day’s schedule – finishing up the signing, dance training with the new choreographer, and masculinity training with an acting coach that Frank’s brought in. Frank’s notes on the schedule – which he’s finally figured out how to type, which
Jenna has also removed upon reprinting, though she’s not able to forget about as she talks the boys through the day – mentioned that both the choreographer and acting coach are former drill sergeants.

Colin raises his hand.

“Colin, you can just talk. We’re not in school.”

“But Frank said—”

“Is Frank here?”

“OK,” he says, his nearly-absent lips curling. “Could I talk to you for a sec?” When he’s in her office – door locked and checked, rumors traded about whether or not Frank’s gonna treat her office to some carpeting – any dreaminess melts from his face, and it’s like the collective spirit of anyone traveling across the Tappan Zee at this very moment has whipped across the nation to collect something from their meteoric son, landing on Colin instead: “I’m P.O.’d,” he goes, “Fuck.” His voice cracks as he curses, the band’s meatiest member transforming again into one of those Rodeo Drive purse dogs. From his seat, he looks in every corner of the room – the monitor’s etched vents, the intersitials of the paneling – until it’s like every personality he’s attempted to don in this two-minute span goes whooshing out of him. He cries, spits a little. Jenna’s got tissues on hands, offers him one of those miniature boxes of Golden Grahams that the cereal people have started sending more frequently, though she takes the monogrammed sticky note off of it that says, “A little bee told us you’re doing multi-packs now?” He empties the box into his mouth, downs it in a gulp so dry Jenna can hear it rattle his throat.

“Gosh,” he says, “Sorry. I’m just like – remember how when we talked about me being the only one who can be myself in front of the crowd and you said it’s a good thing? I just – I really don’t mean to be disrespectful here, but it’s not. It’s really not. Like, I wake up every
morning, and I wonder how much of myself is left, and it always feels like more of it’s gone?
And I just kind of fill it in with whatever’s left? And—” gabbing across his whole personal
universe in a matter of seconds. It’s the way kids these days are supposed to feel, is Jenna’s first
thought – like they contain infinities individual to themselves until they’re easily summarized.
That’s why options – like, say, one boy out of five – are so important to an audience. Problem is,
he’s a kid who’s supposed to be shoveling that thought into others – he’s supposed to be one of
those options. That he’s crying – and that she’s just yelled at the boys yesterday – doesn’t help.

“OK,” Jenna says, “Let’s talk.”
“OK,” he says, and that’s it.

“Go backwards, maybe? We can go back and find who you are that way.”

So, he enumerates the morning, zeta to alpha, no longer knowing how to act around the
guys that are all trying to act, themselves. Who or what is real, all that and then some. A glare in
the conference room off the tops of cars that’d felt like a rare, celestial moment of clarity before
starting to question himself, everyone else. Who is he, really, in some kind of karmic sense? Is
what he’d been thinking after meeting the new masculinity coach, which turns out to be the local
source of the trouble.

“I was in first, and the guy was sitting in Frank’s office – this big, buff bro, like a
bodybuilder with a beard. I remember he – I’m sorry if this sounds bad, but the man reeked of
B.O. – and his armpit hair looked like the kind of moss that grows off of the tops of trees, and he
had all these tattoos, and Frank sees me and goes, ‘hey, hey, come in,’ and I say hi, and he
introduces me to Barry – that’s the guy’s name, Barry Mulligan – and says, ‘this is probably the
guy you’re gonna have to worry the least about, Barry,’ and so then I’m terrified.”

“OK. Why?”
“A few reasons,” he says, and Jenna’s inner valley girl goes, barf. It takes Colin a good
 ten minutes to foxtrot around his list, but it boils down to a similar solute as before – that Frank’s
 started trusting him as the only one able to be on at any given time, like he’s got energy like
 Liam or Jake, can backflip on command. “And so before I even meet this guy, I’m thinking,
 “OK, so I’ve got to represent the whole band. All of our manhoods. And when he asks me what I
 like doing, I say, ‘I used to go fishing a lot,’ and he looks at me like I’ve grown five heads and
 am trying to sell him a baby, and goes, ‘Don’t. Lie.’ So obviously I freak out and start telling the
 truth. I talked about how the sun is gonna conjunct Mercury soon, and how that meant that I, as a
 Virgo, would be feeling an incredible rush of focus soon as a result, and Barry looks at me, and
 looks at Frank, and says, ‘This is the one I shouldn’t be worried about?’”

 “Yeesh,” goes Jenna, though she doesn’t mention to Colin she’s responding to him as
 much as his story. “Well, I’m sorry Frank put all that pressure on you—”

 “Can I say something?”

 “Yes, Colin – again, you are not required to ask for permission before speaking.”

 “I’m realizing that this may not be a bad thing?” he goes, and it’s like all the globs of
 himself he’s said he’s left behind have latched onto him again. He looks suddenly doughier,
 smiling so wide his eyes close, almost psychic.

 “What do you mean?”

 “I mean that maybe this is my moment of focus? Maybe this is my persona. I go from
 being – what was I again?”

 “The Sensitive One.”
“I go from being The Sensitive One to learning what it means to be a man. Maybe this is what
the sky’s telling me I need to focus on. I start bulking up, maybe? I get braver. Maybe I take
jiu-jitsu? Maybe I wear less deodorant, and let my natural musk out more—”

“We’re not doing that last part.”

“But this could be something, right? It gives me a way to learn how to be myself again?”

It makes Jenna’s job easier, too. But it still feels off – separate from what the report had
promised the band would do, separate from what she’d promised herself she would, too. She
would be creating no new rules for Colin’s journey, no new spaces for anyone. But Frank’s on a
warpath, and this could be one of the things to get him off his chopper, to make sure that she’s
still positioned to do what she knows she can. What’s conceding this, then – one more small
thing? What’s slashing their Sensitive One? She imagines herself in a soundbooth at NPR
Headquarters, the monofaceted Moneyboys manager detailing the path to success, acceptance,
and enough golden gramophones to start a studio of her own, telling Terri Gross that including
people of all beliefs was the path to wider acceptance.

“We’ll try it,” is what she says, which she knows he’ll take as a yes. “But if I hear you
start saying ‘man band,’ like Frank does, we’re gonna have an issue.”

“OK, perfect,” he goes, “And in the spirit of masculine honesty, I need to confess that I
saw something I probably shouldn’t’ve last night, and I’m telling you as part of my repenting
process.

He places a hand across the desk, on her trussed hands, and says, “I think I saw Jake
going on the network. Like, the sex one.”

Before she can wonder what kind of midwestern nun died and decided to inhabit the body
of this boy to make him talk like this, he’s pointing to her computer and wobbling his eyebrows,
his whole face pink with concern. “I’m not trying to snitch, or anything – I just want to make sure that we can keep this whole thing going. I don’t want anything bad to happen to Jake, or any of the guys. They’re really, truly like my brothers, and—”

And it’s not until he begins to feign anger that Jenna believes him – believes that maybe this dopey, inoffensively-hot boy who until now only complained to her about losing weight or staying at work past 6PM might actually care about the secret lives of his band-mates in a way that isn’t the performance he’s been expected to complete. She unclenches a hand, and holds his. It’s soft, and she considers whether or not it would be strange to have him do signings with binder gloves. Maybe he could wear one, like the King of Pop himself, and keep the other under the table.

“I’m just,” he sniffs, “I mean, all of us. Me and all of my gay bros. We’re all so grateful for everything that you do, and I’m so scared about all of this ending.” The “haaah” he makes is nasally, as he swings an elbow to wipe his whole face. “Sorry,” he says. “I didn’t mean to be, uh, sensitive.”

It’s only when his thumb starts moving – unconsciously, Jenna hopes – that she pulls her hand away, and then places it and her other hand on the outside of his. “I’ll deal with it,” she says. “And I appreciate your honesty.” She lets go of him, but he keeps standing in front of her. She tries, “Do you need anything else?” and “Hey, later you can order lunch,” and, “I hear Frank is signing paychecks today,” but he’s just there, staring at her, or maybe past her, practicing a glare or a smolder – until she says, “Uh, go hawkeyes?,” which is enough to convince him into flashing a grin, blushing and looking down.

“I keep forgetting you remember stuff about us,” he says. “Sorry about all the – y’know. Uh, actually, wait. Do men apologize?”
Jenna’s spends her lunch break diving, blooming spreadsheets. The dummy emails – courtesy of a few old America Online floppies – and the randomly-generated nonsense passwords Dougherty Zborin had pulled from online engines, saved, and arranged for each account – swell before her. He’s a good kid, thinks Jenna – responsible, well-meaning, sends passwords to her whenever the boys update them. Jake’s most recent login still works, and there’s Jake’s torso, and quivering notifications, red dots like zits sprinkled across the screen’s bar, numbers in the hundreds. She wonders if all of the boys are as active as Jake, flinging heys and wink emoticons to every corner of the globe. And here she was thinking Starfvcker was active only in the hotspots of the hidden and famous. The site itself advertises Los Angeles, Chicago, New York, and Orlando – though it’s only a matter of time before that last city’s greyed off of the homepage, given how quickly newer groups of boys keep one-and-only-one-hit wondering. But Jake’s conversing with guys in Spanish and Korean and what Jenna imagines is Cryillic, guys a number of miles away that approach full journeys around the world, available only through flights you’d plan to sleep during. There’s a part of her that’s impressed – that thinks about how he’s learning languages and gathering perspectives and doing all of the things that the boys’ online classes are supposed to be teaching them but probably aren’t. But in the moment, she’s mostly annoyed that she can’t figure out how to filter messages by local users. She clicks on one guy, who’s pulled down the front of his sweatpants to show a small, tepid line of pubic hair that Jake has been chatting with, to see that they’ve both only been sending “B)” back and forth for the past few months. Then, she recognizes the ribbing on his sweatshirt as one she’d paid to have customized, and realizes she’s looking at Liam. This and the lack of sleep
send her on a face journey toward disgust that’s enough to make Brett, who’s paused in the doorway, make a hiccupping noise.

“Been a minute,” he says. “You got one?”

“Probably,” Jenna says, but it’s close to a whisper, since she’s scrolling across a grid of chests, abs, legs, and asses, all round in the right places and appropriately symmetric and mundane. All of the meat on display’s enough to at least get her to think about switching to vegetarianism. She’d be bored if she weren’t trying to solve something. “What’s up?”

“Probably?” he goes. “Jesus, Jenna, I know I’ve been causing trouble for you, but you’re icing me out already? What if I told you I had an update?”

“Is it good news,” Jenna asks, turning away from her screen, “Cuz I could sure use some”

“The good news is that I’m here!” When she rolls her eyes and flicks back to her monitor, he pops her door closed and storms the seat in front of her desk, spins it from where Colin had been sitting, and guides himself into the backwards, cool-guy lean from nearly every sitcom since the time of his birth. “OK, OK. I swear I have actual news. A Grossman update, if you will. Has she been on you about her spy games?”

“God,” Jenna says, “She sure has.”

“Same. Turns out she was up for a part in this Bay film called The Island – or she at least thought she was. But that whole experience at your house has set her straight, so to speak. She says she wants to pivot to as few cameras as possible, have more control and all that, which of course I talked her out of.”

“Mm,” Jenna says. Back on her PC, Jenna’s made it about 24 hours through Jake’s messages. He’s unsurprisingly a solid flirt, if not a little desperate, sending measurements she wonders where he’s had taken. One guy tells him he must have a beautiful face to match that
perfect body, and Jake says, “Only one way to find out.” He calls everyone handsome.

Numerous threads have a message, clearly copied and pasted, about how he doesn’t believe in having photos taken or videos recorded mid-act – not just because it would violate the Starfvcker terms of service, but also because he feels it would ruin what sex is about, inherently: a connection between two or more consenting adults (“Or more?” Jenna thinks, seeing all of the geometrically-contained body parts piled atop each other, thrashing, ruining one of the bodies that she, herself, is supposed to control) that’s beautiful because it’s so deep in the moment that it is. Jenna can believe that a lot of guys fall for it – it’s the type of faux-elegant gurgling that pops up in every single slice of, well, pop. Read: N*Sync singing that god must have spent a little more time on you. Also read: Vanessa on keys, belting about how many miles she’d walk just to see you. All of it, beautiful and empty and just the kind of blank poetics she’d expect both to come from a kid who’s only lived onstage, saying other people’s words to other people. Plus, it’s also the kind of pretty slobber that anyone who already can’t meet people offline would fall for – especially when horny. It all, always, Jenna thinks, returns to the nerds – how they’ll be out-of-their-minds brilliant, juuuuust up until they start to believe someone more attractive.

“I’m waiting for my thanks about that, by the way,” Brett is saying.

“Wanted control over what? Sorry.”

“Look at us,” Brett goes, opening his arms. “Becoming each other. Me getting efficient, you getting flaky. Which is a joke, before you go postal on me, by the way. What I’m saying is that I charmed Felicity out of trying to get more control over the doc. She was gonna come to you this morning and say, ‘creative control!’, or whatever. But a little of the Brett Lazar magic, and oops, she’s devoutly back into the Church of Muldoon. Plus, she keeps giving me cameras. Which you’ll find in my office. Which you’re welcome for.”
“Thanks,” Jenna says. His hands are over his head.

“Geez. Feels great to be appreciated.”

“You are. I’m just trying to multitask.”

“Talk, type, read what I imagine is a hot spreadsheet of boy band data?”

“Something like it.”

“OK, OK. I get it. You’re still mad, and that’s OK.”

“I’m not still mad.”

“It’s OK! Jenna, I know how it can be. I’ll return for my thanks when you’re willing to give me all of the attention I deserve.”

“I don’t think one person could give you all of the attention you want, Brett,” she says, “Multitasker or otherwise.” It stretches a laugh out of him, but also gets her a salute when he bops past her doorway. “We’re the best duet since Brandy decided she needed a little bit of Monica in her life, I swear!”

She’s looking at the boy with an image closer to hers, rotating through discarded lyrics across DMs. Jenna sifts through so much of them that she could write a grocery store paperback, and have enough romantic aphorisms left over for six or seven more boy band albums – especially if the songs sound different enough for people not to realize that each arrangement of them says, essentially, the same thing. She thinks of a song Frank played for her, a Korean band whose name she can’t remember, where the chorus, in English, started with something like, “I love you, I need you, I’ll never let you go,” which is really just the thesis statement of a solid eighty to ninety percent of boy band songs across America. Eventually, between these messages, she finds addresses, places where men want to meet him, apartments and holes-in-the-wall,
underground bars and literal street corners. “Jake,” she goes, though the room is empty. “What in the world have you gotten yourself into?”

There are only a few addresses sent over the past week – the time during which Jake could have left Toluca Hills – and most of them come from guys he hasn’t responded to. One includes instructions on how to open a digital lock at the front of a building. Another is followed by three different levels of zoom on the same man’s anus, pink and striated, wide open. Jenna wonders if every queer in Hollywood has a scanner – who’s taking these pictures? Only one address is at the end of a conversation over four separate pages that Jenna doesn’t really read.
The other guy says it’s where he works, to meet him around back. Tabbing over to Jeeves, Jenna types in the address, and sees it’s Lick, a WeHo bar that advertises itself as having multiple basements, like the late, great Kyle McKenna, may he rest in peace.

What’s interesting is that this other guy, whose screen name is just “Shup,” gives Jake everything except the sorts of extracurricular bodily pictures that everyone else seems to. There’s his shift hours – he’s a dancer, and works 10 to 2 most nights in the bluelight level – and his home phone and his favorite bands – the Moneyboys not among them, which is both a relief and a minor disappointment. Jenna wonders if this kind of upfront trust would be enough to lure Jake from his room, or if Shup does this for every glistening torso – if he’s as much of an expert at reeling ‘em in as those guys who can catch papery fish from the same, wizened L.A. river that Hawk and Burnquist once used as a half-pipe. They both drop the word “love” in a few places. The fear she has for Jake feels unnatural, empathetic. She wants to ask him about this other guy – this Shup. Breaking an unstated rule of managers, she closes her office door, and practices the ways she could approach him: “Hey, Jake, just wanted to check in;” or “I’m trying to get into dance – no, not the doing of it, the watching of it – know any good places;” or “Man, I’m really
craving bluelight.” Warped in the glimmer of the wooden panels, but still partially reflected, Jenna sees her hands on her hips, her too-interested, hunched-forward stance, looking as much like a sitcom father as she probably sounds. With each newer and more ludicrous attempt to practice a conversation with a boy who’s probably, at this very moment, being told by his new coach that veganism is for wealthy old women only, she feels like she’s in a videogame dungeon she can’t win, like the Moneyboys that came in cereal boxes and chip packs have softlocked.

Maybe it’s the lack of sleep, or the lingering frustration, or believing that she’s already gotten Brett and Colin back, but Jenna Muldoon says fuck it. A quick check of her social calendar reveals that she doesn’t have one, which means she’s free to figure out who Jake’s messing around with when he leaves. When she says adios to her office for the day, post-its and MapQuest-ed directions from her house to Lick stuffed in her pockets like receipts, she sets an alarm on her pager, for 10PM sharp, enough time for her to walk to Lick and catch this Shup character mid-dance, maybe make it his last.

#

A few weeks ago, Jenna Muldoon would have asked Tish or called Frida about what to wear to Lick. The only queer bars she’s been to since college have been those she’s attended for fundraisers – done by 9PM – or for end-of-year celebrations with the students of USC’s LGBT Resource Center – which she and Tish would leave also by 9PM, feeling like the kids should be able to have their fun. But now she stands, recently risen, the clock striking 10:07, before a closet of t-shirts on hangers, pants and skirts she hasn’t looked at in years. It’s not that Jenna’s settled into a limited rotation of looks – it’s that she’s found five shirt-slack combinations that look decent on her, and can go with any other piece in the arrangement, all blacks, blues, and browns. A pink shirt for when she feels casual – though it’s still mottled with splotches from the SCABB
attack a few days earlier. Two dresses in the same shade of blue, because she knows it works on
her, in that nobody will comment on the choice – but one of them’s stayed in the closet ever
since Brett saw it on her and asked how her Rumspringa was going.

Search engines weren’t helpful, either. On the query, “what to wear to bluelight party,”
most of the results honed in on clothes an attendee would be willing to wear – if they even
mentioned clothes at all. One article, “What to Wear to a Gay Club When You’re Nervous,”
suggested a fanny pack: for hand sanitizer, coat check tickets, and singles to tip the dancers. Hers
lies currently on her bed as she digs through the back caverns of her closet, holding clothing up
to her body that no longer fits, or that she’d no longer be caught dead in. White shirts that would
show the seamless, ergonomic, contour-hugging sports bras she mail-ordered for a decade ago,
which at the time she thought she’d paid more than she should have for, but which – since
they’ve held up for so long – now feel like one of the best purchases she’s ever made. One shirt
she touches to her body is collared, almost Hawaiian in its multitudes of color – a designer’s
abstract take on confetti. She thinks back to when she last wore it – probably in college, seeing
some of her friends in a genderbent *Romeo & Juliet*, and then outdone entirely by the garishness
of their afterparty costumes in the theater upspace, guys in floor-length royal gowns, pastel furs
fraying off the bodies of their hosts. And there she was in jeans, sipping from a red solo cup.

She has for so long settled on the safer option – the one that would allow her to remain in
the background. But as she holds this weird confetti shirt in her arms, she thinks back to dancing
in the tinted fog machines of the underground clubs in Ann Arbor, sweat from the other queers
ricocheting between and staining each other. It’s the first time in as long as she can remember
that she doesn’t think about Tish, or about the boys, or anything having to do with the bad. She is
filled with a warmth that leaves once she realizes it is there. But she squeezes into the shirt
anyway, hearing in the voice of Carson Kressley that she’s going to look fabulous. She’s never even seen a full episode of *Queer Eye* – just the commercials. But he’s loud and clear, saying she’s gonna wear it, and she’s gonna feel fierce. Now, if only Ted Allen would show up and teach her how to cook.

And at Lick, when the bouncer looks at her and then her ID, and says she doesn’t look her age at all? Honey, Jenna starts to feel it. Around her are fags in fake fur, twinks in harnesses and jockstraps, lipstick girls in boots that go up to Jenna’s neck. It’s still early in the night – the floor is glowing but sparsely-populated, and there’s space at the bar – but she feels better than she has in a long time – both seen and sexy. She forgets, for a moment, why she’s even here at all, as women compliment the design of her shirt, and as guys call the shape of it sexy. The phoenix-chicken drag queen from the bus nearly floats on a large stage in a frock so puffy it could sleep a whole campsite, its collar trembling out of the weight of a thousand rhinestones.

There’s a mild rupture of faith when the bartender asks – once she decides on a shot of gin – if she’s from out of town, but it’s healed completely when he apologizes with a second.

“Sorry, sorry,” he says. “I’m a little new, and I’ve only met the regulars.”

“To be fair, it’s been a minute,” she says.

“It’s been a minute for all of us,” he says, and then an alarm rings, and he stuffs his shirt into his belt. “Sorry, where were we?”

“Time?”

“Right. This place hasn’t been open a long time – before this, it was called Gut. Before that, Studio 61. There were some other places before that, but it was before I was born. Hey, nice shirt, by the way.”

“Thanks. Nice, uh, non-shirt.”
“That’s literally why they let me work here.”

“Clearly you’re good at your job,” she says, which is enough to get him to wink and walk away. She’s impressed with herself – she’s never been great at bars or parties, her voice soaked into any ambient music or conversation. She’s not a yeller, but here she is, carrying on a conversation in a place where her eardrums ping against the bass. When he’s back – and when she leaves a decent tip – he directs her to the blue light room, four stories below.

All of the motion that she and the alcohol have summoned screeches into the metal walls of the blue light floor, where there’s only one dancer twirling around a pole via a hooked leg. It’s a level of cold that most Californians would call arctic – and they’d be exaggerating. But it’s still cold, and the dancer moves so he doesn’t shiver. She recognizes him right away. There are only three older guys, at tables they must have carried from floors negative-two or negative-three, playing what looks like Texas Hold’em as Seonghun lifts a leg over his head, and grinds backwards against the pole.

He sees her and grins, waves and motions to her from the pole, yells, “Come say hi!” It doesn’t add up that he should be here – there are a million acts in Tinseltown, and he’s one of the best choreographers out there. Weirder still is his ostensible happiness in seeing her – running into the person who repeatedly turned down nights out and then fired him – but she finds herself moving toward him anyway.

“What’s up?” he says, like his split against the metallic ground is the most natural thing for him to do during their conversation, like the mesh jockstrap he has on isn’t enough for Jenna to see his whole religion. “How’ve you been?”

“Are you… OK?”
“Yeah, why?” he asks, as one of the older men tosses a twenty, and flies from the pole to stuff it into his waistband, dragging up the side of his body, spine arched yogically.

“Gonna be honest, you look kind of cold.”

Both of them look down, and he says, “I think I’m doing a lot better than most guys would. Anyway, how are you doing? You’re honestly the last person I would have expected to come check up on me.”

“The last? Not even Frank?”

“Frank at least told me I was hot a few times. And he kept asking me to consider going out with his daughter? Which I guess I probably shouldn’t tell you,” he says, squatting, running a hand from kneecap to waistband, “But in case you couldn’t tell, I don’t have a lot to hide.”

It’s this suggestion of muddling, of covering up through revelation, that remolds Jenna back into remembering why she’d come to Lick in the first place – Seonghun, good guy that he is, must be protecting one of the other dancers. And he’s doing it how performers have for years. Controversy? Show a little skin. Or, if you’re Lil’ Kim, and it’s been two millennia since year 0, the whites still poo-pooing, show a lot. The thing is, it has to be strategic, has to occur at just the right moment to be the most effective kind of pretty distraction – especially in a town where nearly everyone and everything is a pretty distraction. Maybe, Jenna thinks, this isn’t an intentional obfuscation on Seonghun’s part – maybe it’s the animated city, the angels and dreams twirling magic dust toward the natural order of boy band decay, Jake a free radical meant to endanger himself and others and tank the whole operation, everything conspiring behind Seonghun’s thigh gap, or the single node of sweat trailing down it.

It may be the drinks, or it may be the A.C. tempering the typically-throttling portions of her brain down to the speed and efficiency of your average human, or it may just be that Jenna
Muldoon feels like the only way to break through a conspiracy plopped together by the invisible forces of her city is a direct cut, but she says – and, maybe, slurs a little – to Seonghun, “So, is it just you down here, or do they rotate performers in?”

Which gets an eyebrow raise from him that only she seems to notice, the older guys at the table distracted by an accompanying twirl. One cheers, and goes, “That’s more like it,” despite Seonghun having pulled similar tricks for as long as Jenna’s been talking to him. Another of the old queens looks up and yells, “Hey, lady, you’re blockin’ the show,” seeing her, apparently, for the first time.

“We have a few,” he says, moving to a second pole where he’ll be more visible to the tippers. “The other guys are mostly here on weekends, though. I’m the only one here full-time.”

Jenna Muldoon puts two and two together, here, and on the other side of the equal sign, it’s a symbol flipping apoplectically between gotcha and panic. The single torso pic she saw in Shup’s profile could match Seonghun’s – in that it could fit on any dancer. But the more she tries to picture it, to line up the pecs and abs and thin, shaved seams of arm hair, she can’t do anything but place it on the man dancing before her, now twirling between the two poles more easily than some people walk.

“You good?” he asks her, balancing in an upside-down split between the poles. “You just went kind of pale. Even for you.”

“In my head.”

“A dangerous place. From what I’ve heard, at least. Hey, do you have the time? They, uh, don’t let me wear a watch.”

Jenna’s says it’s almost one, later than she’d planned on being out – though she imagines this isn’t why Seonghun looks suddenly, despite the blue light, a little green.
“Oh, yikes,” he says, chuckling to fill air, his laugh this time an absolute, intentional distraction. He slaps his ass – the older guys whoop – and slides down both poles to land in another split. “Just as a heads-up, once it gets late, you’re gonna see some stuff you probably, uh, won’t want to.”

“Kinda feel like I’m already seeing everything.”

“There’s always more.”

“You gonna flash an intestine or something?”

“I’ll never give away my tricks,” he says, but he is, his face no longer on her, looking toward the door she came in with each new turn and every new trick, even straining his neck and twisting his core around one of the poles, always turning away from it once he sees nobody is there, locking back onto Jenna. She thinks, looking in the reflection of the small metal stage’s base so he doesn’t catch her checking on the same door, if maybe this is why he didn’t make it as a member of a boy band – he can move his body, and he has natural charisma, and a great attitude, and a voice that stands out even in a whole city of angels – but when it comes to removing himself from the equation, reducing himself, chiseling a smile onto his face and leaving it there, the guy isn’t fully able to hide how he’s feeling. Boy Band 120: any emotions the boys have shouldn’t be greater than what an audience wants. And here he is, putting himself – albeit unintentionally – between she and the information that would zip at least some of the puzzle pieces together.

So she sits, and watches, and leaves him a Lincoln, as the room fills, and as staff bring more tables and more candles. When in the glare of the stage, Jenna Muldoon sees the exact windbreaker she’s been looking for, the indoor hat and sunglasses beneath its swishing hood, and she tilts up at Seonghun’s eyes flowering into a fear the he’s also not able to swallow down and a
warning he tries not to speak, she spins – albeit like a brick, to look at Jake, whose head flops backwards, then sighs, and mouths, “oh, shit.”

Jenna’s also not a performer – so when she nods at Jake and toward a table, and when he snaps back toward the staircase, she charges him. He is – no brainer – faster than her, alighting on the floor above them, a room of dancers in all-white clothes for, ostensibly, a late labor day party. But he is still timid in how he pauses before passing through the clusters of gathered people, reading each others’ crow’s feet and untrimmed beards and drying skin, which is how she sees herself catching up with him, not entirely sure how her body will become that of a linebacker, or which mean, latent reflexes or she’ll draw on to leap so naturally toward the small violence she imagines. She thinks of pinning him against a wall, and covering him with her body, so nobody in the club leaks which celebrity got out.

But then he’s up the stairs, and the crowd hones in on Jenna and Jenna alone, until Seonghun runs through with towels trailing from his wrists like garlands, finally the right sort of distraction. A bartender with a lit cigarette that somehow hasn’t set off a fire alarm struts toward him, and he says, “Sorry, Boots. Some friends came to visit. I’ll take care of it,” at which point she moves both arms like cyclones, walks through the crowd, and says, “I thought y’all were here to dance!”

“Come on,” Seonghun says, placing a towel over her head, and one around his waist. And they skirt the crowd and descend to the seventh level, which is all just furniture, tables and ashtrays and wardrobes and a bathroom with a door Seonghun locks behind them, both of them studying, apparently, the cracked, bulbous tiles on the ground, counting them so as to not have to calculate toward the conversation they’re about to have, until Seonghun grabs a robe from a shelf over the sink, climbs into it, and says, “I swear to you, this isn’t what it looks like.”
Seonghun drives Jenna to the apartment he shares with a graduate coder named Jessie from – yup, you guessed it – Viterbi, a childhood friend of his from Araenmal-gil, where they’d practice brief dances under airplanes on coastlines leading up to an energy plant, but – told by their parents the place was poison – never entering the water.

“You go back and visit now, and it’s all gone,” Seonghun says, logging into desktop jittering so frenetically Jenna wonders how they found a way to give coffee to a computer. “The plant took everything. But I guess, if nothing else, it got us used to swallowing smog.”

“Both sets of our parents live in Seoul now, though,” Jessie says, shucking one layer of the PC’s plastic covering from its plexiglass innards. “My bad on the noise, by the way. I built this one, and it’s, uh, we’ll say half-done. I’m lucky I live with a control object, who’ll tell me if it explodes. How do you guys know each other again?”

“She’s the one that fired me,” Seonghun says, and Jenna feels her mouth widen into a grimace. Him saying, “It’s cool, though – she’s also the one Doro talked into paying for Starfvcker” doesn’t really help things, but Jessie shoots him a stifled look and goes back to checking wires.

“For what it’s worth, it wasn’t my choice,” Jenna says.

“Hey, don’t lie. You know Frank’s in your back pocket, and you could’ve vetoed the call,” he says, grinning – though this time Jenna’s not sure if he’s attempting a joke. She’s afraid to ask, so the line falls. She looks around the room for anything, sees a server adorned in blue and orange lights, wondering what it could possibly hold, or how the two of them found the unit at all. She imagines them lugging it up from the parking garage in their basement, the same way
Seonghun would help her carry packages of new merch samples up to the second floor, Frank claiming ligament strains and ruptured disks like injuries were cards and he was playing bullshit.

“Anyway,” Seonghun goes, “here’s my page, and here’s my conversation with Jake. It’s all yours.”

Jenna sweeps through the messages from Shup to the user she knows is Jake, desperate for any mar – any odd code that could be taken as double. She knows – at least to a small degree – that she’s buggin’, but she’s so set on the two of them making fruit salad out of their bananas. It would be such an efficient solution – an easy way for her to determine which ties to cut off, and which part of the Pacific to knock them into, like Kramer with his golf balls, just on another coast. Highlighting as she reads, clicking line after individual line, she scours for the dirtier, more malicious sentiments the dark side of her brain swears she saw earlier. As she scrolls through them, though, they’re not just clean – they’re strangely supportive. Once they two of them figured out who they were – Jake hornily messaging first, and Seonghun hitting him with advice to back up that’s only taken out of context one time, it’s all stuff about strength and resilience and finishing contracts. There’s, of course, shit-talking from Jake’s end about Jenna – she’s called a beeyotch until Seonghun tells Jake to stop, and they settle on referring to her as a buzzkill – but everything he asks for – to meet up, to talk about life, to vent – is distinctly nonsexual. Even a message on page 3, where Jake asks to unload on Seonghun, is immediately followed with, “lol don’t take that out of context obvs :D”

“He usually just wants to talk,” Seonghun says. “Sometimes he cries. Usually about the whole you-not-letting-him-come-out thing.”

“You know about that?”
“Yeah, of course. It’s destroying him. Same deal with all the other guys.” He leans against the wall, arms crossed beneath his chest, now in a pair of those three-stripe athletic pants, sighing to one side. “Honestly, I’m surprised you keep taking away the stuff that’d help them out with it. Like, you gotta think, there’s a reason they’re all talking to you.”

Even with plosives clapped from the PC tower punctuating the silence, it is thicker than early morning in the old Industrial District – and that smog’s not even cut by the sun until around lunchtime. Jenna’s not sure if she’s breathing plastic fumes from the computer case, or if it’s the swelling-up of what neither of them wants to admit to the other, of the sort of unspoken defense he had assumed between them, and of her decision to parrot the order to knock it off of a cliff. She can see a version of Seonghun begging before she leaves to let him keep meeting with Jake – to give Seonghun a link back to the kids he cares about, and Jake a role model, an accidental therapist. But Jenna knows she’ll have to veto that, as well. If she’s going to keep motoring the Moneyboys forward, she needs Jake to return to her – she needs to construct enough space between him and the dynamic queers like Seonghun and Frida. It’s late, and Jenna’s not sure if she’s said this out loud, or if Seonghun can read her face – that of another non-performer – better than she can his, but he stares past her, at the speckled, spewing neon lights of WeHo, flickering away in the background like an inverted version of the “‘Since I Left You” video, all the color soaked away from it, the unexpected dancer forgetting their moves, picking backwards on a path they could’ve sworn they’ve forged.

“Seonghun, honey,” Jessie says, now on the other side of the room and cupping the cleft of his chest with a calloused hand. “Go to bed. I’ll drive Jenna home.” And he nods and says see ya, and his eyes don’t open as he slips into his room, and bolts the door behind him.
“So I’m gonna assume that you’re not a fucking autist, and you know he’s super upset about what you did to him,” Jessie tells Jenna, piloting her down West 3rd. “He used to talk so highly of you – all this stuff about how you were putting together a team of skilled queer people to bring this group of boys to success. But then when you shitcanned him, he was so fuckin’ shaken. Like, I’d never seen him like that – not since his band failed, but he was still a kid, then, so – I dunno. It hit harder this time.”

Jenna misses the thick silence, watches her breath muddle the last lights of the Southwestern night.

“And he’s trying to be the big man about it, but like – you didn’t see his room. There’s this huge crater in the wall where he punched it, when he couldn’t stop sobbing. Like, I know the whole point of boy bands is to break hearts and everything, but did you have to break his?” Jenna rolls down her window, and lets the sidewalks, the bricks of houses, whistle past her.

“Like, I don’t know your whole situation, But I just feel like queer people are supposed to look out for each other. I dunno. I’m a big honkin’ lesbian – er, actually, I’m 5’5”, so I guess I’m closer to a moderately-sized honkin’ lesbian – so maybe I’m just old-fashioned, but if we don’t protect ourselves, then who’s gonna? And if we attack ourselves? Especially if we attack the younger queer kids?”

“I don’t need a talking-to,” Jenna says, and swallows it back down right away.

“Agree to disagree,” Jessie tells her, but stays blank until they pull next to Jenna’s, when she goes, “Shit, is this Ayler’s house?”

Jenna doesn’t say goodbye as she leaves the vehicle, wishing it still were. What she’d give for a shoulder to cry on attached to a mouth and a brain that could talk her through the things she’s supposed to know, since they’re the things she gets paid for. What she’d rearrange
or sacrifice or steal for. The desktop's still on, the only entity with life left to greet her in an otherwise empty house. The light in the dead room feels like a test – the type she’d run back at the student theater in Michigan, technical directing shows while her friends memorized lines and dances, placing a single bulb in the lighting rig to ensure new arrangements of wires worked. It’s like she’s there, halfway through a built set, tables and chairs bolted to the ground, grids of abstract, wooden lines all painted white, stiff enough for the actors to climb on, all of them smoking, wishing there was better ventilation or more doors to open as the entire cast wields rollers, splatters the place in grungy monochrome. They build scaffolding out of old construction carts, plywood across wheeled metal poles, story upon story, rickety and nudged into place. It’s late and they all have homework, and there’s still so much more of the set to lock together, but they lie on top of the carts eating take-out, tossing egg rolls at each other and trying to capture them in mouths, atop a three-tiered vehicle of their own creation that could, at any moment, fall down, destroying them all, and also the show – but as they teeter what feels like a mile they’ve made above the ground, the faith that they’ve placed in each other to bolt the proper screws and secure the proper mini-bungees into place feels like enough to hold themselves up, even if the entire contraption were to collapse beneath them.

Back in 2003, Jenna stares into that similar light, typing the names of these old friends into engines, closing and refreshing Google and Jeeves and MSN, trying once again to re-catalogue their dreams, like maybe she’s been caught in The Matrix this whole time, and all of their moves and decayings in the City of Dreams were all tests she had to pass to accrue the kind of strength she has now, an ability to say no. Like if she navigates down the correct datastreams of records and rabbit holes, Alice in Blockchains, she’ll make it to the thirteenth floor, find the universe where their bodies got swapped out, the disguises they’re in right now, the ways that
they did, authentically, make it. She clicks away from yearbook photos, stills of funerals, polaroids scanned in of them, as kids – as kids younger than they were when they died – playing trumpet and saxophone in middle school jazz bands, grinning gap-toothed and big-eyed, childish but still, somehow already faggy, a hand on a swiveled hip in a baseball team photo watermarked with an ancient crest of Beaverton, MI’s Little League. The internet’s already got ghosts, though it’s too young to have secrets – at least the kind someone without a CS degree can access. So she closes windows until she finds she can’t stay in any online domain at all, and she’s clicking across her desktop, opening file after file: kaleidoscopes of she and Tish many Cinco de Mayos ago, forgetting the holiday and ending up seated with a group of aspiring, white actors in unfortunate sombreros, the two of them smiling so uneasily Jenna can almost hear their teeth about to pop; of Frida seated gloriously on Jenna’s desk, mascara running after a breakup, somewhere between Carol Kane and the dramatic stylings of Tim Burton; of Day Three with the boys, when Jenna had talked Frank into allowing some time to bond, each of them baby-faced and still unable to find their angles, holding paper cups of frozen yogurt that tasted sugary and terrible, Liam’s still inexplicably shellacked in that weird, hard-crack chocolate chemical that’s already gone out of style. She starts printing them, but it’s late, and she’s tired, and she leaves them in the tray, and falls into bed wearing the same shell she’d begun the night beneath.

#

The Colin doc goes off without a hitch, and a hitchless launch is welcome news to Frank, Grossman, and the rest of the team. Part of Jenna says to her head’s internal shrink that the bummer across her neurology is a result of feeling like the universe punked her last night, or the strange, queasy feeling she got when Frank popped in with the sheets of merchandise orders and viewer numbers, saying, “Who’s your daddy?” But a lot of it, the shrink says back, is that she’s
gotta figure out how to talk to Jake, to tell him to cut things off with Seonghun without getting him to cut things off with her entirely. And it’s not only their emotional strings that’ve come down with thin wiring – the power’s out in half the building, and all across the lot, including the trailer where they’d been filming all the talking heads. Jenna’s had to take two hikes today as they film in her office instead, its knick-knacks and wood panelling a suitable alternative.

Along with all that, according to the focus group data that’s returned since Frank’s initiation of what he’s continued calling the Man Band Plan – a title that’s remained internal ever since Brett whispered to Jenna re: a porno with a very similar name, leather daddies with tubas and trombones, who do a lot of blowing but don’t play too much music – show there’s another issue with Liam. The home videos his family has sent in – striking dance poses while kicking a volleyball against his garage door, or lounging across a G.I. Joe beach towel on a late-eighties Santa Monica Beach, looking infinitely chill, or tearing up during an embrace with a cousin in a military uniform (footage Jenna’ll find a way to use no matter what) – isn’t in a single, consistent language. Everyone in his family switches back and forth.

“It’s just how we talk,” Liam says, when she finds him hiding in one of the rooms where the lights won’t turn on, perched on top of a file cabinet, hood up like the moody deuteragonist in any cartoon from that new, Japanese wave. When he unplugs his headphones, his CD player still whirring, she can hear Chester Bennington scream-singing about futility at a volume that makes her worry about Liam’s ears. “I don’t know what to tell you.”

“Frank’s saying he wants to do voiceovers.”

“Frank can suck it.”

“Not an offer I think he’d take you up on.”
“Not an offer anyone’s been taking me up on lately,” he says. “Ever since you guys knocked us off Starfvcker, I’ve felt like such a lump.”

“It can’t be that bad.”

“I live in the same building as my ex, who I also work with.”

“Fair enough.”

“I hate it. Half of me wants to fuck off and get a face tattoo.”

“OK, don’t do that.”

“Could I talk you into a lip ring?”

Maybe after this whole docu-series is over, she tells him, waving goodbye and promising not to tell Grossman where he is, as long as he’s back within the hour. Felicity herself is not difficult to find, holed up in Jenna’s office with cameras and lighting equipment – three lights pinned, a triple header, baby – plus the popcorn machine it turns out Frank bought permanently, from his office the night of the Nightline episode, believing it was the best-flavored stuff he’d ever had, ten gulps of Lagavulin in. Crew members cart in mixers and monitors, and pin thick, wiry quagmires of chords in place with what look like the kind of oversized, metal croquet hoops a rich kid with an alt-rock dream would encounter – and maybe dance over and under – in a grungy, atmospheric music video. Felicity’s on Jenna’s phone, and she waves to and turns from her, talking to whoever’s on the other line like they’re an old friend, but the type of old friend who reorganizes production schedules for pay.

Jake’s walking out of the room, smiling until he sees Jenna. His face inflates like he’s been caught.

“You’re not in trouble,” Jenna says.

“Yeah, sure.”
“I’m serious. Just don’t do that anymore.”

“You got it, boss,” he says, eyes on the walls or the ceiling. “Can I go?”

“Yeah, Jake. Just wanted to make sure you know I’m still on your side.”

“Why are you being nice again?”

“I’m just trying to manage. We all are.”

“Yeah, well. I know we’re not talking right now,” he says, a decision Jenna doesn’t remember making, “but it’s weird.” At least he waves when he walks away.

One of Grossman’s team, a tan bandana across the lower half of his face, taps Jenna on the shoulder and asks if there’s anything else he can do. They both look down at Jenna’s technology – the computer, the printer, the whole damn setup – which is how Jenna ends up in the abandoned trailer. It’d feel like her office – there are more of the same, cheap wooden walls – were it not for the carpeting in ugly greens, a table clamped into place. But, hey, at least she has a window, now. After enough crew members trip over the cord she’s run from an indoor phone socket all the way out to the trailer, she stands outside, taping it down like the true gaffer she is, leaving all-caps notes in Sharpie warning anyone around to not trip, and thus not yank the wire, and thus not jeopardize the entire Moneyboys operation by taking her offline for a second time, causing her to have to reload everything, jam it all into place before she can fire it all out again.

It’s only once that operation is complete that she looks up and sees Matt, not just on time but early. His hair’s cut and he’s showered and he’s wearing a shirt with a collar unaffiliated with any sports team Jenna knows, unless she’s misremembering New York’s MLS entry and they’re actually called the Metrosexuals.

“You look nice,” she tells him.

“I look like a schoolboy.”
The clean strategy is, in a lot of ways, the point. Matt’s talking heads should be an easy win for Jenna and Matt, one of many that’ll get them out of the muck of the Man Band Plan, knock the whole rebrand into the territory of the cashed, next to Spin City and Mission Hill and, Jenna hopes, boot-cut everything, denim everything, the greatest crime Justin and Britney will ever commit. She and the boys will weather it, will play Frank’s game knowing she’s holding most of the pawns and is in the process of seizing the others back. “It’s temporary,” is what she’s told Liam, Brett, and Colin – and is telling Matt now – “We’ll get out of it. We just have to stack a few wins together until Frank and the American people forget about the controversy.”

“I thought you said all press was good press,” Matt says. “Also, what are the odds you could get me a bucket hat? That feels like a compromise. Which Frank’s been saying is his word of the day during his angry morning speeches the past few days.”

Later, Jenna’s back in the trailer. She knows there are cameras behind the Mona Lisa reproduction, and the photo of Frank’s daughter he gave up to have yellowed and drilled into on the mantle – but she’s not interesting to watch, wouldn’t be TV-ready if you gave her a year. The best way to be anonymous in the land of glamour is to look regular – but out-of-town regular, like a tourist.

Plus, the trailer gets checked by the night crew after her office does, so Jenna gets to bury herself in her work for just a little while longer tonight. The indigo of L.A.’s sky cracks one last time through its open door before the sun sets, but Jenna doesn’t see it, just senses the change in color in her periphery, the residual warmth evacuating. She leans against her computer, so close she could kiss it, remembers the neck and headache from earlier, and loosens a few pills from their orange containers before unwrinkling a bag of chips that’ll go stale unless she eats them tonight, is what she tells herself. A mechanical pop, a crew member going, “Shit, fuck,” and the
wires are yoinked from her computer, their heads whipped out the door. As she rises to plug them back in, there’s a nice breeze – the rare, Angelinian exhale. She stands in it, the trailer’s items quivering as it strikes them. Then, the door of the trailer whips closed, arcing into the wires with an uncomfortable grind.

When she tries to open the door, it’s stuck, which – given how the day, the week, the whole life has gone – is just her luck. She tries banging on it, and yelling, and there’s nobody out there, the boys with a personal trainer for the next hour, and the night crew not doing rounds until after that. She lies on the couch, remembers Brett saying he couldn’t sit on it because he’s allergic to paisley. “How bad do you think our parents’ taste is?” he asked her, though he’d cooled off when Jenna’d asked him to send photos of his childhood home.

On the couch, there’s at least a sliver of the breeze left, doing what it can to stop the temperature from skyrocketing like Moneyboys’ stocks had been for so long. She tests the computer, and it won’t work across the frayed wires, so she removes her shirt and lies back down. Maybe, she thinks, this is the universe telling her to rest.

When she wakes up, who knows how long afterward, Jake’s in a director’s chair across from her, staring at the porthole window above them, watching the sunset drip down into the city. He looks, in the light so vividly dying, as sad and tired as she does in any mirror she’s ever seen. When he hears her flop up, he reaches under his shirt and pulls out a Family-Size bag of Fritos.

“I had to wear a big coat,” he says. “They’re a little sweaty. So, um, watch the extra salt. I hear it’s not great for your health.”

Jenna is, for the second time over this production credit, surprised.
“Oh, don’t get me wrong. I’m still mad at you, but I felt bad. I’m mad at myself for feeling bad, I think? Sorry, I know you hate hearing about emotions. I just, um, wanted to bring you these,” he says, nestling the Fritos beside her. “So, I guess I’ll see you later. For work.”

When he tries the door, it’s stuck again, Jenna imagining him closing it behind him, bursting in like the place is a stage.

“OK,” he says, “Don’t be mad.”

“It’s been stuck for a while,” Jenna says, glad that they’ve – for the time being, at least – lapsed back into real conversation. “Let’s talk. I legitimately want to know how you’re doing.”

“Oh, god,” he says, with a queeny, dramatic twirl. “Where do I even begin?” He kneels on the floor, and then lies on it. “Honestly, it feels great to be back,” he goes, like he’s practiced saying this in front of a crowd. “Everything sucks and I have nobody to talk to. Brett and Liam are still being dramatic, and Matt and I used to fuck, so there’s no intimacy there, and Colin’s, um – talking to him’s like talking to a wall, and – I don’t know. I hate this? I hate this. I hate all of this. The whole thing – the whole – I used to get breaks between performances, y’know? Like, when I was just doing theater, and nobody knew me, and I could, like, leave my house and fuck boys and see my parents and not feel like I was about to shatter into a million pieces all the time.”

In all of the spotlights and signs from outside, the city creating its own sun once the real one descends, Jake seems almost damp. His exhales are so dense they’re nearly visible. Maybe it’s just the light, but he looks like a horror movie victim, right before they bite it, somehow thinner of face, viscerally desperate.

She wants to tell him he’s supposed to love this. That he’s not supposed to figure out the whole thing’s not fun until later, that the whole thing can do actual harm. Every Jennaic ion
wants to tell him how she’d felt like that when she was younger, that she doesn’t hate hearing about emotions, that she knows that feeling of draping yourself in newer, cleaner, more palatable versions, that she’s been telling herself she’s a technician for so long that she’s cloistered herself off from almost everyone, that she feels, every day, increasingly friendless and loveless and just keeps hardening herself because that’s what she’d learned how to do. She wants nothing more than to give him the OK, to let him be out in public beyond the guise of collegiate experimentation before she was at thirty fucking five, to let him find his people, instead of guiding people that aren’t his to him.

What she says is, “People love you.”

His whole body crumbles when he exhales. He folds so far forward, he’d fall off of the floor if he could. The set lights go on, and he’s a backlit heap. She watches the outlines of his hands flatten against his face, watches him quiver.

“I,” she says. “Jake, I.”

The most she can do is sputter and tick, the rolodex of Boy Band Rules suddenly empty. Signing up to be part of something so beautiful is agreeing to self-terminate, to replace oneself with cultivated pieces and become an appreciated, docile thing. She had, for a long time, assumed this meant only the bandmates, the faces, the ones who get looked at. But as she opens her mouth to this incalculable, grinding silence, Jenna knows that it’s happened to her, too.

Boy Band 121: it all ends. Boys get old and die, get replaced. There are always more boys, prettier boys, boys with better vocal coaches and plastic surgeons. With boys, the idea is, milk them. Let them be consumed. Be cold. Get in, get out – like she knows, like Frank knows – and then let the bubble burst, in that order. Jenna is a technician. But here she is, letting herself care about her intricate pieces, voiding the rule, since this kid, despite what she wants to see, is
so much of what she’d been, and she doesn’t want to turn another person into a technician. The fame machine has so many already, guys who will slice your body across a grater to squeeze every last bit of pulp out.

“I baked a fucking cake,” Jenna says, her voice solid, her tears efficient – just a small leak in the system.

“What the fuck?”

“I was gonna come out to my parents, back when I was in college. I was around your age. I thought I wanted to do something for them, because I didn’t want – I thought that my being gay was this shocking thing, and I thought being that meant I would hurt them, so I thought that I’d do something to lighten the blow. And I spent all this time at college, sitting on the edge of my bed, and fucking agonizing over what to do, and when they came to visit me, I had this cake made. I put frosting on it and it said, ‘I’m Gay! Please Love Me!’”

“Fuck off.”

“I’m serious. It really said that. I thought it would be, I dunno, funny. This was ‘79. It had rainbow sprinkles. It was in the kitchen when they came to visit, and it sat there, and it kept sitting there, and all of my friends felt bad eating it, and I threw the whole thing out after they left. My family never saw it.”

Jake exhales, and it’s like TV static, shaky and jarring. He places both hands on her arms, a test hug. Most of the boys, she realizes, haven’t had unchoreographed friendship outside of their five in at least a few years. She pulls them around her, untangles their arms into a configuration passably human. He holds onto her. He is humid, quivering, smells like B.O.

The door ticks open as he cries into her, Jenna leaping up like she’s been learning routines with all of the boys this whole time.
“Don’t close it!”

“You two?” asks Colin, legs like jelly from cardio, “Really?”

#

“Look,” Frank says, “This is the best I can do for both of you. In fact, I think it’s best for all of us. It gives everyone a cover. We all get an out, it’s just that you two have to get out. But you’ll land. You both will.”

On Frank’s desk are stills from the footage, Jenna and Jake crying and embracing and plotting. Today was another day without phone calls, and he decided he had to watch something, especially when Colin showed up at his office sweater than Janet popping and locking out of the 2-D universe of “All for You,” and landing back in the land of lights, camera, and green screen. Without audio, they look romantic in the way that soap operas are, stitched together to create an appearance, a thing an audience will believe if they want to. Tabloid rags can’t be much different. Turns out, what Frank’s always said about his office is true. Jenna looks down at her first, throbbing around a pink slip, thinking about how its arteries will want to explode within T-minus 5 days, once her meds run out. Pressure shotguns behind her temples, her ears, her chest. She wonders how many vegetables she can eat in the next business week, if it’ll make any difference at all.

Jake helps her excavate her files, holds a padlocked folder with his own name on it, asks if he can have it, or at least a look.

“Remember when I said that people are shitty?” Jenna tells him, and that’s all it takes for him to put it into an empty cardboard box. He keeps staring at everything but Jenna, apologizing at the empty space even when the office is blank, even when they’re outside and he’s hefting it all into her Caravan.
“Do you think they’re just gonna Aunt Viv me?”

“I dunno, Jake. It’s not my call anymore. I don’t,” she says, and that’s all that emerges, her brain switched off.

Later, as she flips to Entertainment Tonight’s story on the Moneyboys bandmate who stole time with his manager and got the pair of them fired, she’ll worry about if she’s mad at him for blowing the whole thing, or for not re-alerting him to the cameras they both should have known were there. She’ll try to squeeze herself back into the meditative state of her employment as reporters mold their faces into shocked side-glances and ask, “Why? And why her?” She’ll sit alone in her computer chair, attempting perfect stillness, but will, with each short exhale, say, “bullshit,” and “bunk.”

Boy Band 122: surround the band with managers, producers and friends and false lovers, people that can take hits for the boys, or with them. The thing about boys is that they land on their feet, even after they’re terminated. They’re believed even if they don’t talk. It’ll happen a few times that she’ll be minding her own business, thinking she’s avoided the tabloid shows, and will elbow her remote in some cursed way. The numbers will dial down, and before she can thumb back to the American Gladiators rerun or the Lifetime original movie, she’ll land on the tabloid news shows, see photos of Jake flutter past, animated flashes behind them. Once, he’ll call her as it happens, as if the universe couldn’t just kick her to the curb and let her be, and she’ll take her receiver and whip it at the TV, breaking both. Hollywood, as far as she’s concerned, is both a diorama of the real world and also dunzo. And she’s a part of it, so away she’ll go, blacklisted by every agency as so many things she isn’t: a bisexual, a disaster. In the short, pungent moments where she doesn’t feel like a sacrifice the fame machine has made so everyone else’s dreams can keep pouring them into the city, she twist the blinds open on her
windows, looks out at the city, and hears every ironic welcome it could give, Alanis and Billie Joe and Nina Persson, a whole complex saying hi for the attention, hoping its plasticity will not bend as it asks Jenna to love it, love it, say that she loves it, that it hopes she’ll have the time of her life.
TRANSCTRIPT FOR: Jennifer Muldoon, Independent

STATION: KBLB

PROGRAM: JUAN AND RISKY IN THE MORNING

CITY: LA

DATE: 10/12/2003, 10:02 AM

SUBJECT: Record for Public Access. Full text below.

ANNOUNCER: You’re listening to KBLB, The Blabber.

[Sound effects: ChewingMouth-02; VoiceLine-448 (“Om nom nom”)]

JUAN LAINEZ (ANCHOR): Big news out of Moneyboys HQ today. Brace yourself if you’re a fan, ‘cuz it means big, big changes for the band.
RICHARD “RISKY” NIPPERSON (ANCHOR): Would you say, JUAN, that things are getting… RISKY?

LAINEZ: Oh, most definitely, my dude. In fact, we’re going to skip past the usual games we do on Fridays just to talk about this.

NIPPERSON: Gotta break the story first.

LAINEZ: For real. It’s just bombshell after bombshell, and there’s a hell of a lot to get through, so let’s just jump into it. Bombshell one: Jake Bennet is out at the Moneyboys.

NIPPERSON: Like, he came out, or–? I know there was some speculation–

LAINEZ: Nope. As in he was kicked out. For – get this – banging his producer.

[Sound effects: VoiceLine-182 (“Wuh-wuh-wuh- whaaaat?”)]

NIPPERSON: No [censored]. You’re kidding.

LAINEZ: Yeah, turns out Jake is as red-blooded as all the kids on your high school football team. According to People Online – the publication, not just, you know, computer users – Bennet was found in an on-set trailer with his producer, Jennifer Muldoon, in, let’s say, an intimate arrangement.

[Sound effects: “This is How We Do it” (Montell Jordan), 0:00-0:03; VoiceLine-194 (“Bop it!”)]

NIPPERSON: This has gotta be heartbreaking for you.

LAINEZ: Well, yeah. Longtime listeners will obviously remember that I’m one of the founding members of the Gay Moneyboys Fan Club and Support Group, and Jake was one of the ones I was, uh, let’s say, rooting for, but, hey, this isn’t about me. [Laughing] And I haven’t even finished breaking the story yet!

NIPPERSON: Oops. My bad. Just trying to be here for you in this trying time.
LAINEZ: Right, right. And I appreciate it. But both Bennet and MULDOON are out—fired by Dirigible Enterprises, their parent company, for inappropriate conduct.

NIPPERSON: That’s so wild.

[Sound effects: Kiss-55; SuckingMouth-02]

NIPPERSON: I feel like this happened so quickly, too.

LAINEZ: Yeah. Last night.

NIPPERSON: Wham, bam, and thank you says the band. Who’s this chick, anyway?

LAINEZ: The producer? Her name’s Jennifer MULDOON, and she’s been with the Moneyboys since they’ve started.

NIPPERSON: In more ways than one, apparently!

[Sound effects: Kiss-38; VoiceLine-92 (sex moans)]

LAINEZ: Before that, she was pretty anonymous and pretty corporate. There’s not a lot about her online— or at least, there wasn’t before this.

NIPPERSON: Well, we know she likes guys in a different, uh, shall we say, age bracket. And judging by these pictures I’m looking at, she’s a little chunky. Maybe her and Lewinski can start a support group.

[Sound effects: ElephantStomp]

LAINEZ: Yeah, that would be something. Anyway, like I said, we don’t have a whole lot of info on her. But here’s MULDOON talking to reporters at the start of the boys’ big tour last year:

MULDOON: I know that you’re all probably looking for drama, but they’re all just really sweet guys, who love music, and who love what they’re doing—

NIPPERSON: Yeah, I’ll bet they love what they’re doing. It’s you!

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MULDOON: –And they’re super grateful you’re all here. They’ll be signing after the show for about an hour, but if you have something for them – I see posters and flowers – and you’re worried about them not getting it–

NIPPERSON: Oh, they were definitely getting it, all right.

LAINEZ: For real. That’s basically the whole clip. About a half hour ago, Frank WILSON, CEO of Dirigible and Lead Producer of the Moneyboys, talked about how Bennet and MULDOON were both out.

WILSON: This is a difficult time for all of us here, as I’m sure it’s a difficult time for so many of our fans. I want to start by thanking God and the American healthcare system, since when I heard about this last night, I nearly fainted. I’m not ashamed to admit it. Two people I trusted really betrayed me. So I can’t imagine how all of the fans of the band must feel. This is a truly difficult day for all of us.

LAINEZ: Tell me about it.

NIPPERSON: Chin up, buddy.

WILSON: I am here to confirm that both Jacob Bennet – who you know as Jake, of course – and Producer Jennifer MULDOON – are no longer affiliated with Dirigible Enterprises, or with The Moneyboys at all. This is a difficult change that we made, but we’re making it because even though we’re a company that believes in all of the things our entertainers sing about – following your dreams, and believing in love – we believe, beyond all of that, what’s most important is protecting the communities – the people – who have joined our Moneyboys family. And that’s why I had to make the decision that I did. I really wish both Jake and Jennifer the best in the future, and if there are any questions–
LAINEZ: WILSON also confirmed that nobody’s pressing any charges, since they were both consenting adults. Jake’s already been driven south to be with his family, in what must’ve been the most expensive taxi ride of all time. No word on MULDOON, though she’s likely a resident of Los Angeles. Though you can head over to our website to see pictures of her, and--

NIPPERSON: And ask why this kid, who could have any chick he wanted in the world, would ever in his right mind choose to--

LAINEZ: Anyway. Head on over to our website to check her out. She’s a tough nut to crack – not too much there, but our investigative team found some stuff.

NIPPERSON: So do you think it was like a “hot for teacher” kinda thing? [falsetto] Oh, Jake. One plus one equals you.

LAINEZ: I dunno. Maybe they– uh, hold on. I’m getting word that the family values action group, The Society of Concerned Americans against Boy Bands – SCABB, if you’re nasty – has just released a statement in support of WILSON. They also say in their statement – sorry if this is robotic, by the way; our producer Alex is in my headphones right now and I’m just parroting – that they’ve reached an agreement with the Moneyboys team to work with them on ensuring the wholesome nature of their content and confirming their ability to inspire good, heterosexual fun for the entire family. They’re working with Wilson on future episodes of the Moneyboys documentary that’s airing every few weeks on MTV, so that’s been delayed by a week as they work with the team to make edits on it.

NIPPERSON: So you think they’re gonna show up lookin’ Amish or something?

LAINEZ: Honestly? No idea. I know SCABB’s been protesting concerts and shows for all kinds of bands – plus there was that protest they did in Koreatown the other day that the cops had to break up, so it’ll be an, uh, interesting cultural moment for all of us.
NIPPERSON: Honestly, I’m still a little nervous for what’s gonna happen to all of them.

LAINEZ: Yeah. Me too. Me too. And now, sports!

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Jenna Muldoon is in need of repair, or at least a house cleaner. She could have sworn the living room was larger, but now that it’s been a week or so, and as she walks from her computer to the kitchen, she kicks corpses of chip bags, clips nipping at the plastic buds of her ergonomic socks like mousetraps, 2-liter bottles rebounding against each other in messy pyramids, clanging – warped, warm gongs. There aren’t bugs yet, aside from the paparazzi – the likely low-level operatives from Extra and ET, plus some guys from a new operation called Celebrity Justice. They knock on her doors and windows – anything glass, anything resonant – and yell her name after strings of honorifics, after promises of payment, as long as she’ll sign a waiver. She’s got a new pimple on the back of her neck. The meds have almost run out and she’s afraid of walking into Walgreens and finding that her insurance has already gone kaput, the glare of the pharmacist the sort of spotlight she’s trying to avoid.

Either way, it’s up by the month, and she’ll need a new gig, or a different cog in a different system. She’s spoken to almost nobody since she was fired. Jake’s tried calling a few times – he’s no longer on an unlisted number – but she hasn’t had the heart to answer. Every sign points to the fame machine targeting her, but she still feels like marring his career was somehow her fault. Plus, it was marred with a version of herself that exists only outside of real life, one that reporters everywhere have tried to construct – and, in doing so, have created numerous other Jenna Muldoons from the threads they’ve been able to pick up. Most of her photos are from back in the days of The Rachel, in powersuits Missy Elliott would’ve worn if she were at all shy. So, all across the internet, there’s Jenna in her first few months of managing the boys, under a
haircut that frames her face about as appropriately as a mullet on a washing machine – though her makeup’s decent, at least.

There are calls from Michigan, too. Relatives, she figures, distant cousins she’d let drop away from her personal map. Maybe a great aunt trying to cash in on the fame, to nail a cover photo for whichever tabloids operate across the Mitten for her buddies at bingo to gawk at. All of these people that could’ve known her at different times, who she’d have given more than a pair of middle fingers to if she could have when she finally got out of the state, feeling she’d only become important to them in a saturated, tokenized way. She’s long imagined what she’d get called if anyone from what she used to refer to around Tish as The Old Country ever discovered the life she lived in the land of sand, sun, and salt water. The Sappho of Saginaw. The Bean Flicker of Bay City. The Todger Dodger of Trout Lake. But now they’re across the line, running their meaty digits over her pictures – her different versions – thinking she’s a slut and an opportunist and – worst of all – a heterosexual.

She’s tried calling Tish a few times, both of them knowing that their conversations are a sort of free therapy for Jenna, but Jenna hasn’t figured out how to ask Tish to go on her plan – or if she’ll need to lie on the form and say that she’s a husband and not a wife, which, given how closely the media’s been trying to surveil her, would get flagged almost immediately.

Today, though, she plans to see Tish in person, to head to her sister’s apartment in WeHo and do a loop around the neighborhood, walk past all the bars and see what they look like in the daytime, when the bartenders there early for setup turn out to have – gasp! – visible pores. Tish wants her to get out, to see the city, to take her mind off of everything. The latter part of all of which seems impossible, Jenna’s argued. But Tish kept pushing it, and so here Jenna is, showered and in a taxi and not in sweatpants, talking herself through the finer points of the
preparatory spreadsheet she made in Office 03, recent songs that mean things to both of them, or even just verses or clippings. Pull all of the Hey-yas from “What’s Up,” and it turns beautiful. Meredith Brooks and Aguilera and Ms. Lauryn Hill, of course. Even Hanson’s made it on there, that one line about having only one or two meaningful relationships in your life. Jenna’s extrapolated the music she knows Tish likes – Sheryl Crow, The Cranberries, Whitney Houston, and then some – into acts she hopes make sense today, Mariah Carey and No Doubt. The idea is to split a pair of headphones between them as they walk, to imbue WeHo with layers that make it mean more to them than just the buildings and sidewalks and palm trees. She wants to show Tish that she – Jenna – is just a girl, and that any learning she has to do is only a matter of time, time. She’s ready and willing and unemployed, so she doesn’t have a whole lot of choice.

What Jenna hasn’t told Tish: she misses the boys, the work of wrangling them, the feeling that she was helping them even if she weren’t. Tish has called them them, when she’s tried to bring them up, Jenna’s “boys” or her “kids,” both of which Jenna hates – but both of which are better than the alternative, that the’re Jenna’s friends, which Tish has said once, accidentally, and it had felt like Jenna had been speared by a melting wax figure that walked out of Madame Tussaud’s with an era-appropriate weapon, a searing brain-pain hot and slicing. Jenna tells Tish whatever she did when they’d talk before their break, that they’re her employees, and she’s there to guide them, and any relationship that develops is purely coincidental. Collateral, even. But when Jenna is alone, just she and her PC avoiding further and further daylight, she wishes Matt were around complaining about his skin, or Liam was talking her through haircuts she’d have to say no to, or Jake was introducing Jenna to the next person who walked into her office as his lighting designer, Shirley Markowitz. “You may miss being around people,” Tish has told her, but Jenna knows that she misses being around them.
The taxi pulls into the driveway of an apartment complex encased in a layer of ivy so dense it could be as old as the city itself. When it’s stopped, Jenna walks between statues of anthropomorphic gators, hips forward, holding torches, as though wondering how they ended up in Los Angeles and away from the D&D game they crawled out from. There’s a low rumble, and a camouflaged garage door jitters up, vomiting up a sedan – a car and driver she’s seen before.

“Well, well, well,” says Frida, leaning out the window, “If it isn’t the gay traitor of West Hollywood. I swear, the lesbian community here’s the smallest big city in the world.”

“Yeah, well, never move to the Midwest.”

“I was thinkin’ New York. They’re saying that produced entertainment’s the next bubble to burst after the dotcom one’s finished popping. Turns out programming about celebrities is more interesting than the actual art that celebrity creates, which is putting me out of a job unless I make it to Broadway.”

“Well, I hope it works out,” Jenna says.

“That’s about as helpful as you were as my boss,” Frida says, winking cruelly, her curls jangling with added beads. “Anyway, I gotta blast. Working on a project. Gotta go pick up some face parts. Mouths and foreheads and all that.” A box in the back of her car reads, “Noses, etc.,” and Jenna suspects it was lifted from Dirigible.

Jenna tries, “I’m genuinely glad you’re still working,” and Frida rolls her eyes.

“That does me a ton of good, Jenna. Really. Hey, I’d love to say it was nice chatting with you, but, uh,” she says, cranking her window back up, “See ya.” And with that, she soars down the boulevard, the glare from her unlatched trunk pulsing in and out like the light of an opened scanner.
It’s felt, these past few weeks, like her head’s been in rotational motion. Swamped with concern about Jake, about the boys left at Dirigible, about what Frank’s putting them through. Regret at putting so much of her life into trying to make theirs. A wide, shaky anger toward Frank, the industry, the universe, and the idea that they’re all in cahoots, that they got a different rulebook and better pieces, that she’s had a red light on her noggin since she began. That she was the kind of business sacrifice Frida was to her – a friend, or at least an acquaintance positioned at the edge of a dumpster, and tilted inside with one digital kick. A not insignificant part of her that says Fuck Them All, sometimes in a bold or red font that gets behind her eyes until she can’t see. There are other voices, sure. Tish saying Jenna needs to take care of herself, and the missed calls that keep coming in from Jake, and the extra few days of footage emailed to her before Frank finally sprouted the cojones to tell Felicity Grossman that Jenna was both off the project and not available for an interview – she’d gotten snared by an NDA. But wherever she looks in the city – whichever lightbox at the end of an above-ground parking lot or whichever clear horizon speared by downtown’s skyscrapers – she’s reminded of her failures, of how instead of accomplishing anything, she just kept naming new goals.

So, Jenna’s not in the best state when Tish opens the door – and it’s not improved when Tish tells her of the phone call she just got from her sister in the security office, who listened in on the exchange with Frida, and rehashed it with Tish as Jenna walked up the stairs. It’s still unsurprising – in a city of stars, there are cameras and mics everywhere, ready to capture brief versions of its residents.

“I heard you’ve been harrassing the tenants,” Tish says, embracing her.

“Guess I cause trouble everywhere now.”
“That’s not new,” Tish says, nudging Jenna toward the door more emphatically than Jenna’s comfortable with. “Are you ready to walk?”

They get through three songs, Tish squeezing her arm halfway through the Samantha Mumba track, and unwiring herself from her earbud.

“This is really sweet, Jenna,” she says, almost sadly, like she’s remembering.

“Glad I could do something nice.”

“You did. And, hopefully, you’ll like my surprise too.”

Jenna Muldoon does not like surprises – not merely because her entire career has involved predicting for and mitigating them, including back when she worked at The Yeast We Could Do in Michigan, a before-class bakery shift that involved eyeballing shaped dough and marking the reasons it was over- or under-proofed. Cut to TAing for econ classes and asking questions before undergrads could even think them. To telling off an exec, in the sweetest voice possible, that the small current of electricity HitClips could potentially send between the ears of their listeners was, yes, absolutely, a reason for delaying production until the new millenium.

Another reason why she loves Tish is that Tish accommodates this, shares her schedule in a monthly calendar document and mentions when a meeting shifts, or a student has an emergency.

“So, how are your students doing?” Jenna asks her.

“Oh, the same. All trying to take on too much or too little, and feeling overwhelmed and undervalued or that they’re expecting a much easier time than they’re in for, all while trying to prove truths about the universe” which is the exact kind of noncommittal blip Tish gives when her brain’s elsewhere – which opens further spaces for the nerves to crawl around Jenna again.

“Today’s gonna be nice,” Tish says. “I have the rest of it off, and that’s part of the surprise.”
The rest of the walk is more small hints that don’t really add up to anything. They steady themselves against the decline of Cynthia Street and start climbing Palm, every step an up or a down that will neglect another. Tish says, “The sky is nice,” though it always is. Jenna’s sweating by the time they turn the corner and hit the two billboards of faceless figures mid-dance, blacked out but with hair and ears against flat, neon pinks and yellows, their iPod’s headphones still visible even as they’re inside each person. It’s like the billboards sing in opposite directions. “iPod,” says the silhouette in the pink rectangle, hand fluttering on the banner’s left side. “The New iPod,” says the other. The pair of ads is so precise – so clean in the way that everything from The Bay has started being ever since the hetero execs took over Dolores Park and forced queer hangouts north and south, a topic Tish developed a model for a year ago and thus a topic Jenna’s heard summaries about for ages. The ads are like, Jenna thinks, the production of an image that reads L.A., but isn’t – nobody here does mere two-tone. And yet, they capture a form of intimacy that Jenna admires. These filled-in outlines aren’t dancing like that – singing into an mp3 player like it’s a microphone – in a place where they’ll be seen. They’re bopping around their bathrooms naked before they shower, or jumping with flailing arms before a workout, or booty bumping their walls at 3AM, unable to sleep and trying to wear themselves out. It’s the type of connection that would give a purchaser closure. Yeah, it says, you just dropped a few hundred – but think of the community you’re joining. It’s classic. Boy bands work the same way – you land on a favorite, and, boom, fellow fans: Brett Army and Liam Legion and Matt Militia, all with their own breakout message boards, all with the sorts of military names that talk the enthused out of swapping.

Just as Jenna realizes she’s thinking about the boys again, Tish has her hand and is guiding her into Lick. There are bulbs up, lit in the middle of the afternoon, providing nothing
but a local glow. The queen by the door’s also melting out from under their Phyllis Diller wig, which is at least some comfort to Jenna – the tired, the gay, the sweaty will be welcome here.

“For two?” says the queen, as they snap paper wristbands around her and Tish. Jenna watches their nose drift down. “It’s a role play, dear. You and I both know old girl’s gotten more plastic in her than the tupperware factory.”

Inside, the stage Jenna remembers has been speared forward across the dance floor, splitting it into sections more elegant, with metal chairs and tables. At each are more queens, but of the butch, casual variety – guys dressed up for the occasion. Tish grabs other hands, scream-laugh as she matches painted faces to the mundane folks in her catalogue. She introduces them to Jenna by their department: Mark in English, Sotonye in Sociology, Judith in history, and so on. “Where are your faces?” asks a queen dripping with gogos, lipstick blood-hued, on a throne so large it looks like it’s been carted in from a southern truck stop. Jenna squints, and it’s a parade float, shedding dead flowers.

It’s here that the rotational dread begins to stop – that the can containing Jenna’s brain is opened, its top ripped off, its edges janky and serrated and cutting into her. Whatever’s going on is the sort of thing she can’t finesse. Maybe she’s even the person in the room who knows the least about what’s going on – why there are banners and sashes, why buckets and bags of unknown items loom above them.

“Madame,” Tish says, bowing at the kind of 45-degree angle Seonghun used to call a broken hinge, dramatic and teetering, “Tish Ayler. I’m one of the organizers. And we’ll be getting ready in just a moment.”

“Tish, oh, Tish,” says the queen, “How wonderful. You’re gorgeous. You’re fabulous. Look at those eyes, glistening even in the dark. Oh, my queens are going to make excellent work
out of you.” She’s hopped from the float, the legs of her pantsuit seeming to hold her in the air for a moment before she drops. Noticing that the crowd has turned to her, she twirls, bellbottoms and kimono sleeves trailing like long petals. “Some say it’s an Indian Summer,” she says, “But I prefer Donna.”

But before Tish can explain – though Jenna does receive snippets of it on the way, the benefit, the people involved with the resource center raising money for a student’s top surgery – she’s in a dressing room somewhere between the unfinished materials of a Home Depot and the bedazzled polymers of a Claire’s. There are enough mirrors here to build a telescope, maybe a laser. There are trays of mimosas, their glasses sparkling, their trays also mirrors. Everywhere, faces made out of other faces: foundation caked to crumbling on a hunched, older guy in a robe that shows more leg than he’s comfortable with, the wave-capped queen saying softly, impatiently, “Don’t move, sweetheart, you’ll mess it up.” Tish sits next to a woman in a director’s chair, feet up on the makeup counter like she’s at a spa, and when she cackles and rises to embrace Tish, Jenna sees that it’s Jessie.

“Girl, please, your mascara. I’m gonna have to do it over, now,” the queen says, a black line struck through half of Jessie’s forehead, “Oh, and look at our other celebrity guest. Y’know, around here, we’ve been calling you Jenna Mul-doom. The lady who slayed the gay away. You know our baby Seonghun, right? You’re lucky he’s only said good things about you. Otherwise, we would’ve said no to all this.”

“All what?” Jenna asks.

“The show, darling,” says the queen, who then introduces herself as Cognitive Disco Nance. “But you can make like a Republican and call me Nance. You’re our queen of honor, Jenna. Timely. Controversial. At least according to the tabloids.” Tish, already smocked,
attended to by yet another queen in what appears to be shingled samurai armor beneath a duvet
cover on which she wipes her hands, sticks her tongue out. Jenna’d be mad if Tish didn’t get a
mouthful of foundation for it.


“A charity brunch?” Jenna asks. “At two?”

“Three, actually. We have to put you in makeup. Anyway, let’s see what we’re working
with.” She scans Jenna, narrating: “Sneakers, rotten; blouse, bleh; and – and what’s this we have
here? Khakis? Oh, my dear, you’re going to need an incredible amount of work. We’ll need
someone with a lot of experience to polish these face cracks back into something pretty. A. Lot.
Of experience. I mean you, Kenya,” she says, tilting her head to the back of the room, where a
queen shaped like a marble on stilts leans a cigarette across her knees, its ashes landing in a scab
she doesn’t seem to notice, “You old bitch.”

A long sigh, a suck on the cigarette that drags half of it into a pile, and a pinch with a pair
of fake nails that seem more than any other decorative facade in the room, to be actual diamonds,
later, Kenya Knott holds out a limp, wet hand. “They always give me the tough ones,” she says.
“And I kept complaining, and that’s how I got this name.”

“I’ll try not to make your life too difficult,” Jenna says.

“Oh, I bet you tell that to all the boys,” Kenya says, “Let’s get you a frock.”

For a minute, it doesn’t matter that Jenna’s been rationing her heart meds, or that she’s
not entirely certain what she’s doing. There are hands on her shoulders, telling her she’s
gorgeous, telling her she’s a legend, and she doesn’t flinch after the first few. She is the recipient
of air kisses, blush. A swivel into a mirror and she has cheekbones, drawn-on but real-looking,
even in the pulsating bulbs of the dressing rooms. Queens call her Queen, a single name, and
maybe it’s the place, its scent – sweat, glue, and one of the lesser-known numbers of Chanel – that’s enraptured her, made her feel like even her dingy, unemployed, world-ruining ass can be one for a day. When her face is complete, there are wigs, but Kenya takes her hand, her grasp limp in the wrist but firm in the fist, to a different closet, where feathers and gems spill, tangled out of duffel bags, onto mannequin heads.

“You can’t have a neck that thick and think I’m not going to put you in a headpiece,” says Kenya Knott. Noticing her lack of balance when they transition to heels, she hands her a small bottle studded with a lightning bolt. “Sniff this,” she says, and Jenna finds herself swaying. The room is blurry, but the panic she’d feel under normal circumstances – that it’s a stroke or some other attack – dissipates immediately. “You’ll need to shit in a few moments,” Kenya says. “Don’t get any on the dress.” When Jenna’s face pivots to the floor, Kenya brings a full tray of mimosas to split between the two of them.

When Jenna’s back from the restroom – a single stall with a broken lock, walls studded with phone numbers and fake gems, some of which stuck there via chewing gum – Tish and Jessie and the guy who’d been in the robe, all of them dolled up and shining, sweating from the neck down and glistening, glittering on top. “Such good head on all of these models,” says Nancy. “You really know how to pick’ em, Tish the Fish.”

“The Fish?” Jenna asks.

“It’s because she’s a woman,” the queens go, in unison, emphasizing the last part.

“You’ll need a name, too, my dear,” says Kenya. “Let’s see. Let’s see. I already have daughters named Tytha, Gorida, and Worry. Who else can we introduce to the Haus of Knott?”

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On one side of backstage, Jenna and Tish sit between their queens, allowed to disrupt the alternating order because they’re a couple, warmed by the backs of spotlights. On the other side of Tish’s drag mother – a 6’6” mermaid in a bedazzled tail (which splits at the end, but only just enough to walk) named Mahia Mahia, who won’t stop talking about how New Zealand is all gorgeous scenery without gorgeous bodies, how she moved here to talk to people – Jessie’s been spiffed into the Team Rocket version of her namesake, wig lacquered to a weight and length that allow her to lean back and rest on it. Mahia swats the wig down whenever Jessie turns away from her: automatic, systematic, apathetic. “Not the first deadly weapon I’ve dealt with,” she whispers to Jenna and Tish. “I was in the Defence Force, y’know. But it was the New Zealand Defence Force, so I mostly protected sheep.” Kenya fans her face with a picture of herself – younger and skinner, or made-up and corseted, Jenna can’t tell. Further down their line, Nance hot-glues fake pearls to her neckline, saying she’s hurting herself for charity, calling herself a saint. Jenna snorts, and Nance sighs.

“Well,” says Kenya, “At least the champagne’s working.” Which becomes the first reason for an afternoon so full of toasts it would give anyone with even the slightest case of Celiac stomach trouble for a week. The lights flicker up in streamlined unison, reds and whites that illuminate the legendary Madame Bacardi Gabor, flown all the way from San Francisco, where her stage productions are rivaled only by the equally-legendary Peaches Christ. Some of her best shows – Tish whispers, the warmth of her cupped hand like it’s cleaning Jenna – are those where she tells fortunes, flips tarot cards from those enormous sleeves, or knocks on her crotch and swears at least one of the balls is crystal. Gabor’s got jokes – she turns around three times during her set asking where Swayzee is, when he’s gonna drop the act and come give Wesley some loving. More impressively, though, Madame has doves, which fly from beneath a
Naomi Campbell wig and reveal an afro with a clean, perfectly-obscured silkfront. All of this – Madame’s skills, her metamorphoses, each triumph and each illusion turned true – comes with free narration through Tish, Jessie, and the other queens. “You didn’t know it, dear,” Kenya says, “But you signed up for the audiobook.”

Each professor walks the runway, some striking poses derivative of cover girls, the types that these academics have seen only from a distance, stolen for their beauty and lost somewhere beneath the geometries of exegeses and tautologies, logics and administrative forms. But build a foundation across their face, paint them some lines, and shellac those drooping lids with enough glitter and, honey, even the most professional of nerds will think they’re models. On Tish’s catwalk, Jenna can barely hear Madame – the crowd swallows her as she points to Tish’s arms and legs, deceptively athletic-seeming: “Look at this skin – touch all this skin, honey.” When Jenna wonders how her bookish wife has sold the sham, Madame erupts into a chorus on realness. It’s not the truth that’s sold, Jenna realizes – it’s the fantasy. It’s nothing, all of it. It’s exactly what she’s tried to sell for other people – pretty, sensitive boys – for so long. As Madame calls for Kenya’s newest daughter – “you may know her as the infamous Jenna Muldoon, but you’re about to witness a rechristening, so hide the boys and make some noise for, drum roll puh-lease, Garlic Knott,” Madame holding onto her name like she’s Oprah giving away an audience’s worth of cars – Jenna feels like she’s solidified. She’s stiff, yeah, and nervous, definitely. But some deep, metallic, skeletal part of her that had for so long clamped her a place that felt like it could change but never did, seems to release. For the first time in maybe her whole life, she feels fluid – the type of gal who could land a high-kick.

And the audience, these young, baby queers and the people who’ve helped watch over them, roar for her. At the front of the stage, she sees Madame has prepared a chair for her, and
she teeters toward it, step after drunken step, trying to grab onto an invisible – maybe even an intangible object – one she knows will help steal her from her firing, her heart disease, her failure. And she makes it, and Madame throws her arms above her head like she’s won a prize fight, but one in which the combatants’ blood has all been moved to the toplines of their heels, soaking and scabbing as the rest of them is gorgeous.

“Now, inquiring minds want to know, Ms. Garlic Knott,” Madame says, wrapping a surprisingly muscular arm around Jenna, “You’ve been in the gossip rags a lot lately. They’re saying you made the mistake that all of us faggots do and you fucked – gasp! – a man. Now, is that true? Or could you confirm for the house tonight that you’re as substantial – as prodigious – of a lesbian as you were born?”

Garlic Knott gulps in more air, tastes the acrid molecules of booze.

“Be honest, now,” says Madame, “You’re among friends.”

“I’m a great, big, fucking lesbian!” Jenna screams, and as she does, the crowd loses it – she’s distilled in noise she hasn’t hears since the boys played The Garden, distilled into a version of Jenna Muldoon she hasn’t ever known, but one that’s been drenched in the world, rolled in the macadam of any city she’s ever inhabited, adorned with particulate she’s placed across herself. She thinks back to her parents, her dorm, her cake. Her dead friends, and the living friends she’s destroyed. Of Tish having to deal with it all, of Jake wandering somewhere alone at this very moment, of the other boys smacked probably, at this very moment, with whatever Frank and SCABB have cooked into rigidity. At the bow of the stage, limbs behind her like she’s the figurehead of a ship long sunk now chained back up from the Pacific Ocean, she leaps into the crowd, and they carry and catch her as she cries. Blasted from invisible speakers, Whitney Houston asks, “How Will I know?” And Jenna doesn’t know how to respond to the question –
which words to say, or which arrangement of herself she should say it with – but she does know
that somewhere – within her, within the room – there is an answer.

“Be careful with that one,” yells Madame from the stage, “Somebody’s had too many
martoonis!”

#

“I told you she wasn’t all bad,” Tish says to Jessie, the three of them at a table, the two
academics guzzling glasses of water the same, harnessed bartender from Jenna’s last night at
Lick continues to bring over. Jenna hasn’t touched hers, but as she rests her head on her elbows,
she’s at least stopped slurring.

“Yeah,” Jessie says, “Just mostly bad.”

“I wonder where we went wrong,” Jenna says.

“We?” Tish says.

“I guess I just assumed the two of us into the one ‘we,’ there, says Jenna.”

Jessie gets up, claiming she can’t handle couples’ talk while she’s still pursuing a degree,
and pivoting over to the stage, where Mahia Mahia lip syncs to a mixed suite of Ariel’s vocals
from *The Little Mermaid*, fins now also on her hands. She’s still somehow elegant as she lies
down on the stage, dollar bills from the audience gushing from the crowd like geysers.

“I do mean me,” Jenna says.

“No, no, I haven’t been perfect, either.”

“Are you joking? Of course you’ve been perfect. You’ve been caring and patient and
you’ve always done the right thing. You deal with all of my bullshit like it’s nothing, and then
you go to work and deal with everyone else’s bullshit, and I don’t understand how you live in
that head of yours when there are so many other detailed models inside of it.”
“Says the girl who won’t stop talking about pop stars.”

“I can fix that. I can work on that. I finally have the space and time to be better, and I’m going to – remember? Remember when we met, and I said I was going to make pathways for other queer people, and I was gonna sneak my way in and—” she exhales, sees her own breath, “I thought I’d raise a middle finger to the establishment, and it turns out it was just an access point.”

“You said you were going to pollute the industry with us.”

“Yeah, yeah. Make space for us. I– when did I stop doing that?

Tish flips over a coaster, pointing to a small photograph of the boys, with all the big acts stacked in a rainbow of bricks, N*SYNC, and the Backstreet Boys, and Britney and Xtina and Mario, oh my! – an advert for Lick’s karaoke night. “I’ve got a guess.” Jenna remembers taking the picture – week three, when the promo photographer cancelled and Jenna, still in the tailwind of the new job, drove to the nearest Radio Shack and rented a camera, one of the new digital numbers with a preview screen and light adjustments. It had felt like the start of a new era, one in which she could touch up even moments that had already happened. Jenna walked them, like a field trip chaperone, down the street from Dirigible, to a long concrete block puffed with plant growth, the site of a CVS sign that had moved, and arranged the boys across it, Brett in the center as the most noticeably post-pubescent. She yelled at Liam to take off his hood, and for Colin to look at the camera and stop commenting on the sky. The boys, still doe-eyed and color-coordinated, still shy and flirting, sat nearly equidistant from each other, hands limp between their crossed legs. “Act like you like each other,” Jenna had said, and Jake had laid down across Matt’s lap, nearly knocking him off of the structure, and that had been the picture they’d used,
comic enough to pass Frank’s still, then, discerning eye. Their photo, on the coaster, is crossed out in red marker. Below it is written, “Event cancelled due to heterosexuality.”

“Look,” Jenna says. “I don’t want to talk about them right now. I want to talk about me.” She’s up now, winking at a guy in a tube top who’s plopped a tepid version of a Hot Toddy – a house specialty, called a Temperate Timmy – next to her.

“I don’t know if that’s possible, Jenna. Even when you don’t talk about them you talk about them. They’ve been more of your life than I have.”

“Oh, sure. ‘Cuz I’m always the bad guy. Big, bad Jenna Muldoon doing it for Corporate America.”

“That’s not what I mean.”

“Look. Let me ask you a question. Let me get your pure, mathematical perspective.”

“We’ve talked about this,” Tish is saying, now scanning the room to see how much of the crowd’s moved from the show on-stage to the show by the bar. “It’s really not healthy for me to solve your problems. This is – I’m sorry, this is exactly the type of thing that I wanted to avoid today. I wanted to get our minds off of everything, and just try to have a fun time together as a couple again.”

“Let me tell you all the errors in your planning then,” she says, wondering how her glass got so empty so quickly. “One. The performance was as individuals.”

“It wasn’t,” Tish said. “It was a thing we did together. We raised about eight hundred dollars.”

“I,” Jenna spits, “Clearly had the best walk in the competition.” Forgetting it’s still painted, she wipes her hand across her face, and her new eyes sag off of her flattened cheekbones.
“I’m gonna call us a cab. I really – I really am sorry, Jenna. I didn’t mean for this to be so–”

But before she can finish, Jenna holds the coaster with the boys on it between two of her fingers, and flings it like Gambit toward the bar. It knocks out a pair of bottles – not top shelf stuff but the next one down – and a few penises previously glued onto naked Ken dolls, which snap off into the crowd and teeter like dropped coins. And there’s broken glass, and people are upset, and that’s all she remembers until she’s on Tish’s sister’s couch with a bucket, a blanket, and a 32-pack of bottled water next to her. It’s night, and she hears whispering, and can barely walk. She catalogues another headache as she swims through the room, its yellow walls and carpets, all cheery and sunlit and making her want to vomit more than the alcohol. Closer to a closed door, she hears Tish’s voice, and then what’s probably her sister’s, the latter saying she warned Tish for years about a corporate white woman, let alone one that seems to prey on queer people. How she’s flying close to the sun with this one, and she still has years and years left of her life, and why spend it with a person who’s gonna keep taking from her like she takes from everybody? And then, Tish telling Andrea that she’s right, and she wants to find a way to split peacefully, and she hopes that tonight at least showed Jenna that there’s a community out there for her if she lets herself be part of it. How there’s no real way to do things ethically here, other than by being honest, and that’s what she’s going to do, once Jenna is up and fed and hydrated. That they’re going to have a real conversation, not interrupted by boys or the dread that arrives on the same limousine as them.

Jenna, blank and in pieces, gathers her headphones, and takes off the gown she’d had on, wrapping the blanket around herself; her clothes either somewhere at Lick or somewhere in this
apartment, where they’ll stay forever, donated, covered in sediment, and at least they’ll have
done something good – provided a reminder, a fun story.

The door creaks when she opens it, but nobody emerges from the apartment’s bathic
hallways. She’s as alone as she’d been when the day began, and all she got was her liver
wrecked. The hallway is ugly, its lights are ugly, and despite all of the work she’s done to build
both it and herself, the city is ugly, and so is she. “Fuck it,” Jenna says, “Fuck it, fuck it, fuck it,”
cursing everything in range except the kid who turns the corner, face red with irritation and
gleaming from moisturizer, Frida behind him going, “I told you.”

“Fancy running into you here,” says Jake, grinning like he’s descended from a stage, a
beautiful kid engineered to love her, a monster stitched up under a mop top, the greatest idiot
Jenna’s ever seen.

#

The ghosts of the internet hum at Jenna Muldoon is zonked out dimmer than an unlit
alley, as Jake lies on the couch trying, also, to sleep. These ghosts are young – days old, some of
them – the throwaway accounts, the viruses successfully dissolved, the message board comments
of the recently deceased. They propagate like pixelated rabbits, the gifs in their signatures blink
like bar signs connected to their own generators. They power themselves, compost themselves,
technotrack accruing in a sea of admins too human to exterminate them entirely. Timed posts.
Reminders. A question from a year ago, a promise to mail $5 to an online friend if Jake ever
ends up with Michelle Branch. Anime Liam, yellow-eyed, cat-eared. A trio of middle schoolers
dancing to a Moneyboys song on video, shared so many times it’s spawned separate iterations,
several universes, the most popular of which is sped up and synced with “So Fresh, So Clean.”
Take a person at any time over the past few years, and there’s a record of them no longer
described, but there, downloadable. There are internet ghosts that already look like you, scanned yearbook photos, uploads to wrong sites, conversions to stock images. There are roleplaying boards where your name is redone, and maybe the pixels of your zits are retouched, or your hair or ears are sliced off for a better background. On one of them, a user in Brett’s image dates one in Colin’s, and they message about a house they buy and redecorate – a mansion, a glorious beachfront property with multiple staircases and windows like cities themselves, and why don’t they make their entire living room, piano included, leopard-print? – and the ocean it abuts, until there is nothing left to talk about, and they send *i luv u* and *<3* back and forth until this version of Brett disappears, and every week until he doesn’t, and that version of Colin enters the chat to ask, *u there?, u there?, u there?*, their imagined home plunked down into the wiry bowels of kept, recorded time, part of the only kind of graveyard that does not decay unless the world around it – the servers and towers that we’ll all keep running forever – does.

So, there idle the old mp3s ripped and recycle-bin’d once the kid who’d downloaded them couldn’t figure out how to transmogrify them into a soundboard, the deleted copypastas, the starving Neopets. They land between the ghosts given unnatural deaths, the witness-protected, the scrubbed exes, the songs bands made that no longer reflected them, Lou P. scrubbing out J.C.’s feature on that Blaque track, even after he’d moved for an entire-band credit with his own thumb, deciding it’s not the image N*SYNC wants, after all. The cut verse. The cut vers, the old dating profiles deemed unreal by moderators, more images of the boys and the boys before them, the ur-boys, the Davy Joneses and the Leif Garretts and all of The Bay City Rollers, promo shots posted by predators, the default options. The cut versus, logs of developer feuds hidden in the tiniest text strings that there’s no way anyone on the front end will ever see, *fuck u bill* and *fuck u woz* and *fuck u steve*. The cuts of film undone by edits and archived. Instructions
on how to cut a purse, policed away. Expressions of love in IRC chats long since refreshed, true statements and play and prey. Viruses and scams long deemed ineffective, old versions too jank to successfully con, dead and dreaming of electric sheeple. All of them, stacked into an electric steeple. A pyramid of the discarded, layered upon those files fallen before them, hoping that they will once again be discovered, or at least remembered, visited again before their ultimate deletion.

Jake throws his balled shirt into the air and lets it cover him like a blanket. He tries to fall asleep in socks and jeans, the kind of clothing he’d never wear for dreaming, afraid of a camera lens slipped through the blinds like a rifle butt (he’s already checked Jenna’s PC), of the tabloids walloping he and his former boss with more allegations, of more digital ghosts that will pop up, torture, and fall away with impugnity. So, he does the wholesome thing, and starts cleaning the place, crumpling bags into bags and bottles into pyramids against the wall. The ghosts of the internet laugh at his arrangement, how he craves touch in ways that they do not understand, with bodies belonging to photos they claim – how his own body itches against the rug’s stiff fabric, how his face is still stiff in places from the prosthetics Frida had tested on him, how it touches everything but what it wants to. How the touch he seeks is a few clicks away, a recently-disgraced star still a star in the eyes of the network, and how he’s even more of a commodity after his controversy minted him a breeder. He is supposed to look after Jenna, and he will, and he’ll be here, but then he’s also logged onto the PC behind him, and onto his old profile, and opened up some of the messages at the back of his queue – those slated to become ghosts, and they reply quickly, promise discretion and condoms and lube and to leave right afterward, and he sends Jenna’s address.
Jenna Muldoon dreams of a ziggurat of internet ghosts, and knows that parts of her are lodged within them. Her photo on the Dirigible website, gurgled up post-raid only through the Wayback Machine, the Marshall Class of ‘84 Photo lost to generations of the new millenium, the browser history plunked away with every drive cleanup, the emailed invitations to meetings she’s organized, a picture of her as a kid, orange-tinted with age, scanned onto and then removed from her family’s church’s alumni webpage. Millions of Muldoons building foundations, on the backs of millions of Andrades and Parks, to lift up the Frank Wilsons and the boys who’ve been tame enough to stay hidden, all of the heterosexuals and game-players at the top. Outside of her dream, she thrashes across her bed, feeling shattered, wondering how so many of her pieces can hold so much in this digital space, when she could only keep an infinitesimally small portion of it in the air as she lived in a world tangible beyond keyboards.

The guy Jake’s called over leans one arm against the doorframe, more casual than any celebrity Jake’s ever seen, his shirt already off, his other hand run through his hair one time before it’s a centimeters from Jake’s waist, and he asks, “Is it OK if I–?” Jake doesn’t want to tell him that it’s been a while, that he’s fucking on caretaker duty, that every hookup he’s ever had has been linear and efficient – stress-relief only – that he’s only ever wanted to lose himself in other people during sex. But here is this new man, ostensibly his same age, but with the mild splotchiness of an over-tanner, with chest hair, with zits on his back that he seems not only apathetic toward, but loving of – not wanting to be admired so much as knowing he deserves the admiration Jake wishes to give – as he leads Jake’s hands across him, saying, “Girl, you can kiss me,” and “Girl, you can touch me,” and Jake leans neck into neck, scared of an incorrect performance, flipping through moves he’s seen in downloaded videos, guys blown upside-down from pull-up bars, guys with legs looped around other guys, fucked against walls, actions he’s
tried with other hookups, with Matt long ago, in pursuit of a rawness, a professionalism, a
maturity that felt necessary in an act that felt, itself, sacred. And the other man says, “girl,” and
says, “girl,” as Jake undoes his belt, and he is afraid of the turn that must soon arrive, the idea
that he’ll be found out as a kid confident only in front of other people, only when decaying into
performances he’s practiced, he’s already seen, but the guy says, “girl,” as their kisses pause and
restart, and the guy laughs, and it’s not aggressive and it’s not nervous and Jake sees that for the
first time in his life that he’s not meant to be anything, that there is no role for him to play
beyond whatever he wants to, as they fall to the floor.

Jenna Muldoon hears the digital ghosts cheer, in tones audible only to the cancelled. She
descends toward them, not just a fragment of her body but the whole, horizontal form, conically
toplit, hovering down like an anime angel that’s just been summoned. Dead memes rise to greet
her, crashed rolcopters, dancing babies, thousands of recuts of “Running in the 90s.” She
crackles through the YTMNDs with fewer than ten views, packets of data hidden but not deleted
crunching brittle beneath her. Zip drives split into flopticals, their LEDs oscillating like fire
alarms. Floppies and flippies blossom across her, next to family photos – Jenna, age 3, in a
Stetson riding a wooden horse in front of her parents, hair on all of them like Sonny and Cher;
Jenna lifted out of Lake Huron by an uncle she doesn’t remember, his chest hair swollen into the
kind of animal Austin Powers wears; Jenna and the other kids in the student theater back in Ann
Arbor, the place and the friends gone, archived nowhere beyond her, or at least nowhere truer,
their families remembering them in their high school caps and gowns, not on dance floors or in
stage shows, remembering them matte instead of gleaming – that pop about her, that pull her into
the pyramid of e-waste like cold hands, like snow in Michigan, like falling into piles of it, the
whole, miniature environment enveloping, gasping for air now, IRL, as she did back then, back when she was a girl.

“Girl,” the other man is saying, as he leans back into Jake, “Tell me what you want.” And though Jake is silent, the guy gives small permissions, placing Jake’s hands on his shoulders, and then his sides, and the end of his back, and Jake wants whatever this guy wants, wants to fulfill every implied request, to kiss his clavicle and bite the nipple he guides Jake’s head toward, and to run his tongue up the guy’s spine, and to hold him as they both shiver, and to lock his arms around the guy’s chest, Jake’s chest on his back, and to move where he says, improvised instead of choreographed. There are moments where Jake stops, unconsciously – to look at the guy until they both blush, to taste him, his sweat breaching his deodorant, his cologne, his body cared for, designed into the thing that he wants it to be, rather than spray-painted based off of a series of metrics. And on the rug, the other guy’s mouth twists into a weird pit, and he says, “This is the scratchiest shit I’ve ever fucked on,” and then Jake knows where he wants to bring him.

Jenna’s body clutches reflexively to the top of the technological pyramid as it absorbs her like quicksand, seas of deleted usernames – hers and those she had deleted, *frankthetank69* and *bigwangcorrea* and *muldoom* – until all of the material couples about her, wires splitting from server racks and coiling into defunct logos of Match.com and CompuServe directories as blunt in their categorization of sexualities as the tabloids have been with her, and as the world has been with her boys, and as her family had been with her. They wind against her falling sides, *1 male4female*, and *2 female4male* around her legs, pulling her deeper into the pyramid, as other options, *3 male4male* and *4 female4female* and other categories cling to her wrists and buoy her in place, like they want her to drown here, deep in this monument of internet trash, like this is the universe she was meant to inhabit, effective for a few years before ultimately discarded. This is
the fame machine, she knows. And in her bed she chokes on what she dreams about, like she’s swallowed a pillow, a sheet, an entire duvet, and she’s grabbing the sides of the bed as her body purples, and she’s hacking now, seeing all of the people she’s torn through beneath her, Tish and Frida and Seonghun and her college friends and Jake and the boys, and she’s dying, and she doesn’t know who to call out for, and she coughs and screams, makes noises like a chainsaw slipped into danger, or a vehicle with a broken engine.

It is as Jake has one arm around the other man and the other leaned against the computer deck – as he considers that both he and the man give each other comfort in systems of those same permissions, those voluntary ways; that the performance he’d thought this would be has given way to sheer enjoyment – that he hears the noise from Jenna’s bedroom, and the other guy says, “girl, what the hell?” Jake wraps his shirt around his waist, and it flaps across his front like an apron as he runs to Jenna, the other guy with him and laughing – though now in short stop-starts, now nervous – covering himself only with his one hand, gasping as he sees Jenna flailing in bed, veins across her face like electrical wires, blue from the neck up. And Jake Seizes Jenna by the waist, and her hands unclasp the bed and grab his arms as he locks them around her, pressing down on all the places whatever she chokes on could be lodged, the other guy saying, “her clavicle, girl, her stomach,” until some metallic-sounding entity pops from her throat, slams into the mirror, and wrinkles its glass.

Personal ads quiver around Jenna, pop like bubbles until she can breathe: repainted versions of the Craigslist text, its purple gone lavender, requests for fisting and flipping, pure statements of need next to filled-in checkboxes: toys and wanting to top (36), SHEER PLEASURE (41), i want to see your hand uncurl beneath my skin (28). And then the censored fanfiction about Whitney and Robin moved to a domain that itself is taken down, and then EFNet
stories where Jake and Liam strip after a sweaty concert, and hold each other, saying, “We still need a top!” until Brett arrives. Accounts scraped from eHarmony and ChristianMingle and Gaia Online, all about loneliness and longing, and wanting a community that they know is out there, somewhere tangled in the web, and if anyone wants to email them, they’re @—— and are really just here for friends before anything else – all of them push Jenna, crushing the articles gathered around her, the raunch and the explicit lifting her back toward the surface of the pyramid, as she smashes through the hooded protests, the blacklists, the asking of questions on whether or not this is truly a free society with free speech, the idea that an internet for all is determined by the needs of a many. Then, deleted rainbow league team photos, guys in tutus throwing frisbees, Jenna herself in a headband she bought from a novelty store and kept apologizing for looking awful in, and she wants to grab onto these remembered spaces, these things that she stole from herself, deleted from her server, but they continue to raise her, and she’s up in the light cone again, and it’s blinding, and she doesn’t know where to look.

“This is the weirdest shit I’ve ever seen,” says the guy, naked and before the mirror, twirling the item released from Jenna in his hand. “I’m gonna get dressed,” he says, and he places it in Jake’s hand as he stands next to Jenna, Jake’s ear over her mouth. In his hand, Jake feels like the object could cut him – it has the strange, bitter edge of a circuit board, but is smaller, not even dime-sized, adorned in clips and broken, jagged down its middle. When the guy is back in the room, he tosses Jake his boxers, going, “Here you go, Abercrombie.” Jake catches them, but drops the object, and it rolls beneath Jenna’s bed, and even as he sweeps his leg beneath it he can’t find it – he can’t get it to stick to him. He hears Jenna breathing and sits back against the wall, and the guy sits next to him, arms around his waist, asking Jake if he wants him to stay.
Jenna’s house, when she wakes, smells sickly, a combination of Febreeze, Axe, and a coconut-scented candle Tish left behind. She does feel lighter, though that may just be the hangover. There’s a crack in her mirror, where she must have punched it last night, though she doesn’t remember when or why. She looks into it, and can see the tip of her nose and everything below it. People say that L.A. is a city of faces – of image, of charm, of facade – but Jenna thinks, more realistically, that it’s a series of mouths – people telling you who they are and what they can do, and asking if you could pass their info along to anyone who might be looking for the right opportunity. People who will eat away at everything you’ve tried to keep safe. Each new meeting – each new adventure – a gullet that can spit you out in the direction of another connection, another universe, another level of fame. She sees Jake in the mouth of her home, of her association, on her computer. He types with both hands, leans into the screen. And she hopes that he doesn’t get swallowed.

When he sees her, Jake x-es out of windows like it’s an arcade game, like he’s forgotten Firefox charts a user’s history. But then, she remembers that she doesn’t have to track him anymore, and she stands in the frame between her bedroom and the living room and watches him, both a slice of entertainment she created and a kid whose body she used to create it. She can’t shake the feeling that she dreamed about him, his body one of many lifting hers from the fame machine, though she’s convinced he couldn’t if he tried, even if he has been working out.

“Find anything good?” she asks, and he points to the rags on-screen, photos of her in a headdress and – embarrassingly – a corset, mouth more open than she ever thought it could go, gums flapping as though trying to escape her little, lined teeth, looking like a peacock bred a sausage, under enormous text that reads, “MONEYBOYS MANAGER BREAKS SILENCE,
COMES OUT,” Madame shrunken behind her, both hands over her heads in victory. Once she’s returned from a quick upchuck in the bathroom, Jake’s on the same page, calves on the edge of her desk, eating a packet of instant oats from a plastic cup with a plastic spoon.

“Don’t worry,” he says, “I cooked them in the mug. Hey, why do you have, like, no actual silverware?”

“What page is that?”

“The Enquirer,” he says, mouth half-full, “But it’s also all of ‘em. Look at this one!”

A new window, and a new headline: “MONEBOYS WHISTLEBLOWER ALLEGES COVERUP OF FORMER MANAGER’S SEXUALITY, ‘MILITANT’ WORKING CONDITIONS SINCE HER DEPARTURE.”

“Did you do this one?” Jake asks. “It sounds like you.”

She hasn’t, but it’s almost like she did. It’s written in Jenna-speak, by a person who knows both her voice and a lot of details about the band – plus more since she’d been forced out: experimental dietary changes, conversion therapy, time with hired women deemed so sexy by Frank that they could cure the boys. Jenna is worried, for a moment, that Jake might see this as the result of some plan of hers. She has visions of him on the phone, calling her family, her previous employers: Jake in the costumes deemed too ludicrous for even a boy band, devil horns on Valentine’s Day, bootlegger fedoras on Halloween. Immediately, though, any sense that he’d want to blackmail her dissipates. She’s not sure if it’s his eerie, early-morning placidity, or the dangling phone, or that she can see he’s logged into his own AIM account, white text on a dark green background, probably knowing that it looks like money.

“Liam says hi, and that he misses you,” Jake says.

“I – what? Uh, tell him the same.”
“OK. He also wants to know if you’re gonna do anything to save him and the other
guys.”

And yeah, Jenna will admit it. There’s a small pang to get back to where she was, solving
dilemmas for a pack of boys she still misses. But she’s away from them, and unmedicated, and
very hungover, and out of a job. What can she do?

“I don’t know if I can, Jake. Did you take the phone off the hook, or–?”

“Yeah,” he goes, in disappointment so persistently felt that it’s begun to look like a
performance, “It woke me up this morning, and I hardly even slept last night. From five onward,
it just would not stop. Do you want me to put it back on?” he asks, nearly falling out of the chair
as he walks over to reinsert the handset. Before Jenna can tell him that, no, she doesn’t need to
deal with any ringing beyond the variety that’s invaded her skull, it’s repositioned, and clanging
again. “See?” Jake says, going in for some more of Quaker’s best. “Someone’s popular.”

Which is when it’s all flung back at Jenna: meeting Jake and Frida in the lobby, Frida
driving them home listening to the newest Moneyboys controversy – that one of the kids
allegedly in need of a blood transfusion Colin was ready to provide had the operation postponed
out of fear of a homosexual donating blood, that Frank was photographed, paperwork in hand,
Death Valley dripping off of him like he’d just freebased a powdered donut, pounding on the
family’s door, yelling about how much he believed in the American family – and of Jake talking
Frida into staying, his voice like a New Year’s song, talking about old times. Frida rolled her
eyes the whole walk to the house, but stopped when she was inside, the mess overwhelming to
the point of sadness, and saying, “Shit, Jenna, are you ok?” and then Jenna savasana’d on her
itchy rug, crying to the ceiling about how stupid the rug was, and how stupid the world was. “I
just thought,” she remembers herself saying, “That if I didn’t make a big deal about my
sexuality, then that would be good for everyone – for me getting an exec job, for the boys not having to worry about exposure,” and how, with the opposite of the truth out, wider, brighter spotlights have been cast on them.

“Well, about that,” Frida had said, leaving. Jenna had thought she’d become fed up with her once again – justifiably – but Frida swung back in the door, digital camera strap around her neck, cords around her wrist. “I was supposed to just photograph the in-house queens,” she said, “But I took a video.” Then, the three of them uploading media to a dummy email, waiting an hour for it to send, every online sleaze they ever remembered covering the Moneyboys blind-copied, Jenna so nervous she puked, falling asleep immediately afterward.

Now, the light of the late morning bounced from tangles of highway trying to split her eyes into pieces even through her blinds, she wobbles into further unease. It’s like she’s followed through on blackmailing herself. Her head screams with the possibility of former classmates at Michigan, or her high school, or even her encouraging preschool teachers – anyone she’d known before she was out opening up their computers and seeing not only more of her body than she’d liked to have seen in the daylight, small strips of fat across her pelvic V wedged out from under her costume, but more of her, the true person, the Jenna Muldoon reinvented once she’d moved to Lotusland, the one that didn’t need new friends because she’d built herself into this newer, better Jenna, one that was not afraid to whisper about her sexuality in a crowded room, efficient with the distillation of identity, and talent, and branding. Who wouldn’t know about Tish or her staff or the boys, or how she discovered to place each of them in front of herself like fleshy armor, hiding the pre-Tinseltown Jenna instead of seeing her, arms around folded knees, afraid of being the next queer kid that died, while also afraid of what it meant to be the only one of her friends that didn’t. With every ring of the phone, she and Jake silent each time it ruptures the air,
she is afraid that she’ll have to immediately know herself in ways that she hasn’t yet learned – that she’ll actually be analyzed rather than surveyed, no longer free to maneuver, that she’ll have to make like Imbruglia and confess that the illusion never changed into something real. That maybe her head has never been screwed on as straight as she’d convinced everyone else it was.

“OK,” she says, leaning against the wall. “OK. This is all going to be OK.”

“You have a plan?” Jake says. “This is great!”

“I wouldn’t go that far. Is Frida around?”

“Nope. She went home, but she’s coming by soon to pick me up. She said she’d call when– oh.”

Every cell of Jenna’s body wants nothing less than to take these calls, to start unraveling whatever Frank’s up to and weaving the boys, somehow, out of it. But here is this kid in front of her, who she mixed and remixed together, stitched with samples of icons miniature and massive, turned into the messed up thing that he is, coolly chugging carbohydrates, like their mutual cancellation and the new complications they’ve brewed are all no big, collective deal. Maybe, she thinks, he grew up Californian – he came with some prepackaged corruption, hands locked into Hang Loose as he left the womb. He loosens the cup from his face, and wipes it off with a t-shirt shoulder that’s already been crusted over. He’s here, she thinks, because he doesn’t know what else to do. He’d been with Frida, and Seonghun before her, trying to dislodge from one of them an instruction manual on how to be queer, believing that it was as simple as learning dance moves or song lyrics, that if he could only find the right guide, he’d be able to reconcile his queerness with the talent that so many people who wanted to appreciate it would tell him to discard so that they could. It’s this infeasible hope – that he could have both, that he could be a big, gay star – that has kept him optimistic, around each elder who’s failed somewhere. And for a
moment, Jenna thinks she’s done the same – that she snowplowed through a world of business designed for hetero people, failing only in transgressive ways, forward as all the business books say – but where, then, is the success that should’ve arrived, postmarked at least by this year? Where are the heaps of American Dollars that she can place between herself and the lives she’s tanked, including her own? Any reassurance she has is functionally bupkis. Where there was supposed to be enough value – whether monetary, or power, or success – for her to walk past camera lenses and say, “nunya,” there’s just nothing. A whole host of imagined Jenna Muldoons with nary a network for them to stand upon. She sits down across from her monitor, and summons them, her hands hovering over the keyboard, any computing occurring only within the confines of her noggin. There was Dirigible CEO Jenna, Producer of the Year Jenna, and Old n’ Long-Married-to-Tish Jenna dressed in a “‘Til Death Do Us Part” t-shirt on her own deathbed. Before that, Valedictorian Jenna and a version of Jenna that could professionally manage stages. Lots of Hetero Jennas, in flowery blouses and pale lipsticks and shoulder-padded powersuits made of fabric looking stripped from an old couch. Jennas with husbands and 1.83 children. All of these imagined Jennas, plastic as Barbies, existing across grids of systems, though none of the systems are her own.

“You’re moving your mouth and not saying anything,” says Jake, who’s partially under the desk, trying to fleck whatever’s hardened on his shoulder into a recently-emptied trash can.

“I think I’m having an emotional moment.”

He stands up, says, “you?”

“Jake, don’t.”

“I’m just saying, you have a reputation. One that you told us to give you. Do you remember how you introduced yourself to us? You pointed to the computer and said, ‘See that?
That’s me. That’s what I do,” Jake says, his impression of Jenna pitched low, and somehow Austrian.

Which is how Jenna remembers the tower buzzing to her galactic north. Shifting through even more windows – phone registries and three different versions of the story on Frank and an eBay shop page for used Jockstraps that Jake reddens at when he sees it pop up, saying, “How do you think I was making money?” – she lands back on the dummy gmail, its inbox already in the triple-digits with validation requests from publications that don’t hypothesize about bump bump in the night, plus a little bit of spam. Turns out the account was smart enough to survive at least one night, which also, she hypothesizes, means it’s become traceable to her machine – a concern unassuaged by the next ring of the phone belonging to one Frank Wilson, who’s chosen to start the day yelling, likely already a solid 6 on the white-to-cartoon-red face scale.

“Fucking Christ, Muldoon.”

“Could’ve sworn we broke up.”

“You just violated your NDA. This is all clearly your doing. I really thought you were above this.”

“Frank, I literally just woke up.”

“My ass you just woke up! Look up the National – the People’s – fucking look up anything online, Jenna. Load any page. Go out and get your newspaper.”

“I’m on Yahoo right now – shit, hold on. It just started downloading something.”

“Like looking in a mirror, right?”

“Sure,” she says, “But I don’t get what this has to do with the NDA.”
“Seriously? Think about what this is gonna do for the boys. If the rumors start flying again, and people start looking into how we do things here – god, Jenna, it’s genuinely tough for me to believe that you’re not putting these pieces together.”

“Frank, what I’m reading here is all stuff that would’ve happened after I left..”

Frank makes a noise like a car crash, like slices of him pop out of his flesh, exposed as a kind of rusted metal, broken into parts. “OK. I don’t mean to yell at you. But if and when I find out you’re the one behind this anonymous whistleblower, your ass is – as they say in France – le fucking grass.”

“I swear I just woke up, Frank. Scout’s honor.”

“My ass, Jenna. My whole ass. Who else could it be? One of the kids? We make them sing so much they shouldn’t even have the air in their lungs to blow whistles! Don’t rock the boat. Like, these systems are in place for a reason.”

She folds the phone’s cord over one arm as Frank yells, listening him rant about how he’s getting the best people in not just the city but the whole country on this – that if it turns out any of this gets traced back to her, there’s gonna be a lawsuit on her hands bigger than the Michelin Man in *Ghostbusters*, bigger even than *Justified*. He’s contacted USC and also the whole UC system, plus private security firms, an on-the-rise group operating only in arid climates called Haliburton. But would he even need them? Jenna’s been following online trends for long enough to know that users still think queerness – “the gay” – is infectious. Plus, mix that in with Boy Band 123: Even after the last show, and even after death, the end of a dream is never the boys’ fault. And she goes from a flighty, abstract slut to a converter, a predator, untrustworthy not because of a false but perceived, irrational womanhood – but because of how efficiently she, allegedly single handedly, had been able to turn Jake from a many-fanned heterosexual into
exactly what half of the world, and half of their fans, fight against. It’s a wrong story, an easy link that anyone with their eyes screwed in entirely would be able to see as untrue – but it’s one the vultures outside will eat up, and then feed to the American people like carcasses. Not to mention that Frank’s partnered with SCABB now, meaning he’ll have even more ammo to blame the issues of the band on anyone who comes out, along with possible sacrifices named Brett, Liam, and Matt.

“I’m calling that FBI agent guy. If there’s any trace of you behind this, Jenna, we’re gonna find it. I know I didn’t treat you the best, but if you want to make it out of this with any rep intact, I need you to work with me here.”

“Let me wake up first, Frank,” she says, lowering the hook before she places the receiver.

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Jenna checks the dummy email, and there are no details – just the pictures of her at Lick. Still, she can’t shake the feeling Rondo – and Frank by association – may actually have something on her. Though whether it’s anything concrete or just eyes, she isn’t sure. One prying of the blinds and she sees that the media vans have come back again this morning, guys in flannel even in the desert heat. A few even have repurposed news vans, cameras poised like nozzles at their apices. There’s a muffled tap on one of the windows next to her, and she can see the shadow of a fuzzy microphone held by a trio of extendable boom operators. One woman in a long ponytail wears night-vision goggles, green and many-lensed, flicking them back and forth as though the right arrangement will bestow upon her the secrets of x-ray vision. Jenna swears she hasn’t seen her before, but that could just mean she’s as skilled at her job as Jenna had thought she’d been at her own. Even the organizations that had begun to slip away, off to find a
newer controversy, a new and actual romance, or a Backstreet Boy out of rehab — something to make the gossip-eaters feel decent for once.

A La-Cucaracha honk, and Rondo Hitch’s fencing van’s barrelled to a stop partway down the street. His other alleged contractors’ve got ski masks on, even in this heat. A few of them listen into tiny satellite dishes. He’s got his suit on, his triangle shades, his badge next to five big fingers pummeling the dash. She knows what the convo would resemble, at least. More protection, he’d say — just look at all these people. But, hey, while she’s here, he’s got a few questions, if that’s no big deal? And Frank would be on the end of every wire.

She turns to Jake with a finger over her mouth, and he gives her two thumbs up. It’s not like she could hear him, anyway — the phone’s apoplectic, working overtime before it even hits noon. Each reporter equals a hangup. Even though she tells him not to, she hears Jake lift the phone from its hook while she’s in the bathroom, and say in what’s admittedly a pretty spot-on impersonation of The Dark Lady, “She doesn’t live here! Snap out of it!” A few more calls — one of which is from Frank’s lawyer, who affirms that Jenna will be hearing from him shortly. She wonders how a man so polite can work for a guy like Frank. Hey, that’s showbiz, is her first guess. But then she remembers that Frank’s loaded.

Frida calls from a CVS down the road, saying she’s tried circling the block four times, but that it’s so congested, even the LAPD have arrived, back of the queue, trying to reorganize the paparazzi into clusters that facilitate at least some traffic flow. “I’m sure they’re doing the best they can,” Frida says, “But they’re, uh, the police, so you know how that’ll probably go. Anyway, I’m hanging out here by the trail mix if you can find a way out.”

And it’s not just the wall of vehicles making Jenna feel boxed-in. If Frank and his lawyers are right, and the photos of herself she’s sent out both contradict Dirigible’s story and
are traceable back to Jenna’s computer, then it’s only a matter of time before all the solid, little blue bars load in and point, glowing, to her. There’s a small chance he’s already nailed her – that a confession from her is a formality required by his mousy lawyer. When she begins to hear sirens, she wonders if they’re her own personal expert. She starts quivering, feels the whole house shake, and wonders if the city isn’t done with her yet – if it’s gotta rapture her one last time before sending her, well, probably not to prison, but at least to the type of situation where she’ll have to wear an ankle bracelet having done nothing technically illegal. The phone falls off the hook and Jake falls off of the chair, and she realizes it’s not just her cranium doing the shake.

What land through yonder window quakes. The San Andreas Fault, like any good resident of this city, has to remind its residents that it’s there, can reveal its edges and open its mouth at any time, and make, as if King and Taylor were back at The Troubadour, the earth move under their feet. Siren lights flip her blinds blue and red, navigating the mamarazzis and the paparazzis to edges of street uninhabited by buildings. A few phone calls later, Frida’s back on again, saying everyone’s pulled into the CVS lot, and that she – having parked close to the exit – is probably gonna be the first one out. She says she’ll honk three times when she’s outside for Jake – that she’ll maybe not even stop the car completely, depending on how close to her tailpipe the other vans bite. From a frazzled voice on Frida’s side of the line, Jenna hears, “Ma’am, please put the phone down – we’re having an earthquake!” and Frida saying, “Oh, really? Guess I was too local to notice.”

It’s like the hole world’s had too much of the whole world, then, as keyholders leap from her walls toward the ground that’s breaking below them. Jake’s holding onto her computer, its CD drive buzzing in and out like a tongue. Jenna feels a mild, nostalgic pang, like this action to save the most expensive thing in the room is something he’s picked up from her. The chair
halfway across the room, and Jake on the ground yelling, “I’m holding her steady, Captain,” like he’s defied the odds of every closeted queer actor and become the first one since Brando to land a part in a war movie, she squats at the keyboard, holding it, mouse, and monitor down with one arm as the other types. In My Documents, files she doesn’t recognize. Normally, that wouldn’t be too much of a trip, since everyone and their mom’s got malware all the way up to the surface – especially those who’ve remained stationary in the land of Internet Explorer, or who’ve opened emails only to find *ILOVEYOU* – but there are weird files in her Downloads, too, Slammers she hasn’t researched and Anna Kournikovas that even she can’t place to their time of last access. One’s called ManBand. Another’s named MulBoom. Sure, they could just be your average, fame-stalking tabloid hackers, but any of these could also be Rondo. She’s afraid to click on them, afraid to click on anything.

Jenna wishes she could give the computer CPR, the monitor rattling into her forehead with another pulse from the San Andreas. She wishes she could pinpoint her computer’s bruises of corruption and suck all the poison out of it like Steve Irwin saving your average Australian from a snakebite. She wishes she could spit it all out with a loud, confident, “Crokey.” She’s lived more on this PC than she has in the meatzone – it’s where she’s kept tabs on the boys and their fans in all of the capacities an “official” label wouldn’t allow. It’s got her bookmarks and spreadsheets and photos of dead friends, videos of the boys. The monitor, the plastic case feel more like her skin than her skin does, feel like they’ve held so much of her for so long, and that the body she’s walked, talked, and meddled around in is just the operational version of what’s inside the plastic and behind the LCDs. If Frank or Rondo is within it, somewhere, it’s like they’ve drilled a sharpened toe into her ribcage, put some uncomfortable part of themselves within her that could mar the whole thing, even if she upgrades.
Jake’s hugging the tower so vehemently, it’s begun to slide off of his skin, the sweat between the two of them so static she can see the fabric of his t-shirt gather fuzz. She wants to save so much of what she’s curated, videos of the boys, the digital copy of the USC report, even the photos of her in drag – photos of a new, separate, truer iteration of Jenna Muldoon, one more covered in foundation and blush and eyeshadow, but one closer to what, she thinks, the sound of facades falling on the street, she would like to be.

“Unplug it,” she says to Jake. And he either doesn’t hear her or doesn’t believe she’s saying it, so she bends under the desk and pulls the cord out of the wall herself, releasing it with one arm, and holding onto the back of Jake’s shirt with the other, telling him again to let it go. It rattles across the floor, its drives half-closed, its lights all emergency reds. When they hear cracks, Jake looks at her, horrified, but then loops his arms against one of hers and braces the pair of them against the wall as they scoot beneath the desk. The monitor flips over them, smacks the floor, and begins smoking. The naked phone jack flails. And before them, a perfect machine, designed and pristine, dies.

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Three syncopated honks after the quake’s stopped, and Jenna and Jake bolt outside and the door behind them. Frida slows to a roll, opens the passenger door for Jake, and drops her jaw when Jenna’s knocking on one of the side doors. “That’d better not be a body,” Frida says about the garbage bag Jenna’s carrying, until there are sirens behind them and Jake screams to let her in – short, little grunts that he would’ve turned raspy and cinematic if he’d been thinking about it. “This is my lighting designer,” he tells Frida once Jenna’s belted in, and the two women roll their eyes. Say what you want about the kid, Jenna thinks. He’s at least consistent.
“I swear to God,” Frida says, one nail picking at another on the same hand as she nearly doubles the speed limit up Western, “If this is some accomplice bullshit, I’m done with both of you.”

The plan had been to drive Jake back to the land of the banana slug, where his parents live in a small house off of a blazed, happy downtown that’s mostly parking garages and burrito joints. Frida explains she’d hired him as a model for her prosthetics in exchange for the ride and a form of room and board that included sleeping on her couch and ordering from the double arches most nights, Jake no longer barred from dairy or breads. Once the fake face was set, he could hang out in the complex’s computer room without being recognized, assuming he didn’t move it too much and crack it off. It only happened once, Jake swears, and the only other person there hadn’t batted an eyelash at his fake nose cascading onto his lap. It’s tough to find a good plastic surgeon in this city, and that’s one of the first things new residents learn. There are even a few tours about botched enhancements, where a crew with a double-decker bus patrols places where even those with faces like craters must go – supermarkets and drugstores – identifying for enthralled tourists celebrities immobilized by botox, sagging lip augmentations, and popped glute pumps. People say nitrogen’s the second-most common element in the air, but in Los Angeles, every atom of popped, lost silicone makes a compelling case for the number-two spot. As Jenna runs through all of this, Frida says, “So, what about the resort?”

Down in Huntington Beach, there’s a place called El Rostro, commoditized cabanas stacked atop each other in the shape of a hotel, with pools so unused they never have to clean the filters. Hollywood legend goes that it’s run by a pair of former beards who fell in love, who decided to take the idea of a bed and breakfast, and crack it open like all of their guests’ faces – and, in doing so, help both heal. Famous? Splurged on a nose job or a cheekbone readjustment?
Head to El Rostro. No cameras allowed, an underground drop-off zone, an alleged signal-blocker, and a 24-hour smoothie bar, all access, straws included. No word on wifi, but the TV’s allegedly solid. Jenna wishes she could look it up, but before she can say Tummy Tuck, Frida’s done what Californians who’ve just gotten their licenses have, for years, called flipping a bitch. She leaves tire marks on the median. At the very least, that there’s no vehicular flare-up after their turn means the cops aren’t on them, and the paparazzi aren’t bold enough to wonder why a mild-mannered sedan powered up through L.A. carrying a celebrity and a few pounds of noses and ears.

“It would be pretty expensive,” Jenna tells Jake. “Are you sure you’d be OK with it?”

“I mean, it would be fine,” Jake says, “But I’m kinda still waiting on those checks from Frank.”


Jenna has some savings, but she’d been counting on them to barrel through the type of insurance plan she needs for her heart meds. She’s in her head all the way down to El Rostro, running calculations, wondering how much her absolute limit is – how much she can get rid of while keeping herself alive. When, at the front desk, the number’s beyond even that, she grimaces. She’s about to turn to Jake, and tell him that maybe dodging the paparazzi for six hours to Santa Cruz isn’t the worst idea, but when she says to the clerk that she needs a minute to call her bank, and holds the lobby’s phone to her ear saying phrases she hopes sound at least vaguely financial, she hears Jake ask Frida why she’s helping Jenna after saying she hated Jenna repeatedly during their prosthetics-testing. Frida goes, “You don’t have siblings, right? Imagine you have one, and they’re annoying. They’re maybe even harmful. But you keep putting yourself
in danger around them because you’re related. It’s like that.” Jenna hears all of it, and forgets to talk into the phone, which Frida absolutely notices, giving her the hurry-up glare.

So, Jenna books a room. Company credit card long turned in, she’s on her own debit, signing her own name, which gets even this clerk, who’s undoubtedly been trained for discretion, to twitch into an eyebrow raise before composing himself again.

“Ah,” he says. “Sometimes we all need a restart. Is the second floor suitable?”

The room itself isn’t anything bananas, but it’s got a bed and a tinted window and a fridge full of soft foods, pureed components in small glass jars next to mildly-browned bananas. Frida’s out within the hour, saying she’s had enough excitement for a full year – even for Los Angeles – and kissing Jake on the forehead like he’s a saint. Jenna gets a handshake.

“It’ll be fine,” Jake says. “It’ll be like a sleepover, but without everyone being horny for each other.” Which, despite its truth, makes nobody in the room feel better.

When the clock strikes late, Jenna’s seated on one side of the room’s one bed, a big mattress topped with soft foam that absorbs the shapes of bodies like sand. It’s as though everything in this place has been designed for softness. The molding is rubber and the headboard is padded. The wallpaper is luxe, puffy, pastel, and royal-looking. The light switches are operated by waving a hand in front of a swirling switch, sort of like a crystal ball sliced like a cold cut. One switch turns on mild, yogic music, which Jenna thinks must drive a lot of the clients here – the rich, the vocal, the attention-having – nuts. Every exposed corner is filled in – even those on the ceilings, though who’s reaching toward those is anyone’s business. Even the full menu – light, expensive meals not part of the continental breakfast or dinner – has its edges trimmed, El Rostro believing that they need to guard their guests even from paper cuts.
The only hard edges in the room, then, are those that stretch the plastic of the garbage bag Jake’s helped her cart up. Any other night, any other timeline, any other version of Jenna, and she’d be on it, scanning for the boys or herself, or downloading old news about dead friends. She wishes she could look up more about the drag queens. Maybe there’s a video of Kenya Knott stomping glamorously through a lipsync of “My Imagination” in her heyday, or of Cognitive Disco Nance taking bites out of the scenery to one of the hundreds of uptempo remixes to “Bob’s Diner.” She thinks of the tracks she heard at Lick, everything like the guests of this hotel, its parts rearranged into something sleeker, faster. If it moves fast enough, efficiently enough, it’s impossible for an audience to see anything for what it is. If that weren’t what she’d once thought of herself, she’d morph that into a boy band rule. But instead, she’s absorbed by what she wishes she were doing, reloading message boards for new, filled-in replies, or googling dance trends to print out for Seonghun, or arrow-keying through footage that the boys shot of each other, knowing that it would all have to get cut down for fans, but that she was gonna be the only one to see it. That they’d recorded it for her, that maybe she was capable of deserving kindness, even love. Another version of Jenna, she thinks, would have at least started a dating profile by now, knowing that she’s got time on her hands now that the job’s up, rather than still thinking about doing it. She wonders what she’d post on it: “National disgrace looking for unexpected love. Mostly dom.” She thinks of the women in Los Angeles, the literal millions of them, and starts to massage her neck as she fantasizes about the kind of bright, hot problem-solver that’d be willing to work out her knots. Both hands reach toward the back of her neck, and work her muscles like a keyboard. There are so many opportunities she’s suddenly absent from, offline.

“God,” Jenna says to the broken PC, “I miss it.”
“Me too,” Jake says, lowering the volume on a rerun of *ANTM*, Miss J swaying his hips like each step is an entire sentence, a deep breath to a period. “Like there were times when all of the other guys annoyed me, but we really were kind of a family.”

And it’s like old times, Jenna flung from thinking about what she could do on a computer to thinking about the boys again, and wondering if there’s some middle place she can operate from – to use the power of technology to twist things back into their favor, to leave the right comment on the right message board to get nerds’ minds firing at the right frequency, to leave parts of herself living in both places at once so she doesn’t have to live fully in either; for living fully online would leave her inevitably in the citadel of internet waste, while living entirely IRL would mean she’d have to think about all of the promises she’d made to screw the boys over. But when she turns to look back at Jake, the point she’s used to landing on – the What about her? What about Jenna? – isn’t there. She isn’t sure what’s replaced it, and doesn’t know where to ground herself, feeling as broken as the bagged-up PC that’s now behind her.

“So you ever think about having one?” Jake asks.

“One what?”

“A family. Like, with a spouse and with actual kids.”

“Never,” Jenna says, and she realizes she’s not lying. “You guys were –”

“Jenna, I’m gonna cry if you’re gonna say what I think you’re gonna say.”

“– More than enough to make me never want kids.”

“Scratch that. No crying.”

“What about you?”

“Honestly? All the time. Like, I think about finding love and living somewhere fancy, with, like, enamel cookware on the walls. And it’s this nice teal, and my husband or partners or
whatever and I have to keep the kids from tackling each other because it rattles the walls and the Le Creusets are expensive.”

And Jenna sings, like she’s back in college, like no one’s gonna call her out for her curdling voice: “A matchbox of our own. A fence of real chain link.” Jake dives across the bed, his face varnished with the happy, acting-school expression of shock, his hand on his heart and his mouth in an O, his head on a swivel as though there are hidden cameras under all the padding of this place, like Jenna knowing the words to a song he’s sung alone to himself – for, he swears, when the loneliness flares up, practice – so many times. They go through the whole thing, Jake leading Jenna to twirl him as he hits notes and she doesn’t. When they get to the first speaking part, they grab each others’ hands and say, “Not fancy, like Levittown,” and even though Jake’s trying to act – to live in the emotional tone of Ellen Greene as much as he’s dipping into his throat to sing every theatrical note – there’s a new shock when Jenna knows any new word. The only times he breaks are to laugh – not at Audrey One, or the song, or the aspirations of a person who knew only small-town infamy instead of fame, but at the strange, docile fantasy that seems to have leaked out of his head and into this puffy hotel room. And Jenna, despite herself, giggles, too. She’s entirely unboozed, and still having fun, and – weirdest of all – not suspicious that anything new is about to go wrong.

“Jennifer. Elizabeth. Muldoon,” Jake breathes, “Are you fucking serious?” He squeezes her hands in his again, smiles like the set’s broken away, and they’re on-stage in front of an audience that’s eaten up any pretense of show or story. “I have been doing showtunes for you for, what, three years now? And this is the first time you– Jenna!” He tries the beginnings of other sentences: “You,” “I,” “How?” When he dives into her for a hug, he says, “I’m really sorry if this is weird, and you can tell me to stop doing this if you want, but–.” She doesn’t. They go
through all of “Suddenly Seymour,” and he says, “Nobody’s gonna fucking believe me,” and she knows he’s talking about the other boys. She falls asleep feeling young, the AC low, sweating a bit, Jake still dancing around in the dark, energetic for the first time in a while, bouncing off the walls.

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A weird, neon fog rises up from the pool. It’s toxic-looking, but in a distant way – the kind that would make Jenna say Jinkies, or give food to a recently-redesigned great dane. She rolls out of the bed, her back sore either from dancing or sleeping, and pulls the curtain open to see the substance glowing in the air. Los Angeles, for the big shop of horrors that it often is, has, every once in a while, a small miracle like this, a blink-and-you’ll miss it phenomenon pushing back against the glossy tourist traps – a real, weird moment in this real weird town. Secret staircases popping up over supposedly blank nights. Rand and Nancy mistily returned to Table #29. Green parrots and the Chickens of the 101, flocking across overpasses, squawking at anyone in a vehicle. Maybe that’s why so many new Angelenos stick around long after they have their dreams crushed and their bags packed for them – there’s this comfortable, visual mysticism around, the kind of eerie wilderness that takes sacrifices only in negligible amounts. And even if you die, you die famous – just ask Dahlia.

Jenna pivots to awaken Jake, but then sees, in the turquoise light, that he’s missing. The bathroom and closet are both empty, as is as much of the hallway as she can see from the doorway. She leaves the door unlocked as she flicks the lights on – her room now visible to the mist, and anybody else who views it – and finds a card key missing. Maybe, she thinks, he’s looking for a posh vending machine, the kind from which he thinks he could charm someone wrapped up like a mummy into buying him a snack, or maybe he’s in one of the monitored
computer rooms breaking his own NDA and talking to the other guys. When she walks downstairs to check, and side-eyes the suited, sunglasses’d man turning to watch each monitor, she sees a PC that hasn’t been logged off of, and types in her room code. Up pops AIM and Starfvcker and some apps even Jenna hasn’t heard of. She MapQuests addresses and is ready to bolt out of the lobby when she realizes she doesn’t know where she’d go. Jake’s got friends and rides all over despite all the hiding he’s been forced into – people who know him for himself, a great big homo in the perfect, toned body of a blonde, California kid. He’s connected with people – just look at the chat’s he’s got open, rather than trying to drive them to a certain point, one they’ll stand on until Jenna dumps them off.

He’s broken all the Boy Band Rules – he’s played the game better than she has, because he’s played both parts – Jake the performer and Jake the person – and invented himself in many more directions. Past versions of Jake are so far away, they’re in a La La Land of times forgotten. You see old photos of him and know they’re old. He’s grown into himself in multifaceted ways, rather than just the one, and it feels thankless to Jenna. Unfair. Like she’s set him up for a very specific sort of success that he’s learned not to desire – and in doing so, he’s learned not to turn into the stunted kind of queer she knows she’s become. There’s a version of Jenna, out there in the atmosphere, who made rules for herself before rules for the folks she managed – one who accounted for friendship and pleasure and, once in a while, an indulgence in the great city that was just that, an indulgence, not a stepping stone to a greater goal or a task someone else has decided will help, but just an ability to sit in the city and watch it move. People fly in from every corner of the earth for Los Angeles’ beauty – but once you’re inside of it, you stop looking at it, aware that the place feels bigger and better than you do, that any dreams you have will get gulped down by one machine or another, that you can’t bring dead friends back
through music or save a floundering marriage by working harder. But if you never learn to stare
it down like that – if you’re able to remain large against the city’s ready-to-puncture backdrop,
then you dream in the kinds of rare, cumulus strands that can’t be cut up and divided into rules.
You become that kind of transient miracle, the ultimate urban legend, the big gay star. And
maybe your audience is smaller – maybe there’s hardly a person in the auditorium at all – but
they love you, and they’re not just people. They’re yours. And he’s found himself there, on that
stage, and he’s gotten there not just without her, but in spite of her. So many versions of Jenna
Muldoon on so many scaled stages, and people keep trying to love her in so many different
ways, but there she is, standing before them, saying she doesn’t believe in love anymore.

There go Jenna’s notes on the back of her printed directions. All the points she was gonna
bring up against Jake when he returned land in the soft, rubber garbage bin behind a round,
fabric-coated table. When he returns, tiptoes one step into the room until he sees the lights are
on, and grimaces toward her, knowing she’s got a nose and she can still smell the anal on him,
she says, “I’m not mad.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah. I, uh – what’s the expression? Live your life.”

“Did you get possessed while I was gone?”

“No, I just – I’m sorry.”

“It’s OK? I – I don’t know what you’re apologizing for, so I’m a little bit nervous.”

He’s still in his same, ratty clothes, plus one of Frida’s fake noses and a leather jacket he
must’ve picked up from some other guy in some other universe. He really does reek. But she
walks toward him and leans into him, and it feels like another Angelonian miracle when he holds
her, when he’s not just safe but rubbing her back like she’s his kid, and telling her – even though
he doesn’t know why she’s crying, or what anything in the future is going to look like – exactly what she’s taught him to communicate to everyone else. That everything’s gonna be all right.

#

It is nearly biblical, the way the sun cracks over the furthest mountain – places so deep in the morning fog they blur to fine edges like paper against the sky, blocks and backdrops surrounding a city of further scene dressing – its rays so wide, so angular, that the rare people awake for its rise – joggers and gogos, bakers and editors remembering to zoom out of their screens, and cut to their window – are reminded of the type of celestial power your average director says art can approach, if not be. In their geometric homes, the wealthy wake to the sun’s rise, buried in so much mountain forest that their homes’ translucent walls are the sort of openness that no one who hasn’t made it is able to achieve: an ability to say yes, this is my life, and you could see it if you were like me, a property owner with a helicopter, with riches so vast and quickly-rising that you may ascend above the city, past the skyscrapers and the radio towers and the big wooden alphabet soup. And in these houses, morning papers and the tabloids that still, somehow, make it up the hill. TV news and ethernet.

Spread like the legs of a yogic master – so many of the boys wake up in beds that are not theirs, each driven to the mountains by valets or eccentrics. It would be nice, Frank had told them last night, to get away from it all – the masculinity coaching, the new music video that involves military fatigues and baby pictures, the new mission Frank’s been on to talk one of them into donating a kidney. Brett’s pounded an exec at another record company into soft, docile stasis as he scans his computer for any hidden webcam video or incriminating message. Liam smokes half a gram naked in a lawn chair as a European photographer takes pictures he’s sworn will only be shared between the two of them. Matt cracks his neck, horizontal and sore from the lighthouse
attached to the man he took last night. Even Colin’s made it, a braless blonde in his arms, pyramids of Solo cups still standing from a house party with special guest Tara Reid, the whole, rented place sticky with beer, his whole head sticky with more than a single vision from last night, him yelling about how he’s not a coward as he jabs another needle into another vein. Each of them in a different glass house Frank’s rented them for a few more hours, they dot the land like a constellation. And other, rogue stars. Seonghun stretches, unconsciously placing a hand on manicured glass. Frida convinces last night’s lover to climb up on the roof, setting chairs so angular they seem quadratic on the pea gravel, and drinking coffee as they watch the city awaken. Birds murmur out of trees. Somewhere down the hills, cars start. Buildings glare once they’re reached by the day’s new light. Faire lights flicker on at the pier and a new cadre of boats shuffles out of the king’s harbor. Airplanes bound into the sky so frequently that the picture of them from the height of these glass houses looks like a time lapse. Common knowledge says that from this high up, the people driving through the concrete labyrinth, and the early beachgoers – tired of staring at the city’s palm trees and tinted windows – parking next to Venice and Redondo and Long, and the men selling paletas to the overdressed business crew – common knowledge says that all of these people look like ants. But that’s just common knowledge. If you’re rich enough for one of these mountain homes – if your lovers are beloved by entire populations and still make much less than you do – then you can place anything beneath a magnifying glass. Or you can hide anything in objects of a much smaller size.

Frank is awake earlier than he’d like to be, in a house with opaque walls, a fencing van parked outside, its owner and his crew plucking strands of video footage from the previous night. It’s no glass mountain home, but it’s aight. And who knows? After tomorrow’s operation, everything’ll be coming up Wilson. Plus, the wife and daughter are in a glass house of their own,
beds and breakfasts, a tutor for the day of school his kid’ll miss. “I really want the two of you to see the city like I do,” he had told them. To the boys, he’d said, “You need a break. We’ve got a big show tomorrow,” Rondo nodding behind him, affirming that all would be protected. If it’d been sound-designed, someone in the scene would’ve played an eagle’s cry. A government guarantee.

Post-controversy spike, the Moneyboys’ numbers have tanked again. And it’s been weeks, and he’s tried it all, and the decline has been steady, fans sloughing off of their operation like adipose at a plastic surgeon’s. He doesn’t get what he’s doing wrong. All of the numbers SCABB’s people have given him – sterile and digital and properly-explained, they swear, he believes – say that the more outwardly masculine the boys are – the more muscle they show, the more aggression they promise – should make them more successful. But money’s flowing out of the operation like oxygen, and Frank feels like he’s suffocating. When he told this to Rondo Hitch – a cool, new friend who’d been surveilling Jenna Muldoon anyway – Rondo had spoken like Jenna had.

“Well, you know it as well as I do, Mr. Wilson. Boy Bands have a lifespan of about five years, tops. Then, they fade out.”

It had felt comforting, more than anything Jenna had ever said, a dreamy realism dripping off of him. It’d been followed, of course, by what Rondo called not government orders but government, uh, suggestions.

“See, the band is doing some things it shouldn’t,” said Rondo. “You and I both know this, and people are picking up on it. It’s time to call it quits.”

“But,” said Frank, thinking of deals unclosed, mansions and yachts and other yachts, boats larger than some countries, the first-of-its-kind sky island he’d hatched up after a long,
inebriated night left him before the spirit of the somehow still-living Lou Pearlman. The entire complex held up by giant, silent fans and hidden by clouds, “But.”

“I get it,” said Rondo, who once again had felt like more than Jenna. Here was a straight-shooter, Frank thought. A man treating him as more than a boss, but as, well, a fellow man. “You don’t want it to end.”

“I don’t know if I can afford for it to end,” Frank said. “But if it’s ending, then I’m not sure what we can do about it.”

“Funny thing – I’ve been doing some research about that? You OK with recs, or –?”

And boy bands do end, true. They dissolve into solo acts with low percentage chances at success. Jenna’d told him something about this once – the boys’l age or lose their vocal cords or something. But she’d promised another year – more time to figure out his assets, i.e. how to turn as many of them liquid as possible – and, all due respect, where is she now?

So, the two biggest boys in the building track endings. More specifically, who gets theirs extended. Timberlake, sure, but he’s a special case – and Frank’s pretty sure that, “Brett?” he said, “I think is the good one?” wouldn’t sign back on with him. And they dove and they searched and Rondo taught Frank some basic search tools, quotes and minuses – and even with that, no stories of executive success emerged. So, they widened. They searched industry blogs Rondo recommended, news stories with dollar signs in their headlines. Who’s made the most since their acts have ended? There’s Capitol slurping up the last bits of Blind Melon. There’s Blackwave and Virgin riding everything left of Aaliyah. There’s EMI channeling gold even after Selena’s left all but recordings behind. Turns out, the secret to extending success is tragedy. It’s like any movie alchemist’s ever mused – you’ve gotta get rid of a life to find a new one.

“Shit,” said Frank. “That makes things more complicated.”
“What’re the odds one of them catches a terminal disease?” Rondo asked, as the sun’s full shape descended over the nearby mountains.

“Basically zero. Muldoon made sure they had blood work done.”

“Huh. Well, gonna be honest, we were gonna be asked to step in if you guys kept going longer, so I was kinda hoping for an out.” Rondo flipped through a copy of the USC report on Frank’s home desk. “See, this is the kind of thing we don’t want the American people to be, uh, infected by, I think is the word. Guess all I can say is that if there’s anything the U.S. government could help out with – you’ve got my number, and all that.”

A man does not achieve the status that Frank Wilson has without understanding, like every soldier he’s ever watched in war films, when and what to sacrifice. He talked to Rondo Hitch, who turns out is a former Marine, about what still, this morning, feels removed enough to be tactics, basic strategy, business. A chessboard had folded down from a piece of Frank’s desk – a custom number, obviously, mahogany – and he didn’t clock that Rondo let him win. His mind was too full, ascending like the money he’s still got to earn, of switches he could pull or evidence he could supply, testimonials and photographs and–

“Video,” Frank said.

“What about it?”

“The guys perform in front of one. Usually, it’s just their names or lyrics or, like, these neon blotches. I dunno. Muldoon did all of that. But if there was a way to, uh–”

“Back up for a sec,” went Rondo, clicking open a notepad. “What are you trying to show?”

Tomorrow, the guys are scheduled for a gig Frank’s booked through the help of SCABB, the world’s alleged largest gun show down in Anaheim, the kind of place that’d seemed to
himself and all parties involved screamed of incalculable butchness. He’d met with the planners already, promised they could debut the new video, at once both military and family themed.

“But what does that have to do with tragedy?” Hitch’d asked.

“What if it’s not the music video, is what I’m saying? What if we, uh, catch them?”

“And put them in a room full of people with guns.”

“Now you’re speakin’ my language.”

And, fancy that, Rondo’d had houses staked out to rent already, had been working with a new recruit named Grossman on securing and installing cameras within little windows in the mountains that turned into Bauhausian, glass mansions when you drove close enough. Each boy could get one, for one night, all expenses paid. Each could have whoever and whatever they wanted. And how would they know that the whole thing’d be recorded? That Wilson would pull a Muldoon and learn video editing, splice all the abominations the boys turn themselves into privately into bait for the gun-holders, the homo-haters, the people in dire need of target practice?

And, frankly – he thinks now, guffawing out his closed window – it wasn’t even hard to do. The cameras had been positioned so perfectly that he’s got clear faces, full-body shots of all the boys in various states of railing. Which, he thinks, gross. But necessary for their demolition. It’s only a matter of time before the show goes on for the last time. And it’ll be the end of them, but not the end of the money. Which, he thinks, is just as planned.

#

Jenna’s not sure how a person slid an envelope so thick under their hotel door without waking either her or Jake, but there it is, and there’s a manufactured conversation between the two of them and Frank, in which the heroic producer monologues through blocky paragraphs on
the merits of heterosexuality. Then, a confession from Frank, in which he read the USC report Jenna had commissioned, and had to act against it. “Clearly, it became her strategy,” Frank alleges, “And I had to do something to stop it – or at least curb it.” The whole report is summarized, albeit hyperbolically: the boys, the turning of the American consumer, the love and acceptance that could tank the whole world. “Your daughter or your son,” says Frank. Jenna knows, by the line where he uses the phrase, “vast gay conspiracy,” that he’s about to sacrifice all of the boys. He’s likely already started dissolving Dirigible, pulling the proverbial gold out from behind the wallpaper and burying it in his big backyard.

“Have you heard from any of the other guys?” Jenna asks Jake before he can eject all of his one, loud yawn.

“Yeah,” he says, “I talk to them pretty much every day. Their IM names haven’t changed. You should really get one.”

She thinks she has a plan until some research on the resort computer shows just how easy it is to brute force an AIM password. It’s on the first page of google results, which means Frank’s seen it, and is almost definitely trying it. “We need something he won’t check,” she says out loud to the silent monitor, who’s still got sunglasses on despite the lights in the room being off of their timers. And though he doesn’t answer, his silence – his discretion – reminds her of the source it took her so long to check as well. Jake, arriving from the most luxurious vending machines the city’s ever seen with skewers of dates in a recyclable box and avocado halves sprinkled with lemon, sits next to her, and whispers that the plan is OK, as long as she doesn’t look at any of his other messages. She hopes the guard doesn’t know who she is – that he assumes she’s just spying on a client, or catfishing at worse. But she logs into Jake’s account again, and finds the thread with all of the B) emoticons.
“Send him another one,” Jake says.

“Is it, like, a code?” she asks, typing it in.

Liam replies with another B) and Jake says, “No, I just thought it’d be funny.”

#

tommygnosis: B)

2nite2niteitson: B)

tommygnosis: Liam, this is Jenna

2nite2niteitson: :( 

tommygnosis: Liam.

2nite2niteitson: :( :( :(( but ok

2nite2niteitson: wats up

2nite2niteitson: ?

tommygnosis: OK. Liam, this is important. Has Frank done anything strange lately?

2nite2niteitson: lol ya every day

tommygnosis: What about in the past 24 hours?

2nite2niteitson: hmmmommommmmmmm i guess hes been gone a lot lately?????

2nite2niteitson: oh lol he gave us the day off too and booked us all separate houses??????? lol it was great

2nite2niteitson: oh also are you the one who leaked all the info? frank is MAD about that lolol

tommygnosis: No
2nite2niteitson: <(¬_¬<)

2nite2niteitson: everyones saying its u

tommygnosis: It wasn’t.

2nite2niteitson: brett said u did it so that u can get us out

tommygnosis: He’s lying.

2nite2niteitson: cn u get us out anyway???

tommygnosis: I can work on it.

tommygnosis: B)

tommygnosis: Jake

2nite2niteitson: B)

tommygnosis: That was Jake.

2nite2niteitson: hey stud lol

tommygnosis: Liam, please focus. Where are you right now?

2nite2niteitson: a big palace in the mountains with my hot french lover

tommygnosis: Liam. Where are you actually?

2nite2niteitson: …

2nite2niteitson: …

2nite2niteitson: …

tommygnosis: ...OK, fine. How quickly can you get to Huntington Beach? And are you able to get the other guys here too?

2nite2niteitson: ummm prolly like 1 hr? and ya sure
tommygnosis: OK. I’ll send you the address, and then I need you to delete it AFTER you send it to everyone else. OK?

2nite2niteitson: lol k

tommygnosis: Jake says to ask Matt to bring him a change of clothes.

2nite2niteitson: k ill ask

tommygnosis: OK. Please, please, please be safe about this. Only talk to the other guys.

2nite2niteitson: k

tommygnosis: Thank you, Liam. I’ll see you soon.

2nite2niteitson: oh colin still thinks you and jake fucked lol

2nite2niteitson: btw

tommygnosis: ...I’ll talk to him about it.

2nite2niteitson: lol

2nite2niteitson: lol

2nite2niteitson: lol

tommygnosis: Please get in touch with the other guys now, Liam. This is very important. I’ll see you soon.

2nite2niteitson: k bye

2nite2niteitson: ( ^_^) /

 Though a few small panics emerge – Brett arriving late and via helicopter, Matt bringing Jake a shirt with his picture on it, Colin saying hi and signing autographs in the lobby while the
clerk looks on at a celebrity appearing as themselves in a resort that’s meant to be hidden in
horror, before Jake in yet another set of prosthetics grabs his arm and leads him into an elevator
– but soon, Jenna and all five of her boys are as scattered as they can be around the hotel room,
which is not very. Liam’s knee touches Jake’s, and Jake blows him a raspberry, but keeps his in
place. Matt leans into Colin until Colin’s arms are around him. Once again, Jenna is surrounded
by the type of casual closeness that years ago she would have killed for when she’d tried to take
their photos. Their brand of togetherness now is almost too close – there’s a level of comfort
between them that Jenna has trouble trying to explain. Maybe it’s because most of them have had
sex with each other, and have discovered strange versions of siblinghood in the wake of their
own failed mania. If there’s anything romantic remaining between them, now, though, it’s only a
residue – the place a hand goes, or where not to touch an overwrought knot of muscles, or
permissions they haven’t had to cancel. Even Brett, who’s not touching anyone, lies across the
hotel bed like it’s a place cultivated specifically for him – like he’s been sleeping in it for long
enough that it’s swelled into his scent.

“I’m sure you heard,” Brett says, “But everything’s been awful.”

“The nights have gotten way longer,” says Matt, waddling up from Colin’s chest like a
cartoon penguin. “We get eight hours off, total, every day.”

“Yeah, and Frank’s brought in all of these weird psychiatrists that we’re supposed to see
after Mulligan. They make us chant ‘I am a heterosexual, I am a heterosexual, in the name of our
lord, I am attracted to women,’ and stuff like that,” Brett goes.

“Yeah, we go over posture from old concerts, and every time you look faggy, he hits you with this weird, rubber hammer thing?” Liam says, flipping around and rolling the back of his shirt up to show Jenna the collage of bruises he’s accumulated.

“Oh, we don’t eat during the day, either,” Matt says. “There’s this, like, buffet table, with little slices of meat and those plastic-wrapped sections of neon cheese, but we’re not allowed at it unless we finish all of our training for the day, but we never do. It could legit be plastic, and I wouldn’t know.”

And the grievances continue, as though the elder Costanza’s invited them all to Festivus dinner. With each, Jenna feels more irresponsible – like the structures she’d thought she’d left in place had turned out to be so infinitely weaker than what she had hoped, paper guards flying away by the seats of their pants, escaping when Frank says Boo. What had felt like a comfortable series of mechanisms dipped immediately down to zilch once she wasn’t there to feed and enforce it every day. She tells them all of this through soft, gritted teeth. “I’m really sorry this is all happening, guys,” she goes. When she sits on the bed, Brett cups his hands around her shoulders, and begins rubbing the back of her neck. It is the sort of instinctive touch that the boys all share with each other, and Jenna realizes that it’s not residual romance, but a form of reflexive doting – “Is this OK, babe?” Brett asks her, and she nods into his massage.

“God,” he says, “Could you imagine doing this when we worked for you? I would’ve been afraid of you having a laser or something hidden in the walls to zap us if we got too close.” With each gnashing of his thumbs, she feels her tendons, her muscles, pop back into place, out of the arrangement she’d squeezed them into, and back into the shape of a functional person. By the time she’s ready to walk them through what’ll likely be the last strategy she ever manages within the music industry, she feels Alex Mack’d into a kind of human-shaped puzzle.
“What’s likely happening,” is what she lands on, “Is that Frank’s going to out all of you that can be outed, and will probably end the band after that.” She reads through the newspaper proofs she’s received, gets only small releases of air, little has when Frank’s confession makes him look like more of a hero than he’s ever been. “So, we’re going to need to do something before tomorrow morning around four, when this’ll go to print.”

“That’ll be a little tricky,” says Brett, “Since we’ve got a show tomorrow.”

“A what?” Jenna asks, which is where she hears about the gun show, a story that ends in, “You’ve got to be shitting me. He’s putting you guys in danger to prove straightness?”

“Don’t act like that’s not what you did,” says Brett. “It’s business.”

“Yeah, but I wasn’t putting you guys in danger,” which gets a communal eye roll. “OK, but not this much danger. We need to do something before this, obviously.”

“So, like, what? Do we just jump in and say, ‘Frank is a big fuck! He’s wrong,’ or something like that?” Liam asks.

“Not necessarily,” Jenna says. “If there’s a way to prove him wrong, then–”

“What if we all come out before he outs us?” Matt asks. “I mean, not Colin, obviously, but if we, like, take ourselves back from him, then we – I dunno – we prove we’ve been gay this whole time. Maybe we get some exes to speak up?”

“So, one thing,” Brett says. “I could maybe, uh, ask the person who leaked all of the info to share some of the videos I copied to him?”

“It’s one of us?” Colin asks, as everyone except Jenna gasps, as though they’re all trapped in a mansion by Boddy and Wadsworth, and the first corpse has emerged,

“Kind of,” Brett says. “Well, it’s not anyone in this room. Except maybe me. But I just sent it to him, and he sent it to someone else, and now all of the news agents have it. But I swear he’s a person who cares about us, and – I mean, after Jenna left, nobody was taking care of us, so I had to step into my role as band leader and do something.”

“The issue is that there’s nobody to corroborate the footage,” Jenna says, “Since doing that breaks all of our NDAs. Frank’s lawyers probably say that any of us coming out – or outing anyone in this room – means violating it, too. Not only is the band over, but everyone’s suddenly in legal trouble without the money to afford lawyers. Which puts you all into the perfect legal position to be in front of a firing squad. Both figuratively and literally”

“What about me?” Jake asks. “I’m already kicked out, so I probably get hit the least hardest?”

“I could’ve sworn you liked getting hit hard,” Brett says.

“Look, it’s been a long few weeks, Brett. But yeah, I mean, if any of us has some kind of power here, it’s me, right? Plus, you know I do love a leaker, so—”

“Enough,” Jenna says, all the latent stuff still lodged within her brain – the reflex of seriousness, the apparent importance of authority – released as she laughs. She remembers how nervous she had been to come out to the boys, despite how much she felt it shouldn’t have mattered – she’d practice with Tish, the most breakable poker face, visualizing the kids as she dropped a my wife and I, trying to not rattle through the words too quickly, so she’d be sure they would hear. How difficult it felt to be nervous about revealing a part of herself to people who it was her job to help reveal pieces of themselves to the world. Brett winked at her and said, “We’re not blind, and neither are you,” and the four queer boys had made what had seemed already obvious even more so. She remembers Jake, arms folded over his chest as he looked into
one of the room’s corners – how he was still lowering his voice around her then, and how he was still calling the other guys “bro” – and said he was about as straight as a rainbow, still afraid that naming himself as gay would make it realer, or serve as the kind of curse that would ruin in rapid, abstract ways and commit him to hoosegows he felt he couldn’t even fathom. And there they were, last night, singing showtunes. She’s proud of him, she thinks, though not in what she imagines to be a maternal way. He’s like her college faggle, but older. He’s survived to a point of readiness – which, she realizes, is more than she could have said for herself until a few days ago.

“Yeah, and Jenna can just pay Jake’s legal fees!” goes Liam. Which knocks her out of her head. Before she can explain the flagrant conflict of interest or the fact that she’s flatlining financially after the reservation at El Rostro, the other boys jump in, suggesting benefit shows and fundraising drives, auctioning dates with themselves to kids with wealthy parents. All of which means Jenna’s on a roller coaster that’ll leave her, as always, in dream-crushin’ mode.

“It would have to be a benefit show that happens tonight at the latest,” she says. “We’d need to record Jake corroborating everything beforehand, too. On a device that he buys, somehow, without it causing a mob in the middle of a Radio Shack. The priority is getting the video out as soon as possible.”

“Boo,” says Liam.

“I,” Jake is saying. “Aside from the, y’know, legal trouble, this is what I’ve wanted for a long time.”

“Yeah, you and the rest of us,” goes Brett, lifting Jake from the floor as he hugs him. “You’re a saint,” he says. “And I’m super jealous of you. You get to be the famous one out of us? I mean, come on.” Soon, all of the other boys are around him as well, their arms like a
lattice. Jenna doesn’t think that she’s done a good job with them – but she is glad that at least a few of the plans have worked.

“Jenna,” Matt moans beneath one of the other boys’ biceps, “Why are you over there?”

“One of us,” goes Colin, “One of us.”

“Puny human,” says Liam in what he probably means to be a demon voice, “Come join our flesh pile.”

And she’s there for a second, all of the boys around her, sweaty and emotional and gross. Then, she pushes them all off of her, can almost hear the bowling pin sound effect as they hit the floor like test dummies. She knows they’re joking, but it feels like they’re not, on some larger scale. For her entire professional career, Jenna has been a technician, her queerness merely oil, flavor. But here, among these boys, it doesn’t just feel like a fun fact. It is somehow intrinsic – to her and to them and to the generations that the report predicts. Years from now, people will talk about The Moneyboys in the same way they talk about N*SYNC or The Backstreet Boys – or at least O-Town – and maybe they’ll even do what the report predicts. Maybe kids who watch whichever butterfly effect Jake jimmies into the timeline end up kinder, or more accepting, or taking better care of themselves. Maybe guys of all strokes stop fearing all things femme – maybe members of boy bands in future decades live together, kiss each other on the neck, or sing about being each others’ soulmates. And maybe that opens up new doors, new timelines – paths for people like younger versions of Jenna to whittle through after the hard fears about sexuality die from the new models of acceptance that boys like Jake begin to pave ways for. In a way, he’s done it for her already. As she steps out of the pile of boys, Jake stands next to her, grabbing unconsciously at the back of her sweatshirt. She loops an arm around him. By all accounts, Jenna Muldoon is one tough nut. So, an entire generation should be a cakewalk by now, right?
“So, do we use the same leaker?” Brett asks.

“For consistency’s sake,” Jenna says, “That’s a good idea. How’s he doing, anyway? It’s been a while.”

#

The number of individuals in Los Angeles who’ve got enough storage space for entire oceans of Moneyboys videos has already got to be a small one, and Jenna banks on the fact that even though Brett gets around, he likely doesn’t trust any of these individuals more than the first to whom he’d run. A call to Frida, a quick game of human Tetris across the backseats that ends in Brett and Colin, the two tallest, knee-to-knee in a third row of spilled, fake noses, and a quick, sweaty nyoom up I-5, and Jake’s reaching out for the buzzer of an underground garage that it seems like everyone in the vehicle has entered.

Jessie opens the apartment door, and says, “Motherfucker. It’s all of them.”

Seonghun embraces each of them in a line, Frida jumping into his arms like a kid before he can get an arm around any of the boys, all of their jewelry – Frida’s bracelets and nosering and double-hoop combo, plus the one, dangling prism off of Seonghun’s ear – ringing like chandeliers in an earthquake. Brett lifts him up. Liam leans his head into his chest. He kisses Jake on the forehead like Jenna remembers Frida had, and she wonders what she missed. She wonders if it was more than a single sort of interaction that evaded her. Only a few months ago, she’d sat across from Frank at her desk, bobbleheads oscillating, not disagreeing that any trauma the boys would face would be normal for them – par for the course, a stop on the cycle. She looked at the boys and saw, well, queer boys – kids with their whole lives ahead of them, fresh and ready to be defeated by the world long after she left them. She had been paid to start a group, and thus, saw a group. But as she sees each of them show love, or friendship, or whatever the
kids are calling it these days, to Seonghun in such different ways, she knows she’s choreographed them all as a unit too mashed together in her head. That perhaps, to know a person is to not follow a short set of rules. When Seonghun is across from her, and he offers his hand, she bats it away lightly, and embraces him back.

“I’ve gotta say,” she tells him, “It’s a lot nicer to see you with clothes on.”

“Wow, she fires me and then she insults me,” he says, his posture rigid as he rocks her for the audience, his forearms against her back but not his hands, as though contact will mean she’ll harm him further. He does this thing, when she lets go, where he smiles into his cheekbones, and they make it look like his eyes are closed – an acting move the boys learned when they were taught to vacate uncomfortable situations. Normally he’s the type of dancer who could slip through a spine, stepping around each delicate nerve ending, aligning the execution of how he wishes to be perceived exactly with how others will see him. But she can see, before he unclenches his face and claps her on the shoulder, that he’s still – afraid’s not the word, but it’s close. She’s still all welled up from the past few hours with Jake and the boys, of the queer capital emergent from consent and touch – so that she’s discovered it doesn’t transfer, even in moments of surprise bliss – throws a wrench into her cranial equation as well. She claps him back on the shoulder, and he tilts his head, mouth pursed, closing one eye – not a wink so much as a WTF.

“Let’s, uh, log on,” he says. “ Seems like we’ve got a full day ahead of us.”

So, as Frida and Jake mold new disguises to drive to a Circuit City that’s already decided to liquidate, Jenna, Seonghun, and the other boys talk through the footage Brett dropped off with Seonghun, selecting clips from the Grossman footage he’d flirted with her for copies of daily, incriminating against even the most finely-groomed attorney: Mulligan smacking Matt with the
metal-edged club of a new training weapon until he bleeds through a neon tank top that he calls “too faggy, my man,” as he walks away to change it, an acting coach preaching about prison and hell to anyone who’s ever so much as sniffed another man, and an extended rant by Frank, in which he screams at Liam for having a family that can’t speak in just one language, cracks his foot in an attempt to kick one of the wooden panels in Jenna’s old office, and asks, in no uncertain terms, if Liam wants some 8-ball in one of his nostril’s pockets. It turns out, one of the benefits of Frank not understanding how to treat the boys is that he’s stopped looking at them. There are corner shots, cameras hidden in hoodie pockets, cameras taped to the ceiling. Brett asks Frank, in his best pre-executive voice, when the boys are going to get paid, and Frank says, “I know it’s been a year or so, but–,” which is all they need. The video’s not a difficult one to make.

Around each scene of dread or violence, though, there are the clips of the boys Jenna’d stay up watching, thinking she was in front of her computer purely to do her job. Shots of Matt and Liam at Hamburger Mary’s with Frida. Colin pokes Liam until he rolls his eyes and agrees to throw a frisbee in the Dirigible lot. Brett’s talk show – which Jenna vows to watch later, in toto, figuring out that it’s an audition reel, the type of thing he’ll be able to glue together and send to NBC if and when Leno ever retires. Jake’s a common guest on Late Night with Brett Lazar. They recreate multiple scenes from Titanic, Jake yelling, “I’m the king of the world,” at a window with closed blinds. Tens of clips of Jake positioning the camera in front of his bed and sitting on it, singing medleys from last year’s Tony Awards. It’s at these that Jenna begins to tear up.

“I know he’s a good singer,” Brett says, “But I mean, come on, it’s not anything you haven’t heard before.”
Though she doesn’t have the proper frontend code to spit out that she sees more of herself in him, within these videos – more than she wanted to believe that she did whenever he performed in her office, the sort of distinct loneliness that must’ve kept him orbiting back to her despite all of the ways she sliced into him, like what she’d felt when she could point at her car and name all of the dead friends that sat in each seat, like she’d killed off pieces of Jake in the same way the universe had cut away at her own system of heart – that she bellows out a long sigh like an exhaust pipe, and that she gnashes at the space between her eyebrows with her free hand becomes a recipe that talks him into backing off.

“Fifteen bucks,” Frida says, dangling a plastic bag dotted in recycling insignia from her flattened middle finger as she walks in. “And you owe the kid, not me. Also, I need one of the other adults to switch out with me – Jake’s having a moment in the family room.”

Jenna’s up before Frida can finish the sentence, and sits next to Jake on a bony couch, his eyes red, and one false cheekbone creeping down the side of his face. She moves her hand before the prosthesis, a fleshy hockey stick with a folding blade, and lets it stay there, until he keeps quivering, and she says, “Do you mind?” Which, immediately, she knows is not her best work. She’s backwards, then, saying it wasn’t what she meant, and she was trying to be nice, and pointing to the silicone flapping off of him, saying “I’m sorry,” “I’m sorry,” “Look at it,” until she realizes the strange noises Jake’s mouth makes are the sort of ugly, genuine laughs he’s been taught to workshop into more elegant closures of throat.

“Oh my god” he says, slapping her hand onto his cheek, “Just get it off, please.”

The silicone peels away easily – Frida’s the best in the business for a reason – and flops into her palm. She places it on an end table, and it begins to curl. Then, she places an arm around the back of the couch, which Jake grabs immediately, and drapes over his shoulders.
“You’re the worst,” he says. “Despite what every tabloid is about to print, I promise I’m non-toxic.”

“This is the first time I’ve ever heard you worrying about the tabloids. That’s usually my job.”

He wipes his eyes on his shoulder, the fabric of his shirt mottling into an array of deeper colors. “Bleh,” he says, “Sorry. No crying in boy bands, right?”

“New policy,” she says, “We’re not using any of Frank’s rules, and we’ll, uh, review all of mine.”

“The clerk at the store recognized me,” Jake says.

“OK,” Jenna says, inhaling to fill whichever part of her stomach has just dropped away, “This is still doable. We need to send someone to watch them, and make sure they don’t get in touch with–”

“No, not like that. Like, I went to buy the camera, and I was the only one in line, and this guy looks at me, and he can’t be more than, like, seventeen or eighteen. And he’s got this rainbow lanyard, and he’s talking to me about it because he sees me look at it, so I’m worried that I outed myself before the plan happened, but he’s saying that I was always his favorite, and that he saw me at a signing hugging every fan that came up to the table even though there was this woman next to me in a power suit telling me that I shouldn’t get too close to people, because they might get sick, and one of the rules of boy bands is that they’re not allowed to get sick on tour, but I kept getting up and hugging everyone, and he was so enamored by this show of love, and the fact that it was non-gendered, that he went home afterward and came out to his parents, and then they kicked him out, but he’s doing fine and he’s putting himself through high school, and I didn’t know what to say, so I hugged him over the counter, and we both started crying, and
– I mean, clearly, I haven’t stopped. But on the way out, I just started thinking about what, like, what happens if this doesn’t go the way we want it to? Like, even if this all goes the way you’re planning it, what if I fuck it up somehow, and it turns out that me coming out makes other people’s lives harder?”

She wants to tell him that she thinks that’s impossible – that even she’s already learned from him, or at least been reminded that she’s still able to learn. There’s a part of her that, she knows, sees him as a version of her dead friends, but one that’s made it. How after generations of people like her loading dice and being talked out of rolling them by the heteros who teach them how to need money in the first place, he’s got the first chance she’s seen to do both and survive.

“Told you about the report, right?”

“Yeah, but I don’t need data on this right now, Jenna.”

“I know I can’t tell you what you need. But I’m thinking that maybe there’s a way to use both – the data, and whatever it is you do need. When I think about that report, and I think about all of the things it said would happen if the Moneyboys continued performing the sort of wide, accepting, uh, thing that ended up being the basis of everything that me and Frida and Seonghun did, that all of you guys genuinely did act out, that kind of anti-consumptive – I dunno – goodness? Kindness? Love? Look, I don’t know what to call it, but it would be the kind of thing that gets people to live in a way that isn’t cordoned off by corporations promising material and customization and then serving up the same thing every time, and gets people to care about each other instead. I remember back when you first auditioned, when I was sitting with Frank behind that beer pong table he said wasn’t fancy enough, and they had to bring in a white tablecloth they bought at Walgreens, and you came in and we looked at each other and said that you had this ‘it’ factor, this kind of genuineness that made people feel like no one else was in the room with you
except themselves and you. And we did everything we could to commoditize that, but it never worked. It’s hard to define, or even talk about, but whatever it is, you have it. And the reason I say that isn’t to say that you have this charisma that people will follow, even though I know that you do – and I have data saying that as well. The reason I’m saying all this it is that I think that ‘it’ factor – this is gonna sound stupid coming from me, but – I think that ‘it’ factor is that kindness or goodness, or whatever it is. Like, it’s not a product of fame or cultivation or acting practice. It’s just this thing that you have, and I know I’m only speaking for myself here, but if the people in my life who’d had that had stuck around, then, my god, would I have been better off.”

He’s stopped laughing, stopped crying. He leans into her shoulder and she can see him staring at the wall, blank and processing, like she’s been for the past – how many decades has it been?

She thinks of all of the people who had whatever she tried to describe – the dead friends, and Tish, and Kenya Knott talking Jenna up until she was ready to be, for a moment, beautiful. These are the queers, the femmes, the trans, the faggots, the people whose names she can search for online – the queers who made papers and music without producers, the queers who dismantled windows and officers, those who laid down on the streets until the world learned to stop driving over them. They have been around her, and she’s done what? Let them fade into other dimensions, other places, layers of the internet she hasn’t yet accessed. And, yet, here is one that’s kept returning to her, that folds his arm around her back as his face warps into thought.

“But I don’t,” he says, “I don’t know how to do this.”

“Nobody knows how to do anything! Look around. You’re in Los Angeles. The moon’s made of paper and the ocean’s made of cardboard. Look at how sure we were that we could hold
you guys all down, and get you to behave like, I dunno, paper dolls. The rules we thought we had
do not apply here. You broke them, and you need to keep breaking them.”

“But–”

“Jake, out of everyone in the band – out of most of the people I’ve met in my life, you’re
one of those people who does all of those things that the report says is gonna happen to people if
whatever’s intrinsic to us – to boy bands – affects the public.”

“Yes, and I’m also very pretty.”

“Right,” she says, realizing she’s got him back, “Plus, you do have this whole team
around you.”

Between the cracked white walls and the light wooden molding, the terracotta tiles of an
apartment that’s seen so many different versions of so many people, the village it takes to
remake a person does exactly that. Frida spills a stemless wine glass of kombucha laughing at a
clip they won’t be able to add to the video. Matt sits in the window like a pinup, calling out days
he remembers filming whack shit, until he realizes he’s got his face in sunlight and Seonghun
has to lend him a hat. Liam looks like he’s about to do a pushup on the desk, he’s so absorbed in
whichever clip of the band he’s watching. Even Dougherty, who’s shown up after a call from
Jessie, undoes hard wires on Starfucker’s back end, checks with her for traces. It’s all of them,
looking through all of their histories, sped through at 4x. Jenna boosts herself off of the couch
with her knees, and offers Jake a hand up. And they watch until they see what the band looks like
without them. They are about to leave the room – it’s nearly sunset, and there are lines to
rehearse, final statements to arrange in proper order to maximize that genuineness Jake carries –
but then, the boys in the footage get dark-eyed, wear makeup over zits and scars that curdles
around each wound in a revealing matte. Necks hang diagonal until slapped into place. Matt, in
one clip, is so zooted out of his mind that he nibles on his arm during a dance practice in which
the boys barely move at all.

“Yeah, it wasn’t pretty after you guys left,” Brett says. No one’s turned on any light but
the computer, and the room’s gone pink with the type of Los Angeles sunset that sells entire
complexes, entire streets. “Wait,” says Liam, “Watch this one. This is so stupid. We can’t use it,
but it’s worth watching.”

It’s a video Colin shot, of Liam in a bathrobe and sweatpants from Hamburger Mary’s,
cross-legged with each hand in a circle.

“This is so stupid,” Liam says, already laughing into his fist.

“Today,” the Liam on screen says, “My apprentice psychic, Colin, and I are here to
summon Jake and Jenna back from the dead.” The Colin holding the camera steps backward to
reveal five points, a used chip clip at one and a lawn chair at another. Below them, a circle made
out of so many rolled Toluca towels that Jenna thinks these two must’ve robbed one of the
housekeeping carts, and that there’s a naked stash of soap being pushed down a hall somewhere.
On-screen Liam lowers his hood and begins twirling his arms like David Blaine emerging from a
casket. “With this thong Jake said he bought for me as a joke, but then borrowed when he went
out a few times, I summon him back to us in the land of the living!” In both the background of
the video and IRL, Matt cackles. On-screen Liam runs through each item, trying to force Jenna
and Jake to apprate in front of him so vehemently that Jenna’s not sure if it’s meant to be a joke.

“Commit to the bit,” Liam says. “A great man once taught me that.” Jake loops an arm
around his.

And they fly through each video, hacking and splicing, until they’ve got a solid 45 of
incriminating sadness that sits on three separate CDs. Jenna sits at the computer burning copies,
looping them together in jewel cases, as Frida and Jessie say they need to walk to Lick and back. Jake’s in and out of the room in different outfits, weird combinations of Seonghun’s clothes that all swallow him into a shapeless body none of the boys can justify as making sense for his upcoming reveal. Brett’s trying to tie a belt around Jake’s waist when Frida and Jessie are back, with margaritas in clear, plastic storage containers.


She returns with a pile of crumpled garments, going, “They’re clean, I swear,” and Jake’s in and out of them as the other boys ooh and ahh, as he runway-walks in and out of the room. Frida places one of the drink containers next to Jenna without saying anything, and joins the boys in their lineup, red-faced and twirling. It turns out the bar’s also let them get away with taking a few coasters, and as Jenna lifts her drink to her mouth, she sees the portrait of the boys, the “Event cancelled due to heterosexuality” message crossed out, and yet another one posted below it, saying, “Event un-cancelled due to the drama~, honey!”

Jake squeezes into what becomes a crop top on him, a purple shirt with a cluster of puppies chasing each other around its border.

“It’s a little tight,” goes Colin.

“Are you joking?” Jake says. “It’s adorable. I feel great. Plus, if I’m gonna do this, I’m gonna fag it up as much as possible.”

“That’s the spirit,” says Seonghun. “I have a vest that might go with that, too.”

“What do you usually wear it with?”

“Nothing,” he says, ruffling Jake’s hair. “But it might make you look like one of Britney’s dancers.”
Jenna oscillates between them and the chain of messages. She’s found herself in a room full of people who understand that the old versions of themselves are just old versions – that it’s important to acknowledge them, but not be inhibited by them. There are always gonna be records, she thinks, looking back at the crossed-out messages, but the dimensional distances a person places between their current version and all of their defunct ones say a lot more about them than an instance captured in just one moment – a perfect image built toward repeatedly. But there’s no one person who’s uniquely pleasant – at least, not until androids start popping up. Androids will never start singing, though – right?

Jake’s maybe two-thirds into a split when Jenna looks back at the coaster.

“Holy shit,” she says, and it’s like the place is before her, Lick done up in lights and its stage extended, ablaze in drag queens and gogos, the entire red room not filled with smoke like the Hollywood flicks of years past will try to tell you, but condensing from the sweat of every queer in the entire complex, all of them summoned up from the place’s lower rings to see the coming out of the millennium. She sees Kenya Knott swinging in from a banister, Cognitive Disco Nance pulling a strap on her outfit to reveal a thousand illuminated skulls. If anyone knows how to initiate a new identity, it’s the queers – just look at the coaster. Just look at her. Every Jenna Muldoon’s been sprouted from another, previous version. A few have even budded at Lick. It will be lush, curtained, fabulous. The backdrops will have thickness and depth. The snozberries’ll taste like snozzberries. For once, what pops out of the fame machine won’t be a construction teaching a crowd to point in the opposite direction. At Lick – at this dumpy, little karaoke contest they’re going to crash – it – and Jenna, and these other queers around her – is going to make like a broken clock, and spit out a rare, personal truth.
Before they head over, Jenna showers, pulls her hair back into an arrangement at least marginally less frizzed than it had been before with one of the many hair-ties Jessie’s let her borrow. “Guess I’m a trendsetter,” Jessie says, “Soon they’re gonna curate my fashion choices online.” Jenna catches herself in the mirror, and buffs out her eye bags so the cameras won’t confuse her for Dr. Neo Cortex. The boys yell, “Gross!” when she leans out in a towel, and then, “Sorry! You look great!” once she slams it behind her. She doesn’t care about looking nice so much as she looks professional enough to be believed again. This is a reboot. Jenna Muldoon, the more human version, technician 2.0 – or whichever version she’s on. Spray slicks her hair, and the orange power blazer goes on, as do a few selections from the box of costume jewelry Frida had in her car: chunky rings, sunglasses studded with ice, a retired model of Swatch. Pieces of her catch light, effervesce.

“No,” Jake says. “Fuck. You look like a queen. And trust me, it takes one to know one.”

#

In the last hour, the gang decides to leave Jenna and Jake together at the house for coaching, as well as Seonghun and Jessie, who promise not to let them do anything fishy. The Andrade Caravan drops off CDs shocked with Jake’s name on them at every media outlet in La La Land, which is a lot of ‘em – every newspaper, every radio show, every TV station. Even the tabloids. There’s a fight over which station they play as they head back to pick up the others, Liam yelling to keep the dial steady on “Sweetness” while Colin, index finger flying, details the merits of a new, chill indie station that he really thinks they could stand to use before a night out. By the time they’re in the parking garage, the two are slap-fighting, which prompts Seonghun to whip back upstairs for a CD he says he’s sure everyone is gonna love. The whole garage seems
to groan when he returns with a Moneyboys CD, their newest, the last to include Jake and Jenna, the one where Jenna had mathematically calculated each boy’s vocals to land within 0.5 seconds of each other.

“Anyone seen Wayne’s World?” Brett asks, and he launches into Freddie Mercury’s, “Mamaaaa–” until the car’s singing it together. Time passes, but slowly – there’s a crowd gathering outside of Lick, but it’s not the type of powerful, staggering congregation Jenna had envisioned. They keep looping around, and someone slips the CD into its drive when it gets quiet. It’s reflexive how each boy lands vocal backflips into their own parts – the ones and threes stay clapless, and the harmonies happen like they’ve been plucked from the recording. The only variance in voice occurs when small fries and fricatives pop from their throats, the boys not warmed up. They go into falsettos for higher parts normally hittable. From the passenger seat, Jenna feels the dampened shock of sneaker on car floor, dance moves also a reflex.

Jenna imagines that walking into Lick with Jake will feel like she’s a cameraperson on the red carpet, there but ignored, propelling him forward, reminding him that, for all of their sakes, the show literally must go on. But though there are a few guys in leather pants who ask for autographs and pose for pictures – Jake channeling Reynolds’ Cosmo shoot as the other guys hold him in the air – the commotion she’d dreamt of is, well, just not there. Despite attempting to arrive a few minutes before the contest starts, the stage isn’t even rolled out by the time they roll in.

“Oh, you must be mistaken,” says the bartender with the sign-up sheet, the same queen who’d guarded the door during the USC benefit, her face more stable in the AC, “The event begins at 9PM gay time. We’ve got at least another half hour. What’s your name, baby?”

“Jake Bennett.”
“No, doll, what’s your actual name?” she says, looking more at the crowd than at him. “I swear, you do one theme night, and all the celebrity impersonators come out.”

“It, uh, actually is?” Jake asks. “I’m not sure what to tell you.”

The bartender rolls her eyes, her pupils so high that she must be able to examine the innards of her own skull. In the mirror behind the bartender, Jenna swears she sees Jake on the dance floor, in jeans only, grinding on a much larger man. And then another Jake, in his outfit for the 2002 tour promo shoot, a tied headband, an oversized explorer shirt with only a single button binding the whole contraption together. A third Jake’s wig falls off, gets kicked by another queen through the feet of the crowd. Someone yells, “Tumbleweave!” and Jenna sees more Jakes in the crowd, plus Bretts and Matts and Liams and Colins – even cabals of older queens outfitted in the elaborate makeup of the “Love through the Ages” video, who Jenna notes she’s going to have to hide from Matt when he arrives. Each impersonator looks similar, yes, to whichever boy they portray, but they’re all slightly off by the time Jenna’s gaze focuses on them. She can’t believe the queen before her can’t recognize the real thing when she sees it, especially when she could so accurately point to the rogue mole on this Brett, or the full, actual ass on that other Jake, or the Liam with a baseline grin, trying to fish a cherry out of a short glass with a tongue that’s also too short to match.

“He’s the real one,” Jenna says. “Just like I’m the real Jenna Muldoon. Remember? The producer who was literally here a few days ago?”

“Right, right. Just like the seventeen other real Jenna Muldoons we’ve got around here,” says the queen, nodding up at a tally board, neon marker on black plastic.

It’s like the internet has broken open before Jenna as each of the other Jenna Muldoons emerges from the crowd. You image search for Jenna Muldoon, you wait the few minutes for the
whole page to load, and you see what she sees right now: a childhood Jenna that she’s pretty sure is a small guy in a wig more expensive than her hair, a Jenna in a lime blazer and shaggy bob dancing with a black zentai suit in a cardboard box that’s likely meant to be a microphone in a podium, and at least three Jennas as Garlic Knott, though gaunter, taller, and deeper into the Molly stash than she’s ever been in her life. The crowd separates, cackling and clapping, as one enormous, muscular Jenna in a harness – but also a khaki bra and matching slacks – pegs a Jake. She’s amazed that this crowd could coalesce into different silhouettes of her and the boys so quickly and – outfit-wise, at least – so accurately – it’s taken her nearly forty-five years, and she’s still not sure what she’s supposed to wear to become herself.

“So, sure thing, honey. You’re both–” and here she arches the clipboard under her arm, to maneuver both hands into air quotes, “–real. But you’re the – let’s see – fortieth Jake Bennett to show up tonight, so do me a favor and try again. God, a couple layers of foundation and everyone thinks they’re Sylvester.”

They’re back and forth, Jake telling Jenna she was right and that he should’ve gotten that license when he had the chance, until Seonghun arrives, the rest of the crew trickling in behind him, seeing the place full of doppelgangers and realizing they won’t have to hide under the noses and hats all night. The queen gathers her cheeks into air kisses around him, weighing the underside of his duffel bag against her hand.

“Is she,” says the queen, “Going to be putting clothes on tonight?”

“Just adding some stuff to the locker,” he says. “But who knows? Maybe I’ll go wild and wear a jacket.”
“Someone call Venus, and tell it to kick Mercury’s wiry little ass out of retrograde. My heart can barely stand it. Between this and,” she says, now pointing at Jake and Jenna, “these kinds of people, who insist on being a celebrity for a single night—”

“It’s them,” Seonghun says, placing an arm around each of them. “You know I used to work with them, right?”

“Darling, if my face could move, it would. You’re joking.”

“Usually, yes. But tonight I’m completely serious. You’re looking at the real things.”

“Honey,” she says, writing Jake’s name on the sheet, “You think you’ve seen everything in this town, and then – poof – some new thing just manifests in front of you like this. Oh, and speaking of poofs, what are you doing at a fairy bar like this? Could’ve sworn you were a confirmed breeder these days.”

“I guess you heard wrong,” Jake says, arms over his head and spinning like Mandy Moore if she knew how to use her arms.

“Well, welcome to the faggot lifestyle, darling. It’s terrible, but it’s ours. Try poppers if you haven’t yet. Also, bathhouses.”

Jenna’s as shocked as the queen isn’t. Here is a celebrity everyone’s wanted on their team, confirming his willingness to giddy up, with – see sees, and has to remember that it’s no longer her job to keep all of his pieces put-together – straps from a skimpy pair of underwear glued like architectural ridges above the waistline of his pants. And here, before them, where a person should be screaming, is an unimpressed bartender.

“Look,” says the queen, when she sees Jenna’s mouth flatline, “I’m happy for you. Truly. You’re living your truth, and that’s wonderful. But the number of famous faces I’ve seen waltzing through WeHo thinking that they want to try being gay for a day, or that they’re
researching for a part, or that they’re pursuing this weird, sexual freedom that they’ve actually had the whole time they’ve been looking for it? Darling, everyone wants to try it on. They wear their disguises and have a single affair, and think, ‘Welp, that’s it, I’m sated.’ It’s the ones that come back who surprise me.”

“Show me your back, then,” Jake says, winking.

“Child,” says the queen, rattling into a laugh. “You’re too young, and I’m too old for you to be tearing up my heart like that – wait, that’s the wrong one, isn’t it? Ah, no matter. You all sort of feel the same, anyway. But good for you.”

She lays her clipboard on the bar – “My drink!” goes a twink in a sequined vest; “Can it, Mary!” says the queen – and, though it looks like she can barely lift the weight of her sleeves, her skeletal arms are wrapped around Jake, and then around Jenna.

“Welcome,” she says. “I’ll sign you both up. I’m of course going to have to tell everyone here that a pair of authentic, Cartier celebrities have joined us tonight. But I’ll keep it fun. I won’t tell anyone which costume isn’t a costume at all. We’ll have a reveal. What a show it will be. What an excellent night.”

In more time than is comfortable for them – there’s a line behind them that the real boys, Frida, and Jessie, have dissolved into the crowd to not clot – the queen writes both of their names on her printed spreadsheet.

“By the way,” she says, whispering as they pass her, dropping a small bottle into Jake’s pocket, “I was serious about the poppers.”

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Word gets out, and, in a flash, so does West Hollywood. It’s that early hour, when the sun has set and the streetlights and the pulsing neons are the only lights across the boulevard, when
everyone and their chosen mothers are home, six drinks in and not one shot more – since you’ve got to save room for what’s bought for you at the club – in the perpetual stage of getting ready, flipping through the codes of eHarmony and Match and Starfvcker to locate who will be where, screenshotting torsos and pasting them adjacent to others in enormous MS Paint documents, the first meat market of the new millennium. It’s here, across open AIM and IRC channels, that news of Jake’s discovery at Lick spreads, that questions pulse up like digital mushrooms, ballooning into the types of unsolvable monsters that one has to see to believe: what is he wearing? Why is he there? And most importantly, is he single? Looking?

Queers of every geometry sail through Lick’s doors. Diesels and drags and daggers pull up on motorbikes, in corvettes, in U-Hauls. So many different kinds of fruit and nuts that Harry & David will have to check their stocks waltz in by group, color-coded by whichever era they’re stuck in, neon for eighties, baggy for nineties, black on black for everyone young and already pessimistic. Knob jockeys in cowboy hats and cock riders in neck-tied handkerchiefs. Enough denim to have kept Levi’s in business for another decade, like a crowd’s come down from San Francisco again. Baby queens in makeup for the first time share both the standing line and powdered lines with graduates of HRT who’ve discarded old, incorrect bodies. In the same twenty minutes, a caravan of big, blue vans arrives with least thirty different village people. Some who’ve arrived fit themselves into a new group: a rogue sailor locking eyes with a partnerless construction worker. Otters and bears and gym bunnies, oh my! Each queer in their own fantasy, in the hopes of seeing this famous kid turn his real.

The boys fit into the crowd of imposters like lubed pieces of a puzzle. Matt’s surrounded by entire generations of other Matts, who’ve staked out their own amoeba, whipping their bodies against each other like they’ll be young forever. Brett evaluates his impersonators numerically.
Liam’s found a mosh pit with some of the emo crew, goths in Marilyn Manson face and Dita corsets curb-stomping and limp-wristedly skanking. From nearby, Jenna hears Colin say, “Oh, I’m not actually gay, but I’m here to be supportive to all of my bros, seeing as it’s the manly thing to do” and a pair of queens groaning, laughing, and saying, “Wow, this guy really commits to the bit.”

The karaoke is about to begin, and from stage left emerges Kenya Knott in a fuller version of what Jenna had already thought of as the complete drag the last time she’d seen Kenya live, hosting in a gown painted with each of the boys’ faces, plus Garlic Knott’s, in anime style, Brett’s hair blonde and up like Goku, Colin a near-exact replica of who the internet’s taught Jenna is named Kuwabara. It’s as though Kenya has absorbed all of them, swirled them up into some greater form, a bodice and a trail and long sleeves like royalty. It seems like all of the queens are in these peplum sleeves, Jenna notices, like Madame had worn what feels like ages ago, as though they’ve correctly snowballed into imagined fantasies and decided to fling new ones forward.

“What a night,” says Kenya Knott, “What a fucking night. Listen, I hope you all took tomorrow off, because this? This is about to be what we called back in the day a doozy. I’m sure you’ve all heard who’s around tonight,” she says, and all sorts of Jakes in the audience scream, “And I’m sure you’re ready to get started. Tip your bartenders and tip your performers, and also tip me, girl, because this dress was real muthafuckin’ expensive.”

Each new singer’s on stage for a single song, mid-fantasy from the moment they’re in front of the microphone, dipping into splits and spinning around poles that’ve been slotted into the stage like ballast. And each of them is on for longer than they should be, milking each outro long until after the audio’s cut. “What do we think?” Kenya asks, and as she holds an arm over
the shoulders of each performer, the crowd chants, “Not the one! Not the one!” Soon, they grow
antsier, throwing the contents of glasses instead of dollar bills, yelling the chant before each
performer is done. Liam drops a martini glass bigger than his head off at Jenna’s table, asking
her if she wants it, because he’s already in pretty deep. Every shred of her rattles as she leans up
to its rim to take a sip of the nuclear-looking fluid. What if the crowd doesn’t believe Jake? What
if he’s not as genuine to them as he is to her – to the other boys? What if he’s been trained too far
into celebrity mode, reflexive performance? She tries to notice other things besides the singers.
Once the next performer’s done, and the crowd is chanting, Liam says he feels like he’s playing
with a cheat code, and then heads back into the crowd to mosh. Someone, somewhere, must have
scissors, because his hoodie’s lost its arms and been sliced down its middle, revealing a tattoo
crawling out from his ribcage that she doesn’t remember him getting. Kenya’s painted herself
and Tish onto the dress as well, and Jenna realizes she has another thought she should but cannot
avoid. She scans the crowd for a wife she’d love to apologize to, to start over with, to have
nearby for just a night to tell her all of the worrying is all OK. She feels like a cheese grater with
all of these pits in her stomach, but starts looking for anything to plug them, firing smaller
apologies at Frida and Seonghun until they take the big glass away from her, asking Jessie if the
other analytical mind at the tiny table believes it’ll all work and receiving a shrug and an offer of
weed.

“You just have to live in them now,” says Jessie.

“What?” Jenna asks, “The messes I made?”

“Nah, the things you’ve built.”

And everyone here has built something, Jenna thinks – and all of them for the world’s
consumption, too. One kid who’s missed the mark walks by dressed as Lance Bass, but he’s
committed, sneering prettily, yelling, “Our songs were better!” after each performance, moving from crowd segment to crowd segment, so a new crew hears the joke. There’s no way he’s the real thing, but if she asked him, she’s pretty sure she knows what he’d say his name was. Like vertices holding every element of the room, the crowd, and all of WeHo together, Knott and Nance and the old queen at the bar project an illusion of womanhood under hours of makeup – skin stretched, guts cinched, and balls tucked. Jessie and Brett, she knows, are both in Step-Ups, trying to appear slightly taller. Everyone here’s got their own set of rules, their own crisscrossing flowcharts toward illusions so obstinate that they will insist on them until they become true.

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To tell the story of how Lick collapses, old queens will say years later, is to tell the story of how infinite the night had felt, how the crowd had felt permeable in the way those at concerts never had before, how every minum – every dust fleck – felt like more of the bar than it had ever felt that night – the floors sticker, the volume higher, the people at by far their most beautiful. And not just because everyone was dressed like a celebrity, mind you. And not just because this is Los Angeles we’re talking about, either. The thing about the city, they’ll say, is that though its wind dances an intricate path through each high rise, peeled window, and elephantine palm tree, it does – like everyone who lives in its city – get around. To even the straights, despite all of our best efforts.

What it would feel like to be a cute, little, nacre fly – eyes like disco balls – on the wall of Frank Wilson’s office when he gets the first call and then the second, the confirmation from Rondo Hitch, the offer of help once again. To see his head move so close to bursting that it turns an impossible blue, to see the one vein that does rupture on the side of his neck, through even his skin, a small trickle down through his beard as he gives the order. The man motors through
anything that’ll become a street, there just as the agents arrive. And the agents are armored, shielded, toting the LAPD’s most must-have accessory for the winter, carbines in matte. Old queens will tell you that the line is mowed through with those shields, those weapons, Hitch at the front of the line breaking the door. They’ll say that some impersonator takes a bullet to the arm, makes it out the backdoor with the help of a queen with biceps the size of your neck, though that isn’t saying much. That before anyone knows what’s going on, the raiders are upon them, so rapid that they can’t be real, they’ll never be real. That the house lights go on, and Kenya Knott on backstage mic says to call your mother, your drag mother, all the people you love. The bar’s broken over, glass across the floor, a gogo’s harness inextricable from a billy club. A speaker goes kaput. The agents are efficient, moving across the crowd, looking for Wilson’s people, who’re not supposed to be exposed just yet, who’ve got a few cents that’ve yet to be knocked out of them. They shove ever broken chair, every sputtering electrical cord in a corner by the entrance, whipping them at anyone who sticks around – which is, of course, everyone. They do not see the queens that stiletto their knees, the bartenders who know just how to smash a glass. They do not see the boys they’ve been ordered to find, so that they may be sacrificed later. And they – of course, of course, we’re getting to that, will say the old queens – surely do not see Jenna Muldoon, atop the pile of broken material, tasselling out from its edges, camera in her hand, aux cord winding all the way down to floor negative seven, where they do the books, where there’s a computer not just preserving the footage, but sending it everywhere, each email on Lick’s list, every weirdo in WeHo, every Priscilla in the desert, every artiste in avocado land.

“I swear,” says Kenya Knott, day-of, into a microphone she forgets she’s holding, “I’ve never seen a little white woman run so fast.”
And the invaders are—of course—upon her, carving her with edges, smashing her camera, until—who’d a thunk? not them, biotch!—there’s one Cognitive Disco Nance floating from the rafters, debuting her aerial act that—she’ll remind everyone for years—was meant to debut to the post-midnight crowd, camera in her hand, glistening like all the cut crystals in a chandelier, swinging back and forth amidst a righteous cackle. Soon, there are cameras everywhere, catching it all, broadcasting it everywhere, even Faux’s newsvan pulled up into the neighborhood. There’s Colin—the real Colin—right-hooking an officer, looking up where Jenna’s been pinned down, saying, “Oh my gosh, I did it!,” and then being tackled into a pile of men in neon jockstraps. Here’s Brett with a stolen camera, down and up the stairs in record time, mugging from the stage. Here’s Liam Legion running dazzle camouflage, the hundreds of matching bodies zigzagging across the bar just long enough to draw the officers away from what they’d been beating, just long enough for a queen’s nails to connect, via punch, with the sides of their heads. And the officers don’t know, of course. They don’t know that the real Jake is kicking a speaker onto them, or the real Matt is helping Seonghun whisk the hurt to hidden places in the bar. They don’t know that they’ve invaded a place of perpetual reinvention, an explosion of persona—that even if they slaughtered everyone in the room, there would still be selves further burgeoning, identities glistening from every hidden fissure in the building, loves unkillable.

So the agents, of course—I’m getting there, the old queens will say, detailing the ways the room changed, the lights growing brighter with every camera that broke out of the building’s pores, the glowsticks cracked open by gogos and spilled around the areas with broken glass, the breathy narration of Kenya Knott still going, saying, “I can’t believe it—those little sausage legs,” the soundtrack of Moneyboys songs that’d been scheduled to play raving about love, about giving it all for the one you care most about—the agents, of course, do not see their own bodies
falling, their enfilade ushered back, the edges against their bluntesses, the eyes against their mouths. But they are outside, their weapons gone, their faces exposed, Frank Wilson on the sidewalk gone from red to purple, a man-shaped bruise; Rondo Hitch with three broken glasses in his side teetering atop the hood of a vehicle, its tires popping flatulantly, its nose careening into the center of the earth.

It is Jenna Muldoon, a cut eye wrapped in the shirt of a guy who wasn’t gonna use it anyway, who’s talking to the reporters then – it is this newly-opened face of hers confirming the footage. It blows up so much, it makes even the places that don’t talk about boy bands – Jennings, even. The BBC! She’ll get slammed by the NDA later, of course. And Lick will be slapped with inspections and regulations from the suits spending every day Sacramental, and there will be visits until every floor goes bottom-up, sure. And the frames will fall off of the place, the basements will get slurried into foundations. But every queer survives that night, lives longer than the falling bar. “There are no deaths at Lick,” Jenna will say, morning after, bandaged, everyone still up. The place’ll get swept and the feds’ll get shuttled out, and all the folx waking for brunch service will find their way there to feed the masses. There are, of course, mimosas, heavy on the Brut – heavy on the vodka, even. Because there are still five boys who want to put on a show, not to mention their manager, their family, their city.

And the rest of the night – for it’s not morning yet, not until lunch – the shaky lead-up to whenever the real Jake will finally get on stage is saturated with all of these ghosts of Dirigible past. Stacey Thompson appears with a partner named Yaritza who looks like either a much older Matt or one that hasn’t figured out how to moisturize. Lainez dances with a guy Jenna swears could be Koppel, and Frida says, “Yeah, maybe with enough makeup.” Liam’s family is there, eyeing her until she nods, his dad squeezing the buhjeesus out of her until she asks if he needs
her to point out the right version of her child. “Estas ciega o que?” he goes. Outside, rogue agents of SCABB in khakis whip plastic eggs filled with globs of fake blood at windows, until a couple of bartenders walk outside in jocks and throw old glasses back at them, models pulled from underbar cabinets until the SCABBs scatter.

Once the food is served, once the news crews are across the place, once Frank’s been carted away in what the paramedics have to tell him is Schwarzenegger’s personal ambulance before he even considers allowing his stretcher to be wheeled inside, Jenna’s at a thin table looking at all of the satisfied people, the leagues of Lick up past even their own bedtimes. She thinks of Tish, tries to distract herself again, searching for anything that won’t remind her of the closeness she now knows she misses, the years of being able to lie her head down across Tish’s legs as they watched Trebek tear as politely as possible through nightly residents of the triple podium, people who thought they knew things but didn’t, people Jenna and Tish each thought they’d never be. She wonders if she’s here, somewhere, in this amorphous diamond of the damned.

“God,” Brett says, appearing once again out of nowhere, his shirt magicked to some other dimension of the club, or lost to a town built on thirsty ground. “That face. Are you sad, or just horny?”

“I think just sad, Brett,” she says, working her tongue around her sharpest teeth so she doesn’t start crying again.

“Huh,” he says, handing her his drink. “OK. But you’re looking out at everyone with this – this weird, I dunno, longing – and it’s the same way people who send face pics in private messages always look like. Like they don’t look at the camera directly, and they’re trying to look
like they’re having a good time, but they’re always alone in their rooms and it’s like they’ve forgotten how.”

She takes a sip of what he’s handed her, and spits it out immediately, back into the glass with some bonus blood dragged out of the scar on her tongue. Jessie and Dougherty, who’ve just pulled into the blur, cackle beside her.

“Fuck, Brett. Is this motor oil?”

“Oh, no idea. Some guy just handed it to me. I figured I’d share the love.”

“I know gas prices are up, but Jesus. At least warn me first.”

“OK, OK,” he says, his sweat dripping into patterns across her blazer as he embraces her.

“All I’m saying is that if you want to be sad, be sad. And if you want to be horny, be horny. Don’t just be a picture. And if you want help creating a good dating profile after all this, I have an enormous,” he stops, grinning like Dr. N-Furter, until a laugh ekes out from Jenna’s mouth, “Success rate. God, Jenna. Clearly your mind’s in the gutter. Which is the right place for it, given—” he moves an arm in front of them like a tidal wave, encompassing every atom of the club within his elbow, “—it’s where we live.”

He leans down to kiss her on her temple, like she’s gone too far backwards, and morphed into his child. And then he’s lifting her out of her seat, and Jessie is winking at him, and Jenna sees Frida and Seonghun cheering. She blubbers out, “Where are we going?” and Brett yells, “The dance floor, dummy!”

“But Jake—”

“Jake’s not on for another hour!”

“How do you—?”

“We asked the queens! Stop sitting in the corner and come dance with us!”
She’s on the ground but it does not feel like the ground. Matt tango-spins her, and there is a lightness as she’s guided into their circle – as Jake is lifted figure-skating style by Colin until one of the bouncers yells to them about a danger that now seems about as poignant as last year’s singles. Liam booty-bumps Frida, as Brett and Seonghun lip-sync to songs they’ve heard so many times, as close to each other as the members of a girl group rained on in a music video. Around them dances an audience of people who, at least for this extended night, want to be them – want to crystalize a version of themselves, whether for joke or fulfillment or just to see what it’s like, as a person who at least seems to have something they do not. As she’s party-boyed by the entire group, Jenna imagines these people dreaming of being them, being her. Even a brief reinvention, she thinks, is still a reinvention. Here, in this cluster of clones, in this diligent rally of dead ringers, are people who have made new versions of themselves consciously, in such a short amount of time. They’ve assumed the efficiency of what boy bands have made them believe – that though it does take a village, it’ll all come out looking natural, real, like it’d been nothing. It feels like every queer in WeHo has come together over boy bands, saying bye, bye, bye to all the sad sectors of the outside world who’ve tried to tell them what they can and cannot be.

And if they can all do it – thinks Jenna, as Jake rolls the back of his neck over her shoulder like he’s Britney and she’s Banana – if there are people she’s never even met who’ve fallen for the boy band rules so hard they’ve come back around and worked to turn their artificial results into all of the potential realities that dance around her right now, if there are people who want, inexplicably, the creations of worlds that even Dirigible’s about to stop selling – then maybe Jenna Muldoon can crystallize into some new form she’s found in the people around her. Maybe there’s something to pursuing, over skills or catalogues or titles or means by which she
should make others think, a realness – a new version of herself that can take less from other people, be an inefficient machine, somehow give them more. Maybe she can love in the ways that everyone around her now has tried to love her.

So, for her benefit for the first time, Jenna Muldoon says fuck it. Off goes the jacket. The boys go wild, and other Jennas on the dancefloor whip their jackets off, too. She’s got her arms above her head and a woman from elsewhere’s hands around her waist. She is in front of the news crews. She wants this version of herself captured, this one-night Jenna that could turn into so many plausible people, this fantasy without stakes, a notion that can only grow. There are photographers around them, gogos with cameras and drag queens with camcorders, and Jenna kisses this woman for all of them, the boys whooping for her in the background. The woman she kisses could have any name, any lips, and tonight, they are the most beautiful, blue in the house lights – unnatural, sure, but why not? And there is a number in her pocket, and an invitation to the new Jalisco Bar in the armpit of a highway whichever Jenna that appears tomorrow will be able to explore.

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And like nothing, then, Jake is on stage, and all of the boys are around her. He ad-libs drunkenly through the song, and at first the crowd thinks he’s some queen RNG’d off the sidewalk – yet another hot guy in body-hugging clothes. The crowd doesn’t believe him when he strikes each flawless note, and they don’t believe him when he runs his hand through the overgrowth of a follicular diagonal part designed to maximize how much of his face is visible even when his hair’s flying through a performance, and they don’t believe him even when he catches a plastic rose flopped toward him like a soft dart.
Jenna wants to scream. How could this crowd so obsessed with his image not recognize him? How much of what Jake is just is the artifice of boy bands and their rules – how much of him, on stage, is what Jenna has taught him – a non-personhood based on data, recordings, public opinion? Who was he before he started performing? Who was he in those rare moments off, when he wasn’t curled up asleep on one of Dirigible’s couches, when he and Jenna sang show tunes in the hotel to an otherwise empty room? Before she can catalogue each slice of him, though, he shows himself. With a move she does not remember teaching him, he unsnaps each button on the sides of his pants in a single motion, and flings them into the crowd, revealing booty shorts too small even for his tiny ass, bedazzled at the back, reading, in cursive, *Juicy*. And the crowd roars. Jessie and Brett are holding hands, jumping in the air, going, “He did it, he actually fuckin’ did it!”

She knows that he knows that he has them. Each kick, spin, and shuffle Jake nails is infused with the kind of personality that she remembers Frank calling too much during early dance practice. There is a fluidity to him she’s also never seen before on stage, as though he’s defying not only the laws of boy bands, but of some basic gravity, like there are bungee cords attached to him that’ve been immediately green screened out. The crowd smashes itself against the stage, and Jenna jumps with them to a beat they’re all close to finding.

And all of the boys are on the stage, and she’s there with them, and there is a spotlight from every angle catching every mole, every new bruise and scar and wrinkle, the dark circles under so many eyes. It is as though they’ve all been propelled to the center of Lick, Kenya Knott cackling and clapping from a director’s chair further down the stage mouthing “keep going,” summoned there by the wishes of the crowd. There are so many people, so many flashing lights. In such a pervasive, public eye, there’s a small part of her that wishes they had had more time to
rehearse. But as that thought touches her, she laughs. Maybe she hasn’t loosened up completely. She’s going to have to take her own machine apart before she learns how to put it back together into the version of herself that she wants it to be. She’s going to have to make like the boys have tried to get her to do for years, and find herself in a way that’s more authentic than any image—any old version—could capture.

“Hey, before we do this next song,” Jake says to the room, “I have something to say. A few of us do, actually. Not Colin, though.” And the audience whispers, and they hang on his every word, and the whole universe, it turns out, is full of more than just boys. They all feel broken-open in this broken bar, the new edges of the city gleaming before them, the day they’ve kept night. So why can’t this new generation—this new millennium—start a little later, too? Why can’t it be part of an eternity that, like each new reinvention expanding from Lick, is realer and realer and realer? And they’ll sing, like they always have, but the loves they sell and the forevers they promise will, from here, grow ever closer.
READING LIST


