

ABSTRACT

Collegiate

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This thesis is an exploration of the process of writing a longer work of fiction such as a novel. It explores the organizational framework in which the author lays the foundation for the rest of the story. Included in this framework are character biographies, a summary of each act, a list of important scenes, and so on. The main work of prose is the first seven chapters of the novel I am writing. It is a coming of age story set at Baylor University. At its core, the story is about finding one's place in life and learning to discern true living and true friends from the many counterfeits the world offers. It is inspired in part by Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, Eugene O'Neil's *A Long Day's Journey Into Night*, John Knowles's *A Separate Peace*, and F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. The events of the story are informed by, but not based on, my own experiences. Within the story, I hope to achieve the element of Ekphrasis, discussed in Sir Phillip Sidney's *A Defense of Poesy*, which is a fictive dream, or speaking image, that pierces the soul and not only offers the reader a glimpse life

as it should be but also inspires them to strive to attain such a life. My target audience is the college student.

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COLLEGIATE

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
Baylor University
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Honors Program

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Waco, Texas

August 2014

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my parents, Keener and Heather Gill, for all the support they've given me throughout the years, in the good times and the bad, and for always encouraging me to aim for the stars and finish what I start. I would not be the writer I am today if you had not encouraged me from the moment I started reading and telling stories. I would also like to thank the rest of my family who encouraged me to keep going and to keep working to finish this thesis, even when things got tough. A big thank you goes out to Professor Mark Olsen and Professor Jerrie Callan for aiding me in this process of writing and editing and for helping me to learn the finer points of reading, enjoying, and crafting literature. I also want to thank all of my friends who positively inspired me, who helped create those wild times that make the best stories, and who were there for me when I needed it most – you know who you are. Lastly, but most important, I thank Christ, the Author of all things, for giving me the talent to write and for giving me the strength to follow through with this project.

INTRODUCTION

Working Title: The Man Without a Tribe

Tag line: Know thyself. Find thy place.

Synopsis

John Hart has come to college with aspirations of one day becoming a renowned author and perhaps pursuing a career in ministry. While other students are trying to figure out who they are as people, John is trying to figure out where he fits. He craves adventure, but he is searching for adventure with a purpose. He is looking for a tribe, a family with whom he truly belongs and who will share in the adventure with him. His transformative adventures begin when he moves out of the Honors Dormitory after his first semester into the wider world of his University in order to seek his fortunes and find true companionship. His search takes him through a series of misadventures which culminate in his personal revelation of where he belongs and just how much he is willing to sacrifice, or not sacrifice, for the sake of belonging.

Major Plot Events

1. Moving out of Alexander
2. Rush (paintball, 80s party)

3. The tunnels (the search for adventure)
4. The Interview (what's the best moment of your life so far)
5. Pledging (The last roast. Christian unhinged)
6. Christian's struggle (life or death at 4 a.m.)
7. Party for start of Sophomore year/beginning of alcohol problem (couldn't party without you, man)
8. Waking up in the ghetto, Edward 40 hands, The "Intervention"
9. The betrayal
10. Your mom has cancer
11. Confrontation with a drug dealer/ Confrontation with traitors
12. John Unhinged
13. Mountain Ranger/Friendship found/who is my tribe?
14. From Scotland with Love
15. Return to part ways, finds "tribe"

Act 1

John decides to move out of Honors College. He moves into Martin to connect more with other freshmen and, in hopes of finding true companionship and a people with whom he belongs, he begins the process of joining a fraternity. Things are looking up for him- he is a big hit at the rush events, the life of the first party he attends, his pledge brothers seem like good friends, and he has a budding romance with a girl named Anne. However, things take a turn for the sinister when pledging begins. As pledging grows worse, John grows closer to his pledge brothers, Christian in particular. Considering quitting as pledging clashes

increasingly with his faith, sense of morality, and basic humanity, John resolves to persevere for the sake of his pledge brothers, and to spite the actives who seek to break him. John wins out, completing pledgship and preventing Christian from committing suicide.

Act 2

John returns to Baylor for sophomore year, excited at the prospect of life as an active member of the fraternity as well as living off campus with some of his new fraternity brothers. He continues his relationship with Anne, joins the fencing club, learns to sail, and begins publishing his poetry. Unfortunately, one of his housemates turns out to be a drug dealer and John begins a serious struggle with alcohol leading to several dangerous misadventures and an identity crisis. He grows distant from his Church and his small group, becoming ensnared by the wanton lifestyle of the fraternity. He doesn't know how to handle it. He cannot reconcile his lifestyle with his faith, with who he was before he joined the fraternity or even who he was during pledging. He longs to become closer to his pledge brothers, but they seem to be splintering, drawing apart, leaving John feeling abandoned and confused. Despite the relationships they formed during pledging (which now seem to be fading) he cannot connect with them on any level – emotional, spiritual, or intellectual. His roommate's drug dealing grows more dangerous, the state of his house deteriorates to disgusting levels, his drinking issues become more dangerous, and finally his "friends" organize an "intervention" for him. The intervention turns out to be a sham with selfish motivations on the part of the organizers, leaving John feeling more alone

than ever. However, he stops drinking for the rest of the semester, only to find that those who organized the intervention have been supplying his drug dealing roommate with a lot of business and have collaborated to cheat him out of a housing arrangement they had planned at the beginning of the semester. John confronts his drug dealing roommate, moves out of the house, and then confronts the conspirators who he thought were his friends in order to learn the truth about their conspiracy. He exposes their leader and cuts ties with them. Alone, angry, and bitter, John plots vengeance and spirals out of control. The year ends with John an emotional and mental wreck. His friendships have faded or crumbled away for the most part, his love interest, Anne, has disappeared, and he now hates the fraternity- the one thing into which he poured all of his hope for companionship and a sense of belonging. He makes plans to travel to New Mexico to get away for a while, working as a mountain Ranger in the Sangre de Cristo mountain range.

Act 3

A broken John begins his career as a mountain ranger, eventually finding solace and spiritual restoration in the midst of the epic, natural beauty of life in the mountains. He grows stronger in spirit and body, draws closer to God, learns what it is to trust again, and finds healing from wounds suffered long ago before ever he went to college. He finds true friendship in his ranger companions- Dawson, Carson, Jack, Daniel, Hannah and Maria. He has many enlightening conversations, during one of which a crew advisor points out "Why haven't you been seeking friends in your church and among places like this one? I mean, isn't

that your tribe?" This strikes John profoundly. Eventually the rangers season draws to a close, and that part of John's heart that was wounded and numb at the beginning can once again feel love. Still unready to return to Baylor, John sets his sites on Scotland to study abroad for a semester. There, he continues to grow stronger in faith and finds romance with an American girl who travels with him and also hopes to become an author.

Act 4

Eventually his time in Scotland draws to a close and, though he wishes he could stay, John knows that to finish his degree, and to truly be free of the hurts he has suffered, he must return to Baylor, settle his differences with his fraternity, accept that he too bears some responsibility for all that has happened, and find his place among those who truly cared about him (his church small group, some old friends from freshman year from the honors college and English department). This means he must leave the woman he has come to love in Scotland, but the parting is not one without the hope of return. The relationships he forms and reignites at Baylor help him to thrive, he becomes an author, and sets his sites on more adventures on the horizon, namely a return to Scotland.

Character Outline

John Hart

When the story begins, he is 18 yrs old. By the end of the story he is 21. He comes from a Christian family and has spent most of his scholastic career in

private schools, but he and his family have moved around a lot, making it hard for John to establish long lasting friendships despite his longing for such relationships. He values his faith a lot and has aspirations to go into ministry. Until the start of college, he has not been the most confident person. He is very smart and he is likeable when he opens up, but events in his past have made him socially cautious in some ways. He loves reading and he loves telling stories and he hopes to become a successful author one day. He also loves adventure. He places an incredible value on relationships, which is what drives him to seek out a fraternity and, later on, other groups in which he might find a sense of belonging and family. At the beginning, he is very strongly rooted in his faith and his morals to an uncompromising degree, as he has been for most of his life. Throughout the story, he begins to slip in that respect, but he finds redemption in the end. At the beginning of the story, he has an idea, an image, that he sets about trying to live up to- the image of a person who is intelligent, well read, adventurous and, in a way, dangerous but good. Basically he wants to be the most interesting man in the world. He wants to be the best at whatever he likes to do. He doesn't just want to be a good author- he wants to write stories that pierce the soul and be the poet of the most beautiful poetry there is. But he also wants to be a hero in the sense that he wants to be able to help other people and to do so in major ways, which is another reason why it frustrates him when he cannot connect with those whom he considers to be friends. If he can't connect with them, he can't know how he could help them, or if they even need his help. He feels he is of value mostly, almost only, when he is of service to someone.

Christian

John's best friend from pledging through the first half of sophomore year. He has a troubled home life as he suffers from an irrational guilt complex over a debilitating medical condition suffered by his brother. This, coupled with the sleep deprivation and harassment brought on by pledging, eventually drives him to the brink of madness. There is a special bond between him and John because Christian is privy to a secret from John's past that he shares with no one else and John is privy to Christian's mental and emotional struggles and is there for Christian when he eventually becomes unhinged. John thinks that Christian might be the friend he's always been searching for because of the openness they share, the level of empathy between them, and their propensity to party to the extreme. However, John doesn't fully understand the extent of Christian's struggles though- that he suffers from some form of manic depression – so he is hurt when Christian eventually withdraws, becomes reclusive, addicted to pain medication after an injury to his leg, and an alcoholic. Christian eventually moves back to his hometown where he receives help, finds Christ, and starts a new chapter of the fraternity in which he and John are involved (one that actually follows the laws and bi-laws, as opposed to John's chapter).

Anne Dunn

She is the daughter of missionary parents and has spent much of her life abroad in Russia and Romania participating in ministry with her parents. She

meets John when his friends try to play a joke on her, using John's talent for impressions of foreign accents, which she sees right through, impressing John. They hit it off well in the beginning. They both attend the same church. They both share the same beliefs and morals and similar views on life and what is worth pursuing. She is an international business major but she loves literature and poetry. She is intelligent, lively, beautiful, disciplined in her pursuits, and compassionate toward others. She is courageous as well, in that she is fearless in expressing her beliefs and faith. Unfortunately, she becomes increasingly busy until one day she doesn't show up for their Thursday pizza. She was all John ever wanted in a woman.

Kieran

One of the original members of the group of friends with whom John adventures in his early days in the fraternity. He is a good friend of Christian as well and they have known each other since before college. Their families are friends. He likes to be the center of social events and organizes it so that people always come to his house to party and drink almost every weekend. He is passive aggressive and jealous in nature. But he and John were friends for a time, which is something that John can never forget, no matter how much more that makes Kieran's betrayal hurt. His is the house in which John seeks refuge during the time when John has a drug dealer for a roommate. Eventually John's struggles with alcohol become too much for Kieran, as well as possibly the attention that John gets. Kieran isn't always petty or antagonistic. There are periods of time when he is friendly, even sympathetic, but they are episodic.

Carson

He is a fellow English major. More even tempered, he is often the voice of reason. He and John become fast friends. Carson is a constant companion of John's throughout the story. While he shares an appreciation of literature with John, he represents the opposite end of the spectrum. Where John is the extreme romantic, Carson is more of a realist.

Dawson

Meets John in the second half of the story. He is a fellow employee at the backpacking camp where John gets hired. He is thoughtful and good at listening. He is a spiritual searcher who knows that God exists but is unsure of any specific definition of God. He loves adventure and being active in general, but also appreciates moments of stillness and peace. He and John become best friends, and through their friendship John learns what it is to trust again and he starts to heal from the wounds he suffered during his sophomore year. His interests include rock climbing and swimming. He is an aerospace engineering major.

CHAPTER ONE

Sunlight streamed through the half covered window and caught the lazy masses of dust swirling in John's bedroom to create a golden glow. The light caught him in the eyes. Somewhere, in the sea of sheets and pillows, loose papers, and crumpled books that was his bed, his body stirred to a slow awakening announced with a low groan and its spawn of sighs.

"Damn that window," he rasped.

He swung his feet over the side of the bed and tried to stand, but his feet found an amorphous mob of cloth rather than carpeted floor. Opening his bloodshot eyes to the torture of daylight he found the floor strewn with clothes in various states of filth. They piled higher and higher toward the center of the room, where an open duffel bag he had not bothered to fully unpack converged with his overflowing laundry basket.

He stumbled to his feet and tried to make for the door to the hallway, but snagged his foot on the pieces of wire shelving he had not bothered to assemble. Now they lay like booby traps beneath the clothing and the books. He stiffened his leg and clenched his teeth in response to the incredible pain. Oh, the books – so many books that cluttered the edges of the room. They were the reason he had bothered to at least buy shelves. Confound them! Why could he not bring himself to assemble them? Assembling one set had not been so hard. As for the rest of the room, he could see neither his desk nor his dresser for the papers and spiral notebooks that covered them like moss covers ancient stones. The set of

drawers by his bed was crowned with cups and mugs sticking to the top along with empty water bottles and two empty bottles of sake.

Nigiro sake. Despite his reticence toward being anywhere near alcohol for the moment, a spark of admiration for the drink still burned in John. Ah that sweet, mellow rice wine, filtered roughly so that it appeared milky white from the rice particles left within it. It had a fruity quality that John appreciated, relative to the harshness of the scotch he usually favored.

John reached the door, the pain in his foot notwithstanding, and took stiff steps out into the hallway. His legs hurt like hell. He plodded down the stairs, slow and with heavy steps. The bottom floor felt cool beneath his heels, if not a bit sticky in some places from the spilled beer and god knew what else.

He had only to look at the kitchen counter to find the reason for his pained legs and cotton dry mouth and dull, throbbing head. The empty vodka bottle stood on the counter like a headstone for his memory: still, shiny, and hollow. It damned him with its stare. John frowned and stared back at the bottle, eyes suddenly seeing very far away and very long ago, when daylight was his friend and nights were things to be remembered.

Somewhere deep within, the spring bubbled up again. A well of sadness from a source beyond recall. It filled him with loneliness, for the arms that were not there to hold him, to catch him when he fell. For promises killed by distance and time, for faces loved who once loved back and now could not be found. For a present without such things, such arms, such promises. Empty like the bottle. Now, as with all times that the spring flowed, it ate away at his heart, paralyzing

a little at a time. And John felt he could cry, but the tears never came. They just built up within him like a hard, painful resin.

He froze in the way he often did when there was no outlet for the spring of emotion within him, staring into the backyard, eyes bone dry yet brimming with sorrow. What was this interminable source of sadness and what was its source? If only he knew, then at least he could try to fix it, to mend whatever wound he carried, but for now he knew only that it filled him with such longing and loneliness.

His legs suddenly felt weak. He felt the lump in his throat. He steadied himself on the couch and slowly sank to the floor to sit and lean against the couch back. How did it come to this? How many bottles had he emptied since Freshman year? How many nights had been lost to the black, like blank skips in a symphony record?

The vague shame he felt every Saturday and Sunday morning clung to him like a wet blanket almost every weekend, for he knew without remembering the foolishness he'd done the night before. The screams. The tears. The strange laughs and maniacal eyes he'd heard so much about from horrified witnesses. The occasional missing boards in his backyard fence where he'd pummeled away with his fists.

All of which was preceded, of course, by being the life of the party, joking, flaunting his wit and knowledge of literature, singing and dancing with wild abandon, but well, to popular songs. But somewhere along the night, a switch

would turn and John would crumble and go to that place from which there was no return.

He hadn't begun this way. Maybe, just maybe, he could feel alive again, escape this weekly cycle of mind-numbing work followed by the weekend descent into the abyss. But to start down the path of fixing things, first he had to remember how it began, back to the very beginning, back to freshman year. John craned his neck to squint into the sunlit backyard littered with beer cans and shredded paper, and let his mind drift backward to a day three years past, when the sun had shone just as brightly, with friendlier tidings...

CHAPTER TWO

Moving was always hard. You made friends and then put a distance between you and them that ate away at the relationship until, bound by schedules, classes, ambitions, and expectations it became locked in the realm of memory, and it felt as if a part of the soul did too. John never could get used to the feeling.

He had been moving all his life. He had to move away from his grandparents in Louisiana who, with his mother, had raised him for the first three years of his life until Dad came back home from overseas deployment. Then, at age 4, he and his family moved away from the military base in Colorado, to Texas. From then onward, life was a series of moves, from school to school, state to state; some stays long, some short.

The first time he set foot in any new state, John could tell a difference in the air, in its smell, and weight, and touch. It felt alien, and exciting, and painful all at once. Pain for the loss of those left behind, excitement for the adventure that lay ahead.

John Hart returned from his thoughts to the world and looked at his dorm room for the last time. The bed was bare. His meager possessions lay in two sea bags and a duffel by the desk on his side of the room. The only thing left to pack was the miniature Zen rock garden that Sterling, his roommate, had given him as a gag gift for Christmas. John smiled. Sterling had been a good roommate. Too

bad they wouldn't let him move out too. He was far too outgoing and zany for the trappings of the honors dorm.

What were people searching for in all of these moves? Maybe, John thought, they might be searching for the final answer- the one place you come to love because it is a part of you and you a part of it, with the one friend who will remain constant, or perhaps many friends. Maybe they were searching for the place where they could truly live, love, be loved, and thus be whole. That is what John wanted, an adventure, a move, a friend, that would make him feel whole.

"You ready to go? I've got the truck out back. Let me help you with those bags."

John turned around toward the door. Good old Clayton.

"Thanks Clayton. I really appreciate this."

"Hey man. It's no problem. This is what friends are for."

John let the door swing to a heavy close behind him. He and Clayton walked to the stairwell with the bags. He walked past the water pipes on the wall that he and Clayton and five other friends had used to climb up through the ceiling tiles and into the attic for an adventure through its dark and web-riddled recesses to find the entrance to the roof.

They had stolen right over their RA's room with stealth and swiftness, and there in the gloom of ancient dust they found the hatch to the roof and opened it. It wasn't hinged. It slid down the roof when they popped it open, but John had caught it before it clanged down the hundreds of feet to the parking lot below. That was the best view he'd ever had of Baylor's campus, as he looked out from his perch in the heavens with his five fellow adventurers.

It was a pity that life was not filled with more such moments, but John supposed that made them special. He never had any more adventures with that crew. They were never up for any after that. John never understood why, and it made him wistful.

John and Clayton came to the bottom of the stairs and John reached the door to the outside. He strained and pushed and it opened slowly, until the air rushed in and the last light from the west bathed him and Clayton in orange afterglow. John smiled, and walked forward.

Clayton stopped the car in front of Martin Hall.

“This is it.”

“Yup.” Said John

“Hey, I never asked before, but why are you moving out of the honors dorm?

Why Martin?”

John was silent for a moment. He stared out the window toward Martin.

“You know, it has nothing to do with the people. You’re all my good friends.

Honestly, I’m just afraid that I’m not fully connecting. I mean, we’re friends of course, but I’ll never be as close to you as Evan or Nathan or any of the guys who went through Freshman year with you. Even if I am, what will happen when you all graduate? I need to be close to my own class. That’s why I’m moving. “

"I can understand that. You're always welcome to hang with us. I'm going to miss having those crazy conversations and hearing your impersonations at 4 o'clock in the morning. "

"Yeah. I'll still visit y'all in Alexander, though. I mean, it's not as if I'm leaving Baylor."

"Oh, of course. Well, when that new Conan the Barbarian movie comes out, we got to go see it. After all, *What is best in life?*"

"To crush your enemies, see them driven before you, and to hear the lamentations of their women!"

"Aye! That's what's best in life."

Clayton and John parted ways then, and Josh began a new life in Martin hall, unpacking and settling in alone for that first night. It would not be the last lonely beginning for John. Life is full of those.

CHAPTER THREE

Saturday, January 18, 2011

John awoke to the gentle silence of the morning as the sun slipped its yellow fingers through his dorm room window. His roommate, Josh, lay in slumber, as per usual. It did not matter what time of day it was, Josh was always sleeping, and if he was not sleeping he was blasting screamo music in their room. Occasionally he and John would watch a movie, selected from Josh's endless digital library of pirated films, old and new, acclaimed and obscure. John didn't mind Josh's idiosyncrasies, but he missed Clayton's wit and consideration. Well, there was nothing for it now, and this morning he had but one thing in his mind: paintball. He threw on his Grandpa's old Marine fatigues, laced up his boots, grabbed a box of blueberries out of the mini-fridge, and raced out the door. He practically ran down the stairs and out the dormitory doors. Outside, there was a chill to the air, but as long as John kept moving he kept warm. He ran down the sidewalk, heading for what he hoped was Bagby Avenue.

10 minutes later, John stood breathless in front of the house referred to only as "9th and Bag'." He strode up the steps and knocked tentatively on the door, hoping he had the right place. The door swung open to reveal Tony Guiliano, whose hulking frame filled the doorway.

"Hi, I'm John. This is where we're supposed to meet for paintball, right?"

“Nice to meet you John,” said Tony with cheer. “Yes, you’ve come to the right place. I’m Tony, by the way. Tony Guiliano . Come on inside.”

“Nice to meet you Tony. Thanks.”

“No problem.”

The floorboards creaked as though in pain when John followed Tony toward the kitchen. The walls were an off-white or beige color. John could not tell which.

The house was dimly lit, stains covered the walls where there were not jagged holes in the dry wall, the floor had been mostly stripped of its varnish, and a thick film of grime and dust covered every shelf John could see. He stepped through the doorway to the kitchen, just past a closet filled with empty liquor handles – mainly Maker’s Mark and some drink called Hideous. John stared.

What kind of place was this?

“Hey, I’m making some eggs for breakfast. Want some?”

“Absolutely. Thanks!”

“My pleasure, bud. So where are you from?”

“Well, a lot of different places actually. Originally I’m from Houston, but my family and I have lived in Atlanta, Georgia for the last four years. Before that, I lived in Miami for a year and a half, and we moved around to a few different places when I was little.”

“Oh, nice. Your dad in the military or something?”

“He was in the Air Force when I was younger. Now he works for Wells Fargo. Used to work for Meryl Lynch, then he moved to Wachovia, and now Wachovia is Wells Fargo. Where are you from?”

“Very cool. I’m from Houston. Hold on a sec. I’m gonna go wake up Rob.”

Tony left the eggs to sizzle in a pan on the stovetop and strode over to the door next to the table. While he pounded on the door and tried to rouse Dan from sleep, John continued to soak up the character of the house. Dishes were piled in a sink that looked as though it had never once felt soapsuds or the scrub of a sponge. The counter tops were little better, and John was thankful that Tony had paper plates at the ready for their breakfast.

Tony returned to the eggs once he was satisfied that Dan was up and moving, and he and John resumed their conversation.

Dan walked out of his room with a low moan, tired eyes, and a face that looked as though it belonged to a zombie. Clearly Dan was not a morning person. Either that, or he was hung-over. He squinted in the sunlight at John.

“Hi,” he said in a voice hoarse from sleep. “I’m Dan Craig.”

“Nice to meet you Dan. I’m John. John Hart.”

“Good to meet you, man. You sleep over here last night after the party?”

“No, I just got here this morning for paintball.”

“Paintball?”

“Yeah man,” said Joey. “We’re doing paintball with the rushees today.

Remember?”

“Oh, oh yeah.”

Dan looked at the floor.

“This is going to be painful. I would not have drank as much last night if I’d known paintball was today...That’s a lie. Yes I would have.”

John laughed and pulled the box of blueberries out from the cargo pocket on his camo trousers. He was getting hungry waiting on the eggs.

"Where'd you get those blueberries? Did we have blueberries?" Dan asked.

"Blueberries?" Tony cocked his head quizzically.

"Oh, I brought them from my place. I wasn't sure if we were getting breakfast or not, so I came prepared."

"Look at this," laughed Tony. "Guy just randomly pulls blueberries out of nowhere. You crack me up, man. That was smart though."

"Who just brings a box of blueberries in their pocket?" Dan chuckled in disbelief.

John laughed a bit, conceding that it was fairly random. He'd never really thought about it being strange.

"I guess I do," he said with a grin.

"Don't be rude, Dan" said Tony with a smile as he handed a plate of eggs to John.

"I wasn't. It's just random, is all."

John and Tony finished their eggs. After a few minutes of talking they all left the house and hopped into Tony's car to drive to Waco Paintball.

John was nervous the whole ride, paralyzed by the desire to speak and the lack of anything to speak about. So he listened. He listened to Dan and Tony's banter, to the familiarity that shone in their interaction with one another. Dan engaged him as well, asking about his major, where he came from, what he wanted to do in life. John got a sense that Dan was truly interested in his responses. He noted that.

They arrived at the paintball course at around 10 a.m., to a crowd of jabbering freshmen and fraternity brothers. As Tony and Dan strolled away to swap stories with the other actives about the adventures of the previous night's drinking, John moved with quiet calm through the crowd, hopeful for a familiar face.

There they were. Alan and Wayne, standing by the entrance to the armory. Alan was a man of average height who always kept his hair neat and whose face made him look younger than he was. Wayne, by contrast, was an enormous being who sported somewhat buckish front teeth but had an agility incongruous to his frame, which made him a comic spectacle when he went anywhere at more than walking pace. They were both wearing blazers. It was fantastic.

'Marvelous,' thought John. 'Why didn't I think of that?'

He had been happy enough to be wearing his grandpa's old jungle fatigues with the name HART emblazoned on the breast pocket. People would know who he was, and the name on his jacket would give him a good starting point to tell them about his family. John did not know much about fraternities and he did not know much about rushing or pledging, but one thing he did know, and it was that you wanted people to know who you were and you wanted to know who liked you for who you were. Anybody who didn't like you for who you were was not worth the effort to befriend, much less go through whatever challenge pledging presented to be called their brother.

He'd introduced himself to a few of them, and even then he had trouble remembering their names, except for Wayne and Alan. They were hard to forget,

dressed as they were, and John had had the pleasure of meeting them many months before, though he doubted whether they immediately remembered him.

Rush was an event that took place during both the Fall and Spring semesters, but freshmen were only allowed to participate during the spring semester in official capacity in Baylor's eyes. It was well known, however, that if you were a freshman and you wanted to increase your chances of receiving a bid, which is an invitation to pledge for whichever fraternity gives you said bid, you should participate in rush events during the Fall semester as well. John had.

Between fierce studying for his first bout of college honors classes, trying his hand at Rugby, and shenanigans with his dorm mates, John had stretched a quiet foot forward. He had attended the Greek BBQ on Fountain Mall, stopping at various tents for burgers and Dr. Pepper, catching wind of unofficial parties happening off campus, and signing up to receive emails from different fraternities about upcoming rush events. Late one night he'd attended "Delta Phi Night," the last of the Delta Epsilon's rush events for the Fall semester. The only thing he remembered from that night was going out to Ninfa's afterward with the other Freshmen, all of whom would eventually be in his pledge class- Alan, Wayne, Carson, Christian.

These were the four friends who would form the core of the legend of John's path through college life. Each one brought something unique into John's life, for better or worse. They were a fellowship, if not in physical presence, then in shared history, in endurance of spirit, and, in some fashion, brotherhood. Alan and Wayne had met in freshman chapel one day when Wayne,

while all were being advised not to stand on the edge of the chapel balcony, complied with the rule by standing on the railing instead. "From that moment onward I knew that this man and I would be friends" Alan would say as he recounted the story. Carson hailed from Houston and Christian, like Alan, called Tyler, TX his home.

John introduced himself to a few of them. Most of the freshmen seemed as though they already knew one another well. They, too, swapped stories of adventures in drinking during the previous night. John had nothing to contribute to such conversations, but he made small talk as best he could. Once everyone was properly armed, the game began. Actives versus rushees. John thought it might be more to Delta Phi's benefit if they mixed the teams, made the rushees feel more "a part of the gang," as it were, but he raised no objections. Paintball was paintball, and what did he know about rushing? But John learned much from his observations. His fellow freshmen were too cliquey. They segregated themselves into obvious groups, amiable but distant to outsiders, and many made no effort to reach out to the active members of the fraternity. Perhaps it was social anxiety, or perhaps they were just there for free paintball. Did they not understand that the point of rush events was not only to get a feel for the organization, but also to make yourself known?

As they marched out to the paintball course, John heard the trademark snap of a paintball shot and a cry of surprise. Some guy out in front, John thought he remembered his name to be Collin, had been shot in the butt. John turned in the direction from which the shot came. There, a group of guys could hardly

contain their laughter. More shots sounded out, and Collin was lit up from behind. He laughed and yelped in surprise. It seemed like fun, but John could see that Collin was being singled out, being made the butt of everyone's joke. He did not know Collin, did not know how he fared with the other freshmen, but years of alienation in elementary school had given John a sense for this sort of behavior. Collin was not in a good position, no matter how much he laughed. The others laughed at him, not with him. The pack had turned on him, for no reason apparent to John. But packs seldom need a reason, or operate with reason.

Every group John had known, whether he had been a member or not, had been plagued by the peculiar but inevitable need to single out one or more persons as inferior, or as outsiders. The group seemed to grow stronger the more they weakened the value of their chosen scapegoat, bound together by the feeling that they were all in some way superior to this pitiful wretch, that they shared a bond he or she could never attain because he or she was...odd. Always there was some characteristic about the alienated person, some ineffable quality that the group could perceive but seldom name – maybe the person was smarter, or quirkier, or more creative, or sensitive, or any number of traits. Woe to the man whose difference makes his brethren more aware of their own limitations. He is a man with few friends, no matter how much he has to offer as a brother. It is a sad truth.

John doubted whether Collin would receive a bid from Delta Phi, but then it was up to the Actives, not the rushees, to make that decision. He un-slung his

gun from his shoulder and jogged forward with the rushees. The rushees stayed at the front of the field of obstacles. A maze of broken cinderblock walls, black plastic drainage tubes, and various wooden structures in the shapes of squares and triangles lay before them. It was a gauntlet. The actives ran through the obstacle field to the wooded area on the other side, and with a blow of the referee's whistle the game began. A shot anywhere on the body meant you were out, as did running out of ammo. Railroad tracks ran adjacent to the paintball complex, and trains would often pass by. If anyone shot at the train, they would be ejected from the game.

The field was silent for 20 seconds as the rushees advanced in as much silence as 50 freshmen can keep. Shots rang out from the tree line. Paint splattered in violent force upon the cinderblocks, the wooden structures, and any thing that stood more than two feet above the ground. Shots found their marks on either side, but damn it if most of the actives did not refuse to admit defeat when shot. The battle was long and fierce, and many a bruise and scrape was earned with the splat of a paintball or a brush with an obstacle. Round after round they went, and soon John found himself in the last round of the game, poised to spring from behind his cover and make a run for the cover of the wooden wall where five of his teammates were pinned down by relentless fire. He chanced it, and rose up to run.

The pain was incredible. Four quick blasts to his thigh and hip, less than half a second between each, sure to bruise instantly though his skin was covered

by the jungle fatigues. He dropped to one knee behind the black plastic tube he used for cover and suppressed a grunt.

Paintballs exploded everywhere and showered him in fragments of purple and yellow silicone. His hands, battered and bloody, stiffened with the sticky yellow paint from a thousand rounds. He was not out. He was not down.

This was the iron man round, and he would not go down without taking a combatant with him. It was a round played to the pain, or until one ran out of ammunition. He craned his neck to look back at his brothers in arms through the fogged up helmet strapped to his face. Ten men were all that was left of the 40 or so they had begun with.

"This is it!" John roared back at his comrades over the staccato fire of the enemy.

"Spread out. Charge them."

John hurtled over the barrier with a banshee yell and sprinted toward the line of men who fired at him from behind their chosen covers.

Halfway across the grassy gulf between the two lines of fire John crashed to the muddy earth in a hailstorm of paintballs, still firing madly ahead, writhing in throes of pain, until his gun fired only the white blasts of Co2 that vanished like wraiths into the winter air.

Not a single soldier had followed him into his kamikaze charge.

Breathless, he held his gun aloft in defeat.

He struggled to his feet and jogged off the field. The rain began to pour, the heavens loosed their torrents, and the rules went out the window.

The few men left on the field rose from their hiding spots like ghosts from the grave, soaked but unswayed by the deluge, and charged. The pops of their guns filled the air amid cries of abandon. They ran at each other, firing manically and yelling. One by one they shuddered to writhing halts, splattered yellow and orange until two remained. One fired in spurts, his gun low on gas, almost out of ammunition. The other detached the barrel from his gun, ran, slid on his knees through the mud and grass and, halting behind his foe, mock-disemboweled him with his barrel turned knife.

John smiled. The man who had won was called Stark. Sam Stark. He was a sophomore and an active member of the fraternity that put on this Rush event. John thought he was beginning to like these men. There was a wildness about them – a savage humor that he admired.

More wild and raw than those he had left. Before the break, before Christmas, John had been living in the Honors dormitory. He left of his own accord. The people there had been fine. All of them were kind. His roommate was outgoing, clean, and had introduced John to hints of a world that, before college, had been unknown to him.

But John never felt that he belonged there, among those people. He could connect with them on an intellectual level, but in other ways he felt that there was a barrier between them. Part of the problem was that he was a Freshman. They were all sophomores.

They were friends to him, but John knew that among their own circle, within their own class, their relationships were at a depth that he could never

hope to reach with them because they had all been through the freshman experience together.

Then there was the craving for adventure. There had been moments of excitement in the honors dorm – his introduction to the exotic hookah lounge downtown, the occasional impromptu lightsaber battle that broke out in the hall, climbing up through the attic and onto the roof with friends, all the while trying to sneak past and above their RA.

Somehow it did not seem enough to overcome the boredom that dominated the majority of time spent in the Honors dorm. John hated boredom. It brought the loneliness, like a heavy jacket that you can't seem to throw off.

So there it was. He craved friendship. He craved adventure. He craved a place and a people with whom he could belong. So, he packed his bags and set sail, away from Alexander, into the wider, wilder world, to seek that which all men crave – love, and purpose.

Now he was here with these men who called each other brothers, playing paintball on a Saturday morning.

Now, after that night months ago in Ninfa's, they were all together – Carson, Alan, Christian, and Wayne – battered, bruised, breathless and grinning under a patina of splattered orange and pink paint, watching the last of the combatants wage furious battle in the most ridiculous ways until the game was over.

CHAPTER FOUR

“So when’s the party? Tonight, or tomorrow?”

“It’s tonight. It’s 80s themed,” Alan said.

“Sounds good. Can I get a ride with you guys?”

“Sure, yeah.”

“Awesome, can I get your number? I live in Martin. What time should I be ready to go?”

“We’re probably gonna head over around 10:30.”

Several hours later, John had readied himself for the night’s event. The theme was 1980’s. He had thrown together what costume items he could to conjure the image of the metal rockstar- a mullet wig fastened with a leather headband made from a belt that didn’t fit, a grungy military looking jacket over a sleeveless shirt, fingerless gloves tied from the scraps of a camouflage t-shirt, jeans and jungle boots. He may have looked more redneck than rockstar, but the completeness of the outfit made it work somehow.

It inspired awe and admiration from the company with whom he rode. Together they plunged through the night, away from Martin hall, toward the cups of fate. With the first step out the car his heart pounded like a Mongol war drum, rife with the anticipation of the unknown. Alan and Carson walked ahead toward the house that pounded with bass and the shrill shouts of raving women.

They had been nice enough to keep him informed about the party and to give him a ride.

Hardly a word had passed between them in the car, but somehow it had not been awkward. He had a feeling that he liked Alan and Carson and hoped that they would be friends.

This registered in John's mind for a sharp, fleeting moment of hope, and was overcome by the excitement coursing through his being.

This was a party. With beer. And punch. And undoubtedly wanton sex. This was the first such party to which he had ever been invited, and it overwhelmed him with a nervous excitement. He had known that parties like this one had gone on in high school. At least, he thought they did. All he knew was that his friends had drank and smoked and carried on into the night and they had never invited him. Maybe they had thought him too innocent. Maybe he was.

But this was a new chapter in life. This party was the gateway to a world that had been heretofore alien to John - ineffable and unreachable, like a distant dimension that the best of authors could never properly encapsulate in words. And here he stood on the threshold, staring into the void- the dark, dank house with floorboards that looked like they had been hauled from a dump, the walls that bore the stains and scores of numberless nights of infamy, the chandelier made entirely of beer bottles that hung crookedly from the ceiling as though from a single thread. And the writhing mass of flesh and wigs and neon cloth that was the hundreds of young men and women, completed by the red and blue solo

cups they sloshed as angry mobs are completed by the torches and pitchforks they wield.

The tall, skinny man with the combed hair at the front door extended his hand toward him through the doorway.

"Hi," John said. "I'm John McCleod."

"I'm Ace. Nice to meet you man. Glad you're here. The beer's just back there" the man said, gesturing to the back of the adjacent room with the beer pong tables.

With that, John breathed deep and plunged forward, diving into the river Styx, and his heart nearly burst through his ribs with its pounding.

He kept his outward expression one of happiness and cool enthusiasm. He knew he that he had no need to be nervous. If they liked him, great. If they did not, it was not worth trying to be friends with them. He would be himself and play it all by ear.

John made a resolute march to the old metal trough brimmed with ice-bathed keystone beers. Looking into the great bed of beer with slight trepidation, he hesitated for a moment, a man on the edge of setting foot on mars, or taking hold of the grail. Knowing grins curled at the edges of the older students' mouths. Here was a new disciple, an initiate, a babe about to take first breaths.

His arm felt light, almost detached, as he reached forward and grasped the smooth shiny can of silver and blue, popped the tab, and brought it to his lips. He gulped a bit, and brought it down slowly. His wide, puppy eyes gave him away in an instant.

"Are you okay?" Carson said with a little laugh.

"Yeah, it's just this is my first time."

"You mean to drink," said Alan.

"Yeah"

Alan and Carson both laughed.

"That's awesome man." said Alan. "You like it?"

"Yeah, it's pretty good."

"Well good, man. This is awesome. I didn't know you'd never had a drink before.

You're gonna have fun tonight. We'll make sure of it."

'I'll bet you will' thought John. He knew what they meant. They wanted to get him drunk.

'We'll see.' He thought. 'We'll see where this night takes me. I'm not sure I want to be drunk. Buzzed, sure. But I've never been drunk.'

He told them as much for the next few minutes as they stopped in the kitchen next to the punch coolers. They soon took up their second beers and, as John was about to open his, Ace intervened.

"Hey man, we're gonna go shotgun. Come on."

"Ok cool. What's shotgunning?"

"I'll show you."

John followed them through the beer stained halls and out the back door into the yard where yet another trough awaited, filled with amber promise. Beer in the hand of each, they circled round where the stone of the patio ended and the grass began. Each produced a key, either to their house or car, and punched a

hole into the side of their can. Carson did the same for John 's can and all were ready.

With a "Onetwothree go!" they rushed the cans to their lips and sucked the frothing beer through the keyholes, racing to finish first. John followed suit. The beer stuck in his throat and chest like sand in an hourglass bottom and he did all to drink more than bathe in the upturned can. Still it ran down his chin and onto his shirt. It was like baptism.

As one they threw their cans to the earth and crushed them underfoot and John laughed, taken with the absurd abandon of this crew and their practices. Still, he felt cautious and resolved to have only three drinks.

"Nice. Your first shotgun. Awesome." Ace said.

"I'm gonna go get another beer."

So the adventure unrolled, spilling out from night into morning and John marveled at this strange new world, allured by its chaotic mirth and sultry danger. Never had he encountered a scene like this, one that had endured since the time of the Roman feasts. He wondered if anyone else there had thought how historic this was.

Like an explorer in some colorful, foreign bazaar he wound his way through the pulse of the drowning music and the din of the throngs. Everywhere his eyes found fascination, between drunk girls who walked like pirates on a ship tossed by the waves and who spoke loud enough to summon the deaf, and paunchy seniors slurring life advice to him.

The rest flailed about with hazy abandonment or wrapped themselves around girls on the dance floor, who entwined with them in turn like an amorphous mass of sighs and passion.

He spoke loud and with confidence, open and friendly to whomever he greeted or to whomever approached. Girls giggled and flirted and men shook his hand and laughed and joked with him.

Try the punch, Alan said. John did not refuse. He put the cup to the nozzle, filled it up, put the cup to his lips and guzzled it down, and he did that two more times and began to sway.

For him it was as though he had begun to walk on the moon after years of dreaming about it, from the time he was two and could point to that majestic orb hung in the forest of space and say “moon” as though pointing to the thumb print of God.

Yeah, his veins flowed with jazz that night, invincible.

But for the time, he came alive with passion and was the most alive and joyful he had felt in years. This elixir stripped him of inhibitions that had made him feel so stiff all his life. He found himself amidst friends becoming equally as vulnerable and expressive and brave to plunge into the night with wild abandon, who shared with him that zeal for life at its height and most absurd and dangerous.

Soon the costume he had worn became his outfit and then became his skin. His voice slurred and gravity swayed like the tide and the lights of the house and the stars above became giant and brighter and more beautiful.

He sat on the couch in front of the beer pong tables and let his body and his feet float on the tide of ethereal intoxication. A passerby expressed concern and checked to see that the rock star was still lucid, but all was well. Coleridge in Kubla Kahn had not known more happiness than John at this very moment.

Hours seemed to pass by as he basked in the glorious feeling of weightlessness. In fact, not even an hour had passed before he noticed a distinct change in the tide- dark ripples. The music was lowered. Men rushed through the rooms with grim faces and determined strides. John popped up on swaying legs to see what was the matter and to avoid whatever it was that was causing a mass exodus from the front of the house. Just inside the kitchen, someone caught John 's arm in a firm grip. He whirled and found Ace attached to him.

“The cops are here.”

As soon as he said it, Ace disappeared and left John bewildered, though with a vague inspiration to act. He strode to the back yard at an impossible angle. The damned steps seemed to undulate beneath his feet as he rushed through the door.

People ran everywhere in mass confusion, trailing costumes and dates and hurling themselves over fences. What was he to do? He had to escape, but how and where?

His roving eyes caught a couple familiar faces standing beneath the nearest tree. Salvation! There stood Alan and Carson, surveying the scene with cool bemusement as though it were all a joke. He swayed over to them and saluted them with a calm but sluggish “Hello.”

Alan could not help but laugh. He had succeeded. John was truly, irreversibly drunk. As if the slur and the swaying did not give it away, John had begun speaking to them in a perfect impression of Captain Jack Sparrow and, coupled with the wig and rockstar costume, he looked the part.

“To my misfortune, the police have arrived. I am in no condition to be carrying out an escape plan...savvy? Would you be so kind as to help me out of this predicament?”

Alan and Carson both could not contain their laughter.

“Don’t worry we’ll take care of you.” Said Carson. “We don’t need to run.”

“Ah, yes. We should wait for the opportune moment –”

A girl dove over the fence like a swimmer. Lights flashed and the unmistakable chatter of police radios burst over the verbal panic of the crowd. “—which is now, evidently.”

Cops streaked through the yard, eliciting screams and curses wherever they trod, like the figure of death itself. Escaping came easily to the experienced Alan and Carson who, to their sole advantage, knew the exact spot on the fence that hid a door into the alley behind the house.

Enthralled by the danger and the dashing escape, John’s legs ran with renewed vigor if not renewed balance. Up the homemade bike ramp they raced, over the dividing wire fence that separated the neighbor’s backyard from that of the party house, and swiftly to the darkest corner of their yard to the wooden fence boards shrouded in dead ivy. They tugged at the boards and away they

came, hinged on the top of the fence by bent nails, and the trio escaped through the narrow opening, single file, and closed the boards behind them.

Alan led the way through a series of gravel alleys and a couple streets until they came to a small, dilapidated white house with a porch.

"We'll be safe here." Said Carson. "This is A.J.'s house"

The next morning John awoke in his room, safe beneath the sheets of his own bed. He was surprised to find, as much as he'd had to drink the night before, that he felt only groggy and no worse for the wear otherwise. He sat up in his bed. Josh lay asleep, snoring soundly beneath a cocoon of his blankets in the bed on the other side of the room.

'How is it,' thought John, 'that after a night like last night, I still get up before he even opens his eyes. Is he going through some sort of metamorphosis in that cocoon of his, or is this just the 'year of the hibernating bear' for Asians?'

John's bed buzzed and vibrated, startling him out of his reverie. It was his phone. Oh thank God he had not lost his phone or anything important last night. He picked it up and answered.

"Hello?"

"Hey man. How are you feeling?"

To John's surprise, it was Alan.

"Uh, I'm doing well, actually. Thanks for calling."

"No problem, man. Just wanted to make sure you were doing alright. You feeling hungover at all?"

“Not really, actually. I mean, I feel kinda groggy but I don’t have a hangover or anything. That was a lot of fun last night.”

Alan laughed. “Good to hear man. You were hilarious. We’ll have to go out again some time.”

“Absolutely. Let me know if any more parties are happening in the future. I’d love to come with y’all.”

“Will do.”

“And, uh, thanks also for checking up on me today. I really appreciate that.”

“Hey, that’s what it’s all about, right? Carson and I have got your back.”

“Thanks man. If y’all ever need anything, give me a call. And let’s hang out again soon.”

“Alright, cool, man. I’m gonna get back to sleep now. Carson and I will let you know about any other rush events.”

John got off the phone and leaned back against his pillows. Such a phone call was unprecedented for him, as was the adventure of last night, and in that moment he felt a spark of loyalty for his newfound comrades. Soon enough, with thought and time, the spark would grow. Perhaps fraternity was all John had really been looking for. Perhaps the answer lay with Delta Phi.

CHAPTER FIVE

“God, please, just let it stick. Let it stick. You turned water into wine, I know you can make snow stick to the ground in Waco.”

John prayed his fervent prayer to the Author of all good things, giddy with the thought of a miracle. A snow day in Waco Texas. A whole day of classes canceled. An early start to the weekend. He felt he could repeat the prayer a hundred times, but he quit his supplication. Best not to beg. It would show a lack of faith, and that would guarantee no miraculous blessing. He sank back into his seat and tried to make himself comfortable. It was hard enough to have to watch a theater production on a Thursday night, the real start to the weekend for freshmen like him. It was harder still when there was the chance of snow flurries outside – God’s own spoonful of sugar to go with winter’s medicinal cold. And by the locks of Fu Man Chu’s mustache, who ever thought up theater of the absurd? John didn’t even know the name of the play he was watching, let alone the plot, except for some recurring bit about a flood and an ark – some madcap version of Noah and family in a play in which every scene seemed like a non sequitur.

John smiled to himself. At least the company was good. Anne sat next to him. Bright eyes, bright mind, brilliant smile. What was there not to like about her? He gave her a sideways glance. She caught his gaze and saw him make his bewildered expression toward the stage. She stifled a laugh. Did anybody know

what these actors were carrying on about? John leaned over to whisper in her ear.

“You know, I find this play to be enlightening actually. Now I will never have to wonder what it’s like to trip on acid.”

Anne giggled. “It’s so horrible. It’s a really effective anti-drug campaign. ‘Acid. Not even once.’”

“No kidding.”

John and Anne continued to make jokes at the play’s expense. It was the only way they could get through it. After 45 minutes that seemed like an eternity, the last scene was ended and the actors were taking their final bows. John hopped up from his seat and blinked away the sleep that fogged the edges of his consciousness. He tried to edge his way down the row of seats as quick and as smooth as he could, but however desperate the other audience members had been to leave, their general pace toward the door lacked urgency. Few things frustrated John more than people who walked without purpose, as if no one behind them had anywhere to be. He lowered his forward shoulder and refused to break his stride, effectively cutting a swath through the herd of groggy theater lovers and making a way for Anne. Anne giggled at John’s impatience and followed swiftly and before long they were standing in the open air of the lobby. John stared through the glass doors, transfixed by the beauty of snowflakes cascading in the night air, painting the ground white.

“Yes!” John cried. “It’s sticking. Anne, it’s sticking! Huzzah!”

Brett looked up from his phone with a grin.

“They’ve canceled classes for tomorrow. A half an inch of snow, and Texas loses its mind. I love it.”

“It’s a miracle, Brett. It’s a sign from God. We were not meant to have classes this Friday. How’s that for divine intervention?”

“Hey, I’ll take it.”

“It’s beautiful,” Anne said. “Come on. Let’s go outside.”

John, Anne, and Brett wove their way through the throngs of leaving students, out into the frigid air of night. Snow clouds blanketed the sky, a partial veil over the face of the moon so that her light was made softer. Students cheered and laughed and screamed and slid about on the ice and the snow, whooping wildly, throwing snowballs at one another. Not a frown could be found among them. Brett was happy, but tired, and decided he should go home. John thought it strange. Who would just go back home on a night like this, especially when classes were canceled the next day? But he did not fault Brett. It gave John and Anne more time together.

They walked away from the theater building, slowly, and made their way to the front of the school of music. There the lights from the inside shone through the windowed hallways and lit the brick porch, now blanketed with snow.

“John, this is marvelous!” cried Anne. “Come, dance with me. Let’s dance together.”

“It would be my pleasure, Madame.”

John smiled and held out his hand. She took it, and he placed his other arm around her waist, the hand on the small of her back, and pulled her close.

“Do you know how to Waltz?” he asked.

“I used to. I’ve never officially learned.”

“I’ll show you. Follow my lead.”

Together they waltzed over the snow-covered ground, weaving a pattern of clear footprints in the white, like a haphazard mandala. Anne smiled and laughed as John held her close and led her in the dance as best he could. It was one of the most graceless waltzes performed in history, foot upon foot, interrupted by fits of laughter from both of them. But it did not matter. They were lost in the moment, a picture out of a storybook, like two eternally spinning figurines in a snow globe. The moon seemed to shine a little brighter that night despite the brewing clouds.

Anne halted the dance and lay on the ground, pulling John down with her, and began to make a snow angel, laughing as she did. John followed suit. He adored her spontaneity, her zest for life, the joy she brought with her improvisations. They lay there in the snow and waved their arms and legs. Anne’s was perfect. John’s snow angel looked like it needed corrective surgery.

John took her by the hand again after they rose from the ground and twirled her around like a swing dancer. This she knew how to do with style and for a few seconds they danced a little more gracefully, a little closer together, all smiles and laughter, and jokes about how they’d met, about how their friends had introduced her to John and tried to convince her that he was Russian. John

had put on a wonderfully thick accent – one that had fooled more than a few people. She had upped the ante, though, and responded to his faux accent with a string of fluent Russian. For once, the tables were turned on John. He had thought her pretty when he first saw her. After that, he thought her beautiful. Looks were certainly important, but a girl without intelligence could not hold his interest. From then on, Anne had John’s undivided attention as far as dating was concerned. Now, he looked into her eyes, and she into his, and the rest of the world suddenly became a stage, a series of props and effects to set the atmosphere, to make the moment even more perfect, to foster the blossoming romance. Everything was perfect – the way Anne looked in the moonlight and the snow, their dancing and their fun, the rapidly closing distance between them. It all built up to this one moment, when both John and Anne leaned inward, and their lips met, gently, passionately.

John became deaf to all else but Anne in that moment. He didn’t hear the car horn the first time it blasted over the distant shouts and cheers of students playing in the snow. The second time it registered with him in the way a shout registers with one who is slipping from the world of a dream to wakefulness, but still in the space between the two realms. His eyes snapped open with the third blast of the horn. He jerked his head to the right and found James Rhoden leaning out of the passenger window of Luke Parr’s truck.

“Hey man, where were you?” shouted James.

Now Anne was aware they had an audience. She cast a sideways smirk at John but said nothing.

"What do you mean, 'where have I been'? I told y'all, and the guys in charge, I had to go to this play for my theater class. Am I in trouble or something?"

"Nah, no worries. We're about to have a meeting. Hop in the car.

You need to come with us."

John sighed and looked at Anne with an apologetic face.

"It's okay, John" she said. "I know you've got to go."

"Thanks Anne. I have to, but I sure don't want to."

"Well, we wouldn't want you to get in trouble."

"Hey, you laugh, but Lord only knows what terrors await me if I'm late to...whatever this is."

Anne laughed. "Go, John. I'll catch up with you later."

"Have fun for me!"

They embraced quickly and John walked down the steps to Luke's truck and got in the back. He waved through the window to Anne, who waved back and then made her way past the truck, back toward her room in South Russell. John turned to Luke as the truck pulled away from the music building.

"So what'd I miss?"

"Who was that girl you were making out with?" asked James.

"Her name's Anne. She goes to my church."

"John, my man! Gets some wherever he goes." said Luke. He and James laughed.

"You missed an initiation ceremony –"

"Wait, we've been initiated?"

“Not like that. It was like an initiation into pledgeship or something. I don’t know, it was intense.”

“Yeah, all the actives were in robes and they were all hissing at us during the ceremony and stuff. It was weird.”

“Well that’s...I’m actually kind of glad I missed that. Sounds creepy. What are we doing now, though?”

“Going to a meeting about our pledge trip.”

“Pledge trip? I thought that was canceled. Baylor wouldn’t let us go. And how are we supposed to go anywhere if no one can drive on the ice around here?”

“I know. I don’t know what the deal is. I doubt we’ll actually have a pledge trip, but Kyle said he and Beauchamp were gonna send us the details, and that we should have a p.c. meeting to figure it all out.”

“To be honest, I’m pretty frustrated we haven’t had a pledge trip yet. Every other pledge class before us has gotten to do it. It’s supposed to be the one fun part of pledging.”

“I know. I don’t think they’ve got this organized very well.”

“I don’t think so either. I’m not sure if that scares me or comforts me. On the one hand, they might not have enough of a plan to really make pledging all that crazy for us without risking getting caught by Baylor. On the other hand, if they’re so disorganized that they don’t know what they’re doing, they could get out of hand.”

“They’ve toned pledging down a lot in recent years though.”

“Oh? Who told you that? Boyd? Every active in the history of actives will tell pledges that they have it easier than when they had to go through pledging.

You’re probably right. But don’t kid yourself. These guys aren’t professionals.”

“You sure are suspicious, John. I mean, yeah, it sucks having to wake up every day and get to meeting at 7, but it hasn’t been that bad so far. I know it’s supposed to get tougher, but we’ll all get through it.”

“Oh there’s no question we’ll get through it. And yes, it will get tougher. Alan seems to know a lot, or at least more than I do, about what’s coming up next. He said something about them making us dig a pit and that they’d make us stand in it and piss on us.”

“That’s disgusting.”

“I heard something similar though. Do you think they’ll paddle us?”

“Look, where there’s smoke, there’s fire. These stories came from somewhere, but right now they’re just rumors. They’d better be, anyway. I’ll walk out if they try to make us do something like that.”

“I don’t think we have to worry about anything like that just yet. Heck, we’re only doing a pledge trip so far.”

“Do you think we’ll be able to drink?”

“Well, we are certainly *able* to drink. The real question is –“

“I think it’s one of those things where technically we aren’t supposed to, but the actives look the other way. From what I’ve heard, everyone who’s gone on a pledge trip before us has just gotten shwasted and had a blast. That’s basically what it’s supposed to be.”

“In that case, we have a moral obligation to uphold tradition. I, for one, will drink enough to floor the Irish.”

“You are Irish, John.”

“Scotts-Irish. But yes, exactly.”

CHAPTER SIX

The entire, jabbering pledge class had congregated in Trey's room in North Russell. The place seemed like a mansion compared to the measly dorm rooms of Penland and Martin – a separate bedroom for each person, plus a living room and a kitchen. For the time being, however, the disparity of grandeur between this room and the rest had its allure lessened by the snowfall outside. The prospect of the pledge retreat strengthened air of excitement.

They settled in the living room, crammed into the few available couches and chairs. Wayne, the pledge class president, began the meeting. Elections had taken place on the first night of pledgship, the same night they were told they had to build a party for the actives. The “pledge dance” they called it. Laughable. It was a nice title to placate the administration, should the venture be exposed. The pledges were not to take part in the party – only to build it, give sober rides to drunken actives and their dates, and serve as bartenders. As hard as pledging was going to be, the current chapter leadership was steadfast in abstaining from alcohol hazing. Such practices were too much of a liability, and they accomplished nothing in terms of the overall goal of pledging, however amusing it might be to make pledges chug a beer bong full of whisky.

That night, when pledging began, Wayne had been elected as PCP almost unanimously. His credentials: having an older brother in the fraternity who had recently graduated. Other than that, he was not a leader. He had an endless

supply of excuses for missing pledging related events, usually some variant of “I have a test tomorrow.” The truth was that he skipped events he suspected would involve hazing so that he could spend time with his girlfriend, Cheryl, a petite, brunette, shrew. A beautiful shrew, but a shrew nonetheless. She had him whipped, and everybody knew it. Wayne served well enough as a mouthpiece for the actives, as someone to pass important information from those in charge to his fellow pledges. That was important, because the less the pledges had to deal with actives in person, the better for the pledges.

Wayne sat at the table and pulled out his phone.

“Alright guys, everyone shut up.”

Workable silence was achieved in a few minutes and Wayne laid out the details.

“Kyle says we’re gonna go on a scavenger hunt around Texas. He gave us a list a list of places to go to. I’ll read’em out and then we have to figure out how we’re gonna do this.”

The itinerary was thus: The Underwood Café, which was in the town of Brown, The Crossroads bar in Fredericksburg, the Alamo, the border station at Eagle Pass, the beach at Galveston, and the grave of one of the founding fathers of the fraternity in the town of Weimar. All in all, the trip was over 1,200 miles, and this presented an issue - The pledge class did not have the entire weekend to do this. They could not leave tonight because conditions were too dangerous. Kyle had called shortly after Wayne finished reading out the locations and, after a brief discussion, Kyle and Beauchamp decided that the pledge retreat would be

put on hold for the time being. Perhaps, if conditions were better the next day, it could still be done this weekend. We had to prepare for that contingency.

This would have been easy had they been able to utilize Sunday as a travel day, but the Sapphire Ball was on Saturday, and about half of the pledge class had been invited to attend. They could not miss the event. To do so would have raised suspicion and possibly resulted in scrutiny from the administration if someone's girlfriend was angered or worried by the fact that their date had disappeared and left town for a pledging event. And it would have to be said that it was a pledging event, because all of the Delta Phi's invited to the event would be missing, and that many "dead grandmas" was more than enough to raise suspicion. So, if they were to do this, they would have to leave sometime tomorrow and make it back to campus by 4:30 p.m. on Saturday.

The next order of business was Eagle Pass. A lot of guys didn't want to get that close to the border. The cartel violence in Mexico had been increasing and spilling over the border with more and more frequency in recent years.

Kidnapping was a lucrative business for the cartels, and "rich" American college boys were sure to fetch a tidy sum. Eagle Pass had become unsafe. Crazy they were, and adventure they craved, but Mexican drug cartels were not an alluring prospect. But as the snow and ice built up over the night, and the prospect of the pledge retreat dwindled, little thought was given to solving that issue. The meeting ended in uncertainty. They had a lengthy itinerary, a nearly impossible time frame, and no guarantee that they could even make it out of Waco with all the ice on the streets, much less make it to Eagle Pass.

So, the meeting was adjourned within thirty minutes, and from then on they spent the night celebrating with the rest of the Baylor community in the miracle of Texas snow. Snowball fights raged around Penland and Martin. Cars slid on the ice, regardless of brakes, and collided with one another in non-lethal but very expensive accidents. Men took the lids from garbage cans and slid about the snow on top of them, standing or laying upon them. For that night, the sting of dry pledging was taken away by the rare joy of snow and canceled classes. It almost did not matter to John when the text came from Wayne, saying that there would be no pledge retreat, that conditions were too dangerous. Almost. Still, he felt robbed of an experience. Robbed of an adventure he could share with friends.

Friends. When John walked among the snowball fighters and the garbage lid sledders and groups of friends roving around the streets, he felt a disconnect. He wanted to join them, not just in their fun but also in their comradery, but there was some invisible barrier he felt he could not breach, like a cage of glass through which he could see and speak but could not reach out, could not fully know or be known. How was it that one could live within a few feet of several hundred people, and for each of them to be so alone? Proximity was no guarantee of close friendship. What a strange paradox. There was hope, however, for John was on the cusp of being a part of something bigger than himself, being a part of a group of men whom he would call brothers.

Beneath that hope lay a cold sliver, a faint voice that seldom spoke but gnawed at John's peace. It spoke of inevitable end. It spoke of doubt. For years

his best friendships had lasted no more than a year or two, only to be severed by time and distance, by moving, or by his own faults – by the times his imperfections reared their ugly heads and those who thought him great began to think lesser of him. He feared the latter the most. It was like a slow drowning, that kind of failure, where the more you flailed and grasped for salvation, the more you struggled to stand yourself on dry land, the more you sank, because no one else knew how to swim either. So others turned away lest they remembered the smallness of their own strength in the grasp of the surf.

John felt he had many expectations to uphold. He thought himself a writer and a poet, but what if others found he was not the artist they thought him to be? “Google,” the actives called him, because he could answer almost any question they asked. What if he was not as smart as they thought he was? And he had claimed that he would do anything for a brother, for a friend. What if he failed when the time came? What if the aid required was beyond his skill and strength? Or what if they never asked for his aid, never shared their burdens? He felt useless when he could not help others. How long would these friendships last? Would they fall away like all the others? Would he screw it up? The prospect of failure, in all of its forms, haunted him.

These questions lurked quietly beneath the hope he had, beneath the growing loyalty he felt for Alan and Carson and Wayne and all the rest. He walked back to his dorm, happy for Anne, for the snow, for canceled classes, and for hope. He slept well, that night. A sleep of pleasant dreams. The cold sliver remained.

The next day, John arose at 9 a.m. to the shining sun and clear skies showing through his dorm room window. He felt the happiness that rose within him the night before. The thought occurred to him that, if his time were to come now, and he were to slip the surly bonds of earth in this moment, he would die a happy man, for he would die at the zenith of friendship. He did not wish for death or ending. He simply had the wherewithal to realize, of life's peaks and valleys, this was a peak and it felt rather tall. Inspiration often struck John at such times of great height or depth of feeling, and now was no exception. For the better part of an hour he sat on his bed and wrote in the green spiral notebook he used for creative writing and class notes. The words poured from him and spilled onto the page, transfigured from the wordless language of the heart to black-inked forms on off-white paper pages. Once the flow of writing began, if it began from a wellspring of feeling, there was no stopping it until he had emptied it upon the pages. When it was over, John had written a poem forged from his contradictory joy of newfound comradery and the dread of its future fate. Read over once, he found it too raw but decided to leave it be. The first draft was always raw. He would polish it later. For now, it was time to go outside and enjoy the sunshine and whatever was left of last night's snowfall. He wondered what he would do this weekend, since the pledge retreat was no longer on the table.

He left Martin Hall and, after a quick breakfast at Penland, walked to the bear habitat. The bears were lively this morning, no doubt invigorated by the refreshing chill of the air and sudden change in weather. Perhaps they felt they should be gathering food in preparation for winter hibernation. All they could

do, however, was walk the circle of their habitat's perimeter – a trail they had so long trodden that it was bereft of grass. Walking and walking, but going nowhere. These creatures craved wide-open spaces, longed to move, to hunt, to live with the purpose etched into their species' being since bears existed. How sad and strange it was to be relegated to an existence where the only activity left to them was to endure life instead of live it.

John's pocket buzzed. He took out his phone. There was a new text message from Wayne.

"Pledge trip is back on. We're heading out at 4 from Penland."

Renewed excitement welled up within him when he read it. He called Alan and made arrangements to ride with him in his car for the first leg of the journey. After each stop, everyone except the drivers would switch cars so that each member of the pledge class would spend time with every other member, in hopes that they would bond and come to know one another well. Now, all that remained was to pack an overnight bag in case events were such that they would have to spend the night somewhere before returning to Baylor.

John returned to his dorm room to finish any work due the coming Monday. He suspected he would want to rest on Sunday after such a lengthy trip, and he did not want to risk leaving his work incomplete should he be forced to stay out of town until Sunday. He finished quickly, almost as quickly as he packed his bag. One set of clothes, bible, the pocketknife he carried everywhere, and enough money for food, gas, and liquor should the opportunity present itself. This would be a trip to remember.

CHAPTER SEVEN

John strode out from Martin at 3:50 in the afternoon, backpack slung over one shoulder, aviators shielding his eyes from the last glare of the Waco sunset. They had been instructed by their pledge trainers not to wear the pledge uniform – a polo shirt, jeans, and boots – so he kept the jeans but wore a t-shirt and sneakers. He jogged to the parking lot behind Penland and met up with Wayne and Alan. He left his backpack in the trunk of the car and got into the backseat. He wished Carson would have joined them as well, but Carson's car was needed in the caravan so he was to be a driver during the trip.

They were a great procession, five cars in all for 18 people, like some modern version of the pioneer wagon trains. Gas was the first stop, at the Shell Station on the other side of the highway instead of the Exxon just across from campus so as not to attract unwanted attention. This was not an officially Baylor-sanctioned event, and they were to take great pains to keep the secrecy of its existence. No one could know of this – not friends, nor family, and especially not faculty members. After filling the cars up with gas, the caravan hit the road and sped toward Brown, TX as the sun began to sink below the horizon, stabbing at the night with its last rays of orange light.

A few hours later the night had come and the pledge class was seated at a great wooden table in the Underwood Café in Brown, Tx, salivating over steaming plates heaped with some of the best BBQ and fried chicken John had

ever tasted. They feasted like kings, gorging themselves on sweet, greasy BBQ until they were fit to burst. Odin in his great hall in Valhalla could not have provided a better feast, nor supped among such excellent, brotherly company. They ate and laughed and swapped stories for about an hour. It was a merry beginning to the trip, and John was excited for the rest of it.

The common question floating among them was whether or not they would stop and get liquor or beer and if so, how and where, and how would they accomplish this and still finish the trip? Ultimately, the particulars were ignored and the main question became whether anyone would drink at all. Some were in favor while others, particularly the drivers who feared they would get no relief if drinking began among the rest, had reservations. Those who had reservations said little, however, for they too had a strong desire to make a party of the trip.

John ended up in a car with Christian Brannan and Clark Gable. Christian, who most called by his last name, Brannan, was the driver. Clark, a gigantic man from Flowermound, TX who played football for Baylor, sat in the front passenger seat while John sat in the back.

“So,” began John, “where to next?”

“Well,” said Clark, “I think we’re all going to go get some stuff to drink, but I’m not sure.”

“Yeah, I think that’s what the plan is, and then we’re making our way to Fredericksburg,” said Brannan.

“Sweet. I’ve got some cash to help pay for whatever we get.”

They followed the other cars in their caravan for a short while, Brannan's eyes scanning the stores on either side of the road for sign of a suitable place to buy our elixirs. Suddenly there it was, ablaze in red, neon lighted glory, its distinct shape cutting a robust silhouette against the night sky – a liquor barn. These liquor stores were unlike any other, for one did not even have to exit their car to pick or purchase their poison – they simply drove right through the store. Every liquor barn was shaped, of course, like a barn, with an opening at both the front and the back and a clear lane through the middle of the store through which customers would drive their cars. Once pulled into the store, an employee would approach the window of the car and the passenger or driver would give them their ID, pick what they wanted from the vast shelves of drinks that lined the inside walls of the barn, make their purchase and drive away. Quick, easy, and overall incredibly convenient. Only in the U.S. could one find such a marvel. John suspected they could be found only in the South, and the absurdity of it made John love the South even more than he already did. He held a deep appreciation for absurdity and extremes.

Before pulling into the barn, Brannan and John handed money to Clark and it was decided that Clark would do the talking. Both Clark and Brannan had fake IDs, and if it came to it John would simply say that he did not have his ID with him. They pulled into the barn dry, and left with the largest bottle of Jaeger they could purchase. Brannan, of course, did not expect to drink any of it, as he was the driver. The deed, then, was left to Clark and John to do. Clark poured

half of the bottle into a large Styrofoam cup full of ice and a mixer he'd purchased beforehand and then handed the bottle to John.

John put the mouth of the bottle to his nose. The aroma wafted up into his nostrils, sweet, with an overpowering flavor of licorice and a hint of mint. He put it to his lips and let the liquid slide into his mouth, washing over his tongue with a smoothness he did not expect, filling his mouth with a gentle warmth despite the frosty chill of the bottle from whence it poured. The taste was almost sickly sweet, like a syrup, but not sweet enough to repulse John's senses. It was different – not unpleasant, but dangerously similar in taste and feel to cough syrup.

He embraced it as a new experience, and the fire of the drink filled him with warmth as he drank. It made his head swim in the most delightful way. In an hour he felt light and heavy all at once, warm and at ease and free of petty worries and cares. The amber muse whose grain born form fills any frame thus began to whisper sweet nothings to him, kindling the spark of inspiration, and a change began to come over him. His usual eloquence, for which he was known among his pledge brothers, was marred by slurring and stumbling over words and phrases, though the stronger the buzz became the more he desired to talk. Clark, on the other hand, was relatively unaffected. Clark was also a massive human being.

"I think that you, my friend, are drunk," laughed Clark.

"Really? Whatever gave ya that idea?" John retorted with a grin.

Brannan said nothing, but snickered a bit when heard John's slurred response.

John did not say much for the remainder of his ride with Brannan and Clark, other than to make the occasional goofy remark. Clark and Brannan were quiet fellows, but they thoroughly enjoyed seeing John so transformed.

They raced along the highway at breakneck speeds. The caravan's notions of traffic law where speed was concerned were highly theoretical, and so long as the flash of red and blue did not appear behind them, nor the wail of sirens pierce the night, John was more than fine with that. God must have been smiling upon them that night, for from that moment onward not one of them was pulled over or harassed by law enforcement officials.

On the way to Fredericksburg the Caravan had to make a stop for gas, and it was here that they had to decide what to do about Eagle Pass. At each stop they had to take a picture of the entire pledge class on someone's phone and send it to both Kyle and Beauchamp, so they could not simply say they had gone to Eagle Pass without going. Eagle Pass was also far out of the way of most of the other stops, and time was of the essence. Many of the men were anxious about the possible repercussions of being caught in a lie about going to Eagle Pass. What terrors would be devised for them should they fail to complete the trip set before them? Some suggested they simply do as instructed. Others suggested they chance it and say that law enforcement would not allow them to take pictures of the border station. Another suggestion was to find a different border patrol station, one that was not on the border but was a checkpoint along a road close to the boarder. The last suggestion gained the most support among the

group, as they could take the picture in such a way that no one would be able to tell that it was not actually Eagle Pass. Still, some doubted.

They were gathered together outside of the gas station discussing the issue when one among them said, "What if Tom calls?"

"If Tom calls," John said in loud declaration so that all were silent and all eyes turned upon him, "Fuck'em."

Maybe it was the sheer shock of hearing a man like John, quiet and gentle, say such a thing. Maybe it was that his words had suddenly pierced the mood of anxiety and fear as a chisel shatters ice. Or maybe it was the sheer stupidity, apathy, and bravado that his words delivered. Whatever it was, the whole pledge class was now embroiled in laughter.

"If he calls, you put me on the phone. I'll get it settled right quick."

"Yeah, I'll bet," said Carson between guffaws.

"John, are you drunk?"

"Ya know, James, drunk is such a loosely defined term..."

More laughter.

"Please don't actually put him on the phone with Tom. That's a horrible idea,"

Richard said.

"I would pay money to see that happen," said Alan.

"And I would pay money to avoid whatever Tom did to us when we got back."

"Alright, alright guys." Trey addressed everyone.

"Hey, guys, shut up," George said.

“Ok, so after Fredericksburg where are we going? Can’t we just head to a border patrol station further inland?”

“Yeah, that’s pretty much what we’re gonna do. I’ll text the location to y’all,” said Wayne.

Thus it was decided, and they loaded themselves into the same cars in which each one of them had ridden. They would switch cars after they finished their business in Fredericksburg.

By the time they arrived in Fredericksburg, the alcohol in John’s system had nearly taken full effect. They pulled into the parking lot for the Saloon, and as soon as Brannan’s car was parked the passenger door swung wide and out stumbled John with as much grace as one can muster in such a state as his.

“Nice shoes,” said Trey with a sardonic grin.

John looked down to find his feet shoeless upon the gravel parking lot, and raised his eyebrows in surprise.

“Why thank you,” he replied. “They’re all the rage these days.”

Trey laughed and he and John followed the rest of the pledge class into the saloon. Just before the doors, John began to stumble. His balance was failing him. Pity that his tongue was not. Carson and Luke stepped up on either side of him and supported him through the doors and he began to sing, loud and proud, an Irish drinking song. It was an obscure song by an equally obscure band – Man Bites God, but everyone assumed that John had made it up.

*“Gather round ye lads and lasses, set ye fer a while
and hearken to me mournful tale about the emerald isle*

*let's all raise our glasses high to friends and family gone
and lift our voices in another Irish drinking song"*

As drunk as he was, he sang rather well. The bar owner snapped his head up from whatever he was working on behind the bar, surprised by the sudden Irish shanty seemingly belted from nowhere. One look at the crew walking in through the doors told him all he needed to know, and the source of the song was not hard discerned either. He wouldn't ask them which fraternity they were. Doubtless they were under instruction not to tell. He stepped out from behind the bar and walked over to greet them. John continued singing.

*"consumption took me mother and me father got the pox
me brother drank the whisky till he wound up in a box
me other brother in the troubles met with his demise
me sister has forever closed her smilin' Irish eyes"*

Luke left Carson to support John and grabbed a stool from one of the tables while Wayne and Alan exchanged hellos with the bartender and bouncer, explaining that they needed to take a photo for a scavenger hunt. Luke brought the stool over to Carson and the still-singing John. John climbed atop it, now oblivious to the world, lost in his revelry. He could not make out what the bartender and the bouncer were saying to Alan and Wayne. Someone tried to shush him, he did not turn to see who, and someone else said "let him be. This is fantastic."

The bartender grabbed a stool and sat a little ways from John. Business was slow tonight and this kid's singing was the most entertaining thing he'd seen and heard all day.

"Now everybody's died, so until the tears are dried

we'll drink and drink and drink and drink, and then we'll drink some more

We'll dance and sing and fight until the early morning light

Then we'll throw up, pass out, wake up and then we'll drink once again"

"There's one in every pledge class," the owner said.

"Uh, sorry about this guy," Luke said to the owner.

"Oh no, it's not a problem at all. It's actually hilarious."

A few minutes later the pledge class gathered to take a picture and send it off to Kyle and Beauchamp. Somehow John managed to get two older women, one on each arm, to pose with him for the picture. Trey did not know whether to be disgusted or impressed.

Afterward, they got back into the cars and drove off. John ended up in Richard's car, ironically without Richard in it. Carson was driving Richard's truck and John had hopped into the passenger seat before Richard could get there. Richard pleaded with him to get out of the seat, arguing that since it was his car he should be riding in it. At this, John decided to give him some friendly advice – "find your own seat, ya twat."

Carson barely suppressed his laughter, or his relief. As soon as Richard trotted off in defeat and John closed the door, Carson thanked him.

Richard was not well liked among the pledge class. This had begun the night of the day they had accepted their bids. Everyone had gathered in Cieran's room in Penland and Richard was sent out with everyone's money to get drinks for the room. John had asked for Rum. Richard returned with some sort of tropical punch flavored rum. Richard also said he had some Tequila. In actuality, it was some liqueur called Tequila Rose, which was sweet, thick, and Pepto Bismal pink. From that point onward, the entire pledge class perceived that there was something strange about Richard. John did not pick up on it and he did not find much fault with Richard, except that Richard had a poor and womanly taste in alcohol in John's estimation. John thought that perhaps Richard's misguided tastes were a result of having three older sisters and no brothers, and since Richard had not done anything to harm him, John had no ill will toward him. A week later, however, a girl named Marissa, who was a long time friend of Richard, told Tony Barclay that Richard had confided in her some delicate information. Apparently, Richard was not attracted to women. Horrified, Tony compelled her to admit as much to the rest of the pledge class during dinner one evening in Penland. Everyone was unsure of what to do. The prospect that Richard was gay was unsettling to them, but no one wanted to confront him over the subject. Neither did the actives, for that matter. Unaware that Marissa had betrayed his confidence, Richard could not guess why the rest of his pledge brothers seemed to distance themselves from him.

John did not trust the testimony of one girl against Richard. Richard was his pledge brother and that meant a great deal to John, whether he liked Richard

or not. For all he knew, the girl might have been taking petty revenge against Richard for rejecting her advances or something of the like. No, it was not his questioned sexuality that persuaded John to dislike Richard. It was the fact that Richard was an idiot. Pledging was not only supposed to be dry, it was supposed to be drug free, and Richard would not stop smoking weed. To make matters worse, he smoked it in his dorm room for any passing RA to smell. Such practices not only endangered the fraternity as a whole, but also endangered his pledge brothers. If the actives found out, the pledges would catch hell for it. If the administration found out, the pledges might never be initiated into the fraternity. Despite knowing all of this Richard refused to stop smoking, confident that he would never be caught. Richard drove the final nail into his own coffin when, one night, in a drunken state of openness he admitted to Christian that he had experimented sexually with other guys.

The alcohol taste issue annoyed John; the weed smoking issue angered John; and the sexual issues made John all the more leery of Richard. Sober, he was civil and friendly toward the man. Drunk, he had not patience for Richard. For that matter neither did anyone else in the pledge class, except for maybe Ben, who was more ambivalent than friendly toward Richard. That was why Carson was more than pleased when John usurped Richard's seat, and in his own car no less.

The night became progressively blurrier for John. He and Carson and the rest of the guys in the car rocked out to Dropkick Murphy and Flogging Molly for a good portion of their drive, more for John's benefit than the rest. He was a fan

of Irish Rock. The more animated John became, the more the general mood of the car seemed to brighten. As his spirits rose, so did those of the friends with whom he rode. They laughed at his nonsensical remarks, egged him on in his dancing and his refusal to be sullen. More and more, John became a scion of that spirit which encourages men to live and act with joyous abandon. He played the fool, but to the end of throwing off that heavy blanket of anxiety and fear laid upon them by the hardships of pledging and the threat of the unknown. For this moment in time, upon the endless sea of Texas highway, beneath the moon and stars of distant cities, in the strange hours of night and morning when natural law becomes tenuous, they forgot their fear and drew close as brothers, sharing in the adventure of the trek and in the spectacle of John. And as his drunkenness progressed, so did his strangeness.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The border station he would not recall after this trip, for he was blackout drunk at that stop.

At the Alamo, he ran across the road, heedless of cars, and attempted to climb over the wall of the former mission with a cry of “Remember the Alamo! Remember Goliad!” His pledge brothers, however, kept him on the right side of the wall.

At a gas station, when asked if he needed water, he replied saying “No. I need *this*,” and produced in his hand, as if by magic, the largest can of beer they had ever laid eyes upon. The can was quickly snatched away amid the ensuing laughter, much to John’s disappointment.

He even persuaded his companions in one of the cars to blast The Lord of the Rings soundtrack over the radio during one leg of the trip.

Amused by the bizarre and almost magical nature of John’s antics, the rest of pledge class realized that they needed to calm him down somehow so that he did not do something more dangerous. So, when John rotated to a car with Christian H., Cieran, Luke, and J.C., they asked him to tell them stories. John was known as a story-teller of rare form. In his chapter interview, John had regaled the actives with a story about a home invasion in which he had chased a would-be thief out of his house with a shotgun. Apparently his telling of the story had been so engrossing that, when the time came to vote on who would receive a bid,

John was voted in on the first round, which was unheard of for any rushee who did not have an older brother who was or had been in the chapter. Stories were his specialty.

He told them of John Smith's adventures before he came to America and the three Turkish swordsmen whom he beheaded in battle, regaled them with the tale of Doc Holliday and Wyatt Earp's friendship, led them from the gunsmoke of Tombstone Arizona's OK Corral to the sun-bleached sands of the Dominican Republic with its swarms of vendors and the dark mysticism of its Haitian neighbors. He wove such detail and emotion into the tales that those in the car could see the stories in their minds' eyes, playing out like movies. They listened with rapt silence as John built the tension in the dramatic tales and they roared with laughter at his lighter, more absurd adventures.

But John was running out of stories to tell. He'd have to come up with something new soon. He had his fellows' complete attention, their hearts and minds. Losing that for lack of material would be a pity. He would prolong this special moment as long as possible, for here was a bond – the bond between bard and listener, hunter and hungry family. And it was a moment of revelation. Through sharing in the experience of John's talent they were coming to know him more and to appreciate him. To be known – that was what John desired, for in a way to be known truly is to be loved. Despite the level of alcohol in his system, he adjusted his speech to compensate for the effects and it suddenly seemed that his eloquence was unaffected.

Then the thought occurred to him, more alluring than invasive, to tell the story he knew best, but the one he had never told. At least not in full. What better way to enthrall his audience and at the same time strengthen the bond that had begun to crystallize?

AUTHOR'S NOTES TO HIMSELF

Information is a non-material entity: Information in the broadest sense of the word – a story, a message, raw data, etc. it does not involve matter. A story does not become a story until it is illuminated in someone's imagination. We confuse the *medium* of information with information. Example: The Bible is not God's word. It is the medium of God's word. Words are inanimate. DNA is inanimate molecules, until DNA reaches a cell and is interpreted

Three parts of a Story

The Source, The Medium (Linguistic analysis of medium: the thing that carries between), The Destination

That's why people become so emotional about good stories. When they love good stories, that story, and the cognitive reality created around that story within their imagination, is their own. It is completely independent of the medium. The power of words is far beyond the medium

Fire

The words are the tiny puffs of air that must be timed perfectly with the precise strength which we use to kindle the fire, but the fire has a life of its own

Look up good information about information as non-material entity. Look in the Bible about Scripture being living and active, the Holy Spirit taking inadequate prayers and turning them into groanings too deep for words

The power of the Big Bang was unleashed by a word from God, before language as we know it was invented.

It is very congruent with the concept of the fictive dream. The story is not about the words, but rather about something kindled within the reader.

Marshall McLuhan: The Medium is the message

This disagrees with the above concept

If you want to know how to really move people, you have to focus on what you are doing in a person's imagination.

Lewis- talks about being "pierced" with a sense of longing for God, can relate this to ekphrasis. Talks about a little garden that his brother made and that through this garden somehow he caught the vision of the pastoral. Also pierced by a picture of an incredibly beautiful valley, which he eventually finds (highlighted in the end of "Shadow Lands."

Could do before and after drafts: 1 draft with very little fictive dream, other draft with fictive dream stuff

Could take whole thing or selected passages with comparison

This is a simple coming of age story about a young man leaving home to seek his fortune and become the man he wants to be in the realm of collegiate freedom and potential and find his place in world.

Leaves home (Is lonely at home. Longs for adventure. Longs for friendship)

Goes to Baylor University- comfort of returning to Texas, but the strangeness, vulnerability and excitement of the unknown in this new adventure that is college

Mention of trying place in honors college (through interview. Also conversation revealing the assassins incident)

Mention of trying place in rugby team (through scar on head)

Mention of trying place on fencing team (through demonstration of skill with a sword and general martial skill)

Frustration borne of loneliness and not being able to find adventure or deep friendship

Then the story really begins to pick up when he hears of fraternities, begins a tentative inquiry into their world, rushes, and then decides to pledge

It is an enchanting world and, as they say, "it's all about choices"

The fraternity is a community entire, a microcosm of society- you will find what you wish to find, first by choosing the right fraternity chapter, then by choosing friends within that chapter

In this fraternity there are good and noble men, but most of them are in the upper classes, and they are passing away

"circling the drain"

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