

ABSTRACT

Unilever: a novel

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Abstract: *Unilever* is a novel that deals with commercials, commercialism, consumerism, and their roles in American culture. The tension in this story hinges on the attractions and allures of commodities versus the desire not to be made an object of advertising (or to be objectified in general). Two main characters include an advertising agent who feels disillusioned by his career, and a precocious middle-schooler who becomes more involved in his drug use while solving the dilemma of a heavy debt. Some of this novel's biggest influences include David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, Don DeLillo's *White Noise*, Dave Eggers's *The Circle*, and Jonathan Lethem's *Chronic City*.

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UNILEVER: A NOVEL

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CHAPTER ONE

UNILEVER: A NOVEL

Blake had never thought these conversations with Jordan would depreciate in their simple beauty.

He remembers when he first saw her—and thinks of it often—several linoleum-tiled yards away in Brainhurst University’s “International Flavors” dining hall. She was wearing small white shorts that showed off her long tan legs and a floral-pattern lace tank-top. Jordan happened to glance toward Blake at an awkward moment: his lips had landed just short of his recyclable coffee cup’s rim, and dark roast liquid splashed down the front of his white Brooks Brothers polo. He saw her grin about it (without teeth, which accentuated the fullness of her lips), which made his cheeks sting. But only a few wadded up napkins later, she appeared in front of him, helping him clean up the mess.

“It’s okay,” she smiled, with a napkin pressed against his shirt. “I did the same thing last week.”

After a few weeks of fervent Facebook messaging, text exchanges, twilit walks, and late-night phone calls, they began dating. Once, on a date at a coffee shop, the first time Blake found himself capable of drinking coffee since what Jordan called “The Bay of Pigs Caffeination,” he had decided to wear an intentionally brownish-black shirt.

“Good choice, Blake,” Jordan grinned. “You found a shirt pre-stained for the occasion.”

Blake tried to deny it.

“Spoken just like an advertiser. Or a senator, maybe.” Jordan had intended at least the former half of the comment if not the latter as a compliment, since Blake had already formally announced his career plans: upon the completion of a summer internship before his senior year, Imago Advertising, Inc. had offered Blake a post-graduation full-time position writing TV commercials—as an advertising agent, or rather an agent of advertising—and he, after having seen so many *magna* and *summa cum laude* English majors graduate joblessly before him who had written honors theses on things like “Postmodernism’s Desire for Simulated Death: A Deconstructive Analysis of Car Crashes” and “The Separative Self, Anti-Interiority, and Crippling Depression in Plath’s and Wallace’s Fiction,” knew he was going to graduate *cum laude* at best, and so basically devoured the generous offer whole. And maybe it was “advertiser’s” proximity to “senator,” but something inside Blake ripped, like a tiny puncture at the bottom of the canoe of his psyche, allowing a leak that would slowly sink the boat until the day it found itself submerged.

“You look sad,” Jordan said as they walked out of the coffee shop with their cinnamon lattes. “Come on, let’s go into PetSmart and look at kittens. That’ll cheer you up.”

Blake twisted awake, feeling he had just surfaced from the bottom of a roiling sea.

“Did your water just break?” Jordan said.

Blake turned on his side and noticed that his back had left a sweaty impression of itself on the fitted sheet.

“I had a dream that I was half-buried in the ground and covered in mud. There were car-sized mud-hills surrounding me as far as I could see. I knew it was mud, and that I normally think mud is filthy, but I didn’t mind the slimy feel of the mud on my skin or the earthy stink. I wanted to dive into all of the mud-hills—to be in all of them. But it was too late—I was already in one, and the mud had caked around me in thick layers. I don’t know what made me more claustrophobic: the actual confined space, or knowing that I wouldn’t ever experience any other particular space.”

Raising a spoonful of vanilla honey Greek yogurt to her mouth, “You’re not even gonna ask if *my* water broke?”

“I’m guessing it didn’t.”

Jordan wrinkled her brow, perturbed. But she sensed that his tone was absent of cruelty or curtness.

Blake, noticing his wife’s brightly-packaged individual serving of Chobani yogurt and wanting to recover from his nightmare, headed into the kitchen to grab a Snickers bar. He kept a drawer full of them, reserved exclusively for moments that demanded a special reward for their endurance. But this time, Blake made his trip to the drawer with a lingering guilt. He restrained an impulse to call Steve about it. Steve, always devoted to a principle of bare-necessities—Spartan, really—had retreated even further into his plain interior lately, eschewing TV, Facebook, Twitter, text messaging, Google, Skype, and phone calls, except for when work demanded, which was obviously often. But Steve’s core philosophy, which he had related to Blake over Frankensteins (a mixer made of as many liquors’ limbs as the name suggests) one night at an uptown bar/lounge—before Steve had suddenly renounced alcohol—was “to render unto Imago what is Imago’s, and

keep the rest for myself.” Steve’s co-workers, Blake included, found it difficult to determine the successfulness of his philosophy. Not that Steve raised facades. In fact, he spoke with such candidness when questioned that Steve’s listeners often mistook his nature for hip irony, or facetiousness, as if everything he said was a quote. But having known him long enough, Blake was familiar with Steve’s honesty, a quality he had grown jealously to admire.

Returning to the bedroom from the kitchen, Blake tiptoed across the ocher stained-concrete floor. He did this not out of concern for disturbing Jordan because as he walked down the hallway he could hear her on the other side of the bedroom door making chalky scrapes with her spoon, trying to extract the last few drops of yogurt. He moved with trepidation because the house itself, newly-built, seemed to demand it. He was reluctant to say anything about it to Jordan yet, since the house was their first big investment together, and his lack of ability to explain it deflated him. Nonetheless, he sensed a clear reason why walking around his house alone at night discomforted him. *Leave the city*, they said. *Move out to the far suburbs where it’s peaceful*, they said. The big diamond-paned back-door near the kitchen faced black-nothingness and otherwise looked like a portal to horror movies, which did not help.

Blake slid back into bed, and pulling his side of the sheets over, said, “Is there some way we can change out that big window on the back-door and make it, like, two smaller windows?”

“Smaller windows are for the front-doors so neighbor-ladies with strollers aren’t tempted to peep as they pass by. And besides, don’t you want to see the beautiful sunrise when you walk into the kitchen and start making coffee?”

Frustrated, but at a rhetorical loss to deny beauty, Blake kissed his wife, moved close to her, and tried to fall asleep. The next morning he turned over on his other side, sore from conforming to the position that allowed him to drape his arm around her while they slept. A watch on the dresser beeped.

In the kitchen, Blake lifted a shiny little Keurig K-Cup off the Keurig-brand carousel which came packaged with the coffee-maker for 20% off, and he wondered whether the same beans ended up packed beneath all of the varibranded labels, because each cup, once poured, tasted the same—satisfying, but not unique. Despite his dulled interest in it, Blake clicked a little yellow Gevalia cup into its socket and activated the trickle of hot water. Gevalia, the same company for whom Blake’s ad featuring a smartly dressed Scandinavian man—certainly over-dressed for doling out samples in the aisle of a local grocery store—had just aired. (During the ad’s writing and filming, Blake saw far enough to discern how the process and its commission translated into a new laptop for Jordan. He liked giving her things as pale reminders or extensions of his affection for her.) He took a swig from his Starbucks mug, tense with worry, like a thorn in his mind, about a career which made him feel like his insides were stagnating. He tried, instead, to remember what Jordan said about the sun in the morning.

As the bitter brew gushed down his esophagus, he could only see how the sun’s phosphorescent crown crept languidly over the horizon, as if lacking commitment.

“I wish we could watch TV while we worked. Don’t you, Bill?”

“We do. Our jobs *are* watching TV. We just have to watch all the commercials, too.”

“I miss the old days when you at least had some hope that you could flip through the channels and find *something* other than a commercial to watch. Even if it was, like, the Bravo channel. You ever watch the Bravo channel?”

“No, Daniel, I’ve never watched the Bravo channel. Are you paying attention to your advertising metrics?”

Bill and Daniel sat in black cushioned swivel chairs before a sleek mainframe which reported information on three monitors: on the far right, a grid comparing and ranking revenue for different television ads; on the far left, a looping clip of the highest grossing TV commercial to date; and in the center, a television which automatically tuned itself to whichever channel held the highest viewership in America.

“Yes, I’m watching the damn metrics, Bill. A little conversation would be nice is all.”

“A little conversation. You’re asking a single, overweight guy in his early forties whether he’s ever watched the *Bravo* channel. I mean, why not ask me about *Deadliest Catch* or *Ice Road Truckers* for chrissakes?”

“I guess I’m just a little agitated. Things with Lynette haven’t been going so good lately.”

“And your strategy’s to watch the Bravo channel.”

“Okay, I get it. I apologize for not considering your weight alongside the demographics.”

Bill and Dan were experienced well enough by now to know cable TV's demographic distributions by heart: there is not, in fact, a single man with a body-fat percentage greater than 25% who watches the Bravo channel.

“I can't even help it. It's a thyroid thing, you know.”

“Lynette says our youngest has been watching a lot of thyroid surgery infomercials lately. In the early morning, when it's just commercials.”

The Unilever cable syndicate owned all major media networks, and so consolidated all advertising and programming schedules into synchronized blocks, allowing the media syndicate to track its most powerful ads. Which was crucial, because the advent of block-scheduled programming had forced open the portal for TV commercials to exist as an entertainment sub-world, and rendered commercials just as much a predictor of whether someone would finish watching a program as the program itself. After 2014, “flipping through the channels” was not a means of skipping commercials, but rather something between amenity and safeguard to ensure something good was on.

The most successful commercial to date was a clip from *The Avengers* [2012] which featured the heroes eating shawarma together in a cramped café, suddenly followed by a Coors Light logo pasted over a blank white background. When awarded for the ad, its writer said, “You know, the movie's producers actually did all the hard stuff, making their audience think this little clip was something to wait after the credits for—a reward. And our network's programming just replicated this effect. Once we leaked the idea of an ‘exclusive promotional entertainment’ to be aired during a new spin-off series over our social media outlets, people tuned in just for the commercial. The show's ratings

for that promotion are *still* an all-time high.” And so the exclusive promotional entertainment looped before Bill.

Daniel continued, “Some people are getting thyroid removal surgeries as cosmetic procedures, and to support people who have actually needed the procedure. They cover up the scar by getting a butterfly tattoo. And that’s one thing Lynette was upset about the other day. ‘Why didn’t you let me get that hummingbird tattoo when we were in our twenties? You *would* be afraid of me getting a little tattoo,’ she said.”

His wife also described him as “predictable: you like to have supper at exactly 6:37—during the commercials—every day, and it can’t be something you’ve never tried before. So here’re your chicken fingers, fries on the side.” And so he knew, based on his fear, that he was not especially creative or insightful, which he regretted, because it left him struggling with a limited number of options for how he thought he could be happy. Post-2014 network syndication seemed to cut these options, as it did programming, and it was just dawning on Daniel why sleeping on the couch was even lonelier lately than it had been during the agitated occasions of yesteryears.

Bill, sympathetic machinery coming out of a long-rusted halt, said, “I don’t have a wife, so I don’t really know how that feels. But that sounds rough. Even if you do watch Bravo.”

“You’ve got a new commercial, Bill.”

“I liked the last one better.”

“I wonder if Lynette has the same kind of nostalgia. But, like, for old boyfriends, maybe. Would she call them missed opportunities? I don’t remember her ever smelling the way she does lately. Like lilac sprayed from a bottle.”

Dan heard the crackle of a bag of chips opening, and hoped to hear one more comforting thing after a handful of Tostitos or two. Then, time seemed to stutter, briefly. Dan heard the bag of chips fall to the ground with a dull smack, which echoed throughout the control room. For the first time in recent memory, Dan took his eyes away from a screen while working and found Bill deep in a state of diabetic shock. Head draped over his right shoulder. And his eyes, like empty snow-globes, stared directly into Dan's.

ANDREW WARHOLA INTERMEDIATE SCHOOL

A group of hairy boys careened down the hall, two of the three munching Burger King from the wrapper; amber-colored grease dripping down their forearms in a vein-like pattern. Midway down the hall, one shoved another into a set of paint-peeled lockers. An impotent algebra teacher whose wife had grown tired of his one pickup-line by the end of their first year of marriage asked the boys to stop. Instead, one boy in an Odd Future t-shirt grabbed a handful of salty fries and threw them at the poor algebra teacher. He shut his door gingerly and began class early.

The three boys, Dirk, Kyle, and Gabe, who shared an adolescent eye-for-an-eye philosophy, stomped toward the computer lab. Somewhere in their growing up and hanging out together, however, perhaps involving some misguided appreciation for their favorite video game characters, this philosophy had turned more into an I-for-an-eye—a bottomless will that hungered for any kind of attention-getting destructiveness. Kyle pressed a marker against the wall. Dirk threw open the door to the lab, and cringed at the harsh rays of sunlight pouring through the open windows.

Miles Downing sat before a series of monitors, a helm of information. Stock trends, currency graphs, nonlinear equations, and chaotic algorithms flickered across the liquid crystal panels and across his retinas, the data transforming and being transformed. Hearing the door crack against the concrete wall, Miles' face flushed.

“What’re you doing in here by yourself, fag?” Gabe asked.

“Shut up, Gabe” said Dirk. “You didn’t even want Burger King this morning because of some shit about *gluten*, so if anyone’s gonna call Downing a fag, it’s me.” Dirk brandished his Whopper, feeling the grease ooze through the wax-paper.

“It’s alright,” said Miles, avoiding eye contact. “I’ll go now.”

Before he could slip out of the room, Kyle grabbed Miles by his plaid shirt’s collar and threw him to the floor. Miles cradled his laptop against his chest before hitting the tile.

Kyle said, “Those codes you gave us to unlock our cable boxes so we could watch TV on ad-free networks were fake, Miles.”

“Yeah,” said Dirk. “I don’t know what you were thinking when you gave us those, but not five minutes after we entered the codes in the cable box at Kyle’s house, the fucking ASPCA showed up at our door.”

“They asked where we got the codes from, but we didn’t say shit.”

“Shut up, Gabe” said both Kyle and Dirk. They sensed something in the exaggerated tenor of his voice that he was a social swearer—he did it to fit in. When alone, he probably did chores around the house, and respected his mother.

“But the point is, Kyle’s dad’s gonna have to pay for your fuck-up.”

“You guys don’t think you had a choice?” Miles asked. “I just mention the codes, as a possibility, and you’re willing to risk getting fined by the ASPCA just over commercials?”

There was a certain irony about the question of choice, Miles realized. He had analyzed intricate broadcast systems’ codes, searching for a way of separating the advertisement from the entertainment for the sake of profit, which was also ironic. But it concerned profit as a means of freedom *from*, rather than freedom *to*. An end existed apart from the means. Miles couldn’t bear seeing Mom come home from a twelve-hour shift, bags under her itchy eyes, skin jaundiced by exposure only to fluorescent light, hair

flat and depressed. She belonged to a sadistic orbit whose massive bodies consisted of dollars and things. The process could not sustain itself. So, for Miles, the project of cable-network logarithm analysis, which he conducted under the guise of a “math” project for the fourth annual Andrew Warhola Intermediate Science Fair, looked like a black-market door to a better future. He could sell illegal, ad-unlocked cable-boxes at a high price.

“We don’t go home,” said Kyle, “to sit still for nothing.”

“Part of the problem,” said Gabe, “is that the commercials aren’t even good enough yet. They’re saying on TV that the commercials’ll start getting better every people provide feedback, but—even though I kinda like that clip with Iron Man and Thor, and stuff—I can still tell the difference between when I’m enjoying something and when I’m being asked to buy something.” He wiped a string of snot onto his sleeve.

“The point is,” said Dirk “we don’t like people lying to us, and fucking around with our money, Miles.”

“You mean Kyle’s dad’s money,” Miles said, starting to sweat.

“The ASPCA is fining my dad \$5000 for a first-offense. Communications fraud, they’re calling it. And if you don’t repay my family every bit of that \$5000, my dad’s not gonna take us to Disney Land this summer because he thinks I need to learn ‘financial lessons.’ So you better fucking pay up, or we’re coming after you.”

Something about threatening someone like a mobster about a Disney trip seemed asinine.

“Do Dirk and Gabe get to go to?” Miles asked.

Kyle hesitated, as if saying “no” would cost his argument credibility.

“\$5000 by next month, Miles. Or we’re reporting you to the ASPCA for fraud.”

A burst of icy air blew in from the ceiling-vent and made Miles shiver. Dirk, Kyle, and Gabe walked out of the computer lab and slammed the door shut. Then, as if prompted by the door's slam, the weight of the entire room engulfed Miles. The different molecular masses of imitation wood desks and stools, the floor's dirty linoleum, all miscellaneous BIC pens and pencils all gathered in his extremities, unable to be contained by the skin meant only to wrap around his frame. Miles struggled to lift himself from the floor. His back was drenched with sweat and his toes and fingertips felt besieged by dull needles.

Dizzy, Miles walked to the bathroom. In a stall, someone had carved "Kyle is a faggot" on the inside of the door. Miles stumbled into this stall and turned the metal knob behind him, almost falling backward into an open toilet. The floor smelled like old piss, and dull yellow spots marked the tiles, but Miles collapsed on its surface anyway. He had begun to think of the pills as vitamins—his consciousness supplements. There was nothing *bad* about them, right? he couldn't help asking himself. Why else would the FDA approve them? Whenever Miles crumbled under panic, sweat, or paranoia, he simply reached for the little amber bottle. Under the cap, hydrocodone bitartrate and acetaminophen tablets, 500 mg, brand name Vicodin®. The taste of wax and chalk.

A trickle of warmth washed over Miles, and the number five-thousand shrank down into its individual parts. Groups of ones, fives, maybe tens, each smaller and less formidable than the goliath sum. Commercials seemed almost watchable, so long as they were funny.

Miles, addicted to a sense of accomplishment as much as pain-killers, opened his laptop on the tile floor and attempted to access the ASPCA mainframe but, accidentally,

kept typing and retyping “ASPCA” into Google, which, with respect to revolutionary subversion, accomplished nothing. But the top results, mostly articles from the *New York Times*, *USA Today*, and the Associated Press, ranged from extolling the ASPCA for restoring the United States’ credit rating to AAA and springing the country out of recession by the advent of block-scheduled ad-heavy television, to criticism over potentially endangering first amendment rights with respect to the ASPCA’s consolidation of a majority of media companies under the Anglo-Dutch multinational Unilever brand name (thereby creating a media monopoly), to further criticism about the ASPCA’s controversial buyout of the American Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals’ acronym and subsequent conversion to the Atheist Society for Procurement of Capital Advancement.

The appearance of these articles caused Miles to remember the ASPCA’s televisual debut, their presidential endorsement, and even the show he was watching which had twined its segments around the public service announcements.

“I’d like to take a minute just sit right there, I’ll tell you how I became the prince of a town called Bel-Air.” Did I just say that out loud?

A man replied to Miles in thick, slurred Spanish of which he took no notice.

The ASPCA infomercial had appeared, in bits, last December, and initially looked like nothing more than another advertised sale for the politically-fair President Gleich Cold Holiday of You’re Off From Work Unless Work Happens to be a Major Retailer, or C.H.Y.O.F.W.U.W.H.M.R. Which was often pronounced something like “choff-wummer.” (Before Unilever media-entertainment syndication had taken effect, striving to create the most entertaining ads possible, the ASPCA had borrowed President Gleich’s

newly instated national symbol: the image of a blind, sexless figure grasping a set of empty scales, designating the non-partisan strength of a value-neutral country wherein no race or creed was particularly highlighted or persecuted. The ASPCA's temporary adoption of this symbol was a gesture of continuity out of which the ASPCA could incrementally grow—before the public eye—as a second governmental head.)

Miles noticed that once the newness of “choff-wummer” had worn off, a small percentage of people, like the faded-brunette quilt-making woman who lived in the apartment beneath Miles' and his mother Debra's, had reverted to calling December 25 “Christmas”—an uncomfortably value-charged word. Not that Miles cared. He pitied, and even respected the quilt-making woman, Jeanette. She donated most of her quilts to a YMCA down the street. But last December, on an occasion when Miles stopped by the leasing office to deposit the rent check for his mother, Jeanette had wished the leasing manager a “Merry Christmas!” at which the manager, Vanessa Chevron, twisted her eyebrows and lips toward the center of her face in disgust. Wanting to take Jeanette's side, though indirectly, Miles had wished Ms. Chevron “a good Choff to you!” with a dramatic hat-tipping gesture as he left her office. Vanessa, however—crusading into the normalizing adulthood of her late twenties—held a mindset that children lacked individual senses of humor or irony, and so she smiled back, pleased with her progressive support of the New Neutrality Movement.

But, Miles thought, who could really blame her? President Gleich, only halfway through his first term, was like a president turned actor, and the only role he needed was his career. He golfed regularly with either Tiger Woods or Phil Mickelson, had sung at a benefit concert for Africa with Bono, and had even made guest appearances on a few

episodes of ESPN's *College Game Day* and a show about a family who created almost anything under the sun from recycled Coke products. He had an unlined face with chiseled features and well-trimmed eyebrows that allowed him to fit in anywhere. So it seemed natural that Vanessa would plaster "Like Gleich! (on Facebook)" stickers with an image of his face throughout her workspace in the leasing office.

On the other hand, Miles wondered whether he wanted to defend Vanessa because her wavy blonde hair, slender figure, and choices in designer fashion (Maison Labiche blouses, E. Porselli ballet flats) reminded him of a baby-sitter he had powerlessly coveted in his single-digit years. Maybe it was just the Vicodin® talking, but then again a body like hers did not need words.

Out of nowhere, Miles heard a loud pounding on the stall's door, followed by a jingling of keys which immediately deflated Miles' brief fantasy, and the same voice from before said, "Leetle boy, I needju to leave the resroom so I can clean. Everyone else's already gone home."

With a ringing sense of panic, Miles slammed his laptop shut, unsure of whether he feared more the idea of being caught with Vicodin®, the janitor's possible suspicion about what he was doing in a locked bathroom stall with an open laptop hours after the school day's end, or the reality that he was now living close to ASPCA communications fraud, as well as in a \$5000 debt. Haunted madly now, by a need to find *some* solution, Miles threw open the stall door, and darted out the front doors of Andrew Warhola Intermediate School to the public bus stop.

The janitor, shaking his head, lit a Marlboro.

MONDAY: 7:13AM

Blake parked his beige Acura sedan on the rooftop level of the Gilt Plaza garage. In “Serenity,” the labeled parking zone across from Blake’s, a man wearing a cardboard sign on his chest that read “I ALREADY RENDERED UNTO CAESAR ALL THAT IS HIS,” pushed his grocery cart in Blake’s direction.

He said, “Spare some change?”

“Sorry,” said Blake. “I only have cards.”

“Oh, uh, okay.” He matched Blake’s stride, and pushed his cart alongside him toward the garage’s main elevator. “Why the long face, man?”

Rolling his eyes, puzzled, “I guess I had a lot of expectations for how my life would turn out. And I was mostly wrong. Work, marriage, my self-esteem. Ennui, you could say.”

“That’s strange, man. Hey,” trying to get the words out before the elevator door closed, “you should probably make sure you’re getting good stuff, because I usually look much happier than you do when *I’m* on weed. You could say.”

At the bottom, past the elevator doors, Blake walked into the Gilt Plaza’s entrance with the end in sight: the Imago Ad Concepts tower, a tall taupe-brick building with reflective windows. He proceeded to the tower, hands in his pockets, past a milieu of upscale shops including *Euphoria!*, an artisan chocolatier; *Heather’s*, a bistro that self-consciously referred to itself as a “kitchen”; and—due to a typographical error in a city-planning schedule—two Starbucks locations beside each other.

Blake admitted that the plaza radiated an eerie beauty, especially in early winter. The last red and orange autumn leaves were falling from their skeletal branches, the delicate litter rolling along the crowded sidewalks, occasionally blowing into the pine-floored entryway of a clothier's boutique. Amplified Bose speakers—some disguised as little boulders among sunflowers and azaleas in the middle of terraced gardens—occupied covert perches throughout the plaza and serenaded shoppers with tunes ranging from jazzy lounge music to European dance music, like “Chambermaid Swing” by Parov Stelar. He walked past people with shopping bags, people with briefcases, and suddenly Blake smelled the hot, salty doughiness of Auntie Anne's first pretzels of the morning. His stomach growled with hunger and saliva collected along the sides of his mouth.

Blake noticed a woman with long and wavy dark crimson hair, which complimented her large, icy eyes and high cheek bones. With a distracted expression, she exited the mis-planned Starbucks (distinguished by a banner that celebrated the opening of Star Pucks “Premium Hockey Retailer”). Like those still waiting in line for coffee, she exuded an aura of perennial tiredness. But her high-heel-accented speed-walk staccato suggested an indomitable will in the face of exhaustion, a “fuck sleep” attitude. Her red leather planner, a larger black leather folio, and a stack of manila folders jostled against her arm and her torso while her Louboutin shoulder bag struggled to keep pace with her. In her left hand she held a coffee cup whose white lid was stained by bright red lipstick.

Without warning, a stiff wind cut through the plaza, separating some loosely gripped shopping bags from their owners and knocking down a few signs advertising 50% off sales.

The red-haired woman lost her footing, the bottom of one of her Jimmy Choo heels falling to the ground at an oblique angle. Her bag slipped from her shoulder, down to the crook of her arm, and the sudden shift in weight caused all of her articles to spill onto the pavement. Blake rushed to her side, kneeled, and helped her gather her various organizers and planners. The coffee was lost to the cobblestones.

“Thank you,” she said, fishing through her purse for her cellphone. “I’m so late. I’m supposed to be giving a presentation on how branding affects marketing. Or maybe it’s the other way around.”

Raising an eyebrow before responding, Blake said, “Act of God’s a pretty decent excuse. You could even say that no one bothered to help you.”

She smiled before departing toward one of the plaza’s office buildings.

For a moment, Blake watched her, noting the curves of her hips and legs.

He continued down the stone path to the Imago tower at the plaza’s south end while Nat King Cole’s “Blue Moon” played on the outdoor speakers.

The elevator doors opened to the Imago tower’s 20th level: copywriting. Blake waded past clusters of round tables interspersed throughout the office to reach his own, which he shared with three other ad agents. HR managers across America took to viral implementation of round tables for employee usage after the publication of an industrial psychology article—“Sitting Still for More.” The article claimed that employees are happier (and more productive) when able to work in spaces that foster human connections.

The Onion, in response, referred to the Round Table Epidemic as “American Knighthood: The Less Glamorous, The Slightly Better Paying (Unless You Account for Inflation).” And, understandably, the real-life results had mixed success.

When Blake reached his table, he noticed that his three other co-workers, Brady, Steve, and Rosetta, each sitting before their own laptops, were typing distractedly into their cellphones, silent.

Blake said, “Morning, Steve.”

“You’re late,” he replied. “The new-career excitement must be starting to wear off.”

“Your words, not mine.”

The others remained silent. It looked like a mild case of what WebMD and a few other pop medical sources were calling “Office Awkwardness.” One article reported that, due to the round tables, people felt *forced* to interface with one another, which often led to small, veiled emotional breakdowns. In advanced cases, these emotional breakdowns could escalate to a syndrome called “Workplace Panic.” The prime example of “Workplace Panic” recounted a man dubbed “Louisiana Andre” who assaulted three co-workers (actors hired for the study) after having sat in numbing silence for nearly four-and-a-half hours.

Blake hung his leather briefcase’s strap over the back of his chair and sat beside Steve. On his fraction of the desk, Steve kept nothing but a plain ceramic mug with a Mondrian pattern printed on it. Steve brewed a special coffee blend—perhaps the only thing in his life he chose to make special—which was 50% Folgers, 50% Great Value,

because Brady had once asked, “is your mug half-empty, or half-full?” and Steve had wanted to reply, “It’s half-something.”

“So,” said Blake, wanting to break the silence, “anyone seen Leonard today?”

Brady lowered his face and covered his mouth.

“No,” said Rosetta, “but he loves to show up near the end of the day.”

“Maybe you’ve turned him down so many times by now that he probably waits until the end of the day to put off his rejection,” said Steve. “But he’s asked you out so many times that it’s like a habit he can’t break now.”

“You’d think he would’ve found somebody else by now,” said Brady.

“Well, you’re talking about a guy who smells like *cheese*.”

“Don’t be so hard on him.”

Rosetta, with her thin lips and sand-colored hair, was not very pretty. But she was kind, which was more than she needed to provoke (and sustain) the interest of Leonard Stein from copyediting. It was her kindness and his ignorance that continually brought them together.

“Any sign of him yet?”

“No, and it’s almost 4:30.”

“Do you have your mug ready, anyway, Steve?” said Rosetta.

“Filled it to the top. But you know this feels like aiding and abetting, right?”

“You still do it,” said Brady.

“Well,” said Steve, “because it also feels like I’m performing hostage rescue—I’d feel bad if I just *allowed* Rosetta to fall into Leonard’s hands.”

“Shh, I think he’s coming,” said Blake. “I see that slinky, hunched-over shadow creeping out of the hallway.”

“Time to put on my straight face,” said Brady.

At this time, just before the day’s end, the office transitioned from workplace to audience. They shared Leonard’s painfully embarrassing anticipation, but with fewer lingering questions.

His footsteps made a bizarrely soft *pat, pat*, which followed the swishing sound his slacks made when he walked.

“Hey, Rosetta!” Leonard used all of his facial muscles to form his most appealing smile. “That scarf brings out your eyes so much.”

Brady lowered his gaze, and used his hand to cover his mouth.

“Oh, thanks, Leonard!” She spoke in a tone that would be well-suited to encouraging a child trying something new. “How are you?”

“So, um, would you like to get some coffee after work today, maybe?”

“Oh, Leonard, I’m sorry. I already have some right here.” She brandished Steve’s mug of half-something with a wave of her hand, as if displaying it for the Home Shopping Network. But her apology sounded genuine. “Maybe, next time?”

“Yeah, o—okay,” he stuttered. Leonard hoped that that time would come soon. He could not understand what it was about his own timing that seemed so *off*. “Have a good night, Rosetta.”

“You, too, Leonard.”

Leonard left the office disappointed again.

“Does that guy have asthma or something?”

“He does have an odd way of breathing, doesn’t he?”

“It, like, adds syllables.”

“It’s probably not his fault.”

“Would he choose to breathe that way if it were?”

“And what did I tell you? *Cheese.*”

Perhaps Leonard’s own failure reminded him, but Blake realized he had accomplished no significant work all day. Setbacks had a way of robbing Blake’s own personal sense of significance. The empty desk before him reminded him of the brief period of his life—his last undergraduate year—during which he could not function intra- or interpersonally without a regular dosage of anxiety medication. When Jordan asked him why he stopped taking it, he simply said, “I’ve learned how to control my own thoughts and feelings. I’m better now.”

Blake raised his eyes to the window, and he noticed that the sky was beginning to sink under the weight of dark clouds. No sunlight. And he wondered whether, like his decision to discontinue Zoloft®, a series of prideful mistakes rather than informed decisions had led him to this point.

Stumbling out of the Andrew Warhola Intermediate School complex, Miles noticed the absence of a satisfying rattle. His hand fished through his pocket, and sure enough he had depleted the little amber bottle while in the bathroom. Shit. At least Fix's apartment was nearby.

The skyscrapers' legs, austere office buildings, and glowing shops floated above Miles' head. He saw a Snickers billboard attached to a high-rise a few blocks away. It featured a woman with a neat row of sugar-white teeth and caramel skin whose features looked as smooth as a bowling ball. Wavy chocolate hair covered part of her breasts and the top of her black sleeveless gown. The word "Snickers" was nowhere to be found on the sign. But the bottom read SATISFIES in the classic blue font. The billboard's brightness marked the nearby sidewalks with yellow glow, and Miles always used the sign as a compass: light spilling all over the entrance to Fix's building, the gateway to what *really* satisfied.

He pushed open the swinging glass door into a dim lobby. On the left side of the room, someone had arranged for a reception desk with a series of active monitors, presumably for a security guard, but the station was empty. Not even a chair behind the desk. The monitors' security cameras reported their footage to no one.

Miles stepped past the empty reception area, a dilapidated velvet loveseat, and across a brown oriental rug that lay beneath a rosewood coffee table loaded down with the same outdated tabloids as when Miles had first started buying from Fix. He approached the elevator and hit the ^ symbol on the brass console beside the door. After a rusty lurch, a steady hiss, and a satisfying *ping*, the steel door peeled open. Someone had scratched away all the elevator's floors' numerical designations and replaced them with

icons of different obscene gestures. The etchings transcended the status of bathroom graffiti, each executed with calligraphic attention to concise strokes and clear lines. Miles struck a raised middle finger: Fix's floor. On the way up, Miles noticed that one of the elevator's glass walls revealed two pairs of outstretched handprints, and an ovoid smudge between the two lower hands. When the car stopped and the door peeled open again, Miles disembarked, leaped to the closest door, and knocked in a downtempo pattern.

A pause. Maybe thirty seconds.

Someone on the other side of the door released a chain and left it for Miles to open. Lemon cleaning solvents, a hint of ammonia, and artificial air fresheners permeated the air inside.

"Where's Fix?" said Miles.

"Oh," said Jorge, "he'll be back in like twenty minutes. I think he's visiting his Nana at her nursing home."

Shit.

"Guess I'll just wait till he gets back," Miles sighed.

"You want some of this?"

"No thanks. I'm not a smoker."

"Suit yourself, bud. Pun intended," he winked. Jorge held a small shiny pipe to his mouth, ignited the end with a cheap BIC, and drew a deep breath, as if submersing. He exhaled into a wadded up towel.

"He makes me use a towel or blanket when I smoke. And I have to line the towel with this special detergent that's fortified with Febreze. Says I'll stink up the place if I

don't." He grinned, showing the crests of his upper row of teeth, a perfectly average shade, but mostly shiny red gum line.

Miles sighed, sharing the space with Jorge without amusement. He thought about playing a game on his cellphone until Fix returned. Jorge was one of Fix's *lingerers*. He had his own apartment, and his own life (he worked as an assistant manager at Petco) but he probably spent more time in Fix's apartment than Fix himself. He was soaking up the fluffy feather-cushions of Fix's armchair and wearing his red Petco polo shirt while he played a video game loosely based on real life. He had brought the game and his own data drive from home.

Annoyed, "Why do you keep crashing your car?" said Miles.

"I wanna see if I can fly through the windshield."

A toilet flushed down the hall.

"Is someone else here?"

"Yeah, that's just Marcus.

What did he mean *just* Marcus?"

A tall man with patchy stubble and visible lines around the corners of his mouth stumbled out of the dark hallway adjoining the other side of the kitchen. He was wearing faded gray slacks, a wife beater, and a panama hat. Without a word, he dropped onto the couch cushion beside Miles.

"Ay, Jorge," he said in a smoky voice. "Can you pass that pipe? Towel, too." He did as Jorge had, and after he exhaled into the lavender towel, an ashen stain growing in the center of it, he said to Miles, "Did you want any of this?"

"No, I don't smoke."

“Alright, just thought I’d ask. I like to be polite. Whatchu here for anyway?”

“He’s one of Fix’s,” Jorge paused, “*pained* friends.”

“You know dis’ll do da same thing. Bob Marley himself said this what makes him *feel all right*. Probably healthier than what you on, too. It’s...*na-chuh-rull*.” He widened his eyes with a mystified look.

“I just don’t have the time for any ‘*natural*’ solutions.”

“Now that’s just ignorant,” said Marcus.

With a sudden flicker of inspiration, Jorge paused the video game and laid the shiny little pipe on the chair’s armrest. He leaned over the opposite side of the chair and resurfaced with a candlestick-sized glass chute with a hollow, spherical chamber at the bottom. Jorge held the open end of the chute to his mouth, lit a little glass stem near the bottom, and when he inhaled, a dingy pool of water gurgled at the chamber’s bottom.

“You want some of *this*?” said Jorge, as if a change in instrument would rewrite all of Miles’ perceptions. “It’s gentler. Literally does nothing to you.”

“I get it, man. I just *don’t smoke*.”

Jorge sighed with dissatisfaction. Anyone else would be delighted to take a free hit. Not that there weren’t free amounts, here and there, to be doled out whenever Jorge was holding. “Weed,” he always said, “is like food: better when shared!” Refusing some free weed when offered was a snub equivalent to refusing a host’s dinner. And then returning with takeout.

Miles, on the other hand, sat awkwardly, un-loaded, between Jorge and Marcus. His mother, Debra, had given him the impression that any drug was good so long as it was FDA-approved and that any drug was bad so long as it wasn’t. Her dichotomy

worked to Miles' legal advantage, but made no promises in terms of health. Even marijuana's recent legalization (*sans* FDA-approval) failed to sway her. "Do you want to become some *bum*?" was the conclusion she jumped to when Miles once asked her an innocuous question about the drug. "I was just asking how you *felt* about it," was his reply. "Just don't ever do it," she had said. "I'd never look at you the same if you did. You wouldn't be my son." While Marcus and Jorge laughed about a sailing accident that had just happened in the video game, Miles stewed with these thoughts.

He lifted himself from the couch, almost ready to leave, until suddenly the doorknob jiggled.

Fix.

"Aw, wha's good, papa? How's yo nana?" Marcus had left the couch and motioned Fix through an elaborate handshake.

"I wasn't with my Nana," said Fix. "My Nana's been dead for three years. Where'd you get that idea?"

"Oh. Um, shit. Man. I thought Jorge said..."

They all turned to the screen to see what Jorge was doing. His character was in the process of deciding whether or not to mug a gray-haired man using an ATM. Pixel-Jorge turned toward the screen and—for a moment—seemed to look back at everyone, gauging their approval, before he ran off with the wallet.

"Credible source, Marcus. Great. Actually, I was at Azteca Worldwide Entertainment. Seems like they've been having some problems disseminating their pre-recorded Native American tribal dramas through the History Channel. Something weird keeps showing up during their pre-paid time slot. Like, pictures of people's necks

followed by the words ‘Coming Soon.’ The elder I spoke to didn’t know how to react to it. He just kept on saying things like ‘bad omen,’ ‘end of days,’ and ‘I’m out of cigarettes.’ Shit like that.”

“Did you give him one?”

“I didn’t *have* one. You know I don’t touch those. It would stink up the damn house. But we should keep in mind that I was kind of high at the time. So I could be remembering parts wrong. Probably would’ve brought you, Marcus, if you hadn’t been in the bathroom so long. You always know the right questions to ask about these TV things.”

“I’m a little rusty anyway. Haven’t been in a cable box in a long time. And you know they’re different nowadays.” Looking toward Miles, “I used to be able to earn money by giving people free access to the movie and sports channels. Every box used to run a program where you could trace the signal back to its source and you could exploit the connection, stealing the access codes from the company itself. And because you used the cable company’s own access codes, they just thought it was paid-for. But with these new Unilever systems, there’s nothin’ to trace back, almost like there *is* no source.”

“Or it’s more like there are so *many* sources,” said Miles, bubbling with sudden enthusiasm. “You never know which one is right. I’ve seen their software. They use a mutating security algorithm, so even if you choose a weak point in the program, it shuts itself off after a certain time period anyway.”

“It’s not the kind of software you can just *hack*,” said Marcus.

“How do you know that?”

“Because it’s impossible. I tried. I broke into someone’s house to watch TV one day. When I turned it on, it was nothing like what I remember TV used to be. Nothin’ but commercials. You know how hard it is to watch a damn movie when seven minutes of department store sales keep interrupting a beautiful relationship? Sorry.” He paused. “I was trying to watch my favorite movie at the time, *Titanic*. I just can’t get over Jack and Rose! But that’s aside the point. Let me start over.” He took a breath. “I heard from a friend of mine who used to work for one of the old independent cable companies that got sold into Unilever and he said Unilever TV would be like this. So I thought maybe I could open the box and disable the ads. Just like installing free cable channels.

“After the first adjustment I made, it just shut off. The little green lights on the box stopped blinking. The screen went black. Nothing. All of a sudden, the home phone started ringing, the TV started blaring emergency broadcast system alerts, the microwave turned on, the oven and stove turned on, and man I got the fuck outta there. And it was the weirdest thing, dude: it didn’t look like no one ever came back to that house. Like it was abandoned right before the first time I went there. Ghost town. Weeds everywhere when I returned. But no neighbors seemed to notice.

“I still have a few connections, though, so I asked around. Talked to a guy about Unilever boxes. He said the damn things are rigged. It’s a federal crime just to open one. And they’ll *know*, unless you have an authorized decryption drive. But because it’ll let you make modifications to the entire network, only people in the ASPCA have those. Hopeless.”

“Have you heard from your friend recently?”

“No.”

“I just remembered, Miles,” said Fix, “that you’re actually here for a reason. I got so caught up in all this communications talk that I forgot to communicate with *you*. But I think I know why you’re here. Just let me pull on my white doctor’s coat and stethoscope so I can write your scrip.”

“That’s not what doctors call ‘em,” said someone not Miles.

“Touché, touché!” called a voice, already down the hall.

Miles’ gaze twitched over to Jorge.

“Hey let me try some of that.”

“What, really? Now?”

“I changed my mind.”

“Since 15 minutes ago?”

Miles nodded. All the talk of conspiracy had flooded him with adrenaline. He’d had an opportunity to show to Marcus and Fix that he possessed some measure of intelligence, which made him buzz, like a fast dose of caffeine. Hearing of the ASPCA also recalled to him the urgency of the \$5000 debt he owed. Rather than pressure closing in on him, he felt no ceiling above him: limitless potential to handle any- and everything.

“I could try anything right now.”

“Well, alright, whatever.” He handed the hefty glass totem over to Miles. “Just don’t spill—or drink—any of the water in there. Balance it on your lap.” He handed Miles the stubby plastic-blue lighter. “Just hold the lighter up that little piece near the bottom. You have to breathe in through the top really hard if you don’t want to burn your thumb.”

“K.”

Miles steadied the glass assemblage in his lap, lit the piece, and inhaled two lungfuls of smoke. He hadn't held it all in for more than a second or two before he suddenly started coughing hard—ribs shaking, the wheezy whistle of the bronchial tubes sounding. Miles' eyes watered while he struggled for breath.

Jorge started laughing, and Marcus chimed in with a restrained chuckle.

“But you didn't burn your thumb, right?”

Cough, cough. “No.”

Jorge smiled, satisfied with his giving attitude.

Miles could feel bile surging through his lower esophagus, but he struggled to keep it down, because he knew how much vomit would upset Fix. It soothed Miles to realize that that was *it*. His eyes were red and watery, but that was *it*. Taking a drug without FDA-approval hadn't caused him to explode. A milky sense of peace even melted over him. He wanted to forgive his mother for a time when she hit him with a wooden cooking spoon for jokingly suggesting the presence of “drugs” in the house when a date was visiting for the first and only time. What Frank D'ambrosio didn't know, and what Miles' mother Debra *knew* Frank didn't know, was that Miles, a silly eight-year-old at the time, meant nothing more serious than Advil.

“So,” said Fix, walking back into the living room in his lab coat and stethoscope. “Your prescription is ready. I recommend one-to-two tablets every four-to-six hours for pain as needed. But try not to exceed more than that. Unless you're sharing with others.”

“I don't want it.”

“What do you mean you don't want it? You *love* Vicodin. Fifteen minutes go by and suddenly you don't want what you came here for?”

“You don’t think people can change?”

“Unbelievable. Jorge, you know this is going on *your* tab, right? I mean, this is such a regular sale for me that I have it figured into my rent. And I have the fucking coat on and everything. I’m gonna go clean something while you figure out your payment method.”

“Don’t take any of it, Jorge,” said Miles. “It’s no real satisfaction in life.”

Steve pushed open the heavy wooden door to the “Oceania” conference room at the ASPCA’s offices. Presiding chairman Mark Buns had summoned him to deliver his regular report on televisual innovations. From the front of the room, Steve cleared his throat and peered at all the suited men before him. Publicly speaking rarely made him nervous, but Steve could not help noticing—in fact, he tried not to notice—that Mark Buns bore an uncanny resemblance to the man seated beside him: newly hired Vice President of Associated Communications, Cliff Goldman. The resemblance between the two men—a round face with thick eyebrows, brown eyes, pale lips, and thin brown hair—plus their ambiguous connection to each other within the corporate hierarchy, brought to Steve’s mind the image of a posed family portrait from his childhood. His family had loved taking portraits for every major holiday. An old Thanksgiving photo with the words “What We’re Thankful For” superimposed beneath smiling faces found its way into the digital inboxes of aunts and uncles far and wide, and sometimes an uncle by marriage would have to ask, “Who are these people, again?” And his wife would reply, “They’re the ones I introduced you to three or four New Year’s parties ago. Remember? My cousin’s sister’s family.” Relatives said they simply adored receiving the little photographs.

Before he could take a breath to deliver the meeting’s first word, Steve travelled back to the moment his father or, George, rather—*just* George, really—told him he was adopted. It took weeks to sink in at the time, if it ever did. In the days after George delivered the news, Steve caught himself at different times staring (without being seen, of course) at Dad/George, Mom/Gladys, his brother/Gary, or his sister/Gina. He imagined he could find his place among them again if he could identify a similar nose, mouth, or

even fingernail on one of them—any common trait to trace him back to them. The promise of shared blood had made life during the pre-adoption era clear.

Steve, a neon-blonde child in a family of walnut brunettes, had never noticed his physical differences until George confessed to him the secret of his adoption. He was five years old at the time. And the information had clung to his insides, like an infection, distorting his family's rituals and mealtimes into alienating events until he no longer lived with them on a daily basis. What George had revealed was a secret, because it was something Gary and Gina had had to pretend for a few years not to know.

Until that revelation, with child-like enthusiasm, Steve had imagined himself a necessary piece to something. He would be the first to stack piles of board games on the coffee table on weekend evenings, gathering the family into the living room to share each other's company. He would grin about the power he had to bring his family together, but loved to see their animated reactions to a "Go Straight to Jail" card or a pivotal money-making dice roll even more. Gina liked to pretend she was a real bank teller when handling Monopoly money. She once tried to instate an official bureaucracy (on top of the game's already extant system) for purchasing and selling properties until the parents realized her seriousness when she demanded the full completion of an eighth acquisition form in one game. (Popular vote ended up sending her straight to jail.) Gina, nonetheless, bought a pantsuit to wear during Monopoly, which would prove to be a waste of money. But the few times she was able to, she wore it regardless of whether the family allowed her to be banker.

The post-adoption era, a time when Steve floated in and out of child counseling centers, flailing, sobbing, and screaming that he did not know his real name, saw less

Monopoly. It saw more closed doors. One specialist, Terry Larson, said she had never seen such an extreme case of child abandonment issues. A wall of framed diplomas and awards in her office certified her vision. After the revelation had passed, the kids—Gary, Gina, and Steve—started spending more time in each of their own rooms, watching their TVs or chatting with strangers on the internet. Gary and Gina did not spend the kind of quality time together whispering secrets into the night's dead hours about the brother turned outsider now in the center of the family like Steve imagined. Had he known the unspoken guilt that Gary and Gina each shared over their unasked for blood, things might have been different.

The parents, George and Gladys, could not find an agreement about whether they should have ever told Steve. "He deserves to know his own history," George would say. "But look what it's done to him," Gladys would shout. The kids, when they resurfaced from their rooms for a snack or a glass of water, often saw one parent watching the news in the living room, the other watching a separate news channel in the bedroom. Steve, formerly the great uniter, could not be coaxed to so much as socialize with his family. He sedated himself with Batman and Superman cartoons, preferring Batman.

George and Gladys noticed the increased amount of time he was spending alone in his room and struggled to pour as much love as ever on Steve, as best they knew how. Perhaps out of guilt, perhaps because they really loved him that much. George and Gladys bought him the best clothes from chic, incandescent-lighted boutiques, ignoring the fact that he would outgrow the little designer shoes and small-chested cashmere sweaters. For Gary and Gina, their own blood, the parents bought mostly grocery store brand clothing. When he grew older and converted his devotion from Batman to

schoolwork, George and Gladys sent Steve to a private college, Stanford. Steve's grades barely demanded scholarship money, and did not adequately support George's and Gladys' argument for sending Steve to Stanford. But the parents had made their mind. Gary and Gina had resented Steve's special treatment once they were no longer children, calling him "spoiled" behind his back.

But Steve received the luxuries his parents lavished on him with an immutable bitterness. They seemed more like tokens meant to pay the cost of balling up and discarding an illusion he would have rather lived with. They seemed like senseless Joker machine guns shooting down the walls he had put up to protect them. His parents' gifts just seemed like different representations of what he lacked—four years of study at Stanford, a BMW convertible, and a designer wardrobe's worth of what Gary and Gina already had that George and Gladys felt they needed to make up.

In his Stanford interdisciplinary studies, Steve found an afamilial sanctum, which almost worked. But he learned he could only write about Pavlov and Pynchon or Plato in DeLillo so many times before he stopped feeling pleased with himself and started noticing a cancerous emptiness in the center of his thoughts, which he feared was much older than his collegiate history.

He blinked. He readjusted his eyes to the conference room's fluorescent pallor. Mark Buns and Cliff Goldman appeared before him again. They looked like two ghosts of Steve's childhood staring back at him. Gina was using her philosophy degree to manage a small chain restaurant, Gary operated as her assistant manager, and Steve's inhalation reached its apex, full of the breath needed to deliver the meeting's first word.

OFFICE SOURCE, STORE NO. 665. ROUGHLY 12:30 P.M.

“I think he thinks I think he’s stupid,” said Debra. “So he’s responded by deciding to think that *I’m* stupid.”

“Um. Who?”

“My son,” stirring her Lean Cuisine chicken parm with heated vigor. “We’ve been talking about my son, Miles.”

“Who thinks you’re stupid.”

“More and less.”

“How can it be both?”

“Isn’t that the answer to any question these days? Do I want to go to sleep? Or watch TV? A little bit of both.”

“Well, that’s it right there, Debra,” said Mitch. “I understand you now.” He checked to see how well his red polo shirt was containing his belly. “We wouldn’t be surrounded by so many things if we weren’t supposed to engage them all.”

“Some of the things my son says scare me.”

“That’s what kids do. They scare the hell out of you.”

“You mean that’s the function of kids?”

“I bought my daughter an Easy-Bake Oven and she was bent on serving the family salamanders from her friend’s backyard.”

“God.”

“I *know*. Not even our backyard. Her little friend’s family believes in some strange religion. The kids don’t get a damn thing for Christmas.”

“That does sound worse than salamanders.”

Mitch nodded and poked a microwaved noodle with his plastic fork.

“Does your daughter ever talk about,” Debra hesitated, “TV?”

“Only thing in the house worth talking about.”

“So you know that AT&T commercial. With those really adorable kids?”

“One of my favorites.”

“A man in a suit asks them a bunch of questions that kids would respond to in predictable ways, like ‘would you rather have *more* or *less*?’ and compares the predictability of their answers to how AT&T’s service is predictably better than other services.”

Mitch nodded, trying to suppress a burp, face turning a brief reddish green.

“My son said that AT&T’s making fun of us.”

“Kids say things. They want to eat salamanders.”

“He says that we’re as dumb as a kindergarten class to believe them.”

“Sounds like my daughter’s religious friend. You better watch that boy, and make sure he doesn’t start going in people’s backyards.”

“I thought it was your daughter who liked backyards.”

“Her friend’s family considers the backyard a center of religious activity. Said something about focusing on leaves, and the beauty of all living creatures.”

“Wow. It feels good to just watch TV and work for a living.”

“Sometimes it does. Your wavy blonde hair reminds me of how my wife’s used to look.”

Debra wondered whether her hair would eventually wither away.

“I love my wife, but when things change like that, it kinda makes you feel like you didn’t get what you paid for... Break room conversations stay in the break room, right?”

A bright flash flickered, and the fire alarm started wailing.

“All Office Source associates,” an intercom in the lounge said, “please come to the front to assist in barricading the exits.”

“Shit, already?”

“They keep moving this holiday up earlier every year.”

“I heard President Gleich wants to turn choff-wummer a bi-annual thing.”

Debra, peering around the corner of the employee lounge’s warehouse door, took a survey of her surroundings. The sales floor swarmed with thrashing and elbowing bodies like a rock concert. Two men used a filing cabinet to push through the hordes while a third stuffed a cart with discounted electronics accessories, music, and movies. At the front of the store, two assistant managers were trying to lock the entrance to prevent theft and contain the flow of customers. Mitch dove into a crowd, using his hairy girth as buffer to break up fights over last scraps of merchandise. Knowing no eyes were on her, and that the security cameras’ lenses would be pointed toward the sales floor scanning faces and hands, Debra slipped back into the warehouse and approached an open box. She reached for a just-released smartphone, still preserved in its shrink-wrap.

“I never get to see Miles,” she thought. “I’ll give this to him next time we get to sit through one of our *America’s Most Photographed Model* marathons. It’ll be something to remind him I’m thinking of him.”

A stocking associate remembered a lighter in his pocket and slinked to the back of the store. He noticed Debra, alone in the warehouse. She froze when they made eye contact, which looked suspicious, but the stocker simply winked at her and said nothing. He stacked enough boxes to form a short staircase, ignited the lighter, and held it up to a fire sprinkler, triggering a system of showers throughout Office Source.

Two men in their forties stopped wrestling over a used iPhone charger when the streams of water hit their skin. One released his grip on the other's sweater and brushed out the wrinkles. He apologized, and both realized they felt too embarrassed to take the charger, so they left it on the ground, and others around them acted similarly, releasing wrinkled cardboard packages and mumbling words of sincere remorse. Gradually the customers collected themselves, got in their cars, and drove home.

Debra helped Mitch pick up trampled packages, toppled displays, and the occasional abandoned clothing article.

A red scarf, a child's mitten.

Mitch kneeled down and picked up a knit hat with a cartoon dog embroidered on the front.

"Hmm," he murmured. "Looks like my daughter's."

LONESOME, HALFHEARTEDLY MAINTAINED APARTMENT ACROSS TOWN

The living room was small, had a smell of stale food, and the drawn blinds allowed little light. Spindly, oily-haired Leonard Stein, who considered himself a collector, rubbed his shoulders, arms crossed, as if trying to keep warm, despite the thermostat's reading of eighty degrees. Whenever he found himself stumped between what he wanted to believe and what he felt he *ought* to believe, like keep pursuing Rosetta? or accept that he's not what she wants?—his habit was to maximize the issue, attempt to expose all of its hidden corners at once, and solve all of his interrelated dilemmas in one sweeping blow. But he suspected that this kind of Herculean flexing only threw him into spells of cold-sweat fevers.

Without any promotional warning, the History Channel had ceased all its usual reality-based programming about recently uncovered artifacts and their trade values, and landed on Leonard's singular obsession: black and white Mickey Mouse cartoons. The characters' predictable actions and the limited color spectrum fostered a sense of security, which, during the phases when he collapsed under the weight of his own problem-solving, made his couch the safest space in the world to crumble apart. Leonard grew up as and grew up into a shaking leaf of a person—the kind of man Teddy Roosevelt claimed he could carve better from a banana, but without Leonard's own knowledge.

On the sixty-three inch high-definition television, Mickey wandered into a haunted house filled with bats, spiders, and faulty electrical wiring. Leonard Stein sat on the couch, his knees in his arms, and his eyes lingering on the screen. Different episodes transported Leonard to different moments in time. This episode, like others circa 1929, reminded Leonard of the nights he had spent with his baby-sitter, Rachele, who, to

Leonard's dismay, spent most of her nights with him standing several feet from the couch on the phone in hushed conversation with someone. Whoever it was, he or she was the object of Leonard's childhood envy. Despite their age gap—and his being only nine in general—he couldn't help but find himself hopelessly attracted to her. His parents, racing up their own corporate ladders into the night's dead hours, hired Rachelle five to six nights a week. Leonard's ritualized TV watching began one evening when Rachelle had just removed a packaged spaghetti meal from the microwave, dumped it onto a plate, and told him he could eat dinner in the living room because she no longer knew how to deal with his constant gazing at her from across the dining room table. She knew of his painful shyness, but it bothered her that he never attempted to correct it.

Rachelle's televisual institution was a moderate success for her personal space, but every so often, during the commercial breaks, Leonard still glanced at her out of the corner of his eye. His pulse rushed whenever she noticed, and her intense, icy green eyes met his. Usually, he settled for the side of her head: curly, brown-blond hair he wanted to reach out and touch. Maybe TV didn't work—he wanted her to be the Minnie to his Mickey.

Before Leonard's tenth birthday, Rachelle quit. His parents, Darien and Diana, never told him why.

The microwaved dinners and TV shows stayed the same, maybe even improved with technology, but Leonard remained unfulfilled with Rachelle's replacement: Jeremy. He was a business student attending online classes at a for-profit university. Jeremy, who thought fine menswear reached its zenith at Men's Wearhouse (and did not appear to shop anywhere else), took it upon himself to lecture Leonard on a themed life lesson each

night during his favorite dinnertime shows. One night, *Tom and Jerry* was interrupted by “How to Project Confidence.” A few days later, *Scooby-Doo* aired against a strangely passionate lecture on proper table manners.

“I promise you,” said Jeremy, channeling a tone he learned from a speaker at a sales seminar. “I’ve seen executives thrown out of conference rooms for chewing with their mouths open.”

Leonard made conscious effort not to look directly at Jeremy, whose chin resembled two small light bulbs touching each other.

On his frayed couch, before the sixty-three inch screen, Leonard’s tics were not slowing down, but instead building a gradual momentum. Something about Mickey Mouse was working contrary to how it normally did, reminding him of all the Rachele-like things absent from his life, rather than simulating the feeling of her presence—any presence—to make the room feel less empty. If he could not turn to Mickey Mouse, he needed to turn to his therapist.

STARBUCKS, STORE NO. 100000017913

They sat at a black wire frame table outside. The moon competed with some fluorescent lamps for mood lighting. A pair of chairs at each table implied that the space was for couples, which sparked a flash of guilt within Blake, but he felt powerless and lonely over Jordan's recent and sudden depression, which had robbed her of most of her voice and personality, creating silent car rides, mute dinners, and a static bedroom. Steve was getting increasingly harder to find lately, attending company "Broadcast Revenue" seminars with a religious reverence and cultist secrecy about them. In need of a replacement confidante, Blake had happened to meet a woman named Carol on his trek to the office one morning. She had red hair and legs made for designer shoes.

"I should head home soon," she said, with a note of sadness in her voice. "I have to file a press release for Azteca Worldwide Entertainment. They're having some conflict in an agreement they made with the History Channel, and instead of taking legal action against them, they've hired my PR firm to boost their image so that other networks'll want them, and the History Channel will come crawling back." She sighed. "So we'll see what happens."

Blake listened with an earnest expression, told her he understood, and gathered their empty coffee cups to dispose of inside. A few people sat inside the shop at respectful distances from each other, focused on the tablet computers in front of them and the headphones in their ears. Two people appeared to be nodding their heads to the same beat until they fell out of sync after a measure or two. A man in his early twenties sat in a corner beneath a black and white stock image of a young Italian couple embracing each other, and he checked and re-checked his phone without seeming to find what he was

looking for. As he dumped the cups in the waste container, Blake noted that the barista, apparently the only one working, looked like a bespectacled child with a mustache. Despite the shop's relative silence, the barista shouted across the room that a brutally polysyllabic kind of hot chocolate was now ready for someone named "Beff."

He returned to the table while Carol was digging for something in her purse, and for a brief moment he accidentally saw down her blouse. He could not help but think it was grotesque how un-grotesque she was.

Blake said, "Do you want me to walk you home?"

Some makeup and other stains coated the area around her sink in a thin layer, some splatters matte, others pastel. On the counter's left side, an organizer in the shape of a willow tree dangled with silver, gold, and imitation jewelry. Extension cords for a curling iron and a hair straightener drooped down the counter's other side like sad horsetails. Notes-to-self were scribbled in a dark shade of lipstick on the bathroom mirror, and Blake took one last look at his face before returning to her bedroom.

She was sitting at the center of her bed in a red lace bra and matching thong. Blake looked into her eyes, but started having second thoughts when he noticed all the photos propped and hung throughout her room. Pictures of her with friends and family—in all of which she stood or sat at the center—adorned almost every spare inch of wall, dresser, and end table. The photos seemed to surround Blake in a hall-of-mirrors, the glowing apex of which was her corporeal face. The sight of it knotted Blake's stomach, distracting him, causing him to go soft. Like a ghost with unfinished business, she seemed to haunt her own room.

She took slow strides across the bedroom. She stopped in front of him, her body pressed against his, and she unbuttoned his jeans, removing them and his boxers in a single motion. She then grabbed him, leading him to her bed as if by a leash. When his head hit the pillow, Blake could swear he had landed in an indentation roughly in the shape of his own head, a space too large for a woman's.

Carol rolled on top of Blake, kissing and gently stroking him.

"You know," she breathed, "I used to be scared of this kind of thing. But then I realized: I might die some day."

What kind of thing? Blake wondered.

"Do you want to die," she paused for breath again, "knowing there was something you were too afraid to do?"

"Well, no," and Blake shifted his weight on top of hers, and almost into her, until a photo of her and a weary-looking middle-aged man stole his attention.

"What's wrong?"

"Are your parents divorced?"

"What?"

Blake retreated to Carol's side, now with a solemn expression.

"You're joking, right?"

"I'm not allowed to ask?" Blake said, an image of Jordan hovering in the back of his mind.

"*Well,*" she said, receding into her own space, pulling part of the down comforter over her body. "My dad left my mom when I was in middle school. Seventh grade." She paused. "I remember, because my dad sat in the kitchen and helped me with my

homework every night after dinner. He used to be a science teacher. But a few days before the Seventh Grade Standardized Science Exam, he stopped coming home from work. I don't remember what Mom said—mostly I remember her hands at the other end of the table reorganizing cold manicotti on her plate until she started washing dishes. Apparently he'd started dating a travelling makeup saleswoman named Viviana.”

Blake had no words—at least no meaningful ones—and stared at a corner of the ceiling feeling, overwhelmed. He looked back at the photo and something about her father's haggard image was still incomplete.

“What're they doing now?”

“Viviana left my dad six months after they met,” she sighed. “Now he's mostly an alcoholic. I think he also delivers mail on weekday afternoons.”

Carol turned over, pulled a cigarette from a bedside drawer and lit it. They had not even fucked, but she was already worrying about whether discussing her life had made the affair any less meaningless or more meaningful. She feared the latter because she had lost her desire to see him again. She released a long trail of smoke.

“You want one?” she asked.

Blake had never smoked cigarettes but accepted one anyway. He took a small drag for safe measure, but the smoke still burned the inside of his throat as it travelled with the heat of the lighter's flame down into his lungs. Blake released a puff of smoke smaller than he expected, straining to suppress a deep cough.

The decorations in her room, presented in new clarity of nicotine, suddenly looked used and outdated, and started forming a cohesive picture. The pillows, curtains, and rugs—hot pinks against black, lurid oranges against turquoise. It looked like the kind

of color scheme chosen by a newly divorced dad, straining himself to furnish a remotely feminine room for his daughter to sleep at every other weekend because he knew her mother would receive custody.

Blake climbed off the bed and pulled his jeans back on. She wanted to say she had never related the story of her parents' divorce to anyone before (though that was untrue) because she wanted Blake to stay interested in her. But his mind was no longer focused on her family history. Instead it was divided between guilt, remorse, and something Carol had said earlier...Azteca Worldwide Entertainment. He felt an eerie tension in his stomach, doubting that he could possess the kind of business negligence that would leave him unfamiliar with a local brand. Blake said goodbye, noting a purple stuffed dog with a bracelet around its neck in the corner of her bedroom before he left.

Carol stepped down from her bed and smoothed the plain white comforter. She sat on its corner for a moment, looking up at her reflection in the mirror on the dresser across from her. Blake Hartz was strange, she thought to herself. Who just *abandons* sex like that? It was alienating. Rude.

Leaning over the edge of the tub, Carol dialed the shower's hot water and selected an episode of *Ellen* while she waited for the water to heat. She had moved her flat-screen TV from her bedroom to her bathroom (on top of the toilet tank) when she discovered she could not shower without noise in the background. This was partly general anxiety, but also because she tended to want long showers after sexual encounters gone bad, and it helped to hear someone's voice during this time. Picture quality was secondary—the screen had a milky haze to it, having endured so many steam-filled uses. The voice of

Ellen DeGeneres allowed Carol to be alone. She felt safe to retreat to the quieter recesses of her mind, as if with a close friend.

After her conversation with Blake, the story of her parents' divorce played in her head on repeat. Her mom, Bernadette, was briefly involved with a man down the street named Mr. Aldobrandino. He stopped by often to offer Bernatte his sincere regards, but had little to say to Carol. Her father, Marvin, arrived home one day in the middle of one of Mr. Aldobrandino's expressions of sincerity to retrieve some old photography equipment which had been passed down from his father. Discretion, however, was one of Mr. Aldobrandino's weaknesses. Without a word, Marvin left and never returned. The box of photography equipment continued to sit in the middle of the stairs for a few weeks until Carol moved it into her room. Over the next weeks, Carol used photography to get away from her house and her mother's constant chatter about Mr. A. "Oh, he just made the *best* vermicelli," she said. "Your father was never much of a cook. I could never stand that about him. Does he say things to you about my cooking?"

Photography was the doorway to Carol's interest in publicity—she discovered she had a need to construct positive stories about others, even if they were just businesses. Which reminded her: she had yet to touch the Azteca Worldwide Entertainment account, its press-releases and a few statements from the Nation's chief nestled among other documents in her leather folio. She was unsure how much time she had been showering, but the water started to chill her skin, raising wet goose bumps along her arms and legs. Credits for *Ellen* faded down the TV screen.

She returned to her bedroom with a towel wrapped around her body. Digging through the Azteca files, she found most of the advertising proposals not necessarily

illogical, but *allogical*. They conformed to none of business writing's usual scripts or guidelines. One document, which seemed to begin in mid-sentence, pursued the notion that the History Channel's absorption of Azteca's guaranteed television spot was an offense on the level of spiritual affront, upsetting hundreds of years of Native American free speech rights, especially with respect to broadcast television. How ironic, Carol thought, that from this perspective the History Channel was standing so deeply in the way of history itself. But it wasn't just History. Another document mentioned a partner channel. But as far as Carol could discern, the partner channel had no actual *content*. It sounded like nothing more than a crude slideshow featuring photos of necks and captions—at least that was as much as a report from the chief conveyed. He and the other media executives of the Azteca Nation wanted a guerilla marketing approach—an approach just as sudden and unwanted as the History Channel and its vague partner.

Carol made a phone call. Her instincts told her that Azteca may find a solution closer to home than they anticipated.

Steve entered Quality Control, the room's title etched across the glass double doors by laser. Though they had lost Bill, the signals travelling through the air, emitted by the Unilever Broadcast Syndicate, were as clear as the doors' laser engraving. On the center screen, a Mickey Mouse cartoon played to a rolling chair and the white lumbar pillow on its seat. On the far left aired a commercial—inserted after thirty-six hours of non-stop programming—which required the entire allotted eight-minute slot between regular programming. A young boy—dirt on his face and clothes, no shoes—wandered up the center of a gravel road, peering between makeshift stands and carts at fresh tomatoes, sacks of rice, caged roosters and chickens, bundles of loose tea leaves, and vials of medications. His father was dead. His mother was ill. Crowds of people filled the avenue, walking, talking, and buying, all oblivious to an imminent death. He watched the men and women behind the stands and carts, most of them elderly. A woman selling mostly herbal medicines and some Western medications was especially old, and whenever she found herself unoccupied by customers, she shuffled with an awkward gait between the front and back of her store, replacing and reorganizing merchandise. The boy watched, waited for her to make her next voyage to the back, and before she could return, snagged a bottle of penicillin. He couldn't move. Something had seized his left wrist. He looked up to find himself in the unyielding grip of a man towering over him, a disgusted look in his eyes. The boy looked down. He did not want to be seen; he wanted to disappear.

A much younger woman, hardly older than the boy, rushed out from behind the store. She gave the man a look that told him to release the boy. She took the penicillin from his hand, deposited it into a sack she took from behind the counter, and added a

bowl of hot soup and some soothing herbs. She gave the sack to the boy and he ran back down the dirt road past all the people and into the low hills.

Time passed. A woman with deep brown eyes and attractive cheekbones sat in the blue-green light of a hospital room at the side of what she feared would be her father's deathbed. His eyes were closed, but a monitor near the bed showed her his heart was beating. The family business had been sold to pay for his admittance to the hospital, but most of that money was gone. The woman re-examined her father's medical bill, hoping she had misread it, but she hadn't. Tears fell from her eyes, dotting the several zeroes before the decimal point. She returned the next day and wrapped her hands around her father's withered fingers, afraid that it might be for the last time. Her father's updated medical bill lay on the bedside table before his heart monitor. She broke the envelope's seal, and when she opened the tri-folded document within, the bill's remaining balance was \$0.00. She looked again: \$0.00. Nothing. The bottom read ALL EXPENSES PAID TWENTY-NINE YEARS AGO WITH A BOTTLE OF PENICILLIN AND A BOWL OF SOUP. She looked around the room in bewilderment, blinded by the pale sunlight coming in through the window. Beyond the sunlight she was able to discern a dark figure approaching her. Her father's doctor emerged, and he pulled down his green surgical mask to reveal a face that was handsome, polished, and the sure image of someone she knew. He was the boy her father had caught stealing. Tears welled in both the woman's and the doctor's eyes. The woman smiled as a tear ran down her cheek and—for a moment—it appeared as if the two would embrace. But before they could, the two were obscured by a layer of blurry distortion. Two almost-touching semi-circles, like an opaque yin-and-yang, appeared in

the center of the screen. COMMUNICATION MAKES LIFE BETTER, the new flagship slogan for AT&T Wireless, faded into view below the circle and Mickey Mouse resumed.

“I’m at least happy that Bill doesn’t have to sit and watch *that* all day,” Dan said. “He’s more sensitive than he admits.”

“It’s the new market we’re tapping into,” said Steve. “Feelings. Our research has always shown big marketability in laughter, but some of the other executives and I went out to a screening of *Lost in Translation* the other night. It was an experience for me—you know I try to limit the stimuli I encounter. But it was a work thing.”

Dan wanted to scratch his head, but didn’t want his confusion to be obvious to Steve. He could not understand how a “vice president of communications” could limit the number of images he viewed—or limit anything else for that matter—and still be relevant to the business. But Steven Ironwrist was like an electromagnet. Imago Ad Concepts seemed to revolve around him.

“Anyway, I’m sure you heard about what happened with the Azteca deal.”

Dan made a motion of slitting his throat.

Steve nodded. “We had to cut it. We wanted to try out our new method, but also we thought that the Azteca entertainments were too un-relatable. Most of them were kinds of interpretive dances with chants in Native American languages, but without any subtitles. When I met with the head of Azteca distributions he told me he wanted everything to air as was submitted—Native American art form had a certain purity to maintain. I told him this was a business. But he wouldn’t bend. It’s like they have to have everything their way.”

“They?”

“Indigenous peoples. I know they all have their own languages, customs, and practices, but I can’t relate. It’s like they don’t want to adapt.”

Dan pursed his lips, suddenly unsure of the kind of executive whom he was conversing with. Dan thought of his wife, who was currently at home, he figured, and probably in front of a daytime talk show or an *Oprah* rerun with a glass of white wine in her hand. Lynette had always had a preference for Oprah as a talk show host, and even as a person, for she (Lynette) appeared white, but was proudly half black. “Oprah,” Lynette once said in the middle of a refreshing pinot gris, “speaks with the diction of a white woman, but the *tone* and look of a black woman. I wish I could do it like that, Dan. I want others to see me and count *me* as a member, because it’s part of who I am. But no. I just look plain old blonde.” Dan wondered if Steve condemned such nuances of identity as reasons why the media was still a few points shy of a maximum approval rating.

“Maybe it’s not just feelings,” said Steve. “Maybe we ought to get a little bit deeper than that. You’ve seen all the thyroid removal surgery infomercials, haven’t you?”

“My wife happens to be one of those people who volunteered for that procedure.”

“Those?”

“You know. The ones who did it to *raise awareness*. Lynette had her thyroid removed and now a once-genetically-overweight woman from New Jersey thinks there’s someone in this country who she has something genuinely in common with. She and Lynette are pen pals now.”

“That’s it, Dan. It’s not just feelings, it’s one layer below that: health. All people have bodies, and there’s an assumption that they’re all perfect, but whenever you learn

that someone else's body is weird or deformed in the same way as yours, you feel a connection. Like at the bottom of your hearts you two have something in common."

"You become friends. Or pen pals."

"And imagine if there was a place you could go where you could always run into that kind of person. From the comfort of your own chair—or wherever you want to be—you have a chance of finding someone you *really* connect with. I'm thinking its name is *The Wellness Channel*: a fully interactive cable TV channel where different options are always streaming live. Let's say you just contracted mono. You go to *The Wellness Channel*, you search an option for "mono," and you're presented with all these people at different stages of mono. If you buy a *Wellness Monitor*, a little camera for your TV that uploads to the channel, you can join them, swap—I don't know—mono stories, I guess? But you can become part of each other's lives. How sad it would be to miss out on that."

Something inside Dan shook on the inside. He imagined Bill returning from the hospital, forced to watch images of people suffering with cancer or AIDS, and how it might affect his struggle with a less fashionable disease like diabetes. Dan hoped that that vision would stay locked within his mind.

Leonard sat on the edge of his couch taking deep breaths, trying to calm his nerves enough to head into the sprawling, ocular public. He knew everything would be better once he reached his therapist's office. The only difficulty was in navigating all the little hit-and-run courtesies and exchanges with strangers on the way there.

When he arrived at his elevator, he pressed the downward arrow encased within the brushed-steel frame. The elevator was already lifting other passengers, moving with a steamy hiss, and when an electronic beep signaled the car's arrival, four women in what appeared their mid-twenties disembarked. Their footwear shared a theme: tall black heels, excepting one red pair. One woman, whose skin looked digitally enhanced, wore a skirt and a loose-fitting top with an effervescent glow. Another, dark skinny jeans and a dark blazer.

A muscle in the back of Leonard's neck started twitching. Sweat. He threw his gaze to the floor. His legs felt weak.

The women were walking right by Leonard and the spasm was now turning his head in erratic ways—down, left, right, left again, down, like a small bird forming a distorted panorama of its surroundings. It sounded like he said "hi," but Leonard did not remember wanting to form words. Everything paused briefly, and by the time Leonard found himself beneath the elevator's fluorescent lamps, he heard a frenzied *clip-clop* of heels against the ground and paper shopping bags crashing together before a door slammed and a lock turned. He proceeded in silence to the basement. It smelled like lavender.

It was a small office, but not too small for an agoraphobe. So, cozy, rather. Regal West African themed curtains diffused light from the windows, tribal masks dangled from the walls, and a small white elephant guarded the corner of the therapist's rosewood desk. Leonard considered the room a peculiar blend of things both foreign and familiar. But when the therapist outstretched his right hand, indicating the overstuffed leather chair, he took his seat without question. The thing in the room which bothered Leonard the most—especially because of its incongruity—was a ceramic figurine of Peppermint Patty seated behind a booth, labelled “FREE ADVICE: THERE’S NOTHING LIKE A GOOD FRIEND.” Leonard cringed at her sign: he agreed with Peppermint Patty, of course, but he found her advice an obvious, low-grade truth worth exactly the asking price.

“I hope you don’t mind, Leonard, but we’ll be recording today’s session.” He pointed behind his shoulder to a black video camera rigged to a tripod. A red light beneath the lens flickered on and off, as if counting something. “It’s for educational purposes. Students entering their first year of doctoral psychology training will watch these tapes to learn how to communicate with future patients once they’re ready. You could think of it as a simulation. Do you feel okay with that, Leonard?”

“I think I had another panic attack today, Dr. Nimoy.”

“Well, alright,” touching a patch of facial hair on his chin, “I’m glad you’re opening up so quickly. As I say, I want you to think of this room as a place where you can take your mask off.”

Leonard sensed a desire on Dr. Nimoy’s part to look back into the camera and wink, though he must have suppressed the urge. This idea’s inspiration might have been partly Leonard’s own prejudice. After watching a romantic comedy about a man and his

therapist who fall in love after he narrowly overcomes a rare cancer, Leonard was annoyed by Dr. Nimoy's gender. On the other hand, he could talk to Dr. Nimoy without wanting to tremble.

Suddenly Dr. Nimoy's secretary walked in. She had a master's degree in management and was currently in the middle of an engagement that would lapse eleven years. She said, "Dr. Nimoy, Bryant's here and he's having an anger episode. I don't think he's had his medication."

"Oh," said Dr. Nimoy. "Shit. Wait right here, Leonard."

He left the office and locked the door behind him. Leonard heard some indistinct shouting in the lobby area—there was either an actual wild turkey roaming the lobby, or a bottle of Wild Turkey which needed extraction from someone's grip—and then a security guard (very audibly) discharged his Taser. A moment later, Dr. Nimoy returned, no longer wearing glasses.

"I apologize for that Leonard. Bryant has several dependency issues, and he occasionally shows up outside of his scheduled meeting times. And I'm sorry again, because we are going to have to cut our session short today—I might have acquired an infection. But I want to make it up to you. Do you feel okay with that?"

Leonard blinked.

"Okay, well," Dr. Nimoy reached into his desk's bottom drawer and pulled out a small camera attached to a headband. "This personal camera is part of our new pilot program to give you better counseling sessions by monitoring your daily activities. You'll wear this camera around your forehead like so. What I want is for you to leave this camera on until 9:30PM if you're at home, and if you're out, I want you to leave it on

until you arrive home. The camera will broadcast what you see in real-time to our servers and give us a direct insight into your interpersonal interactions. It is completely confidential: only some of the other doctors, students, and I will see it. But if this program is successful—if you feel like it *really* does good in your life—with your permission—the stream might be made public. And if that happens, I think that’s a good thing, Leonard. You’ll be in a position to help others. How do you feel about this? Do you agree?”

Leonard nodded and fitted the camera around his head.

“Excellent, Leonard, I’m so happy to see this.”

A couple of blocks outside Dr. Nimoy’s office, Leonard headed home, passing high-end clothing stores and bistros along the way. He felt lightheaded from hunger, so he decided to stop at a kiosk for a deli sandwich. While he gave his order, the young woman behind the counter gazed directly into his face, unable to pull her eyes from him. She smiled between every word she spoke to him, and constantly looked up at him, rather than the sandwich ingredients in front of her. When Leonard reached the cashier, she too maintained such direct eye contact with him that Leonard wanted badly to look away.

“\$9.67, sir,” she smiled. “Thank you so much, and have a great day!”

Bewildered, Leonard tucked the sandwich under his arm and set on a brisk pace for his apartment. The entire way home, people he had never seen before—strangers—greeted him in passing with smiles, waves, and hellos.

“Where did you get that?” a woman pushing a stroller asked. “It looks perfect for recording home movies or vacation photos—I also do some avant-garde short films with my partner.”

“I’m only wearing this because my therapist suggested it,” said Leonard.

“Oh, you do therapy?” she said. “I dabble in that, too. We *really* ought to do coffee sometime. What’s your phone number?”

Patches of sweat, again, broke out across Leonard’s back, neck, and face. Her eye contact, sustained and invasive, paralyzed him, making him want only to be alone and in front of his television—anywhere away from her gaze which saw too deeply into him.

“I’m sorry,” said Leonard, grasping his sandwich like a crutch, “I don’t drink coffee.”

The woman and her daughter both stared at Leonard in confusion as he fled down the sidewalk, nearly tripping over himself when he passed a yoga studio.

“What was he so afraid of, mommy?” said the little girl in the stroller.

“He’s a man, sweetie. They don’t make them like they used to.”

Miles made a point of traveling to Fix's apartment at least every few days to smoke and pocket some high-grade marijuana. Any unease Miles might have had about continuing the habit was assuaged by Fix's passion for weed and natural theatricality in selling drugs. Fix adopted a different persona for each drug he sold. The lab coat usually came out for pills—Xanax, Vicodin, Ambien; *the doctor* knew best. But for weed, Fix had an arsenal of costumes based on a pantheon of stoner comedies—a character suited to each strain he sold. Miles' favorite was an exceptionally piney variety called THE CHRONICKAL OF NARNIA, which had a way of erecting its own snowy wonderland much superior to the one around him. A world with camaraderie and characters.

The other selling point was that Miles usually smoked *gratis*. He had Fix's non-explicit blessing since Jorge was still fielding the cost of Miles' typical Vicodin dosage (without accepting any) until a new buyer found his way to Fix's door, which never took long. On the other hand, a question was beginning to stir as to whether Jorge still leased his own apartment. A pile of clothes near the bathroom, which had originated as one Petco polo and a pair of slacks, had metastasized into 76% of a wardrobe. Aside from the clothes, no one seemed to mind. Jorge's transition from visitor to tenant was hazy at best. He and his video game character on the screen were still the room's focal point, while Miles and Marcus sat on the couch and watched.

Releasing a long-held puff, Miles asked, "Do we sit around and smoke too much?"

"There's not really such a thing as *too* much," said Jorge, maneuvering his character through a highly-monitored office building. "I mean, unless you're, like,

dependent. Like, if you can't wake up without having smoked, then maybe something's wrong."

"How do you wake up already having smoked?"

"That's not what I—"

Before Jorge could finish, the door flew open—Fix with Marcus in tow.

"Turn it to channel 3488," said Fix.

Jorge slumped over to reach the remote on the chair's arm, and for a moment his head was at just the right angle for the overcast light coming through the blinds to cast a soft glow on the bags under his eyes.

The channel changed, but the images and scenes appeared too unintentional and insignificant to have any meaning—a clear absence of studio-quality production. The camera bobbed up and down, probably the result of someone's gait, but the footage did not quite seem handheld. Smiling bystanders, waving at and shouting to the camera in random bursts streamed by as the view waded down the street. Suddenly, the camera jerked, and stared straight into the sky. The screen went several shades darker to account for the over-exposed shot, until it darkened completely, a black wall sliding from left to right shutting out any last rays of light. The only sound was a brief gasp followed by shuddered breathing.

"Oh, shit," said Fix.

"Is this like some new first-person mystery show?" said Jorge. Fix was a known mystery addict, and one of his favorite things to mention was that if he had not been a drug dealer, he would have modelled himself after one of Raymond Chandler's characters, like Philip Marlowe. Nonetheless, there was a Philip Marlowe *version* of Fix

who dabbled in cocaine, heroin, and one or two other intravenous substances. But Fix preferred to avoid those, which he considered *hard stuff*, so his Marlowe suit usually hung in his closet—a cost of staying relatively true to the persona.

“Nope,” he said. “We just witnessed an abduction on live television.”

“Oh.”

The room held an awkward silence, and in the clouds of a THC fog, Miles and Jorge both forgot to wonder what Fix meant to see on this channel in the first place. They stood still, reluctant to break the TV’s silence should it start on something important. Just before Jorge thought to question their programming, a hood uncovered the lens and light returned to the screen, revealing a man’s face. His skin looked more like leather with a pronounced patina than organic tissue.

“Hey, that’s the guy,” said Fix. “He’s the one I sell all the LSD and mescaline to.”

“What’s that crying sound coming from the camera?”

“The person it’s attached to.”

“What’s the *name* of this fucking channel?”

“It’s supposed to be *The Wellness Channel*. Some pilot health project. I guess it’s like a televised WebMD, except other sick people—live—are your symptom checker. I was hoping there would be, like, a medical marijuana special.”

“Well, you did say this is just the pilot.”

The man onscreen warned the History Channel never to block Azteca Worldwide Entertainment’s programming again. He then pointed the camera at a stage on which several Native American men in varied animalistic regalia stood in a circle as stage lights flickered on, dramatizing their presence.

“I guess this is what we were supposed to see instead of all those random old cartoons last week.”

A dark-skinned man wearing a buck’s bust as a hat walked on all fours to a steady drum beat accompanied by flute accents. He was joined by another, an eagle, flapping his wings, flying in a circle around the buck.

“I think I prefer the old cartoons.”

“Why does this feel so foreign? It’s hard to believe America started out like this.”

“I almost *want* the commercials to start rolling.”

“This channel doesn’t have any. It’s an ad-free experiment.”

“I’m surprised someone hasn’t shut this down yet.”

“My question is how are we supposed to sit here and get culturally enlightened when we don’t even know what the chanting or dancing is even about? Rain? Sun? What are we worshipping here?”

“I think I know how we can find out,” said Fix. “I was there, like, last week. I can take us there.”

“Yeah,” said Marcus. “We should also see if this has any kind of connection to the decryption drive. Either way, it looks like it could be a way around Unilever.”

Miles suggested a pre-journey joint to which the others agreed. Fix loaded it with what happened to be on the table, a strain called GREEN NOISE, known for the anti-zeitgeist abstraction it inspired. Jorge, Miles, Marcus, and Fix passed it around, trading conspiracy theories about *The Wellness Channel* and Azteca Worldwide Entertainment, establishing a mood for the visit they were about to make. Marcus decided that since nothing was being done to take the unscheduled performance off the air, maybe they

could use that same camera to their advantage in some way, gain some leverage over Unilever's monopoly and air some *real* programming without commercial interruption for once.

“Maybe,” replied Fix. “But you’re forgetting: this is *The Wellness Channel*. No matter what gets shown on here, don’t you think that if they needed to they could just explain it all away? They could issue a statement like, ‘those guys were an example of an acute mental illness, and we take your concern so much to heart that they will now be part of a new mini-series tracking the recovery of their health.’ They could do that with AWE, us, anyone, really.”

“Maybe that’s where the medical marijuana special would come in,” suggested Jorge.

It could have just been the GREEN NOISE talking, but Miles envisioned Office Source asking his mother to work fewer hours because her son was one of *The Wellness Channel’s* star patients, obviously suffering paranoid delusions as a result of chronic isolation. And he wouldn’t have to worry about the matter of the \$5000—Unilever would not want to penalize one of its own subjects if Miles, Marcus, Jorge, and Fix were bought into the system. It was a clear win-win.

“So, it’s not just you that I need for this work favor,” said Steve, looking at Blake across his bare dining-room table. “Before I go further, it’s not my idea. This is a contractual obligation under the ASPCA’s direction. Essentially, you and Jordan will shoot a commercial—you as an Imago advertising agent, she the wife of one, supporting ASPCA-sponsored President Gleich’s Neutrality Proclamation for a Unilever-hosted cable event. You two are in love, she looks pregnant, and it’ll be great. People will love it. I remember thinking the last time I saw you guys that you two are the *perfect* couple.”

“You haven’t *seen* us or been in the same room as us in about six months,” said Blake. The décor in Steve’s apartment seemed constantly to be growing more barren—things like napkin- and paper-towel-holders just disappearing, a reign of blank space gradually taking over. Blake wanted to believe that someone whose home had a fear of developing its own personality—not even a framed photograph to be found—couldn’t be a good judge of emotions.

“Well, I’m sure your love has only grown stronger since then.”

“I almost fucked another woman last week.”

“W—what is *almost* fucking?”

“That moment when unconscious guilt subverts conscious hard-on.”

“This is a contractual obligation. Does she know what you ‘almost’ did?”

“She doesn’t talk to me lately. I don’t know whether it’s, like, anxiety or some kind of *prepartum* depression, but she can’t or won’t talk to me.”

“We’re expected to film next week.”

“You could have told me sooner,” said Blake.

The tin building that housed the studio looked out of place in its urban setting, nestled among high-rises, expensive dining, and a few department stores. Whether the tin building had recently erased an older building to make room for itself or had always been there was unclear, but its exterior's custardy façade suggested some violation of ordinance. Yet no one treated it as such—the suited patrons at the steakhouse next door, pleased enough over their places of New York strips and neat whiskey, made no gestures hinting at the mysterious blight.

Blake walked Jordan the three blocks from the parking garage to the tin structure. She refused to move or speak for herself, but she sooner resorted to non-action than *reaction*. She had withdrawn into a world where others were inconsequential and irrelevant, props bordering her consciousness.

Inside, the studio resembled a warehouse, tall and vacuous, but with a glowing epicenter powered by the tripod-mounted lights around the set. A couch, an armchair, a coffee table, and a wooden dining-room set were arrayed in an illogical linear fashion to each other, but probably conveyed the sure image of a living- and dining-room when on camera. Blake had to squint to be able to gaze into the darkness around the set as he hunted for any sign of Steve or a film crew. In a moment of eerie confusion, Blake guided Jordan over to the set. He sat on the rough polyester couch, leaving room for her, but she took the armchair instead.

Then, soundlessly, Steve appeared from the dark void beyond the set with a man of confusing bodily proportions in tow. He had the face and torso of a thin, possibly underweight person, but suddenly swelled at the hips, exaggerating the effect of his low-waist jeans.

“We’re very lucky,” said Steve. “This here is Jake.” He paused, assuming enthusiastic recognition from Blake or Jordan, if not both, but when the meaning failed to take hold, he continued, “He’s an acting coach under contract with Universal Studios, but they’re letting us borrow him for today. Go ahead and introduce yourself, Jake.”

“I found my voice for coaching a few years ago when I completed a season of *The Biggest Loser*. I lost a hundred and twenty-eight pounds.”

Jordan offered no reply, but continued to sit in her armchair, head tilted a few degrees away from Jake and Steve. Blake made introductions both for himself and for Jordan, trying to glaze over her non-presence.

“When you say ‘completed,’” said Blake, making conversation, “do you mean—out of all the contestants—you won?”

“No,” said Jake. “No, I didn’t.”

Throughout Jake’s acting instructions and encouraging pointers, which he offered like a sage of bite-sized wisdom, Jordan continued to occupy her armchair as if she had arrived for the purpose of sitting in it. Jake was too polite to interrupt her concentration, but whenever he arrived at a piece of crucial information, he craned his head in her direction and repeated himself so he could feel sure she heard him. He was harboring a latent hope that Jordan’s inner-actress would suddenly burst—flower forth—from her during dress rehearsal. But he hadn’t considered that Blake and Jordan’s costumes were their own clothes.

Approximately six takes in, Jordan had yet to pronounce a single line. Her total unresponsiveness had broken down Jake, who, after several minutes of deep coaxing, finally fell to his knees in tears, wondering why he lacked the power to move *anyone*.

“That’s just how Jake is,” said Steve, clipboard in hand. “Jake Elderberry. He’s actually very young for an acting coach.”

“This happens often?” said Blake.

“It’s his gift, really. Few actors find their motivation in his speeches, but almost all find some raw thespian power in his tears.”

“Does he know that’s why he’s hired? Or is it more subconscious for him?”

“Well, he cried Daniel Day-Lewis all the way to an Oscar. Daniel refuses to work with anyone else now.”

Pulling Steve off-set, out of Jordan’s earshot, “Jordan looks...the same.”

“I never said it was an instantaneous effect. Jake’s tears take a few minutes to sink into the unconscious.”

“What about when the cameras show up? That’ll be happening, right?”

“Yeah, I’ll call the cameraman now.”

Blake returned to Jordan. Jake’s tears, if she had even noticed him crying, had failed to awaken any latent acting powers, and she remained seated the same way in the armchair. Blake was beginning to worry about what a bad or unfinished commercial might do to Steve’s standing in the ASPCA. They were known to punish ineptitude with permanent expulsion from the organization, which could even cost Steve’s position with Imago Ad Concepts. Yet Steve seemed the least distressed person in the studio (especially by contrast to Jake). His collectedness in moments like this made him seem photoshopped.

Steve emerged from the cowl of darkness surrounding the set’s glow with a man at his side who made Jake look physically impressive, even virile: Leonard Stein. Blake

struggled not to twist his face into a disapproving shape. He had nothing against Leonard, but—especially in this case—he had nothing *for* him. He seemed an inept substitute for Jake, and a further endangerment to Steve’s career. Even his equipment betrayed inexperience: a little camera clung to his head, like a cheap gift-shop disposable, and he was otherwise empty-handed.

“You remember Leonard,” Steve assured. “From our office?”

Blake nodded.

“Well, don’t be rude, shake the guy’s hand.”

But before Blake could outstretch his arm, Jordan appeared beside him to shake Leonard’s hand. His face lit up, terrified with joy about physical contact with a beautiful woman, and—without a word—Jordan resumed her seat in the armchair.

Steve pulled a metal folding-chair from a shadowed corner of the room for Leonard to sit in while he filmed—an awkward arrangement. The camera’s smallness made it appear to Blake as if he was delivering his lines to an aloof studio audience of one. And the lines themselves were just fragments. In spite of the camera’s presence, Jordan still had no interest in participating in the commercial. So, to establish the context for his own lines, Blake adapted hers into rhetorical questions which he asked and answered himself, manufacturing a poor illusion of dialogue.

While Leonard filmed, Steve adjourned to a control booth within the studio. He—and to some degree Leonard—knew the truth: there was no ASPCA-sponsored message. The studio was a space he had privately leased himself. He looked through the control booth’s window, observing the action on-set, and then looked down at his tablet, a screen

showing a live comment feed in response to the first program intended by his own pet project: *The Wellness Channel*. The comments read:

(20:34:06) *Tiffany*, 36, F – “Are they supposed to be married? That couple—if they’re a real couple—acts like they’ve never held hands.”

(20:34:21) *Clark*, 24, M – “He has this sort of hesitation around her. Like he’s afraid he might break her.”

(20:34:38) *Jacob*, 17, M – “She just seems so closed off. Maybe something in her is already broken.”

(20:35:01) *Veronica*, 44, F – “Good. If part of her’s broken, she should be closed off. She doesn’t need that douche to fix *anything* for her. Good for her staying strong.”

(20:35:02) *Marco*, ?, ? – “I just made \$75,666 with this easy trick. Just visit <http://thyroidcanvas.com/> to start earning money from home!”

(20:35:33) *Eleanor*, 28, F – “omg, don’t click, it’s disgusting.”

(20:35:38) *Jacob*, 17, M – “lol.”

(20:35:39) MODERATOR – “TWC appreciates your comments! Please adhere to discussing TWC programming only when using this forum. Thank you!”

(20:35:47) *Diehlon*, 19, M – “This couple’s relationship tells me you can’t choose to be happy. Also, is spam just going to be *allowed* in here?”

(20:35:56) *Veronica*, 44, F – “^ cynical.”

(20:36:02) *Carol*, 27, F – “Some people are unhappy in their marriages, some in their affairs, and some people are just happy to have sex.”

After reading “*Carol, 27, F’s*” comment, Steve almost choked on a glob of saliva. He locked his tablet, slid it into a drawer, and left the set, walking past the tripod-mounted studio lights he had personally funded. He took a linoleum-tiled corridor to the bathroom, marched into the last stall, and reached his phone from his pocket to dial Carol van Candelabra.

Before she had the chance to say hello, he said, “I told you I want there to be a distinction between my personal and professional life.”

“Steve,” she said, “I’m a PR agent. I have to be able to relate publicly.”

“I just don’t want to be incriminated for anything.”

“Incriminated for *what*? You’re paranoid, you know that? Aren’t you worried about someone tracing this phone call? Hacking into your address book?”

“This phone’s not registered under my name.”

“Who’s it registered under?”

“I’m not going to tell you my not-real name. But I just say that as a matter of principle—I’m not some kind of identity thief. Think of me more as an identity *donor*.”

“Whatever, Steve. Were you still planning on coming over sometime soon?”

“Yeah,” he said, suddenly sounding distant. “I’ll call you ahead of time,” and he hung up before hearing another word.

Steve had met Carol on a night when a spell of drunken hunger had turned the idea of IHOP into an urgent need. (For the sake of his professional image, he normally banned himself from appearing in public while intoxicated. But the idea of a cheesy omelet with bacon, diced tomatoes, and spinach had persuaded him to conjure an air of sobriety.)

When she came to take his order, the waitress, Andrea, was wearing an inexplicable grin.

“You know, sir,” she said, “there’s another woman sitting alone in a booth at the other side of the restaurant.”

Steve blinked, unaware of her point if there was one.

“You should sit with her! I think you two would get along.”

Why Andrea had taken it upon herself to play matchmaker during an IHOP’s darker hours—when having an on-duty police officer at the hostesses’ station was commonplace—absolutely boggled Steve. *But*, he decided, *what the hell*. Sitting in a vinyl booth alone at one in the morning is a little bit depressing. He followed Andrea back to a booth where an attractively disheveled red-head in a thin black coat and dress sat before a plate of scrambled eggs and pancakes.

“A lot of people expect strawberry to be my favorite syrup. Because of my hair color,” she pointed out. “I almost wish it were, but I keep choosing maple instead.”

“That’s from a commercial,” said Steve.

“How’d you know?”

“I wrote it. Aunt Jemima’s sales went up about 5% in one quarter. Oh shit,” lowering his voice, “I wasn’t supposed to tell you that.”

“My memory’s terrible,” she lied. “My name’s Carol. Van Candelabra.”

Steve signaled Andrea, whom he spotted floating between rows of imitation-copper carafes.

“Can you make my order to-go?”

“A box for mine, too, please.”

Andrea smiled, pleased with herself. She knew they would hit it off.

“Also,” Carol said, “aren’t you going to tell me your name?”

“I thought about it,” Steve kidded. “But you’d probably just forget it.”

In retrospect, Steve wished he had given up drinking—or pretended to give up drinking—sooner. But on the night of the IHOP experience, he had been obsessing over the way alcohol in his system gradually erased all the little anxieties that erected unnecessary social barriers—a phone placed back into one’s pocket, having things to say, a conversation without the need for a contrived ending. The ability to connect.

Sober, silent, Steve left the bathroom and headed back to the studio.

The one-month deadline by which Miles had promised to front the \$5000 was only about a week away, but it receded far to the back of his mind as he'd immersed himself in the world of Fix, Marcus, and Jorge. The four decided to take Fix's car—a gray 1989 Oldsmobile with maroon velvet interior—to reach the reservation where AWE lived and filmed their dramas.

But just as they exited the desecrated elevator into Fix's lobby, Miles spotted Kyle, Dirk, and Gabe walking through the entrance, the overcast light outside reducing the fronts of their forms to darkened silhouettes.

“What're you doing here, Downing?” said Dirk.

“You *know* these assholes?” said Fix.

“They look like *tweens*,” said Jorge.

“I forgot how young you are,” said Fix. “The apartment makes you look older. Like, nineteen, maybe.”

“Wait,” said Miles. “How do *you* know them? I know them from school, but I kind of forgot about them, because I haven't had a reason to *go* to school in a while. English class, for example, is redundant. I'm a native speaker, I always say.”

“You're *high*,” said one of the tweens.

“These guys come to my place,” said Fix, “about once a month for a boatload of cigarettes and salvia.”

“Our dads have a monthly business meeting if you *must* know,” said Kyle. He was wearing a t-shirt with a raised middle finger on it just like the button in Fix's elevator. “Gabe's parents are divorced, so when his dad leaves for the weekend, we just chain-smoke cigarettes and salvia at his house.”

“I heard that a long-term effect of salvia is improved concentration.”

“Shut up, Gabe. And hey, do you have any of that money yet, Downing?”

“What’s he talking about?” said Fix.

“I tried pulling a Marcus,” said Miles. “I thought I could make some money by getting access to some premium channels on Kyle’s dad’s cable box.”

“What made you think you could do that?” said Marcus.

“I looked up some stuff on the internet. But I think the articles I read were outdated, applying only to pre-Unilever stuff. So the ASPCA found out and now Kyle’s dad owes them a big fine.”

“Look,” said Fix. “I don’t have time to go all the way back up to my place for cigarettes and salvia right now. And I don’t have time to change clothes either. I’m not gonna sell *salvia* in my good turtleneck—just bought it at Nordstrom. And besides, we’re kind of on our way somewhere right now.”

“We probably won’t be gone too long anyway,” said Marcus.

Once they were out of earshot and safely in the confines of the Oldsmobile, Fix said, “Why’d you try to console those shitheads? They always try to pay me in money orders. Drives me crazy.”

“Well,” said Marcus, “I was in middle school once, too.”

They arrived at the bottom of an extended driveway, following a steady stream of cars into the giant parking lot. In the distance, beyond the wire fence encompassing everything, Miles could make out bits and pieces of AWE’s crooked skyline: a few high-rises, teepees (probably non-functional decorations), neon signs, one and two-story

houses, high-wattage streetlamps, restaurants, a casino, and an outlet shopping center all huddled together without any apparent regard to zoning or order. It looked as if Reno, Nevada had been balled up and poured through a funnel onto a patch of space in the middle of South Dakota. All that was missing was a sign saying something like, “Headquarters and Home of the Azteca Worldwide Entertainment Nation, Est. 20—.”

“Hey,” said Jorge, “the parking lot’s sections are labelled different.”

“Court ruling,” said Fix. “Circuit judge said they could no longer use the names of other Native American tribes to the different zones in their parking lot. Part of it was copyright issues, but it was also offensive. So they can only use letters of the alphabet now.”

“Native Americans being offended by other Native Americans?”

“AWE is sort of the black sheep among the remaining tribes. The others say they’re too ‘showbizzy.’”

Fix managed to grab a space in “W.” It was about a half-mile from the entrance, but parking spots in the first half of the alphabet were—without question—reserved for the families who arrived in their mini-vans at the first stroke of dawn, their fun planned to-the-minute. The ticket booths spanning an opening in the fence made visitors wonder whether the AWE Nation was more theme park or walled city. The distinction was blurry at best. Miles, Fix, Marcus, and Jorge joined the long line of families awaiting entry.

When they finally reached the ticket booth, a man in a Brooks Brothers suit jacket accepted their payments—twenty dollars for each adult, twenty percent off total admission with a coupon Fix had. His jacket’s brand was obvious because he wore it

inside-out, the label facing outward, and the fluorescent lamps inside the booth giving the polyester lining an effusive glow.

After passing through the turnstiles, Jorge said, “Okay, Fix, so where do we go to set up a meeting with whoever’s in charge here?”

“Oh, you mean the *chief*? There are no meetings around here. The only way to see the chief is to do something against the Nation’s rules so their local police can take you to him.”

“The punishment for crime is an audience with the chief?”

“There’s a certain logic to it. If you can’t follow the rules, shouldn’t you be brought before the *chief* legislator?”

“I guess it makes more sense than being sentenced to spending a fixed amount of time with a bunch of other criminals. What kinds of crimes do you usually commit to get to see him?”

“Usually, I just walk around with my arm outstretched, showing the families all the acid and peyote I’m about to sell. Park security already knows who it’s for, anyway, and the families don’t. So the disturbance is just written down as ‘General Disruption’ if they’re even required to file paperwork.”

Fix strolled over to a tent where two people in black AWE polo shirts were renting bicycles, and paid eleven dollars to use a Cannondale city bike for one hour. After he hopped on, straddling the bike, he reached into the inside pocket of the tweed jacket he was wearing over his black turtleneck and revealed what looked like a sheet of stamps. With total nonchalance, he started riding the bicycle into the different crowds—families, tour groups, and mixtures of both—plucking the little stamps from the sheet, one at a

time, trying to place them in others' hands like an absurd postman. He couldn't help but laugh at the economics of the situation, how a change of scene would totally transform the laws of supply and demand. Families, almost as a rule, kept a wide berth from his reach, assuming that a carefree grin on a tired-looking adult's face implied certain evil.

He rode toward a tour group—The Wreck and Crash Mail Society—who distinguished themselves with uniform t-shirts featuring an image of Socrates pointing upward, into the sky, at a falling plane. A lanky twenty-something with curly brown hair reached his hand out in eager anticipation when he spotted Fix, hoping for the possibility that the stamps he was doling out were connected in some way with the eight-hundred and sixty-two letters and packages riding aboard a cargo flight last seen over Eastern Canada before the plane vanished without trace from air-traffic controllers' radar screens two weeks ago. The stamp possibly held the key to a missing world—one with its own stories and grammar at an altitude of thirty-thousand feet—but just before Fix could drop it into the tourist's hand, a snag caught his bicycle's back tire, the inertia causing him to fly over the handlebars. Two other men wearing inverted Brooks Brothers jackets, helped Fix up to his feet. By some power of intuition—or perhaps just security footage—they knew the three with whom Fix had arrived, and corralled the whole group into a monogrammed golf cart with silent efficiency.

Miles turned around in the golf cart to see a defeated expression on the twenty-something's face. He admired the WCMS member's enthusiastic resolve to accept who-knows-what from Fix, the untethered intrigue expressed in the simple act of reaching.

He made eye contact with Miles. “Was that an invitation?” he cried, referring to Fix's undelivered stamp. “We're in town trying to get tickets to President Gleich's press

conference on the missing plane. But so far all we've received as a group are daily admission passes to *this!*" gesturing at a re-purposed hot dog stand behind which a vendor stood selling Manhattan Maize® brand tamales. "Gleich's press conferences *always* sell out!" he despaired.

But before he could utter his next sentence, the WCMS activist receded from Miles' field of view. The cart's eco-friendly motor buzzed past food trucks, kiosks selling bracelets made from turquoise stones, and a busy campfire photo-op, finally disembarking at the crest of an isolated hill. The chief's homestead and central offices loomed at the hill's focal point like a harbinger of a world turning sterile. The steel-forged Corinthian columns supported the mouth-like entryway, and crystal balustrades framed an upper-level patio. Miles almost mistook the building for the Office Source corporate headquarters where his mother had once taken him when she was under consideration for a short-lived promotion.

After passing through the entry's glass double-doors, a tall Norwegian-looking woman in a gray blazer and matching skirt appeared and asked if anyone would like any refreshments.

"We're just here to drop off the chief's spiritual supplements," said Fix.

"Oh," the woman blinked, and when she re-opened her eyes, she appeared to awaken to a less affected persona. "I should've known. I'll escort you gentleman to his office's elevator."

She walked them down a white granite hallway decorated with taxidermied animals along each end: a gray wolf in mid-step, an owl with widespread wings, and a

stoic bison among others, making uncomfortably dead eye contact with those on their way to the elevator.

“What did she mean ‘I should’ve known,’” whispered Fix. “I wore my good turtleneck for this! And my good tweed jacket. That Viking woman’s probably *all* business. But it’s not like I’m some cheap *neighborhood* dealer. I’m an inter-municipal businessperson—I *perform* drug deals. Today, I’m Professor Acid.”

“But have you seen how the employees are all dressed here?” said Miles. “I don’t even think you can call them employees. They’re more like ambassadors. I haven’t seen so many designer outfits since the last season of *America’s Most Photographed Model* I watched.”

“You watch *America’s Most Photographed Model*?”

Miles groaned. “I’m being raised by a single mom, man. She has to work double hours *and* overtime at Office Source. That’s what she feels like watching together if we’re ever home at the same time. It’s the one show she records.”

“No need to get all defensive,” Fix said. “That’s something Kyle or Gabe would do.”

Miles’ face reddened, but it was only visible for a moment before the elevator’s gilded doors shut against each other. Some dim incandescent lamps were the only sources of light in the spacious car, casting soft shadows on an image embossed in the elevator’s doors—an impressionistic eyeball at which Miles stared as they soared upward, silently.

The Norwegian-looking woman who, purposely or not, had made no effort to introduce herself, coldly presented Fix, Miles, Marcus, and Jorge to the chief. He had hardly thanked her before she drifted back into the dark elevator, out of sight.

“You’ll have to excuse her,” the chief said, with an expression containing both embarrassment and sadness. “I give out perks and raises—like the designer outfits—to everyone who works here. I want them to think of this as a *family* business, because everyone here has some of the Azteca blood in their veins. But they continue to lose a little more interest in our purpose every day.”

Fix reached into his jacket and retrieved the stamps as well as a Ziploc baggie full of dirty cactus buds. He laid them on the massive mahogany desk dividing the office between the chief and the four.

“Ah,” he said. “Nothing takes my mind off the idea that this may all be gone someday better than some of the Earth’s natural properties. Do you know how beautiful nature is? It’s getting harder to see every day.” He held the Ziploc baggie of peyote up to the ceiling-mounted fluorescent lamp, examining the little green buttons as they tumbled over each other. “That’s what makes this spiritual for me.”

“Yeah,” said Fix. “Oh, and I know I usually don’t ask you for any form of payment or anything, because I love your commitment to tradition and clean living. But we want to learn about how we can get on *The Wellness Channel*. Like your performers did. What can you tell us about that?”

“Ah,” the chief said again. “I could not possibly begin to explain the intricacies of *The Wellness Channel’s* role in the Unilever cable network—that is, before we commence our *spiritual journey* together.” The chief peeled a stamp and it fell onto his wide tongue like a lone snowflake. In immediate succession, he snapped open the Ziploc baggie and popped a few of the green buttons into his mouth. A sensation of loneliness and dread travelled from Miles’ head to his stomach. He had doubts about the Chief’s

spirituality, and Miles wondered what his own spirit needed elevation from to go on the Chief's journey. But with confident obliviousness, the Chief shoved both the stamps and the baggie to the other end of his desk, toward Fix, Miles, Marcus, and Jorge. Without hesitation, Fix mimed the chief—and as such, Jorge copied Fix.

Miles, at the end of the line, looked up at Marcus, as if for some kind of relief, when the awakening supplements came into his hands.

“It’s just like the first time you smoked,” said Marcus. “Just dive in, let the cool water wash over you.”

“What we are about to do,” said the chief, “is no more than paving a new avenue for *thought* and for *being*.”

“It’s free,” Fix said.

So Miles ended his stalling, his staring into some void only he could see lurking between the bulbous bits of cactus, the stamps, and his eyes. One stamp, one button.

Everyone’s eyes landed on Miles, anticipating some kind of revelation from him. The analog clock on the far wall with illustrations of birds and their genera in place of numerals seemed to echo—*tock, tock, tock*.

“Oh, God,” said Miles finally. He crumpled in his seat, covered his mouth with his hands, and said, “This tastes like dry, powdered Cheez Wiz. A sour heap of processed, powdered *shit*.”

“There is nothing,” the chief warned, “‘processed’ about *peyōtl*.”

“You’re upsetting him, Miles,” said Fix.

“I’m not saying *it’s* processed! Just the taste!”

“Hey, wait, are you okay?”

“You must calm him, otherwise he will never find his spiritual voice.”

“Here, Miles, I brought a bottled water. Just drink this and you’ll be fine.”

“One’s inner spirituality is very annoyed by *complaint*.”

“I apologize, Chief,” said Fix. “Miles has water now. We’re okay. But we just want to know how we can use *The Wellness Channel* to make TV programming more...*spiritually purposeful* to us.”

“I’m trying to git back to that *place*,” said Marcus, “when you could sit in front of the TV and *feel* something. You know, like, feel the TV communicate *back*.”

“I still feel that sometimes,” said Fix. “If I watch TV before bed—even if it’s just those thyroid infomercials—I can’t fall asleep without it on. Even though I don’t like the narrator’s nasally voice, I miss it once it goes away.”

“That’s the very reason we stage our dramas,” said the chief. “For too long, our tribe’s stories were lost to us. Please, do not misunderstand—I loved *M*A*S*H*, *Cheers*, *Seinfeld*. And so did so many others of the Azteca Nation. But forgetting our own past made things so confusing. The other tribes—the ones who don’t try to tell their stories over television—they don’t like us. They call us ‘white-washed,’ ‘traitors,’ ‘impostors.’ Sure, they tell their stories at night, sitting around fires together. But they don’t see how we’re just like them. We’re only trying to remember, too.”

“I didn’t think you were white-washed,” said Fix.

“That just means you are immersed in the spirit of our community right now. I’m proud to have a friend who can abandon stereotypes so easily. Is *your* friend okay?”

They all turned to view Miles who was crumpled over in his chair, his face a turning a shade of lime green.

“Uh, Miles?”

“Just ask him about the *decryption drive*,” he groaned.

“Ah, shit,” said Fix, his eyes beginning to redden and water, “I’d, uh, kind of forgotten. Chief, can you tell us about this *dacription drife*?”

“I cannot say that I’ve ever heard of one,” said the Chief. “But there is a group who has been causing havoc around my grounds today rooting through bins and leaving trash everywhere they go—The Wreck and Crash Mail Society. They arrived here by mistake. The tour agency I coordinate with, Predestined Destinations, is not always reliable. The Society thought they were going to the President’s press conference, which *The Wellness Channel* will broadcast live. Find one of the Society’s members to take you to the press conference, and look for the camera when you’re there.”

“Oh, I can’t *wait* to talk about what’s wrong with TV on TV,” said Fix.

“Nah, nah,” said Marcus. “You mean talk about what’s wrong with TV *for* TV.”

“I hope,” mumbled Miles, “I just hope we make sure that *America’s Most Photographed Model* doesn’t get cancelled.”

Miles heard the sounds of the others’ laughter all around him, the rising and falling pitches, until they all blended together into a dizzy harmony, like a record playing backwards, and the blinding brightness of the fluorescent bulb overhead washed out everything into whiteness.

Then the phone calls started coming in droves, reverberating from uptown to downtown in such a way that the beeps and tweets seemed to be issuing from the sky or buildings themselves.

Among the first wave of calls, Blake Hartz's cellphone awoke him early on Saturday morning, the sun's pale rays barely creeping through the blinds and onto the navy blue bedsheets.

"Hello," said an oddly confident automated voice. Blake hung up and turned over to his other side, away from the phone, though not necessarily toward Jordan. Her last words were about the Korean barbecue they shared after they had filmed the commercial. She'd said nothing since then, but, nonetheless, Blake didn't want to risk shoving his uncaffeinated, un-shaved, and un-bathed morning-ness in the face of this progress.

But the phone persisted.

"Hello," with that same warmth again. "I'm Tony Robbins. Are you a longtime fan of television? I know I am—there's no wrong time of day for it! But do you find yourself wanting more? A television that hears *your* voice? Needs your input? Your trusted cable company, THE UNILEVER CORPORATION, is unveiling an entirely new format for your viewing experience: *The Wellness Channel*. Don't just watch. *Participate* and *communicate* with other viewers while your show happens—live! Say goodbye to the old television of dinnertime background noise. And say hello, again, to the TV that unites and brings us *together*. Channel one-thousand and seventy-five." Click.

"Did you hear any of that?" Blake said, apparently to himself, since Jordan offered no response. Blake wanted to discount whatever he had just heard about *The Wellness Channel*—if anything, because of its weird and obtrusive marketing style. He

had heard the name dropped every so often around Imago's round tables—usually someone mentioning how they refused to pick up the account because *TWC's* schedule made no room for televised commercials, and the channel itself only advertised via non-televisual media. It sounded like a waste of time, a fiscal dead-end. But something had broken Blake's armor of ad disillusionment, the shell to which each headache and disappointed sigh of his career had contributed. Though he doubted it, and felt insecure about turning to TV in a moment of real need, Blake wondered if something—anything—in *The Wellness Channel's* programming held that elusive panacea that would restore Jordan's vanished self. That is, if whatever it aired actually provided for the kinds of needs and “wellness” Tony Robbins had just promised. There didn't need to be a twenty-four hour live feed of the Dalai Lama uplifting the general audience's human spirit. Nothing grandiose or heavily-sponsored. Maybe another viewer, like Tony mentioned, would somehow offer a personality of substance to connect with. Anything to bring Jordan back.

He stepped out into the living room, found the remote buried beneath a blue throw pillow, and searched the TV guide for *TWC*: NO RESULTS FOUND. He panicked. But before resigning himself to the idea that his last best hope had disappeared just as immediately as it had woken him up this morning, Blake went to channel one-thousand, skimming through each individual channel. Maybe Unilever was behind on their consumer database. He waded through a few sitcom reruns, a news report about a cargo plane that was still lost and possibly somewhere at the bottom of the North Atlantic's bottomless expanse between Newfoundland and Ireland, and the History Channel's flagship series: *Pawns of Industry*, which particularly depressed Blake, because—despite writing a

number of ads for the show—he failed to see the entertainment value in secondhand capitalism, the day-to-day operations of a Toledo pawn shop.

Just before caving under the disappointment of *TWC*'s potential nonexistence—just before he felt ready to renounce any remaining good in TV—he found it. Channel one-thousand and seventy-five. But it was nothing more than a middle-aged man on the other side of a desk speaking directly into the camera. His snowy beard contrasted with his dark hair in a way that looked as if his follicles were engaged in a kind of civil war with each other. Pieces of African artwork hung from the walls in his room—masks mostly—and orbited his face like homuncular satellites.

“The doctoral candidates and I,” he said, “are so happy with the progress you’ve been making in your human interactions...”

A marquee floated across the top of the screen that read, “Rebuilding social wellness.”

“What the fuck am I watching?” Blake wondered, his hopes beginning to sink. “There *has* to be more than just this.”

He rewound the channel for several minutes. Every so often the footage appeared to walk backward along streets and sidewalks while others did the same, walking perpetually away from the camera like it was “it” in a game of tag. Then the images started to look familiar. When he pushed play, he saw Jordan sitting in the familiar armchair, and he appeared on-screen next, talking to himself beside her, looking like a talk-show host who lacked even the simplest talent of personality. A stream of comments faded into view on the bottom of the screen, most dated the same day he and Jordan had

filmed. Most were harsh judgments about his relationship with Jordan, but then one posted by a Carol van Candelabra faded into view, and froze him where he stood.

Steve.

Steve had lied. He had invented the illusion of a “commercial consideration” for the ASPCA so Blake and Jordan would film this segment for *TWC*. The topic, according to a header at the top of the screen was “*Mental Wellness: Dysfunctional Relationships, Their Tendencies, and Their Results.*” How *degrading*. He had lied about what he thought of their relationship, too. Blake reached into his pocket for his cellphone, hands shaking from the shock of this unplanned and unsolicited TV appearance for the entertainment and scrutiny of strangers, and dialed Steven Ironwrist.

“Hey, Blake,” Steve answered. “Before you say anything, I showed the commercial to the executives I work with at the ASPCA, and they loved it. Jordan’s silence wasn’t even a concern. I told you Jake Elderberry was a master.”

“Oh? The ASPCA loved it? Then what the fuck am I watching right now on *The Wellness Channel*?”

“Oh,” said Steve. “So you found it.” Steve had thought that the negative rumors about *TWC*—most of which he himself had started—would be enough to discourage Blake from ever developing interest in it. At least for a long enough period of time for his “commercial” with Jordan to be buried beneath weeks’ worth of digital sediment. Steve had especially failed to expect this from Blake because lately he’d been pushing TV further away from his life, claiming it was responsible for the deepening rift in his relationship with Jordan. A rookie mistake either way, Steve thought to himself.

“This stupid telemarketing call wouldn’t leave me alone. Did you hire *Tony Robbins*?”

“I *hate* Tony Robbins. People are always mistaking me for that insipid *talker*. And he’s twenty years older than me. I’ll call you back.”

Steve dialed Carol, adding her phone’s ringtone to the polyphonic voices erupting across the city.

“Do you know Tony Robbins?” said Steve.

“Is he the black one? Oh wait!” said Carol, “You mean the talkative one. He just likes to *wear* black. We got together for drinks once. Why?”

“Why is he calling people about *The Wellness Channel*?”

“Is that a loaded question?”

Steve sighed into the receiver.

“Okay, fine,” said Carol. “I wanted to surprise you. Eartha, my publicity director, found out about the channel you’re putting together and she told me to design an exclusive promotional package for it. Or else. She’s a former women’s tennis champ, and you know how former pro athletes are when it comes to business, so it’s not like I could say no.”

“That’s great. But you know who’s upset with me about it now? Blake.”

“Blake? Blake *Hartz*? How do you know him?”

“How do *you* know him? He’s my best friend.”

“You put your best friend on live TV without his knowledge?”

“Part of it was for his benefit,” said Steve. “And when he told me how he almost cheated on his wife with someone, I really hoped that someone watching *The Wellness*

Channel would provide the message he needed to hear, like in a comment, and I'd pass it on to him."

"I can't talk anymore," she said, "I'm running late for something."

Carol hung up, and the only particular errand she had in mind was calling Blake before Steve. She had exiled Blake's contact information to her phone's "Not to Be Called" folder, which seemed like a senseless creation when her friend Justine Montreal had first recommended it. But, over time, it had proven itself a useful organizing tool for reminding Carol of her social life's friends-turned-pariahs and ensuring they stayed that way. Not that Carol held grudges—she forgave easily, but had done so enough times to have developed a fear of being taken advantage of. Her eyes lingered for a moment on the phone's reflective screen while she drew a deep breath.

For several minutes, Blake had been struggling to reach Steve again, redialing incessantly, wondering why he had only learned of his first star role—really more of an anti-star—after its advertisement had reached him. But Steve's phone had stopped ringing. Instead, Blake kept hearing a split-second pause followed by Steve's recorded representation, the small piece of him forever directing disconnected others to his voicemail box. After hearing Steve's voice repeat the same words so many times in a row, Blake started forming the Tony Robbins connection himself. Steve's voice projected that same husky force of personality—the way he hunted after the ideal diction, but the slightest salivary note persisted in his speech anyway. Blake was just about to redial again when his phone buzzed with newfound urgency. But his heart sank when he saw the name: CAROL V. CANDELABRA.

"I didn't expect to hear from you again."

“I know,” she said. “I didn’t plan on it. Believe me, I *really* didn’t plan on it. But this weird thing happened. I used to watch a lot of Ellen DeGeneres’s talk show. I sometimes kind of had this feeling like she was my soulmate while listening to her. But I found out recently that she was involved in some kind of cellphone sales scam. I should’ve caught on to it, but the entire last season of her show was basically about marketing this phone that answers itself for you. You know, tells the caller things you’d probably say, emails you a transcript of the call, saves you time—stuff like that. And I just don’t hear her voice the same way anymore.”

“Why are you telling me this? And why do you care? I thought publicity in any respect was, like, your life’s blood.”

“It was—I mean, it is. I love it when people, businesses, and organizations all form a perfect web together, like we’re all just one efficient organism. But I thought Ellen was my friend, no strings attached, as silly as that probably sounds. And now I don’t know what to think of her—it’s hard enough to lose a friend as it is. So maybe I thought I’d fill that empty space with a phone call to you.

“I feel like I shouldn’t be about to say this, but it’s been too long since I’ve done something good for someone else, and I don’t care anymore about what almost happened between us the other night—things almost happen, sometimes. So just hear this as a friend: Steven Ironwrist used you. For that ‘commercial.’ He’s aiming for a top position in the ASPCA right now. What he wants, he once told me, is to create the *ideal* model for television. The Platonic form, I guess. He wants programming that will ‘pull together the human race,’ I think were his words. Or maybe it was ‘pool’ together. He thought you—and *your wife*—were the first step to completing his vision. I’m sorry.”

Why wouldn't Steve have just told the truth? Why couldn't he share his plan for broadcast TV with his *best friend*? That is, if the words held any meaning, or were even applicable today. But all Blake could think to say way, "How do you know Steve?"

"It's not a very entertaining story," Carol replied. "The only theme is that things between us always find a way to more than *almost* happen."

Blake couldn't help but feel a pang of jealousy and ineptitude. He paused, phone in his hand, and he could hear the faint glissandos of other ringtones playing throughout the homes near his and emanating from cars passing in the street.

Suddenly Jordan appeared at the end of the hallway between the living room and their bedroom.

She looked Blake in the eyes and said, "Who are you talking to?"

“Hey,” mumbled Fix. “I think that guy from the Crash and Burn Mail Society was on to something. What if we just present these tabs as, like, our invitations?”

“Bold move, man,” said Marcus. “Bold move.”

The four were making their way out of the Azteca Nation’s grounds. Fix, Marcus, and Jorge all managed to find a general level of composure, though, occasionally, the group halted in mid-exchange, pausing for minutes at a time to watch a Ferris wheel turn or to watch the lights cascade up and down a marquee display. The group’s only worries belonged to Miles whose particular high only happened not to draw attention to itself. Rather than scratching his head in effort to understand the vibrancy of the Nation’s swirling colors or crying in ecstasy about the taste of fried maize, Miles kept to himself, mouth hanging slightly open, pupils dilated to the max.

“Come on! Someone’s *bound* to let us in. This stuff’s not cheap. And this way we don’t even have to worry about finding that weird guy that the chief was talking about. We just go to the press conference, and you know what? We get to Gleich: the man himself.”

“Are you fucking *joking*? He’s the *President!*”

“What’s your point?” said Fix. “The guy’s *all about* shaking hands. If we’re lucky, he’ll *want* to talk to us—you know, it’ll boost his image.”

“He just wants to be seen with pretty people,” said Jorge.

“Not at press conferences,” said Fix. “His press conferences are the one place where he totally emphasizes his connection with ‘common’ people. Of course that was all he did when he first started campaigning for office.”

The four reached the parking lot, and after a collective reconstruction of the order of the alphabet, they found their way back to “W” and the crushed velvet hideaway that was the Oldsmobile’s interior. Miles sat in the backseat, head leaned against the window, staring up at the bulbs of bright streetlamps passing overhead as the Oldsmobile raced down the interstate. The streetlamps mingled with the glares of headlights and taillights, which effect Miles understood as a kaleidoscopic light-tunnel.

“You doin okay back there, Miles?”

“Unilever, Unilever.”

“*Sheeeit*,” said Marcus. It was unclear whether Marcus meant surprise about how high Miles was or shock at the profundity of his comment.

“We’re almost there,” said Fix.

“Holy Maize of Manhattan I hope you’re right,” said Jorge. “It feels like we’ve been driving for hours.”

“Really?” said Fix. “I could’ve sworn we *just* got in the car.”

President Gleich was hosting his press conference at the Marriott Marquis Resort and Conference Center just a few miles from their current location on the interstate. Fix could already see traffic clustering at the edge of the horizon, a concrete desert decorated by sparkling vehicular jewels. The Marriott Marquis stood out from the other buildings along the skyline, its terraced levels resembling a fortress rising up from the ground. Fix was getting closer to the cluster of traffic, the river of taillights, and did not seem to be slowing down.

“I feel like I’ve done this before,” said Jorge.

The Oldsmobile's bumper collided into the rear of a BMW, which propelled the BMW into the rear of a mail truck. A rear window shattered, bits of plastic scattered across the pavement, and the impact jettisoned a carton of letters from the mail truck, sending white envelopes into the open air, sailing on wind currents like birds, but there seemed to be no sound signaling the actual crash—only a vague awareness that three bodies had smashed into each other.

“Oh my God,” said Fix, “I can already hear my insurance agents' keyboards. My deductible's fucked.”

“I'm actually really disappointed in this car crash,” said Jorge. “Did you guys even feel anything? We ought to redo it, I think Fix messed it up.”

“We hit a government *ve-hi-cle*,” shouted Fix. “That's gotta be, like, an invitation to liability hell!”

“Yeah, that paperwork is *really* gonna detract from the excitement of this.”

“We should check on the people in the other cars,” said Marcus.

“Ugh, even the postal worker?” Fix whined.

“*Especially* the postal worker,” replied Marcus.

Marcus pushed open the Oldsmobile's door and stepped out onto the cold concrete. Traffic was a non-threat—they were in the left lane, close to the shoulder, and the cars that had been driving behind the Oldsmobile had since halted either in response to the wreck or because they had caught up to the mass of cars gridlocked just ahead. The other driver opened his door and stepped out to greet Marcus. He had bright blonde hair and his tailored suit made his body look like a Greek sculpture. The postal worker remained in his vehicle.

“Is that God?” whispered Miles from the backseat with wide-open eyes.

“That’s not *God*,” said Fix. “That’s just a guy in a *really* nice suit. I could probably afford something like that if I was more willing to deal the hard drugs. But even *I* have some principles. Do you think I’d look good in a suit like that?”

Marcus met the man between the Oldsmobile and the BMW and asked whether or not he was okay.

“I’m fine,” he responded. “Are *you* okay? Actually, just come with me,” he sighed, noticing how high Marcus and the others in the car looked. “Tell your friend to drive his car into the nearest parking lot off that exit up ahead. I’ll drive you guys home—I just need to make an appearance at a press conference first.”

“Wait,” said Marcus. “You’re going to *the* conference?” The man winced at Marcus’s apparent recognition. “That’s where *we’re* going. You can just take us there.”

“Look, I really don’t think—”

“He’s *going* to the conference!” Marcus shouted at the Oldsmobile. “And he said he’d take us!”

“Yeah,” he sighed again, “park your car behind that taco restaurant over there, and I’ll take you all there. We’ll sort the insurance stuff out later.”

“I can’t believe we get to ride in *God’s* car,” said Miles. “It must be *so clean* in there.”

“I can only hope,” said Fix. “I’m running low on hand sanitizer.”

“Speaking of insurance,” said Marcus, “why hasn’t that mailman gotten out of his car yet?”

The two made brief eye contact, sharing a moment of mutual dread. They walked along the shoulder, Marcus just a few steps behind the man, and when they reached the mail truck they peered through the window and discovered the driver, upright in his seat and gazing into the sea of traffic with an air of serenity as if nothing had happened. The pale sunlight at the edge of the horizon washed out the driver's features, and the only objects Marcus and the man could glean were the large glasses resting on his nose and a rather sad goatee hanging from the brief slope of his chin.

“Are you, uh, okay, sir?” said Marcus.

The driver, without moving a muscle, responded, “You know all that mail's gone now, right? By law, I can't deliver that scattered mail. Funny, right? It's all around us. But to the U.S. government, it's lost. This is my third strike.”

If there was some joke, Marcus and the man did not laugh. Instead, they shared another one of their dread looks.

The blonde man, with some trepidation, said, “Is there anything we can do to help you, sir? Maybe someone I can call?”

“Do you believe in fate?” the driver replied. “My name's Arnold DeLicto. These kinds of things happen to me more often than you'd think, you know? In school, they used to call me ‘Accident Arnie.’ For small stuff, like if I fell off the monkey bars, my mother or my sister would tell me, ‘Everything happens for a reason,’ so I wouldn't feel upset about it. But how can you say there's a reason for scraping your elbow? What's the reason for *this*? Maybe I take things like this personally, but it's only ‘cause I'm a person. I'm starting to believe less in reasons and more in life itself. Reasons are just convenient—conveniences.”

“Do you want me to call your mother or your sister?”

“Someone’ll come for this stuff. It’s good mail, I read some before I left. Don’t worry about the damages—I got a cousin who repairs bumpers.”

Overhearing the conversation from the Oldsmobile’s backseat’s velvet confines, Miles thought of the curly-haired member of the Wreck and Crash Mail Society they had been forced to leave stamp-less. Miles wondered if he would eventually stumble upon this heap of mail, freshly abandoned to the indifferent asphalt of the highway. Once the gridlock had eased, Arnold chugged in his white mail truck alongside the faster and more colorful vehicles of the consumer populace who rocketed toward the interstate’s endpoint, following the sunset.

After Fix moved his Oldsmobile to the parking lot behind the turquoise-painted taco restaurant and they had all seated themselves in the man’s sleek BMW—Fix in the passenger seat, and Miles, Marcus, and Jorge in the back—he introduced himself as Steven Ironwrist. He admitted that he had been on the phone when they rear-ended him, but not that his phone played any part in the wreck. He was trying to get in touch with an angry friend of his, but his calls were being sent to voicemail.

Steve fell into silence for a few minutes while the four conversed among themselves, the background noise of their words sounding more slurred than how they had spoken just a few moments ago. It was only out of a need for karmic penance that he agreed to let the four—who smelled vaguely of corn and...cactus?—into his car. He knew he had shattered Blake’s trust with *The Wellness Channel* (albeit for a good cause).

He did not care what Arnold had said—everything was going to come together and it would all make sense. He would make sure of it.

When they arrived at the press conference’s venue, used primarily as a professional basketball arena, Miles was flabbergasted to realize they were strolling through the parking lot of the Office Source Center. Seeing the bright red “Office Source” letters glowing atop the glass and stucco dome struck a raw area within Miles. He could not remember the last time he watched an episode of *America’s Most Photographed Model* with his mother, or when he last spent time with her in general. A fog of sadness crept over him. Standing in the shadow of the Office Source Center, made him feel as if he was contributing to the piles of money and paperwork that kept his mother bound to her over-over-time job where she made (and did) most of her living.

They hiked up a long set of stairs which ended at an open plaza decorated with fountains, potted plants, and planted trees, and led to the front entrance of the Office Source Center. Posters with sayings like “I’d Gleich Four More Years, Please,” and “Neutrality is Equality” covered the face of the Office Source Center, and banners spanned across the lengths of treetops and light fixtures in the plaza while speakers filled the space with poppy indie dance music—high voices and synth notes played against deep bass and snare drum hits. Along the stretch of glass double-doors spanning the entrance, ushers in black slacks and maroon vests scanned tickets presented by men like Steve, but every so often, a group of two or three in their twenties wearing high-waist shorts and toting a Gleich-related sign trickled into the building. The pattern of the transactions reminded Miles of a toll booth, or the stretch of traffic that they had just left, but with the intention of political dance party in a pseudo-tropical climate.

“I hate waiting in lines,” Jorge said to anyone listening. “How do pass the time in these things?”

“I keep myself informed,” said Steve looking up from the phone in his hand. “‘Information can save a generation,’ I always say. Look around you—that’s why President Gleich’s press conferences are always so packed. No man knows more information than Gleich. These people are all here to learn. Why did *you* all want to come here? Not that you don’t look like voters.”

“I feel like ‘to learn’ would be the easy answer,” grinned Jorge.

“We’re here because we want network TV to be what it used to be,” interrupted Marcus. “No more Unilever, no more pre-scheduled commercial blocks, none of that, man. We’re hoping Gleich’ll listen to us, and that he’ll restore the independent cable companies so that shows and commercials will be on at different times again. It’ll make everyone so much *happier*, I know it will.

“Oh, no,” said Steve. “I don’t think it’ll do tha—I mean, I don’t think *he’ll* do that.”

“Why not? President Gleich *loves* making people happy.”

“He loves *neutrality* which is what makes people happy. He banished the independent cable companies because the amount of choice among the thousands of channels at any one time was overwhelming. Shut-ins—people choosing rarely to leave their houses because there was always fresh new programming on TV—were a real social issue before he came along. And it wasn’t just that—because there were so many options, rarely did anyone ever watch the same thing on TV at a given time. Do you know the kind of decrease in conversational topics between two people that that used to cause?”

Structured TV fixes all of that—large groups of people, like demographics, can now experience everything together. *Pawns of Industry* isn't just a show anymore—it's a shared experience.”

“That's not how I experienced it, man.”

“Neutrality,” said Jorge, “feels like waiting in this line.”

They reached the head of the line where Steve presented his ticket to the usher and mentioned that the other four were with him.

“Oh, big group today, Mr. Ironwrist. Have fun! I heard today's conference is one you won't want to miss,” she winked.

Once inside, seemingly far from the fountain-and-planter pop-tropical zone instated outdoors, Miles struggled not to shiver as high-powered air conditioning rained down from ceiling vents high above his head. More Gleich signs hung from the walls and rafters and, as an added bonus, silkscreened headshots of Gleich that appeared done by an Andy Warhol imitator joined the assemblage. Kiosks and vendors selling Gleich paraphernalia like bobble-heads and coffee mugs, as well as food, were perched about the long hallway surrounding the arena where the press conference was about to begin.

“Oh my God,” said Jorge. “I just realized I'm *starving*. Hold on one second—I need to make a quick stop at that McDonalds over there,” gesturing to a red tent with golden arches printed on it.

Jorge greeted the cashier, a cherubic girl whose blonde hair was tied up in her logoed hat. He wondered if she was a new hire.

“I'll have a ninety-nine piece Chicken McNugget, please.”

“Alright,” she chirped, reaching a giant bucket of chicken nuggets from under the counter, “your total is two-thousand and eight-hundred Gleich Points.”

“What? Why is money not an option?”

The girl hesitated. “Gleich Points *are* money, sir. That’s the official currency of any event centered on President Gleich.”

“So if I gave you, like, twenty bucks, you couldn’t do anything with it?”

“I’m sorry,” said the girl, reaching for the bucket of nuggets to place back under the counter. “If you have a smartphone, you can download the Gleich Markets International app. You can buy points there and use them anywhere in the world President Gleich is hosting an event.”

“Why doesn’t the president of *America* just use *American money*?”

While they waited for Jorge near the arena entrance, Steve noticed an uncomfortable look on the girl’s face as she removed the nuggets from Jorge’s sight. He walked over to the McDonalds tent at a brisk pace, handed the girl his Gleich Markets Club Card and said to charge whatever Jorge had ordered. She thanked him, and Steve and Jorge followed their group behind a red velvet curtain at the end of a concrete tunnel and into the arena where thousands of people were standing in front of their applauding the one and only President Gleich as he walked onstage.

“I was wrong before,” Miles whispered to Fix. “I’m way more certain *that’s* God.” He looked over his shoulder and stared at Gleich who was waving to the crowd as they walked up the concrete stairs to their row of seats. Bursts of white light from cameras’ flashes illuminated Gleich to a minute level of detail, but—from his brown wingtips to the starched white shirt beneath his navy suit jacket—he appeared without

flaws. Dark hair with a touch of grey framed his sweat-less forehead. His face was beautiful.

“Isn’t it great when we can all be in the same room together?” he said. The room roared with applause, cement shook beneath feet. “Just me and you. Us. But what if I told you we could *enhance* that? That we could be more than *just* us? Reach under your seats. When you find your box, remove what’s inside and put it on.”

The whole arena fumbled around under their seats and eventually came up with a container about the size of a shoebox wrapped in white cloth. Miles opened his box and discovered a pair of goggles with twin video screens meant to cover the eyes. Without hesitation, Miles slid the goggles on and found himself staring straight into the magnificent face of Gleich which appeared so much closer now. In fact, too close. Miles wanted to squirm away from Gleich’s Renaissance-esque suntan glow, to pitch the viewing goggles from his face, but part of him lusted over the fact that it was one thing he had finally managed to dive into before Fix or Jorge. He wanted to peek from under the corner of the goggles to see what the others were doing with theirs, but instead Miles relished in his small moment of action, hoping the others noticed.

“This may be hard to believe,” said Gleich, “but now that you’re wearing the goggles you found under your seat, we are even closer together than when we were simply sitting in a room together. The goggles are a new item from the Unilever Corporation that they are calling *Ontolovision*. As President of the United States, there’s nothing for which I am more excited than Ontolovision.

“You’ve probably noticed how much more immediate—how much *closer*—I am now that you’re wearing Ontolovision,” he joked. “I’m not some suited politician in the

distance anymore—I'm right there in front of you, which, as leader of this country, is right where I feel I should be—not hidden away in the Oval Office behind walls and Secret Service agents. And that's precisely the beauty of Ontolovision—we don't just *appear* closer to each other: we are. The same goes for your surroundings. Whenever you wish simply to gaze at your surroundings, toggle the switch above your left eye and Ontolovision will adjust to Actuality. Most of the US is already programmed into Actuality, so you can either travel with it in real time, or use Actuality to virtually explore places you've never been. Unilever's working to integrate social features so that you need never take Ontolovision off.

“And this gadget is no one-sided experience. The lenses in your Ontolovision use biometrics to relay data back to whomever or whatever you're watching. In fact, since this is such a large unveiling, Unilever has a team of analysts here at this building monitoring the data from your Ontolovision in real-time. They're viewing things like your biographical information, your vital signs, and even your mood. The first thing they are going to do with the data they collect,” Gleich announced “is analyze everyone in the audience's vital signs to detect which four of you are enjoying this press conference the *most*. And *those four* will get to visit backstage with me.

“Seeing isn't *just* believing anymore,” he added. “Seeing is being.”

The arena burst into applause. Someone had even snuck in a noise-maker that was wailing without restraint.

“You know,” Miles heard Fix saying in his ear, “that's not the kind of thing any ol' president can announce. Personally, I would've liked to see Gerald Ford try to get away with that one. But Gleich. Something about this smile of his that I'm staring into

right now really reminds me of how JFK looked in a pair of Wayfarers. It's hard not to love."

"I'm kind of lost in his face and his pores and his words right now," said Miles. "It's all blending together, but it's like he's becoming *everything*."

"Oh," said Fix, "don't worry about that *too* much. That's just the drugs. I kinda see it, too."

"Alright, ladies and gentlemen," Gleich announced, "the results are in! After analyzing blood pressure, pupil dilation, and frontal lobe brain activity, it looks like the four most enthralled audience members are...the four guests of Steven Ironwrist!"

After President Gleich's address ended and goggled fans started to leave their seats, filing out of the arena in a cloud of enthusiastic chatter, Gleich spotted Steve and beckoned him and whoever was with him to join him backstage. A crown of sweat formed across Steve's forehead as he glanced over at the watery-eyed but earnest gang, and he stood for a moment in decisional limbo, staring awkwardly at Gleich and his trail of bodyguards as they made their way to the private area, until his professional rationale found a truthful enough loophole for itself: the four were no friends of his—but perhaps they were useful as a male focus group. Their ragtaggy aura provided them with a diverse enough image for market testability. Yes: that was what Steve would tell Gleich. In fact, Gleich would be delighted to hear that: a product still in development like Ontolovision *craved* diverse testers.

With what might have been his first smile that day, Steve gathered up Miles, Fix, Marcus, and Jorge, led them behind the stage's velvet curtain, and found Gleich chatting with a few other suited men besides his security as they reviewed Ontolovision's first live

data streams on an array of monitors. The setup looked familiar to Steve: it resembled the systems Unilever used to track TV ads, but this reached an entirely new level of sophistication. The monitors' readouts appeared the analytical lovechild of life-sustaining hospital equipment and up-to-date news. But the news was people themselves. Steve continued to scan the faces of those with whom Gleich was talking and, suddenly, toward the rear of the huddle of people exchanging information, he noticed Leonard Stein, silently observing. A sign in the room read NO GOGGLE ZONE.

A black-and-white cat paced around the black stone floor, occasionally rubbing against the trouser legs of those in the room.

“Ah, Steve,” said Gleich, “glad you could join us. The engineers here were just showing me how Ontolovision could be used for, ah, what did you call that, Jeremy? Virtual *sex*?”

“It’s a pretty simple logarithm. Basically—”

“You’re much shorter in-person, Mr. President” interrupted Jorge.

Steve’s jaw dropped before Gleich said, “No, it’s alright, Steven. I hear that fairly regularly. But this is, thankfully, just one reality and height is just one dimension. Someone else’s dimensionality is nothing for me to be upset over.

“Ah, by the way, Steve. Have you met *Leonard Stein*? That man is *hilarious*! He had all of us *in stitches* back here before the conference started.”

“Know him?” said Steve, bewildered. “He’s one of my employees. You’re sure you don’t mind him back here? With the camera on his head and all?”

“Nonsense! In fact, I prefer that he have a camera on his head back here. After all, it makes me appear taller,” said Gleich, winking at Jorge.

Marcus walked to the end of the small room where Leonard was standing near an archaic filing cabinet and a vending machine. Frustrated, he grabbed Leonard by the arm and brought him back to the group. “So, Mr. President, what if I was to say something like,” he pulled Leonard close to his face, gazing directly into his third eye, “The Unilever network is an illegal monopoly that has an incestuous partnership with the Gleich administration. The United States has a *responsibility* to impeach Gleich and boycott Unilever.” Marcus was shaking, sweating.

“Do you have to speak so *loudly*?” said Leonard.

The room filled with laughter, but none from Miles, Fix, Marcus, or Steve who watched with widened eyes, his hand covering his mouth in horror.

“See?” said Gleich. “Leonard has a *gift* for observational humor. We’re thinking about hiring him.”

“But he works for *me*,” Steve protested with a sense of futility.

Miles looked around the room, noticing the engineers, Gleich, the four he walked behind with, the flickering panels of bio-data, and the NO GOGGLE ZONE sign. His mother’s face came to his mind as well as the impending five-thousand dollars. The plan to foil Unilever seemed like a total failure, and he knew his mother could not afford Kyle’s dad’s ASPCA fine. Ontolovision was a brand new technology and there was no way he could reasonably be held completely liable for his interactions with it. That is, if one of his interactions were *accidental*. He kneeled on all fours, waving the goggles in front of the cat so it would swipe its paws at them. After the cat’s attention was fully devoted to the goggles, Miles swung them toward his face—the cat pounced on his chest,

and as he fell backward, he released the goggles from his grip, letting them fall over his eyes, and he held them in place while he looked up at the engineers' displays.

President Gleich looked down at Miles and gasped.

One of the engineers, noticing a sharp increase in Miles' heart rate, turned in his seat and said, "he's about to have a heart attack!"

Another said, "get those off of him! His data subsets are showing that he's under the influence of multiple hallucinogens! His mind can't handle the paradox of simultaneously being, perceiving, and understanding itself in such a condition!"

All of Miles' thoughts and experiences swirled together like a stew composed of his subconscious. He heard the Chief's words rattling around his head. He walked alongside his mother the very first time she took him to Office Source—the shining software packages, the printers and copiers arrayed on display tables, the chocolaty snack she bought him from the vending machine—he could smell it everywhere. He almost knew what the word "spiritual" meant, and he wanted to tell the Chief—anyone—so badly. All seemed to be melting into fluorescent light.

"I...miss...I...miss—" said Miles.

Fix snatched the goggles off of Miles' face. The capillaries in his eyes were swollen and red, his brown pupils contracting. Steve disappeared from the room, unable to bear the sight.

"Oh God," Gleich said.

"He no longer has a pulse," one of the engineers reported.

"Call a coroner, please," said the other engineer.

Fix looked at the man who, until this moment, had been his favorite US president.

“You did this,” said Fix. He, Marcus, and Jorge carried Miles to the other side of the curtain and waited until the paramedics arrived.

“Who,” said Marcus “did you think Miles was gonna say he misses?”

Fix, sober as a tooth, stared through the Oldsmobile’s windshield into the blackness of the night sky, one star in the distance failing to be washed out by the city’s fluorescent lamps. A billboard for *America’s Most Photographed Model* hanging beside the interstate zoomed past.

“His mom.”

Blake and Jordan sat in the living room with their newborn baby, the two parents staring into their respective Ontolovisions while taking turns rocking the sleeping infant. The goggles were a gift from Steve, who had recently started smoking marijuana prescribed to him for post-traumatic stress disorder (though he kept both of those things away from the burning gaze of the public eye). Blake was holding the baby—they had not yet decided on a name—while ads crept from left to right along the bottom of his Ontolovision’s lenses, the region just below the news report he was watching. Officials were pronouncing the missing plane “lost.” While none of the search parties had actually located anything, an authority from Eastern Canada proclaimed that the plane’s wreckage likely lay somewhere off the southwestern coast of Greenland, sealed permanently beneath a sheet of ice. The next story was coverage of the President Gleich trial. He was under investigation for criminal negligence involving a fourteen-year-old boy pending the results of a biopsy. In the meantime, Vice President Shannon Gray had taken over Gleich’s duties.

An alert flickered across the top of Blake’s Ontolovision: a text message from Carol van Candelabra.

He handed the infant back to Jordan. He raised the edge of his goggles just a bit and he noticed that Jordan’s lips were slightly parted, the ghost-white edges of her teeth just visible. She looked as if she was about to say something.

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

DeLillo, Don. *White Noise*. New York: Penguin Group, 1984. Print.

Reading this novel for Dr. Luke Ferretter's Postmodern American Novel class dramatically improved what I could glean from this work. What I gained from it the most as a writer, however, was more focused concentration on DeLillo's hilarious, but deadpan narrative voice throughout this novel. DeLillo's voice and style is an extremely effective counterbalance to David Foster Wallace's influence on me, which, admittedly, has the potential to manifest itself in my work as prolixity or sometimes inanity or total confusion. Essentially, DeLillo keeps me grounded and relatable, but I do feel that Wallace encourages me to push my limits on complexity and imagination. I think that it will be a successful and unique blend of these two voices (as well as others) that have the potential to lend to a successful writing of this novel.

Eggers, Dave. *The Circle*. San Francisco: McSweeney's Books, 2013. Print.

The world that Dave Eggers creates in *The Circle* which is largely run by the social networking company of the same name shares many similarities with the kind of media-control propagated by Unilever in my work. Eggers shines in his ability to show the kind of interconnection that social media engenders in his novel, which I tried to accomplish by means of *The Wellness Channel*. In fact, the idea of Leonard Stein wearing a camera around his head is adapted from *The Circle*. But where Eggers uses it as a way of portraying a claustrophobic lack of privacy, I use it to thrust a once isolated character to a place where he is at the center of human interactions. Others who might have formerly ignored him or were frightened by him are drawn to his presence once he dons the camera. Though Leonard would want nothing more than regular contact with other human beings, the process is a difficult one for him to adjust to, as it is completely new to him. Leonard's camera becomes an important step in how he learns to empathize with others and how others learn to empathize with him.

Lethem, Jonathan. *Chronic City*. New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 2010. Print.

One of the greatest advantages of reading *Chronic City* was exposure to Lethem's style and humor and how seamlessly he used those to his advantage to weave his narrative conceits so seamlessly into his novel. Like *Chronic City*, *Unilever* involves a world where pop culture, politics, and human experience all occur alongside each other. This kind of world can be extremely difficult to balance when so many opposing forces are responding and reacting to each other, but Lethem makes the workings of his plot appear like normal processes of action and reaction. In the early stages, many facets of my novel struggled to cohere, but reading Lethem has provided for me a model of a world that contains order but also multiple tiers of depth.

Pynchon, Thomas. *Inherent Vice*. New York: The Penguin Press, 2009. Print.

Inherent Vice's plot is mostly character-driven in the sense that whenever the novel's protagonist, detective Doc Sportello, meets a new character, he or she introduces a new element to the novel's mystery, making it appear deeper and more interesting. Part of this is because, as strange as most of the characters are, they all possess very human traits. The combination of intricate plot mixed with engaging characters is an effective reminder not to concentrate too much on building a grand plot without paying attention to characters, caring enough to have insights about them, and sharing those with the reader.

Wallace, David Foster. *Infinite Jest*. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1996. Print.

Infinite Jest, though not my novel's first influence, is the book I consider my novel's biggest influence. That is, I do not believe what I have written could exist without having read *Infinite Jest*. The three most important things *Infinite Jest* offered with respect to my thesis are: its synchronous blend of humor, intellect, and sensitivity; its fragmented structure, which Wallace himself describes as a fractal; and the telling of a story from at least two main characters.

The humor I attempt to infuse into my characters' dialogue is hugely owed to Wallace. For Wallace, conversations in the Enfield Tennis Academy's locker-rooms ranged from boyishly insipid to sagely profound. I attempt to do a similar thing in the offices of an advertising building because humor can often reveal absurd qualities about human behavior and interaction, but in a way that pays attention to and can even share values with the reader, so long as the reader is not insulted (which I think is something to be mindful of). I think humor is also important for removing a tendency for too much self-importance in a work. A novel that takes its ideas too seriously—especially when discussing contemporary U.S. culture—wears thin.

Wallace, David Foster. "Good Old Neon." *Oblivion*. New York: Little, Brown and Company. 2004. Print.

"Good Old Neon" was an effective (and entertaining) story in conveying an unorthodox style of narratological cohesion, and the necessity for specificity in fiction. The first-person narrator tells of his life using many digressions, but the beauty in his digressions is that they all trace back to a singular point. A visual model, for example, could be a series of overlapping, concentric circles collapsing in on each other until meeting at a single point: that is exactly what "Good Old Neon" seems to do when it reaches its conclusion. This was useful to observe, since my novel's structure is similarly digressive, and probably could have roared off into a series of unintelligible tributaries (or at least much worse ones) without this story's lesson.

"Good Old Neon's" first paragraph is also an extremely gripping introduction with its narrator's claim of fraudulence, and his explanation of such by way of emotionally palpable and relatable stories, which seem at once both like classic coming-of-age-type stories, and yet uniquely the character's own. Part of this introduction's power is in its specificity. The narrator's vivid depictions of his past make him seem both real and believable, which is a funny irony, given his confession that he is a fraud.