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Orange Blossoms

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University of Central Florida



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ORANGE BLOSSOMS

by

EDWARD MONTALVO

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Honors in the Major Program in English–Creative Writing
in the College of Arts and Humanities
and in The Burnett Honors College
at the University of Central Florida
Orlando, Florida

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Thesis Chair: Dr. Lisa Roney

ABSTRACT

I miss the smell of orange blossoms, which used to flood the countryside. But as a city grows, the land surrounding it dies. You cannot roll down your windows anymore and smell the sweet scent dancing off the buds. You will however find impressive theme parks, factory-style chain stores and restaurants. If you look close enough, you'll also see disgruntled souls of a once naturally spectacular culture of people. Laid back like the sands of Florida's coast. But now there are bills, traffic, and IKEA. This collection of essays is an attempt to escape such an experience. To explain such an existence, and to explore an eschewal from the inevitable, retail therapy.

Xanthomonas axonopodis, often known as citrus cankers, is a bacterial disease affecting most citrus species. Dead tissue forms, then slowly grows, and consumes, then kills the fruits of labor. Grapefruits are the most susceptible to the disease. There was an outbreak from 1910, to 1931. Another from 1986 to 1994, and rumors sprang less than a year later stating the canker was back. To solve most outbreaks, famers and officials just burn the trees to complete, and utter ash.

In 2006, the USDA stated eradication of the disease was impossible. If this sounds like cancer, the trust me, you're not crazy.

Florida is known for its beaches, hospitality, and it's citrus.

DEDICATION

For Brittany, my better half.

For my parents, Ed & Elaine, for all their love and support.

For my professors who helped guide me.

For my writing group, Jamie's Badass Unabomber's, for their constant support.

And most importantly for the Sierra Nevada Brewing Company, for producing the Torpedo IPA beer which fueled me throughout this process.

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INTERSECTIONS

Los Angeles is known to host some of the most beautiful weather within the continental United States—72° year round. No ifs, ands or buts. Spring, summer, fall and winter. Twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, three hundred and sixty five days a year. And if the Sun so chooses to settle on the Boulevard, looking to brighten its life in some major motion picture to become a *true* star, come six o'clock, the weather will still be wonderful. I heard all the rumors regarding the overly sunny disposition of Los Angeles and thought, *it sounds just like Florida*.

Co-workers from California said it's just like Florida. More than Florida. Better than Florida. Florida is where old people go to die, where immigrants teach their kids English. California is deserts to mountains. The Hollywood Hills to the Redwood Forests. Golden Gate and Golden State. Death Valley to Silicon Valley. California is where the finest wines are aged, where the tastiest organic foods are harvested, where the strongest weed is cultivated. Where creative consumers command the innovative inventors and their intricate contraptions.

California is where the sun sets, and the ocean ends the day. California is more than flat, hot, dumb stupid Florida.

Again Florida is flat, hot, and dumb. Who would ever want to move to the retirement capitol of the world? Florida: Just as long from Pensacola to Key West as San Diego to Crescent City. Surrounded by so much water, consumed by so many lakes and swamps, you wonder how the state even manages to stay afloat. Thanks to a state legislators fighting for Tampa to Ocala, Jacksonville through the panhandle, begging for the toxic tax income of I-Drive and the Wizarding World of Harry Potter, half the population is left out to fend for themselves in the

hottest sinkhole in the world—*South Florida*. California has meth heads, we have zombies¹. We have mosquitos, love bugs, colossal cockroaches that fly, and Rick Scott. The sun rises, and sets in Florida, which is why it's so god damn hot. With a constant humidity of 125%, Florida is a moist death trap. When I started packing for Los Angeles, I packed for cooler, dryer weather. I bought two sweaters, excited to wear them more than just once a year.

I flew out of Orlando (MCO) around seven in the morning. Hot as balls outside, as the common saying goes. Step outside [insert any Florida location], *Holy shit, it sure is hot as balls!* Say goodbye to white shirts, your body will dye them with a yellow found in tobacco stained walls. No boots, just flip flops everywhere you go.

I heard all the rumors about the beautiful California weather. So I dressed in one of my nicest shirts and jeans. Wore nice shoes that were shockingly comfortable, and a stylish vinyl jacket. I was suffocating my body, looking to lose a few pounds along the waistline. I know what Hollywood likes. I think I like Hollywood, and I think Hollywood will like me. I've woken up next to worse regrets.

I had a connecting flight in JFK and was a little upset I couldn't skip over to Manhattan for a few hours. The city of concrete sidewalks and glass walls; my what beauty. There is no place like New York City and I always dream of making it a home. One day. The gate which leads to my next flight from JFK to LAX is open. The attendants are flagging me down. *This way sir. You're future lies here.* I had enough cash so I could change my flight, and stay in the city that never sleeps for a few days. But I had to get to L.A. I had to check into my dorm, get

¹ That's right, zombies. Up to February 4th, 2014, there have been over 36 documented separate attacks in which one Floridian, usually high on drugs, bites the flesh of another in a cannibalistic rage. It's easier to think of Florida as the Australia of the U.S., in the sense that everything can, will, and *wants* to kill you.

ready for summer classes, and find an internship still. I had a purpose in L.A., a sense of meaning for my feeble existence. In New York, I would just gallivant around until I decided to go home. And yet isn't life just about gallivanting? I learned as an English major, it's all in how you interpret things.

So it goes.²

I landed in L.A. at the end of June. Spring was well over. A cool pacific breeze mingled with a desert smell. In the movie *Traffic*, every scene in Mexico is filmed with a yellow filter over the lens. When the shuttle pulled out of LAX to a connecting bus stop, a yellow film was stretched over my eyes. I didn't notice the pollution at first, just the nice weather. It was just like in the movies, the rumors, the voices of all my co-workers. Such weather. So nice. So plastic. Much SoCal³. I found a window seat and watched Venice, turn into Santa Monica, turn into Westwood, then I got off.

I got off an exit way too early. I didn't anticipate the distance from Santa Monica Boulevard to UCLA's campus. I trudged. Carrying my backpack and a duffle bag full of six weeks' worth of clothing and school supplies. I was walking past all these Arabian shops. Farsi was written all along the walls of all the little shops, cafés, and beauty parlors. Was I in Persia? Iraq? Iran? Pakistan? Saudi Arabia? But they were just like the nail salons back in Orlando

² It's very upsetting to me, knowing that Vonnegut is dead. I would have loved nothing more than to take a class under him. He's so cynical, so lovely; I fear I'm reading into the future. My future. The sunshine state has made me grow cynical, but I assume any dreary place, job, or relationship can do that to a man. This is life. You live it and come to love it, or hate it. So it goes. But it's better to visit Vonnegut's post office rather than Bukowski's. God, who could ever be such an asshole?

³ I'm not sure how I feel about Microsoft Word *not* autocorrecting SoCal. SoCal, also known as Southern California. This trend eventually skipped over the flyover states and landed in the Everglades. Most of UCF's student body says their from SoFla. There's a red squiggly line freaking out under that word. When ever I meet someone new from any part of Florida south of Fort Pierce, but north of Homestead, and they say they are from SoFla, a red squiggly line builds under me and I stab it into my ear. What's next, SoLina? SoKota? SoSissippi? SoXas? SoYork? SoFrance? SoEngland? SoNorth? When will Southern California stop influencing our lives? When will the madness stop?

owned by all the Vietnamese refugees escaping economic and political hardship I will never understand. All tucked into the floor levels of skyscrapers. Unlike New York, the streets of Westwood and Los Angeles were empty like Damascus. For the second largest city in the continental U.S., I thought it would be a little more packed. I walked up a barren sidewalk to the top of a hill to cross over Westwood Boulevard and was immediately immersed in a sea of people. A Sunday afternoon and everyone had business to see to. I stood there in my jacket, blending in, but not blending in. I was sweating, profusely. Everyone around me knew. They knew I didn't belong here. They knew I was different. I think it was the duffel bag, but they weren't even looking at my luggage. They were looking at me. Another chunk of meat for the grinder.

Another lost soul in the City of Angeles.

How cliché.

How Hollywood of me.

Two weeks later and I'm pacing between two high volume crosswalks just outside of UCLA. The sun is lighter than in Florida, but the heat is just as heavy. Humidity is low, still I perspire. I'm on the phone with my sister. I couldn't decide if I should walk away from the campus, or climb the hill back to my dorm and start packing. It's only a mile away from a major business intersection, but it's up a steep ascent. I hesitated. The squares of the sidewalk have crashed into each other like tectonic plates. Just another line in the San Andreas Fault. Landfair

Avenue appears scenic; almost a historical homage to the fraternity houses of the cult college films of the eighties and early nineties. Now it is a nature-infused, man-made stair master. I'm fit and can run a mile in seven minutes flat at a relaxing pace⁴, so this should be nothing. A small, brisk jog is in order. This climb is a pathetic challenge to my immaculate calves. However, these hills, and I constantly remind my parents and Brittany about this, will be the death of me. The inclines are unlike anything I've ever experienced. I've climbed the spirals of massive lighthouses just for a view. Trotted up the Lincoln Memorial in one step. Traversed from Battery Park to 85th street in one breath, ready for more. But here, I feel unprepared, unconvinced, unqualified to handle the blight of the concrete's existence.

I'm roughly about two hop-scotch throws away from the grounds of Bruin Walk on UCLA's campus, but it's still a walk I dread. It's a long cobblestone walkway connecting the southern end of the campus (SoCampus) full of engineering and medical students, to the northern end where all the liberal arts majors hibernate. I've been sharing a one-bedroom dorm with two other students, Asians who never complain.

From our third floor balcony, you can see all of the campus. On the roof at night, the view is spectacular. A scene out of the fantasies surrounding California. A moment captured in the advertisements of hipster culture, of youth. SoCal at its finest. But I'm getting older, I'm inching up to twenty-seven. I find I'm growing more cynical, wearier of the road ahead of me. Less likely to take a detour without plotting out the route beforehand. Pop music is terrible.

⁴ I can run faster. Trust me. When I race on the beaches in Florida, I beat everyone. Everyone. I even let my opponents run next to the water, I choose the sinking bank. I still win. I run, and I run well. I inherited it from my father. I feel as though every Puerto Rican needs to learn how to run. We never face our problems, our women, or ourselves (is that why the island has never opted for statehood?). Even now I want to run from this computer. If this is in your hands, then I didn't just take off in the middle of the night. It would be so easy, wouldn't it? It's something I can do. And do well.

Television has lost its value. The Republicans and Democrats are all assholes alike. The Internet is no longer fun and even pornography has lost its excitement. The world is growing smaller high above West Los Angeles. The rooftop has lost its allure.

I wonder, did this cynicism start before takeoff? Was it slowly molding in the thick heat I call home?

The streets of Santa Monica breaks against the Pacific Palisades along the west. No downtown L.A., it's still too far away. But Beverly Hills, the Hollywood Hills and Westwood all grow around. The skyline spreads like weeds in a field. The smog sits thick above Culver City to the south. I don't like leaving the dorm. When I have to go back, I'm winded twenty feet up the hill. I've only been in Los Angeles about two weeks and I'm not sure I'll last. My blood is too thin, or my skin isn't thick enough. I packed for six months and watched my legs double in size. My calf muscles are engorged and my thighs, chiseled. I want to beat down the doors to all of Hollywood, demand respect and compensation. Yet at this current intersection I find myself at a crossroad. Cliché? So is cancer. Christina calls me just as the intestine shaped 720 Metro pulls up.

Tete⁵, my sister, has an airy voice. "Mom's back in the hospital." Her words are shaky, but she's doing a good job keeping her composure.

"Today?"

"No, she checked in a few days ago."

"Why didn't you call before?"

"She didn't want to worry you."

⁵ Her real name is Christina. My brother couldn't pronounce it when he was younger. Ti-ti would flop out of his mouth because he constantly sucked his thumb. It just stuck after.

“Sounds like Mom. How is she?”

“I don’t know. Waiting for Dr. Bose.”

“Shit. Well, what happened this time?”

Over the past two years, my family had experienced an unrelenting roller coaster of a ride in regards to my mother’s health. To get on the bus or not? She’s never made a big deal about herself and the same attitude transcends when she needs to communicate any news or concerns with her children. Half the bus is empty. I’m sorry mom, but you brought us into this world. Do I have change? Yes, I do, sure would be nice if you told us about yours. What did you eat for breakfast? How was work today? What’s making you seem so upset? Should I get on this bus? Are you scared of what the doctor will say? How much is a ticket back to Orlando? Can I switch my round trip to a sooner date? Why haven’t you stopped smoking? What’s wrong? Are you scared of something? Tell me Mother dearest, what’s on your mind exactly? Why do I need to go to this interview? Why can’t I get off the bus? What the hell is that smell? In a Sedaris essay, I read there are four burners in life. One representing each niche of life: family, health, career, love. In order for one to burn brighter, you must cool down another. In order for two to burn brighter, you must cool down two⁶. So it goes. Is this something I can do? Is that why it’s so hot in Los Angeles? Why didn’t my mother call me before the interview lined up?

⁶ David Sedaris. “Laugh Kookaburra, Laugh.” *Let’s Explore Diabetes With Owls*. Don’t worry about pages, just read the whole damn book. It’s worth it.

My mother and father are children of Generation Jones. Born after the blithe of the gold glittered sparkling Baby-Boomers, but conceived before the radicalization of the hopefully despaired Generation-X. They are the ones who saw darkness grow in the greedy entitlement of a nation. Expected to prosper, but doomed to derailment. They who worked their asses off to provide for their families, to live day by day and rejoice in the American dream, only to fall victim to inflation and the selfish rulings of their older cousins. My Dad would like Vonnegut. I like good old' Kurt, it's like having a conversation with my Dad. We start talking politics and it turns into an hour of *I know right!* We both get fired up about the inescapable defaults of our country. Fuck republicans, fuck bipartisanship, fuck these stupid wars in the Middle East, fuck the insurance companies, fuck congress, fuck Whitey and fuck reality TV. It's a military complex. An Israel complex. A dependency on fossil fuels and a blunt disrespect to humanity complex. It's a complex for complexes. Our society is complex, leaving us perplexed. Then we talk about school. We talk about my goals, dreams, some accomplishments. I tell him I want to do scriptwriting, short story writing, maybe some teaching if I had to. *Dad, I got published in a student lit mag.* More pleasant rejection letters. We blame the Republicans and crack open more beer. Lately though, we don't have these kinds of conversations. We still talk about school but something bigger is going on. He tells me to stop posting this anti-God nonsense written out from the fumes of frustration on Facebook while my mother sits in the hospital watching Lifetime reruns.

“Ed, what are you posting on Facebook?”

“Nothing.”

“Doc⁷ says you’re bashing God.”

“So what if I am?”

“Don’t post that shit.”

“Why not? We never go to church.”

“Because you don’t know. It’s depressing. What if your mother reads it?”

“How’s she gonna get on a laptop up there?”

“When she gets out, what if she reads it?”

“Fine, ok.”

It all started with a massive pancreatic attack. I’m not one hundred percent on all the details, but when I get a call from my Dad in the beginning, I develop a loathing for the idea of God over a two-year span. Your Mother’s in the hospital. Complained of stomach pains so we called an ambulance. The doctors of my hometown, of St. Cloud, incompetent as they come, informed her she was an alcoholic and a chronic smoker. Here’s your diagnosis, you poor victim, you poor product of your environment, that beer you drink at the end of the day to unwind after waking up from six hours of sleep at six a.m. to spend upwards of an hour in rubbernecking traffic twenty miles away to then stare at a computer screen and hundreds of identical documents littered with tiny numbers for eight hours straight while only having a small break to spend more time in lunch hour traffic because you have to go to the bank to drop off rent because the drive thru lanes close at five now because of the irresponsibility’s of Wall Street and God if you have to hear your loving husband and grown son bitch about that again you’ll

⁷ Not to be confused with an actual Doctor. Not to be confused with an individual who spent years studying one thing. This man plays internet shoot-em up games with my Dad. They’re best friends who have never met. Welcome to the future.

shoot yourself, but since you have spent another hour and half this time trying to beat everyone home so you can cook dinner for a family of four grown teenagers and one husband with an appetite the size of all four and constantly be followed by the two dogs you might as well just let them bitch and moan and groan and all you want is a fucking cigarette but your stupid kids bitch about smoking in the house and how it makes their friends not want to come over, but this is okay because you have a massive headache, borderline migraine and the loud noises annoy you and you just want to speak into your husband's ear how your day went and hear how much fun your children had after school but then he goes to the computer to finish some AutoCAD documents and shoot the shit with Doc and his other online gaming buddies spread across different time zones and oceans and your daughters are growing women so they want nothing to do with you but to scream about how much they hate you and your sons are too busy chasing tail to tell you you're the only woman that matters in their life and they will quietly whisper this to you when you lay asleep on the hospital bed with a breathing tube shoved down your throat and so the moment you go to grab a beer from the garage fridge that's skyrocketing the electric bill because you can't afford a new fridge upfront and need the extra storage to hold four gallons of milk a week for those four teenagers who want to be called adults but wont move out, and for the coffee of that husband with an appetite of four teenagers you then feel a tingle in your side but think its from sitting down all day, but then it's getting stronger and before you can crack open the tin can you feel your stomach crack open against your side and the life you thought was stored inside you just flows out on the ground and the hope you contained, the faith you upheld spills out and bloats your gut and the entire family freezes for two years because you are the rock, the foundation of their lives and without you they would be miserable and God fearing so

we want you to know Elaine, that after twenty years of ups and downs, happiness and despair, out of all the massive global events diminutive in comparison to the unknown chaotic feats of the universe itself, this pain in your side, this pancreatic attack we fear may be cancer, this and all that comes from it, is all your fault Elaine. You have no one to blame but yourself.

Let's clear up two misconceptions with this medical diagnosis however, then we'll work on a prognosis. 1.) Elaine Montalvo, my mother, is not an alcoholic. She may drink, a lot, but there's no aluminum can cracking at seven in the morning. She handled four reckless kids. Calmed a stressed out husband and soothed his cracking hands. And held a job at Colonial Bank as a premier employee until the company was seized by the Feds in 2009⁸. The people there

⁸ Colonial Bank was, keyword here: *was* a unit of the Colonial BancGroup based out of Alabama. Colonial Bank *was* the fifth largest bank in Florida and operated also in four other states—Alabama, Georgia, Texas, and Nevada; you know, where everyone was moving. Just before the banks failure and closure in 2009, Federal Agents blocked the intersection leading up to the main offices adjacent to Lake Eola in downtown Orlando and ordered a lockdown. The FBI kept all workers in the building upwards of twelve hours, pulled up massive rental trucks, and boxed up every single sheet of paper within Colonial Bank offices for the investigation of wired fraud, security fraud, and bank fraud with the former mortgage lending company Taylor, Bean & Whitaker Mortgage Company. Everything from copy memo's and mortgage paperwork, to family photos and coffee filters in the trash. My mother worked at a backup facility about three miles south on Orange Avenue just passed the hospital we'd live in for well over half a year. Though she didn't get to see any theatrics, or badge busters, she did have a chance to clean her desk and keep the Feds from seizing precious pictures of the family. She brought all her Steeler memorabilia home and watched the investigation unfold on WFTV with the rest of us. The mortgage company's chair, Lee Farkas was rumored to have sold \$1 billion dollars worth of mortgages to Colonial Bank between 2003 and August 2009. Taylor, Bean & Whitaker Mortgage Company was reported by the Justice Department to have sold \$400 million worth of fake mortgages to Colonial BancGroup. In 2008, the lending company then conspired to obtain \$553 million from TARP (the Troubled Assets Relief Program implemented by former President George W. Bush to help relieve large banks from equity losses caused by the recession of 2007, rather than the people who actually needed to pay some bills) through Colonial BancGroup, but was investigated for irregularities in the application process. On August 14, 2009, Colonial BancGroup failed and its 346 branches were seized by regulators of the Federal Deposit Insurance Corp. \$22 billion of the bank's deposits were subsequently sold by the FDIC to BB&T Corp (who then offered a.) A shitty severance package for my mother, or b.) The chance to start over in North Carolina; you pay for your own moving expenses though). The bank's failure was the largest bank failure in 2009 and the 6th largest bank ever to fail in the United States, costing the FDIC's Deposit Insurance Fund an estimated \$2.8 billion. It was also the 74th bank failure

adored her. When my mother walked in the door, returning from work, she would pour stories out of her larynx and pound into my father's ear drums. I never knew what kind of shenanigans she partook in, but she would gleam an off-white smile and have my father holding his gut in laughter while trying his best to unlace his steel toe boots. To this day she still maintains some relationships with her former co-workers. After losing her job, she returned to college and studied for a degree in medical coding and billing. She completed a sizeable chunk of her assignments from the eleventh floor of M.D. Anderson Cancer Center in Downtown Orlando. Don't dare diagnose my mother as being an alcoholic. She functions just fine. Until her pancreas gives out.

2.) Yes, she smokes. If you could get her to stop I'll forever be grateful. But thanks to subliminal advertising, an entire generation of Americans can dock off twenty years of living. I can't blame her entirely, only selfishly beg. *Do it for me, okay?*

Right about the time I was set to finish my junior year at the University of Central Florida, this "awesome" opportunity arose. Finally a sense of excitement within the lackluster I

of 2009. Lee Farkas was sentenced in 2011 to thirty years in prison for one of the largest fraud schemes in U.S. history. Prosecutors originally had asked for 385 years, but missed it by a small margin I assume. Farkas was 58 when he was sentenced. Like I said, a greedy golden glittered baby-boomer. He'll be 88 at the end of his sentence, assuming he doesn't remain on his best behavior or just die in his cell. This fucker swindled \$40 million to support his lifestyle according to prosecutors. Jets, vacation houses, vintage cars. *Insert any other material possession.* My parents shared a car for well up to a decade, never owned a house (which in hindsight, worked out for them) and took one vacation. I think its safe to say, someone needs to, and pardon my French, fuck his asshole 40 million times while he's in lock up. Over thirty years, that's 3,652 dicks a day, give or take a few tips. Lord knows the amount of lives he himself has dicked over or ruined. The amount of people forced out of their homes. The number of jobs lost. The number of taxpayer dollars wasted. I'm getting off topic, but maybe now you've got some empathy with some history.

call home—Central Florida. In the bleak halls of the Nicholas Communication Building, I attended an internship orientation. I clamored into a film production classroom with about forty other students and believed I was undertaking the first steps to the rest of my future. My career in Hollywood, in film and writing would start right here, in this callous room. In interviews I would commemorate this moment as *the moment* everything changed. But this is Orlando and just like Hollywood, there is a large industry in fabrication. Hollywood constructs imagination, and Orlando commercializes. I was waiting for the classroom backdrop to be removed and be told to return to my post. They'll call when they're ready to shoot again. Instead, they just kept rolling.

Professor Robert Jones, with his thick white beard, and sleek Hollywood production jacket welcomed all the students to the biggest opportunity of their young adult lives. *Step right up! I've got a package composed entirely of the dreams written in screenplays just for you! I have to admit though, the man sold me. For the cost of out-of-state tuition, out-of-state housing, airfare, food, gas, living expenses, bus fare, taxi rides, vending machines, Dodger's game tickets, studio tour packages set at a discounted rate for students (\$10 off), movie tickets, the possibilities of a rental car, forget it—just purchase a shitty bicycle, you can have the opportunity to intern for any Hollywood studio/production company of your choosing.* The program is only six weeks long, but the direction lasts for a lifetime.

I ignored the catches of the program because I was just so frustrated with UCF's English program. I believed I wasn't writing enough, reading too much. The irony. Too much time learning from Steven King. Rereading Carver and Alexie and O'Brien. Reading *Fargo* three times in one year between four classes. Combine this with a feeling of pure boredom and an

immeasurable amount of growing distaste for the Central Florida area. *But there's Disney! And Universal!* says the naysayers. And to them that's Disney and Universal.

I was ready to jump the next flight out of Orlando into anywhere else. I love New York. Always and forever. I'd be there in a heartbeat. D.C. was nice, but too expensive. Philly had some family and New Jersey would at least be affordable. But I never considered Los Angeles. To me, the City of Angeles appealed as a predecessor of Miami. Though it was well established before and influenced by Mexican culture rather than Cuban or Caribbean Hispanics, I hated South Florida. I never once believed SoCal would be different from South Florida. SoFla, where it's too hot, too flat, too boring with its scarcity of theme parks, and it's abundance of overly self-entitled, self-indulged humanoids who all believe(*ed*—remember, old people come here to die) money could solve their problems. This is ranting, but the Porn industry has made South Beach a permanent fixture in their backdrops. Miami itself has, overtime, become a continuing burst of infected puss and blood from a massive herpes outbreak of the phallic state that is Florida⁹. I believe The Big Red Son of Hollywood tainted the image which is Los Angeles from the late 70's, and onwards to this day. They had the streets lined with miles of cocaine and the LA River overflows now with an excess of bodily fluids. I understand after only two weeks of living in L.A. there are no real stars because they have all fallen from the sky and

⁹ I want to formally apologize to any and all ethnic minorities or refugees who consider Miami a home and who might be offended by the above statements. I do welcome all people with open arms and do not insist this insult define all of Miami, but understand this kind of chismes is genetically inherited, not learned. However it took me only fifteen minutes to realize how much I would loathe South Florida. After taking a trip to Key West with Brittany, we both had succumb to Hemmingway hangovers. Drinking more than our share, dehydrated in a swampy environment, which is relentless and unforgiving. We pulled off the turnpike near Miami International to get gas. Simple task. We shuffled about in traffic like herded cows, like fat ugly tourists waiting in line at Disney. Just to drive five miles. An insurmountable amount of road rage filled every capillary in my body. I wanted to be as far away from SoFla as possible. Nothing good can come from an area so hell bent on conquering the deadliest swamps just to supply enough retirees and snow birds with a grande white chocolate mocha. For Christ sake, you're in Miami, order a cordadito.

believe their destiny lays in the disgusting sidewalk that is Hollywood Boulevard. But Goddamn did Jones convince me otherwise.

I've always wanted to see the Pacific.

The UCLA campus is beautiful. The Bruin Walk is a brick pedestrian highway dead-ending at the curvier parts of Gayley Avenue. Gayley is lined with old stucco condo buildings now converted into student apartments and sorority houses. The road hugs the bottom of a steep hillside, bending around a new medical center dedicated to Ronald Reagan, of all individuals. The walk starts from the top of a cliff like drop, and creeps through these massive student dorms before winding through the student union and classrooms. There are stacks of eleven story plus buildings crammed full of Adderall addicted Asians cramming for a make or break test. Each building has a "café" dedicated to a specific type of cuisine. You want Mexican? Hit up the new joint Rendezvous in Rieber Terrace for everything muy caliente. In the mood for continental? Covell Commons has everything and more. How common for all corners of America. Feeling slanted? Check out FEAST with all caps and savor every Asian flavor upsetting your stomach. Lord knows the ramen smell bubbling under the wallpaper in the bleak hallways of Sproul Hall can't be enough. With so many commodities surrounding the campus I realized something about UCLA I never thought I could muster.

I had this idea of what the campus would look like; *enter here any National Lampoon description*. The Bruin Walk, with its foreign fir trees attempting to rise above the redwoods of

the north, presented a false setting. This Mediterranean vibe, which felt cheap, sits only in front of an artist's backdrop. It could be Christmas year round. Mountains of prescriptions drugs floated down from the constant smog covering the city, seducing the weak, letting them believe all will be ok. Believe you made the wrong decision coming out here to the west? To the land of opportunity, where the setting sun is always welcoming? Well this here little 30mg guy can help relieve all of your troubles. Your Asian roommates have it just sitting in the open on the counter. No one is looking in on you. Your family is 3,000 miles away and the neighbors are too busy keeping up with their herbal clientele to ever notice. Float around for a few hours like your roommates do. Pick it up, swallow, do it again, and again and again and pretend everything is ok. These little guys will help keep you focused. Keep you from letting your head explode. We don't want the nice carpets to get all soaked now, do we? The blood will flow better. Every capillary will expand, bringing fresh oxygen faster to the darker parts of your mind. Your mother is sick and lying in a gurney 3,000 miles away. There's nothing you can do, so why worry? You're supposed to be out here for six weeks without a thread of concern. Los Angeles isn't forever and neither is this opportunity, though it's presented every year to wide-eyed students eager to do something unique for their lives. Los Angeles will disappear into the ocean and you will have missed your chance to embrace the intersections, which may possibly lie ahead of you. You'll never know. Turn left and embrace yourself into the materialism of Beverly Hills. Make a U-turn and head back to Venice, become a street performer and swallow your dignity (with a little guy). Hell, why not head east then and start your own drug cartel? Lose all you money in a meth lab just at the ridge of the national park, and spend your afternoons

searching for a ride into downtown. Or you can drive straight and join a hippie commune in Santa Monica. The world is right in front of you, why are you looking back?

I decided to head further west, to view the Pacific. If I was going to go back to Florida, I wanted to at least say I've seen this great nation from coast, to coast.

I bought this shitty road bike to get around while in Los Angeles. It was lightweight and needed a heavy tune-up. The brakes wanted to give out at every stop and the handlebars constantly had to be bent back to align properly with the front tire. Riding it down to the Westwood Whole Foods turned into a chore, so I spent my mornings walking instead, using the bike only to glide down Hillgard Avenue after class. The ride up to the far side of the campus along Sunset was full of painful grumbles and constant cursing, but the evening departure was well worth the struggle. I would turn right off Sunset onto Hillgard, the weather at a chilly 72°, and roar down past Le Conte until I ended back at Gayler. It was a straight mile and a half glide in which I would keep up with traffic. The wind would rip through and my teeth would chatter. How I wish my blood and skin were thicker. How I wish I could give Los Angeles a chance. But with my mother sick, I couldn't focus on letting any other part of my life mature.

When the road stopped into Gayley, I would jump off the bike, and walk it up to the top where my dorm was. Constantly I would readjust the handlebars, and lift the bike over the staggered sidewalk chunks jutting out from the earth.

But after the call with Tete, I got on the bike and headed for the Santa Monica Pier.

My legs throbbed. Florida is flat, hot, and dumb. California is fancy and full of hills. When I rode down onto Westwood Boulevard I had great momentum, but once I turned onto Santa Monica Boulevard, traffic was as unforgiving as the natural elements of Florida. Everyone competed for space. I cut off a row of SUV's waiting at the light for Sepulveda, then headed south until I got to La Grange. It was nice, quiet, and seemed to be a good place to raise a family, but then the road started to grow higher. The gears were slipping and I found my feet giving out against gravity. The wind wasn't on my side and I began to become agitated. I was sweating worse than sitting outside in Florida during July. My god was my shirt soaked. I was grunting and cursing and damning myself for embarking on such a stupid journey. Just to see a stupid body of water. Florida is surrounded by water, what the hell made this so special?

I zigzagged my way back to Willshire. Right on Colby. Left on Missouri. Right onto Barrington. Left onto Nebraska. Check out the park. Right onto Westgate. Left onto Iowa. Pass Bundy, Wellesley, Carmellina. The checkered patterned roadways of Santa Monica were built just like Orlando. Some of Orlando commemorates Native Americans, SoCal can't seem to find a way to cleverly rid itself of its rich Mexicaness. A mestizo of street names. Cross over Centinela and head right onto Franklin. They all sound so, California. I followed that until I reached Willshire, I struggled less. The major office buildings flattened out the land to allow for square footage. I could see a strict line separating the ocean from the sky. Two distinct shades of blue. The road turned into a slight decline, and I felt as though my luck had changed.

I crossed over Ocean Avenue to see the beach was a clear 50 feet below. Only in California is it not enough to have just a beach, but the need for a cliff and mountains. The view from the road was, and for a moment, spectacular. The Palisades to the right, the Pier just off to

the left. And the ocean straight ahead. The airport was shooting off planes left and right and I saw them bank out over the ocean only so they could beeline straight for the east. But then when I looked into the sun, I saw Cocoa Beach, Florida. The Pacific was dark, muggy. No one was swimming. The area looked like a snow globe as it all surrounded me. I felt betrayed. There was no more majesty. I climbed up a row of stairs to cross the coastal highway carrying my shitty bike so I could ride the shitty bike along a shitty beach to see if something distinct would happen. To see if California could finally woo me.

I stopped to call Brittany.

“So I finally made it to the Pacific.”

“Is it pretty?”

“It...it looks like Florida. There’s sand and water.”

“Really? Is the water clear?”

“Nope. It looks black.”

“Probably from all the pollution.”

“Oh, there’s a mountain, so that’s nice.”

“That’s why all the smog is trapped.”

A pause.

“I think I want to come home.”

“You don’t have to stay in L.A.”

“I don’t think I will.”

The beauty of Florida is that it is surrounded by water. When you turn off the 528 and head south on A1A into Cocoa Beach, you can turn left anywhere and hit the ocean. Turn right,

head west and there's the gulf. Nobody ever goes north in Florida; we always drive further south to get away. You can view the sunrise on one side, then drive across the peninsula to see the sunset. You can see sand change from rocky orange, to a dusty white. The water alone makes up every spectrum of blue and it blurs into the skyline with no way of distinguishing the difference between the two. No matter which beach you stand on, you can look left, or you can look right, and the coastline goes on forever. You can only move in one direction, or recall the path you've taken before.

You can find a cheap home in Florida. For now. Till it all dies, and you finally let yourself go somewhere else. Somewhere where the fear of missing out is no longer relevant.

UNA LECCIÓN EN RUSO

“Cuatro tacos por favor.” I give my order to a flamboyant Mexican waiting behind the counter. I watched his hair whip around as he danced his delicate fingers onto the register. When he responded I only picked up one word, *gustaria*. In the back of my mind I knew what he had said, *what would you like?* Some deeply buried primal part understood. A distant set of survivor skills lodged in the abyss of bundled nerves in my left lobe. Thanks Wernicke¹⁰. I don’t understand Spanish. I can speak a little bit, *un poco*, but I certainly cannot mimic the level of fluency from my father’s side of the family. But I try. “Dos Adobabas y Dos Carnitas por favor.”

“Si. Trece dólares con quince centavos señor.” The Mexican replied with a natural lilt. In English, this would have been considered an error. Normal people don’t annunciate in such a way. For my Mexican friend, it was function *and* form. Spanish has always sounded poetic. Though poetry always sounds beautiful entering my ear, the sophisticated phonetics hammering the drum and twisting down the canal, I will never understand it. I heard numbers and proceeded to slide my debit card. It felt automatic. Thirteen dollars for four tacos was a bit much. I turned to see my roommate Lam, smirk. I hoped he was impressed by my bilingual skills. Hell, even I felt less like a gringo.

¹⁰ Wernicke’s area, named after a German neurologist before any of us were born, is a part of the brain located in the connecting tissue of the parietal and temporal lobes. It’s understood that this is the part of the brain associated with language, specifically words and structure. It’s where you learn to understand written and spoken languages. *Shit*. See that? The Wernicke’s area helped you to process the construction of that specific word. Some smart ass out there is probably all like, well what about Broca’s area? Broca’s area does involve the same concept of language process, however it is believed that that particular area is more associated with language production, grammar, and syntax due to its close proximity to the frontal lobe. Wernicke’s sees shit, Broca speaks shit. And you, the reader, understand *shit*.

Lam was one of my roommates while I was enrolled in a summer film internship program at UCLA. He is a perfect example of what it means to be American, but no American will ever accept him to be anything comparable. Lam is Vietnamese in every physical context; lanky thin, almond eyes, puffy lips, and his head is topped with a thick, mop of static black hair, yet Lam is not from Vietnam. He tells me he is actually from Moscow and when my eyes spy onto his phone, I see the text message characters on his white iPhone are set to Russian. When I hear him talk, it all makes sense. He hisses on his *s* and there is a harsh emphasis on the *ar* sound when his words drool out. There is no lisp, but it's just as poetic. He is the squeeze of lime on a taco, a garnish of parsley on a continental dinner plate. For an exotic cuisine, it just sounds normal.

One of the first conversations I had with Lam was about food. The course of our dialogue naturally evolved into a depiction of dishes and appetizers. I imagine this is how men throughout history kept from invading another's home and burning everything they've ever built high, to the smoldering ground. Compare apples to keep from sweeping away ashes. I start educating Lam about the basics of Spanish food, but more specifically Puerto Rican food. I elaborate on the comfortable flavors. There's starchy rice, creamy gandules, shredded carne y cerdo. Pollo cooked in every way possible. Supplemented with sofrito, plantains and banana leaves. Then some avocado and papaya. Mango if you're feeling really fruity. And of course, *cervezas*. I tell him this isn't everything though, that I'm missing more than Nana¹¹ will ever reveal and more than the Internet could ever hope to obtain.

¹¹ If you haven't guessed already, Nana is a nickname for my grandmother on my father's side. The Puerto Rican side. Traditional Spanish translates grandmother into *abuela*, however we already have an *abuela*. *Abuela* was what my entire family called my great grandmother, Nana's mother. She was still alive with Alzheimer's up until I was a teenager. If the *abuela* titling isn't confusing enough, consider the lineage of Eddie. I'm little Eddie; my

“Can you teach me cook Spanish food?” Lam pauses before every word when he speaks and hesitates in what I considered a supreme level of *confidence* in his English. I had never made arroz y gandules before, rather only fed the dish by Nana. Her pequeño hands would wave in my face. “Demasiado flaco” she would sing in Spanish, but usually referred to the classic English term shouting, “you’re too God-damn skinny.” I wasn’t sure if this should be Lam’s first experience with Spanish food so I decided to show him the next best thing, tacos. I told Lam we needed to find a taco stand within the mall’s food court. I told him the energy of the mall itself was a lot like one of my family’s meals; there were too many people and not enough clean bathrooms. We both laughed and I realized it wasn’t even close to a holiday meal at my Nana’s house. There was no love in the kitchen. No merengue or salsa damaging the eardrums. No bass bumping or wood block knocking or guiro clicking or timbales ringing and no *bump bump bump bump bump, ba ba ba bump ba bump*¹². No thick smoke from the searing meat and rice demanding someone open the fucking windows *dios mio! Abra la ventana o nos matará todos!* No aroma of warmth or comfort.

This wasn’t the Spanish food Lam deserved to experience though. I had no money, nor any desire to teach him how to cook authentic Puerto-Rican food. To do this, I would have to

father is Eddie, and his father is Big Eddie. Ironically though, my grandfather’s first name is Elismaro. When I would walk into the hospital room to visit Abuela, she would constantly call me Eddie. Her mind was trapped in 1972. This woman was a stranger to me though I’m a drop of her own blood. She reached her hands out and cried for the child my father used to be, speaking all sorts of jargon Spanish I couldn’t decipher. I don’t know if she was scolding my father, or praising him. So I blended in and tried to hear what she had to say.

¹² This description of music itself must seem foreign to some. Oye mira, listen to Tito Puente *Oye Como Va*. Pay attention though, there are two very famous renditions of this song. The original rendition was recorded by Tito in 1963, but then in 1970 covered by Carlos Santana. It’s what made him infamous and shot his ass onto the billboard charts. In Santana’s rendition there really no change to the rhythm or background instrumentation, after all this would be blasphemous, but Santana is a great Mexican guitar god but Puente is often referred to as El Rey de los Timbales and the King of Latin Music. You become distracted by updated sounds and this profound guitar solo with Santana. It’s a song you get drunk to and jam out on. Get to the basics. Listen to the roots so that you can better understand the rhythm.

get in touch with my father's side of the family, call my Nana and try and resurrect up a recipe. I'd hear her speak a few words at a thousand miles an hour, then spend a few minutes on the internet trying to translate what she had just said. But then I'd also have to stay on the phone with her for almost an hour updating her on my life. Yes, Nana, I'm in L.A. No, I don't have Kevin's¹³ number. Nana, Kevin doesn't know who I am. I'm taking one class, still searching for an internship. Yes the weather is amazing. No, this place smells like shit. Actually the black people here are nice. No I'm not smoking pot. I don't know how Stevie is. Why don't you call him? I broke up with Kerry a year ago, I'm dating Brittany, remember? No you're not losing your mind like Abuella. The weather in Puerto Rico is like that huh? Yes, I miss home too. I don't know if I belong here either.

I love my Nana, but thanks to two decades of living in a small Florida sundown town, I had become ashamed of my Hispanic heritage and learned to hate a part of me I could never change. I can swing my hips in a perfect rhythm, sway my body into the arms of any unfortunate woman. I can tolerate spicy food. I can roll my tongue and make love better than any white stick figure to cross an ocean, but the American I had become was too ignorant to let the beauty of experience and genes, exfoliate and embrace the naked skin I feared to bare.

When I received my order I was pleased to see I got my money's worth. Four authentic, Mexican tacos crammed together on the teal tray like organs in the body. Surely this is what all men look like on this inside regardless of their background; a mash-up of red trimmings and meat. The pico dressing was art and the pork, sweet with a citrus aroma, was tender and spicy

¹³ By Kevin I mean Kevin Smith, a Hollywood screenwriter, director, and actor. His most notable work includes *Clerks*, *Chasing Amy* & *Dogma*. He is tall, round, and known for having an obscene tongue. A vulgar language developed from his early directing days existentially living in his fictional character Jay. His mother is Grace and also happens to be Nana's next-door neighbor. They go to dinners at Denny's super late and shop together at Kholes. They're like teenagers.

like my father's side of the familia. "Not bad for a set of tacos at a shopping mall in Santa Monica," I told Lam. Granted, the city is four hours from Tijuana, but the tourism of the Third Street Promenade has created a freshly opened anthill as insects from around the globe all converged on the finest goods the world can make, and Americans can sell. Like flies swarming over horseshit. While stuffing my face, I asked him about the basics of Russian food. Is it like the sauerkraut of Germany or the Kielbasas of Poland? Lam shook his round head and his face grew beet red with laughter.

"No," he says. "Not at all." Lam pauses and puts his taco down to show me with his hands. "There's one dish we have, like lasagna." He spreads his hands across the table and starts stacking imaginary ingredients into a casserole shaped fathom. "First, you make a layer of raw eggs. Then you add layer of vegetable or potato. Next you cover a layer of raw fish that has been in oil. Not an oil you cook, but one that makes safe. Then layer of raw vegetable. Finally you cover with only mayonnaise."

Suddenly I found myself hungry.

TURBULENCE

When you're thirty-eight thousand feet in the air, you feel special. Nestled in the narrow cabin of an Embraer 190, your buttocks clenches in the soggy vinyl seats. You grip tightly onto the itchy cloth arms of the passenger chairs. Had the arm rests been made of the same slick material your ass slides between, you'd have no control. All hell would break lose. You imagine fellow passengers gliding down the aisle like the sweat on your brows. If you're patient for one moment, you'll hear their thin skulls smacking into the thick concession carts. Like kernels of popcorn popping. You hear it. You feel it. Like a smack on the back of your neck.

The faces around you do not appear scared. No one looks the part, but even your nervous laughter is growing steadily into a silent scream. There's a soccer mom next to you shivering in fear. Her breathing sequence swings into a jazzy rhythm, as though it's some sort of distorted lamas. There's the fat Italian in front reciting a soft prayer, sweating and spiting onto a minuscule screen while salty tears plummet onto his hands. His grip keeps slipping as he bops around like a kernel. You hear a baby wailing from the front rows and your flight begins to lose altitude. There goes your faith. Cabin pressure is dropping and the air in your lungs is thinning. There you are, miles high, and you pass out.

Your eyes break open peacefully as you wake up to a soft ping. Your captain has flipped the fasten seatbelt sign. Flight attendants rush to their seats and all the passengers get religious.

It's a miracle!

You're unsure of how to assess the situation. Can you even do anything? Beg God for a shift in air pressure? Recite a psalm with the passenger beside you? Should you even do anything at all? You hear a woman mention something absurd, something along the lines of

either God will save us from this mess, or he needs us for his army. “I’m ready for this. I can do this,” she says. There’s clarity in her tone.

You don't know whether to cry with her or mash your knuckles into her eye sockets. You want to feel warm, at home. You want to feel powerful, so why not destroy something beautiful? Twenty-four hours ago your hands were caressing warm skin. Why not break those bones. Loosen the grip on your seat, float up to the ceiling and bring the hammer down. It would be worth it. You could focus on the pain. The tender swelling flesh. It’s hot, numb. Knuckles breaking cartilage could distract you from the aluminum coffin you’ll share with 128 other souls, all of who whisper for their deaf savior.

You hear the oxygen masks pop out. They’re loud, clunky, and now there is an echo of bands snapping and stretching against the backs of skulls, quite the choir of angels. You think of Tyler Durden's kind words. You know he was wrong. There’s no euphoric sensation from oxygen pumped into your lungs. You're dropping altitude and you're not in some higher plane of existence. Before you flew, you Googled what those masks really do. You know, to make yourself feel better. You learned when an airplane drops 5,000 feet in less than two seconds the oxygen is sucked out of your lungs. You struggle to put your mask on, tying knots with your hair while scratching the plastic against your face because you thought it would be cool to grow your hair out over the summer. You want to think clearly. You feel your lungs struggling and you're begging to God to spare your pathetic life because you were meant to be so much more than this, more than you've achieved, more than you were never supposed to go this way and your kids need to experience the same hopes and dreams you secretly whispered to him in the

middle of the black hollow night and the fact that he never for once listened to you and that it really breaks your heart that a GOD could be so Cruel and NEVER think you are that special and then, Clarity.

With one final smack, you feel the oxygen mask suck onto your face. Deep grooves cut into your cheeks, highlighting the accents of your skull. You don't feel the plastic digging into your skin and you start breathing again. God, life, the master plan; none of it matters. Just breathe deeply. You're just, fine. For a moment, you're calm. For a moment you realize, you should get a haircut. For a moment, you land safely.

GÅ VIDARE

Before I found out Brittany was pregnant, I asked her to move in. In 2006 we broke up, but then started talking again in May of 2013. This was before I flew out to L.A., which was before I asked her to move in, which was before I knocked her up on Christmas Eve. But that is neither here nor there.

I flew out to Los Angeles for two weeks towards the end of June 2013 and waited for any excuse to return home, return to her sooner. Fourth of July I found out my mother was sick and in honor of Independence Day, I found my independence lied in the company of others. I went back home, stopped chasing an idea of what I thought I was supposed to be and did what I was biologically supposed to do; the eventual impregnating of my girlfriend. Scriptwriting, possible director/producer once again became the manufactured fantasies of a younger Eddie. Eddie now had two arms, two legs, a torso, a brain, a heart, a penis, and the Puerto-Rican heritage of briar patch style reproduction. I, as a human, am meant to do nothing else but to breed. I am to find a woman, to convince her not to call the cops, and then conceive in her the future of my specie's survival. We may be creative individuals but sometimes I believe it is a wasted talent. We are meant to breed, to survive, to endure, and to surpass the physics of nature and adapt into the epitome of our biological existence. It's terrifying to believe this, but so rewarding to understand and accept. To know the little details in life are neither here nor there. You are here, not there.

In December I asked her to move in with me. I know, this sounds fast, doesn't it? We'd only been together for a little over six months. To make such a big decision...it could be viewed as insane, irrational. Idiotic, illogical, ill-advised. What's another word that starts with "I"? I've heard it before from my peers, from adults all alike: are you sure? Did you knock her up?

Shouldn't you wait? By whose standards? With no complete understanding of the gravity of our situation, eyes feel inclined to pry into my affairs. Our affairs. For the sake of brevity, I'll make this quick. Brittany and I had dated just before the two of us turned twenty-one. It didn't work. We didn't work. Now we're both twenty-seven, different adults with different understandings of life. We've progressed from our simple party days. Now we work. It's simple, we are simple(r). Our current focus is on working to make my pathetic box of an apartment a home. We've stumbled through the Pinterest Internet boards, talked with friends and colleagues, talked to our parents about what they needed to make a home and mentally began constructing our future dwelling.

I like natural wood, with veneer finishes, accented with bright airy colors. Brittany is more grounded and enjoys mahogany, oak, chocolate browns and beautiful hues of blue mixing with one another. We compromised: I get the office and the living room, she the bedroom and kitchen. We both agree to have children one day. I want boys, she a girl. But this was before I planted my seed, but that is neither here nor there.

I get a few days off from work. It's just after Christmas and a blessing considering I work in grocery retail. From the days of October 1st to December 31st any retail employee is not an individual, but rather a slave to consumerism. I'd want to say all of capitalism, but we are all slaves to such a system. Capitalism itself is a slave to its own constructs, continuously building on growth and success, keeping its head in the clouds unable to comprehend the simple fact that resources are limited and one day, it itself will die. If capitalism is the heart of the western society, then consumerism is the arteries, and industry the veins. Supply and demand. It will fuel and sustain the body by supplying it with nutrients for growth. Kuerigs, Sony Bravia LCD

flat screen televisions, iPhones and iPads, IKEA minimalist style furniture, designer clothing, all essential components for a healthy functioning body. During the holiday season, I'm not scheduled nine to five. I don't get weekends off—hell even requests for time off are weighed against other employees' and the demands of the sales floor. Plan on visiting family for the holidays like the rest of America? Too bad, we need you to stock the shelves for those who were privileged enough to host the receptions of their holiday gatherings.

By some miracle, the few days I get off revolve around a weekend. I receive not just a Saturday off, but a Sunday and Monday as well. Brittany and I take this as a window of opportunity so we travel to Tampa to visit her newlywed friends, Erica and Travis. We're all young, but for some odd reason everyone around us and on Facebook is tying the knot. Sharing nuptials and posting "expecting a new edition!" pictures.

It's weird to believe my generation is progressing into the middle class ideals. We are becoming the next round of concerned voters. I can hardly decide on a breakfast option as all my peers struggle to find out which suburb will be called home, which car is a family vehicle with the best gas mileage, which engineering firm offers the best benefits, is Florida really the right place to stay? We should be closer to family. I switched to a new 401k, found better health care premiums that include maternity packages; we joined the bowling league with our church, opened up a new credit card in case of emergencies, which of these hotels has daycare? Should we take out a second mortgage? I got life insurance today. Sweetie, I need your social security number so you can be the beneficiary. No I don't want to get divorced, we should see a counselor. No I don't think we rushed this. I can barely understand myself yet my generation

says this is what people do. This is how they age, progress into adulthood. Can't we all just sit back for a moment and order a coffee to talk before we put in an order of a few eggs?

There's a club in Ybor City Brittany and all of her girlfriends use to go to during the heydays of their college experience where they would all get buck wild before settling down. The invitation captures my full attention and the specials sell me. Twelve bucks, all you can drink from ten at night to close. Fucking beautiful.

I don't think I'm an alcoholic, but I do love a drink. Craft beer is not a disease, but rather a hobby. If wine and cheese are proper ways to entertain guests, surely beer with chips and salsa will suffice just as well. I work grocery retail so I don't rake in the cash. I have to rummage the sulfuric toasted ground for weeks with broken fingernails until I have collected enough minerals to trade in for a nickel. I don't have wonderful health care so I ignore any pains in my body along with all the cuts on my hands from deadly cardboard boxes and jagged shelf nails. I spend the money on beer to help unwind after those laborious days, and then on chips and salsa for Brittany to snack on.

I'm at Brittany's apartment helping her pack a bag for one night in Tampa. I text my roommates and ask them to look after our dog, Lucy, and as we pull out of my apartments' covered parking corral, I see my little Jack Russell mix shift the blinds to watch us leave. Now that Brittany is moving in, they are her roommates too, or as she says, "babysitters."

We take State Road 436, Semaron Boulevard to State Road 50, Colonial Avenue. Then get onto I4. It's sounds complicated, but it's not. The Native American will meet you with the White Man in one of the worst intersections ever constructed. Both roads are so busy, so congested. The county, city, and state officials all joined in building a new highway overpass to

aid the flow, not solve the traffic volume epidemic. The traffic is complicated and Orlando still remains one of the deadliest cities for crossing pedestrians in the country, but that is neither here nor there.

I4 is the aorta of Orlando, which is reason enough to sever it. The six-lane highway stretches from Daytona Beach in the northeast and coagulates into the 295 of Tampa. This is neither here nor there, but understand, this is partially the reason why I4 is a giant cluster fuck. So much traffic in and out of Orlando. So many people, so many rat races. Jackson Pollock couldn't make worse a mess. Still, it is the only free highway in Orlando. Every other highway surrounding the Orlando-Sanford-Kissimmee metro area costs stacks of dollar bills to travel on. No nickel and dimes here. Just arms and legs. Say you need to drive from South Oviedo to the Millenia Area. It will cost you, well how much do you like your right foot? Millenia is itself a giant cluster fuck of upper-class shopping centers including, but not limited to a massive crystal colored mall featuring a Macy's, a Nordstrom, a Bloomingdales. They have every shop a self entitled prepubescent asshole, selfish about their own needs and existence while bitching about the trials of their awkward growth spurt, could ever desire to step foot in. There is an Urban Outfitters, an Anthropologie, Nieman Marcus, Lucky Brand, Abercrombie, Lacoste, Swarovski, and an Apple Store to keep the hipsters quiet and trendy. Also two Starbucks directly facing each other. I know, it's two steps above ludicrous.

Lately we've seen the establishments of more urban consumerism trends such as a West Elm, The Container Store, a few upper niche eatery joints like The Elephant Bar and BJ's Brewhouse. They don't offer anything exquisite, but the appearance is flashy which is enough to keep the drunks of Alehouse at bay, along with the families of six conjuring at the tables of free breadsticks and salads at Olive Garden. Keep them across the street and away from the upper crust. All this sits cozily next to a Mercedes Benz dealership profiting more from the sales of Jaguars and Audis, and an art gallery selling Chihuly¹⁴.

This area is the peak of Orlando. A collision of locals from the north and cancerous tourists from the south make traffic between Sand Lake Road and State Road 436 on I4 a goddamn nightmare. I hate driving in this stupid city, and since I own a massive, gas guzzling F150 with an eight-foot bed, I'm a target for speeding Hondas to cut off while my front grille is itching to smash through all the rentals going five miles under the speed limit. I scream out my window *fifty-five miles an hour is not a suggestion. Get back in line to take the monorail to your hotels and wait for the bus to take you to the mall.* This road, this only free road in Orlando which locals use to traverse between Daytona, Tampa and all the space between. We have bigger things to do than continuing to permanently bend our spines for the fantasies of your overweight children. Our nine-fives are over and for fucks sake, we just want to get to IKEA before the store closes at seven, because you know, they're just so busy from eleven in the morning to five in the afternoon.

¹⁴ Dale Chihuly is an American glass sculptor who works primarily with blown glass. Think of the glass vases IKEA sells for decorative purposes, and then force yourself into an intricately terrifying acid trip. Think about the insides of most glass blown pipes, you know the ones used for "medicinal purposes." Now take the stringy, colorful insides, and magnify them to the size of a human. That's Chihuly. That's what is selling. His sculptures are as fragile as his left eye, which he lost in a head-on car accident. He flew through the glass of the windshield. Talk about irony.

Brittany and I have this idea for how we can better the apartment. Our entire ride out to Tampa could be a dialogue about space, options, colors, and wants versus needs, but on a rash decision, we decide to stop by IKEA to kill some time and see for ourselves. I checked online to see the best possible routes to the Millennia area. The Google Maps says the quickest way from Winter Park, a major suburb of the greater Orlando area, is less than thirty minutes away if you travel takes you from Aloma Avenue, a two lane radial nightmare filled with soccer mom SUV's and old Hispanic minivans, to then jump on I4. Or you could take the femoral Semoran, (State Road 436/Altamonte Springs Road) southbound so you can jump on the 408 westbound and pay yet another toll, or risk the jugular we call Colonial, State Road 50. While staring down at the Google Maps, and seeing red lines and yellow lines highlighting all the routes suited as our "best options," I believe I might as well slit my own throat then have to pay for the tolls just to hop scotch across the traffic south of the 434, which loops all of northern Orlando. Then I could jump onto the 17-92 and join the rest of the metro area into the world of stop and go traffic. The money you save alone could cover the costs of an emergency room visit. And to hell with the 408, the East-West Expressway, and its constant construction. You might as well stay in the abandoned Albertsons parking lot while the Google Maps tries to reconfigure the trajectory of your location while you scream at your S.O. that there's no way you're going to make it to IKEA before the store closes. Right now, you are stuck in the gravesite of a decrepit shopping cart corral of one of the South's most promising grocery retail stores. The once lavish store is now victim to irresponsible growth and spending, aggressive competition, and outdated ethics. The ceiling rounds the front entrance and the upper windows invite natural illumination onto the sales floor, yet the ideas of old business models condemned the doors to close forever. Now all you

see are mediocre depictions of wilted Home Depot particleboards covering the entryways as though people *want* to rush inside this pathetic establishment. I'm sure only dust bunnies bounce down the barren aisles. It's these reasons of abandonment, our desires to keep up with "modern society" why Brittany and I have decided to race against the store hours of our local IKEA before heading to Tampa in an attempt to keep our friends in our apartment for more than five minutes. I tell her it's not my fault the most popular furniture store in all of modern mankind only has three locations in Florida. And the one you need to get to before seven might as well be across the Jordan. But that is neither here nor there.

When I say keep our friends, I mean entertain. We could keep them with opulent amounts of booze and oven baked chicken breasts, really they're not lavish people. A simple game of Cards Against Humanity should be sufficient enough, but we also have a future together to invest in. Spend more now, reward later. Isn't that how the saying goes? But that is neither here, nor there.

I don't mean to be rude about Brittany, I never do. Just people—humanity and its direction—drive me up the fucking wall. Remember how I mentioned I work grocery retail? Well it's full time. Full forty hours a week. Well I also chose to go to school full time and the chemical reaction between the two gets volatile. I need to pay the bills so I work at Whole Foods, the organic grocery store, forty hours a week. At work, assignments clutter my head, and at home I cannot focus on schoolwork because the constant interaction between the upper niches of society and medical professionals has drained my mental energy to a few fumes of gas. The small 9,000 square foot store is in a wealthy part of Orlando called Winter Park and banks upwards of \$600k a week. It's *Tree City USA!* and a white, upper-middle, upper class safe

haven. I fucking hate it. The food is good, and good for me, plus I get a discount at on everything in Whole Foods including beer and wine, but after my tenth year of mixed grocery retail, I'm starting to despise anyone with a gluten allergy and the scrubs who can afford to shop at our store. It's always *Me, Me, Me*, and no one ever comes off their default setting when shopping at our store as they scurry about searching for quinoa and raw cacao nibs to fulfill their selfishly idolized eating habits. Engine Two diets and Atkins and Gluten Free and Paleo and Raw and Vegetarian and Pescatarian and Vegan and High Protein and Organic Only and I don't want to be fat like the rest of America so I don't shop at Wal Mart or Publix and I don't want to buy junk food because my body deserves only the best and I want to live a long healthy life so I can pay off the thirty year mortgage of my \$750,000 split level with only three bedrooms I work tirelessly to afford and what's that pain in my chest? Better go ahead and buy some chia seeds and some cayenne to help with my blood pressure and since I can't take a day off to simply relax and unwind I'll just have a few hard liquor drinks because I never see my family or have time for them or to make coffee so I purchased a Keurig and it's made my life so much easier and what do you mean Whole Foods doesn't sell K-Cups? What are they, *not organic*? And what about life do you know? You're just a pathetic dairy stock clerk and go to the back and get me a freshly dated milk because I know you keep them in the back and screw you, you little servant slave of the middle class trying to amount to something, going to school full time but having to also work full time because you can't afford to live within your own means and so you can afford health care as enforced on all Americans thanks to Obama-The-Devil-Care! You little sack of shit why isn't this milk labeled as gluten free and do you think I'm sterile now?

This, this is a daily routine. It is soul crushing, it is heartbreaking and it is infinitely terrible to the mind and body of a creative individual. But I'm stuck until I graduate. Stuck until I'm certified to teach. Brittany grounds me, reminds me that it is all just temporary. So I pour myself a drink, or slug a beer to unwind from a day of working in retail monotony. When Brittany and I pass a wet bar setup at IKEA, we both fall in love, again. Behind a main traffic flow, IKEA professionals have installed a Värde wall unit with a dangling wine glass rack installed underneath. The frosted door is split in the center and lifts off the mount like a Delorean. The wood is earthy and contrasts the steel accents breaking into modernity. The Värde Base cabinet sits below and offers kitchen storage solutions for those living in a cramped environment. This progressive installation, which turns a ten square foot dining area into a lavish living area captivates Brittany and I. This could be the solution to the dark corner of my dining room where only a stack of old milk boxes and a rusty mountain bike hide. But we don't have that kind of money, and we must get to Tampa. So we leave with our heads in the clouds.

Orlando is about an hour and a half from Tampa. We pass the time by discussing more of the things we'd like to purchase from IKEA. What kind of table should we get? You want to host Thanksgiving this year right? How can we increase storage in the kitchen? What about the bed? How about new couches? Tax seasons coming so we can afford all this upfront. Swipe a credit card for some overhead and just get everything at once. It's a future we have to consider, so let's think carefully about what we need.

Truth is, we don't need any of it. Society says we need these things. But that is neither here nor there.

We stop at a Steak'n Shake on the way in. We're both hungry and though the food isn't organic, or probably even close to being all natural, they have a guacamole burger for the same price as a burger with bacon and cheese. Who can argue against? We run in so Brittany can pee and I wait in line to order our food. No service. No attention has been paid to us, the young couple obviously famished from their daily routine with hungry eyes on the menu. Brittany suggests we just get back in the car and go through the drive-thru. We do this and a massive line forms. "Every fucking time" Brittany says. She's right though. Every time we embark on some task, or stop to get to some food, to look at home furnishings, to look at new accessories for Lucy, a hoard of people find the exact same interest. I don't know if it's because we have something in common with this species, or if we are unconsciously aware of some mystical kind of trendsetting skill. Either way, our growling stomachs match the expressions on our face so we spend the time in line shooting shit about middle class America.

When we get to Erica and Travis's house I feel lost in a suburban nightmare. I hate the suburbs; I've lived in them my entire life. Cookie cutter houses, bright green lawns with a lack of adult trees. Lawn gnomes and plastic flamingos. Clay garden pots and alumni flags. My student goes to *this school* and *I'm on the PTA of Blank Blank Elementary*. Rotary club contributor. Support our troops. Riding lawn mowers and mailboxes shaped like bass fish.

Retention ponds full of sulfur smelling water fused with our own defecation for that waterfront view. Oh the suburbs. They are god-awful, manufactured dreams of the American Dream. Built on the growth of consumerism and merely trophy cases of materialism.

Erica and Travis's house is in "the country." Really it's all former agriculture land of South Tampa, nothing too unique about it. Just like the former orange groves which used to sprawl across this region, their house is surrounded by the exact same house, with the exact same people, sharing the exact same retention pond, sharing the exact same road in and out of their nests into the same exact city where they all work and despise the mundane nine to five because they're all stuck in the same exact traffic, while they all suffer from the exact same high blood pressure and near fatal heart attacks because they're all stuck in the exact same rat race and the only thing that moves forward is time and they all have the exact same fear no one wants to talk about: one day they will all die. But that is neither here nor there.

Erica and Travis are wonderful people. They are hospitable and Travis and I share a wonderful conversation about the overgrowth of Central Florida since our childhoods, which were once full of orange blossoms and boredom. We both ran into the backwoods to find entertainment. We both saw forests leveled for the surges of new residents eager to bask in the warmth of the sunshine state. We both were victims of the FCAT and one of the poorest education systems, but we turned out fine.

More of Brittany and Erica's girlfriends walk into the house. Each ready for a night out. Each dressed to the nines in sleek dresses, or vintage hipster styles. Each unique in their own style and mannerism. All giggle like hyenas.

We take 75 northbound and exit onto some newly built toll road on the Southside of Tampa. Evidently something built for the yuppies north of MacDill Base. Travis decides to stay home so it's just Brittany, Erica and me in her semi-luxurious Nissan Altima. The rest of the group follows parallel in some Honda or Kia. This Nissan though, it's a really lovely car. Tan leather interior, spacious heated seats that can tilt in every which direction, defrost, tinted windows, chrome accents with 18" rims. The dashboard has a dark oak panel with a veneer finish to showcase luxury and class. Below in the center console there is a video screen to keep up with technology. Erica says she can plug her iPhone straight in and do everything capable with her phone, in her new car. "Too bad it wont fit in my back pocket." Classic joke followed by classic laughs. The video screen also displays up to ten feet behind her car thanks the fish eye camera just above her license plate. There's even green, yellow, and red lines to show how she is with the distance of any objects inconveniently behind her or near her blind spot. The car is very nice and everything is powered. Windows, locks, brakes, air conditioning. It's a shame all vehicles require gasoline and these upgraded luxuries may only be temporary. Such wasted creativity. Wasted time, wasted resources. Like the suburbs, a waste of space.

We pass an IKEA just before our exit into Ybor. There are only three in Florida. The most popular furniture store within the continental United States and only three spread between Tampa, Orlando, and Fort Lauderdale. Florida has had one of the largest homeowner growth spurts with a population increase since the end of World War II. In 1960 there was a 78% growth in population from 2.7 million, to 4.9 million by the end of the decade. From 2000 to 2013 the index alone jumped from just shy of 16 million, to roughly 19.5 million. We are on track to break the state of New York's total population, and they've got Manhattan. Given the

birthrate of Latinos, and this is not based off any scientific evidence, Florida should double the population of New York in five years. My culture fucks like rabbits. Point being, that is a lot of people. Lots of homes, lots of *empty* homes. These people will need beds, ovens, televisions, refrigerators, coffee pots—scratch that, Keurig’s with Keurig stands, K-Cup trees, K-Cup filters, etc. But still, only three stores? The furniture is only guaranteed to last for only ten years; surely the stores are capable of maintaining steady business, steady growth. Perhaps this is capitalism at its peak, making the consumer demand and salivate at the imagination of owning what’s printed on the glossy pages of the at home mail catalogs. But that is neither here, nor there.

We pull off the exit into Ybor city. Tampa is an old port city on the gulf coast of Florida. Once known for a booming cigar industry, agriculture, and prior to modernism, it was a renowned safe haven for pirates. Hence the Tampa Bay Buccaneers. There is also a parade to commemorate the infamous pirate taking over the city, Gasparilla. It’s actually quite fun with the drinking all day long in the bright February sun as the hand crafted floats drive down channel-side through the financial district of Downtown Tampa and toss beads to the locals dressed like plunderers. It’s a PG version of Mardi-Gras, but I’m told it can get *buc-aneer wild!*

Cigar City, the other trendy name for Ybor City, is full of old exposed brick buildings with empty chimneystacks. Historic houses straight out of the Sears catalogue are decorated with National Historic Society commemorative plaques with *Built in Nineteen Hundred* inscribed underneath to showcase the rich history of the city. It’s a nice ghetto, really it is. Some of the poorest people live in Ybor because—well no one wants to live next to the ports. The opposite of shopping centers, it’s empty during the days. It’s fine enough to drink near all the haunted factories and dine near 7th Avenue, but living is for the suburbs. Cops patrol the

numbered streets with K-9 units galore to sniff out any kind of contraband and there are more than enough bums scattering through the parking lot begging for change. You could almost believe they are just like the rest of us, making an honest living off the sympathetic tourists. Just like Orlando, but with ecstasy. I hear all the cool kids in Orlando get their molly out of the club scene in Tampa. But where we're going, we've got enough friends, and booze will hold us off fine enough. It betters for twelve bucks.

We go to the club. We get drunk. We have a good time. I remember having more than my fare share of whiskey cokes while slugging down some PBR's. Brittany hasn't broken anything, she hasn't cried, and the worst is just a hangover in the morning. It was a good night, a good climax of a weekend.

I map out a route to Cracker Barrel while she continues to pack up all her makeup and shoe options for the night in a suitcase. We thank Erica and Travis for their hospitality, compliment them on what newlyweds can do with a brand new house, progress outside and greet the magnified Florida sun with thick sunglasses. It's December and still a miserable 88°. That's one thing about Florida that will never change, the heat. No matter how many trees they uproot for new homes, or how many taxes they impose in an attempt to keep the school system from going belly up, how many orange blossom candles they must sell at another new Bath & Body Works to remind the new residents of the former glory of Central Florida, how many headlines of monstrosities and extravagance must filter through the Florida headlines till it's just another state full of the same tragedies without the exotic twist, no matter how many Latinos it takes until the majority of white people are now the minority, no matter how many Zora Neal Hurston Festivals quietly take place, no matter how many times they attempt to turn I4 into a toll road,

one thing will always remain, the heat. It will slowly roast you until you are fully done. It will always be here, and there.

We get back on I4, talk about how excited we are to get back to our puppy, back into our comfortable bed and I suggest we stop again into IKEA to pick up some things and look at the couches. On the right, just past Lakeland, more land has been cleared out to make room for a new privatized technical education school. They plan to build a manmade moat around the school and use the windows in the ceiling as a means to illuminate the entire pavilion. It's interesting to see how innovative engineers attempt to integrate the pristine qualities of nature, into the high functions of modern society. By including natural wood against steel, you can create a dichotomy, a relationship defining growth and progress. The Swedish word for progress, to "move-on," is gå vidare. But I don't know if the human race is capable of doing this. Either return back to the caves and give your bodies back to mother Earth, that which gave you everything, or take everything from her, and move on to the stars.

Like a child, take all your parents can offer so you may be able to move on for yourself, so that you may continue the cycle and move on to bigger things than your basic biological makeup. Leave this terrible world comprised of material goods, and embark on a journey down a sunlit highway through the dense, tropical brush of your ancestors. Pull your vehicle back, grab the hand of your partner, and embrace the great expanse of the universe. Fall into oblivion, into darkness, into permanence. You are a slave to existence, to your senses, and nothing else. One day everything you know and love will die and you will wilt away alongside it. The commodities you stuffed into the hollow shells you slept in through the darkest nights are bright compared to the coffins you'll sleep in six feet below. The guests you poured drinks for, the

ones who slept on your couch and asked how to operate the Keurig will disintegrate beyond the advanced embalming techniques of today, and their smiling faces will disappear in the digital expanses of the masses. You parents will scrape the last particles of skin off their backs and die wishing they could have done more, but when the final amounts of DMT are released into your brain, old memories and new experience will blend into one as you meet “the so called creator”.

The child you bring into this world will constantly fill you with immense amounts of fear and worry as you wonder if the crib is safe, or if the baby monitors will pick up all the sounds. But then the face you’ve loved more than your own, producing a voice you’ve listened to grow over time will fade into a blur as your hearing gives out and the blinding white light at the end of the tunnel is revealed to be nothing more than the final neurons of your eyesight firing off in one last attempt. Everyone you have ever loved and hated in your lifetime will move on beyond your perceived thoughts and the future of humanity will always be unknown. Retail therapy will keep you occupied in the meantime, for you are neither here, nor there.

GRAPEFRUIT

Nana's backyard in the early nineties looked like the broken streets of Damascus. A massive concrete porch spreads out over the grass yard and leaves little for the lawnmower to ingest. The concrete was on fire, baking the Florida sun, yet resilient to the thumping of my siblings and I while we ran across. In the corner of the yard, tucked behind the house were two fruit trees. There was a small grapefruit tree producing the bitterest citrus in the state, and left massive canker sores in my mouth. The banana tree was always full of green chiquitas. It always tried producing fruit in an attempt to gain our affection over the years. But it would always spoil first.

Nana's house was asymmetrical, and the concrete slab filled in to square off the property. Patches of dirt were broken up by crab grass. The fine Saint Augustine blades, a luxury of Florida Homeowners, were dwindling to a handful of needles. I was six or so, and the outdoor glass table was always empty. I could never remember the family actually sitting at it. It was more for decoration, and the glass warped in the heat. The barren mesa magnified the sun and burned a lighter shade into the slab. If you cleaned the backyard, which no one ever did, you could always know where the symbol of family gathering was supposed to go, right in the center.

Nana was stretching out our clean laundry on the electrical wiring some male had jimmied up for her. My father and his father before him were both carpenters. You could never know who fixed what in the house, but you always knew Nana was there to clean it up. She started with the towels. The fresh bundles of cotton were always so soft against my skin. But on this particular day, they looked sad dripping their soapy tears. Crying from being handled so roughly. Over the years they lost their touch and showering at Nana's lost its comfort. The grimy laundry water steamed as it fell onto the concrete porch and I scuttled my feet over to keep

them from blistering. Nana was humming some Spanish tune and asked me to go play with my siblings, to leave her be with the household chores. It sounded romantic, but her voice was weak.

We zigzagged across Nana's frail backyard, thin like her brittle figure, but we always stopped at the back corner next to the grapefruit and banana trees. A giant wasps nest always loomed in the dark awning and though my father and Pop-pop could spend all day bitching about who could fix what, they never once fixed the threat. The wasps were military grade drones. Anytime we stumbled into the back corner, they would chase us out of their prized territory.

The chain link fence, with its mismatched white and maroon plastic interweaving in and out of the grills, kept the trees locked in the corner, only allowing the grapefruit tree to grow so much. The banana tree next to it always staggered over and blocked the grapefruit leaves from gorging on sunlight, yet the citrus tree, with its roots deep in the soft Florida soil, sucked dry all the nutrients the trees could possibly share. The banana trees chiquitas were horrible, and produced handfuls upon handfuls of wasted fruits. Yet the grapefruit tree, though struggling to stand on its own provided us with the most succulent of juices. Many times only one good fruit at a time, yet we'd hoard the citrus as though they were pasteles from the island.

Nana always warned me to never pick the fruit straight from the tree, said that we caused it great pain. It worked hard to make that fruit. How would I like it? Nana said to wait, and the tree would give us the fruits of its labor. I saw a small grapefruit fall to the ground, and I abandoned the runaround with my siblings. I bolted over to grab the fruit, but the wasps patrolling the corner awning flew down to scare me back. I knew they wouldn't hesitate to swarm down at me if I even took one step back towards their direction. I was frightened, but

hungry for the grapefruit. I ran over to tell Nana. She stretched out the corners of the bed sheet from my Pop-pops room, and walked over to the back corner of the house. The wasps no man could ever kill flew circles around her head. She paused for a moment, swatted once in the air, and leaned down into the corner of the yard to grab the fruit. She paused again, dusted off the fruit, swatted away another wasp, then continued to inspect the fruit. Nana came back to me and handed over the grapefruit. She punched her finger through the thick skin of the fruit to reveal the juices running dry. The tree was dying, and soon the banana tree would too.

Nana went back inside to grab her laundry from her room. I heard her scream to my Pop-pop, her husband, his sheets were drying, but if he wanted his clothes washed, he would have to bring them out of his room.

Pop-pop came to the back door and asked if I wanted to help. "I'll give you an ice cream sandwich." I sank my teeth into the grapefruit and felt my face stretch dry. My gums were stinging from the acid and vitamin C. I needed something sweet, something sugary and full of fat. So I decided to help the man who was never sweet to his wife.

SE DUELE

I walk up behind the counter of the seafood department, greet the stank steaming up from the raw fish on display, and see this dime walk inside the store. She pulls her oversized sunglasses away from her face, and whips her hair back in a sexual fury. By god, this blonde is drop dead gorgeous. Drool drips down from the corner of my sagging lip. She's got me hooked.

I'm staring out over the Sunset Strip we call produce. Beautiful people of all kinds bust in through the automatic doors of my store, picking up hand baskets, and checking their cell phones. They correct their crotches by unsticking the spandex hugging their inner thighs. They're chaffing and I'm sweating. Sweating because, see, this nine is walking in and making my chest hurt. She's breaking necks, starting riots, causing all sorts of a ruckus. All mayhem is about to break loose. Wives are slapping their awestruck husbands telling them to pick their jaws up off the ground. Old men are punching their cocks trying to get a little cooperation. And I'm just staring at this girl like she's another piece of meat. I desperately want to sink my teeth into her.

Then there are these so called "respectable"¹⁵ women. They get envious upon glaring at such a sweet pair of stems. They got those kind of thighs that be looking like dried up riverbeds,

¹⁵ These are beautiful women too, or at least they were. Maybe they were nines back in the day, before they plopped out a couple of squats and found their husbands working late just get a little more *work* done. Who knows, but I've been in the grocery business long enough to know what kind of people shop at my stores. I can point them out fairly easily. The ones with troubled marriages, or the recently divorced bachelors, they like to talk nonsense with the meat guys about rock and roll *dude! You catch the game man? I can always watch the game now, no more bitching.* The soccer moms too into fitness, too into the healthy diets of their children, too into their slick tight yoga pants, stroll the aisles constantly asking for gluten free everything. *Does this contain any GMO's? How do you know? You sound so sure, just like my husband, but you don't know a damn.* Don't get me wrong, because there are also some great people who come in shopping. We got one couple, interracial, still a little uncommon in such a progressive industry, and they're a breeze. The wife looks like a cracked out version of Latoya Jackson, and her husband has a Nigel Thornberry size mustache that makes Dali rethink his definitions of reality. They're wonderful people, and to my surprise a wonderful couple. But you have to wonder, what about their biological makeup made

cracking and peeling away like moldy wall paper. Meanwhile Miss Universe is strutting around with airbrushed skin, fresh off a waxing ad billboard. They snarl at the whore who's working her blonde hair up into a casual ponytail. She isn't sweating. Her skin is tight, tan, smooth. Firm breasts, a sweet ass. *Se duele!* Little girls ask if she is an angel. She smiles, tells them they're sweet and swaggers away while the little boys are completely oblivious to the ninth wonder of the world. They slide sale tags down the shelf (making my job harder) and make imaginary sounds for their toy cars. They are the lucky ones. For now.

These little boys have no idea the amount of power those little girls next to them will have in the coming of years. They will become slaves to the swing of their hips. Thirsty for the taste of their lips, crazy for their curves, and go knockers for their...knockers. I wish there was a way to freeze those moments of pre-adolescence. Before testosterone and estrogen started messing up our minds, and body parts began dictating our direction. Freeze the innocent moment when the little girls smile so sweetly at the goofy little boy telling her in his most polite tone, *yes you can play with my toy cars*. Let's go racing down the highway of infinity, never hoping to find a finish line for millennium to come. Don't worry girl, ain't no one on this road but the two of us. A setting sun, a killer soundtrack, and the bliss of our ignorance.

But those are the dreams of Hollywood. I've been there, and there ain't nothing spectacular about homeless men pissing drunk on the stars we idolize. This is real life and beautiful people can be, difficult. It's the most infuriating thing to my coworkers and me. To

the other person start paying attention? It's what makes the respectable women envious. They believe the traits that once made their husbands gawk and gander like the sorority sister, whose got me and all my coworkers trembling, may be long gone. And then they see this mixed couple walk in peppy as they day they found each other. Call it jealousy. Call it ironic. Call it cyclical. I call it just another Saturday.

see such a gorgeous woman walk into the store, then dismiss us as mere hound dogs looking to get our bones wet. There is a lack of character in glamor. It's all an image.

But beauty is in the eyes of the beholder. And in the eyes of all the men working at my store alongside of me, we all agree, this broad is a *god, damn, nine*.

So this nine walks into my job and I just want to announce a few things first, give a little background information. First off, my associates and I are polite, not perverted, but we are also human and prone to flaws. So allow me to set up the context and situation of the story here. I've changed all the names and the place we work to keep from embarrassing some of my close friends. Also to try and keep some of the integrity—which may be little, in the lives of my stores leadership. If you do enough digging, you'll probably figure everything out, but even Bukowski¹⁶ couldn't be such an asshole.

Two: I really do care about my relationship with my girlfriend, Brittany. Not to make this sound too academic, but here is how we setup the conflict. The great example of the human condition, blah blah blah. This is a man against his wits. Love versus lust. Biology versus civilization. This is about how skin hugging yoga pants can change a man. The tighter they become, the darker the man. How image can at many times bring me to unfairly doubt the

¹⁶ Charles Bukowski, famous poet and author who lived a bitter life from 1920 to 1994. A lot of youth and uneducated individuals love his poetry, and why not? But it's like praising comedian Bob Sagat over the likes of Seinfeld, Chris Rock, or Louis C.K. It's all dirty, funny, and true to the clichés of fantasied reality, however lacking some depth, some sense of character. Bukowski was a drunk and a womanizer. Appropriate for this piece is some ways. Many people would agree, *that guy was an asshole*. There's a video clip circulating the Internet of him cursing and kicking his pregnant girlfriend, so it's best to let other judge. I quote Modest Mouse here thought, "yeah I hear it's a pretty good read, but god who'd want to be such an asshole?"

wonderful unity I share with Britt. But after all is said and done, we are merely human. We are all flawed.

So let's start:

It's grocery retail. Not just standard grocery retail, but like high end, high margin grocery retail. Items capable of depleting most of America's bank accounts. We've got all sorts of these imported items¹⁷ hailing in from across the globe. Each item packaged and labeled with all these trendy logos. Fair Trade Certified. Non-GMO verified. Organic this, organic that.¹⁸ We are a lifestyle store attracting the higher echelon of society. The cream-on-top. Crème de la crème. The pretty faces inheriting the lucky fortune from some bigot relative. We also get all these healthy nut-jobs too. *I want my water ph balanced, alkalized with no added fluoride and straight from the best springs on the planet.* Remote locations where the locals can live on less than the cost of this bottled water. We are a store that sells image.

¹⁷ Fun fact: Some of our top selling imported items include quinoa, coconut palm sugar, green bean coffee bean extract, and red palm oil. And guess what all these items do? They “help you lose weight.” All items have been featured on Dr. Oz and in hundreds of food articles as beneficial towards combating the great American obesity epidemic. However, because of the spiking demand of crops like quinoa, also known as the Bolivian supergrain, the local economies of these underdeveloped nations (in comparison to most of western Europe and the United States) have actually struggled to maintain adequate supply while supporting their local communities. It’s a catch twenty-two. Americans want healthier food that’s not processed or contaminated by scientists, so let’s sell them our version of corn and finally build some infrastructure. However, because demand is so high, and the money so good, now the global economy has set the market price too high against a demand unable to meet the compliances of natural sustainability. These nations find they can no longer afford to feed their own citizens. Bolivians can’t even eat their staple crop now because of Americans. But we’ll be damned if we gain weight after having a child. Also many of these crops are grown in very dense rainforests and with demand come the need to supply. Which brings on countless amounts of rainforest destruction and the loss of endangered wildlife. So really, what’s the true price of all these superfoods? Can they really save us from our own selfish ways? Or are they only meant to save our waistlines?

¹⁸ Fair Trade Certified is a third party organization for farms and companies to register with to ensure equal and fair economic practices. Non-GMO verified is a third party organization that inspects organic integrity to make sure no genetic engineering practices have interfered with the production of the food. Organic is a term used by the FDA to certify food that has been grown and harvested in the most natural setting, with no genetic engineering or industrial practices which may cause harm to the nutrient or ingested value of the food itself.

But some do want to change. They want to buy healthy food and live healthy, normal lives. They blend in so well with the shelves though, we never see them. Never bring it to anyone's attention to acknowledge his or her existence.

So these people come walking into this store I work in, where I've worked for a little over three years, and let me tell you, they all wear these sexy ass yoga pants. Super tight. Can't slide a dime between these dimes. A man would think it's painted on. My store is small¹⁹, but from our seafood counter display, you can see every single woman that walks in. Front row seats to the greatest show on Earth.

So I see this nine walk in. I'm panting like a mangy mutt at the sheer site of this woman. I tap G, one of our seafood clerks on the shoulder. He's already locked his cross hairs on her. I slide a bowl under his jowls while he fills it twice over beaming down at this woman. I reach for the phone to make a storewide announcement.

"Seafood you got a call, park 9000. Seafood, park 9000."

See, that's special lingo in our store. A standard code used by one male team member to inform all the other male team members a "future ex-wife" just entered the store. I came up with this particular term one day when a different dime walked in. She was so drop dead gorgeous, just so spectacular with her thick wavy hair, flowing into a body melted into a perfect form. I wanted to drop down to one knee right then and there and offer her a proposal: *girl you won't ever have to worry a day for the rest of your life, so long as you're with me*. But this is real life and so long as she's with me, I'll keep looking. One day she'll get so fed up with my dog like

¹⁹ The typical grocery store in the south averages about 40,000 square feet, which usually includes a 10,000 square foot back-room/production area. We utilize the same amount of space as a standard Walgreens (9,000 square feet) while earning their monthly allotment in one day. Mostly from selling quinoa, coconut palm sugar, red palm oil, and green bean coffee bean extract.

nature, she'll pack up her shit and leave. Leaving me to clean my own junk in the corner of the couch. So I just let her keep shopping.

Brady came up with our park 9000 call. He used to be our frozen guy and was then promoted to the back of the house as a receiver. He ain't got to deal with customers or nothing. It's a dream position. Just scan in items and pay off some invoices. The biggest complaint he tells us is that he doesn't get a chance to stumble over these hot pieces walking in anymore, at least not with same old kind of frequency. So out of respect, we make an announcement over the intercom, mostly to let him know. Also anyone else, but mostly for Brady. Out of respect for the man.

Before I was hired, when Brady was still working frozen, the store's seafood department used to have this bell off to the side of the fresh case, the place where all the raw fish was displayed. It was a polished brass bell, ideal in form. Iconic with its symmetrical curves. Intentionally installed for decorative purposes, some nautical theme, but then slowly it integrated into a customer interaction exhibit. To incentivize the team members, or the soccer moms desperate to keep their infants under control. If they sold/bought a fish, someone earned the right to ring the bell. But this was back in 2009, just after the economy tanked and no one could afford to purchase wild caught, self sustained seafood, let alone a single tail of farm raised shrimp. And for some strange reason, that bell was still ringing. Team leaders began noticing all the young men would be dropping their current tasks, and begin helping out the overstaffed produce department. Grinning with the same kind of excitement children showcase when their parents agree to take them to McDonalds. The bell sits in the back of the department now with the rope removed.

But back to this nine. She's got graceful looking blonde hair. They're normally not my style. I prefer brunettes. Green eyes are a plus, and blue bores me. But this blonde has dark roots and two well-constructed breasts. The surgeon had to have been an artist, because this man created a masterpiece. I tell ya, the broad will probably float in the roughest of seas. Don't worry about finding land, just look for her upper half bobbing about in the open ocean. G is about ready to lose his shit all over the bright pink wild-caught fillets of salmon lined up in the case, so I let him have his moment and head back to the dairy department.

So we got codes for everything. A customer comes in and pisses you off, you walk to the back room, stare into boxes full of product picked by migrant hands, and holler about the empty souls running you dry. You say the angry code: *Some asshole* [insert your complaint here]. This is the primary term used when some dingbat asks you a stupid question. *You guys don't sell Coke? We sell natural sodas. No, I want Coca-Cola. What the hell is wrong with you? You guys sell prescriptions? You guys sell artificial food coloring? You guys sell liquor? You guys sell enemas? Where's your Splenda? What about the Paula Dean stuff?* Some asshole...This jerk off...So, get this...these are all little codes to showcase our anger. You'll never hear us repeat these phrases out on the floor. They're too obvious and of course, we don't want to get fired.

But for women. *Se duele!* Oh my god, get out an encyclopedia sized legal pad and start taking notes. Because we can so easily get caught, but we try hard not to. We want our jobs

because we need money to buy beer, support our significant others, and Christ, we want to look at the beautiful women in yoga pants that walk through our store.

Se duele is a Spanish term for "it hurts." G, who is Peruvian coined the term with Gringo, our Mexican butcher. Go figure. It spread like wildfire between me and a few other Latinos at work. Orleans, who is half Puerto-Rican like me, got in on it and now screams it from behind the meat case. Best part is, no one picks up on the slang. They think the man chopped off his finger. *Quick, give this man thirty cc's of morphine. Let him live.* But we come alive when the pendulum swings. When the ladies come strutting in and swing our necks into whiplash. The pain. *Se duele.*

This is our favorite line, but for people like Brady and Halo, their culture is more commodity than language. You look at the phone when the announcement is paged, and sure as shit, ALLPG-217: "Produce park 9000," comes blasting out from Brady's office. He's also where we get our 100/0 scale. When you buy ground beef, the beef is measured by fat content. Lean meat has the lowest content, usually a 98/2. 85/15 is perfect for burgers, perfect for our gorgeous gals. A nice piece with fifteen percent body fat. The best. *Se duele.* The scale moves along. The nine started the day as a 95/5.

We got a number scale too, one to ten, but doesn't everybody? Like I said, we don't want to get caught.

During the Olympics, we mark off medal winners. Bronze for a hit-it, then quit-it. Silver for seconds. But every athlete wants to take home the gold. Polish it clean, set it on the shelf above the fireplace. Go down in history.

During the football season, we rank the ladies with downs. First and goal is "holy shit." Second down equates to silver. Third and long is gonna take some heavy drinking, like when we all head to Confines after work and start ranking the roughed up waitresses. Fourth down? Forget it. You're better off staying in bed, rousing through your computer and feeling guilty when you delete the browsing history.

We got Model-T's. Stingrays. Corvettes. Wives. I call dibs on that! Honeys. Sugars. Starlets. Dibs. Fully loaded. Fully stocked. The nines. Butter-face. Good from far but far from good. Holy Shits. Dibs! The Blonde by the apricots. Neck breaker in the cereal. Future ex-wife in bakery. Help this lady find some *help* in juices. Oh my goodness, look at this one coming up. Shit I've never seen such a beautiful piece of ass ever walk by me with such a swing. I think I want to marry her. I'm sorry miss, but I think you dropped my number. You want to double bag me and take me home? I'm organic, all natural, the best source of nutrients for your hardworking body. Let me take care of you baby, you ain't got to work another day in your life. Girl you're so beautiful it's put a hurting on my heart.

Se Duele.

But back to our story. I walk back to my dairy department to tell the other guys trapped in the cooler about this nine. It's a Saturday afternoon, so this is the first of many park 9000's. Next time you walk in the store and you hear park 9000, be on the lookout for a Mila Kunis, a Jennifer Lawrence, an Emma Watson, a Katy Perry, a Kristen Bell, a Giselle, hell even the older

ones; Courtney Cox, Jennifer Aniston, an Emily Blunt.²⁰ The list goes on; oh does the list go on. You'll see all these gorgeous ladies walk into our store. Now I know she isn't going to be the real gal, but beauty is in the eye of the beholder, right? We are thirsty, crazy, and knocking our heads against corners. Goddamn, do we have a good fucking job.

One time, on Christmas Eve, Zooey Deschanel²¹ came in shopping with her mom. The real Zooey Deschanel. This was my dream girl. She's got these huge blue eyes complimenting a perfect, petite body. Dark hair, indie style²². I'm dead when I see her in flannel and boots. I tell Brittany all the time I'm saving myself for her. Now she laughs, tells me to keep dreaming and rubs her belly counterclockwise.

Brittany's got this sway, this sarcastic attitude I found I was a sucker for and now were having a baby. She's got me on lock down with her mind, her upbeat nature, and this silly little giggle that sounds like the beauty of innocence. I won't leave because she's so good for me. But I still look. It's only natural. I'm just a mere human. A simple man comprised of the same biological makeup as everyman before and after. I'm not alone in my stares. And when Zooey Deschanel walks past me I get so excited, so revved up and ready to go, I have to call Brittany and tell her, *you'll never guess who I just saw*. I have to release all this built up excitement and we're just lucky Brittany is already pregnant.

²⁰ This a *small* list of some of People Magazine's most beautiful women of 2013. All are celebrity actresses. Some have Oscars, many Golden Globe. Most look awkward without makeup.

²¹ Famous Hollywood actress, producer, singer/songwriter, and musician.

²² Indie style is a term used to describe a specific fashion trend beginning just after 2010. Post new-millennium, and slightly influenced by the seventies, the great depression, and a dash of nineties grunge era. New clothing was manufactured to look old, faded, and vintage. Flannel shirts with plaid designs, Native American influenced moccasins, cowboy boots, skinny jeans, flower power dresses, thin suspenders etc. On this particular day, Zooey was wearing a hunter green flannel shirt, with blue skinny jeans, and tan boots. Women partaking in the indie trend, typically have a hairstyle reminiscent of the late sixties, early seventies. Bangs were a big thing back then, and have made a triumphant return. Zooey wore them right above her eyes. Brittany cut her hair into bangs just before Thanksgiving upon my request. Indie style individuals typically enjoy eating organic food, listening to Modest Mouse, watch movies like *500 Days of Summer*, and drink PBR.

Brady meets me outside of dairy, towards the back of the sales floor. He's coming up from seafood with a pain in his chest we all know too well. The feeling of deep heartache from falling too fast, too quick for something too soon.

"God damn that's a 9000 if I've ever seen one," Brady says to me.

"That's a nine at best. I hate blondes."

"Get out of here. Did you tell meat?"

"She's in meat right now."

"Eddie, be my wingman. Help a brother out."

"You're an adult. Give her your number. Ask her if she needs help finding anything."

Brady goes and walks up to this nine. He turns back to grin at me and gives this creepy ass wink. He's about halfway there to busting out, gut laughing, when he straightens his posture, coughs and flexes his chest. I break and have to walk away. I can't bear to watch this eminent disaster. In Hollywood I fast-forward through the romance but this is real life; Brady and I both know this won't end well.

"Excuse me miss, but I couldn't help how beautiful you look, are you a model?"

"Me? Not today." *Smile. She pulls on a lock of her hair and points to some meat she wants. She ignores Brady and waits for the meat attendant to assist her.*

"Well, you're something else. You let me know if you need anything darling."

"I'm good." *Bitch face.* "I just want to shop in peace. Thanks." Cut to black.

Tell her you love her Brady. Tell her you'll make all her dreams come true. Tell her about your fake job where you're making six figures, ordering little peons about. Tell her your a man of power, capable of creating worlds and bending rules to please her. Just don't tell her you've got a five-year old daughter. Don't mention that after one of our fellow coworkers broke your heart and moved to California with some other douche, you swore your daughter would be the only woman you'd need in your life. Don't tell her how you're a spectacular father juggling forty hours a week scanning in the broad's gluten free lifestyle. Don't tell her you managed to pull straight A's in your upper-class accounting courses, four of them at that. Don't tell her you take your daughter to the theme parks and have daddy dates racking in so many *awe you're such a good dad!* Don't talk about how you meet up every Saturday morning to throw down some game on the basketball courts with all your closest friends. Don't tell her about how outside this factory farm, you live a life worthy of more than an infinite amount of respect. You're just a dog. A filthy, stinking, mangy mutt. She hasn't even got the tiniest little sliver to feed you.

Bless Brady's heart though man, seriously. This dude gets shot down constantly, but he is every so efficient in his attempts. You have to hand it to him. He's ever so eager, ever so ambitious. For a moment, I wonder why this girl is so quick to faze Brady out. Brady's a good-looking guy. Coming from a very wonderful family. Product of an interracial marriage, so you know he's built out of love against standards. He has no defects. Has an asymmetrical face, a typical athletic body, and he's charming. Brittany scores him an eight on a scale of ten. So why does this nine sneer at him? Is it the job? How does she even know he works here? Is she gay? Does she feel overly sexualized in her tight ass yoga pants? Has she been dealing with these attempted pickups all day? *Not again, ugh. I just want to shop in peace thank you.*

Is it her fault for wearing such sexually appealing clothing? For being bred from a great gene pool? Is it her fault for purchasing those breasts? Or is it Brady's fault for being a lonely grocery clerk? For being born a male biologically trained to impregnate any woman that walks? Is she spoiled? A classist? Is she a victim or a bigot? Is it society's fault for determining the course of fitness clothing styles? Or is it the consumer's fault for purchasing so many yoga pants that now these companies find themselves forced to produce the most provocative outfits to earn the most publicly acclaimed sportswear? Can we blame the media? Or *People Magazine*? What about *Cosmo*? Or *Men's Fitness*? Can we blame religion? Should we blame God? Or can we blame it on Obama? Who's at fault for Brady not being able to successfully pick up this nine? Whose to say she isn't single, gay, or just not into moreno dudes?

Could women ever say, *no we will not be sexualized for attempting healthier lifestyles!*
Or could men ever say, *no we will never objectify women in any perverse means simple because they are our better halves!*

Down with patriarchy!

Down with gender roles!

We are not dogs! We are civilized!

Or are yoga pants just that fucking comfortable?

Brady walks away, unsure how to react to this nine's barefaced shutdown. I retreat back into the dairy cooler and hide. In the cooler we are able to fill all the perishable items from

behind, rather than having to lug all the boxes out to the sales floor, and then expose ourselves as the simple grunts of a multi billion-dollar corporation. It's not what you'd call, sexy. The display is what customers see and pull from, but inside the cooler we are separated. We are invisible. We can listen to whatever music we'd like to, and we can talk about whatever crosses our mind without having to ever worry about offending or upsetting one of our prized shareholders (our customers). No, *can I help you find anything?* No, *what can I do to make your life easier?* *How can I break my back for you, sir?* No chance of ever being disrespected or pushed aside as a lesser being. The greatest beauty is that we can see out onto the floor, but the floor can't see into us.

Brady comes in laughing, hollering about how this nine can't be pleased. Two other young UCF guys work in the back with me, M&M we'll call them because they're inseparable. A good pair. Both young and strong. Different colors on the outside but made of the same rock hard chocolate bound to melt when left in the heat. We all rise up against the girl who just shot Brady down. He shares with us his magnificent attempt to pick her up. How she got real cold on him when she saw him scan her up and down right quick. We talk about the yoga pants she wears. How we can see every curve, every bounce and every jiggle when she shakes down the aisle. We point her out while she looks at tofu. We see a perfect silhouette and lose our shit behind the cooler doors. She has no idea how bad were dogging her from behind the grass fed whole milk cartons. Then we see another. Another. And another.

It's later in the day and I'm alone in the cooler. Everyone else is either on lunch or out on the floor trying to keep warm. Then I see this Zooey walk into my eyesight. I've been filling yogurt from behind for about forty minutes. Jamming out to some thrash metal and Modest Mouse. Just fucking enjoying myself because this job is so mundane. America loves their Greek yogurt. High protein, high carbs, decent sugar. No fat, no flavor. I'm putting up case after case of Organic, whole milk, non-GMO, blueberry, black cherry, pineapple, dark chocolate, salted caramel, fruit on the bottom, cream on top and then this girl sweeter than a strawberry looks right into me. I've packed the shelf. I know she can't see me. I can't let her catch me. I see her, then scan down to the see the expanse of her hips. Holy shit. A ten if you wanted to look at the hourglass alone. I lost it.

"Holy shit." But she can't hear me say this.

She stepped away after buying a few yogurts and moved down the aisle emptying in front of the cultured products. She looks at the shelf stable milks and I look at her. Holy shit. I didn't rush off for a phone. No parked 9000, no hollering to my buddies about this 85/15. I wanted her to myself. This moment was just me, and her. Just the two of us in this terrible universe. She was lost and I was going to help her find the *deepest* parts of her soul. She set the hunter green basket down on the ground, reached to the top shelf for some chocolate milk, and there she stood, se duele.

Her head jutted out this thick black ponytail. Hair so thick you wanted to wrap yourself around in it. It flowed over her left shoulder, drove me nuts. Her arms lean and strong. Skin the color of sand. Little makeup, like she wanted to sweat and not trot on the treadmill for attention alone. She had on the tightest grey sports top with pink accents lifting these spectacular breasts

just asking me to act on bad decisions. Begging me to do something horrible. Her shirt sucked back into a flat stomach with a thick waist and a profound ass. She stood like the letter "s" on her tiptoes. She had a pair of stems more outstanding than all the redwoods of California. I watched my Zooney looking so hot, so beautiful while I shivered in the dairy cooler. Layered in sweaters, a beanie, and gloves, I started sweating myself. I didn't go out to the floor to try and talk to her, to see if still had the same charm I used to woo Brittany. I was too busy trying to fill up with the needs of others while my dick attempted to break off and flee from the scene.

I had fantasies of Zooney coming back into the cooler, asking me for help and me giving her some *help*. Whether she wanted to admit it or not, Zooney and I had a moment. We had a moment whether she was willing to be consciously aware of my existence at all or not. Reality is all based on perception and she has no idea how much better her day was because of me. How much better her breakfast will be the next morning because I decided to fill the goat milk yogurt first. And now she's able to shop around effortlessly. To continue on her day floating up into the sky. Goodbye Remedios the Beautiful²³. Ascend into heaven as perfect as you are and will ever be. Never struggle, never strengthen your character. Just stand there and look beautiful and make my blood pump furiously.

When she walked away I continued on with my day. I started searching for the entire coconut yogurt we were running low on. This is how almost every weekend goes for me.

²³ Remedios the Beauty appears as a prominent female character in Gabriel García Márquez's masterpiece *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. In the novel, Remedios is so beautiful, men are afraid to talk to her and few even die from sheer lust. She's borderline stupid from her inability to develop any productive, or flawed traits and walks around naked. The reader assumes she dies young because she ascends straight into heaven after folding laundry. Never once ever really having to struggle in her life.

Zooeys come in and out of the store all day long. It helps to pass the time. To keep us from losing our minds every time some self-entitled, middle-class yuppie starts demanding us for an unsustainable crop the nation's out of stock on. Bitching at the meat guys because they already sold out of the highest quality bacon. There are only so many pigs on the planet, only so much land, so much grass. *Get out of the way asshole. You are ruining the view.*

Later in the day, Brady and I walk up to the meat counter to ask if any of the fellas have seen some good talent just strolling on through. A seven strolls by, glances at all the meat on display, and smiles when we tell her hello. Says she's just dandy when we ask if she needs help finding anything. Then turns the corner and fills her cart with whatever else comes up next. This is where the most disgusting remarks are made.

"Yeah I'll give her an order of sausage," says Orleans.

"I'll tag in and give her a second order," says Gringo.

"I'd tell her which breasts are the best," says Halo.

"I'd love to lick my fingers clean off those ribs," says Giant.

"I'd eat a mile of shit just to lick her asshole," says Bill.

I can't stop laughing. All of us, laughing at the expense of this poor woman. Slopping her around like she's a pile of unwanted fat, sloshed into the grinder for cheap hamburgers and market meat. She, completely oblivious to our carnal thoughts. She, completely oblivious to how romantic any of us may be. She, completely oblivious that when isolated in a group of fellow men, all we want to do is fuck anything that walks by. She, completely oblivious to the

fact that when you do need help finding something, we act like gentlemen (after all we have no intentions of getting fired). We escort you to the product, give you cooking tips, suggest supplementary sides, wish you a good day, then head back to the pack to howl away about licking the scraps clean. She, undeserving of any such treatment.

Still I wonder, why do we act like this? Why does this poor woman fall victim to our filthy discourse? She is sweet, beautiful like the girl-next-door; someone who all of us can agree is a woman you'd want your parents to meet. So then why the pig talk? Why the barking? Why degrade ourselves to such a level we know we aren't? For goodness sake, aren't we better men than to just howl about looking for some action?

Orleans is studying for a MA in Health Affairs.

Gringo is happily in love with his girl of two years. They have a puppy. Identical to Britt and I—minus the baby.

Halo is tall, quiet, and focused on graduating to get a better job.

Giant is a volunteer firefighter with two kids he loves dearly.

And Bill, Bill is bitter. Bill is, Bill.

Again we all laugh, bright smiles adorn our young faces. Except for Bill. Bill is old. Like dust-coming-out-of-his-ass-when-he-farts old. There is a thirty year gap between the oldest guy in our group, and Bill. He's the on the wagon, off the wagon kind of fella. Drunk at meetings, but sober when using a knife. He's been through a few divorces and is now just biding his time till he bites the big one. Bill is so old, so pissed off, so sloppy that now, he has to stick with whatever he's got, because he ain't getting anything new. We joke he is our future, but

secretly, deep down, we all fear this. We know if we score, then working at grocery store won't seem so god damn depressing.

We go back to our respected departments, fall in line, single file, return to the monotony of the day and wait for the next number to walk in. Before Brady heads back into his cave next to the cardboard bailing machine, he rallies up the troops and says "Hey, wings?" A universal statement to announce a period of male bounding.

"Yes," says everyone.

Nighttime. Store's closing, we make an announcement, tell the remaining customers we'll reopen again at eight in the morning for their organic and natural needs. We will always be open for *your* needs, always ignoring ours. By the end of the night, the stragglers are usually buzz-kills, some kind of old folks bored and looking for some young kid to educate. Or they're fanatical hippies eager to communicate their third eye knowledge on some college dude still searching for his place in the world. Brady has finished his shift, but he sticks around helping us power front²⁴ the store instead of ordering the first round while securing a table at Confines. Bill goes home early. Just another day in paradise for him. Orleans, Gringo, and Halo finish

²⁴ Power fronting is a term used to describe the act of "beautifying" the store. Essentially, a clerk will approach a section of displayed merchandise, and of the items on the shelf, will pull two to the front edge of the shelf, and repeat this task until every item in the store has been fronted. It is an image-based task to help maintain a full appearance. It makes the store look nice and not like a post-apocalyptic nightmare. It helps boost sales, but makes it difficult for overnight our overnight clerks to stock, rotate, and order. It's boring, mundane, and full of water cooler talk. It's also known as fluffing, blocking, setting, facing, and/or neatening depending on where you work.

cleaning the meat case. G finishes off seafood, hollers at us he's heading out, says he'll snag a table.

I text Brittany I'm going to Confines to grab some wings and beer with the fellas after work. She tells me just not to get too crazy. I've been crazy enough today creeping on Zooey, and losing my load over all the 9000's walking in and out of the store. I tell her I'll stop at two drinks because I have to drive home and since she's pregnant, I'm trying to cut back on a sloshing my brain around. Early in our relationship we established the needs for "girls nights" and "boys nights" out. She doesn't give me any shit about getting drinks, and for that I know I'll never leave her. She's just too good for me. I don't need to scale her, ain't one good enough.

I pull into Confines and Brady parks right next to me. Gringo and Giant are walking inside. Halo and Orleans are right behind. I text my roommate Justin, ask him if he wants to join and he's not too far behind either. Inside, G's got a nice sized table for all of us. The Olympics are on one T.V., but were not interested. Eight sets around us turn to the Miami Heat game, the Magic game against the Bucks, and whatever hockey matches are going on. We fall into formation, knights of the round table style, and wait for our waitress to come up. We're starving, and thirsty. Hell we're starting to get antsy. We talk about the dimes that came in and out, the long lost loves of our lives, and which waitress we hope is lucky enough to serve us. We get lucky. A real sweet seven from Brady's calculus class asks us what we want to start off with.

You girl! We want to spread you around!

We don't tell her this. We're not pigs. The girl's cute, and we all know she's got a thing for Brady. We can see it in her eyes, and the way she flips her brown hair whenever Brady starts asking about her day. He gets real sweet with her, making her laugh and she stretches them cheeks from ear to ear. She flatters him with some dimples. We watch her melt, and Brady just, just works wonders on this broad. The rest of us get real polite, tell her we'll split some pitchers and be ready with our food order when she returns. We act like gentlemen because we don't want her to think Brady hangs out with some lowlifes. We tell her how swell of a guy Brady is. She blushes more. He gets nervous, fills his face with some embarrassment, but shrugs us off.

Brady is Maverick. We are not Iceman. We are Goose. We fly with the flock.

Sweetie comes back with our pitchers, about three to start. Brady asks for a round of shots, says we're celebrating my becoming a father. She fucking lights up. Her eyes sparkle and she leans in closer to Brady. She asks how far a long. If I'm scared. If I'm nervous. What am I expecting. Do I want a boy or a girl? Was it planned? Are we happy? How old are we? What size is your left foot? What night was conception? You want another drink? This and that.

"Yes, we're very happy. Very excited." I tell her thanks for asking and I really mean it. I don't take this pregnancy lightly. She embraces her heart, hell I think she may cry. You know how women get with emotions. She puts her hand on Brady and smiles.

"You're gonna be a great uncle."

Brady knows exactly what he's doing. Brady and I aren't even close to being related. But he plays the game oh, so, well.

And now it's list-making time. After spending about twenty minutes spitting sports statistics, college calculations, and bitching about the day's end, we naturally evolve the conversation into the realm of women. After all, we are they're slaves. It's pathetic. It's not even true, the least bit. Whenever our sweet waitress swings by to check on us, we hush up, pretend like we aren't talking about her, and tell her we're just fine. *Sweetheart, we don't need anything else.* She glides away, so we go back to snickering like teenagers.

The list: Top five in the store. Top girls. By best looks. Best ass. Best rack. Best mind. Just like in *People Magazine*, like in *Cosmo* or *Men's Health*. Guilty pleasures. Best hips. Best swing.

Throughout the discourse of our entire list making, we all tend to agree one girl we all work with. One specific female coworker whose got us all seeking urgent medical attention. She's making our lives hard, *very hard*. This mestiza with just the most spectacular body/face/eyes/hair/personality we've ever come in contact with. She's a god damn ten. Park one million. Go for the gold! 85/15. A sandy blonde Zooey. First and goal with the NFL's best offense squaring up against pop warner. You have to walk around with a mop to clean up your mess, and a helmet to keep your head from exploding. She is why it hurts. She is,

Se Duele.

And she's married! To a dude we all work with. But she's not married to some douche bag incapable of honoring basic politeness, but rather Mr. Polite himself. He's a standup gentleman. He's got religion, posture, and a chin like George Clooney. Whoever said the good guys don't win has never met these two. Mr. Polite and Mrs. Se Duele herself are happily

entangled in the compassion and care for each another. They drop each other off at work, and go on break together. He makes coy little passes at her on the aisle, while she constantly searches the aisles for him, just to see how he's doing. They fit together like salted caramel in creamy milky yogurt. Just the sweetest couple you'd ever see. Hell, I've got diabetes now just talking about them.

Our wings come out, and we order another round of pitchers. We get sloppy, we get drunk, and Brady orders another round of shots. With our fingers smothered in buffalo sauce, our mouths on fire from the heat. We're sucking in air left and right trying to cool down our blistering tongues, slugging down gulps of our beers. But we keep eating and we keep spitting vile nonsense about the women we work with, the women who shop at our store, but never once talk about the women in our immediate lives. We all talk about Mrs. Se Duele. We talk about her poor husband, who knows how lucky he's got it. We talk about envy.

In the midst of our cumulative jealousy I realize the union of Mr. Perfect and his wife, Mrs. Se Duele, isn't the only romance story to see fruition. To breathe to life the essence of the human condition and scare away any traces of fear. Brittany and I have our own beautiful tale so utterly romantic it makes me sick.

Brittany and I dated before I knocked her up. We were both twenty; new to being adults, new to relationships outside of high school, and new to ourselves. After six months of playing house, we parted ways, sobbing uncontrollably. I just couldn't handle being in a relationship and I was sick of hurting her. I wasn't responsible. I wasn't a man. I was a damn puppy dog just looking to play around. I called her one night a few weeks after we broke up when I found out she was hanging out with some other dude. Some hombre I knew was trying to get to know

someone I thought only I could understand. It raised a level of anger in me I never knew I could feel. God did it scare me. I told her I had a dream that I was fishing with my father when I get this phone call. He tells me it's time to go meet my son. He takes me to the hospital and there's Brittany, holding our make on life, looking more beautiful than I could ever imagine. A real, true wonder of this world. I tell her we were together, we were happy. I told her it felt too real to be a dream. There's no way it couldn't be true. At the time she didn't know how to comprehend my pouring out of emotion. She must have thought I was crazy. I told her to give me five years. Girl, let me get my life together and I'll show you, we are meant for each other.

Well guess what, a little over five years later we started hanging out again. We both explored other people, contemplated over possible destinies with other significant others, and now I'm the one she's having a baby with. She's the one who doesn't have me still searching for that Zoey I fantasized about ending my day with. I wake up next to her, and plan on sleeping next to her in the dark. I'll follow her into the dark.

Like I said, it's a pretty disgusting story full of *awes* and *how romantic*. Fucking fairytales. I don't like telling people simply because I don't want to skew the reality of the situation. I don't want them to think there's hope. I don't want them to hear about our trials and present a false idea that everything works out, because I can't promise it will. This isn't Hollywood. Humans can be disgusting animals, hell bent on fulfilling their most primal of urges. We are selfish, greedy, and always hungry for more. It takes sheer luck to fill up one's

appetite on a single course alone. Dogs are always scavenging for scraps, for something leftover, never once committing to a single meal themselves.

When I go back to work the next day, Brittany stops by to have a lunch date with me. Brady and Gringo say hi to her while I walk to the back and punch out. I know they're asking her how the pregnancy is going, if I've done anything to really annoy her, if her hormones have made her act in the most illogical of ways. Did you make him drive to the store at midnight just to get you a soda? Did you start crying when he wasn't paying attention to something you said? Did you get immensely sick upon hearing him fart something that didn't even smell? Do you want to leave him? Are you sure this is how you want your life to turn out? Like the simple dream of some arrogant twenty year old?

I can see Brittany from behind the backroom doors. She can't see me, but I can see her. Brady and Gringo are making her laugh, probably at my expense. I wonder if they are having a moment with her. When we leave to go across the street to eat, what are they going to be saying about Brittany? Is she being ranked? Is she an 85/15? Would they go for the gold or call a second down? What happens when she shops alone at another grocery store? Who stares at her from behind the dairy case and fantasizes about giving her some *help*? Is she a park 9000 when I'm not there? With her blanketing brown hair flowing over her shoulders, and her "s" curve body glowing while she peruses down the aisles, who isn't calling her their Zooney? I think of the pain of losing Brittany to some other scumbag. I think about her fleeing me and fulfilling the

hopeful fantasies of some other poor sap so desperate to find meaning amongst all the mundane duties of his life. After stocking yogurt after yogurt, writing paper after paper, he goes home and tells her she's the most important thing in his life, and she never once doubts his words. Never once questioning if he looks at some other broad doing the same shopping.

I think of the pain,

how it hurts

and it scares me to death.

How it hurts, oh how it hurts.

Se Duele.

NEW YEAR'S

Everyday, around eight in the morning, Lucy starts sniffing my lips and squeaks out a little puppy yelp. She wants me to wake up. She has to pee/poop/eat cat poop/chew on a stick/attempt to whip out of her leash and run away from me. She is my alarm clock. Our standard ritual while my girlfriend, Brittany, gets ready for work. It's constant. Once Lucy's accomplished all her morning objectives, we come back inside and continue the same discourse. I brew some coffee, kiss Brittany on the lips, and watch Lucy sniff her morning food as though something has changed. Lucy swears it's changed. Eat your food Lucy. It's the same grain-free dog food as last week's.

Brittany adopted Lucy on a spur of a minute in late October. Unsure at first, I've welcomed the new lifestyle with joy. I adore it. Even in a woozy, half-zombified state of morning enthusiasm, I am filled with bliss. I just have one itty-bitty, infinitesimal problem; today is New Years Day. I'm slightly hung-over. But to Lucy, it's just another day in the obstinate cycle of existing with her pack. Started with beer and had a glass of shitty hunch punch? Too bad. Mother Nature is calling her and you don't want her to leave a voicemail over the stiff carpet.

Let's be honest, I've spent the better part of five years hung-over. Before I reconnected with my first real relationship from six years ago, my first chance to understand the opposite sex, I spent a good amount of time drinking. I was young, not too reckless, but full of confidence and invincibility. Brittany's back in my life and we have a child on the way. Now I feel vulnerable at every moment. Not because something terrible may happen, but because it's not just about me

anymore. I need to remember these days because they really are spectacular. A bonus comes as no headache the next morning. But the two of us are human and I do love to drink beer.

We follow our humdrum routine. I tell her to sit, snap her collar around her thick neck, hook her leash through her harness and unlock the door. The irony of this essay is this: Lucy has the audacity to continuously whip her head out of her over sized collar and dart off in circles. When we first got Lucy, after she would poop, I would undo her leash and let bolt across the yard, exert some kinetic energy. However this also developed a bad habit. She thinks it's time to play, even when my voice bellows two octaves lower and I'm towering over her in my best alpha-male posture. It took Brittany and I three months, three-dozen chases, and three full on runaways to realize we need to get her a harness. When she tries to whip out now, we still think the jokes on her.

Lucy is a forty-pound Jack Russell mix of God knows what, but trots weightlessly down the sidewalk. The vets said she was a Border Collie-Aussie mix. She clearly looks like a giant Jack Russell and I think there's whippet. Brittany swears there's collie somewhere in there. We both agree she's full blood stubborn. She has a unique sass in her stride, and though she appears doubtful to walk on the dewy grass, she's out here to do some business. A Florida New Year's rises with overcast skies and misting rain. It's not heavy enough to drench me, but just damp enough to speckle my glasses. Lucy is addicted to sun bathing so I know she'll be quick while we walk around my apartment's front knoll. It's very quiet, almost scary. The wind is soft and even the echo from Semoran Boulevard is a thin whisper. It's morning, yet you can't find the fresh sun behind the dense grey.

This is my favorite time of the year. The moment feels empty and serene. I scan the parking lot to see dozens of diagonally parked cars. There's a pile of exploded firework residue resembling Damascus off to the side. No doubt what had Lucy shaken when Brittany and I returned from last night's shindig. There's no one in sight and even the most diminutive ant can be heard screaming. Outside, it's just Lucy and I. We fill this eerie void. I hear her shuffle in the grass as she stretches her legs. Everyone is still inside recovering. All the windows in the complex have the blinds drawn to keep the bleak morning light from filtering in. I wonder how many people are still drunk. Still hung-over. Still full of regret. Still convinced things will be different this time around.

Last night was the chance to forgo all mistakes and declare a "new you." Isn't that what New Year's Eve is all about? In my time I've only understood New Year's Eve to uphold the same consistency as Cinco de Mayo, or Labor Day; i.e. let's get drunk. But this time, get it all out of your system. It's more than just an arbitrary form of measurement. It's a metaphorical restart button for an individual to ignore responsibility and declare a new "me."

Binge drinking. Confetti popping. Countdowns. Hunch Punch. Beer Pong. Kissing strangers. Hors d'oeuvre. Brut Champagne. Glasses shaped like the year 2014. Dick Clark. Top hats. Ball dropping. Muted MTV performances. Pandora playlists with extensive amounts of advertisements for Orlando Kia. Laughing. Some Crying. Cards Against Humanity. Shots. Remember when I got fired? Wow this past semester has been crazy. #NYE2014 I'm so glad I met you. Dubstep. You are the best thing about my year. Fuck this, I'm going to do things different this year. Remember Cinco de Mayo? I don't. My goal is to drop twenty pounds by summer. I'm modest, two dress sizes. I think I'm gonna try Crossfit finally. I forget about her.

She was crazy, that's why we divorced. What a great spring break. I've got an action plan for supplements. I can't believe Paul Walker died. Obama-care is going to ruin me next year. I welcomed a nephew this year. #NewYearResolution I'm going to be nicer to strangers. I'm going to get all A's. I'm going to call my family more. Dude, Kevin came out of the closet. Can you believe UCF made the Fiesta Bowl? I think the Broncos are gonna win the Super Bowl. I'm going to find Mr. Perfect. I know she's out there. This is the same thing the Magic always do. I'm going to start taking better care of myself. Take control of my finances. I'm going to read more. I'm going to do everything possible to make 2014 the best year because everything before this day doesn't count and it's only about the here, the now, the moment that matters. #CarpeDiem14 and it's the year of the horse and communication is key and I'm deleting Snapchat because I'm tired of sending him *those* pictures and say goodbye to Facebook because it's full of spam and stupid ignorant white Americans and Happy Fucking New Year I can't believe it's a whole New Year and new chance for a new me new you new job new semester new house new car new style new diet new direction...

A new life.

And yet 2014, with all the years prior to, are none of these things. It's the end of an old cycle and the beginning of the same old shit. Our society has adopted the Julian calendar. This day is merely a measurement. A tick on the face of a clock. An increment on a ruler. A ring of a tree. The flake of a dead skin cell. The mold of a molting insect. It is the same January as last year's, and the year before that, and the year before that, and the year before that, and the year before that. The same first day as in February, March, April, May, June, July, August, September, October, November, December, and the next January. We grow older but not wiser.

Yet we lie to ourselves and promise things will be different this time around. *You'll see!* In three hundred and sixty-five²⁵ days, someone will declare the same vain goals and the same cycle will repeat. A few days later, we will all forget how feeble and selfish we sounded before the clock struck midnight. We will never contemplate if we as a human race are even worthy of redemption.

And then there's Lucy and I, still caught in the silence of New Year's. Just a few hours before the rest of the world wakes up, demanding some aspirin and secretly sneaking away a few mimosas. Wondering, what happened after the bottle? Did I kiss a stranger? What things did I say? What same mistakes did I make last night? What makes this morning different from the ones before?

Lucy sniffs the air as she always does, scratches the dirt and lays a fresh one in the same spot as yesterday. I reach into my pocket to grab a plastic bag and wait for her to finish. I take a deep breath of the moist Florida air and smell the same rancid smell of Lucy's defecation, as yesterdays. Nothing has changed. It's the same morning air from the same last cold front which homogenized with the same food I feed Lucy. When Lucy has completed "doing the business," a small orange blossom blooms from her fresh turd and the cycle continues.

But I wonder, am I out of the cycle? I flew out to Los Angeles to escape Orlando, only to return to a sick, dying mother. With her healthy now, I began questioning graduate schools and my destiny in Florida. I declared that I'd rather freeze my rear end off somewhere in the northern U.S., than sweat another day in this desolate swamp, Orlando. Yet within months, I sparked an old flame with Brittany. And then just before New Year's, I did something I never

²⁵ 366 for those in a leap year.

thought I would be capable of. I *purposefully* impregnated my girlfriend. With no fear, or concern of consequence, I stayed with her until the very end.

Though the numerical value of the year changes, and under standard circumstances the measurements of time remain the same, my vision of “years” transcends into another stage. Time is no longer a measurement of tracking progression, for it has morphed into a countdown. I have fulfilled my biological purpose on this planet, so now I must wait. But in the meantime, I have a family to care for. To feed, to protect, to love. They will keep me occupied in ways I could not fathom before, and they will keep me forever selfless and selfish for them. There are no more distractions, therapies, or “guys nights.” There are only them. Though they may not have chosen to enter this life, it is on my shoulders to keep them occupied. As a man, I must take the stress, the regrets, and the pain away from them. I must remain strong; I’m a man now. When the cycle ends for me, they will search for answers. *How did Edward Montalvo do it?*

Simple dear child, retail therapy and beer.

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